

Women Survivors: Female Characters and Their Role in Colonial Adventures: Elizabeth Whittaker's *Robina Crusoe* and the Image of Victorian Women

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyze the female characters in Whittaker's novel and the differences between them and the established ideas of what Victorian ladies were and should aspire to be. The idea of a powerful female protagonist who survives independently is a challenge to the Victorian ideal of the woman as a docile and subservient wife bound to her husband and is more similar to the later feminism and egalitarianism movements. The paper will also analyze the colonial, racial and gender discrimination and negative images regarding native and British women and will compare them with works by other authors of the era as well as modern criticism. A further aim is to underline the importance of Whittaker's novel from an educational and gender point of view, showing that the novel belongs in the "New Girl" socio-cultural and literary movement with which began the process of female emancipation.

Keywords : female adventure novels, gender studies, colonialism, discrimination

Ever since the expansion of the European colonial empires (Spain, Portugal and Britain) reached global proportions from the late 16th century onwards, the idea of spreading outwards from Europe and establishing control over the many "New Worlds" has been at the forefront of European policy. Naturally this had a profound impact on the cultural and social development of Europe: Imperialism established the European empires firmly at the top of civilization with all other regions of the world gradually being subjugated or heavily influenced by the colonial powers. The process of exploration/conquest of distant lands and peoples was dangerous but promised the growth of wealth and power: from this was born a whole new genre in literature: the adventure novel. One of the first and perhaps the most famous such novel was Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. While based (very loosely) on a real castaway story, it was mainly a work of fiction and it was so popular that it is described as having "started the genre of realistic fiction" (Buss and Karnowski 7). It has also inspired many adaptations into film, drama, opera and even comic books as well as a whole sub-genre: the Robinsonade, or, the survival story of a (usually) male protagonist who overcomes hostile environment and people and establishes a European form of civilization. However, there is also the female Robinsonade, where the female survivor has to face the same problems while also challenging (and defeating) the perceived limitations of her gender. It is still an adventure story, but with the additional complication of placing a woman far outside the established boundaries of her social and gender role and see her successfully overcoming the odds. Female Robinsonades are therefore stories of female empowerment: they show the "capacity of female

self-reliance" (Doughty 60) as well as the unfairness of putting social and cultural limitations on women solely on the basis of their gender. On the other hand, their underlying colonial and racial bias is often equal to that of Defoe's novel and thus they help reinforce the idea of European cultural and racial supremacy. Much like the male Robinson, female survivors too manage to build a haven of civilization and to expand it, overcoming (violently or not) the baser instincts of the people they encounter: Said calls that the "ideology of overseas expansion" (*Culture and Imperialism* 70) and argues that in this way literature serves the political aims of the colonial governments.

One Robinsonade that merits particular attention in the light of the above observations is Elizabeth Whittaker's *Robina Crusoe and Her Lonely Island Home*. Serialized in the popular weekly educational periodical *The Girl's Own Paper* between December 1882 and August 1883, it closely resembles Defoe's narrative in many points: Robina clashes with native tribes and rogue sailors, saves a native girl (similar to Friday), builds infrastructure and ultimately returns to England. However, as pointed out above, the main merit of the novel is in its exploration of gender roles and challenging them, showing that Robina is as capable as Robinson to survive and establish civilization. Furthermore, there is a strong educational element in the novel, which is particularly important as *The Girl's Own Paper's* aim is to encourage female education; Robina possesses a vast array of useful skills and knowledge and imparts some of those to the native girl, thereby "civilizing" her and assuming the roles of mother, teacher and overlord. That is the idealized image of the "benevolent colonialist" famously espoused by Rudyard Kipling in his poem "The White Man's Burden", an allusion to the romantic notion of the sacrifices that enlightened men must make to bring their culture to the lesser races.

This paper aims to assess the development of the female characters in Whittaker's novel and the differences between them and the established ideas of what Victorian ladies were and should aspire to be. The idea of a powerful, self-reliant female protagonist is a challenge to the Victorian ideal of the woman as the "angel of the house"¹ and is more akin to the later feminist and gender equality movements. The paper will also analyze the underlying colonial, racial and gender discrimination and negative images and will compare them with works by other authors of the era as well as modern criticism, so that the paper can clarify the aspects of the complex cultural continuum involving the Victorian ideology, integral creativeness of serious literature, and the compliant but subversive popular imagination found in the Female Robinsonade. A further aim is to underline the importance of Whittaker's novel from an educational and gender point of view, especially since the idea of female empowerment had made very little progress until the beginning of the 20th century.

1 A term based on the poem (published in 1854) by Coventry Patmore which depicted the the Victorian feminine ideal: a wife and mother who was selflessly devoted to her children and submissive to her husband: "The Angel in the House." in *The Broadview Anthology of Victorian Poetry and Poetic Theory*. Ed. Thomas J. Collins and Vivienne J. Rundle. Peterborough: Broadview, 1999. pp.739-760

The background of *Robina Crusoe* is unclear: the author, Elizabeth Whittaker, is mysterious as there are no other works published by her in the magazine and she appears nowhere else in the literary world: Doughty states that she could not find Whittaker's name or works in any literary sources or depositories. She therefore concludes that "Elizabeth Whittaker" is likely a pseudonym (Doughty 61). Two probable reasons why such a story would be written and published under a pseudonym merit attention: one is, according to Doughty, that an established author writing in a new genre would not want to risk his or her reputation. The other reason, I suggest, is the controversial status of the female protagonist: Robina is a strong, educated, independent woman who is able to fend for herself without any help or guidance from men – an idea challenging the patriarchal society of the Victorian age and even going against the general aim of *The Girl's Own Paper* to educate and nurture young ladies: future mothers and wives, angels of the house. Robina is a "descendant of the world-famed Robinson Crusoe", as the protagonist herself states in her opening words. She is also the daughter of a colonial administrator, therefore ideologically and socially qualified to serve empire despite her gender. However, Robina regrets that her sex "precluded [her] from seafaring life" (184). It is obvious that women were not considered suitable for participating in the exploration and subjugation during the colonial age. Imperialistic expansion, especially in Britain, was a male-dominated affair: women possessed no political and few civil rights and were relegated to the role of wives and mothers, with limited education available aiming to enhance their social graces rather than any scientific or sociopolitical knowledge. The gendered nature of elementary education can be seen after the 1870 Education Act with the curriculum for girls stressing the need for teaching domestic skills. Gommersall argues that these "domestic subjects" are meant to "limit girls' access to more academic studies and lower their standards of achievement" (Gommersall 37). Therefore the character of Robina (with her yearning for adventure and, more importantly, her abilities and knowledge) stands out all the more compared to the typical Victorian image of women. She is an explorer, a survivor and a colonial overlord, claiming these typically male roles while at the same time retaining her femininity and ability to raise and take care of children and be the mother figure for several other characters.

On the subject of female explorers, Pratt offers valuable insights, especially on the fact that they were extremely rare and often forgotten, having had the impertinence to enter such a male-dominated world as exploration of distant lands. Discussing travel writing and transculturation, Pratt argues that writers and explorers, being almost always male, view conquering and subjugating nature with a distinctly sexual undertone: the male conquers and dominates the nature, which is always described as female due to its fecundity and ability to nurture life (Pratt 55-6). In such a setting women are hardly ever present: they are out of place, which makes Robina even more interesting as a subject of literary analysis. Only in the latter part of the 19th century, with the advent of the "New Girl" concept do girls and female characters begin to regularly appear in the hitherto male domains of colonialism, war and empire. Adventure novel characters as well as real-life explorers and conquerors "scripted themselves into a wholly male, heroic world" (Pratt 152). The female travelers, however, took a more domestic and personal point of

view than the men who concentrated on adventure and conquest. Pratt argues that "The predictable fact that domestic settings have a much more prominent presence in the women's travel accounts than in the men's [...] is a matter not just of differing spheres of interest or expertise, then, but of modes of constituting knowledge and subjectivity" (Pratt 156).

This is applicable to the writing style of "Robina Crusoe" despite the fact that it is a work of fiction. The main character remains first and foremost a lady, worrying about her skirt while marooned at sea (185), finding the need to crawl while entering her cave home "undignified" (290) and depicted wearing a dress throughout her stay on the island. She is a lady-survivor, pitted against nature and natives in a bid to reestablish civilization, but through a lady's mindset. Unlike Robinson, she takes little interest in gaining wealth or building walls and defences, but concentrates on domestic duties such as making a mattress (290) or building and furnishing a bedroom, a kitchen complete with a brick fireplace and tables (380), and spending many evenings on the "reparation of [her] wardrobe" (380). Gradually she explores the island and establishes control in a very similar fashion to Robinson's adventures. In the words of James Joyce in his essay "Daniel Defoe" (published in 1964), Robinson Crusoe is the true symbol of British colonialism:

"He is the true prototype of the British colonist. ... The whole Anglo-Saxon spirit is in Crusoe: the manly independence, the unconscious cruelty, the persistence, the slow yet efficient intelligence, the sexual apathy, the calculating taciturnity." (pp. 24-25)

These very words apply to Robina as well, even the "manly independence" because, in establishing control over the island and its nature, she assumes the task of conqueror with its masculine nuances. The narrative provides ample descriptions and explanations of Robina's abilities and knowledge which help her master that task. She is familiar with most of the practical and scientific knowledge available in her time. She herself states that she "learned much of the elements of geology, chemistry and botany. [Even] cookery and medicine..." (245).

In the same passage there are other important points. Robina acquired her diverse and useful knowledge outside of the "confinement of the classroom," that is, in her own free time. Undoubtedly her school hours were occupied by the aforementioned "domestic subjects." She goes on to "strongly advise [her] young readers to devote some portion of their time to similar study. [...] ... even the happiest and most guarded home will be incalculably benefited by the mistress of it having some knowledge of the laws of health—of the science of the common objects of everyday life" (245). Perhaps the most important message of the novel follows, concluding chapter V:

"This early penchant of mine for diving into subjects which have far too long been considered not a necessary part of a woman's education, proved most advantageous. This may make me feel more strongly on the matter than I otherwise should have done, but I cannot but wish that teachers and parents would strive to awaken a taste in their girls as well as their boys in natural science and

history, as an intelligent in such is one means of preparing useful and common-sense wives and mothers." (245, underline mine)

This paragraph is of great importance as it offers the idea that gendered education is harmful and equal educational opportunities can have a very positive influence on young ladies without jeopardizing their still gendered ideal role: that of mothers and wives. I believe this idea to be concurrent with the then-emerging "New Girl" culture, that is, the idea that girls can be active, independent and successful and, more importantly, can join the men in the successful government and expansion of empire. Robina's achievements are impressive: she is an accomplished hunter, can use a gun and a bow, is able to identify the ingredients for manufacturing gunpowder (390), produces salt through evaporation (381) and even makes black ink and parchment in order to record her story (572) as well as being proficient in the domestic skills of cooking, sewing and agriculture. This emancipated versatility is obviously in line with the "New Girl" culture and can be found in many other adventure novels. Sally Mitchell points out the popularity of adventure novels with girl readers (Mitchell 111). She argues that late Victorian girls found novels for boys very interesting and "girls liked best [...] historical novels, empire-adventure tales, and (to a somewhat lesser extent) sea stories. These offered a particular variety of food for girls' mental lives, and all except the sea story were adapted by women authors to feature girl heroes. The feminized versions, however, suggest some of the period's ambiguous shifts in gender roles" (Mitchell 112). In accordance with Mitchell, I suggest that Robina, with her asexual rule over the island as a colonial conqueror while maintaining her ladylike qualities is a prime example of such ambiguity. Similar traits are perceived by both Mitchell and Norcia in L.T. Meade's adventure novel *Four On An Island* (published in 1892), where a group of children "survives through the efforts" (Mitchell 15) done by Isabel Fraser: their tomboy girl leader, whose character traits are likewise positioned between male and female gendered roles: conquest, leadership and control mixed with compassion and care for the other children. That role is easily comparable to Robina and her behaviour towards Undine and Henry. Norcia furthermore suggests that the ambiguity of character of Isabel is meant as a suggestion that girls can in fact "join and surpass their male counterparts in the imperial project", noting that Isabel is at the same time a female Crusoe and an "angel of the house" (Norcia 358).

This ambiguity, also present in Robina, finds its balance in the other main female character: the native girl Undine. She is the equivalent of Robinson's Friday but carries much greater importance as an assimilated subject of the empire. I suggest that Undine's raising, education and development into a fine young Victorian lady is a symbol of the effectiveness of Victorian girl education in creating "angels of the house" while at the same time it should be expanded and utilized in creating competent female servants of the empire like Robina. Thus both the ambiguous, adventurous image of the New Girl and the established gender framework of the Victorian education are shown to work in a distinctly imperial setting. The first meeting between the native girl and Robina echoes that of Robinson and Friday with the difference that Undine is a baby and her mother dies despite Robina's help (525). The chapter in which

this happens is named "A New Pet" and she also calls the baby her "pet" before deciding on a name. This is also concurrent with Robinson's idea that he "owns" Friday due to having saved his life. Robinson's terminology is even more colonial than Robina's. When Friday (what his real name was we will never know) prostrated himself and put Robinson's foot over his head the European man saw that as a promise that Friday will be "his slave for ever" (Robinson Crusoe 147). In exploring the relationship between the characters Rogers points out that, "Friday is acceptable because, for obvious racial reasons, he represents no threat of equality" (Rogers 384), that is, in line with his tawny skin and broken English, Friday will never be a full member of the English society and thus will be perpetually dependent on Robinson, his master. I apply the same line of logic to Robina and Undine's relationship where the cultural and moral subjugation of the native character is even more obvious. Undine never calls Robina "mistress"; she instead refers to her as "mamma", accepting her own adoption into European culture. In this way, Undine is even more subjected to Robina, because despite the implied voluntary slavery Friday was a male, kept his language and his father joined him in Robinson's settlement. Undine marries Henry (the inevitable outcome) and is thus more thoroughly assimilated: I would argue that her assimilation is far more complete than that of Friday due to the fact that she was raised from a baby by a European foster-mother and married a European man, putting herself in control in a true Victorian fashion, becoming a wife and a mother, quite different from Robina who, despite having saved and helped her "children," remains largely asexualized, much like Robinson as viewed by Joyce. Undine also is subjected to a far more thorough education than Friday: Robina takes her to England where Undine "learnt rapidly under her instructors and improved in many ways through the companionship of other girls" (668). The obvious implication is that the native girl can be "improved" through immersion in British culture: the main idea and agenda of benevolent imperialism is reconfirmed. At the same time, however, Undine seems to miss "the freedom of her island life" (668) and therefore the protagonists all return to the island (renamed Cerisia) a few years later; Henry and Undine as a family and Robina as the acknowledged matriarch of the island, now rapidly changed from wilderness to peaceful English countryside complete with cottages, fields and a forge. Industry and agriculture have transformed the new land, it is now firmly a part of the empire and it is all thanks to Robina and her audacity. The character of Undine, however, is more important from another point of view: she is the main target of the Victorian idea of what girls should aspire to be and her assimilation into Robina and Henry's culture is a triumph of empire.

There is yet another aspect of the native girl's character that carries significant hidden meaning worth exploring: her name. After saving her, Robina gives the infant the name Undine. It undoubtedly comes from the famous novella *Undine* by Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué², a love story inspired by a French fairy-tale in which an Undine (a water-spirit) marries a human in order to gain a soul at the price of immortality. While Robina herself claims she chose the name because the baby girl (and her dying

2 A German author of romance with Huguenot French ancestry. "Undine" was published in 1811 and reached great popularity.

mother) came to her "from the water" (565), i.e. alluding to the water spirit (or mermaid), I would suggest the other aspect of the undine (the lack of a soul) as equally important though understated in the narrative. Doughty also states that this may be seen as a hint that the native girl's "otherness might similarly handicap her" in her future dealings with Europeans (Doughty 67), but goes no further than stating the impending cultural assimilation of Undine. Undine's 'lack of soul' is more than a mere allusion to otherness; it shows the native girl as less human than her white counterpart. Much like Robinson arbitrarily names the native man Friday after the day of the week they met, Robina assigns the native girl a fairy-tale name suggesting she is not a complete human being. The importance of this fact is acknowledged by Doughty who points out that Robina (and therefore the readership of *The Girl's Own Paper*) would certainly be aware of Fouqué's novel and its plot details (Doughty 67). Discussing the works of American author and poet Edgar Allan Poe, Pollin notes the popularity of the tale in both the UK and the USA: English translations were published in 1818 and 1830, and a "superior version" by Thomas Tracy appeared in the USA in 1839 and was reprinted in 1840, 1844, and 1845; Pollin estimates that by 1966 about a hundred English versions had been printed, including adaptations for children. Edgar Allan Poe was "profoundly influenced" by Fouqué's tale (Pollin 60), which influence came through Poe's reading of Walter Scott and Samuel Coleridge who also drew inspiration³ from the story of Undine. Thus the widespread popularity of the story in the literary world on both sides of the Atlantic ocean is sure to mean that the readers would grasp the full implications of the name given to the girl: a lost orphan without a soul. Robina, assuming the motherly role of enlightened imperialism, endeavors to "give a soul" to Undine by teaching/civilizing her: much like Robinson transforms (or rather culturally subjugates) Friday through education, Undine becomes Robina's disciple. Cro analyzes the process thus:

"In several passages, Defoe identifies key issues of education: the learning of speech, the conquering of superstitions, the renunciation of bad habits, the division of labour as essential to a growing economy..." (Cro 99)

While Undine (raised by Robina from a baby) did not possess any superstitions or bad habits (as opposed to the mature Friday who was a cannibal and a pagan warrior), she underwent the same civilizing process as him, being the "little wild girl to be tamed" (653), and, as soon as she was old enough (8 years old in Chapter XXXIV), she "attended to the domestic affairs" (572) while Robina dedicated herself to writing: a division of labour typical for a colonial setting. With her education completed in the cultural metropolis of the British Empire, London, Undine completes her quest for gaining a soul through her marriage to Henry like in Fouqué's story. All aspects of the character of Undine, educational, spiritual and even physical, are used to affirm the power of Victorian education to refine (or "tame") even a "wild girl" into an angel of the house as well as the power of empire to assimilate culturally and psychologically

3 Walter Scott had based the character of the White Lady of Avenel (*The Monastery*, 1820) on Undine and a passage by Coleridge on *Undine* was reprinted in Tracy's 1839 edition.

people from very different backgrounds. The physical aspect of Undine's gradual transformation into a Victorian girl is a focal point of Doughty's essay on *Robina Crusoe*⁴. The popularity of the novel with the readership of *The Girl's Own Paper* was obvious. Its installments were the cover stories of several issues (January 6, February 10 and 24, 1883) and it was richly illustrated by several artists throughout its run. Doughty concentrates on these illustrations as pictorial evidence of the gradual metamorphosis of Undine from a dark-skinned native to a light-skinned colonial lady. While allowing that the differences in Undine's skin colour might be partly due to the different artists who drew her or the low quality printing (Doughty 65), she nevertheless points out several illustrations in which the characters' faces are deliberately put in more light or shade in order to have similar skin colour, usually making Undine appear more white (See Illustrations, Figure 1). Ultimately Undine and Henry's children are depicted as "white" (Doughty 74) while their parents' faces are shaded to appear similar: the assimilation is complete in the next generation and everyone in the family has a distinctly European appearance (Figure 2). The depictions of Undine as a married mother and an accomplished Victorian lady completes the story: Robina, much like her "ancestor" Robinson Crusoe, has succeeded in establishing a colonial outpost and expanding the empire both geographically and culturally, assimilating the representative of the native culture with the assistance of Victorian education which helped her survive in the first place and then impart her knowledge and abilities to a dedicated disciple: the civilizing aspect of empire and education succeeded.

Elizabeth Whittaker's *Robina Crusoe and Her Lonely Island Home* did not attain or keep the popularity of the original story by Daniel Defoe. Its importance lies in offering and defending two important socio-cultural ideas of the late Victorian period: that women are as capable as men to survive and perform every kind of task (from agriculture to seafaring to hunting and educating), and that women are equally capable to work as agents of empire and colonialism. In this sense *Robina Crusoe* is definitely among the germinal works of female emancipation in the early stages of the "New Girl" movement as well as upholding the firmly established idea of benevolent colonialism based on civilizing the natives and their lands by assimilating them into the European way of life. This clash of emancipation and discrimination: the call for gender equality and the still-persisting belief that Europeans (male and female) are morally, culturally and intellectually superior to the natives, gives Whittaker's novel its uniqueness and makes it a good showcase of late Victorian society and the processes occurring within. It challenges the docile and obedient Victorian feminine ideal and replaces it with a bold, enterprising spirit well suited to join and serve the empire. Cooper describes the process thus:

"Many Victorian women discovered that the ideal female of the British drawing room could rise to the challenges of the foreign experience, and discover within herself the resilience and

4 Titled "Deflecting the Marriage Plot", it deals with the domestic and gender aspects of the story as well as the level of sexuality of the characters.

independence to survive." (Cooper 78)

Robina Crusoe not only rises to the challenge and survives, she builds an entire colony and ensures the survival of Undine by assimilating her into the dominant British culture. The survival and the subsequent happy conclusion of the two female protagonists' story are examples of both female empowerment and the viability of empire and colonialism.

Illustrations



Figure 1. (upper left) A.J. Johnston, *Illustrations of Undine's Education, Part 1* (above left), 'Robina Crusoe and Her Lonely Island Home', *The Girl's Own Paper* Vol. 4, 525;



Part 2 (lower left) , 'Robina Crusoe and Her Lonely Island Home', *The Girl's Own Paper* Vol. 4, 636; Note the remarkable change of Undine's skin colour in these illustrations by the same artist.

Figure 2 (right) . A.J. Johnston, "A Merry Party", 'Robina Crusoe and Her Lonely Island Home', *The Girl's Own Paper* Vol.4, 669;



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