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The Silver Screen Crusoe: Exploring the Interdisciplinary Dynamics in Jack Gold's *Man Friday*

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"Over the past few decades the encounter between Robinson and Friday has taken on a significance that Daniel Defoe was a thousand leagues from even suspecting."

— Michel Tournier. *The Wind Spirit*.

Moving miles apart from a story of mere solitude and survival, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) has become the embodiment of the contested site of critical dialectics. As the parable of the consolidation of the empire, as the topos of female denial, as the myth of modern individualism and as the epitome of the 'homo economicus,' Robinson Crusoe has become one of the most mythologized characters of Western literature, keeping on resurfacing in one form or another in our cultural utterances, resulting in a huge body of literature which are variations on the Robinson theme, generalized as Robinsonades (Schnabel). Carl Fisher contends that "Robinsonade" refers to those texts which rewrite the Crusoe story, replicating the castaway condition and incorporating specific physical aspects of Crusoe's experience (130). The Robinsonades create a heterogeneous, multidimensional

space where authority is denied and the narrative is necessarily politicized and misread in order to produce meanings from contradictory standpoints. So the figures of Crusoe and Friday suffer alterations with time and culture: sometimes Crusoe becomes a woman, a black African, or a white slave, and Friday too sometimes becomes a woman, a volley-ball, or a culturally superior noble-savage.

The twentieth century Robinsonades reveal that their onus is primarily on the Crusoe-Friday relationship. Now Friday is problematized and refigured as the anguished voice of the postcolonial subdued consciousness. He becomes an essential element in the adaptations, in which cultural transmission is a paramount theme along with the theme of subjugation of nature; he voices the "other's" reaction to that subjugation and the possibility of mutual open-minded cultural transmission. Thus the postcolonial adaptations displacing the authoritative voice of the European Crusoe subvert the original text and shift the attention from the master to the slave, thereby proclaiming their altered moral commitment and insinuating at the unstable relationship between the 'centre' and the 'margin.'

Adaptation is the process of reworking texts to generate new texts which may or may not include a generic shift. If fidelity is considered as a key term to adaptation, then surprisingly it is noted that the best of adaptations depart broadly from the original narrative. The drift in the adapted texts successfully exposes the gaps in the master text thereby demanding a more comprehensive appreciation. The novel to film problematic creates a dynamic interdisciplinary space where conventional ideological assumptions are dismantled and a polyphony of voices are heard from the repressed zones, resulting in a holistic understanding of the text. The postmodern cinema has become an essential part of a self-

reflexive culture of representation that reworks past classical films, remixing the rules of genre and appropriating cultures from across the world, culminating in a playful and often dark textuality. So the Robinsonade is still alive because of a deeper cultural manifestation of the dynamics between isolation and self-reliance; nature versus civilization and colonized versus colonizer.

Thus Jack Gold's 1975 film *Man Friday*, adapted from Adrian Mitchell's anti-canonical parodic play by the same name, can be seen as an instance of a silver-screen "canonical counter-discourse," or a piece of writing back against the dominant Eurocentric discourse propounded in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Working in the wake of the 1970s international "counter-cultural movement," Gold pictures the story against a multicultural background, narrating the events solely from Friday's perspective thereby inverting the paradigmatic polarity between the colonizer and the colonized, leading Robert Stam remark: "Now it is Friday who "sees" (point of view, ocularization), "knows" (focalization), and tells (narration). Now Crusoe is observed from the outside, while Friday is seen, in narratological terms at least, from the inside" (87).

Man Friday opens with Crusoe reading from the Bible ─ "Have dominion over every living thing that moveth over the Earth." The alarm clock rings and the paranoid Crusoe, afflicted by the evils of an automated western civilization, retaining the tyranny of time even in the timeless utopia of the island, sets about to execute the lessons imparted by the Bible. Peter O'Toole, enacting Crusoe then launches into the 'foot print episode' traversing the island like a maniac and hallucinating the foot print on fire, followed by the image of an African Negro, in grass-skirt and exotic armour, brandishing his steel and stamping his foot.

The huge discrepancy between the signifier of a mere footprint and the magnitude of signification it evoked in Crusoe confirms perfectly with the racist stereotypical imagination that a European confers to an Oriental.

Launching into a flashback the film then features a native funeral ritual, whereby the natives eat the dead comrade, lost to the storms, to retain some of his spirit in themselves. Robert Mayer notes that though *Man Friday* accepts cannibalism it nonetheless justifies it by suggesting that "anthropophagy might well be a loving act and [. . .] not a sign of degeneration making colonization with its putative 'civilizing' effect almost inevitable" (43). In the midst of their cannibalistic rites, they are attacked by Crusoe, who misapprehending the entire scenario, guns them down — save one, who realizing the futility of running in front of Crusoe's gun, apparently accepts his supremacy. Crusoe then begins a crash course to civilize the savage, naming him Friday and teaching him the English language, food habits, property rights, sportsmanship, Christianity, and work ethic. Friday's curiosities regarding Crusoe's lessons destabilize a number of habitually accepted hierarchies. When Friday learns to call himself "Friday" and Crusoe "Master," he mistakenly thinks that whoever points his finger at his own self is called "Master." This ironically reveals that meaning depends on the user and also hints that the relationship between the colonizer and colonized is potentially interchangeable.

Stunned hearing Crusoe's brand of religious and cultural enlightenment and his fetish for private ownership, Friday subtly tries to share his more generous and unashamed culture with him. But in however positive light Friday may be represented, it nonetheless falls victim to the typical Orientalist discourse of binary formation ─ childish innocence as opposed to

mature rationality. Friday's pre-fall tribe, modeled on the 1970s hippie ideals, believed in sexual liberation and free love as opposed to Crusoe's culture which thrived on competition and abstinence. In order to train Friday, Crusoe engages in a series of competitions, draining his body and spirit to win them but Friday impervious to the ethics of winning or losing simply enjoys it. A reflection of a differential society of self-centered egoism where all things are labeled "yours" and "mine," is juxtaposed to a selfless communitarian world where love abounds without any discrimination.

All chances of their mutual friendship were destroyed when Crusoe tries to teach Friday the meaning of 'civilization.' Impatient with Friday's relentless questioning, Crusoe shackles Friday to a tree, gags his mouth, holds a gun to his head and teaches him 'civilization,' the word chalked on the board behind reveals the bitter irony of the scene and an uncanny doubt seeps in, as to who actually needs civilizing. In his frustration, Crusoe shoots Pall, the parrot, his only companion before Friday's arrival. Friday realizes that Crusoe cannot be reformed so he sets out to teach him a lesson, reverting back to him the capitalistic system that Crusoe once initiated with him, only this time it is Friday who becomes the master and Crusoe, his slave.

When Friday becoming conscious of his exploitation demands the works to be shared, Crusoe cleverly introduces the hypocritical capitalist system with him which creates the illusion of freedom by paying wages. After collecting 2000 gold coins, Friday keeps Crusoe to the promise which he earlier jocularly made stipulating the price of his property and turns the table against Crusoe himself. Proclaiming himself the owner, Friday, swiftly takes control of a baffled Crusoe's gun, and coldly declares that the master-servant-relationship is inverted

now. Friday even coerces Crusoe into building a raft at gun point which would eventually take them to his native island. So in *Man Friday* the slave does not accompany the master to his civilized world, it is rather the master who follows the slave to his native island and begs to be allowed to live with them, but they contend that Crusoe is "sick beyond magic" and refuse. Eventually, in the director's cut of the film, Crusoe commits suicide. Robert Mayer considers that Gold's adaptation has no connection with the original novel, as it introduces a completely new negative character: "*Man Friday* does not so much refigure the Crusoe myth as discard the figure of Crusoe, identifying the character as one that cannot be reformed or recuperated but that instead has to be rejected" (44).

The film attempting to demystify the ideological premises of *Robinson Crusoe*, actually confirms them by presenting Friday's tribe as the very binary opposite to it. Crusoe, the product of a rational, scientific society attempts to recreate 'civilization' in the cultural void of the island, but the replica of an imperfect world can only be an imperfect one. Thus Crusoe who practices slavery on Friday becomes a potential white slave for the two Europeans whom he initially believes to be inherently good but later on learning that they are slave traders, kills them. The episode reveals Crusoe's world of subjugation, deceit, and violence, as opposed to Friday's veritable utopia of merry making and free sex, undeterred by guilt or social constraints. The revised ending of the film presents Crusoe, rejected by Friday's community, reading about his dreary God all alone on the island, while Friday is seen rejoicing with his companions in his merry land. The Crusoe of the first scene is no different than the Crusoe of the last scene, hinting that a possibility of change in Crusoe is a near impossibility.

Jack Gold's failure to imagine Friday's world is evident from the fact that Friday is neither given an actual name or language and though all his tribesmen are seen communicating in English, the film shows Crusoe's efforts to teach Friday English. If identity is both essential and differential, the essences of Friday are never revealed and the differences are mainly fabrications erected around the usual stereotypical binaries. In spite of these shortcomings, the film successfully presents the interface between two different cultures and also exposes the evils of racism, slavery and colonialism, though offering no practical solution. Its pessimistic conclusion implicates that Fridays and Crusoes can never coexist and the problems of misrepresentation and racial inequalities will remain a perpetual reality. Discarding a capitalist world view, the film promotes an alternate erotic utopia which is also flawed in imagination. The Orient and the Orientals are as ever misrepresented and Stam notes that Gold's Friday "lives in a cultural and historical vacuum, the film does not dare to imagine Friday's life before Crusoe, [. . .] The film critiques Eurocentrism [. . .] but remains Eurocentric in its incapacity to imagine Friday" (92).

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