

The Colonial Narrative and Postcolonial Interpretation of *Robinson Crusoe*

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Abstract— This article takes the classic colonial literary work of the 18th century, *Robinson Crusoe*, as the research object. By analyzing the historical background of British colonial expansion in the 18th century and Defoe's life experiences, and applying post-colonialist theory, it delves deeply into the colonialist logic contained in the novel from two dimensions: narrative construction of colonialism and post-colonialist criticism. The research found that Defoe legitimized Robinson's colonial behavior by using colonial narrative strategies such as civilization, language and religion through the character of Robinson, and revealed the process of Friday's "otherization" and cultural transformation by means of the binary opposition framework of "self and other". In his novels, Defoe not only participated in the construction of colonial discourse but also implicitly criticized the injustice of the maritime empire through Robinson's experience on the deserted island, conveying modern reflections and presenting to readers the inherent contradictions and ideological tensions of colonial narratives.



Keywords— *Robinson Crusoe, Colonial Narration, Post-colonialism, Otherization*

I. INTRODUCTION

Robinson Crusoe (1719) is an adventure novel written by the 18th-century British author Daniel Defoe. Since its publication, it has been widely read and interpreted by scholars both at home and abroad. In traditional literary criticism, Robinson is often regarded as a model of bourgeois individual struggle for his tenacity, resilience and wisdom in fighting against the harsh natural environment and eventually becoming the master of the deserted island. However, with the development of literary criticism theories, especially the rise of post-colonialism, the novel has revealed more complex ideological connotations, allowing us to re-examine the character of Robinson—he is no longer merely an adventure hero but

rather an embodiment of early colonizers, and his experience on the deserted island is a literary metaphor for the colonial process. Looking back at the period when *Robinson Crusoe* was created, the work was published in 1719. The 18th century was the golden age of British colonial expansion, and at that time, a "colonial justification" was prevalent in British society, which held that the British had the responsibility to spread "civilization" and "Christianity" around the world. The rise of the bourgeoisie and the expansion of overseas trade simultaneously required ideological support, and *Robinson Crusoe* was a product of this historical context. As An Sufang pointed out, this novel was "the first time that the image of the bourgeoisie was presented through a literary

work after the bourgeoisie stepped onto the historical stage”[1]. This article aims to re-interpret *Robinson Crusoe*, a classic sample of 18th-century British colonial literature, from the perspectives of colonial narrative and postcolonial critical theory.

II. THE RATIONALITY OF DEFOE’S CREATION OF ROBINSON CRUSOE

Defoe was born into a middle-class family in London and belonged to the emerging bourgeoisie. During his youth, he engaged in various commercial activities, including the trade of knitted goods and the manufacture of tiles, and also participated in political activities, serving as a government intelligence agent. He keenly observed that long-distance trade had aroused people’s desires and vitality. In this era of transition between the old and the new, commerce opened the door to a new order. Throughout his life, he wrote numerous works on trade, politics, and religion, demonstrating a close concern for Britain’s colonial endeavors. Historian G. M. Trevelyan even referred to the early 18th-century Britain as “Defoe’s Britain.” Because Defoe was a representative of the emerging bourgeoisie, the character of *Robinson Crusoe* he created epitomized the fundamental traits of early colonists. Robinson was born into a bourgeois family and was not content with a peaceful and comfortable life. From a young age, he had an extraordinary spirit of adventure and a strong sense of business. It can be seen from the novel that Robinson was fond of taking risks and participated in many voyages and trade activities, including his initial trip to Guinea, his subsequent management of a plantation in Brazil, and the slave trade voyage that eventually led him to be stranded on a desert island. These experiences, to a certain extent, typically reflected the lifestyle and value orientation of the 18th-century British bourgeoisie represented by Defoe.

III. NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION OF COLONIALISM

Robinson Crusoe constructs and legitimizes the colonial logic through a series of narrative strategies such as dream metaphors, naming ceremonies, and religious subjugation. After being stranded on the deserted island, Robinson quickly regards it as his territory and establishes

his ruling position through labor reform, naming rights, and legal systems. This process appears to be the “civilization” of the deserted island, but in essence, it is a form of colonial possession. Robinson uses the typical language of agricultural capitalism in the 17th and 18th centuries to call the land he cultivated “enclosure.” He also, like most upwardly mobile industrialists of that time, admired the honor of the noble class, and thus built “Shanty Towns,” established “country houses,” fortified “castles,” and crowned himself the “governor” and “king” of the island [2]. To escape the deserted island, Robinson used a dream metaphor. After waking up, he believed that he should save a “barbarian” in order to live on the island. Defoe legitimized the colonial expansion behavior through this dream metaphor as a rationalization of Robinson’s survival on the deserted island. Robinson regarded this “barbarian” as a “tool.” And as an upper-class figure, he named him “Friday.” Moreover, Robinson taught him English and Christianity, making him his servant. This relationship was glorified as “education” and “salvation,” but it was actually a form of colonial domination. Fan Meiyu pointed out in *Postcolonial Interpretation of Robinson Crusoe*: “Friday had no resistance consciousness and eventually lost his cultural identity, becoming a silent ‘other’.” [3]. Robinson represented European civilization, possessing technology, knowledge, and religious beliefs; while the natives on the deserted island were depicted as “barbarians,” with cannibalistic customs and primitive lifestyles. Robinson’s naming of the animals on the island also exposed his colonial mentality: he regarded all other animals as potential enemies and rivals, called the birds that ate his grains “thief of grains,” and punished them by showing them public executions like those of thieves in Britain. This behavior of treating animals as “criminals” and punishing them reflects Robinson’s attempt to impose British laws and order on the natural environment of the deserted island, which is a typical colonial mindset [2].

In *Robinson Crusoe*, Defoe used language and religion as key roles in providing legitimacy for colonial actions. Language is not only a communication tool but also a carrier of power relations. The first word Robinson taught Friday was “Master” and required Friday to address him with this. Language teaching is one-way, and this one-way nature itself symbolizes the “civilization”

indoctrinating “barbarism,” which is a manifestation of power relations. By teaching Friday English, Robinson not only enabled Friday to understand his orders but also instilled his values and way of thinking into him. More profoundly, after Friday accepted English, he unconsciously accepted the power structure and hierarchical relationship contained in the language. He not only taught Friday English but also spread Christian doctrines to him, making him abandon his original beliefs and behavior patterns. Robinson, through reading the Bible and repentance, believed that he was an “elect of God” and had superiority, thus being able to carry out colonial activities on the island in the name of God [3]. This process was described as a “renaissance” and “salvation,” but it was actually a cultural colonization. Through religious transformation, Robinson not only conquered Friday’s body but also his mind, making him accept the status of being enslaved. When he successfully transformed Friday into a Christian, Robinson not only gained a religious sense of satisfaction but also strengthened the legitimacy of his colonial mission.

IV. THE “SELF-OTHER” FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF POSTCOLONIAL THEORY

Postcolonial theorist Said proposed in *Orientalism* that colonialism is not only a political and economic practice but also a discourse practice. Through the construction of the binary opposition of “self” and “other”, it provides legitimacy for colonial rule [4]. According to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory, after Robinson completed the primitive accumulation of physiological and safety needs on the deserted island, Defoe deliberately directed his path to the realization of the need for belonging towards the violent possession of the “other”, this narrative choice exposed the inherent contradiction of the binary opposition thinking of Enlightenment rationalism-when civilized people encounter an identity crisis in the isolated island space, they must reconstruct their self-subjectivity by creating an image of the “wild man” as the other mirror. In *Robinson Crusoe*, Robinson’s “self” identity is constructed by negating the “other”. Robinson compared Friday’s loyalty and obedience with “the fast plowing of oxen and the sharpness of the axe”,

seemingly praising Friday’s ability and his loyalty to himself, but in fact, he transformed Friday’s body into a quantifiable tool, completing the symbolic castration of his cultural subjectivity. That is to say, the objectification of Friday is the negation of his human subjectivity as an individual, he is no longer a human with complex emotions, but is regarded as a “human-shaped tool” serving the colonialist group [5]. Fan Meiyu pointed out: “Robinson constructs his ‘self’ identity through two ways-himself and the ‘other’”. On his own part, by recording his daily experiences, he brings the advanced European cultural ideas to the island...and another more important way is to negate the ‘other’. Robinson negates the local’s cannibalistic nature through caricaturing it, to prove the ‘other’s’ ignorance and ugliness, thereby revealing the superiority of ‘self’ [3]. Defoe held this view in the novel: he believes that the locals are savage and eat each other. Robinson, as a new type of civilized cultural disseminator, logically believes that he should change the locals’ eating habits, no longer eating each other, but instead using goat milk and bread. He is actually constructing a materialistic civilization hierarchy order, by linking the dietary habits and moral progress, Defoe disguises the colonialization behavior as the dissemination of universal values. The locals are imagined and alienated as “cannibals”, while the colonists become the dual embodiment of civilization and morality. The process of Robinson’s self-identity construction reflects a typical colonial mentality. He considers himself “civilized”, “rational”, and “devout”, while the opposite is that the indigenous people are “savage”, “uncivilized”, and “superstitious”. This binary opposition thinking provides a psychological basis for his colonial behavior. As other relevant researchers have said, “In Robinson’s eyes, the relationship between people is, of course, first a contractual relationship, a lending relationship, and a master-servant relationship. He complacently regards the slave trade of black people as a profitable risky business”. This instrumental rational thinking is a typical characteristic of bourgeois colonizers.

Friday plays a typical “other” role in the novel, and his image and the process of his transformation reflect the cultural hegemony of colonial discourse. Starting from Robinson naming Friday, Friday lost the right to

self-expression, his language, religion, and cultural identity were systematically eliminated, becoming a “colonized subject”. Only later, Friday said: “God is greater than our Benariki (Friday’s original belief in the natural god)”. This indicates that Friday has subconsciously negated his own belief. Zhang Jingyuan pointed out that in the power structure of colonialism, the cultural characteristics and national consciousness of the colonized people are suppressed, leading to “distortion of cultural essence”. The local residents and the elite intellectuals accepted the culture of the colonizers. When they observed various cultural phenomena in their own homeland, they often unconsciously applied the standards and theories used by the colonizers to examine and evaluate matters [7].

V. FROM CRITIQUE OF COLONIALISM TO REFLECTION ON MODERNITY

Robinson Crusoe is not only a colonial text but also a literary expression of the paradox of modernity. On the one hand, *Robinson Crusoe* embodies modern individualism, rational spirit, and labor ethics, which are the core values of modern society; on the other hand, it also represents colonial violence, cultural hegemony, and ecological destruction, which are the dark sides of modernity. Marx pointed out keenly, “The solitary and isolated hunter and fisherman, as set forth by Smith and Ricardo, belong to the unimaginative fiction of the 18th century. This is the kind of story like *Robinson Crusoe*.” but at the same time, he emphasized that the image of *Robinson Crusoe* is “a premonition of the ‘civil society’ that was prepared since the 16th century and advanced in a big way in the 18th century” [8]. The island life of *Robinson Crusoe* presents the internal contradictions of modernity: rationality and violence, freedom and oppression, progress and destruction coexist. Through labor, he transformed the island and demonstrated human conquest of nature, also indicating the ecological crisis caused by modern human-central; he established a personal kingdom, reflecting the dream of self-liberation, and also showing how individualism evolves into the domination of others; he spread Christian civilization, expressing the impulse of enlightenment, and also revealing the destruction of diversity caused by cultural hegemony. These

contradictions are the specific manifestations of the paradox of modernity.

Defoe in *Robinson Crusoe* unfolds a dialectic between nature and civilization through *Robinson Crusoe*’s island life. When he first landed on the island, *Robinson Crusoe*’s thinking was still imprisoned by the symbols of civilization. He found gold coins in the shipwreck, but in the face of the issue of survival, the gold coins were of no use, and their value was illusory. Not only the gold coins, but also in the civilized society, time is abstract and is regulated by calendars and clocks. But on the island, the absence of calendars and clocks made *Robinson Crusoe* begin to have an unclear sense of years. As time passed, he no longer needed to know what day of the week it was, he only needed to know when the rainy season would come and when the sowing season would arrive. His sense of time gradually integrated into nature, into the rhythm of the cycle of nature. The island provided *Robinson Crusoe* with an opportunity for self-reflection, enabling him to recognize the divine will and the natural law, understand the foundation of morality and order, the origin of wealth and civilization. Through direct contact with nature, *Robinson Crusoe* gradually realized the falsity of the civilized world and the truth of natural laws, this process reflects Defoe’s profound reflection on modern civilization [9].

VI. CONCLUSION

This article conducts a detailed textual analysis of *Robinson Crusoe* to reveal the colonial narrative strategies including dream metaphors, naming rituals, and religious subjugation. Defoe showcases *Robinson Crusoe*’s cultural hegemony and symbolic deconstruction over Friday through the colonial narrative. Robinson’s dreams expose the profound collusion between Enlightenment rationality and colonial violence; his “reasonableness” is actually a cognitive violence that dehumanizes others. Further, the legitimacy of civilized conquest is based on the alienated human needs, and the individual’s belonging needs are ingeniously transformed into the desire for colonial possession. Naming and religious subjugation complete the deepest cultural colonization, erasing the original identity through symbolic dominance. Defoe constructs the binary framework of “self-other”, and through Maslow’s

hierarchy of needs theory, Robinson seemingly intends to change the local people's dietary habits, but in reality, it is merely a whitewash of his colonial expansion logic.

In the current era where the globalization process reshapes the way human civilizations interact, *Robinson Crusoe* demonstrates the internal contradictions of modernity and the dialectics of nature and civilization. Humans need to reflect on themselves, clarify the foundation of morality and order, and the origin of wealth and civilization. Therefore, in today's increasingly accelerated globalization process, *Robinson Crusoe* is no longer merely a model of colonial literature; it also provides a reflection blueprint for the way people communicate with each other and handle matters.

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