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## *Sobuj Dwiper Raja as a Robinsonade*

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Islands have always held an undying fascination for people across history and time. A piece of land bordered on all sides with water, a mystery unreachable in its isolation, yet its isolation is the very key to its fascination. For some, it is the isolation and the relative insularity of island life that is intriguing; the opportunity to escape from the mainstream ‘reality’ and to reinvent an alternative ‘reality’ for oneself. For others, it is the challenge of coping up in a harsh environment, with limited resources, the opportunity to prove one’s self-sufficiency and autonomy. The blank spot is sometimes imagined as a savage and enchanted space of demonic darkness or is sometimes imagined as a utopia, a space of release from the evils of a scienticized, mechanical existence. Islands have always addressed a crucial cultural thirst, implicitly challenging the accepted notions of normativity and offering a glittering array of possibilities about otherness in all its forms.

Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) exploits this island theme in every ways possible. The story is a story of survival, redemption, escape, colonialism, consolidation of the empire, encounter with the ‘other’, or the imagining of an alternative culture or ‘non-culture’. Other stories which repeatedly recreate these themes of *Robinson Crusoe* either faithfully or from revised socio-political angles are broadly grouped under the genre called Robinsonades, a term coined by Schnabel. Roland Barthes in *Image-Music-Text* notes that all texts are somehow connected to a network of existing texts and art forms; it is a “woven fabric” (n.pag.), an intertextuality. So, all the Robinsonades are woven on the fabric of Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, revising and reimagining the source text from shifting cultural and aesthetic view points. *Robinson Crusoe* has thus emerged free from the constraints of time and culture and has been reworked by authors and film-makers, producing meanings and alternative perspectives which are often conflicting, plural and dynamic. It has been frequently adapted as a children’s narrative and has been rewritten from time to time either to



validate the dominant discourses forwarded in the source text or to interrogate and question the ideological premises of the text.

It is often asserted that children's literature is never as innocent as it appears to be; it is often used to acculturate children into society and to teach them to behave and believe in acceptable ways. Jacqueline Rose in *The Case of Peter Pan: The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (1984) claims that innocence is not "a property of childhood . . . but a portion of adult desire" (qtd. in Daphne Kutzer 9). Adults who produce children's books are nearly always conscious of conveying morals and values to their young audience, trying to shape their childhood according to their own desires and needs. At one point of history, for the expansion of the empire, the imperialist ideology was an omnipresence in most of the classic British children's books. The empire's ubiquitous presence in British children's texts is no surprise as it was specifically motivated to mould the adolescent audience, the future rulers of the world. Similarly, at the time of decolonization or in a post-colonial country, a resistant tradition came up, where most of the children's compositions of the colonized or the newly independent countries highlighted the evils of imperialism and the existence of a superior Oriental culture.

Sunil Gangopadhyay, the Bengali fiction writer and poet is famous for his creation of the fictional character of Kakababu and his adventures. The series is chiefly targeted at children and teenagers and has become legendary in Indian Children's Literature. His *Sobuj Dwiper Raja* (1993), one of the adventure novels of the Kakababu series, is a Robinsonade, adapting Defoe's text to enter into a dialogue with it and provide a glimpse of a utopian 'otherness' and an alternative experience of post-coloniality. Kakababu is a crippled ex-Director of the Archeological Survey of India, whose real name is Raja Chowdhury. He is an adventurer by nature and takes pleasure in solving unresolved mysteries. In *Sobuj Dwiper Raja*, Sunil Gangopadhyay takes us with Kakababu and Santu to the great Andaman and Nicobar islands where many foreign scientists had been coming from time to time, but none returning home. Kakababu and Santu leave Kolkata to unravel the mystery of the island and realizes soon that it is the Island of Jarwa that holds the key to the secret.



Located amidst the impenetrable forests, the Jarwan's island is insulated from the impact of colonialism and modernity. It is the primeval space, inhabited by uncontaminated Orientals striving singularly to retain its native culture. It is no wonder that such a land has to be defined in terms of the Orientalist discourse of binary formation. Dasgupta, a westernized Oriental of independent India, inheriting the imperialist bias and the discourse of Orientalism of the Europeans, describes the Jarwans as a savage, naked, ferocious tribe, not knowing how to make fire or to use iron and shooting with poisonous arrows whenever they encounter any person from a civilized society. For Robinson Crusoe, a European in pedigree, Friday and his people invariably had to be cannibals and savages. But Dasgupta, though an Indian by birth, is hybridized by the Western influence and adapts the Western beliefs and ideologies. He and his kind perpetuate the colonial regime replete with discrimination and deprivation, even after attaining physical and chronological decolonization.

The East has always been identified as an exotic space of mystery and wealth. The infinite treasures in the distant Orient is forever seeking appropriation, and according to Fakrul Alam, Daniel Defoe through his work attempted to convince the English people how that exotic East can be with ease, "Possess'd, Planted, Secur'd to the British Nation . . . and what Immense Wealth and Increase of Commerce might be Rais'd from thence" (qtd. in Fakrul Alam 12), and how the emptiness of the unpossessed space can be converted into potentiality. So it is striking how full of resources Crusoe's island was. Devoid of any wild animals, it had fowls, hares, goats, fish, turtles, and even penguins and seals. More important than the fauna of the island was its extraordinarily fertile soil, the evidence of which was found when Crusoe noticed "perfect green Barley of the same kind as our European, nay, as our English Barley", and next to it "some other straggling Stalks, which proved to be Stalks of Ryce" (58-9), which were the outcome of Crusoe's unthinkingly spilling of some husks on the ground, a month earlier. He also discovered tobacco, "large Plants of Aloe," several sugar canes, melons, grapes, cocoa, orange, lemons, citron trees and "Savanna Fields sweet adorn'd with flowers and grass, and full of very fine Wood" (113-23). The insatiable Crusoe rummaged the wealth of the island and transformed the disordered heap of goods into the luxuries of an empire.



The island in the *Sobuj Dwiper Raja* is also a lush tropical island, rich with natural vegetation, sweet fountain water and natural resources. It is a mysterious island as no one can cross the threshold of the forest and enter into the Jarwan land; whoever tries suspiciously disappears. The island becomes the centre of attraction for the scientists and foreign criminal gangs through the ages because it harbours an unearthly fire in an abyss, coming from a meteor fall, galaxies of years ago. The fire breathes death, it has a very rare metal component and the blue, red, green flames of the meteorite can never be extinguished. The Jarwans not knowing how to make fire depended on the meteorite to meet their needs of fire and light. The greedy and insatiable Westerners gaining knowledge of the meteorite invariably comes to the Jarwan's island over and over again to steal and take possession of their sacred fire. The rare fire represents the wealth and riches of the Oriental countries which has forever held an irresistible charm to the Westerners, alluring them to come and amass their wealth and claim them for their own.

Gunada Talukdar, an Indian freedom fighter, after escaping the cellular jail of Andaman and Nicobar islands in a small boat, takes refuge in the Island of Jarwa. Gunada, running away from his own country and living a life of a recluse, experiences one form of marginality. He finds the Jarwans island, a piece of sanctified east, uncontaminated by the Western influence and enjoying a freedom unimaginable in a colonized country. Gunada, becoming their king, deliberately orders them to spread terror among the so called civilized people, so that nobody dares to bring the Jarwans under their oppressive rule and vitiate them by the cancer of Western civilization and modernity. Kakababu, having a leg amputated after a jeep accident on the Himalayas, several years ago, suddenly finds himself alienated from the normal human activities, and is initiated into inhabiting another form of marginality. But, however, this mishap could not cripple his strong mental will and physical strength. He along with Santu comes to unravel the mystery of Jarwa and feels an empathy with the marginalized king of the Green Island and hence genuinely tries to protect the meteorite fire from being stolen.

Unlike *Robinson Crusoe*, Gunada Talukdar does not attempt to teach the Jarwans his own language or culture. He instead inherits the Jarwan's language and culture since he finds



them more superior, as the Jarwans knew no robberies, lies and diseases. They all live a harmonious life, sharing and caring for each other. Dismissing the Orientalist binaries which proclaim the west as civilized and rational, while the East as savage and irrational, the old king upholds the presence of an alternative sanctified Oriental culture which is superior in every ways to the European culture. The island is a veritable utopia, unaware of colonial violence or the bondages of Western civilization. The only remnants of civilization that Talukdar was bearing was a pair of iron handcuffs and Geeta, placed on a red piece of cloth, as if continuously warning the Jarwans from adapting the shackles of civilization.

The Jarwan's Island is a piece of pre-colonial paradise not suffering from the evils of colonialism and it is here that Gunada Talukdar enjoys a post-colonial freedom being once the victim of British colonial oppression. Talukdar's postcoloniality and Kakababu's post-coloniality are different and not compatible to each other. This is evident from the fact that Talukdar could not survive in a post-colonial India. The independent India, modernized to a great extent with concrete roads, cold marble statues of freedom fighters, the air vitiated, the streets crowded with beggars and sickly children is not a vision that Gunada Talukdar or the other freedom fighters conceived of an independent India. Though Santu and Kakababu feels at home coming back to Kolkata, Gunada Talukdar simply could not identify the India of the past or the liberated India of his dreams with the actual independent India. He feels suffocated in this India which only experienced a physical decolonization, but was in no ways free from poverty, corruption, pollution, and was a victim of neo-colonialism. A believer of 'primitivism' and the 'noble savage,' the king wishes to go back to the Green Island, breathing fresh air, listening to bird's singing, sounds of leaves and fountains, where there was no beggars, no ill-fed children, no commotion of city, only peace and serenity. The freedom fighter Gunada Talukdar, the king of the Green Island, is thoroughly disillusioned with the independent India and deeply grieves at the present degeneration of the country. Unable to reconcile with this brute reality he does not live long to inhabit that disillusionment.

*Sobuj Dwiper Raja* thus writes back to Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, showing an obverse possibility of the story where the Crusoesque figure do not manipulate the





environment to meet his needs, but realizes the superiority of the ‘other’ environment and changes himself to fit in there. Defoe does not deal much about the life of Crusoe after his return from the island to England, but Sunil Gangopadhyay asserts that the king of the Green Island could not survive in the concretized real world coming from a natural utopia. The story thus reworks Defoe’s narrative to question its absences and suggest alternatives to the text and its values. The story has also been cinematized by Tapan Sinha, enacted by Samit Bhanja and Anumabha Adhikari, foregrounding the uncorrupted dream world existing in the Green Island. The *Sobuj Dwiper Raja* thus deliberately recreates and subverts the Crusoe myth, grounding it in contemporary reality, highlighting the evils of neo-colonialism, the present degradation of India and suggests a remedy in returning back to nature and living a simple, noble life.



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