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Are Early Novels Archives of Empire Both in Forms and Content?

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Abstract

Novels as a form of literature represent a new age marked by social and political changes and economic revolution. It is difficult to say when the era of the English novel began since there are controversies among literary scholars on the first novel in English literature. Undoubtedly, the controversies will not soon end in a consensus, as the components that make a fiction novel still need to be debated. This essay does not aim to become engaged in this debate but will try to find out what initiated the era of the novel. As it is found, this was around the time when the slave trade began, and colonialism was emerging as the pivotal factor in the economy of the country. This essay will try to show how the British psyche received colonial activities of the age and how imperialism encouraged writers to make new stories of age in a new form, like a novel. In other words, it is worthwhile to look into how the early novels are archives of empire both in form and content. Here, two early novels- *Oroonoko* by Aphra Behn and *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe, are taken as examples to illustrate the points.

Keywords: Empire, Archive of Empire, Robinson Crusoe, Oroonoko, Daniel Defoe, Aphra Behn, postcolonialism

Introduction

New forms of literature emerged in ages with socio-economic changes. With the rise of imperialism, writers felt the need to write new epics narrating the adventures of their countrymen. Novels became the new epics of the age and began to record the imperialistic psyche. The early novels of English literature, not necessarily the novels on the imperialistic mission only, have become the archives of how society received the new age of colonialism. There lies the vast significance of the early novels as archives of empire.

Imperialism is a mindset, a name of a national ambition to dominate others politically, culturally, and economically. Hobson writes, 'Colonialism, in its best sense, is a natural overflow of nationality; its test is the power of colonists to transplant the civilization they represent to the new natural and social environment in which they find themselves' (Hobson 6). It is exactly what Robinson Crusoe in *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) by Daniel Defoe did even

on the lonely island, and it is exactly what Kurtz did in Congo in *Heart of Darkness* (1899) by Joseph Conrad. This essay aims to find out the 'overflow of nationality' in early novels written in the heyday of British imperialism.

Oroonoko by Aphra Behn, published in 1688, and *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe, published in 1719, - two early novels, reflect the time, incidents, mindsets, and values of the time when the whole of Europe was in desperate search of new lands, engaged in face-to-face conflicts with one another in amassing wealth from the unexplored parts of the world and above all expanding the territory of their colony to the maximum extent. These practices of colonialism led the European countries to adopt the centuries-long slave trade, which was legalized and normalized as a part of the colonial practices, leading to a massive loss of human lives and human suffering. The literary works of the empirical era reveal how and to what end the empirical forces conducted their acts of colonialism, becoming valuable archives of empires.

Oroonoko by Aphra Behn was published in 1688, while the transatlantic slave trade officially began in 1663 with the Royal approval of Charles II. This novel represents the British slave trade, the values of slavery, and details about transatlantic colonial practices. Behn focuses on the tragic life of the protagonist, Oroonoko, who, along with his beloved Imoinda, undergoes a tragic end. *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe, which features the life of the protagonist living on a lonely island for almost three decades, helps the readers understand the norms and values of the British regarding the slave trade and colonization.

This essay will explore how far the two fictions may be described as 'Archives of Em-pire,' to what degree the effect is achieved formally, how the archival elements are presented, and what purpose they serve.

Background

At the height of British Imperial power, the relationship between literature and Empire seemed self-evident: the expansion of 'England' caused an explosion of English Literature. English literature and the British Empire were the twin children of the English Renaissance, that extraordinary widening of intellectual and geographical horizons during Elizabeth I's reign (Armitage 99).

The Renaissance, not the English Renaissance only, encouraged science, exploration, and love for beauty, widening avenues for material knowledge, arts, and literature. The Renaissance was a shift of attitude towards how people should live. Therefore, the Age of the Renaissance led Europe to political change, increasing people's expectations and empowering people in general. The empowerment included increased freedom of expression, presentation of new ideas, and exploration of philosophies that pushed the boundaries of possibilities. And most importantly, 'Since the sixteenth century, the coincidence of the discovery of the routes to the Indies and the rediscovery of the ancient texts has been held to mark the break between the 'middle' ages and the modern world' (Armitage 99). This 'break' involves a revolution of intellectuality and recognition of freedom of thought.

As the Renaissance recognized individual freedom, literature gathered momentum in different forms and volumes. The expansion of the British Empire and the flourishing of English literature went hand in hand, each inspiring the other. The historian has chronicled every detail of the empirical era, but what literature can record is different. Literature goes beyond facts and captures emotions, ideas, and attitudes, and most significantly, how they combinedly work. As a literary form, the novel made its appearance to mark the historical moment of change, encouraging the readers by telling the stories of uncharted lands, distant territories, and exciting adventures. Along with serving these purposes, this novel gives us the opportunity to see a different aspect of British Imperialism:

... it is genuinely troubling to see how little Britain's great humanistic ideas, institutions, and monuments, which we still celebrate as having the power ahistorically to command our approval, how little they stand in the way of the accelerating imperial process (Said 82).

Most of the early novels, whether written on imperialism or day-to-day domestic life, can provide us with a glimpse of the moral values of the colonial culture and the narratives that convinced the nation about the moral justification of colonial enterprises.

***Oroonoko* by Aphra Behn**

The question of how far *Oroonoko* by Aphra Behn is an archive of empire is not easy to answer. Aphra Behn uses realism as one of the narrative techniques to make the story more credible to the readers and gives the novel work of fiction the status of an archive, incorporating a number of historical elements. It is a first-person narration, and the narrator says in the beginning, 'I was myself an eyewitness to a great part of what you will find here set down' (Behn 1). Again, the narrator asserts, 'I do not pretend in giving you the history of a royal slave, to entertain my reader with adventures of a feigned hero' (Behn 1). It is to be admitted that it is a work of fiction where love is a major theme, and the eponymous hero is sketched as a valiant man in the scale of European literary tradition. Yet, the main European characters mentioned in the story are historical figures. They are the deputy governor William Byam, James Banister, John Trefry, and the ex-parliamentarian George Marten. The artifacts brought from Surinam to England refer to the authenticity of the story. The significant ones are the dried butterflies and snakeskins' that may be seen at His Majesty's Antiquary's' (Behn 1).

Can the narrator's claim of being true to the fact be accepted without any controversy? The narrator claims that she was 'an eyewitness to a great Part of what' the readers' will find here set down' (Behn 1). Here, the narrator claims herself to be a historian who records the history of *Oroonoko*. She went to Surinam as the daughter of the Lieutenant-General-elect of the colony, along with her mother, sister, and brother. Unfortunately, her father, the Lieutenant-General-Elect, died on the voyage. The historical sources suggest, '... she (Aphra Behn) would have been in Surinam in January 1664 and left in March 1664' (Rogers 2). Consequently, the text demands to be studied as an archive of empire.

The question then is to what extent *Oroonoko* by Aphra Behn has formally achieved the effect of being an 'archive of empire.' As far as the form is concerned, there is controversy regarding whether the fictional work *Oroonoko* by Aphra Behn is a novel. Ian Watt says, 'There are still no wholly satisfactory answers to many of the general questions which anyone interested in the early eighteenth-century novelists and their works is likely to ask: Is the novel a new literary form?' Watt thinks that *Robinson Crusoe* is one of the first novels of English literature, and he says, 'And if we assume, as is commonly done, that it is, and that it was begun by Defoe, Richardson and Fielding...', and later Watt regards Aphra Behn as one of the 'Earlier types of prose fiction' writers and aligns her with Lyly and Mrs. Manley (Watt 4, 15). Still, *Oroonoko* by Aphra Behn is a strong contender as the first novel in the English language. Regarding the length of the novel, *Oroonoko* has 29,149 words for 132 pages (Broadview Press-June 8, 2020) – compared to *Crusoe's* 99,200 words for 607 pages (Macmillan and Company, 1868, Harvard University, Feb 17, 2006). The plot is leaner and

biographical with elements of romance, but it was often overlooked as a novel by earlier critics like Watt. Fiction sketches the major characters broadly as a novel demands. The main story is told in the background of the African slave trade and with a number of characters who are not fully developed. Edwin writes, 'In Oroonoko, which appeared in novel form in 1688, Mrs. Behn did pioneer service, actually blazing the trail for the eighteenth-century realistic novelists, and the humanitarian writers that followed some years later' (Edwin 335). Holmesland categorizes Oroonoko as a novel for its huge archival elements that cover a number of cultures. 'There are ample indices that the royal slave is a novelistic medium for Behn's utopian restoration of English culture. The wider context consists of three different cultures-the English, the Coramantien, and the native Surinam- which are compared to one another' (Holmesland 61). The novel attains a height of archival value for covering different cultures of the seventeenth century. Therefore, formally as well, Oroonoko is a success when it comes to preserving historical records.

The capture of Oroonoko by the Captain and the brutality Oroonoko undergoes, though fictional, bear archival value. Rogers in his seminal article, 'Fact and Fiction in Aphra Behn's Oroonoko', mentions a historical source and writes, 'In 1476, a Spanish slaving captain invited on board a black king who regularly sold his prisoners of war to the Portuguese....promptly seized him...' (Rogers 7). There may be some elements of romance in the way Oroonoko shows defiance and accepts death, but 'The grisly details of Oroonoko's execution and his preternatural stoicism under torture are authenticated by actual events. Whipping a slave raw and then rubbing his wounds with pepper was a regular punishment' (Rogers 8). The execution of Oroonoko, the description of which matches historical events as mentioned by Rogers, is a record of the way the British used slavery as a tool of empire building. The indifference of the white colonialists to the grisly incident in the novel is the witness of the normalization of the slave trade across the empire and centuries.

With the use of a first-person narrator, Behn tries to make the story more credible. The narrator says in the beginning that she has got the story from the protagonist of the story, Oroonoko. So, the sources of the story, as mentioned by the narrator, give us an air of second-hand narration. Prince Oroonoko, who is captured as a slave, tells the narrator about how he was enslaved and how his love for Imoinda led him to the tragic incident. Even the identity of the first-person narrator is also to be noted. The narrator is a white female, a British colonist in the South American country where the major tragic part of the story takes place. While telling the story, the narrator not only provides the readers with information but thoughts, feelings, and impressions of the protagonist and other characters, which, as the narrator claims, are obtained directly from the characters. From the first-person point of view, the narrator gives information about land and people, which adds an aura of realism to the story. Here, it is to be noted that the third-person narrator seems to provide only necessary details on the incidents and places where the first-person narrator was not present. Both narrators are complementary to each other, and they serve the purpose of narrating the story differently. The first-person narrator is very lively and engaging, making the emotions of the characters animated, while the third-person narrator is brought only to provide information in a less engaging tone. The use of two narrators contributes to the credibility of the story and

the claim of the first-person narrator that it is a 'history'. (Behn 1). Thus, formally, *Oroonoko* by Behn is a success in becoming an 'archive of empire.'

Because it is mostly a first-person narrative (The novel is written in a mixture of first- and third-person narration), the story is very subjective in nature. The subjectivity certainly adds to the trustworthiness of the story and makes the realistic details more convincing, but at the same time, this subjectivity inherent in the narrative confuses the readers about the standpoint of the narrator as regards slavery and native people. The narrator does not seem to be prejudiced against the native people of the European colony. She regards the 'natives' as the close descendants of Adam and Eve before the fall of Man- "[L]ike our first Parents before the Fall, it seems as if they had no Wishes, there being nothing to heighten Curiosity' (Behn 6). How the narrator treats *Oroonoko* and thinks of other black people in general bears much archival value as they speak of the norms and exercises of the white Europeans of the seventeenth century. The narrator has a remarkably high esteem for the protagonist *Oroonoko*, but he, to the narrator, is an exception only. The narrator explicitly says that she abhors the way *Oroonoko* is treated, but she does not have any clear stand against slavery in general. She admires the foods and customs of the ethnic groups with whom she comes in touch during her stay in Surinam. Her stand about *Oroonoko* is clear because her friends include *Oroonoko* and *Imoinda*, who often dine with her. When seen from the archival point of view, the narrative style matters to determine the position, tone, and voice of the narrator.

There may be a question regarding whether the purpose of the narrator is to speak against slavery and the slave trade consciously, but her descriptions of the treatment of the slaves in the colony, the slave trade that fueled the British economy in the seventeenth century, empire building of the British in the 'New World' and most importantly the national ethics surrounding the slave trade attach much importance to the novel as an 'archive of empire'. The critics have argued for and against the question of how far *Oroonoko* by Behn is antislavery. For example, the title itself, *Oroonoko*, or *The Royal Slave*, is oxymoronic and confusing. Ferguson says, 'The traditional argument that *Oroonoko* marks the first antislavery fiction in the English language turns on *Oroonoko*'s fiery exhortation to the slaves, since all other textual commentary points in a proslavery dire' (Ferguson 341). She attaches an obvious stigma to the other slaves and their races, yet *Oroonoko* is described in a way that makes him powerful and unique compared to the others: 'His face was not of that brown rusty black which most of that nation are, but perfect ebony, polished jet... His nose was rising and Roman, instead of African and flat. His mouth the finest shape that could be seen; far from those great turned lips which are so natural to the rest of the negroes. The whole proportion and air of his face was so nobly and exactly formed that, bating his colour, there could be nothing in nature more beautiful, agreeable, and handsome (Behn 6). Behn describes *Oroonoko* as completely Roman, except for his skin colour. He stands for a powerful individual who, despite his race, will have influence over others. His slave name, *Caesar*, also suggests that Rome, the paradigm of civilization, has come back to life. *Oroonoko* is handsome not only because he satisfies the European criteria of beauty based on classical physiognomy but also because he is different from other Africans who have been forced into slavery. Now, the question is whether the narrator could be equally sympathetic to *Oroonoko*

if his appearance was not so European. The whole approach of the narrator as a white woman and the treatment given to the Oroonoko by other white people bear archival value.

Being an 'archive of empire,' Oroonoko by Behn demands postcolonial study. Critics like Ferguson examine the archival elements to assess if the novel is an antislavery work and argue it to be rather a 'proslavery' fiction (Ferguson 341). To the narrator, slavery is not hateful and a crime against humanity. Rather, she portrays slavery in a positive light. When Oroonoko sees Imoinda for the first time in the new land, the narrator describes, 'Cesar swore he disdained the empire of the world while he could behold his Imoinda, and she despised grandeur and pomp those vanities of her sex, when she could gaze at Oroonoko. He adored the very cottage where she resided...and she vowed it was a palace while adorned with the presence of Oroonoko (Behn 87). The cottage is not a prison but a 'palace', and slavery is not an inhuman condition for the protagonist. There lies the question of whether the novel Oroonoko can be considered an antislavery work. The praise and appreciation that the narrator pours on Oroonoko and Imoinda is because she wants to make it a romance with black characters. When Oroonoko is found and beaten, he no longer looks like himself: 'We all ran to see him; and if before we thought him so beautiful a sight, he was now so altered, that his face was like death's head, blacked over, nothing but teeth and eyeholes' (Behn 86). Evidently, it is after this scene that the narrator and other friends of Oroonoko decide not to save him, for he has lost his love, Imoinda, as well as his handsome European looks and has ultimately become a common slave. Behn is not sympathetic with the slaves, but Oroonoko only as Oroonoko is different from other African slaves. Yet, whatever Behn's approach is, it adds to the novel's archival value.

Robinson Crusoe by Daniel Defoe

Robinson Crusoe provides archival elements of empire as it takes place in the context of the British Colonialism of the seventeenth century. Mcinelly says, 'Featuring a British trader as its hero and set on a distant Caribbean Island, Robinson Crusoe cries out for study in its colonial contexts. Indeed, British colonialism informs nearly every feature of Daniel Defoe's first novel. British colonialism started in the sixteenth century and began to expand across the world by the time Daniel Defoe wrote Robinson Crusoe in 1719' (MCINELLY 1). With its vast fleet of ships, the British Empire began to explore the world and explore resources from all possible corners of the world. At its height, the British Empire rose to 24% of the world's total landmass and ruled 412 million people. By this time, Robinson Crusoe was published, and England began to reap the fruits of colonialism since the resources exploited by the colonies started to expand the economy. Before 1719, there were three chartered companies: East India Company (1600), Hudson's Bay Company (1677), and South Sea Company (1711), which enjoyed the monopoly of business in different parts of the world. The slave trade also received Royal approval, making the path easier for British companies to strengthen their roots in the 'New World.' Crusoe's ambition for the 'sea' and negligence of his 'Ancient' father's advice is representative of the historical truth (Defoe 1).

Robinson Crusoe is a remarkable archive of empire as far as the typical financial attitude of the era is concerned. David says, 'Crusoe becomes quite wealthy very early on in

the novel. The plot up to the point of the shipwreck shows us a fairly rapid accumulation of wealth culminating in the establishment of his plantation' (David 71). The desire to accumulate wealth in Crusoe is evident from the beginning, making him a representative youth of his time. In the beginning, Crusoe says, 'My father, who was very ancient, had given me a competent share of learning, as far as house-education, and a country free-school generally goes, and design'd me for the law; but I would be satisfied with nothing but going to sea,...' (Defoe 1). Since the slave trade and colonization of the Americas went hand in hand at the beginning of the eighteenth century, the social order and values regarding wealth accumulation started changing rapidly. Mercantilism became the fundamental concept of the financial ideology of people in general, which led the nation-states to monopolize areas and their natural resources to maximize their resources. Crusoe was not satisfied with the traditional domestic happiness of the middle-class people, as his father had advised him. To explore the world beyond his means and amass more resources, Crusoe made home his key inspiration. Nothing could prevent him from exploring the world. Neither his father's advice to be modest in desire nor the dangers that befall his ways could prevent him from taking the riskiest adventure of the day. Crusoe's psychology reflects the attitude of the youth of the age who became desperate to explore the Americas, the 'New World.' Thus, Crusoe's financial principles attain an archival value.

With regard to the question of to what extent Robinson Crusoe is formally an 'archive of empire', it is better to look into the question of why Robinson Crusoe falls into the category of one of the earliest novels. In the words of Ian Watt, 'Robinson Crusoe falls most naturally into place, not with other novels, but with the great myths of Western civilization, with Faust, Don Juan, and Don Quixote. All these have as their basic plots, their enduring images, a single-minded pursuit by the protagonist of one of the characteristic desires of Western man' (Watt 84). This desire of Robinson Crusoe was to build an empire, which became both an ambition at the individual level and national level in eighteenth-century England. The Royal African Company was established (1660) by the Duke of York, later James II, only a few decades earlier and began thriving by the time Robinson Crusoe was published (1719). The 'single-minded pursuit' for Robinson Crusoe is the pursuit of establishing an empire. Ian Watt illustrates the nature of the pursuit of all heroes of the 'great myths' mentioned above, 'Each of their heroes embodies an arete and a hubris, an exceptional prowess, and a vitiating excess, in spheres of action that are particularly important in our culture' (Watt 85). Crusoe's desire to establish an empire and exploit the world to the maximum is reflected in his words, 'I have observ'd already how many things I wanted, to fence it, secure it, mow or reap it, cure and carry it home, thrash, part of its from the chaff, and save it' (Defoe 86). The pursuit of wealth, a competition that was going on among European nations in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, is a major part of the plot of the novel. Watts says, 'Lastly, Crusoe's island gives him the complete laissez-faire which economic man needs to realize his aims' (Watt 85). In the form of a novel, the ambition of empire, which is the national desire of Defoe's age as well, attains success.

The first-person narrative technique of Daniel Defoe helps develop the colonial view of an individual and its progress with the plot. Mcinelly says, 'In this essay, I attempt to

demonstrate the extent to which colonialism shapes Defoe's novel both formally and thematically, and I suggest that Robinson Crusoe indicates ways in which British colonial history made the genre of the novel possible' (MCINELLY 2). What Micinelly wants to assert is that Robinson Crusoe perhaps has not reached the height of novels as developed in the later centuries, but fiction paves the way for novels to flourish later. Formally, Robinson Crusoe, through its narrative structure, gives the readers access to the workings of the mind of the narrator or protagonist. When it comes to considering the text as an 'archive of empire, 'readers can explore the values, ideas, and political thoughts of the writer and the age. Mcinelly writes, 'Though the model of colonial rule Defoe articulates in Robinson Crusoe may appear egocentric to the modern reader, it is largely informed by Defoe's political thought' (MCINELLY 15). How the narrator approaches the characters and incidents is mostly subjective and claims critical study. For example, Friday 'kneel'd' down and kissed the ground, and Crusoe wants to show it as typical behaviour of the native people of the colonized area. This is either the ambitious expectation of the colonizers or the fantasy that the British used to nourish in the eighteenth century. Pearlman writes 'His instinct is to turn a fellow being into a powerless dependent—to infantilize him. The conclusion of the novel, disappointing and confused as it is, follows this model, as Crusoe demands obedience from each group that he encounters' (Pearlman 43). Robinson Crusoe transforms Friday into a Christian but does not hesitate to subjugate him. Friday, to Crusoe, is not a fellow human being but one of the resources that he has accumulated on the island. Friday is a commodity or a tool like a gun or other useful assets like animals. Here, his version of spirituality and devotion to Christianity does not shake his conscience when he treats another human being like Xury as a slave. Mcinelly says, 'In this respect, the Crusoe-Friday relationship exemplifies what Homi Bhabha means by colonial mimicry and ambivalence... Again, no matter how well Friday imitates his master, he is always Other' (MCINELLY 17).

The narrative technique used in Robinson Crusoe is close to that of a realistic fiction autobiography or spiritual autobiography, which is generally used to make the work of fiction more convincing. Here, the writer is not an omniscient narrator who knows the workings of the minds of all characters. Here the narrator can describe his own thoughts only. So, in a way, Robinson Crusoe adopts the narrative technique of a memoir or epistolary description and presents archival elements in a more convincing way.

Defoe aims to create a protagonist who represents the national colonial ambition of his age. The slave trade became the national value that was encouraged by Daniel Defoe. Slavery is justified in a number of ways. Friday is seen to submit to Crusoe, and the local people are depicted as cannibals. The portrayal of local people is less a historical fact and more an attempt to justify the subjugation of the natives. Crusoe shows that he is on a lonely island, but he does not have any doubt that he is the master of the land, having the right to kill and exploit whatever falls his way. He is generous to Friday, but the generosity emerges from the point of view of a master, not a friend or fellow human being. Crusoe brags, saying that he has killed seventeen of the twenty-one' savages. 'His kingdom may be a small one, but he is the absolute monarch of the land where his desires reign supreme. All coming here are 'savages' or intruders, and Crusoe wants to dominate them. Friday is good only because he

submits, and others deserve death as they do not bow down to him. Whatever theory might be advanced for his ownership, Crusoe is convinced that the island belongs to him' (Novak 488). Then Crusoe is seen becoming humble to the point of reading the Bible, which is his own version of spirituality. And spirituality did not prevent him from the desire to accumulate more wealth, subjugate another human being, exploit wealth, and be materialistic to the best of his capacity, even when he is confined to an island. The approach to wealth reflects the national motto. In the words of Mcinelly, 'The religious overtones of Defoe's text thus provide a blueprint for a religiously 'sound' colonial policy. Since colonialism brings colonizing peoples into contact with individuals of competing Christian creeds as well as non-Christians, colonialism must, as does Crusoe, establish a strong, liberal, and principled policy on religion' (MCINELLY 11).

Conclusion

In conclusion, both *Oroonoko or The Royal Slave* by Aphra Behn and *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe are rich with archival elements of empires. The two works of fiction represent the time and incidents that took place during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and, most importantly, the views and approaches of the age to colonialism and slavery. The values reflected in the two works of fiction speak of the spirit of the time, making the literary works worthy of deep scholarly exploration. Further studies are needed to investigate how far the two novels are archives of empire in terms of the then trade and commerce, laws and bureaucracy in particular.

Early novelists could not even know that they were keeping a record of their colonial mindset. They did not know that they were historians depicting the social and economic changes that were taking place with the slave trade and massive colonial activities of the day. To the British people, colonialism, though a curse for millions of people around the world, was the beginning of a national adventure that raised the economic and political status of the British and changed the international power dynamics. The novels are the epics of the age of adventure for the British, giving the readers the opportunity to look into the British mindset.

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