



Shipwrecked Crusoe and His Post-war Children: Reading *Islomania* and the Castaway Narratives

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Abstract

Literary islands are rarely neutral. Their textual representation is marked by ambivalence and discursivity. Many of these 'literary islands' are both associated with savagery and wilderness, or with scenic beauty and immeasurable natural abundance. Such a binary construction of literary islands has been quite common in European literature. This paper is an endeavour to examine the representation of the island trope in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and William Golding's post-war masterpiece *Lord of the Flies*. The paper intends to offer a theoretical understanding into Euro-American cultural fixation with the island trope, which is laden with cultural/imperial meanings. What I propose in the paper is a postcolonial critique of *islomania* through Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* with a view to critique the colonial understanding of civilization and savagery, which foregrounds symbolical and discursive figurations of islands within Western culture.

Keywords: *Islomania*, Castaway narratives, Cannibalism, Civilization, Allegory

It was, of course, Europe's encounter with the New World, and Christopher Columbus's 1492 arrival to what is now known as the Bahamas, that precipitated further voyages of discovery into the vast Southern Seas, in order to "discover" new trade routes and other lands that were as of that time unknown to European sailors and traders. The history of travel and European imperialism is thus intimately tied up with early European encounters with the Pacific and its sea of islands. Indeed, it was the many written and pictorial accounts of the South Seas produced in the wake of the explorations that piqued the attention of the reading public in

Western Europe. Such narratives were responsible for creating Europe's first impressions of the mysterious terra incognita in the South Seas.

(Kinane 13)

Introduction

William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1610–1611) reflects the aforesaid European interest in the topography of the islands of the post-Columbus world. In Shakespeare, the island is an enchanted space, unlike the real kingdom of the exiled king Prospero, where the native Caliban is the only evil presence after his mother Sycorex's death. In fact, Prospero's plan of the shipwreck on this magical island is a complex allegory to the human theme of evil and forgiveness. However, Shakespeare's play was just a beginning. The most remarkable castaway story came out in the year 1719 with the publication of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, which paved the way for the genesis and growth of an entirely novel genre, now popularly known as *Robinsonade*. Before Defoe abandoned his Crusoe on the island as a castaway, islands were usually seen as petrifying places where unbearable isolation and inevitable death awaited an individual. However, Defoe's shipwrecked Crusoe uses this terrifying experience into a morally sublimating and financially rewarding experience through his supposedly innocent imperialist and virtuously Christian adventures. Crusoe appropriates his 'near fatal imprisonment' into a redemptive liberation. In other words, Crusoe's inspirational story of unimaginable human heroism transforms the island imaginary, giving birth to several survivor narratives. It engendered an enduring attraction to the islands, paving the way for "islomania." This expression was first used by Lawrence Durrell in 1953 to refer to an obsessive desire for islands. After Crusoe, *islomania* was to become a major obsession of Western cultural imaginary. Many writers have produced several significant island narratives, which include Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), Agnes Strickland's *The Rival Crusoes* (1826),

R.M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* (1858), Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883) and H.G. Wells' *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896) to name a few.

The Idea of Island: Theorizing Island Narratives

Harry Garuba, in his essay "The Island Writes Back . . ." contends that "for explorers, islands have always been objects of desire, the blank spaces in the vastness of the seas for which the questers long in their sojourn to bring under the cartographic system of the map and render them amenable to discursive control" (61). His description suggests the stereotypical commodification of the island space, which had often been exoticized and eroticized to serve the interests of the centre/metropolis. His theorization also underlines the binary between the continental mainland and the oceanic island. Although the European civilization was largely continental, yet it had a deep fascination with the islands. In fact, the European islomania is marked by a queer ambivalence, suggesting both attraction and repulsion. It would not be fallacious to argue that the European mind was obsessed more with the idea of island than the actual island. Garuba contends that islands constructed "the binary oppositions of center and margin, metropole and periphery, self and other" and this collusion between geography and history led to marginalization through the process of colonization (62). Garuba is referring to the links between colonial exploitation and imperialism, foregrounding the rupture between the 'real physical islands' and 'islands of the colonial mind.' He is trying to suggest that islands are not only physical spaces but also discursive metaphors imbued with lived realities. John R. Gillis, in "Island Sojourns" argues that "in biblical geography, islands were the product of the Flood that had shattered the once-whole earth, separating mankind until the time of the Second Coming, when the seas would disappear and earth would again be heaven" (277). Since the fall of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden "had created a condition of homelessness that would not end" and "mankind was on an exilic journey. . . Christians could obtain some measure of redemption through the pious act of pilgrimage to some remote

and isolated place” (Gills 277-8), the islands were ritually imagined as sites for temporal sojourns in search of self-discovery and salvation.

However, there is another aspect to island imaginary. Despite being the sites of solitude, solace and unparalleled freedom, the islands also generate the feelings of isolation, banishment, and imprisonment. Although the individual is surely thrilled with the exhilarating sense of freedom and happiness in exploring the unexplored, the feeling of being trapped, the longing for home and the desire to return cannot be avoided. Their boundedness, finitude and remoteness produce not only ceaseless pleasure but also puzzling pain. Though islands can indubitably be mastered, but the possession is never without the caveats of powerlessness of the master. This perplexing ambivalence and anxiety is difficult to be dispensed. Further, Islands have often been associated with childhood. Because they are situated in a remote place outside the world, they are often viewed to be free from the ills and corruptions of the adult world. To be on an uninhabited island is to symbolically return to the primal innocence of childhood.

Island as Imperial Paradise/Inferno

On the one hand, in the European cultural imaginary, islands were often conceived as the symbols of earthly paradise. They symbolized man’s unconscious longing for the Garden of Eden on the earth. However, this European will to physically discover and explore the paradise on the earth resulted into colonialist/imperialist institutions as well. It may not be erroneous to suggest that colonization of the Pacific Islands, along with Polynesian and Melanesian islands later, was inextricably linked to this subconscious European desire to find such topographical locations in far-off places which could correspond to the real Eden-ic paradise. Ian Kinane writes that both the trope of the island and the mythology of paradise are connected with the narratives of modern imperialism and colonisation which created an enormous trajectory of the representations of the Pacific to cater to the Western imaginary. Kinane argued that the paradise became a unique geographical

topos, “motivating European exploration and colonization” and “the islands of the Pacific were seen as places of vast, untapped natural resources, waiting to be exploited” (138). He further contends that “once European explorers had successfully navigated the South Seas and had begun to colonise some of the islands, the myth of paradise evolved as a means of “justifying imperial discourse and praxis” (Kinane 138). Thus, it can be readily observed that the trope of the island used *topos* of paradise to aggressively accelerate imperial projects.

On the other hand, the islands were also viewed as metaphors of hell, imbued with a possibility that an individual, once marooned, could be punished to live a life of eternal damnation/isolation. The possibility of the island inhabited by the savages/cannibals further emboldened this frightening imaginary. In other words, island as a reflexive category also figured as an intimidating site, always referring to a spatio-temporal loss. In his essay “Abject Body/Object Sites: Leper Islands in the High Imperial Era” (2003), Rod Edmond proposes his categories of healthy mainland and diseased island. Paraphrasing the arguments of Rod Edmond’s essay “Abject Body/Object Sites: Leper Islands in the High Imperial Era”, Kinane writes that

The island is cast as abject and disgusting; it is a place of disease. Edmond concedes, though, that the island becomes a “parody” of mainland civilisation, characterised—as leper colonies were—by the diseased bodies they enclosed. Islands, as sites of “custody” and “banishment,” were seen as repositories for the diseased, dysfunctional, antisocial and repressible elements of society— (144)

Therefore, the possibility that the island is not a paradise but a degenerate Eden cannot be overlooked. Its constant reminder of home in the mainland, combined with a longing for possible return and threat the native savages could pose to survival, always denoted its otherness.

II

Crusoe's Island of Despair

Daniel Defoe published *Robinson Crusoe* in 1719. Since then, it has become a source of literary inspiration for several (re)writings and adaptations. Often considered as a literary masterpiece, the novel recounts the shipwrecked Crusoe's struggle for survival on a remote, desolate island. During his twenty-eight-year exiled stay on the island, Crusoe discovers the island to hand it over to a group of mutineers to develop a civilized colony on the island. Defoe would have surely been inspired by the story of Alexander Selkirk, who was shipwrecked in the Pacific Ocean on the Juan Fernandez Island of *Más a Tierra*. Selkirk lived on the island for four years before being rescued in 1709. Later this island was renamed *Robinson Crusoe Island*. Selkirk became a very popular public figure during his time who must have inspired Defoe. The story of Friday is also probably borrowed from Dampier who had written about a Mosquito Indian.

Crusoe's island is undeniably a Caribbean Island, off the northeast coast of Brazil. He calls it the island of despair. Although Crusoe has been represented as a creative and courageous individual who demonstrates mercantile/capitalist sensibilities of industry and enterprise on the island, yet his isolated existence is marked by an undying desire for reunion with civilization. His forced seclusion can be considered his allegorical return to the state of nature. Robinson Crusoe is a Puritan, who has a firm belief in the philosophy of predestination and the role of Divine Providence in man's life. Further, this puritan ethics not only prescribes the duties of religion but also supplements the belief in god with the call of business. In other words, the economic enterprise is to be considered the conscientious mark of the religious and moral obligation. This is exactly what Robinson Crusoe did on his desolate island. Therefore, through his severe and sincere labour, Crusoe is able to transform the desolate island into a prospering colony. During his forced exile on the island, he displays innovative commercialism, the hallmark of the early

colonialist. His hardwork and acquisitive desire exemplify the Puritan ethic.

Martin Gliserman has argued that Robinson Crusoe “is a document of social and psychological evolution and conflict. Crusoe, a loner, a traveler-observer, presents various forms and aspects of social organizations— cannibal, hunter-gatherer, agricultural-herder, commercial maritime, territorial/colonial, etc” (200). He opines that “In Crusoe's approach to the island, we see less direct and immediate greed, and find instead feelings of possessiveness—long term greed—and omnipotence” (213). Crusoe's implicit desire to possess the island is hidden in his unconscious exaltation—his commercial and economic greed philosophized in an allegorical tale of spiritual salvation. He is concealing his colonial agenda and imperialist anxieties. James Joyce, the eminent novelist, too considered Crusoe to be the proto-type of the Anglo-Saxon colonialist. In his estimate, Robinson Crusoe is

The true symbol of the British [colonial] conquest is Robinson Crusoe, who, cast away on a desert island, in his pocket a knife and a pipe, becomes an architect, a carpenter, a knife grinder, an astronomer, a baker, a shipwright, a potter, a saddler, a farmer, a tailor, an umbrella-maker, and a clergyman....The whole Anglo-Saxon spirit is in Crusoe: the manly independence; the unconscious cruelty; the persistence; the slow yet efficient intelligence; the sexual apathy; the practical, well-balanced religiousness; the calculating taciturnity. (quoted in Phillips 33-34)

Crusoe is thus seen as the absolute ambassador of British imperialism, and the island becomes his newly discovered dominion like the islands of the Caribbean and America, which were to be used/abused for the economic interest of the British Empire.

Soon after Crusoe has comfortably settled on the island, he declares himself the master of the island. Though his confessions are overt expressions of spiritualized life, their inner logic is embedded in the colonial desires:

In the first Place, I was remov'd from all the Wickedness of the World here. I had neither the Lust of the Flesh, the Lust of the Eye, or the Pride of Life. I had nothing to covet; for I had all that I was now capable of enjoying: I was Lord of the whole Mannor; or if I pleas'd, I might call myself King, or Emperor over the whole Country which I had Possession of. There were no Rivals. I had no Competitor, none to dispute Sovereignty or Command with me. (Defoe 109)

Crusoe not only does away with his initial inhibitions and fears of the island, rather plainly articulates his monarchical authority and despotic will to power: "I had the Lives of all my Subjects at my absolute Command. I could hang, draw, give Liberty, and take it away, and no Rebels among all my Subjects" (Defoe 125). Thus, Crusoe's projection of the island as the site of spiritual rebirth which allegedly offered him an opportunity for self-reflection provides him with a prospect of colonizing the island and practicing conversion.

In the novel, Friday is also written in the essentialist colonial fashion. Despite having muscular strength and manly vigour who could "at one blow cut off his Head so cleverly, no Executioner in Germany could have done it sooner or better", he submits to the authority of Crusoe: "all the Signs to me of Subjection, Servitude, and Submission" (Defoe 174). Crusoe calls him 'My Man' and later renames him Friday. Friday's representation in the novel is symptomatic of the colonialist binary wherein Crusoe, the paternalistic master is portrayed as masculine while Friday, the slave is feminine. In fact, not only Friday but the entire island has been feminized. Highlighting the femininity of the island in the European representations, Catherine Addison argues that islands in literature, mythology, and other such narratives are usually feminine spaces, an object of male desire. She contends that "it usually has as its concomitant the narrative of the voyage, whose direction, always away from home (and then back), posits the island on the extreme verge of the imaginative vision, points to it from "here" as "over there" and invests it with the elusive attraction of Otherness (687-88). In other words, femininity and otherness

constitute the core of island narratives. Though Friday is a native 'cannibal', who might have posed a serious threat to his security, Crusoe— by protecting the life of Friday from his fellow tribesmen—weans obedience and dominion over him. Friday not only refuses to remain 'a man-eating cannibal' but also agrees to serve him: "At last he lays his Head flat upon the Ground, close to my Foot, and sets my other Foot upon his Head, as he had done before; and after this, made all the Signs to me of Subjection, Servitude, and Submission imaginable, to let me know, how he would serve me as long as he liv'd" (Defoe 174). On that island, Friday becomes not only Crusoe's companion, but also a slave and a child: "His very affections were ty'd to me, like those of a Child to a Father" (Defoe 176).

By portraying the practice of cannibalism, which was always a vital justification for upholding the European civilizing mission, Defoe not only endorses the racial and moral supremacy of the British but also obfuscates the colonialist savagery which was to occur later. In other words, Defoe's narrative can be read as an early manifestation of the nefarious connection between the culture and imperialism. This powerful representation of the cannibalism on the island in *Robinson Crusoe* constitutes the colonial imaginary of otherness, which has been used since then to define and consolidate the European identity. Cannibalism of Friday and his tribe consolidates Crusoe's civilizational superiority. After Friday becomes a Christian by conversion, Crusoe's civilizing mission is completed. Further, Crusoe's colonial anxieties can be visibly seen in his choice of not exterminating the native cannibals of the island, like the millions of native indigenous populations were destroyed by the savagery of the Spaniards in America. Though Crusoe does not reflect the will to conquer and rule the island, its domestication is surely imbued with latent colonial desires. The island is thus presented as a new horizon for colonial desire in a world in which Britons stand the ready beneficiaries of all that the happy clime has to offer.

In the novel, the island Crusoe has landed on can also be read as a symbolic site of abjection which reflects Crusoe's

fascination with and repulsion at the island. For Crusoe, the island was certainly 'a prison', a site of physical incarceration: "I found also, that the island I was in was barren, and, as I saw good reason to believe, uninhabited, except by the wild beasts (Defoe 44) His first response to the island is that of utter dejection. Though Crusoe considers his state to be some kind of divine punishment, yet he does not blame God for placing him into that harrowing situation.

I had a dismal prospect of my condition...I had great reason to consider it as a determination of Heaven, that in this desolate place, and in this desolate manner, I should end my life. . .But something always returned swift upon me to check these thoughts, and to reprove me; . . . "Well, you are in a desolate condition, it is true; but, pray remember, where are the rest of you? Did not you come, eleven of you in the boat? Where are the ten? Why were they not saved, and you lost? Why were you singled out? Is it better to be here or there?" And then I pointed to the sea. All evils are to be considered with the good that is in them, and with what worse attends them. (Defoe 54)

Crusoe's refashioning of the island through the theological imagination and vocabulary is to conform to the Protestant belief that salvation is possible only through the will of God. Therefore, Crusoe transforms the island into a typical protestant utopia spiritualizing his island experience. His faith changes the prison into a paradise.

Golding's Isle of (Un)Freedom

Island in the novel, *Lord of the flies* corresponds to all the variants of existing European perceptions about the islands. It is any desert tropical island, uninhabited but full of natural resources and scenically beautiful. On this island, the trees are laden with abundant fruits, and the climate is almost forever pleasant:

The shore was fledged with palm trees. These stood leaned or reclined against the light and their green feathers were a hundred feet up in the air... Out there, perhaps a mile away,

the white surf flinked on a coral reef, and beyond that the open sea was dark blue. Within the irregular arc of coral the lagoon was still as a mountain lake—blue of all shades and shadowy green and purple. (Golding 4)

It is the almost hypnotic portrayal of any real romantic island a reader may come across. Certainly, the island is a land of idyllic sun-kissed lassitude, with its palm trees, beaches and blue lagoon. Undoubtedly, it is no less than an accidental tour of paradise. Fortunately, the island does not have any wild, murderous savages, and there are no adults as well to spoil the freedom of the children. Unquestionably, this desert coral island becomes a site of liberation, a place of freedom from the tyranny of adult authority. Except the occasional remembrance of the home and the family by little ones, the majority of these stranded children do not take their trapped existence as a moment of imprisonment. The island, which might figuratively indicate itself as a space of physical confinement due to its geographically bounded finitude, enthralls the children with its promise of freedom. Children neutralize their feelings of physical and metaphorical imprisonment, “looking at the dazzling beach and the water” (Golding 5). Island, for these marooned kids, becomes a seductively enchanting place of freedom. As a utopic space, the island becomes both a fertile physical topography as well as an imaginative landscape, or a *space waiting to be used and scripted* by the children.

But this is a good island. We—Jack, Simon and me—we climbed the mountain. It’s wizard. There’s food and drink, and –‘

‘Rocks—‘

‘Blue Flowers—‘

‘While we are waiting we can have a good time on this island.’ . . .

“Treasure Island—‘

‘Swallows and Amazons—‘

‘Coral Island—‘

Ralph waved the conch.

“This is our island. It’s a good island. Until the grown-ups come to fetch us we’ll have fun.”

Jack held out his hand for the conch.

“There’s pigs,” he said. “There’s food; and bathing-water in that little stream along there—and everything.” (Golding 34)

Here, the island obviously constitutes the European ideological fantasy of its other. Symbolically, the island is everything, what Europe was not, especially in the aftermath of the atomic war. It was a place of serenity, bounty, excellent climate, no greed, no violence, no maladies, of course no war. The island is completely healthy in contrast to ailing and diseased Europe. Although Ralph informs his community of young children that “we saw no homes, no smoke, no footprints, no boats, no people. We’re on an uninhabited island with no other people on it” (Golding 28), yet the island remains, for him and his friends an Edenic paradise, a place of freedom and plentitude.

However, this is only one aspect of the island imaginary. The children soon discover that the island is inhabited by the beasts. Unlike Robinson Crusoe wherein the natives are portrayed as cannibals, the children themselves are savages they are searching for. The island has only provided them with an opportunity to allow that beast to come out of their hearts. The paradise they have initially discovered on the island is transformed into an inferno. The idea that children could become so demonic in the absence of the social order becomes intimidation and the longing for isolation on a deserted island is diminished. On Golding’s island, an evil exists on the island, not in the form of savage cannibals rather in the heart of the civilized man.

Conclusion

Representation of the island in both *Robinson Crusoe* and *Lord of the Flies* reflects contradictions of the European *Islomania*. While Crusoe’s adventures on the island are marked by embryonic colonialist anxieties, mercantile ambitions and

puritanical spirit, Golding's island comes out as an allegorical fable to critique atomic war. While Crusoe's story is a record of the evolution of a castaway into a spiritual coloniser, Golding's children regress into hunters. In both cases, island representation has been infantilized, and the two writers fall a victim to the temptation of considering the island either as a sort of Eden or Inferno. In other words, their gaze on the island remains Hebraic – Christian, juxtaposing the stereotypical binary of continental and island civilizations.

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