

## “IMMODERATE DESIRE”: *ROBINSON CRUSOE* AS AN ALLEGORY OF CIVILIZATION OF MAN

**K. Shrikarunaakaran**

PhD Research Scholar,  
Department of English Literature,  
EFL University,  
Hyderabad

### Abstract

This paper aims to show that Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* as a representational work of human civilization. It discusses the preoccupation of the work in its historical backdrop and evaluates as to what extent the work allegorizes the human civilization. Ideological baggage of the period is touched on to lay out an understanding in this view. Moreover, the origins of a capitalist era and the modernist emphasis of individualism are underlined. The paper ends with the note that the work could be positively seen as an allegorical work of human civilization despite the fact that it is predominantly focused on a single individual, and runs short of the collective subjectivity of Mankind.

**Keywords:** allegory, individualism, homo economicus, civilization, struggle

*Robinson Crusoe* written by Daniel Defoe is considered too be the first work that deserves to be called novel. It was intended to be a historical novel. This is evident in the author’s special concern over the mention of special concern over the mention of the exact period of time of the events/incidents. As a matter of fact history reveals civilization. As part and partial of civilization, various philosophies come into being. Some are relegated and stuck to a strict adherence and through passage of time expose their limitations and inadequacies. Generations dwelt on the task of finding ultimate truth of life. As part of the pursuit human life required a systematic refined life. Out of such noble thinking there dawned a philosophy of Puritanism/Calvinism. As a result of environmental factors (social factors / family upbringing) Defoe’s commitment towards Puritanism was skin-deep. This belief is manifested in *Robinson Crusoe*. However Defoe appears to give this theme a secondary treatment. The primary focus is on, as Ian Watt puts it, homo economicus- economic Man. Since going in search for fortune and living bound by the Puritanistic principles were the order of the day, it is no surprise for critics that a writer should opt for writing such a novel as *Robinson Crusoe*.

Crusoe’s narration of his experiences out in the sea and beyond presents a conflict at the very outset – he commits a filial sin (it is coupled with Crusoe’s irreligious nature). This conflict lays the foundation for the rest of the story. In a way it could be called a beginning of self-realization. When one oversteps the norms that restrict men, he is beyond consequences and he is

ultimately forced to make his conceptions of the life meant for him. These and the like conceptions of each individual assist in the construction of the ideological frame of civilization thereby exercising a great deal of influence on their collective existence.

One such ideological conception that had been in operation was Puritanism which hardly tolerates its articles of norms being violated. Defoe's work is one of a didactic nature of such belief. The original sin of filial disobedience and his irreligious nature are the primary objects of attack from the author. Crusoe supports this when he says: his 'rambling thoughts' and 'rash and immoderate desire of rising faster in life than the Nature of a thing admitted' brought him the mortification of being confined to a lonely island that is full of danger.

Defoe's attempt to make the work a literary piece is obvious. A critic says of the works as "it is essentially... a superb adventure story charged with the primary appeal of all narrative fiction: suspense individual resourcefulness, threatening disasters and eventual triumph". Though Defoe abstained from presenting a mental trauma or psychological suffering resultant from loneliness, Crusoe's acts to drive it away are of revealing nature. He engages himself to find out any companion. He finds solace in Poll, the parrot, etc. He even engages himself in some sort of task or other all the time. (Conrad in the *Heart of Darkness* deliberately engages the narrator in hard labour of repairing the steamer.) The same critic says, 'in breaking with his father, an act of "Original Sin", which is the first step towards loneliness. But it is also the first step towards self-realization. Throughout the novel ...he takes a giant towards self-determination'. This points out at the risk-taking and venturing out of comfort zone in the march towards one's self-determination, and which is microcosmically represents the condition of the entire human civilization.

What Crusoe does is to go backwards to ancient civilization and start again from scratch. Situational compulsion leads him to use his resourcefulness to the extreme point and takes a giant leap forwards. He undergoes a hard and terrible experience to make it a reality. Crusoe's account of his management and manipulation of things really gives a peep into how humanity evolved. The account of the predicament of the single man faced, has the capacity to bring to focus the smothering challenge that was ahead of the humanity and the endeavor men would have taken collectively since time immemorial. The origin of civilization comes about as part of man's gradual evolution of man's life style; hunting, cattle-breeding, farming and industrialization. Though Crusoe is a middle class Victorian his natural instinct ignored its safer existence. He braves the challenging world outside his comfort zone. Hence he is bound to face the consequences alone. He has to spend time in providing himself with basic amenities. His sea-going venture directed by his "rash and immoderate desire" (Defoe 59) costs him his lifetime; brings him desperation, hopelessness and alienation. Human company and the comfort fraught with therein are out of reach for Crusoe on his Island of Despair.

He constructs a dwelling place; makes it safer; delves under the rock; builds more than one wall and camouflages it to protect him from potential dangers latent on the unknown island. He always hatches a thought for a safer place. Anticipation of natural catastrophe always keeps him under check. He is often under brown study on how to tackle any unforeseen circumstances. He is head over heels at his discovery of a cave. He is contented when he finds a pleasanter country on the island. He deems himself a counterpart to the European landlords. Yet he cannot forget the fact that his lonely life on the island is always uncertain and unpredictable.

Crusoe has to engage in hunting for daily meal. Consequent upon his continued struggle for survival, his hunting improves. He specializes in it. Having come to know that cattle's eyesight is always directed downwards, he chooses hilltop to look for them. Shortage of gun

powder forces him to consider alternatives; he tames goats; for human-like comfort he trains Poll (a parrot) to say his name; he mulls over of ways to get access to certain meals; dries grapes; thoughts of growing barley finds ground reality; makes tools out of timber; fences the garden; drives away animals and birds that feed on the crops; uses scarecrow-like techniques; acts prudently with foresight; takes special care to keep aside a portion of seeds for sowing; looks out for ways to pound the corn and husk the grain. His spirits do not sink to doldrums at his failure to find out an appropriate stone for making a mortar and pestle. Alternative ways are soon considered and iron wood comes to help. To search and separate the grain from the husk, he uses a material taken from the wrecked ship. Flour is ready; now he is at loss of vessels. His keen study relieves of it. He makes them out of mud and dries them in the sun. The pots and vessels gradually take a well-formed shape and become appreciable. Crusoe says: “by stating and squaring everything by reason, and by making the most rational judgement of things, every man may be in time, master of every mechanic art. I had never handled a tool in my life” (Defoe 107) Crusoe gloats over with tones of one making a discovery:

“It might be truly said that now I worked for my bread. I believe few people have thought much upon the strange multitude of little things necessary in the providing, producing, curing, dressing, making, and finishing this one article of bread” (Defoe 187)

His boat-making capacity adequately demonstrates his technical skill. Crusoe can even be seen as the agent of urbanization. Ian Watt identifies Crusoe with the typical western man. Industrial revolution and urbanization find allegorical significance in the novel. Aspects of urbanization are evident in his concern over building up infrastructure facilities like drains and fortifications. Man of no motive was the primitive Man. Later motivated by his development of intelligence he establishes himself in a permanent place. The man, who went in search of his needs, settled at one place and procured everything to his dwelling place. Crusoe’s life on the island of Despair is typical of this development.

Civilization is composed of everything that is fraught with the continued existence of humanity. The instinct for upward mobility is the cardinal cause for the continuous change of civilization. Crusoe’s restlessness and individual courage with bursting enterprise depict how it keeps taking on increasingly better forms over time. His tireless stamina encounters each imposition with creative skill. His firm stand and optimism brings out the strength of Man at best. The capacity to be good is also evident in Crusoe’s avoidance from unnecessarily inflicting pain or damage. The anthropological connection of religion with fear is characteristically observed in Crusoe’s frequent indulgence in religious thoughts when difficult circumstances made his life hard. His reason coupled with religious backdrop works well to keep him alive and with values. He expresses his religious commitment in the analysis of his plight and consequences. “Providence” is the recurring key word he seeks succour. He presents ‘certain Discoveries of an Invisible world and a converse of Spirits’ as doubtless evidence of benevolent spiritual influence latent in the world. Clive T. Probyn says ‘Crusoe’s self-scrutiny is underpinned by his creator’s almost anthropological view of religion born out of Crusoe’s fear’. The footprint on the beach sends a shock wave through his veins and nerves. Constant bible reading implies his complete surrender to the ‘Providence’.

*The Rise of the Novel* by Ian Watt provides a classic treatment of Crusoe as the man of nascent capitalism. Materialism holds a supreme sway over the protagonist. His activities are basically material oriented. Though he ritually renounces money his concern is still after worldly possibilities. After all, the crucial cause for his wanderlust is the “desire of rising faster than the

nature of thing admitted...” (Defoe 59). Crusoe’s calculation of things in terms of practical benefit pins him down to what would Ian Watt designate as ‘homo economicus’. Crusoe’s regret at having sold Xury to the Portugal captain when he is in utter need of many hands to labour at his Brazilian plantation points out his self-motive. The very start of his Guinea business venture and the subsequent transactions and the final fortune gathered up in Brazil leave him rich. All these drive home the point of materialism. Book-keeping is the chief symbol of economic-based life. Crusoe pays attention to these records.

Defoe appears to discuss two economic phenomena that expedited economic growth. They are division of labour and specialization. The ordinary routine things gain prominence in Crusoe. His work bear witness to the foregoing concepts: eg. pot making, timber cutting,... Ian Watt says, ‘Crusoe observes not with the eyes of pantheist primitive but with the calculating gaze of colonial capitalism’. Exploitation could be the key term to call this. Colonization also attains a place via allegorical significance. Tools from the wrecked ship proves colonization (peopling the island and sending some assistance). Robinson Crusoe’s economic motive draws a contrast with the other heroes of the myths of our civilization. Whereas those heroes are after an idea, Crusoe is for gain. It is worth mentioning that Ian Watt relates the essential themes of modern civilization (Back to Nature, Dignity of Labour, and Economic Man) with *Robinson Crusoe*. He says ‘Crusoe is a culture hero’ (Watt).

The present day Individualism falls in harmony with Crusoe. No external institution is influential over Crusoe. Religious faith finds a late appeal. Political individualism too manifests through them. Crusoe looks upon himself as the sole monarch of the island, and makes others think so too. Others are subjects for him. They serve him and ready to lay down their life for him. In this, forms of capitalism are manifested.

Education and military build-up have become essential. Education receives a special consideration. Crusoe takes pains to teach Friday religion and English; trains him in handling the tools; takes care to keep him away from cannibal savagery. Crusoe’s precaution and fortification and the strategies adopted, to encounter the savage cannibals are revealing of the present day muscle-flexing scenario of countries.

Finally, a case against the work is being considered, i.e. Defoe abstains from discussing matters related with family life, love, human relationships. There is another case in point. The novel is about a single man in a single island. The word ‘civilization’ is applicable where there is a social life – i.e. collective existence of people. Moreover values have no place where materialism takes precedence. These provide a substantial ground against considering *Robinson Crusoe* reflective of multi-faceted civilization. Still, one could stay supportive of the statement that the novel reveals civilization. For it discusses philosophers of life, growth of humanity, its fears, challenges, compulsions and inherent hope for sustaining existence and provides an illuminated insight into human civilization.

## Reference

- Allen, Walter. *The English Novel*. London: Penguin, 1958.  
 Defoe, Daniel. *Robinson Crusoe*. London: Macmillan & Co, 1868.  
 Probyn, Clive T. *English Fiction of the Eighteenth Century 1700 – 1789*. New York: Longman. 1987.  
 Watt, Ian. *The Rise of the Novel*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1957.