

# The Politics of Negotiation: *Moll Flanders* and Defoe's Ethic Codification

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**Abstract**—Daniel Defoe is often perceived as one of the most influential and prolific writers in the world literature as well as the inventor of the English novel. Among Daniel Defoe's various works, *Moll Flanders* (1722) is neither the most enduring nor the most popular one. But it is Defoe's first novel, also the first one in the history of English literature, with a woman protagonist from the lowest social class. By analyzing three women authors' works and three men authors' works in her *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (1999), Spivak proves the complicity between the ideology of writers, both male and female, and their class in their literary representation at certain social context though sometimes the ideology of their class is not the dominant culture power at society. This thesis aims at proving the heroine in Defoe's *Moll Flanders*—*Moll Flanders'* detour of identity and at interpreting this transformation of connotation of gentlewoman with the help of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theoretic analysis of complicity relationship between author and his class and literary representation.

**Index Terms**—*Moll Flanders*, Defoe, complicity, gentlewoman, ethics

Among Daniel Defoe's various works, *Moll Flanders* (1722) is neither the most enduring nor the most popular one. But it is firstly Defoe's first novel, also the first one in the history of English literature, with a woman protagonist from the lowest social class. Second, *Moll* is especially ambiguous, for she, though defiant and indomitable, is often confused about her own identity and even tends to fall into the muddle of self-deception. Although *Moll* realizes her ideal identity of gentlewoman in the end of the novel, the connotation behind it has been changed compared with the conventional one. Third, this work appeared in the pre-industrial age provides me with a good chance to examine *Moll Flanders* and Defoe's ethic codification, thus disclosing the complicity relationship between author and his class and literary representation.

Despite its great popularity upon publication, for a long time *Moll Flanders* has to find its readers in the lower classes. Respectable readers dismissed it as a secondary novel and found its vulgarity and profanity outrageously distasteful. Though Charles Lamb was said to admire *Moll Flanders*, he labeled all Defoe's stories as "capital kitchen reading" (p.327), and William Hazlitt asserted, "*Moll Flanders* is utterly vile and detestable" (p.110). Twentieth-century literary criticism witnessed a drastic rise in the critical appreciation of *Moll Flanders*. Ian Watt writes in *The Rise of The Novel* that "it imposes itself as the best single work for the purpose of investigating Defoe's methods as a novelist and his place in the tradition of the novel" (p. 94); James Joyce, who possessed the complete works of Defoe and read every line of them, acknowledged his indebtedness and once commented in a lecture that "This lady (Mrs. Christian Davies), together with the adventuress Roxana and the unforgettable harlot *Moll Flanders*, forms the trio of female characters which reduces contemporary criticism to stupefied impotence" (p.346). The highest praise came from Virginia Woolf, who held that "*Moll Flanders* and *Roxana* ...stand among the few English novels which we can call indisputably great" (p.87).

The story is ostensibly narrated by a 70-year-old woman, a reformed criminal, looking back on her past life and commenting on her youthful self from the vantage point of maturity and repentance. Thus, the narrator is simultaneously the wayward girl who moves at breathtaking pace through a sequence of picaresque adventures and the mature woman unfolding her story to the reader with mingled understanding and regret. When reading *Moll Flanders* we are faced with a question: What is the narrator's attitude to her own life? Behind this question lies the other: What is Defoe's attitude towards his own creation?

I propose to approach *Moll* the female subject from her detour of identity of gentlewoman with the help of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theoretic analysis of complicity relationship between author and his class and literary representation to try to answer these questions.

## I. GENTLEWOMAN: STEREOTYPING AND ITS VARIATION

### A. *The Stereotyping of Gentlewoman in the 18th Century*

#### 1. Representation of the conventional feminine virtues

The phrase "the weaker vessel" (p.60) originated with William Tyndale's translation of the New Testament into English in 1526 and became common usage during the next hundred years or more. It has become an established proverb: it runs though the conduct book literature of the pre-civil war period and recurs in sermons. It carries all the

resonances of the gender order upon which scriptural patriarchy rested, resonances of man's strength, initiative and authority. The subordination of women began with the hierarchical ordering of bodies and indeed with firmly defined gender roles. Women's protected and conservative role in the household and society was justified by arguments from her naturally preordained function. What enabled these ideas to persist in England was their germination among the squirarchy, the predominant class politically, culturally, and socially, with a "near monopoly of high prestige and status. (pp. 260-261)"

The stereotype of womankind is intensely vulnerable and unprotected. Women were credited with an inner weakness that could all too easily lead them through the assertion of their sexual and emotional power to subvert to the patriarchal order and break its boundaries. Chaste, silent and obedient; the trilogy of primary female virtues carry with it a series of logical connections. The central theme of female gender construction was humility and obedience.

Moll is inevitably different from those male adventurers. As a woman she is forced to stay at home and to move strictly within the defining institutions of female destiny, sex, marriage and the family. She can only come to her sense of herself and establish her particular identities in relation to those institutions, that is to say by disrupting them. Throughout her narrative her practice and sometimes clearly articulates a feminist individualism that subverts or at least qualifies the validity or binding finality of marriage and the family.

## 2. Causes of such representation

Under such social context, girls must expect to contain their expectations of living to the utmost of all their abilities: moulding and repression are the essence of female training. When, for some girls, this came to include schooling, as it did from around the 1620s, a consistent ideological pattern can be found in the teaching of the attributes of femininity at school which complemented men's approach to an upbringing at home. By the middle of the seventeenth century the pattern of upbringing for girls from gentry families was very firmly established. The number and variety of girls' schools expanded enormously during the eighteenth century. Therefore, girls were educated for marriage through a moral and social programme rather than an academic one. Those in gentry circles grew up knowing that nothing but a good marriage—that is a prestigious and advantageous one—would fully secure their family's lasting approval. Thus gender differentiation from an early age was rooted in this society's values and universally taken for granted. However, in Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722), his heroine shows a different understanding of gentlewoman though she still lives in a society that gentry's morality is dominant.

## B. *Moll's Ideal of Gentlewoman - the Variation of Gentlewoman in the 18th Century*

### 1. Conflict between the aristocratic ideology and the bourgeois ideology

The eighteenth century has been portrayed as an aristocratic century and clearly in many respects it was so. Yet Paul Langford's account, which emphasizes the growing wealth and importance of the middle class, is an important corrective. Some women in middling families were not content to live the rest of their lives laboring on behalf of, and being dependent upon, families or husbands. And there are numerous cases of women who used their earning power to establish full or partial independence from their relatives or to avoid marriage. Middling families did apprentice their daughters to trades. Over the course of the eighteenth century most middling women learned to read and write, and with these skills they gained an ability to contribute to the historical record, as well as the chance to appropriate new kinds of power and authority that few non-elite women before them had possessed. Social aspiration has become a driving force in Hanoverian England, unifying the middle ranks in an almost obsessive engagement in seeking entry to the ranks of the gentry by aping their style of life, manners and morals. Defoe's *Moll Flanders* demonstrates it to the most by pursuing her identity of gentlewoman throughout her whole life yet the connotation of this identity has been changed in her mind.

### 2. Moll's varied understanding of gentlewoman

Moll, at this point in her life, knows exactly what she does want to be: a gentlewoman. Between pages 5 and 13 of the novel, this desire of hers to be a gentlewoman is a dominant topic. When the child Moll is shown to understand the word "gentlewoman" differently from the way her elders understand it, we see one of the potential hazards of identifying people by Moll's chosen means. Of the differences between her definition of her desired role and the definition made by her elders, Moll writes, "All this while, my good old Nurse, Mrs. Mayoress, and all the rest of them, did not understand me at all, or they meant one Sort of thing by the Word Gentlewoman, and I meant quite another: for alas, all I understood by being a Gentlewoman, was to be able to Work for myself, and get enough to keep me without going to service, whereas they meant to live Great and High, and I know not what". The sort of person that the old nurse and Mrs. Mayoress refer to with the word "gentlewoman" turns out to be not "gentle" at all: when Moll names for them one of her intended models, her old nurse says, "she is a Person on ill Fame, and has had two Bastards".

Moll is undeterred, however, by this information: I insisted that she was a Gentlewoman, and I would be such a Gentlewoman as that. And, she triumphantly asserts, two pages later, "I was a Gentlewoman indeed, as I understood that Word; for before I was Twelve Tears old, I not only found myself Clothes and paid my Nurse for my keeping, but got Money in my Pocket too" (p.10). Twice, the child Moll points out, with reference to the "gentlewoman (p.8)" who is her exemplar, "they call her Madam (p.9)", and, even as author, she seems pleased to remember that she herself achieved the desired reputation: "Mr. Mayor's Daughters would come and see me, and ask where the little Gentlewoman was, which made me not a little Proud of myself besides. I was often visited by these young Ladies, and sometimes they brought others with them; so that I was known by it, almost all over the Town" (p.9).

As has been shown, Moll's understanding of gentlewoman related with the attributes of independence and self-support is completely different from the stereotyping of it defined by the gentry. By comparing the stereotyping of gentlewoman and its variation we can ask such a question: what is the relationship between Moll Flanders and her creator Defoe-a representative of the bourgeois in such a social context?

## II. THE DETOUR OF MOLL FLANDERS' IDENTITY

### A. *Gentlewoman*

#### 1. Moll's feminine virtues

There is no doubt that in most hierarchical societies some members of socially inferior groups do embrace the dominant ideology in whole or more likely in part, up to and including an at least partial belief in their own intrinsic inferiority. And it is not surprising that writers should have succumbed to the prevailing ethos. Submission to duty is the most important lesson a girl has to learn in her years at school in a society which in each instance normality is represented by the life of an aristocratic gentlewoman. It was natural for women to subject themselves to men. Self-sacrifice for the benefit of others and obedience to authority remain the central aims of female socialization. In the opening pages of *Moll Flanders*, we see Defoe's heroine is constrained to the convention of gentlewoman and she actually internalized the aristocratic ideology which was dominant at that times at the opening of this book. In terms of male-female relation at the very beginning of the book, Moll is placed in the most passive position in her intercourse with her first lover, which commences and ceases strictly in the way the male authority demands. During this stage, Moll is governed by an approximately conventional morality and she is caused acute moral discomfort by the prospect of being at once one man's wife and his brother's whore. The male-female relation of Moll's at this period can typify such conventions and show the great power of aristocratic ideology upon Moll.

#### 2. The roots of Moll's femininity

The eighteenth century has been portrayed as an aristocratic century. It is equally the case that eighteenth-century society offered a pitiful array of chances for women fully to express themselves. In this respect the most deprived classes were neither better nor worse; women probably led a marginally more brutal life, with the hazards of childbirth augmented by crude gynecology and surgical implements that look like instruments of refined torture. Prostitutes-estimated by one observer at 50000-lived a scarcely more degraded life to many eyes. However, in the middle and upper orders of society, many women had enough leisure to regret their enforced idleness. Women could start salons, could become independent scholars, and could even become painters in the approved style. They could exercise power behind the throne, as consorts or royal mistresses or society hostesses. But they were denied access to proper schooling, excluded from the universities, forbidden the professions, kept well away from the armed services, and generally confined to trivial and ornamental offices. Defoe was all by the standards of the day advanced in their attitudes towards female education, but they could none of them foresee a real transformation in sexual patterns. All women, and the vast majority of the poor like Moll, were excluded from practical politics.

Moll is portrayed as passive in the face of men, biology, and fate. She has received the genteel education from the old nurse as well as some leisured middle-class gentlewomen in Colchester since her early childhood. But her education was social and gender-specific, that is, to see herself modest, neat, graceful, and obedient to draw on the likings of husbands. Moll, be a wife or whore, is commercialized in order to meet men's satisfaction. Moll actually internalized the aristocratic ideology which was dominant at society at the opening of this book under the influence of social program and her received education. During this period, Moll is a typical woman designated by dominant society, genteel and subversive.

### B. *Degentlewoman*

#### 1. Rising of the middle class and attributes of the middle class women

The traditional role of the wife in the English household was as a friend and partner, albeit a junior partner, of her husband. Some tasks, such as running the household, doing the shopping and bringing up young children were more the function of the wife; others, such as running the family business, were more the function of the husband, but this did not mean that the wife should not play an important part in the business side of middling family life with the development of society. One of the most fundamental changes that took place in the rearing of middling girls between the mid sixteenth and the late eighteenth centuries was the popularizing of the new or relatively new skills of reading and writing. The ability to read and write was a saleable skill in the early modern period, and once having mastered it, some women were not content to live the rest of their lives laboring on behalf of, and being dependent upon, families or husbands. They begin to find their way in the patriarchal aristocratic society.

Under such social context, more and more women, including Moll, were not content to live the rest of their lives laboring on behalf of, and being dependent upon, families or husbands. They begin to deconstruct the conventional role designed for women. There are numerous cases of women who used their earning power to establish full or partial independence from their relatives or to avoid marriage. Over the course of the eighteenth century most middling women learned to read and write, and with these skills they gained an ability to contribute to the historical record, as well as the chance to appropriate new kinds of power and authority that few non-elite women before them had possessed.

#### 2. Moll's strategy of deconstructing the convention of gentlewoman

Moll begins to destroy her identity of “weaker vassal” defined by society. Her relation with men at this period proves her transformation. In the affairs with her Lancashire husband, Moll has erased the difference between men “the self” and women “the other”. Moll and her Lancashire husband are the same from the nature and this marriage is a strategy of double deceivery. In this affairs, men/women regards the other side as “the self/the other” respectively, thus erasing the difference between men “the self” and women “the other”. In the affairs with the clerk, Moll destroys the sexual codes. She has become the “bad woman” who feminizes men, that is, she has become the “the self” while men “the other”. From the beginning of this marriage to the end of it, Moll is in positive and dominant position. From this marriage, Moll got what she wanted to get, that is, the economic security and quite life while clerk got what he wanted to get, that is, Moll-his ideal gentlewoman wife. As a matter of fact, this marriage is a covert commercialization. However, this time Moll is never the objective of it but the subjective of it.

### III. COMPLICITY RELATIONSHIP OF DEFOE AND MOLL’S ETHICS

#### A. *Regentwoman*

##### 1. Defoe’s division of gentleman and gentlewoman

Defoe divides the English gentry into two categories which he treats in very different fashion. The first category comprises the first-born of a noble house: that is to say, in keeping with the English law of primogeniture, the heirs to the family estates. The second category comprises the younger siblings. In launching his attack on the first category, Defoe takes the side of the younger brethren who do not give themselves the airs commonly assumed by the first-born. He dismisses without further ado the megalomania surrounding so-called “purity of blood”, whether on family or on national level. Throughout the book, a distinction is maintained between “gentlemen by birth” and “gentlemen by breeding or education”. Defoe has little to say in favour of the former and would like to see himself as an example of the latter: they are the real gentlemen though education or self-education towards “gentleman” status has continued to be under the influence of aristocratic models.

##### 2. Moll’s representation of Defoe’s ideal gentlewoman

After transportation to America, Moll realizes her understanding of an ideal gentlewoman as well as Defoe’s who is the gentlewoman by breeding and education instead of the gentlewoman by birth. Moll returns London with his gentleman husband and enough money to support her leisured life. She can be regarded as the self-made gentlewoman by education, the variation of the conventional gentlewoman. The role of a virtuous wife and kind mother have been changed here. Moll has become the supporting and controlling role in the family. It is money not sex that determines the social and familial status. Moll finally makes her ideal bourgeois living by her own efforts. She can be regarded as the self-made gentlewoman by education, the variation of the conventional gentlewoman.

#### B. *Moll Flanders: Mirror of Defoe’s Ethics*

##### 1. The representation of Defoe’s ethics in Moll Flanders’s marriage

A sad and bleak future which worries Moll greatly is always shown at the beginning of every episode of marriage. While in the end of every episode, the men who keep close contact with her are dead, or leave her to escape from the punishment of law, or desert her to avoid the condemn of morality and consciousness. Thus Moll is swirled from ups and downs again and again all her life. Her experience of marriage can be summarized as a repetition of such a narration: Moll’s lack of money-Moll’s possession to the owner of money-Moll’s halt of money. Therefore, it can be inferred that money plays an irreplaceable role in Moll’s life. Every time when she must make a choice between love and money, the latter is always her invariable pursuit. Since the pursuit of money is the reassessment of her ethics, we have every reason to say that it is the newly arising bourgeoisie ideology which centralizes money instead of money itself that controls Moll’s life. Moll derives a sense of security from wealth, and the more wealth, the better. Viewing from the perspective of minority discourse, Moll is absolutely endowed with such positive qualities as self-reliance, acumen, and adaptability. These positive bourgeois characteristics is gradually strengthened by the binary opposition between her ideology and the dominant ideology at that times shown in her carrier of thievery.

##### 2. The representation of Defoe’s ethics in Moll Flanders’s thievery

Having repressed her feelings for Jemy in order to achieve a secure life, she is prepared to steal when the clerk dies. She passes into another circle of her hell, which has Newgate at its bottom. She takes risks beyond reason, stealing anything, even a horse that she cannot use or sell. With the accumulation of her wealth, Moll’s thieving becomes less and less associated with her poverty and Defoe makes it clear that she is now a thief “though love of the vice”. As a matter of fact, Moll’s worry about poverty is a reflection of a social psychology rather than of a living reality. Having several pounds with her, Moll in fact never plunges herself into a serious plight. According to three kinds of bills for breeding children the landlady gives to Moll, we are informed that the lowest spending is 13 pounds at every three months while the highest one is 53 pounds. She will spend no more than 50 pounds a year if measuring by the lowest spending. Therefore, Moll’s pursuit of money is not the mere demand of survival but the necessity to satisfy her nature and psychology to possess money.

### IV. CONCLUSION

Moll's detour of identity written by English novelist Daniel Defoe in the eighteenth century is interwoven with the novelist's ideological confirmation that the female protagonist Moll Flanders's pursuit of identity all her life is in essence the confirmation of capitalist individual value. Therefore, Moll Flanders stands for the newly rising bourgeoisie and her change against the legal system and moral conventions in Defoe's contemporary society is a positive negation of the dominant cultural force.

Money plays an important and irreplaceable role in Moll's life. Every time when she has to make a choice between money and another things, the firmer is her unchangeable choice. It is the newly rising bourgeois ideology which makes money as its key word that controls Moll's life. From the perspective of minority discourse, Defoe is no doubt endows Moll the female subject with such positive qualities as practice, prudence and diligence. As a matter of fact, Moll's values which affirm the newly rising bourgeoisie run in the opposite direction with the dominant ideology at society. Moll is a mirror to reflect the bourgeois spirit and demonstrates the motive for them to accumulate wealth as much as possible. Although such bourgeois codification as a newly rising culture is not the dominant power at society, it yet shows the increasingly bourgeois working system and the material relationship between men and men under the control of it. What Moll pursuits all her life is to challenge the established codification and to affirm the capitalist individual value. And Moll's qualities can be traced to her creator Daniel Defoe.

Defoe's own experience bears part of this evocation of the heroic merchant. Bankrupt twice for substantial sums, her continue to struggle financially all his life, in his transformation into a journalist an covert political agent an propagandist for opposing factions, exemplified the difficult, specifically social relationships that he renders in his fiction. Defoe was in his lifetime a servant of various aristocratic masters, a client begging for grace and favor much of the time. Therefore at the opening pages Defoe's heroine shows some traces of convention.

However, Daniel Defoe was born in London in the autumn of 1660. He was brought up in a world in which the predominant values were orderliness, discipline, self-sufficiency and respectability to improve one's lot through one's own industry was the prevailing ethic. As a boy Defoe must have been familiar with such terms as "merchant", "trade" and "commerce" and been impressed by the knowledge that his father had attained a position of modest prosperity as a result of hard work and initiative.

The 1680s were a promising time for an energetic young man to establish himself as a tradesman. Filled with the ambition and self-confidence of youth, Defoe set himself up as a London merchant, trading in hosiery, wines and spirits, tobacco and other commodities. He continued in this capacity from 1680 to 1692: years of decisive importance to his personal development and the shaping of his world. Defoe's ties with his class are so clear that no special flair for sociological investigation is needed to identify him as a typical representative of the bourgeoisie. As Taine wrote of Defoe: "His imagination was that of a businessman, not that of an artist." Defoe is very aware of the role of the bourgeoisie in England, as of the role of the tradesman and the role of money, which the bourgeois amass and with which anything and everything can be bought.

Such living background ensures Defoe's heroes and heroines survive against all odds because they use all their qualities of ingenuity, patience and cunning in their determination to win for themselves a place in the sun though he shows his convention at the beginning of the novel of Moll Flanders. They, as Ian Watt describes them, are all "an embodiment of economic individualism". The self-reliance which is the hallmark of their behaviour is characteristic of the rise of capitalism. The qualities which typify Defoe's narrators-self-reliance, acumen, adaptability-are the very qualities in such demand during the birth of the modern age and which he embodied so forcefully in his own person. The spirit infusing his novels is experimentation: a willingness to adapt oneself to the vagaries of fortune and a refusal to be browbeaten by unpromising or limiting circumstances. To use a modern expression, his narrators are characterized by their upward mobility: the urge to be a gentleman or to be a gentlewoman, to be socially acquisitive, to better one's lot until every possibility of advancement has been exhausted.

Watt criticizes Moll for not being a woman in his *The Rise of the Novel*, but of course she isn't a woman: she is a male author's narrative device, and her "unfeminine" traits are important not because they destroy the illusion of the female narrator but because they draw attention to it. Similarly failing to distinguish between the author's manipulation of gender as a thematic issue and a structural device; Watt mistakes Moll's ambitions for Defoe's: "Defoe's identification with Moll Flanders was so complete that, despite a few feminine traits, he created a personality that was in essence his own." Watt declares that Moll is simply Defoe dressed in a skirt and that her story is in effect an autobiography because Defoe was incapable of writing anything else: "There is certainly nothing in Moll Flanders which clearly indicates that Defoe sees the story differently from the heroine". Watt abandons any investigation of the text as literature in favor of his social analysis of the rise of the novel. For him, the text itself becomes an instrument in that rise, and he praises Defoe as a genuine spokesman for a new reading public. Defoe wrote effectively, Watt claims, for those of his time whose views of social relations and whose expectations of literature were as limited as his own.

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