



Ain Shams University
Faculty of Arts
Department of English
Language and Literature

**Rewriting *Robinson Crusoe*: The Intersection of
the Postcolonial and the Postmodern in Coetzee's
Foe, Walcott's *Pantomime* and Selvon's *Moses
Ascending***

An M.A. Thesis

Submitted by
Yasmine Ahmed Abdel Aziz

To
The Department of English Language and Literature
Faculty of Arts
Ain Shams University

Under the supervision of
Prof. Mustafa Riad
Dr. Shereen Mazloun

2010

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

{قالوا سبحانك لا علم لنا إلا
ما علمتنا انك أنت العليم الحكيم}

صدق الله العظيم

سورة البقرة {٣٢}

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	ii
Preface	1
Introduction	5
Chapter I:	
“Friday/Crusoe Amid the Colonial Venture”	26
Chapter II:	
“Friday/Crusoe in the Post-Independent “Periphery””	59
Chapter III:	
“Friday/Crusoe in the “Decentered” Center”	99
Conclusion	138
Works Cited	147

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deep and sincere gratitude to Prof. Mustafa Riad and Dr. Shereen mazloun for their valuable help and advice during all the steps of the research. I would like to thank them for their care and patience. This thesis would not have been possible without their continuous support, guidance and encouragement. Thanks are due to all my professors for their invaluable help over the years. Finally, my thanks go to my parents for their total love, dedication and encouragement. This thesis could not have been completed without their support and their faith in me.

PREFACE

The thesis explores an important area in postcolonial literature, that is, the body of work written by postcolonial writers to rework major British colonial texts that facilitated their colonization and propagated European values as universal truths. They rewrite these works to interrogate their assumptions and question their assumed authority. *The Tempest* (1610), *Othello* (1603), *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) are among the works that are widely chosen as targets of this revisionary project.

The thesis lends particular attention to three texts that rework Daniel Defoe's colonial novel *Robinson Crusoe*. These works are written by writers that belong to different races and origins, namely the white South African Nobel prize novelist, J. M. Coetzee (1940), the Creole West Indian Nobel prize dramatist and poet, Derek Walcott (1930) and finally, the Creole Indo-Trinidadian novelist, Samuel Selvon (1923-1994).

The thesis aims to examine the postcolonial texts in question, Selvon's *Moses Ascending* (1975), Walcott's *Pantomime* (1978) and Coetzee's *Foe* (1986) in relation to *Robinson Crusoe*. Moreover, it attempts to offer a reading that illustrates common postcolonial and postmodern features in the texts concerned. It sheds light on the various strategies postcolonial writers use to subvert the British canon and retrieve the voices of the marginalized and the suppressed.

The study attempts to answer the following questions with special reference to *Foe*, *Pantomime* and *Moses Ascending*. First,

why do writers, particularly, from the former colonies resort to reworking Western canonical texts, and are these reformulations considered as mere imitations/pastiches of Western models or as effective tools of resistance/subversive parodies? Second, what are the problems and concerns that postcolonial writers face regarding their choice of topics and language? Third, how far does a writer's race and beliefs affect the way he appropriates a canonical text?

As far as methodology is concerned, the thesis attempts an analysis of the texts that traces points of intersection between postmodernism and postcolonialism. Thus, each chapter examines one of the postcolonial texts in question and highlights common thematic concerns such as history, marginality, ambivalence, mimicry and power, as well as, shared strategies of analysis and interpretation such as irony, parody and metafiction.

Worthy to be mentioned that while points of difference between the two theories are out of the scope of the thesis, the researcher does not want to neglect a major point of difference between them. Postcolonialism has a more distinct and pressing political agenda that is intrinsic to its oppositionality. This more direct political motivation, in the words of Linda Hutcheon, goes beyond “the postmodern limits of deconstructing existing orthodoxies into the realms of social and political action” (150).

The thesis consists of an introduction, three chapters and a conclusion. The chapters trace the development of the Friday/Crusoe relationship at three different stages in the history of colonialism and, consequently, are organized according to a certain order that parallels the history of colonialism.

The introduction pinpoints some of the thematic concerns and tools that bring postmodernism and postcolonialism together. Moreover, it tackles the issue of reworking canonical texts and the debate it stirs among postcolonial and postmodern critics and writers.

Chapter I entitled “Friday/Crusoe Amid the Colonial Venture” analyzes *Foe* and *Robinson Crusoe* side by side to explore the subversive strategies that Coetzee employs to dismantle Defoe's text. It portrays the Friday/Crusoe relationship in the eighteenth century during the time of the colonial venture. The representation of the self and the other and the relationship between authority, authorship and silence are some of the issues tackled in the chapter.

Chapter II entitled “Friday/Crusoe in the Post-Independent ‘Periphery’” examines *Pantomime*, which traces the Friday/Crusoe relationship in a latter phase as the events take place on the independent island of Tobago. It explores the difference between blind mimicry and subversive appropriation. Moreover, it illustrates how Walcott mixes the European form of drama with Caribbean carnival and how he mixes Creole and Standard English. Finally, the chapter examines Walcott's use of metatheatrical techniques and carnivalesque role-playing to negotiate and undermine Defoe's fixed roles that are based on binary oppositions.

Chapter III entitled “Friday/Crusoe in the ‘Decentered’ Center” examines *Moses Ascending*, which depicts Friday's life in the London of the 1970's and his encounters with other immigrants and his white servant. What starts as a simple role-

play in *Pantomime*, is further developed in *Moses Ascending* as it becomes increasingly difficult to keep Defoe's colonial binarism. The chapter examines the concepts of ambivalence and resistance. Finally, it explores how Selvon uses irony and the mock-heroic style to subvert colonial hierarchies.

The conclusion offers an assessment of the issues raised in the thesis.

INTRODUCTION

Recently critics started to notice similarities of concerns and strategies between different theoretical approaches. According to Bill Ashcroft, Helen Tiffin and Gareth Griffiths, postcolonial and postmodern literatures share some thematic concerns and tools of analysis because “the intensification of theoretical interest in the postcolonial has coincided with the rise of postmodernism in Western society” (117). They add that the main project of postmodernism, the contesting of totalizing metanarratives through which a culture legitimates its practices and beliefs, is similar to the postcolonial project of dismantling Eurocentric colonial discourse, which legitimates colonialism (117).

In this sense, the colonial discourse becomes one of the metanarratives that both postcolonialism and postmodernism seek to contest. By examining the colonial discourse, one can see how and why a metanarrative is created and how it sustains itself and by examining postcolonial works, one can see how this metanarrative is subverted. However, before highlighting the points of intersection, the nature and function of metanarratives need to be explored.

According to John Stephens, a metanarrative is "a global or totalizing cultural narrative schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience" (6). Jean-François Lyotard believes that in addition to explaining and organizing knowledge, metanarratives validate the origins and the purposes of existing power structures, science and thought and present them as the natural order of things. In this sense, the ideas that revolution will

free the proletariat from the iron grip of capitalism and that rational thinking and scientific reasoning will bring about social and moral progress are examples of metanarratives (qtd. in Klages 184).

Lyotard explains that the postmodern age is characterized by its “incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv). They are no longer credible or acceptable because of their overarching totalizing nature that demands consensus and rejects any deviation. They mask the instabilities and contradictions in the systems they seek to protect. In this way, they efface difference and opposition to maintain order and stability. Lyotard believes that the postmodern disbelief in metanarratives gives rise to multiple and provisional ‘little narratives’ that promote diversity and heterogeneity over all forms of totalization (xxiii-xxv). They account for the actions of specific groups in certain local circumstances.

Linda Hutcheon maintains that in a postmodern age:

Any knowledge cannot escape complicity with some metanarrative, with the fictions that render possible any claim to ‘truth,’ however provisional...No narrative can be a natural ‘master’ narrative: there are no natural hierarchies; there are only those we construct. It is this kind of self-implicating questioning that should allow postmodernist theorizing to challenge narratives that do presume to ‘master’ status, without necessarily assuming that status for itself. (13)

Hutcheon's words are very significant because interrogating metanarratives, which try to smooth over contradictions, challenges the notion of consensus. She adds that the systems that try to make people believe that they can easily define universal agreement have now been interrogated by the acknowledgment of differences in theoretical, artistic, social and economic realms (7).

The attitude of postmodernism towards metanarratives is similar to that of postcolonialism towards Eurocentric colonial discourse, which legitimates colonization and exploitation of the natives. The colonial metanarrative depends on a binary system, which presents the colonizer as civilized and the colonized as savage. The English culture is portrayed as the norm or epitome of civilization that the colonized have to follow in order to be saved from their savagery. Thus, the colonial venture is portrayed as having a humanitarian goal, saving the souls of the natives by teaching them European values and tastes.

Edward Said explains how European colonialism constructs certain representations and stereotypes to fix the colonized and make them knowable and manageable. Then, it maintains the status quo by repeating them over and over (3). Texts that belong to various disciplines such as literature, history, politics, science and geography were used to provide stereotypical images and representations of the natives, which were essential to colonizer's self-definition.

Bill Ashcroft and Gareth Griffiths explain that the gradual building and development of the British Empire relied on a fixed hierarchal relationship in which the colonized function as the exact opposite of the colonizer. The colonized are savages,

irrational, sensual, codeless and sluggish, whereas, the colonizers are civilized, rational, articulate and hard workers (41-43).

Not only did these texts speak about the colonized, but they also spoke for them. For example, explorers wrote narratives about the processes of discovery, language, traditions and appearance of the natives. However, in these accounts, the voices of the colonized were silenced and the previous histories of the colonies were ignored. Similarly, in the *The Tempest*, the history of Sycorax, the ab/original ruler of the island before the coming of Prospero, is never mentioned. This implies that the real history that is worthy of documentation starts with the coming of Prospero, Miranda and the rest of the white colonizers.

Gauri Viswanathan explains how English language and literature played an important role in the colonial process by defining English values and imparting them to both the colonized and the colonizer. The colonizers realized that mental and cultural control are as necessary as the physical one. That is why, colonial education played a major role in managing the natives in the peripheries. The British administrators claimed that it had a humanistic purpose, but it was used to form a class that would promote Britain's rule and safeguard its interests (3).

Since the colonial classroom was a site for propagating Eurocentric ideologies, education had negative effects on the identity of the colonized and on the way they viewed their histories. Ngugi Wa Thiong maintains that colonial education created a hierarchy of cultural importance and value, which was imposed by the British Empire on both the colonized and the colonizer. This hierarchy was meant to domesticate them and

place the indigenous cultures in an inferior position. He expresses his anger towards the damaging consequences of colonial education that leads to:

Annihilating a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves. (3)

Since many postcolonial writers are aware of the negative effects that colonial education has on the identity, psyche and history of the colonized, an important step in the decolonization process involves the production of postcolonial literature that reworks major colonial texts, particularly, those which colonial education labeled as great literature. They interrogate their assumptions and question their assumed authority and in this way, they produce counter-texts by using the colonial work as a starting point and by transforming its characters, plot and narrative structures to suit their own agenda.

For example, Jean Rhys, rewrites Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) because she disliked the way the novel represented the Jamaican Creole woman, Bertha Mason, as the mad woman in the attic and decided to give her a voice and write her story in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). Marina Warner's novel *Indigo* or *Mapping the Waters* (1992) reworks Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1610) to recover the voice of Sycorax and uncover the elided

history of the island, which was portrayed as a nearly empty place before the coming of the colonizers. The novel portrays how life was before the coming of Prospero to illustrate how he usurped, by deception and force, what lawfully belonged to Sycorax and Caliban.

One of the significant texts that have acquired a special place in the project of rewriting canonical works is Daniel Defoe's novel *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins rightly maintain that:

Defoe's novel, along with *The Tempest*, is held responsible for establishing and maintaining the New World tropologies that have led to the subordination of black peoples in a master/slave dialectic. Read critically, both texts depict the profound interpellation of the racial other into Western discourse; hence, the Crusoe /Friday and Prospero /Caliban relationships act as a symbolic touchstone for the larger colonial enterprise. (36)

Helen Tiffin explains that many of these works bear on postmodern and postcolonial discourses because they reject the idea of a center that assumes superiority and smothers difference and plurality. Moreover, they contest the idea of a single fixed truth by exposing the constructedness of this 'center'. In addition, they give voice to the oppressed and challenge their stereotypical representations. Tiffin adds that in these texts, one can see:

An ongoing dialectic between hegemonic centrist systems and peripheral subversion of them; between European or British discourses and their post-colonial dis/mantling...It has been the project of post-colonial writing to interrogate

European discourses and discursive strategies from a privileged position within (and between) two worlds; to investigate the means by which Europe imposed and maintained its codes in the colonial domination of so much of the rest of the world. (95)

Black writers are not the only ones who rework Western canonical texts, white writers, as well, participate in this revisionary project. Although they cannot speak about the black experience of oppression from a position of authority, they respond to the prejudices of the colonial discourse. Nadine Gordimer explains that the role of the white writer is to “raise the consciousness of white people, who unlike himself, have not woken up” (qtd. in Gallagher 6). She believes that although the white writer has little impact on the white-dominated regimes, he can influence the individuals through raising their awareness and changing their views.

Other writers rework colonial texts to explore and evaluate their ancestors’ past. Marina Warner, a British novelist, comments on her experience in rewriting *The Tempest*:

With *Indigo*, I chose to rework *The Tempest*, a locus classicus in current re-visionings of imperial encounters; I felt presumptuous in doing so, but my reason- my excuse – was that it seems to me that people who are descended from the wrong side, as it were- the colonial side- don’t examine what that inheritance holds, that if speaking is left to those who are justified by oppression in the past and in memory, then in one sense one part of the story has been written out of it. It is as important to tell the ugly story as it is to tell the