CULTURE AND INDIVIDUALISM IN DANIEL DEFOE'S *ROBINSON CRUSOE* AND CAMARA LAYE'S *THE AFRICAN CHILD*

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Abstract

In a real sense, the world is made of relations rather than things. The pattern of relations in which human beings learn and share together constitutes the culture of any given society. This paper points out the communalism of Laye's culture as against the capitalistic individualism of Defoe's. It argues that although every person is a product of a given culture, his attitude and responses to his cultural background may set him apart as a unique individual. From this premise, it further argues that while Crusoe resents the stratified social structure, which would exclude him from the wealth of the emerging mercantilism of England and ventures out to create conditions for his survival as an "emperor", Laye's hero on the other hand combines the opportunities of his native culture with those of the European culture for his survival. The study points to the spirit of adventure in both heroes, the fact of alienation in both heroes, and the fact that in spite of their alienation, both heroes are finally reclaimed by their different cultures. This paper examines how culture and individualism are negotiated in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Camara Laye's *The African Child* (*L'Enfant noir, 1953*). While Defoe's novel is often read as a foundational text of English individualism and colonial modernity, Laye's autobiographical account stages personal development within a communal, ritualized West African cultural environment. By comparing narrative voice, representations of selfhood, the role of religion and labour, and the texts' treatments of "the other," this paper argues that both novels articulate distinct models of individual formation that reflect their divergent cultural frameworks. The comparison illuminates how literary forms mediate cultural values and how the idea of the individual is historically situated rather than universal.

Keywords: individualism, culture, society, postcolonial, identity

Introduction

The figure of the individual occupies a central place in Western literary and philosophical traditions. Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, published in 1719, is frequently invoked as a paradigmatic text of early modern individualism: a stranded man who survives by reason, industry, and resourcefulness, exemplifying a proto-liberal, Protestant ethic of self-reliance. Camara Laye's *The African Child*, published in French as *L'Enfant noir* in 1953 and later translated into English, offers a contrasting portrait of personhood rooted in communal ties, ritual knowledge, and apprenticeship within the cultural practices of a West African Malinke community.

This paper sets these two texts in productive dialogue to explore how literature constructs individual identity in relation to cultural matrixes. Rather than treating individualism as a stable ideological category, I read it as historically mediated: Defoe and Laye stage competing pedagogies of the self that map onto colonial-era formations of power, religion, and economy.

Society, Culture and the Individual

Culture is commonly used in the social sciences especially by anthropologists to refer to the totality of a people's way of life. It is the distinctive way of life of a people, their complete design for living. In sociological parlance, culture "includes any piece or pattern of behaviour, any attitude, any value or belief, any skill that human beings learn as members of a human group plus the manufacture or use of any human activities" (Reece Melee; 89). Culture refers to anything that human beings do that does not have a biological basis. It is learned and shared. What is important is a structure of society in which there will be from 'top' to 'bottom', a continuous gradation of cultural levels: it is important to remember that we should not consider the upper levels as possessing more culture than the lower, but as representing a more conscious culture and a greater specialization of culture (Eliot: 48).

As individuals, we find that our development depends upon the people whom we meet in the course of our lives. These include the authors whose books we read, and characters in works of fiction and history; such as Crusoe and Laye. From the point of view of those who desire the survival of culture, so one needs the enemy, within limits, the friction not only between individuals but between groups, seems to be quite necessary for civilization. The universality of irritation is the best assurance of peace.

Both novels are autobiographical works of the authors that deal with the conflict of the individual personality with his cultures; these two are intertwined. Notably, is the optimistic belief by these authors that no individual can survive the perils of life without the constant help of the group of class or society, which he belongs to. Culture also has a lot to play in an individual's life. The individualistic theory then holds that the interest of the normal adult is best served by allowing him maximum freedom and responsibility for choosing his objectives and the means for obtaining them, and acting accordingly. This belief follows from the conviction that each person is the best judge of his own interests and granted educational opportunities, can discover how to advance them. It is also based upon the assumption that the act of making these choices contributes to the development of the individual and to the welfare of the society. Society, from this point of view, is seen as only a collection of individuals, each of which is self-contained and ideally almost self- sufficient entity.

'Citizens, you are brothers, yet God has formed you differently' - Plato (Floyd. 235). Individualism is that behaviour governed by the belief that individual people should lead their lives as they want and should be independent. It is the feeling or behaviour of somebody who likes to do things his own way, regardless of what other people do. It is a theory that favours complete freedom of action and belief for each individual person rather than state control. This means that the state should in no way control the actions of the individual.

Findings

Culture and Identity: Both Crusoe and Laye's protagonists are products of their respective cultures (European individualism vs. African communalism). Under Cultural Identity and Postcolonial Consciousness, Crusoe represents the Enlightenment individual, the self-made man who dominates nature and culture while Laye's protagonist harmonizes indigenous traditions with Western modernity, highlighting communal values and spiritual depth. Scholars like Homi Bhabha (2010) argues that the postcolonial subject like Laye's narrator exists in a state of hybridity, where

identities are negotiated rather than fixed. This aligns with Laye's depiction of dual belonging to both African tradition and French modernity. Simon Gikandi (2011) points out that Crusoe's industriousness masks a deeper complicity with colonial capitalism and the racial order of Enlightenment Europe, a critique only implicitly acknowledged in the original essay.

Crusoe's cultural detachment and his effort to master the environment reflect Enlightenment rationalism and colonial capitalism. In contrast, Laye's character undergoes a process of cultural synthesis, closer to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's concept of "decolonizing the mind" (2009), where native culture is not rejected but integrated thoughtfully into a broader human experience. Despite being shaped by their cultures, both protagonists express individualism through personal choices and internal conflicts.

Individualism vs. Communalism: Crusoe embodies Western individualism, emphasizing self-reliance, conquest, and dominance over others and nature. Laye, by contrast, harmonizes with his communal African roots, showing deep respect for tradition, spirituality, and familial bonds. Crusoe embodies Western individualism and capitalism. Laye exemplifies African communal values, though open to modernity. Chinua Achebe's arguments in his essay "An Image of Africa" (2000) note that African novels reclaim subjectivity through narrative collectivism, which is evident in Laye's nostalgic storytelling. Ato Quayson (2013), presents African urban identity as dynamic and negotiated, reinforcing Laye's liminal experience between tradition and modernity. Crusoe's self-reliance and capitalist ethics (as critiqued by Ian Watt, and echoed by scholars like Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri) depict neoliberal individualism. Laye, conversely, represents Afro-modernity, a term used by Achille Mbembe, blending individual aspiration with collective memory and responsibility.

Cultural Conflict and Adaptation: Crusoe rejects England's rigid class structure and finds self-worth through imperial conquest and economic independence. Laye embraces both traditional African values and modern European education, balancing both worlds without fully rejecting either. Both *Robinson Crusoe* and *The African Child* remain deeply relevant, but for different reasons. Contemporary analysis moves away from viewing them merely as individual quests, instead situating them in wider discussions of cultural imperialism, hybrid identity, spiritual cosmologies, and narrative agency.

Survival and Transformation: Crusoe survives by mastering his environment and imposing control, symbolizing Western survival through dominance. Laye survives by internal growth, emotional resilience, and cultural synthesis, symbolizing African survival through adaptation and community. Crusoe survives by conquering while Laye survives by adapting. The idea of the "survival narrative" has been redefined by authors like Saidiya Hartman (2007), where survival is not only physical but cultural and existential. Laye's story represents postcolonial survival—less through conquest and more through cultural negotiation and memory as supported by Paul Gilroy (2003). Crusoe's survival is external—mastery of space and resources. Laye's is internal,

emotional and spiritual perseverance in the face of cultural rupture. This speaks to the shift from imperial adventure narratives to diasporic memory work in global literature.

The Journey into the Unknown: For Crusoe, the unknown is physical (the uninhabited island). For Laye, the unknown is cultural and emotional (moving from village life to Westernized education and values). Both novels are deeply rooted in their cultural contexts but present universal themes of growth, alienation, and survival. Crusoe's journey reflects Enlightenment ideals of rationalism, capitalism, and imperialism. Laye's journey reflects African traditions of spiritual harmony, communal responsibility, and the challenges of post-colonial identity. Ultimately, both characters are "reclaimed" by their cultures, highlighting the enduring influence of one's cultural roots on personal development.

Religion and Moral Philosophy: Crusoe's religiosity is individualistic and tied to survival while Laye's spirituality is communal and ritualistic, embedded in social life. Kwame Anthony Appiah in Cosmopolitanism (2006) discusses the clash and interweaving of spiritual worldviews in a globalized world, which reflects in Laye's peaceful co-existence of Islam and animism, and the moral guidance of elders. Robert Young (2012) critiques Eurocentric spiritual superiority, noting how Crusoe's missionary relationship with Friday constructs a colonial moral order. Laye's religious syncretism presents a cosmopolitan religiosity that contrasts sharply with Crusoe's proselytizing, Eurocentric Christianity. Friday's transformation under Crusoe is now widely critiqued as a tool of colonial subjugation, rather than a moral awakening.

Language, Narrative, and Representation: Defoe uses unembellished, factual narration to convey realism. Laye uses nostalgic, structured storytelling to preserve memory. Tejumola Olaniyan and Biodun Jeyifo emphasize how African authors use narrative form to deconstruct colonial epistemology and assert oral tradition's legitimacy. James English in *The Economy of Prestige* (2005) discusses how Laye's French-language writing challenges assumptions of cultural authenticity, a debate ongoing in African literary studies. While Defoe's narration mimics journalistic documentation (as per formal realism, per Ian Watt), Laye's reflective tone offers ethnographic counter-memory, a resistance against historical erasure of African culture.

Therefore, comparatively, the power dynamics in cross-cultural encounters (Crusoe/Friday vs. Laye–French culture). The representation of nature and landscape as either commodity (Crusoe) or sacred (Laye). The shifting meaning of heroism from colonial conquest to cultural preservation and adaptation.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis draws on interdisciplinary work in cultural studies and postcolonial theory. Key concepts include:

Individualism as cultural practice: Individualism is treated not simply as a philosophical doctrine but as a set of social habits, economic behaviours, and narrative strategies through which characters are taught to value autonomy, labour, and self-calculation.

Narrative voice and pedagogy: Following narrative theory, we consider how first-person narration instructs readers in models of subjectivity. The confessional and reflective modes of both texts function as pedagogical devices that stage the formation of identity.

Postcolonial critique: Insights from postcolonial studies (e.g., Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Frantz Fanon) help situate the texts within histories of empire and cultural encounter, especially in the ways each text frames ‘‘the other’’ and mediates cross-cultural contact.

Methodology

Close textual readings are combined with comparative historical contextualization. Primary attention is given to narrative voice, rhetorical strategies, representations of work and religion, and depictions of social relations. Where relevant, I gesture toward archival and historical research on early eighteenth-century English mercantilism and twentieth-century French West Africa to situate cultural assumptions.

***Robinson Crusoe*: Self, Labour, and Providence**

Defoe’s protagonist narrates his life with an insistence on providential structure and moral economy. Crusoe’s solitude on the island becomes a laboratory for the cultivation of self-reliance: his diary-like account records experiments in agriculture, metallurgy, and domestic organization. Two features stand out:

i. Labour as self-fashioning: Crusoe’s mastery of the environment through labour is depicted as the primary means of asserting individuality. Work produces both material survival and moral rectitude; industriousness is framed as evidence of divine favour.

ii. Religious introspection and conversion: Crusoe’s spiritual journey from wayward youth to repentant self-examiner anchors his identity within a Protestant framework. His solitary prayers and scriptural meditations form a solitary moral subject whose interiority is continually reinforced by God’s visible providence. Moreover, Defoe’s narrative treats encounter with others (notably Friday) as opportunities to pedagogically extend Crusoe’s rationalized, hierarchical model of personhood. Friday’s instruction in English language, Christian religion, and modes of labour reproduces colonial power relations under the guise of charitable paternalism: Crusoe as cultural teacher, Friday as receptive pupil.

The African Child: Communal Formation and Cultural Memory

Camara Laye’s *The African Child* is a lyrical memoir in which personal development is enmeshed with communal rites, craft traditions, and familial apprenticeship. The key dimensions in Camara Laye’s *The African Child* include:

i. Apprenticeship and embodied knowledge: Laye's account emphasizes apprenticeship (e.g. goldsmithing) and embodied know-how transmitted across generations. Skill is learned through participation in communal practice rather than isolated experimentation.

ii. Rituals, naming, and social identity: Birth rituals, naming ceremonies, and ritual competencies mark the child's integration into a collective moral world. Identity emerges relationally through parents, elders, and the village not primarily through solitary inner reflection.

iii. Religion and cosmology: Animist and Islamic elements coexist and inform moral reasoning and community life. Religious practice is communal and ceremonial rather than primarily interiorized. Laye's narrator recalls how elders and kin shape his aspirations; individual achievements are celebrated insofar as they contribute to the social good or uphold cultural heritage.

Comparative Analysis

Narrative Voice and Models of Subjectivity: Both texts use first-person narration to make claims about their worlds. Defoe's voice is pragmatic, didactic, and oriented toward exemplarity: Crusoe narrates to instruct readers in virtues of thrift, labour, and piety. Laye's voice is more lyrical, memory-laden, and networked: the child's recollections are mediated through communal memory and affect. Where Crusoe's voice constructs an autonomous, self-sufficient subject, Laye's constructs an individuated but relational subject whose identity is achieved in dialogue with social institutions.

Labour and Economy: Production of the Self - In *Robinson Crusoe*, labour is an instrument of isolation and mastery of Crusoe's gardens, houses, and tools which mark his sovereignty. Labour is commodified mentally in that Crusoe thinks in terms of planning, inventory, and profit (even in solitude), aligning with mercantile rationality. In *The African Child*, craft and labour are pedagogical and social. Apprenticeship transmits cultural knowledge and social roles rather than producing private property or profit as the primary value. Work is integrative: it binds persons into communal cycles of exchange and obligation.

Religion, Conversion, and Moral Order: Religious introspection in Defoe is individualistic and teleological: conversion marks moral progress toward a Providentially-ordered self. Defoe's Crusoe internalizes a Christian morality that legitimizes his autonomy. Laye's religiosity is collective and syncretic: ritual practice and communal worship form the matrix in which moral sensibilities develop. Faith is expressed through shared rites and social duties rather than private covenant alone.

Encounters with 'Others' and Power Asymmetries: Crusoe's relationship to Friday exemplifies a colonial pedagogy, Crusoe's instruction imposes European categories of language, religion, and labour. The power asymmetry remains central: Crusoe remains the cultural arbiter. Laye's

accounts of encounters (with colonial modernity, French schooling, or urban life) often dramatize tension between communal norms and external pressures. The child's exposure to Western education signals both opportunity and cultural dislocation; identity is negotiated rather than simply imposed.

Conclusion

Reading *Robinson Crusoe* and *The African Child* side by side highlights how literature constructs modalities of selfhood that correspond to broader cultural economies. Defoe's model of individualism anchored in labour, piety and hierarchical pedagogy contrasts with Laye's model of communal individuation and embodied apprenticeship. The comparison shows that individualism is neither culturally neutral nor historically fixed but is narrated, taught, and contested.

The comparison suggests that individualism takes culturally specific forms. Defoe's text envisions the individual as a product of self-discipline, labour, and divine election an anglophone model consonant with capitalist emergent modernity. Laye's narration posits a subject formed through relational ties and communal practices where autonomy is bounded by obligations and memory. This reframing challenges universalizing assumptions about the self: what counts as 'individual' depends on the narrative practices and cultural institutions available to subjects. Moreover, colonial contexts complicate these trajectories: Defoe's imperial imagination exports a template of individual mastery, while Laye records the lived consequences of cultural contact and the resilience of communal forms of personhood.

Implications for Further Studies

Comparative studies should attend to formal features (narrative voice, apprenticeship scenes) as conveyors of cultural values. Teaching these texts together offers students a way to see how different historical contexts produce divergent models of personhood and moral formation. Future research might chart how other colonial and postcolonial autobiographical texts stage the transition from communal to liberal-individualist modes of subjectivity.

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