

Power as an Identity Determining Factor in *Robinson Crusoe*

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Abstract

This paper investigates the role of power in determining the identities of different characters in Defoe's novel *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) basically from a postcolonial lens and based on the social identity theory by Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner. Apart from analysing the relationship between the protagonist Crusoe and the other characters, the paper also contains some psychoanalytic interpretations of some significant events. Moreover, to demonstrate the influence of power in defining positions of hierarchy, an analogy has been drawn between the co-existence of Crusoe and Friday in the deserted island with two objects of different temperatures kept in contact where a change is inevitable in any one of the two and where the agency is determined by the temperature referring to power.

Keywords: power, agency, hegemony, postcolonial identity, psychoanalysis.

That the eighteenth century novel *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) deals with some oriental material becomes evident if one traces the novelist, Defoe's "strategic location"¹. Accordingly, Alam identifies Defoe as a "colonial propagandist" (1) and traces the text *Robinson Crusoe* as belonging to a discourse which is, of course, Oriental discourse. Moreover, in *Robinson Crusoe*, most of the non-European characters including Friday are described as having "savage" and "barbarian" nature and being "uncivilised" although Friday and the other

“cannibals” could work with fire which is the first mark of civilisation. Certainly, the creation of “false images or at least, images which touch up the truth to make colonisation attractive” (Said 6), the use of completely Eurocentric perspective, and the repeated emphasis on distinctions with the West prove that the author as well as the protagonist Crusoe treats Friday as the Other (Said 7). The effect of drawing this distinction is the formation of a European identity that is superior to the non-European one. According to some scholars like Foucault, “there is no identity without power” (Sindic 2) and Foucault also talks about “a form of power which makes individuals subjects” (Foucault 781). Therefore, the role of power in determining identity is significant in the novel in question.

Tajfel and Turner’s social identity theory explains that part of a person’s concept of self (identity) comes from the groups to which that person belongs. Crusoe, despite remaining detached from his English community for around twenty eight years, still considered himself to be English, Christian, and superior which Benedict Anderson would call Crusoe’s “imagined community” (Anderson 6). With that regard, this paper will analyse Crusoe’s relationship with two different characters, Xury and Friday, and try to prove that it is the exercise of power that gives Crusoe the agency or the opportunity to determine his own identity as superior and also to shape the other two’s identities.

First, when Crusoe was captivated in North African town of Salle, he belonged to a group which was formed by slaves. In accordance, his identity was nothing but one of a slave. There his status was equal to Xury’s, who was an Arab or black slave boy who even helped Crusoe to flee away from the captivity. When both of them fled away, their identity was of runaway slaves. However, Crusoe sold Xury to a Portuguese captain. Among the two runaway slaves, Xury seemed to be given an eternal identity of a slave. On the other hand, Crusoe played the role of a slave owner. What made Crusoe feel the ownership of Xury? The answer is of course: power. Xury was just a boy whereas Crusoe was a grown up man.

Therefore, in terms of physical strength, he was more powerful than Xury. And interestingly, Crusoe had already demonstrated his strength in front of Xury by throwing the Moor into the sea (Defoe 23). Only after that, he asked for Xury's faithfulness again by frightening him: "Xury . . . if you will not stroak your face to be true to me, *that is, swear by Mahomet and his father's beard*, I must throw you into the sea too" (23). Crusoe also had chosen Xury, not the Moor, as his companion because the Moor could not be "trust[ed]". In other words, he probably would not have accepted Crusoe's domination.

The second thing this paper focuses on is Crusoe's first encounter with Friday which is followed by Crusoe's defining their master-slave identities with the influence of power and through the hegemonising of Friday all leading to the formation of Friday's post-colonial identity.

It is noteworthy that by the time the encounter between Crusoe and Friday occurs, Crusoe was already in a powerful position. The novel's order of exposition is significant here, "Crusoe [had] pulled himself through the crisis of the first few years and managed to build a secure position before the Indian arrives. This [was] the basis for the hierarchical relationship between the two men" (Velzen 598). In addition, prior to the appearance of Friday, Crusoe had his sole authority over the island. Crusoe says, "There were no Rivals. I had no Competitor, none to dispute Sovereignty or Command with me" (Defoe 128). Accordingly, when Crusoe first came across the single footprint, his immediate reaction was as if he were "thunderstruck" or had seen an "apparition" (153). Psychoanalytically explaining, the unnatural reaction came out possibly because he was nurturing within himself a fear of losing his sole authority. Mcinelly supports this idea by stating, "Crusoe's authority- indeed . . . is threatened by the mere prospects of an encounter with the Other" (7). Because of that repressed fear, in the first encounter with Friday and the cannibals, similar to the case of Xury, Crusoe thought it necessary to demonstrate his power first. Alam

comments, “Crusoe’s possession of such superior weaponry gives him a sense of power over the people and he is willing to use it” (161). This demonstration of power was basically in order to declare his own superior identity and to determine the others’ identities as not at all equal to him.

Unlike the way he had handled Xury, Crusoe, who is the “true prototype of the British colonists” according to Joyce, took a new approach by appearing in front of Friday as a saviour (153). However, the real motive of Crusoe was what he said: “my only way to go about to attempt an escape was, to endeavour to get a savage into my possession” (Defoe 199). In order to use Friday completely for his own purposes, Crusoe needed to prepare him as someone though not white in colour, but English in manner. In other words, if Crusoe is considered the governor of his state (which he claims later in the novel), he used both “Repressive State Apparatus-RSA” (his gun) and also “Ideological State Apparatuses—ISAs” to hegemonise Friday (Althusser 2). Crusoe’s first instruction to Friday was to call him “Master” (327). Once the titles and hierarchy were established, Crusoe proceeded to reshape much of Friday’s identity. Crusoe’s domination of Friday was domination by consent. Crusoe was so successful in “hegemonising” Friday that in spite of being physically strong, Friday did not protest even for once (Gramsci 2). Rather, he was ready to give up his life for Crusoe.

At first, to hegemonise Friday, Crusoe (re)named him. Novak states in “Friday: or, the Power of Naming” that “By renaming [Friday], Crusoe assumes possession of him in the same way that Columbus assumed possession of the land by his namings” (McInelly 5). The second step was to teach Friday English language. Crusoe calls it his next “business” to teach Friday to “speak” (Defoe 206). Only because Crusoe could not understand Friday’s language, it seems as if Friday had no language of his own. The third step was using the grand narrative of religion and converting Friday into Christianity. Friday had his own god “Benamuckee” (Defoe 216). “Still Crusoe merely convince[d] Friday that the Christian God is greater- more

powerful- than old Benamuckee” (Blackburn 369). Thus, Friday’s linguistic and religious identities were manipulated to establish “cultural hegemony” (Said 7).

Even if we do not consider these changes in Friday’s identity as conscious act of colonising by Crusoe, even then the question of power predominates. To show that, an analogy can be drawn: two completely different persons, Crusoe and Friday, being the only two inhabitants of the island, were like two objects of different temperatures kept in contact. Scientifically, heat transfers from the object of high temperature to the object of low temperature. Similarly, a change was inevitable either in Crusoe or in Friday. However, who among the two is high and who is low? In other words, who will influence the other and who will be influenced? That is determined by the temperature referring to power. Since, Crusoe is the person who had weapon power, already had authority over the island, and also had the credit of saving Friday’s life, it is he by whom Friday’s identity would be influenced or changed.

Now, the most important issue that remains is the effect of naming or renaming, of the teaching of English language and of the conversion and so on. Definitely, the effect of all these colonising acts is the formation of Friday’s post-colonial identity which would be interpreted in the light of Homi Bhabha’s concept of “hybridity” (112).

McInelly discusses the issue in the following way:

The Crusoe-Friday relationship exemplifies what Homi Bhabha means by colonial mimicry and ambivalence. “Colonial mimicry” Bhabha explains, “is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite”. No matter how well Friday imitates his master, he is always Other. In this regard Bhabha postulates that colonial mimicry helps to establish and regulate the power structures that underlie colonial relationships. The “partial presence” of the colonised subject produces a fragmentary vision of the colonist’s own identity. (17)

H. U. E Velzen adds, “The Red Man derives his identity from Crusoe; although he is treated with compassion and understanding, he is nonetheless a human machine for Crusoe, without culture and personality” (598). Furthermore, Friday’s use of a Pidgin language is the best instance for his hybrid identity.

To conclude, this paper takes it for granted that *Robinson Crusoe* offers a prototypical colonising plan, hence a psychoanalytic perspective will be taken. To explain that way, it was probably the painful experience of Crusoe in the captivity as a slave that created a great fear of being dominated in Crusoe’s “unconscious” (Freud 605). And it was added to his superiority complex about being a “civilised” English Christian. These in the following parts of the novel made Crusoe repeatedly demonstrate his power and strength which he used like a Machiavellian character. However, though it helped him hold on with his so called “superior” identity, this power ended up shaping the identity of Xury as a slave and creating a “double-consciousness”² in Friday regarding his identity (Bois 2).

Notes and References

1. Strategic location: “a way of describing the author’s position in a text with regard to the oriental material he writes about”. Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books, 1978, p.20.
2. The individual sensation of feeling as though your identity is divided into several parts, making it difficult or impossible to have one unified identity.

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