



## The Contribution of Daniel Defoe to the English Novel with special reference to *Robinson Crusoe*

Dr. RAJNIKANT S. DODIYA

M.A., M.Ed., NET(Edu.), PhD(Edu.), GSET(Eng.) Ahmedabad, Gujarat (India)

**Abstract:** This article contains the details about the contribution of Daniel Defoe to the English novel which is considered his principal contribution in the Eighteenth century. He is also called as the first English novelist who made the English novel come to existence in its proper way. Before him, there was writing in the form of prose in English literature; which was given a form of a novel by Daniel Defoe. He gave a new direction to the English novel with many regards, i.e. the selection of themes, art of characterization, adding a blend of romance and realism to the novel, etc. He made novel more fascinating and introduced realism along with morality to the form of adventure in the English novel. This article depicts how Daniel Defoe had contributed to the rise of English novel and what factors make him the father of English novel.

**Keywords:** English novel, Robinson Crusoe, Realistic Novel, Realism

**Introduction:** As one of the great literary genres of English literature, the novel form of writing has been entertaining people with its realistic themes and real-life autobiographies of the main characters. For a ton of years, the English novel has been a significant part of literature in English. The novelists in English literature include Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, Laurence Sterne, Oliver Goldsmith, Tobias Smollett, Charles Dickens, etc. It is believed that the genre of novel was emerged in the beginning of the eighteenth century with the early English novels *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe and *Tom Jones* by Henry Fielding. The industrial revolution and the rise of the middle class people created a demand for them to read subjects related to their real-life experiences which are shown in the themes of the English novels of that time. The above two stated novels are the best examples of this type. The realistic theme was the main aspect of the English novel as it demonstrates the real experiences of the middle-class people through its characters. A notable aspect of both the 18<sup>th</sup> century and 19<sup>th</sup> century novels is the way the novelist directly addressed the reader. The rise of English novel is due to Daniel Defoe who did a lot for the English literature mainly in the field of novel writing which made him known as the “father of English novel” later on.

### Daniel Defoe's Contribution to English Literature

Daniel Defoe lived an interesting and productive life. He was a son of a candle maker named James Foe. Later in his life, Daniel added the ‘De’ to his family name ‘Foe’ – often seen as indicative of his desire for upward social mobility. Defoe lived a middle class life of the new 18<sup>th</sup> century Britain and so his writing are grounded in middle class sensibilities and concerns. His writings were intended mainly for a like-minded middle class people of that time.

In the beginning, Defoe was a very successful and prolific journalist and writer of pamphlets and books on subjects ranging from politics to morality. Defoe wrote seemingly about everything. His writings included more than 550 published books, journals and pamphlets. Defoe's distinct contribution to English literature is novel and he has been considered the first English novelist. Many people considered Defoe to be the first realist because of his new form of ideas which he used in his fiction writing. Defoe used devices such as rogue biography spiritual autobiography and Christian allegory. Defoe used the actual account of his time and expressed the social issues

around that time in his writings. The techniques introduced by Defoe in writing include dialogue, setting, characterization, symbolism and irony. The major part of his style was to make overly detailing small descriptions in writing. The people of middle class can understand the message in his writing because Defoe always used common language of people of that time. The social issues in the 1700s such as sexuality, crime, morality, adultery, social order and the controversial role of women are brought by Defoe in his novel writings. His *Moll Flanders* is one true example of realism because you see the truth behind all the lace and satin that people of that time were so dazzled by. Watt (1957), in his book, *Rise of the Novel* states that – Defoe's fiction is the first, which presents us with a picture of both individual life in its larger perspective as a historical process, and in its closer view, which shows the process being acted out against the background of the most ephemeral thoughts and action.

### **Defoe as the Father of Realism**

As a father of realism, Defoe always wrote about people, gave them specific, concrete motivations, and explained how and why they pursued them. In the earliest days of his career, Defoe wrote in literary form. His *Robinson Crusoe*, widely considered as the first English novel, is the finest example of his realist work also including romances and picaresque qualities which later on descended as a English novel. *Robinson Crusoe's* full title in the first edition is "*The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York, Mariner: Who Lived Eight and Twenty Years, all alone in an un-inhabited Island on the Coast of America, near the Mouth of the Great River of Oroonoke; Having been Cast on Shore by Shipwreck, wherein all the Men perished but himself. With an Account how he was at last as strangely deliver'd by Pyrates. Written by Himself.*" According to Defoe, he didn't write this novel: Crusoe himself wrote it which became *Robinson Crusoe*.

His *Robinson Crusoe* can be taken as a real story. Unlike similar works of the time, it stands alone as a text. The chivalric romances that preceded novels like *Robinson Crusoe* often had the goal of moral instruction. *Don Quixote*, generally considered Europe's first novel, is in part a satire of the romances and the principles they purport to teach. But *Robinson Crusoe* is simply a story about an ordinary, capable, recognizable person doing things ordinary readers could imagine themselves doing. In that respect, it's "realistic" in a way its peers were not.

### **Robinson Crusoe as an English Novel**

Daniel Defoe entitled his novel as *The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York, Mariner, Written by Himself*. This novel is read as eagerly today as it was when it was first published. An exotic novel of travel and adventure, *Robinson Crusoe* functions primarily as Defoe's defense of his bourgeois Protestantism. Crusoe's adventures—the shipwrecks, his life as a planter in South America, and his years of isolation on the island—provide an apt context for his polemic. A political dissenter and pamphleteer, Defoe saw as his enemies the Tory aristocrats whose royalism in government and religion blocked the aspirations of the middle class. Like Jonathan Swift in *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), Defoe in this novel presents a religiously and politically corrupt England. Both authors were intent on bringing about a moral revolution, and each uses his hero as an exemplum. Gulliver, however, represents a moral failure, whereas Crusoe's adventures reveal his spiritual conversion, a return to the ethics and religion of his father. As one critic has stated – *Robinson Crusoe: We read it . . . to follow with meticulous interest and constant self-identification the hero's success in building up, step by step, out of whatever material came to hand, a physical and moral replica of the world he had left behind him*. If *Robinson Crusoe* is an adventure story, it is also a moral tale, a commercial accounting and a Puritan fable.

Significantly, Crusoe's origins are in northern England, in York, where he was born in the early part of the seventeenth century and where his father had made a fortune in trade. He belongs to the solid middle class, the class that was gaining political power during the early eighteenth century, when Defoe published his book. Crusoe's father is an apologist for the mercantile, Puritan ethic, which he tries without success to instill in his son. As Crusoe says, "Mine was the middle state," which his father had found by long experience was the best state in the world, the most suited to human happiness, not exposed to the miseries and hardships, the labour and sufferings of the mechanic part of mankind, and not embarrassed with the pride, luxury, ambition and envy of the upper part of mankind. Its virtues and blessings were those of "temperance, moderation, quietness, health [and] society."

His father's philosophy, which is designed to buy a man happiness and pleasure in both this life and the next, nevertheless fails to persuade the young Crusoe, who finds nothing but boredom in the comforts of the middle class. He longs to go to sea, to follow a way of life that represents the antithesis of his father's. He seeks the extremes of sensation and danger, preferring to live on the periphery rather than in the middle, where all is secure. Crusoe's decision to become a sailor is an act of adolescent rebellion, yet it is also very much in the tradition of Puritan individualism. Not content with the wisdom of his class, the young man feels it is necessary to test himself and to discover himself and his own ethic.

Even after the first stage in his adventures, which culminates in Crusoe's gaining a modest fortune in South America, he refuses to settle down. Intent on his own "inclination," as he says, he leaves his plantation and once again takes up the uncertain life of sea trade. It is at this point in the narrative that Crusoe is shipwrecked and abandoned on a tropical island without any hope of rescue.

Crusoe's first response to his isolation and the prospect of living the rest of his life alone is one of despair. He has, however, a strong survival instinct, and courageously he sets about the task of staying alive and eventually of creating a humane, comfortable society. One of the first things he does is to mark time, to make a calendar. Despite all of his efforts to continue his own life and environment, he falls ill, and it is at this point that he realizes his complete vulnerability, his absolute aloneness in the universe. Stripped of all his illusions, limited by necessity to one small place, Crusoe is thrown back upon himself and confronted by an immense emptiness. He asks desperately: "What is this earth and sea of which I have seen so much? Whence is it produced? And what am I and all the other creatures, wild and tame, human and brutal? Whence are we?"

All of these questions predate Crusoe's religious conversion, the central and most significant event of the novel. His answer to the questions is that all creation comes from God and that the state of all creation, including his own, is an expression of the will of God. Upon this act of faith he rebuilds not only his own life but also his own miniature society, which reflects in its simplicity, moderation, and comfort the philosophy his father had taught. Furthermore, his faith brings him to an acceptance of his own life and station, an acceptance that he was never able to make before: "I acquiesced in the dispositions of Providence, which I began now to own and to believe ordered everything for the best." Later, after two years on the island, he says, "It is now that I began sensibly to feel how much more happy this life I now led was, with all its miserable circumstances, than the wicked, cursed, abominable life I led all the past part of my days; and now I changed both my sorrows and my joys; my very desires altered, my affections changed their gusts, and my delights were perfectly new from what they were at my first coming."

Once he is able to answer the overwhelming question of the novel—"Whence are we?"—the rest of the narrative and Crusoe's adventures justify, to his aristocrat

readers, his religious faith and the middle-class Puritan ethic. Apart from this justification, there also remains the glorification of the self-reliant and self-directing man. This was a man unfamiliar to Defoe's readers, a new man beginning to appear on the fringes of the power structure and about to demand his place in a society that was evolving toward a new political structure that became recognized as middle-class democracy.

### **Conclusion**

Thus, Daniel Defoe's contribution *Robinson Crusoe* is widely acclaimed as the first English novel. It presents the story of Robinson Crusoe's adventures. It is presented in first person narrative technique and this makes it look like an autobiography and also gives a note of authenticity to the narrative. The story presented in the novel takes the reader through the account of Crusoe's background, his life history, his strange adventure and incursions into precarious situations and survival through his tenacity, determination and hard work. In this article, we discussed the first full length novel. You need to read the novel to be able to understand the discussion in this unit. We presented the plot, the themes, setting and discussed some major and minor characters in the novel. The novel as a work of art is open to many interpretations. From our perspective here, we see Crusoe as a generous hardworking man but also a selfish racist. We see that initially, he saw himself as a king and the animals as his subjects but we discover that when human beings replaced the animals, Crusoe's attitude to them does not change as he treats the human beings-Friday and others as less human.

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