Re-visiting the Text and Context of Female Self-Representation in Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana*

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Abstract

The explorative framework basically the extrinsic criticism of Defoe’s female self-representation in *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana* urged the critics to deal with intricate concepts of the plural and dialectic intrinsic text. Re-visiting Defoe’s novel through the flourishing provisions of literary criticism and cultural studies offers a fulcrum that connects the text to the world. Thus, the notion of female self-representation has been given much interest by many 20th century scholars, among others, Novak, Richetti, Sutherland, and Watt who considered Defoe as the father of the novel. Defoe’s critics unveil his interaction with and his impact on the literary canon. This article examines how his novel compels the theory of representation in his era by creating new writing modalities.

Defoe’s novels ponder on the significant quest for shaping individual and collective human destiny in an unstable world where the marginalized self prevails. Defoe’s female self-representation is contingent to a fluctuating tone between an extrinsic real context and an intrinsic fictional one linked to his conception of the autobiography premises. The present paper eschews the intrinsic context of female self-representation in *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana* through the examination of the protagonist’s self-evolution conveyed by the use of new writing modalities. Thus, the intent of the research is to unfold the duality between form and content, idea and structure, representation and reflection, fact and fiction. The image of the female marginalized-self reflects the despised position of the novel as a literary genre. Through fiction Defoe challenges the literary decorum of poetry and drama.

Keywords: Intrinsic/extrinsic/text-context/female self-representation/factual/fictional.
I. Re-visited the Extrinsic Context of Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana*

1. Defoe’s Autobiography Premises

The extrinsic framework of Defoe’s novel shows how it affects the ideological and the literary premises of autobiography. The constituent themes and structures of Defoe’s autobiography reveal its diversity and complexity. It embeds a universal vocation to represent the self and its divergent multiplicity. Philippe Lejeune\(^1\) shows two main reasons for writing autobiography: the study of the self and its relationship with the other. This relationship portrays the protagonist’s self-conscious evolution and reflects the social consensus of the era.

Defoe’s novels belong to the global system of expressing the self and its fluctuation between “virtue” and “vice”. The remark of Basil Willey in his *The Seventeenth Century Background*, underlines the role of literature in associating the social context with the textual representation:

> And my excuse for trespassing so outrageously beyond the supposed limits of “literary” criticism I would offer the following recent remark of Mr T. S. Eliot’s, from which I have derived considerable consolation: In attempting to win a full understanding of the poetry of a period you are led to the consideration of subjects which at first sight appear to have little bearing upon poetry.\(^2\)

It is true that the history of a life is inseparable from History as a whole. The autobiographical novel, for instance, relates the protagonist’s life experience and records the historical events that he/she goes through. Therefore, contextualization is a paramount external factor in approaching the literary text and interpreting it.\(^3\) Yet, it seems hazardous to consider the novel as the faithful mirror of society. One aspect of its writing modalities is the use of fictional forms inspired from reality. The narrative techniques used in *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana* are of great importance and suggest the complexity of the text analysis. The story is told in a retrospective scheme, a nonlinear structure and comprises blurring polyphonic voices. The unnamed narrator recollects many stories from different characters and many stories are told from various points of view to reach a final and all inclusive version. This structure generates ambiguity because time and space are challenged since past and present are mingled together without any line of demarcation.

Another important aspect of Defoe’s autobiography is that the characters’ feelings are intimately presented to the reader. For instance, Moll and Roxana give many confessions about their crude wickedness:

> I was enter’d a compleat Thief, Harden’d to a Pitch above all Reflections of Conscience or Modesty, and to a Degree which I must acknowledge I never thought possible in me. (…) Thus the Devil who

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began, by the help of an irresistible Poverty, to push me into this Wickedness, brought me on to a height beyond the common Rate, even when my Necessities were not so great, or the prospect of my Misery so terrifying.¹ I cou’d not, in the height of all this fine doings, I say, I cou’d not be without some just Reflection tho’ Conscience was, I said, dumb to any disturbance it gave me in my Wickedness; my Vanity was fed up to such a height, that I had no room to give Way to such Reflections.²

One can easily infer that Defoe’s novels discuss many important problems such as human limits and fallacies. The narrators are able to make social advantages from their “wickedness” early in their careers and only later, after a fair amount of soul-searching, are driven into prostitution and thievery. Moll and Roxana are constantly aware of their doings when they exceed the boundaries of virtue. They are placed in situations that make such transgressions inevitable and their various impulses toward survival and salvation are brought sharply into conflict with one another. As abjects, (both women lead a miserable life in a patriarchal society and without male protection) Moll and Roxana do not respect the social rules. Having sacrificed their virtue to satisfy their greedy self, they find themselves addicted to the pursuit of crime. Morality in Defoe’s novels marks the duality between a realistic female self-representation and a fictional reflection of the novelist’s attitudes. The fictional tone endorses a position of retreat from the protagonist’s expressed views. Thus, Defoe is distinguished by his deep insight into female emotional needs epitomized in the image of parents, family, husband or friend and especially the mother. Nevertheless, his female self-representation cannot be taken at face value.

2. The 18th Century Context and Female Self-Representation

The early 18th century novel shows the vulnerable situation of females in a male-dominated society. Written at a time when rogue and criminal biographies enjoyed great success, Moll Flanders and Roxana depict the struggle of two irresistible women against poverty and their relentless search for riches. Defoe was an advocate of women rights. In his An Essay upon Projects he claimed: “Capacities of Women Are Supposed to be Great and Their senses Quicker Than Those Of The Men”.⁶

From a feminist perspective the novel’s phallocentric discourse is a matter of nurture and not nature.⁷ Thus, the female image in the 18th century novel was misleading and equivocal because of the “masculinist/materialist” discourse shared by most male critics. Under the umbrella of deconstruction, Derrida criticizes the essentialist conception of presence. He sees the philosophical traditions down to Hegel as being logocentric. Re-visiting the extrinsic context of Defoe’s novel shows how it came into being as a response to fill the gaps left by the logocentric and phallocentric discourses of his era. According to this

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essentialist thinking “the self” and “the same” occupy the privileged position at the center, and “difference/alterity/otherness” such as women compared to men, are absent, excluded and/or marginalized, i.e. pushed to the periphery. From this perspective, Derrida’s deconstruction seems to be the one of the most noticeable interventions to the text that plays the role of a supplementary method to understand the extrinsic interpretation rather than an intrinsic analysis of the context.

In fact, the bitterness of both Moll and Roxana makes them defy the society. The lack of harmony in their lives (being born in the prison and imprisoned because of theft for Moll and being a widow and a prostitute for Roxana) reflects the flaws of a whole society. Maximilian E. Novak demonstrates that Defoe’s female self-representation provides a realistic picture of family life and male/female relationships. In fact, in the 18th century economic independence was a prerequisite to woman self-fulfillment. Yet, her job opportunities were limited, except perhaps from marriage, domestic work or the world of prostitution:

I had no adviser, at least who cou’d advise and assist together;(…); and I found by experience, that to be Friendless is the worst Condition, next to being in want, that a Woman can be reducd to: I say a Woman, because ‘tis evident Men can be their own Advisers, and their own Directors, and know how to work themselves out of Difficulties and into Business better than Women.

Moll and Roxana show a spiral of conflicting attitudes within human nature: evil and virtue, sin and redemption, criminality and salvation. The subtlety of Defoe’s work lies in his use of allegory, metaphor of his own life experience. A resemblance can be established between the novelist and his heroines. To say the least about Defoe’s life is that it was a strange one. Due mainly to his bankruptcies he was pilloried and jailed. These circumstances can be credited for his ambivalent attitudes towards the social conventions at the beginning of the 18th century.

Defoe’s novels reveal the impact of poverty on the female protagonists and show the path to follow not to be snared by the lure of gain. Marxist and Feminist critics unfold a recurrent link between the emergence of capitalism and the world of crime. Some critics highlight the dilemma in Defoe’s female self-representation as being a victim and a criminal at the same time. In her study on Moll Flanders Lois A. Chaber claims that: “The links connecting marriage, capitalism and crime are strengthened by their common use of what Marx calls “the language of commodities.”” Similarly, Kimberly S. Latta ponders on how Defoe’s polarized attitudes towards female self-representation using a figurative connotation to the aspect of capital used by the signifier “Lady Credit”. For her woman image reflects:

The ruined maid Trade saunters through the city with her incorrigible offspring, whose voracious lust and fecundity mark them as the

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obvious descendants of the monstrous madam found in anti-usury literature.\textsuperscript{11}

In a similar vein, a study concerning the debate whether female self-representation is construed as Marxist or Feminist, William E. Hummel\textsuperscript{12} argues that it is contradictory if we consider the author of \textit{An Essay upon Projects}, \textit{Essay on South Sea Trade} and \textit{Atlas Matrimus} can be regarded as the source of criticism to the capitalist market. Hummel shows how Moll and Roxana elicit the problems that may rise if ever people confuse the premises of the rising economic ethic of that era. For him people are still unable to assimilate and adapt this ethic in the right way. Hummel believes that:

The “gender of the gift” will prove an appropriate theoretical framework of the exchange of material wealth and for complicating (but not obscuring) both Moll’s and Roxana’s variously positioned selves. (Hummel 120)

In fact, Defoe’s novels are weighted with many traces of intertextuality\textsuperscript{13} that must be linked to the historical context of early 18th century. The Biblical tone in \textit{Moll Flanders}: “Give me not Poverty Lest I Steal” (149) is reminiscent of Bunyan’s spiritual autobiography \textit{The Pilgrim’s Progress}. From this vantage point, the stress on intertextuality calls attention to the notion of the text to set the deconstructive strategies and their practice throughout the web of texts mentioned earlier. Thus the literary text is considered as:

No longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces. Thus the text overturns all the limits assigned to it.\textsuperscript{14}

This statement sheds light on the conceptual aspects of the literary text as a medium across which the division between text/context is established and transgressed. Context has to be rethought in terms of difference and not only intertextuality. Thus, the issue of text and context will be scrutinized through the specific prism offered by the conception of the context through the novel in relation to issues of textuality and interpretation.\textsuperscript{15} Subsequently, the focus has to be directed from the intrinsic textual reading towards a rethinking of the contextual interpretation in Defoe’s novel.

\textsuperscript{13} Clarified definitions for this postmodernist concept are found in Michael Worton and Judith Still, eds., \textit{Intertextuality, Theories and Practices} (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1990) and Graham Allen, \textit{Intertextuality}, (London: Routledge, 2000).
In this context, Hummel’s reference to Defoe’s patriarchal society shows how he transcends the simplistic meaning of irony to invest a more sophisticated and latent tone. Hummel shows how in their attempt to gain equal access to material resources as men, Moll and Roxana aspire towards: “Christian selflessness” (Hummel 120). In fact, Roxana’s alienated self is due to her man-woman image which symbolically suggests and challenges the masculinizing of the female sex in the context of a patriarchal society. Yet, for Hummel Defoe’s eroticism creates an uneasy relationship with its moralism (Hummel 120). The latter interpretations of Defoe’s text show how contextualization has to be understood under the light of the limitless potential for texts to be articulated in different conceptual interpretations rather than in relation to the general consensus of an era.

II. Re-visitng the Intrinsic Context of Female Self-representation in *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana*

1. The Factual Self and the Fictional Self

Defoe’s female self-representation is scrutinized through two approaches: the factual (context) and the fictional (text). We better understand the origin of the dual self of Moll and Roxana torn between reality and expectations. The story starts with the first person narrator but it sends back to another person: the “Governess” in *Moll Flanders* and “Amy” in *Roxana*. It oscillates between the tale narrated by the heroine and the narrator’s depiction of the fable. At some level of the story-telling the narrator resorts to the direct speech in the dialogues and the soliloquies when the heroine expresses her inner feelings punctuating her sentences in the following way:

> I think I almost cry’d myself to Death for him (….). These things amazed me, and I was a good-while as one stupid; however, after some time, I began to recover, and look into my affair; I had the Satisfaction not to be left in Distress, or in Danger of Poverty. *(Roxana 89-90)*

While tracing her miserable life and misdoings, the heroine, existing by her wits on the margins of society, emphasizes her dexterity to transcend her vulnerable situation. She reflects the motives of the self-wrestling against the overwhelming social conventions. This female self-representation makes the reader sympathize with the tears of the simpering heroines of love:

> But there are Temptations which it is not in the Power of Human Nature to resist, and few know what would be their Case, if driven to the same Exigences: As Covetousness is the Root of All Evil, so Poverty is, I believe, the worst of all Snares: But I wave that Discourse till I come to the Experiment. *(Moll Flanders 147)*

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As it is clearly inferred, Moll intends illustrating how necessity leads her into temptation. By attributing passivity to women, the text can be said to reproduce and reinforce the patriarchal assumptions. The text seems to instill these patriarchal premises while presenting females as weak, passive and victims of the lures of poverty. Throughout the text, their realistic self is revealed through the narrator’s recollection of their life wrestling. Their fictional self, however, is displayed through a narrative process fluctuating between several tenses and narrative voices. Active verbs like “I carried on the argument”, “I played with this lover…I let him also go” (Moll Flanders 110) are allocated to the mature heroine in the text to show that she is the maître du jeu and that she is the decision-taker and reveal her power over her subordinate partners. The recourse to this duality between being passive and active agents of their deeds marks the shift from the speech of a young heroine to a more conscious and mature woman. The latter has a retrospective look on her past that suggests to the reader her naivety and innocence when she was younger. Consequently, the writer succeeds in recovering the real history by remolding it into fiction.

Defoe’s female self-representation is characterized by a “narrative vagueness” when the heroine can say that she thinks something at one moment and later, having new data, she can assert the opposite. The representation of the female self as passive and active at the same time can be interpreted in both cases to show the hostile image of the patriarchal society. The use of a double chronology to tell her own story and that of another can’t prevent the reader to believe that the two stories are hers. This action must be imaginary because in real life this initiative is impossible. It is, thus, the reader’s role to discern reality from fiction.

2. The Cognitive Complexity of Text/Context Rapport

Defoe mixed frankness with duplicity. This temporal breach between the real world and the fictional world is intertwined with the alternating chronology. The obliteration of some chronological facts is voluntary and deliberate. To omit details is a way of saying reality differently, of re-transcribing it into art. Forgetting, however, implies an involuntary disappearance. Thus, the change or omission of some hints in the memoirs repels the textual confusion in Defoe’s text. On the contrary, it is a proof of his mastery of the writing process. His representation is a mixture of a mimetic narration of events and a cathartic confession of feelings. The innocent voice of the child makes the delivery of truth possible which neither the characters nor the contemporary readers of Defoe would have accepted from a mature heroine:

I had the character too of a very sober, modest and virtuous young Woman, and such I had always been; neither had I yet any occasion to think of anything else, or to know what a Temptation to wickedness meant” (Moll Flanders 16)

When Moll is confronted with temptation and succumbs to it, her tone will also be affected: “Thus I gave up myself to a readiness of being ruined without the least concern, and am a fair Moment to all young Women, whose Vanity prevails over their Virtue” (Moll Flanders 21)

These sincere confessions charm the reader with its duality between the two forms of literary lie: the literal realistic tone and the fictional latent one. The duality between the story’s context and its implementation into the text emanates from this narrative distance between a
narrator, subject of the writing, and a heroine, object of the discourse. Defoe’s preface introduces another element of duplicity creating a distance between the story told by the narrator and the morality communicated by the author:

> It’s to be hoped that such Readers will be much more pleas’d with the Moral than the Fable, with the Application than with the Relation, and with the End of the Writer than with the Life of the Person written on. 
> 
> *(Moll Flanders 4)*

The preface shows how the narrative plan of both novels elicits the gap between the heroine’s essence and her appearance, her fact and her image. This distance affects the relations between the heroine and the narrator, as much as that between the author (disguised as a narrator) and his readership. The Postmodern critics refer to what they named as a “real author” who recollects the self’s real life experience and the “implied author” who weaves the components of the story to transform it into a fable. 17 Yet, this adequacy between context and text is not easy to discern because the distinction between both worlds entails a cognitive complexity of fiction. The furtive narration instills several possibilities of interpretation.

Defoe elaborates a concordance between the need to change the social institutions and the literary artistry. If he evokes the main dilemma of the old *nomos* in England, he proves that this latter is not stigmatized and can acquire another facet through fiction. It is noteworthy that for Defoe the novel is the most adequate form to reflect reality but it is also the most disdained literary genre during that period. Lennard J. Davis provides a thorough analysis to the novel’s deliberate narrative:

> The frame of the novel insists that the work is true while the technique of the novel aims at creating the illusion of reality. (…) Thus, like ideology, the novel’s point of reference is not history, from which the novel stands autonomously aloof, but the social process of signification, the world of “lived” so opposed to “actual” experience. In this view, realism can be seen as a function of ideology and ideology can be seen as embodying the same process as are used in the realistic novel. 18

Similarly, Sutherland believes that forms of reality and fiction in Defoe’s novel are mingled together and cannot be separated:

> When Defoe turned in the last decade of his life from fact to fiction, the change was not so remarkable as it might appear at first sight. For one thing, his fiction is remarkably like fact. (…) No one has better than Defoe at turning his reading to the uses of fiction, appropriating it to some particular context, making it come alive and appear to be a matter of personal recollection. 19

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Certainly, it requires a great deal of perseverance to weave the threads of Defoe’s writing and connects the realistic facet of female self-representation to its fictional image. Thus, the writing modalities of obliteration, ellipsis, allegory and metaphor used to engulf the reader’s intellect and it would be absurd to list out the things that Defoe represents through his 18th century context without grasping what his text teaches.

3. Real Life Context and Textual Morality

Defoe’s commitment to an elaborate form of writing proves the revival of his work among the modern scholars’ criticism and shows how his fictional autobiography is a complex genre to deal with. The polarization of female self-representation intricate to the literary genre transcends the mimetic reality to the cathartic scope of fiction. Defoe finds in the emphatic duality between mimesis (mirroring the context) and catharsis (expressing the ideas through the text) a revealing tour de force to elicit the intertwined relationship between the text and the context.

This follows the Postmodern critics’ assumption that writing is not only a tool of communication corresponding to the individual and collective expectations but it rather aims at creating two simultaneous acts: reproducing reality and inciting the reader’s intellectual vigor. Deleuze emphasizes the principles of connection and heterogeneity to demonstrate that the importance is not what the thing is but what it does; not “being but becoming”. 20 Bakhtin claims that the poetic complexity of poetry is situated between the discourse and the world; that of prose, between the discourse and its producers. 21 He perceives that prose valorizes forms like the “polyphonic” or the “hybrid” discourse which are more subtle in the novel as a literary genre than in poetry. For him the poem is an act of discourse, while the novel represents it. (Bakhtin 21-91).

The scrutiny of Defoe’s novels is bimodal: it sheds light on the agonizing external context of the heroines and the novelist’s textual representation born within the orchestration of his linguistic muse. Thus, the cognitive complexity of his fiction is added to its open-endedness. The story is told in flashbacks and it turns occasionally to the present. The two tenses are melt together and the difference between them cannot be distinguished as they can be used interchangeably where going away is coming home and vice versa. Numerous are the sentences with anticipation and resumption which introduce a multiplicity of space or time. The repeated exclamatory intonation of the subject in the text operates an emotional effect on the reader’s psyche and intellect: « being now marry’d and settel’d in so glorious a Manner! ». The interlocution with the reader is also maintained through the use of explicative sentences prerequisite to the understanding of the message: « I mean (...) and such things »; « as is mentioned above ». (Roxana, 303-6)

For a long time the novel was relegated to a second position compared with the rhythmical genres. Unlike poetry and drama which were in the center, the novel was set on the periphery of arts. Defoe did not respect the literary classical decorum of the age and strove

to change the writing modalities of the novel. Consequently, his use of blunt and vernacular English made him accused of literary lightness from the “witty”, such as Pope and Swift. His novel was a fundamentally complex self-reflexive genre and its textual intelligibility is strongly bound to the beginning of the 18th century context.

One can see so far how Defoe joins the disparate ideological aspects with a new theory of representation and creates a linkage between text and context. This displays the duality between explanation and comprehension, showing and telling. While the first exposes to the reader the context, the second is an act of making him grasp the text. This theory of reception is inaugurated by Hans R. Jauss who examines the novel through its perception by the addressee and his implication in the story. He shows how the textual representation is linked to the writer’s perception of the context and his conception of the text. It is therefore the contextual frame which sets an anchorage with reality and with the textual representation.

Defoe’s moral reformation of the society’s flaws burst into multiple truths to endorse morality. The dialectical provisions lie in the novel’s metamorphosed morality. It comprises several contradictions unfolding the coexistence of two didactic discourses. The first one is divine and deductive. It illustrates the right way to God to achieve salvation. The second shows the inductive strategy of the narrators. What represents an example in the first one turns into a comment in the second; Defoe’s novel unfolds a new way of representing reality delivered through the context. Therefore, grasping its textual representation is necessary to its interpretation as indicated in the prefaces:

But I leave the Readers of these things to their own just reflections, which they will be more able to make effectual than I, who so soon forget my Self, and am therefore but a very indifferent Monitor. (Moll Flanders 4-5)
If the Reader makes a wrong Use of the Figures, the Wickedness is his own (…) the Story, however meanly told, will find a Passage to his best Hours; and be read both with Profit and Delight. (Roxana 36)

Defoe does not only indicate the synchronic representation of the context, but also and especially incites the reader to focus on the diachronic textual representation. In the prefaces of Moll Flanders and Roxana, the emphasis on the necessity to transform the text into a moral fable suggests that the context of the story-telling is reduced to an artifact. The narrator must be considered as a character, in other words, a part of the plot created by the writer. Consequently, the context of the story-telling becomes just a pretext. Defoe’s intention is not limited to mirror reality. He has to go beyond the former representations of the female self. Thus, the heroine’s psychological credibility is revealed through her confessions. Her confidence in textual words, devoid of a magical force, blurs the horrible reality of the context.

Defoe’s purpose behind writing fiction was double: he implicitly criticizes the former context of female self-representation and masters the textual representation of this

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fictional world. In his attempt to be completely detached from his opinions, he succeeds in creating a released-self close to the reader. Thus, female self-representation needs to be conveyed through the truth of the social context and the credible lie of the text. What matters however is not only to judge the context of the heroine’s morality but especially to permit the reader to engage in endless struggle for textual meaning.
References


