



## Memory, Other and Identity in *Robinson Crusoe* and *Day*

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### ABSTRACT

*Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe and Elie Wiesel's Day use the similar narrative strategy to discuss the relationship between memory and identity. Robinson Crusoe traces the hero's transition from social isolation and disconnection to self-actualisation and social reintegration through the novel's core narrative structure. While Day demonstrates the mental isolation, haunting past memories and the painful journey of seeking the real identity of a Holocaust survivor. In a first person narrative structure, both of the protagonists converge their individual memory into a collective memory, Robinson Crusoe as a pioneer image of British capitalism and colonialism, "I" as the ashamed and suffering creature destroyed by one of the most widely known atrocities happened during World War II, the Nazi Holocaust from 1933 to 1945, which is partially caused by the development of capitalist and imperialism in the 1920s Germany, mirroring the relationship between center and margin of Self and Other, constructing their identities: one as the prototypical selected British middle class Christian male, the other as a castaway suffering figure without a future. What behind them is the collective memory and national identity. In a sense, there is a cause-effect relationship between the narratives.*

**KEYWORDS:** *memory, Other, identity, Robinson Crusoe, Day*

Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* traces the hero's transition from social isolation and disconnection to self-actualisation and social reintegration through the novel's core narrative structure. Elie Wiesel's *Day*, similar to *Robinson Crusoe*'s narrative strategy, demonstrates the mental isolation, haunting past memories and the painful journey of seeking the real identity of a Holocaust survivor. In a first person narrative structure, both of the protagonists converge their individual memory into a collective memory, Robinson Crusoe as a pioneer image of British capitalism and colonialism, "I" as the ashamed and suffering creature destroyed by one of the most widely known atrocities happened during World War II, the Nazi Holocaust from 1933 to 1945, which is partially caused by the development of capitalist and imperialism in the 1920s Germany, mirroring the relationship between center and margin of Self and Other, constructing their identities: one as the prototypical selected British middle class Christian male, the other as a castaway suffering figure without a future. What behind them is the collective memory and national identity. In a sense, there is a cause-effect relationship between the narratives.

Narrative is the external representation of memory which plays an important role not only thematically but also structurally in literature. The construction of identity is inseparable from memory, which forms the basis of those strongly held beliefs relevant to the individual and is directly involved in the

construction of identity. Going over the memory is to live the history of the race, the nation, the country behind. Memory is a collective social behavior and every social group in reality has its corresponding collective memory, which must rely on certain carriers and be recorded and preserved through constant communication and sharing. Thus, the relationship between the individual memory and the collective memory is a common theme in recent years. Many writers have dealt with this theme as seen in the popular stories ranging from the individual surviving and prospering in a deserted island to the individual suffering and struggling to find a meaning in life.

*Robinson Crusoe*, an adventure story written by rationalist Daniel Defoe, depicts the tale of how a sole survivor of a shipwreck lives, adapts to a space and becomes a resourceful and capable ruler over an economically viable cultural monopoly. Much criticism has been focused on colonialism, post-colonialism, some scholars pay attention to the spiritual activities, religion including the question of God, transformation both of the island and Robinson's identity, Enclosure and identity are discussed. By using the individual memory, part of the national and race memory, Robinson has established the identity of "white, male, Christian and English as the rational norm to which everything else, including foreign spaces and foreign identities, must submit." (Smit-Marais, 2011: 105). It is in the deserted island, a



utopia of Crusoe's kingdom to practice the British capitalism and colonialism, that Robinson finally completes his self-identity.

Unlike Robinson Crusoe, the nameless narrator in *Day*, together with Eliezer in *Night*, Elisha in *Dawn*, constitutes a triptych of self-definition. As the survivor of the concentration camp, the narrators have the authenticity to retell their stories, memories, pains and sufferings. They are bare lives in the state of exception space like camp, "characters without a future; they have only a past cruelly presided over by the smoke of the Holocaust and a present nostalgically punctuated by childhood memories of what was lost in the flames. The 'I' has curled into a question mark." (Estess, 1976: 20-21). Trauma, psychological, philosophical, post-Holocaust literature approaches have been used to analyze the text, highlighting the trauma of the Jews and the impact on their identity formation.

Either the individual memory or the race's memory, Holocaust is both a landmark which marks their pain and suffering and a burden which they probably never be able to unload. The question of God and "Who am I", the memory of the Holocaust, the depression of finding no meaning in life are the main themes in *Day*. Interwoven together, they constitute the certain yet uncertain identity of the Jews survived and destroyed by the Holocaust, confused, haunt by the past memory which is more real for him than anything in the present.

The question of God, an analogous encounter of Robinson Crusoe, is one strand in Wiesel's response to the Holocaust. As Wiesel contends, "everything to do with Auschwitz must, in the end, lead into darkness," questions remain concerning what that darkness might be and whether the leading into darkness is indeed the end (Roth, 1992: 62). It reminds the audience of Theodor Adorno's aforementioned assertion about the impossibility of writing poetry after Auschwitz, which has frequently been invoked in relation to the limits of Holocaust representation. Eliezer, "the son of Sarah, the son of Sarah, Sarah, Sarah..." (Wiesel, 2006:75), seeks to understand himself by questioning God. This story of initiation into the drama of interrogation leaves the self not in the place where initiation rites should end - in a new community beyond the trials of the initiatory ordeal - but alone in the nadir of death (Estess, 1976: 21). Yet, for all its power of muted outrage and endless suffering, *Day* is not a final answer to the question of the self.

Gyula's portrait of the protagonist functions to question the mask through which the protagonist has been seeing himself. Surely the mask of suffering and isolation behind which the protagonist has been hiding is authentically in touch with his life experience and terrible memory. But, according to Estess (1976:22), the interpretation of the self solely in negative terms is a dishonest masquerade which shields the person from the rich diversity of life. Viewing the portrait, the protagonist decides cynically to take another mask, this

one of happiness. Realizing what behind Eliezer's fake smile, Gyula burns the portrait. By doing so, he emphasizes that the mask of solitary suffering must be rejected - it belongs more to the dead than to the living; it does not tell the whole story of the self. More importantly, Gyula's act suggests that an interpretation of the self as a series of inauthentic masks is an inadequate model of personhood (Estess, 1976: 23). The ashes left also foreshadows the impossibility of the hero's healing though the burning symbolizes the end of the past.

Wiesel's work, parabolic and elliptical as it is, "adds ethical intensity and human fullness through its attempt to provide an ideationally significant response to painful religious, social, and psychological dilemma" (Estess, 1976: 20). Religion plays a different role in Robinson's world. As an Enlightenment model, Robinson Crusoe, a solitary sailor, so self-contained and self-sufficient that he could create a life by himself, indeed a society composed of just one rational individual, needing nobody else to establish his own identity or fulfil his potential (Holmes, 1972: 319). He takes out the religion whenever he needs it, requires the introduction of God and the ideologeme to save him from the growing reality of the meaninglessness of his actions, and cultivates and disciplines Friday to subjugate him. The goal-oriented Enlightenment ideals of self-advancement and progress are articulated by Crusoe's perception of himself as "lord", "king" and "emperor". Facing the unknown environment and possible threats, Crusoe decides to survive, and satisfies his basic needs of shelter and food as well as his dream of becoming a wealthy colonial master, making *Robinson Crusoe* the "epitome of the concept of self-reliance" (Hamendi, 2018: 104). The core of Crusoe's discovery of the island is expanding, possession and belonging, while the nature of having Friday is not considered an equal, in fact, Friday's idolization satisfies in him the need to feel appreciated and valued, making Crusoe feel like a king who takes everything in control. However, as observed by Smit-Marais, the footprint calls the sustainability and legitimacy of Crusoe's island sovereignty into question, symbolizes not only of presence, but also absence and loss. Furthermore, it marks physically and structurally the inception and culmination of the final phase in the conversion of space, namely the establishment of a colony (2011: 111-113).

Living alone on the island, solitude accompanies Robinson Crusoe. Viewing the island as an geographical Other, Robinson Crusoe builds his identity as a rational man possessing tools who has ability to overcome and control nature; Friday as a cultural Other, from whom Robinson Crusoe sees as a marginalized and imaginatively object to be colonized. As self-appointed "Master", his interaction with Friday is enclosed in a fixed pattern of subjugation and domination, as Friday submits not only his identity to Crusoe, but also his entire culture. His movements of building fences, hedges resembles the Enclosure in Britain, setting clear boundaries between the outside and the inside, in the process defining margin

and centre (Smit-Marais, 2011: 107). In finding the island as a “planted garden” (Defoe, 113), Crusoe associates the nature with the English landscape in the tone of ownership, which suggests that the space is colonized (Smit-Marais, 2011: 108). The physical structures, such as fences, hedges, plantations and his various dwellings, stand as a wall which walls in the security, ownership, and money, what is walling out is the fear, unconquered, and poor. Crusoe invests the island space with “cultural meaning so that it becomes metaphorically and metonymically linked to Crusoe’s identity as a white, middle-class, Christian, British man” (Smit-Marais, 2011: 108). The same master-slave pattern can be found in the relationship between Kathleen and “I”, Kathleen serving as a Jewish female who loses her identity and subjectivity and submits to “I”’s disposition. Serving as a sexual slave rather than a caring girl friend, Kathleen, who seemingly does not deserve a kiss from “I”, obeys what “I” tells, frets what makes “I” upset, eventually, accepts what comes to her.

The inner debate of bad Robinson and good Robinson in his mind, representative of the Enlightenment ideals, recollects the self-division of “I” in *Day*. Rejecting Dr. Russel’s perception of “suffering is not the enemy” (Wiesel, 2006:20), “Life wants to live. Life wants to go on. It is opposed to death. It fights.” (ibid, 62), I choose to walk toward death partially because that he does not see God in his dream by saying “He was no longer there.” (ibid, 65) and declaring he is not normal human beings (ibid, 68) who could not transcend the limits of his body and makes love passionately. The self is dissociated, one cries “I wanted to live, create, do lasting things, help man make a step forward, contribute to the progress of humanity, its happiness, its fulfillment!” (ibid) while the other always feel “alone, abandoned. Deep inside I discovered a regret: I would have preferred to die.” (ibid, 18). In Freudian terms, the Thanatos defeats Eros. The memory of the Holocaust is felt as an agonizing obligation on the part of the survivor. “I” do not want to live, what he thinks most is the suffering experience, what he tells is the story of suffering, what he conceives is death. Unable to embrace the brightness and sweetness, “I” is a zombie. Ashamed at having survived the dead, “I” yearns to crawl back into the grave. “He has survived, but it is a survival he can no more come to terms with than the wholly meaningless deaths visited on his family and the millions of others.” (Idinopulos, 1972: 201-202).

Both Robinson Crusoe and “I” are the individual members of a community, a race, a nation, in which the members share a common knowledge, common religion, common political standpoint, and common cultural memory. Memory culture refers to a society makes uses of cultural mnemonics to preserve the collective knowledge from generation to generation and present them to the offsprings to ensure the continuity of the culture and to help to construct their cultural identities. When Robinson Crusoe’s progeny boast of overseas colonizations and the glory of “the sun never

set”, especially the Germans, which is suggested by a scholar, the last name of Crusoe has a German origin which hints his identity and relationship with the Germans, the “I”s are suffering from their distorted memory, partially initiated by Robinsons.

In traditional island literature, narratives of shipwrecks and castaways involve a physical journey across oceans, disaster strikes and the voyagers becomes stuck on an unknown island, then the adventure of human nature begins. Thus, the castaway then sets off the metaphor of a spiritual journey in which a rite of passage that explores the parameters of existence and becomes symbolic of spiritual insight and transcendence. As such, representations of the castaway’s plight often functions as a vehicle for spiritual and moral exploration (Smit-Marais, 2011: 105). For Robinson, the shipwreck symbolizes the abandonment of God and his survival is the proof of his being selected while for “I”, the sea is a metaphor of the Jews abandoned by God have to commit suicide, his unsuccessful jumping to the sea is the failure of Exodus.

The question of God, the obligation to remember the past, and the importance of story-telling are intertwined in Wiesel’s effort to create a meaning, for all the people destroyed in the Holocaust. They are the motifs of all his stories (Idinopulos, 1972: 204). While Robinsons’ stories are Western identity formation and the colonisation of space, Wiesel’s stories repeat a single theme “the Holocaust” which problematizes “truth and fact, reference and representation, realism and modernism, history and fiction, ethics and politics” (Mahan, 2017:4). The narrative strategy of repeating the memories of mine in the camp, the rape of Sarah (maybe also Kathleen’s), the confrontation of his mother and grandmother again and again, even arranging an accident to display the scarred bodies as memorial container, presents the individual trauma and the history of humiliation of the Jewish nation as a whole. The final goal is not to raise hatred, but to inscribe the bitter history of the nation and call on everyone to stick to their national identity. It is safe to say that the sufferings of the saint “I” is a performance of memory, with the attempt to internalize Jewish cultural memory into his individual memory, to a deeper meaning, to maintain the integrity and certainty of their own identity, eventually to form the national memory and the international memory. In a narrow sense, the encounter between Englishness and Israeli-ness is the collision of different national memories.

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