

# AN ANALYSIS OF INDIVIDUALISM AND HUMAN NATURE IN ROBINSON CRUSOE

Sercan Öztekin

School of Foreign Languages, Kocaeli University, Kocaeli, Turkey

## **ABSTRACT**

*This paper attempts to focus on the issue of human nature in different political stages in Robinson Crusoe with some comparative examples from Gulliver's Travels and study the theories of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke on individualism and human nature. Hobbes and Locke, the seventeenth century philosophers, are known for their political philosophies on human nature and the development of social societies and governments by this. These features can be seen in Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe clearly and they can be scrutinized in this respect, for Defoe's views on human nature are similar to these two philosophers' thoughts. We can recognize both the individualism and egocentricity in Robinson Crusoe's character, and his fears and doubts that depict human nature perfectly. Moreover, Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels, which was written as a satire on human nature in the same period with Robinson Crusoe, also points out and criticizes different emotions in human psychology.*

## **KEYWORDS**

*Individualism, human nature, egocentricity, social society*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Human nature has always been analyzed because of its complexity and incoherence. It is generally regarded as being egoist, self-centered, and thinking of his own profit more than anything. Besides these negative sides, many rights were believed to be bestowed to humanity, as people are different from animals and they have reason. Reason is one of the merits that make people free and the judges of their own conditions. Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, the seventeenth century philosophers, are known for their political philosophies on human nature and the development of social societies and governments by this. Their concern is on the evolution of the modern societies from the nature in relation to the psychology and the mind of human beings.

These features can be seen in Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe clearly and they can be scrutinized in this respect, for Defoe's views on human nature are similar to these two philosophers' thoughts. We see the human condition in different political stages in the process of creation of governmental societies. We can recognize both the individualism and egocentricity in Robinson Crusoe's character, and his fears and doubts that depict human nature perfectly. Moreover, Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels, which was written as a satire on human nature in the same period with Robinson Crusoe, also points out and criticizes different emotions in human psychology. I shall try to focus on the issue of human nature in different political stages in Robinson Crusoe with some comparative examples from Gulliver's Travels.

## **2. HOBBS' AND LOCKE'S POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY**

Thomas Hobbes and John Locke advocate human beings' right to be free and their equality, especially in the state of nature. In 'On the Citizen', Hobbes emphasizes people's individualism; he claims that they try to satisfy themselves according to their own interests. In the state of nature, some men see themselves as superior to the other people. Hobbes cites that even when a man needs the company of the others in a social structure, he thinks of his own pride and benefit. Similarly, Locke defines liberty in the nature as "...to be free from any superior power on earth, and not to be under the Will or Legislative Authority of Man..." (1998: 283).

Hobbes says that in the state of nature, all men may have a desire to harm the others, so this greedy nature of humanity is dangerous. For him, freedom is unlimited in nature and men can do anything they regard necessary to preserve their lives. However, Locke is not as libertarian as Hobbes in this subject. Locke gives importance to the rights of the other people in spite of his defense of equality and freedom. He advises not to occupy the others' rights. His idea of self-defense is similar to Hobbes, as he mentions about the right of people to punish the invaders and rebels. According to him, men have right to prevent crimes to preserve his and the others' lives. Considering the egoism of human beings, Hobbes claims that it is not reasonable when people judge their own faults and conditions. Man's arrogance makes them biased to themselves and their situations. They can not see their own mistakes clearly from the eyes of the others. Grant describes Locke "as a political individualist, as a kind of intellectual individualist, and an advocate of the independent use of the faculty of reason against prejudice, custom, and dogmatism" (1988: 42-43).

According to Hobbes and Locke, when two people may want the same thing, considering the complete freedom that they have, that is defined as 'The State of War'. Both of these philosophers see this state as destructive as a result of hostility and egoism of human nature. According to Locke, men should enter into society and quit the state of nature to avert the state of war. The nature of man makes this precaution almost compulsory to live with minimum trouble.

In society, there are laws that recover the arrogance of human beings and their violent desires. Locke underlines the necessity of a society and government to make people more reasonable agents, while Hobbes does not favor the laws that much. For Locke, liberty in society is to be under agreed contracts and consensus. Locke asserts that people enter into society voluntarily, because they are under risk and in fear of danger in the state of pure nature. The free condition of humanity is full of fears and distress that people make laws and create societies to preserve themselves and their properties. According to Hobbes' philosophy, laws and governments are artificial obstacles that avoid people from being free. Even though laws do not affect people's freedom excessively and physically, it is just psychological impediment like people's fear of disobedience and consideration of the results of the acts. For Hobbes, in society, we are not free as we are in nature. We can not have a right to act as we wish in society, but we can do in nature. In 'Hobbes's Theories of Freedom', Mill declares that "...civil law is what obliges us, and hence in those areas where the law speaks, it removes liberty from us" (1995: 454).

Property is another issue in their philosophy that was more focused by Locke. He regards people rightful of having properties by working. If a man works hard and gets an amount of property, he has right to use it. Money is regarded as a tool for men to enlarge their property.

In terms of paternal power, their thoughts differ. Although Locke defends the authority of parents over children, he cites that the children may act freely when they come to an age to be free.

Hobbes is stricter, claiming the complete dominion of parents over children. “Children are no less subject to those who look after them and bring them up than slaves are to Masters, or subjects to the holder of sovereign power in the commonwealth...” (Hobbes, *On the Citizen*: 110). However, he adds that children may be set free as slaves may be done by their masters. His implication that children are like slaves can be recognized here in terms of human rights to be free.

According to Locke, men lived in small family groups where children accepted the authority of their fathers. Grant (1988: 45) explains that for Locke there may be four kinds of social and political organizations which can be recognized in *Robinson Crusoe* explicitly. The first type is family, and families may be changed to political societies that are the second type. The third type is regarded as the incorporation of families for protection, like troops with leaders. The last type is a community which has a government, as people need laws and government in bigger communities.

### **3. ROBINSON CRUSOE**

Daniel Defoe is generally known as being more close to John Locke in terms of his political philosophy. Defoe’s political philosophy can be seen in *Robinson Crusoe*, beginning with the emphasis on his individualism, then the depiction of political societies’ development from the smallest units such as families. As Novak (1962: 11) explains, Defoe would think that human nature was governed by self-love and vanity, and it was open to corruption. He can also be considered as a conservative in his religious identity, for he attributes many things to God and religious dogmas. He does not give such a great importance to reason unlike Hobbes and Locke, he sees reason as deficient to question and judge religion. Law and government are significant for him like Locke, as he thinks that they provide actual freedom for humanity. All these views can be found in *Robinson Crusoe*, as it is the representation of Defoe’s political philosophy. We see the depiction of development of political societies and human nature through the character of *Robinson Crusoe*.

#### **3.1. Individualism**

In the beginning of the text, we see *Robinson Crusoe* in the family and society, and in an unobtrusive rebellious and individualist situation. The individualism of human nature is shown through him perfectly. He wants to be free saying that “I should certainly run away from my master before my time was out, and go to sea ;...”(p. 3). He always thinks of going away, going abroad, expanding his business and property from the very beginning. The narrative level of the novel, the first-person narration, also reveals the individualist approach. He tells everything from his side, being partial to himself like all the people. He manages to go abroad by ship, but changes his mind when he is afraid of a strong storm in the sea. He thinks of going back to his family in the time of storm, and then he changes his mind again when it abates. He can not stop thinking of going away that shows the obstinate and obsessed human nature. All this egoism of *Robinson Crusoe* can be regarded as criticism of egocentricity of people. His habitation in Brazil is the beginning of a political society. He has his own life, job, neighbors which form a small community. He is very ambitious about expanding his business and plantation, and he goes to Africa for slave trade. He feels himself alone and isolated in Brazil and in England when he goes back there from the island after a long time. The fact that he feels himself isolated in the society demonstrates his strong sense of individualism.

*Gulliver’s Travels* may also be evaluated as representation of individualism through the character and travels of Gulliver. Although Gulliver does not have a rebellious nature and obsession to go away unlike *Crusoe*, his hatred of man and being different in the places that he goes makes him

individualist. Especially the part in which he goes to Lilliput and the fact that he is bigger than the citizens of this place symbolizes the inclination of people to see themselves superior to other people.

That Robinson Crusoe survives and falls onto the island is the completion of his freedom that he has always wished. It is the place that he can realize whatever he wants. “On his island Crusoe enjoys the absolute freedom from social restrictions for which Rousseau yearned- there are no family ties or civil authorities to interfere with his individual autonomy” (Watt, 1957: 96). When he reaches the shore, he ruins himself in vain instead of praying for having survived. That denotes the ungrateful nature of human beings. Then, he starts to enjoy the solitude compulsorily and the fact that he is the owner of the island. As soon as he starts to live in the island, he focuses on preserving his life just like men do in the state of nature. Defense and resistance are the key concepts in Hobbes’ and Locke’s political philosophy. He gets the food and other necessary things from the shipwreck, and he makes a shelter for himself and extends it day by day. He begins to have a permanent settlement in the island and creates a life on his own.

Crusoe shows many features of human nature that were analyzed by Locke and Hobbes. “Although most modern critics have regarded Crusoe as an embodiment of enterprising, fearless economic man,...he is always afraid, always cautious” (Novak, 1962: 23). He is scared so much by the natural happenings like earthquake, and strong storms. He is afraid of the footprint that he sees on the shore that he can not even sleep for days. He thinks of several possibilities about to which it may belong. He has been so individualist that he looks like he is afraid of people. We generally see him afraid throughout the novel that depicts the psychology of human beings in the pure state of nature. It may be the implication to show that people are not fit to be solitude without people in nature. Moreover, the brutal nature of humanity causes people to distrust each other.

He always debates on his condition and decides what to do very carefully. He uses his reason which is vital for human nature and removal of violence. “I consulted several things in my situation, which I found would be proper for me” (p. 44). He keeps book and writes a diary that is the merit of civilized man to read and write, and use his logic. He makes a division of good and evil sides of his condition that shows his reasonable wit. He tries to be as logical as possible, considering his situation.

As Crusoe settles the island more, he becomes the owner of it with his properties, plantation, and home which he calls ‘my castle’. He sees himself rightful to own the things in the island, as he works hard to have them just like in the philosophy of Locke. Crusoe says that: “...this was all my own; that I was king and lord of all this country indefeasibly and had a right of possession and if I could convey it, I might have it in inheritance as completely as any lord of a manor in England.” (p. 76). He always mentions about his property by listing them eagerly. Hence, we understand that his property is of great importance to him for his life in the island. He is so impatient that he wants to get immediate results from his work.

He sees Friday as his servant as soon as he saves and gets him. That shows the instinct of human nature to be Godlike and superior to other people. When he utters that he needs someone to get out of this island, he says that he needs to get a savage into his possession. He does not mention his necessity of a friend who is equal to him. This passage tells us many things about the nature of man. Men are usually in need of a community that he can live with, as they are always in danger alone. Even though man needs the company of other people, he hardly leaves his pride in society. Crusoe’s attitude to Friday shows this part of human nature. Claiming his mastery and superiority on Friday, Crusoe always commands and orders him what to do. He chooses to give him a name instead of asking him what his name is. “This reckless and egoistic attitude towards one’s

neighbor results naturally in a strong impulse to dominate and to command'' (Häusermann, 1935: 449). This situation is the same when he saves the captain and the other men. When he has more people in the island, he asserts that he is the authority.

Besides Crusoe's egoism in the novel, we may see the criticism of human nature by Defoe when Crusoe says "I was removed from all the wickedness of the world here. I had neither the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, or the pride of life" (p. 98). The selfishness of humanity in is criticized once more through the character of Robinson Crusoe. He is not aware of his own nature while criticizing the society; this shows the arbitrariness in his identity.

The criticism of human nature can be clearly recognized in Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels, because it is one of the main themes in this work. The genre of this work is regarded as a satire that criticizes and satirizes the human condition in general. It criticizes the corruption of human being in the beginning with the presentation of the utopian country, Lilliput. The fact that all the people in these four different worlds to which Gulliver traveled lack some emotions of human nature, and it shows this criticism of humanity because of their defected personalities. He faces with the corruption and deformity of human reason and pride through his visit to Houyhnhnms. Swift's criticism of men reaches its climax at the end of the text when Gulliver can not touch even his wife because of his hatred of men. The giants may be said to represent governments of European countries, while Laputas represent philosophy without practical application.

The presentation of human nature as brutal and being inclined to fight is given clearly in some parts of Robinson Crusoe. As it is cited by Locke and Hobbes that people are tempted to fight in the situation of rivalry and competition. Especially the representation of cannibals, Friday's people, explicitly represents this brutality of primitive communities in the state of nature. They kill and eat the ones that they have to fight which is disgusting for the civilized men. "According to Defoe's theory, the primitive patriarchal state of nature gradually gave way to a period of violence" (Novak, 1963: 16). When Crusoe talks to Friday for the first time after he teaches him to speak English, the first thing that Crusoe asks him is that if they fight good or not. Then, he keeps on asking the details about how they beat the enemy. Friday answers eagerly and tells they fight well. It is a kind of exploration of human nature and its interest and temptation to fight and battle.

That Crusoe is totally free in the island brings his economic individualism at the same time. He has the autonomy in deciding on his own economic situation that would be probably opposed by the government and the society. He gives us the figure of a perfect businessman, as he is already a merchant and knows how to deal with trade. "His sensibility is concerned with material things; he is businesslike; he works effectively; and he keeps excellent account of the results" (Novak, 1996: 157). He cultivates his own food and breeds his own animals expanding them in time. When he is in the island he gets the goods from the shipwreck in the beginning, so he is not in a completely crude situation, but in a capitalist one. As Watt (1957: 67) explains, this economic freedom and capitalism is regarded as the most significant cause of the individualist nature of humanity. We see that Crusoe is economically powerful even when he goes back to England after twenty-eight years of residence in the island. He learns that his job was continued by his old neighbor in Brazil, and he has enough money to keep his job and expand it. He also sends an amount of money to his sisters. Crusoe's freedom and power in this respect make him more egocentric in his attitudes and views.

For Defoe was a conservative religious writer, we see Crusoe's religious development in spite of his religious individualism in the novel. As he is in a total freedom, he is free to believe in God and pray. He prays to God only when he is afraid and needs help that is natural in human psychology. He is not questioned about his religious identity in the island unlike in a monarchical

tyranny. We see some parts that he realizes the existence of God, or 'Providence' as it is uttered like that in the novel. Firstly, he feels that when he sees the grain that was grown itself without any seed. Then, he recognizes that some seeds might have dropped from one of the sacks that he carried from the shipwreck. As it is seen, he is in a kind of confusion about religion and the existence of God. However, he is usually in need of this belief on the existence of God, and he mentions about the God and his power that shows Defoe's religious character. Defoe's religiousness was emphasized by Novak (1963: 15) when he says that:

The basis for Defoe's theory of society was a belief in a divine right of property. If God had not given Adam control over the land and the animals, man would be forced to expand all his energies in an individual struggle to survive.

In the times of his dense religious monologues, he questions the existence of the earth, claiming some great power superior to humanity. He calls the help of God many times when he tries to redeem his faults, and he believes that God punishes him because of his mistakes. He says that "I rejected the voice of Providence, which had mercifully put me in a posture or station of life wherein I might have been happy and easy" (p.69). The text is full of religious references that make him more attached to God and religion. Then, he finds and keeps the Bible, and reads it most of the time which shows his religious identity. We can understand that Defoe opposes the idea of religious individualism and freedom, as he was a conservative Puritan. It can not be denied that religion and civilization are regarded as being supportive to each other. As religious dogmas remove the primitive instincts of human beings from their nature, they make humanity more reasonable and thoughtful agents. Novak (1957: 23) cites that Crusoe thinks of being an unreasonable and bestial creature before his recognition of religion and the power of God.

### **3.2. Political Development**

Grant (1988: 42) explains that Locke analyses 'how political societies developed from pre-political family groups'. Locke's division of political societies into four in the formation of post-political societies can be seen in Robinson Crusoe. It is about the transition from one community to another. The first community is the family, when the next one is the island. Then it goes towards the creation of governmental society with laws and agreed contracts, after it is transformed to a kind of tyranny with Crusoe's authority. Crusoe's condition is parallel to the stages of humanity. "Robinson Crusoe survives his loneliness, conquers his environment and becomes the 'King' of his island, ruling, at first, over his parrot, goats, dog, and cat." (Novak, 1963: 50-51).

The first community is the family from which Crusoe escapes and goes to the nature. According to Defoe, the family was the most significant social unit. According to Locke and Hobbes, it is the smallest unit in the process of the formation of political societies. The family is a conservative metaphor used with commonwealth; there is an inequality in the system of the family. The children are under the management of the parents and they continue this through the time that forms the process. That is why Crusoe rebels and escapes from that in the beginning, for he is individualist entrepreneur who defends the freedom. Although Crusoe does not pay much attention to the bounds of his family, he is regretful because of this in the island. We have many parts when he misses his family and mentions it. He says "It would have made a stoic smile, to have seen me and my little family sit down to dinner" (p.113). That he escapes from his family is defined as his 'original sin' denotes serious significance for Defoe.

These notions stress the importance of family for Defoe. That Crusoe marries and have a family after he is saved from the island highlights the significance of having a family. When he goes to the island the second time, he tells the men who lives there that he will send them women- which

may be seen as humiliating by feminist critics-. However, this can be seen as his efforts to make some contributions to the creation of family. In the families, the fathers are seen like dictator with their authority. Hobbes explains in 'On the Citizen' that families are like little kingdoms as the parents' authority on the children are huge (p. 102). Hobbes adds that the children are like slaves owned by their masters. Defoe implies the right of the children to go away from their families, when Crusoe escapes to the sea voyages from his family. Defoe is more liberal in this respect, resembling to Locke in terms of his ideas on the family and the rights of the children to be free.

The island is the second community in the stages of political societies. It may be seen as a metaphor for England. There can be found some references to England in the novel that shows the island's similarity to it as a country. Crusoe's definition of the island as 'country' many times proves this analysis. So, it can be associated with it and how it developed to a country from an isolated island. The island presents the other stages of political societies with the coming of the other people to the island and their interaction with Robinson and each other.

In his solitude situation, Crusoe generally yearns for a company and the advantages of the society as he yearned for his family. Throughout the text, we see the transformation of the state of nature to the government by the appearance of civilization. "Defoe recognized the benefits of the state of nature, but he believed that the freedom and purity of Crusoe's island were minor advantages compared to the comfort and security of civilization" (Novak, 1963: 23). Defoe attached credence to civilization, for it replaces reason to passions and violence of human nature. Crusoe is obsessed with the idea of getting out of the island, but his attempts in this aim are vain because of his solitude and weakness against nature. He says that "I thought I lived really very happy in all things, except that of society" (p. 110). It can be understood that Defoe praises the civilized condition of men, as it makes the people use their reason. We see that Crusoe makes Friday civilized in time, and Friday leaves his primitive condition for the advantages of modern society.

When the population increases in the island with the coming of the Captain and his men, and Friday's father, they need some laws to live harmoniously. Even though they form some laws, Crusoe is still the most powerful authority. He is the owner of the island, for he has his property by working for years. According to Hobbes's and Locke's philosophy, it is not wrong that he has this right. He claims his authority, saying that "...while you stay on this island with me, you will not pretend to any authority here; and if I put arms into your hands, you will,....be governed by my orders" (p. 196). That the captain calls him 'Governor' is the proof of his acknowledged authority. Crusoe sees himself as the 'absolute lord and lawgiver' in his small community.

The concept of 'consent' is very important in this respect, because people choose their lead being compulsory. There is an agreement which is done among the people by the force of the authority. That is what Crusoe does here to his new people in the island. He makes a contract with them, as the oral swear is not enough for him. According to Hobbes in *The Leviathan*, "the mutual transferring of right, is that what we call contract" (p.192). This is a very significant step for them in the process of political development of the society, as "our civilization as a whole based on individual contractual relationships..." (Watt, 1957: 70). This shows the human nature once more that people do not trust each other because of their hypocrite identities. His society becomes like a democracy by the agreements and contracts between the authority and the people, as it removed from the state of nature totally. Novak regards it as Defoe's probable 'concept of the ideal government' (1963: 62). That is the transition from society to government which may be interpreted as replacement of the political stage by the pre-political state of nature. As Mill (1995: 456) explains, according to Hobbes we are morally bound when we make contracts with the other people or authorities that limit our rights partially in the society.

In need of protecting themselves from the outer dangers, Crusoe's group turns into a kind of tribe which is the third type of society in Locke's political philosophy. Here, Crusoe sees himself as a commander and his men as his army; he says that "...I immediately advanced my whole army, which was now eight men,..." (p. 205). He may be regarded as a monarch, as he is in a state of war with his 'army' against the ones who threaten the kingdom. That may be regarded as 'the state of war' after 'the state of nature' which is defined by Hobbes and Locke in their philosophy. That he sees himself as the king of his kingdom shows this view. Crusoe and his society changes into a tyranny in the end of their life in the island, that may be said the last stage in the process of political evaluation of the society.

Towards the end of the text, Crusoe and his men get out of the island and go to the civil society in England after twenty-eight years. He gets all the profit from his old job, for his old neighbor worked Crusoe's business. Although he feels himself as a stranger, his individualism and comfort are still emphasized. He is in a perfect economic individualism because of the money that he got. Money helps him to live in better circumstances as Hobbes claimed the importance of money in this respect. He declares that money gives people the chance to expand their possessions and business.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

As Daniel Defoe's political philosophy is alike to Hobbes and Locke's views, it is not wrong to examine Robinson Crusoe in this sense. Considering the contradictory human nature with two opposing sides, the evil side is more dominant in the state of nature. Although human beings are totally free in nature, they always need other people for protection. People also should enter society not to reveal his dangerous part in the harmony of the social order. Furthermore, people are always individualist, placing the greatest importance to themselves.

Robinson Crusoe is a very appropriate work to explore this nature of human being, for it is based on the story of one main character by which the psychology of human beings can be presented thoroughly. We can see almost all the theories of Hobbes and Locke on political societies in relation to individualist perspectives. The presence of Robinson Crusoe personally in all parts of the novel is useful to present human nature and psychology in different circumstances.

In this respect, it can be realized how literature and social life are interrelated to each other. The process which started with Renaissance and Humanism brings us to the issue of individualism and the rise of the novel. Ian Watt postulates that the rise of the novel coincides with the birth of a new economic system and social philosophy, suggesting that Robinson's "travels, like his freedom from social ties [...] by making the pursuit of gain a primary motive, economic individualism has much increased the mobility of the individual" (67). As the social incidents shape literary activities, literature also affects society in different ways.

#### **5. REFERENCES**

- [1] Grant, Ruth W. 1988. "Locke's Political Anthropology and Lockean Individualism". *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 50, No. 1, pp. 42-63.
- [2] Häusermann, Hans W. 1935. "Aspects of Life and Thought in Robinson Crusoe". *The Review of English Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 44, pp. 439-456.
- [3] Hobbes, Thomas. 1998 (1651). *On the Citizen*. Ed. Richard Tuck. Cambridge University Press.
- [4] Hobbes, Thomas. 1985 (1651). *Leviathan*. Ed. C.B. Macpherson. Penguin.

- [5] Locke, John. 1998 (1688). *Two Treatises of Civil Government*. Ed. P.Laslett. Cambridge University Press.
- [6] Mill, David van. 1995. ‘‘Hobbes's Theories of Freedom’’. *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 57, No. 2, pp. 443-459.
- [7] Novak, Maximillian E. 1961. ‘‘Robinson Crusoe's Fear and the Search for Natural Man’’. *Modern Philology*, Vol. 58, No. 4, pp. 238-245.
- [8] Novak, Maximillian E. 1961. ‘‘Robinson Crusoe's "Original Sin" ’’. *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 1, No. 3, Restoration and Eighteenth Century, pp. 19-29.
- [9] Novak, Maximillian E. 1962. ‘‘Crusoe the King and the Political Evolution of His Island’’. *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 2, No. 3, Restoration and Eighteenth Century, pp. 337-350.
- [10] Novak, Maximillian E. 1963. *Defoe and the Nature of Man*. Oxford University Press.
- [11] Watt, Ian. 1968 (1957). *The Rise of the Novel*. Penguin Books, Great Britain.
- [12] Watt, Ian. 1996. *Myths of Modern Individualism*. Cambridge University Pres.