

POST-COLONIALISM IN POST-MODERNISM: A COMPARATIVE CHARACTEROLOGY OF J.M. COETZEE'S *FOE* AS AN APPROPRIATION OF DANIEL DEFOE'S *ROBINSON CRUSOE*

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Abstract

J.M. Coetzee's Foe is a rewriting of Daniel Defoe's classic novel Robinson Crusoe. This paper presents a comparative analysis of four key characters in Foe and their canonical counterparts in Robinson Crusoe: Cruso, Susan Barton, Foe and Friday. It purports that by appropriating not only Defoe's characters but also the author himself, Coetzee actively engages in palimpsestic dialogues with its canonical counterpart to explore the dynamics between the different socio-historical contextualizations of novel writing in Defoe's 18th century England and Coetzee's Apartheid South Africa. From more general theoretical perspectives, this paper argues that in Foe, postmodern techniques, intertextuality and metafiction in particular, are central to its deconstructive approach toward the notion of post-colonial truth in silence.

In every story there is a silence, some sight concealed, some word unspoken, I believe.

--Foe, *Foe*, J.M. Coetzee (1986: 141)

Introduction

The South African Nobel laureate J.M. Coetzee is one of the most important figures associated with post-colonial literatures in English. As David Attwell (1993: 122) has pointed out, Coetzee's novels tend to focus on the themes of power and authority, especially the complex dialectics they form under colonialism or its post-colonial legacy. However, according to Sebastian Smet (2004: 11), while these thematic concerns are still prominent,

Foe departs from Coetzee's other works in its "predominantly postmodernist" qualities, including its self-reflectivity, metaphoricity and allegorical potentials. Its uniqueness also lies in the fact that it is a complex rewriting or adaptation of Daniel Defoe's canonical "founding father of the English novel" *Robinson Crusoe* (Sanders, 2006: 108). In the first chapter of *Foe*, its protagonist Susan Barton, from a female perspective, retells a Robinsonade story about how she spent a year with Cruso (Coetzee purposefully omits the "e" in Defoe's "Crusoe") and Friday after she was stranded on an island. But in the later parts of the book her story stretches beyond the confines of Defoe's island and she brings Friday back to England, where she becomes preoccupied with negotiating authorship and discussing the philosophical implications of writing with the writer Foe, who, needless to say, is Defoe's eponymous fictional incarnation in *Foe*. Therefore, it can be said that by appropriating not only *Robinson Crusoe*'s characters but also its author, *Foe* actively engages in palimpsestic dialogues with its canonical counterpart to explore the dynamics between the different socio-historical contextualizations of novel writing in Defoe's 18th century England and Coetzee's Apartheid South Africa. This essay will thus examine this engagement by comparatively analyzing four key characters in *Foe* in relation to *Robinson Crusoe*: Cruso, Susan Barton, Foe and Friday. Through these analyses, it argues that in *Foe*, postmodern techniques, intertextuality and metafiction in particular, are central to its deconstructive approach toward the notion of post-colonial truth in silence.

1. The A-colonial Cruso: Crusoe without the Eurocentrism/Enthusiasm

The palimpsest originally refers to a manuscript page which has been reused for a new text after the original text had been erased or scrapped. In their discussions on postcolonial writing, Ashcroft and Griffiths (2002: 202) have linked the palimpsest to the postcolonial writers' textual practices: in such "writing back", they appropriate elements from classic European literatures to address colonial connections or/and indigenous realities. In order to understand the palimpsestic dialogues Coetzee is trying to establish between *Foe* and *Robinson Crusoe*, how the canonical title character Crusoe is presented differently in the two texts is crucial. Defoe's Crusoe is marked by passion in his activities on the island and also his positive attitudes towards life. Before he was stranded on the island, Crusoe was already a prototype of the adventure capitalist as he chose to venture out to the sea to fulfill his own dream and passion instead of the "life of ease and pleasure" (Defoe, 2000: 1) designed by his

family for him. The opening pages detailing his life with his family in York also functions as a frame narrative that indicates his vested interests in the English social system, which has pinpointed his preexisting and transfixed socio-historical identity that would remain perpetual even on the island and foreshadows his coming back to England. Stranded on the island for more than 28 years, Crusoe has familiarized himself with the geography of the island, built his own house using tools he collected from shipwrecks, domesticated several kinds of plants and animals for sustenance, and obtained a manservant by the name of Friday to affirm his mastery over the island. Instead of losing faith in returning home and losing interests in any worldly affairs outside of the island, Crusoe's spirits proved to have toughened by his years on the island since after being rescued and returning to England, he organized even bigger adventures to South America and established trade from there.

Indeed, Defoe's Crusoe is like a self-nominated king obsessed with the idea and practice of possession. This obsession is constantly revealed in his brave ambition towards the exploration of oceans at the beginning of the story, in his patient taming of the island through economic individualism during his stranded years, as well as in his successful career as a maritime businessman at the end. This kingly spirit of his is most evident in his "surveying" the island:

This was all my own... I was king and lord of all this country indefeasibly, and had a right of possession; and, if I could convey it, I might have it in inheritance as completely as any lord of a manor in England (Defoe, 2000: 76).

It is also evident that this active kingly spirit is rooted in Crusoe's aspirations for his post-insular English life at home. As Mike Marais (2009: 15) suggests, despite his activeness and positive attitudes towards survival and life, Defoe's Crusoe has never escaped the colonial and exploitative mindset generated by his Eurocentric aspirations for a successful life in the English city.

Similar depictions and attitudes are present in *Foe*. After Susan Barton is rescued by Cruso and accepted to live with him in his small hut, she makes the observation about Cruso's relationship with the island: "He is a truly kingly figure; he is the true king of his island" (37). But different from the self-indulgent and self-important tone emanated from the first person narration of Defoe's Crusoe, the "kingly" qualities of Coetzee's Cruso, as indicated by the third person pronoun in the quoted sentence, only exist as Susan Barton's

inner thoughts about Crusoe. In this regard, Barton shares the same sets of English ideologies with Defoe's Crusoe while Coetzee's Crusoe, without the "e", is also without Crusoe's Eurocentrism and enthusiasm for island exploitation and capitalism. In contrast to Crusoe's activeness, Coetzee's Crusoe is marked by indifference and passivity. First, contrary to Crusoe's possessiveness, there is an absence of property relations on Crusoe's island. For example, when Barton, again in her colonial mindset, asks Crusoe, "Is it your plan to clear the whole island of growth, and turn it into terraces?" Crusoe replies: "Clearing ground and piling stones is little enough, but it is better than sitting in idleness" (33). For Coetzee's Crusoe, this preoccupying activity is little more than a way to kill time, in the hope that people who would probably come to island would "bring seed" and thus bring the island into prosperity (ibid). Clearly, Crusoe does not imagine a life beyond the insularity of the island. For Crusoe, the action people can perform is "come" (ibid) rather than "go", so in such directional thinking he has already unconsciously aligned himself with the island as the center of his cultural system.

Second, in this fusion of himself and the island, Coetzee's Crusoe has both literally and figuratively forfeited himself to reach an a-colonial status of ekstasis (in the sense of self-displacement). For this reason, Barton's colonial mindset, manifested as her occasional questions and comments on issues regarding the island, sometimes provokes Crusoe's anger. Her remarks not only discursively colonize the island, of which Crusoe has already been an organic part, but also remind him of his colonialist past as an English subject and thus subsume into an identity category he no longer identifies with. For instance, when Barton inquires whether Crusoe has taught Friday many English words, he impatiently retorts: "this is not England, we have no need of a great stock of words"(21). In fact, unlike *Robinson Crusoe*, *Foe* does not provide any background information about Crusoe in any frame story and Barton does not relay much about his past either; the Crusoe the readers know has always been living idly and carefree on the island and dies when torn away from it. It is thus at best ambiguous whether Coetzee's Crusoe has gone through the same colonizing stages as Defoe's Crusoe has. Even if he has, this post-coloniality of Crusoe seems to have already been sublimated to an obliteration of any colonial traces and thus to a status of a-colonial existence rather than a post-colonial one.

Such comparative analyses makes the two texts' different attitudes towards otherness evident. In the Hegelian sense of recognition, Crusoe represents the colonial

nature-conqueror who secures his independence and individuality in establishing master-slave relationship with the Other, whereas Cruso, in his inseparability from and reconciliatory fusion with nature, is the truly autonomous being that achieves a post-colonial mutual interdependence with the Other (Hegel, 2004: 87). *Foe* is thus not just a “transposition” or an “analogue” of its canonical counterpart but more importantly it is a “commentary” in its purpose and nature (Sanders, 2006: 20). It exposes the “hostility” of colonial discourse inherent in Defoe and his work and comments negatively on it by actively reconstructing an a-colonial alternative with “hospitality” (Marais, 2009: 45).

2. Mrs. Cruso and (De)Foe: the Metafictional/Feminist Battle over Authorship

The female perspective of *Foe*'s primary narrator Susan Barton has led Chris Bongie (1993: 264) to label the book as a kind of “feminist revisionism”. Subsequently, debates surrounding whether Barton's ideologies and behaviors constitute any kind of feminist empowerment have developed, with critics including Chris Bongie (ibid) and Robin Runia (2011: 12) interpreting her as an independent free-spirit who has a sense of responsibility and uses her femininity to achieve her goals. But critics such as Radhika Jones (2009: 45), Dana Dragunoiu (2001: 309), Jamie Snead (2010: 1) and Rosemary Jolly (1996: 22) have emphasized her reliance on the men in the story and her ultimate fatalistic lack of substance (as demonstrated by her constant inability to write her own story). However, as mentioned in the introduction, the uniqueness of *Foe* lies in its participation in the postmodernist “favoring of the signifier over the signified” (Gräbe, 1993: 195), so feminist criticisms of the text should also focus more on the telling of the story rather than the story itself. As Gayatri Spivak (1990: 12) and Laura Fisher (1988: 43) have pointed out, the status of Barton's femaleness is not only linked to her struggles with English patriarchy and colonialism, but also her battle with the male writer Foe over the issue of authorship, writing and the notion of truth. For the purpose of this essay, the implications of Susan Barton's characterization for the intertextual/metatextual relations between *Foe* and *Robinson Crusoe* will be the primary focus.

Firstly, as is obvious, the character Susan Barton is Coetzee's invention, as she is not present in Defoe's original text. But her presence in the novel is nonetheless quite prominent: the travelogue narrative of the first chapter, the epistolary records of the second chapter and the philosophical discussions of the third chapter are all more or less presented as Barton's

narratives. Readers of *Foe* follows her from the island back to England, then to Bristol then back to Foe's house. Notably, among the four chapters, only the events in the first chapter, namely her experiences on the island, have the strongest connection to *Robinson Crusoe*, as her story before their rescue can be easily incorporated into Defoe's story without significantly altering the latter's plot. However, the events that ensued, including Crusoe's death, Friday's life in England, meetings with the writer Foe, all depart from the Defoe's plot, which raises some important questions: how should *Foe* be categorized in terms of its relation to *Robinson Crusoe*? An alternative plot and ending? Its sequel?

What is of significance in answering these questions is the character Foe's identity as a writer since Susan Barton relies on him for the writing of her island experiences. As Foe was the name Defoe used before he gentrified it with the aristocratic sounding prefix "de", Coetzee's Foe may as well be an allusion to Defoe before his rise to fame, and thus readers can ponder on the possibility that this story Barton wants him to write is exactly what will later become Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (Sanders, 2006: 108). Hence, by appropriating both the fictional character and its real-life writer/creator and inviting them into a metafictional dialogue, Coetzee also invokes the readers' knowledge about the basic plot/content of the canonical work to illustrate his point: *Foe* is a story about another story, a story behind another story, the background story from which the canonical *Robinson Crusoe* has germinated.

In this way he has successfully subverted the canonicity of Defoe and *Robinson Crusoe*, both formally and thematically. Formally, Barton's background narrative fictionally precedes the appearance of *Robinson Crusoe* (which of course factually precedes the appearance of *Foe* in reality), and thus it has reversed its relationship with *Foe* (the factual appropriation has thus become the appropriated in the fictional dimension) and simultaneously strengthened their intertextual/metafictional symbiosis in its mixing up the chronological and spatial order in both fictional and factual dimensions. Thematically, this metatextual link between the two texts has poignantly put Barton's concerns about the possibility that Foe may write "only Crusoe and Friday" "without the woman" (71-72) into a karmic irony since this turns out to be the exact case in *Robinson Crusoe*. This factual disappointment generated by Barton's fictional expectations then further stresses Coetzee's post-colonial concerns regarding how authorial discourses are authoritarian in nature, and how individual agency and alternative histories are lost in such literary authoritarianism.

Secondly, as mentioned before, Barton's travelogue in the first chapter reveals her colonial mindset similar to that of Defoe's *Crusoe's*, but after Crusoe died, her situation has increasingly come to resemble that of the colonized. As L. E. Ciolkowski (1998: 2) has theorized, a female colonizer's identity is always hanging on the borders as she inevitably perpetuates patriarchy's sexual colonization on her by her imperial colonizing of the Other, against which her domestic virtues and manners are a yardstick. So it is not surprising that Spivak (1990: 10) has insisted on the limited nature of Barton's feminism despite her unconventional profession (prostitute) and the sense of freedom and independence she thinks she has obtained from it.

However, what is more important in this dynamic of the colonizer and the colonized for Susan Barton is her relationship with her "burden" (81), namely the story of the island she wants Foe to write for her, and it is in her interactions with this "burden" that her female body and sexuality become relevant. As pointed out by Marais (2009: 80), the word "burden" has an obsolete meaning of "child" in addition to its primary reference to an often troublesome "load", and thus Barton's burden, the urge/need to have "the story of his (Crusoe's) island" told (45), is not dissimilar to that of a pregnant woman waiting to give birth to her child. This gestational burden pertaining to otherness then links sexual potency with storytelling, and offers explanations as to the meaning of the dead child on the road and why Barton keeps rejecting the little girl who claims to be her lost daughter. To be more specific, Barton conceives the story of the Other through her sexual intercourse with Crusoe on the island, upon whose death she has to assume the role of "Mrs. Crusoe" (45) and deliver this otherness to Foe through another sexual intercourse (139). This link explains why the tongueless Friday is also castrated (119), denied the ability to "father" his own story (123). The dead child she saw on her way to Bristol (to send Friday off to Africa) provokes her sentiments because it reminds her of her own parental status, of her responsibility to keep the child/story/Friday safe and alive, and through this she becomes very aware of the correspondence between storytelling and an individual's existence: "who was child but I, in another life?" (105)—if one loses the power of storytelling, one loses the fundamental means of existence. For the same reason she cannot accept the little girl as her child, as her parental anxiety on producing her fictional child as a means to secure her continued existence overwhelms any extra-fictional elements that would put her into "doubt" (133).

Ironically, it is exactly this combination of her obsession to have the story told and her

insistence on her perceived incapability to tell it that has gradually reversed the pattern of textual colonization, because “her attempt to write this narrative is a wholly involuntary response to her contact with the alterity of the island life” (ibid). Once she brings Friday back to England and tells him “I must assume the burden of our story” (81), she has extended the colonizer’s hospitality as home to the colonized but at the same time generated the epiphenomenon of their inseparability, which, like discussed in Crusoe’s case before, gradually fuses her colonial identity with that of the colonized (Fisher, 1988: 22). She thus becomes increasingly colonized not by her femaleness but by the story/child she has to bear, of which the mute Friday is a constant reminder: “Mr Foe, I must have my freedom!...It is becoming more than I can bear! It is worse than the island!” (147). The readers can share this sense of frustration with Barton since, with the intertextual knowledge about *Robinson Crusoe*, we are aware that Barton is caught between two bad options of either actively aborting the story or passively letting an unreliable writer obliterate her existence and ventriloquize for the island.

Therefore, the feminist implications of the addition of the female protagonist Susan Barton in *Foe* are susceptible to her metafictional relations with storytelling. On one hand, her struggles with (De)Foe indicate the irrelevance of gender/feminism in the face of the power of authorship and authority. On the other hand, Barton’s body, and more poignantly the whole of her existence, despite its prevalent presence in the story, is little more than a vehicle by which stories are attached, transferred and distorted. This subsumption of feminism into literary authoritarianism can thus be interpreted as Coetzee’s warning against an excessive focus on superficial political appropriations instead of genuine reimbursements of discursive power to the formerly oppressed. Clearly, the battle between Barton and Foe is not only ethical, political and narratological, but also ontological. After all, it takes a voice for feminism to be heard in the first place.

3. Friday and the Sounds of the Island: Silence and Truth

As Coetzee has emphasized in his interview with Attwell (1993: 30), in *Robinson Crusoe*, Friday is a handsome Carib youth with quasi-European features but in *Foe*, he is a black African. Similar to Susan Barton, Friday in *Foe* also has a continuous presence as he follows her back to England and lives in Foe’s house. But while Defoe’s Friday, whose name is given to mark his subservience to Crusoe’s rationalization and mastership, learns European languages and adopts Christianity from Crusoe and thus plays a clear colonized role,

Coetzee's Friday is full of mysteries, the most significant among which is his missing tongue.

According to Derek Attridge (2004: 33), post-colonial readings of the story tend to interpret Friday's silence as a boycott for ventriloquism, both in his own refusal to be ventriloquized and Coetzee's refusal to ventriloquize for him. Essentially, Friday's silence is a kind of allegorical speaking nonetheless: its solipsistic reticence in its own ontology blatantly highlights the obvious political and epistemological limitations of colonial discourse, a position from which even "the critical, self-convincingly marginal, and feminist colonial discourse" (Attwell, 1993: 108), represented by Susan Barton, cannot entirely escape. So instead of liberating the perspectives of the formerly oppressed, as the feminist appropriations of canonical texts are wont to do, Coetzee commits further violence on his Friday and renders him tongue-less and subsequently robs him of his capability to tell his own story altogether. Gone with Friday's tongue are the stories of his life, of how he lost it (whether it's Crusoe who cut it off?), of his mysterious behaviors, of how he thinks about the island days, about England and about his life in general. Truth has thus become a myth, and through this philosophical manipulation, Coetzee reaches out to the readers to advocate that Truth, might as well just be a myth, because even if Friday can speak and has a story, it would just be one among many fabricated discourses doomed by the lack of their verifications. This ontological nihilism of Truth is most evident in the ending where the mysterious heterodiegetic narrator dives into the sea to explore one of the many myths in Barton's story—Friday's flower-scattering rituals—only to find that "this is not a place of words. Each syllable, as it comes out, is caught and filled with water and diffused. This is a place where bodies are their own signs. It is the home of Friday" (157). This revelation renders the struggles for truthful stories futile and thus deconstructs the stability of Truth altogether, because the answer lies in "Friday's home"—the place that witnesses, feels, but never tells.

Sue Kossew (2003: 155) points out that this "unsatisfactory closure" is typically postmodernist in its "soft and cold, dark and unending" echoing (157). Indeed, judging by Ihab Hassan's (1987: 22) four defining features of postmodernism—unpresentability, indeterminacy, fragmentation and metafiction, the whole ending chapter of the book presents to be very postmodernist. The entrance of a heterodiegetic narrator into Foe's house simultaneously renders the narrative indeterminable and metafictional, and his descriptions about the deaths of Barton and Foe and the utterance of Friday form huge contrasts with the narrative of the former chapters and shatters the whole book into a status of un-presentable

fragmentation. In such fragmentation, the boundaries between the fiction, the metafiction and reality are all broken down in the end when the narrator transforms from the one who searches to the one who is absorbed by Friday's mysterious utterance: "his mouth opens...from inside him comes a slow stream, without breath, without interruption..it flows upon...me...it beats against my eyelids, against the skin of my face" (157).

Though in the fictional events of *Foe* Friday remains a quasi-oxymoronic existence—a voice without sound, a shadow without a body, a substantiality without substance, allegorically speaking, Coetzee's Friday actually is more like an omniscient clairvoyant, who silently observes the flowing and intersecting of the never-ending production of (counter-)discourses just like the "walking eyes" (147) he draws for Barton—"nothing is hidden from the eyes" (Coetzee, 1982: 79).

Conclusion

In summary, this essay has comparatively analyzed four key characters in Coetzee's *Foe* against their canonical counterparts in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Firstly, it has been argued that the contrast between the activeness of Defoe's Crusoe and the passivity of Coetzee's Cruso corresponds to their ideological differences regarding the treatment of the Other, and through this contrast Coetzee negatively comments on *Robinson Crusoe*'s colonial discourse. Secondly, the philosophical battle between the female castaway Susan Barton and Defoe's fictional incarnation in *Foe* has shifted the focus from post-colonial critique to the power of storytelling, and how this power always precedes struggles of any other kind. Finally, the silence of Coetzee's tongue-less Friday not only denies any post-colonial accessibility to the narratives of truth, but philosophically deconstructs the stable and structural notion of Truth altogether. From these characterological analyses, it can be observed that there is a deep pattern in Coetzee's postmodernist (re-)construction of these key characters, and it is formed by two layers of post-colonial deconstructive forces. First, he deconstructs the canonicity of Defoe through the literary politics of textual decolonization (through Cruso); second, he then self-reflectively deconstructs the ventriloquizing processes of the political agenda of literary appropriation itself through a postmodern/post-structural interpretation of discourse construction/storytelling. In the end, by writing a complex intertextual novel like *Foe*, Coetzee makes the readers aware of the agnostic "dark mass" (156) hidden behind every told and untold (hi)story, without uncovering what it contains or implies.

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