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Robinson Crusoe, Judith Shakespeare, and Friday: A Reading of J.M.Coetzee's "Foe"

Neeru Anand, Ph.D

Assistant Professor of English

Dyal Singh Evening College (University of Delhi)

Lodhi Road, New Delhi – 110003

Abstract: One of the key features of Post-Modernism in literature is to critically engage with the past. Nobel Laureate, J.M. Coetzee (b. 1940) in his 1986 novel *Foe* (re)writes one of the most influential texts of English literature, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). However, the narrator of Coetzee's novel is not Crusoe himself but rather a woman, Susan Barton, who finds herself on the island with Crusoe (called Cruso in Coetzee's text), and a mute Friday. In my paper, I discuss the three characters and interrogate the issues of myth, post-colonialism, feminism, and marginalities that the author raises through these characters. The paper also looks at the process of writing as a strategy of power with the potential of silencing and obliterating other voices. The position of Coetzee as a White South African writer is also looked into.

Keywords: Feminism, Marginalities, Post-Colonialism, Post-Modernism, Rewriting.

In his seminal essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent", T.S.Eliot has words of advice for an aspiring writer: He has to have a historical sense which involves a "perception not only of the pastness of the past but of its presence," and for this, he continues, the writer must have a knowledge not only about the literature of his own country, but also that of the whole of Europe from Homer onwards (49).

One is not necessarily an aspiring writer but nonetheless starts reading the great masters of the past only to be assailed with feelings of doubts. Is this the great tradition? (Here I am confining myself to English literature). If so, where are the women writers? Where is the woman in literature?

Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* argues that a denial of space and voice leads many a woman writer to the fate of Judith Shakespeare¹. The die one feels is firmly loaded against women. Even if like Jane Austen, they are able to write on 'two-inches of ivory' they have Matthew Arnold's real estimate to contend with. The historical estimate, which gives room to the particular circumstances that produce a

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work and judges it accordingly, is dismissed by Arnold as a false criteria for judging a literary piece.

Now the work of women, written in circumstances substantially less favorable than those of men, naturally suffers in comparison. The result is that the Western literary canon has for ages denied space to women². In frustration, one turns to history only to see the same case being repeated. And this fate of obliteration befalls not only women but the other ex-centric too —non-whites, non-binaries, homosexuals, minorities.

With the spread of imperialism and the histories of nations intertwined with each other, surely the colonized people must have made a difference to the history and literature of England. But where are they? The various colonies of England seem to act only as exotic backgrounds against which lonely Englishmen and women enact out their passions. The presence of the 'native' meanwhile is confined to being merely the *punkah-puller* and the bearer of food and drinks. Like the proverbial "*koi-hai*" he remains invisible to the sahib's though always in full-view³.

Instead of these (the colonized, women, minorities etc.) one encounters — in the historical and the literary narratives of England — a white, male European figure. He stands tall, his eyes holding the sea with their intensity, as he surveys far

and wide for new lands to be assimilated. Slowly, he turns round: "*I am the Monarch of this island.*" Immediately, the words rise tone's lips — Robinson Crusoe.

The myth of Robinson Crusoe, as this paper will argue, has exerted the greatest stranglehold on the history and literature of England. For this purpose I will be discussing Nobel Laureate J.M.Coetzee's 1986 novel *Foe*, critically engaged as it is with Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719)⁴. This interrogation of the past is a notable feature of post-modernist texts with their challenges to the original narratives and trans-world identities⁵. The paper is divided into three parts with each part discussing one of the three main characters: Cruso(e), Susan Barton, and Friday.

"For thine is
the Kingdom"

—T.S. Eliot "The Hollow Men"

In the midst of her narrative, Susan Barton suddenly reflects: "*The island was Cruso's (yet by what right? by the law of islands? is there such a law ?)...*" (Coetzee 51). One can ask oneself the same question. By which law did Crusoe gain hold of the island? For the answer, one has to go back to the beginning.

Let us then, consider for a moment, the closing years of the second decade of

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the eighteenth-century. The parliament has triumphed over the divine right of the King and Protestantism over Catholicism⁶. The New World (still a colony) has opened up new vistas; trading companies have been established; overseas ventures are in vogue; the middle class is asserting itself: Peace, progress, and prosperity are in the air.

In such a confident age, a figure like Robinson Crusoe can well emerge and announce to the whole world: “*I (am) Lord of the whole Manor or if I please I might call myself King or Emperor over the whole country which I(have) possession of. There (are) no Rivals. I (have) no competition, none to dispute sovereignty or Command with me*” (Defoe 198). Nobody can miss the power-drunk imperialistic tone of the lines. A novel cannot escape its particular historic moment: England, expanding its overseas empire, demanded such heroes who could command the course of history. Robinson Crusoe became the man people wanted to imitate and such was the force of his personality that many mistook him for a real-life person. Linda Hutcheon writes, “*Defoe’s works made claims to veracity and actually convinced some people that they were factual*” (107).

One of the ways in which *Robinson Crusoe* achieved this (its claim to veracity) was by its narrative technique. Narration works onto levels: the level of the told (story) and the level of telling (discourse)⁷. The former involves the events or actions

which the narrator would like us to believe occurred, and at this level, the book comes across as an intensely exciting story of a man marooned on an island. Discourse, on the other hand, involves the way in which the events are recounted, how they get told, and the organization of the narrative. *Robinson Crusoe* being entirely in the first person narrative, everything is narrated the way Crusoe saw/sees it. There is no divergent viewpoint because the other voices that could have refuted or disputed his views are never given a chance to speak.

Now narration is never innocent. Crusoe has total command over what he relates because the authorial strategy is such. Defoe makes Crusoe towering personality who dwarfs the others and whose opinions as well as his account of the years that he spent on the island are accepted by each and everyone.

The present age is however skeptical about such unadulterated opinions and facts. Our search into such facts often leads to what F.H. Bradley calls “*a host of jarring witnesses*”, each with a different viewpoint from that of the dominant one, yet who over the centuries have been chillingly silenced (85).

In *Foe*, the jarring witnesses are Barton and Friday. Further, rather than a single point of view, the story in *Foe* is to be told by Foe, by way of Barton, by way

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of her memory of stories told to her by the since deceased Crusoe, who may not have been aware of “*what was truth, what fancy*” (Coetzee 12). Such a distancing from the source of the story problematizes the entire notion of reality being put down on paper. Moreover, Barton’s reflection that “*Who but Crusoe, who is no more could truly tell you Crusoe’s story?*” introduces a crucial aspect of the critique of representation (Coetzee 51). The question is not simply whether ‘reality’ can be represented exactly through language but also whose story gets told in that attempt at representation.

With the publication of Edward Said’s trail-blazing *Orientalism* (1978), the issue of representation has become one of the most debated around the world. Representation, as Said explains, has been used for “*dominating, restructuring and having authority over the colonised people*”(10).

Representation involves in the first place, a drawing of boundaries between the coloniser and the colonized. The colonization project depended to great extent upon the (assumed) superiority of the colonizer and the corresponding inferiority of the colonised. Drawing boundaries helps to marginalise the colonised so that he would always remain different and alien, always the “other” to one’s “self”. Further, the representation of the colonized in writing and discussions was/is such that he

remains forever fixed in negativity — he is cowardly, greedy, brutal, and lazy: all in fact that the Self is not. So strongly have these dividing lines been drawn that till date, people take these binaries as something fundamental. The question is how such strong lines could be drawn. The answer begins to emerge when Barton starts toying with the idea of fabricating events and including them in the story: “*How long before I am driven to invent new and strange circumstances.*”(Coetzee 67). From the position that she would only tell the truth, she has realised that often facts are twisted so as to make a work interesting.

Facts are twisted not merely in order to make a work readable or interesting but also for some ulterior, much more sinister purpose, is revealed in her recognition of the part that power plays in the language equation. Differentiating between her silence and that of Friday, she says, “*What he(Friday) is to the world is what I make of him... Therefore the silence of Friday is a helpless silence whereas the silence I keep regarding Bahia and other matters is chosen and purposeful: it is my own silence*” (Coetzee 122).

This then is a discourse on power, recognition of the ideology of representation: Who gets to speak, for whom, and to what end? She hits the right spot when she states: “*It is still in my power to guide and amend. Above all to*

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withhold. By such means do I still endeavour to be father to mystery” (Coetzee 123).

By the use of the word ‘father’, Barton stresses the position of authority (as also the patriarchal nature of the society). That she is convinced about the relationship between power and language is made clear when she says that the moral of the story (that Foe narrates to her) “*is that he has the last word who disposes over the greatest force*” (Coetzee 124).

She has herself answered the question that she had asked regarding Crusoe’s right to rule the island. He ruled the island because he had the force to subdue all challenges and change them to submission. Moreover, he had the power to manipulate and twist words according to his own wish. He could represent those under his power as he wanted to — malign them or praise them. Undoubtedly, it was Social Darwinism at its most ugly but for the English it was a way to vicariously live their fantasies: absolute command over a land and its people. No wonder, as a thrilling quest of uncharted territories, the book exerted the greatest hold on their imagination and as the Empire spread, the new colonies seemed an ideal place for the people to live their Crusoe dream.

“You are a poem, though your poem’s naught.”

In the midst of her narrative Barton writes to Foe :“ *When I reflect on my story I seem to exist only as the one who came, the one who witnessed, the one who longed to be gone ... Yet I was as much a body as Crusoe* ”⁸(Coetzee 51).

The pain in these words reflects the tragedy of women reduced to the margins, mere spectators to the power-play between men. Empire-building, work for the country, Father, and Church are all male domains. Where is the woman in history? Coetzee seems to ask.

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In *Foe*, Coetzee demonstrates that authors can silence, exclude, or obliterate certain events and people, but drawing an analogy between fiction and history, it suggests that historians have also done the same. Continuing rather naively, Barton questions: “*Is the fate of all story tellers like that?*” (Coetzee 51). She has not as yet learnt the lesson which would make her declare by the end of the text: “*I am the father of my story*” (Coetzee 123). By the end, she has realized the power of words and moreover by using the masculine gender, emphasized the logo centric, patriarchal state of society which bars a woman from expressing herself and whose achievements are deliberately obliterated from the records.

As the previous section argued, representation of the world depends upon the whims of the victor. It is his words that can twist, manipulate and obliterate histories and people as and how he wishes to. The power of words makes him the centre of the world. And since man views himself as the centre⁹, he feels it imperative that it is he who should wield the pen.

In their path-breaking book, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, contend that the pen is a metaphorical penis¹⁰ and that a male writer sees “*writing as a male creative gift*” (64). Woman, on the other hand is often seen as a

blank page which the male writer can narrate or fill-in as he deems fit. Man as author is hence an active participant, a creator, while the woman is merely a passive creation whom he can mould or break as he desires. Further, complicating the issue is the role of the author as God, since the patriarchal notion is that the writer “*fathers his text just as Godfathered the world*” (Gilbert and Gubar 64). This analogy between Foe, the author, and God is drawn when Barton states: “*In Mr. Foe’s house there are many mansions*” which is a rephrasing of Christ’s proclamation that “*In my Father’s house are many mansions*” (Coetzee 77; John 14 : 2).

Subsequently, battle lines are drawn between the male author/god Foe on one side and the woman Barton on the other. The woman wants to present her story of Cruso, but her views and ambition clash with that of a patriarchal society which questions not only her presence in a male domain but also her right to narrate his(s)tory. In other words, what the society forbids is a woman writing about a man as her subject since it is a woman who is destined to be narrated. A woman cannot be conceived as a creator.

Foe, meanwhile desires to fill in the blank page, that is, he wants to write a story of her (Barton’s) life and thus acclaim her forever as his possession. However the saucy and sagacious Susan Barton is not easy to confine. Writing down her story has

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made her not only find a voice and an outlook but also realise her worth: “*Where would you be without the woman?*” she asks Foe (Coetzee 72). Significantly, she has begun viewing herself as a storyteller and like every “*would be woman writer*” feels horrified at being “*defined as his (the male author’s) creation*” (Gubar 295).

In order to confine her in a domestic space as also to confuse her, Foe sends her a girl masquerading as her daughter (Significantly, Barton calls her ‘Father-born’, thereby showing that the girl is a creation of Foe — something that he desires Barton should also become). The ploy is that in a confused state, Barton will reveal her story to him but Barton is made of sterner stuff: “*I am not a story Mr. Foe,*” she thunders, refusing to be his creation (Coetzee 131). However, Foe has his revenge on her (as Coetzee teasingly suggests) when in the story of Robinson Crusoe he erased all traces of the woman!

“The rest is silence”

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The delineating of De in Defoe serves not merely as a reminder of the real name of the creator of Robinson Crusoe¹¹, but also underlines the post-modernist ambitions of the text. Interestingly, Coetzee assigns to the female character (who is his own creation) rather than Friday (who is present in the earlier work) the task of narrating the story. As discussed in the previous section, one reason for this into highlights the difficulties that a woman writer encountered when she set out to express herself in words on paper.

However Susan Barton also serves another interesting function. And the interest lies in the position she occupies in the text. We have already discussed the dependence of the colonizing project upon the differentiating of the colonizer from the colonized. Through Barton, Coetzee reveals the cracks that can arise between such binary oppositions. Vacillating between Cruso/Friday (Master/ Slave) duality, her presence on the island destroys the power

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equilibrium that had existed between the two. Her race and colour make her one of those who belong to the centre, yet her gender is one which automatically sends her to the fringes.

Her position gives rise to two possibilities. The first one is that perhaps the arrival of the women worsened the relationship that existed between the ruler and the ruled. To give an instance, the English mem-sahibs with their habit of regarding India as a “*nation of eunuchs*” have been blamed for many of the ills of the Raj (Scott 471). Barton herself seems aware of the problems that her presence created when she imagines Foe going through her letters and murmuring: “*Better had there been only Cruso and Friday... better without the woman*” (Coetzee 72). Better without the woman because in a world without women, there is no possibility of miscegenation.

The second possibility lies in the relationship that Barton shares with Friday. The first glance she has of him convinces her that since he is black, he must necessarily be a cannibal. “*An important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of “fixity” in the ideological construction of otherness*” (Bhabha 6). So fixed is the image of the Negro as a cannibal in her mind that it recurs repeatedly in her thoughts about Friday. Despite the fact that Friday’s

favorite dish is oatmeal and despite the fact that it is he who has been wronged — sold in slavery by the whites, his tongue cut off — when she sees the infant’s body, she is certain that had she not been there, Friday would have gobbled up the body. Despite all pointers to the contrary, so fixed is the image of the black man as the savage that the whites can visualize him as indulging in a number of ‘unspeakable rites’¹².

In fact, throughout the text one finds evidence of her blinkered vision regarding Friday. From the moment that Friday carries her in that “*strange backward embrace*” to Cruso, the affinities between them are clear (Coetzee 6). Both are the subjects of Cruso.

However, in her desire to remove herself from the periphery and get to the centre, Barton quite forgets Friday. To her he is a creature of little significance, and she gives little thought to him. Hearing of his mutilation, she is repelled by him. When he does not (unknowingly) heed her command but obeys Cruso’s, the first thought that she has is that he was like a “*dog that heeds but one master*” (Coetzee 21). Her decision to lord over Friday becomes clear—Cruso is his first master than surely she would like to be the second. When Cruso becomes weak, she dons the imperial mantle and under her instructions Friday is forcibly hauled on to the ship, to be taken to England. Whether Friday wants

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to go or not does not concern her. She (like other colonizers) assumes that what she does is in the best interest of the colonised.

The position of Susan Barton in a particular way also reveals J.M Coetzee's own position. As a white, South African writer Coetzee is both one of those who were colonisers as well as those who were subordinates. The white settlers in South Africa were the rulers of the indigenous Africans yet were answerable to England. From this position of both periphery and power, Coetzee personifies his dilemma in the persona of Barton. Helen Tiffin writes, "*J.M.Coetzee's Foe explores the problem of white South African settler literature in relation to the continuing oppression by the whites of the black majority*" (96). Is it perhaps the guilt of white South Africans — that instead of siding with the blacks and becoming one of them, they saw themselves only as an extension of England and continued to treat the Africans with contempt — which Coetzee expresses through Susan Barton? Her tragedy (and that of the white South Africans) lies in the fact that instead of sympathizing with the subject (Friday), she seeks to challenge the supremacy of the centre (Cruso) and seek it for herself. Even when she starts writing it is Cruso whom she places at the centre.

Both Barton and Foe fail to understand Friday because they are involved in power politics of their own.

Considering him dumb and mute, they do not comprehend that his silence contains all the sounds. The Friday of *Robinson Crusoe* can speak but what he says is mere "parroting" of what Crusoe tells him. In the silence of this Friday, on the other hand, lies not only his individuality but also a challenge to white supremacy. Both Barton and Foe feel threatened by his silence. It is not they but rather the unnamed narrator at the end, who "*dives into the wreck*" of Friday's silence; but to listen, not to force someone to speak (Coetzee 142).

Barton and Foe fail to grasp that it is the silence of Friday that forms the crux of the story. By putting Crusoe at the centre, their story refuses to come to life: "... *but the same story overhand over, inversion after version, still born every time: the story of the island, as lifeless from his hand as from mine*" (Coetzee 151). Western literature is full of the same authoritarian figure espousing his viewpoint. It has become repetitive, boring, and unconvincing. The white, dominant figure can no longer hold the narration together. The myth of Robinson Crusoe has to be exorcised. The unnamed narrator at the end should be identified with the reader. Coetzee asks the readers to dive into the heart of stories/histories of the Colonial era and decipher the silence of the colonized.

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1. Virginia Woolf's invention of the tragedy of Judith Shakespeare is a powerful account of how a woman is repressed and ultimately driven to the point of taking her own life by the violence of patriarchy.
2. Carolyn Heilburn gives an instance of this by citing the Penguin Modern Masters series edited by Frank Kermode. Both the masters and those chosen to write about them are men. "*Nor is the exclusion of women from either list immediately, self-explanatory.*" "Bringing the spirit back to English studies", *The New Feminist Criticism*, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985) 21-28.
3. Paul Scott in an ironic portrayal of the English sahib writes "*(he) then stumps up to the verandah in full view of the whole vast retinue of his servants, but shouting "Koi-Hai" in response to some deep reflexive notion of the protocol to be observed.*" Paul Scott, "After Marabar: Britain and India, A Post-Forsterian view", *My Appointment with the Muse*, ed. Shelley C. Reece (London : Heinemann, 1986) 111-129.
4. "A literary work can longer be considered original, if it were, it could have no meaning for its reader. It is only as part of the prior discourses that any text derives meaning and significance." Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Post Modernism* (London and New York :Routledge, 1988) 126.
5. Umberto Eco terms the transmigration of characters from one fictional universe to another as transworld identity.
6. By the passing of the Bill of Rights (1689), the English Parliament had negated the principle of the Divine Right of Kings by altering the succession, and it underlined this victory in the 1701 Act of Settlement by excluding James's Catholic son from succession, choosing instead the German Protestant House of Hanover. No longer could the kings openly challenge parliamentary sovereignty, for they themselves were the creations of Parliament.
7. Distinctions made by Jonathon Culler, similar to the Russian Formalists' "fabula" and "sjuzhet" and the French Structuralists' "recit or histories" and "discours."
8. "*We are led to pose the women questions to history in quite elementary forms like, 'Where is she? Is there any such thing as a woman?' At most many women wonder they even exist. They feel they do not exist and wonder if there*

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has ever been a place for them.”

Helene Cixous, “Castration or Decapitation?”, *Authorship : A Reader*, ed. Sean Burke (Edinburgh : Edinburgh UP, 1995) 162-177.

9. “‘I am the unified self-controlled centre of the universe’, man (white, European, and ruling-class) has claimed.’ *The rest of the world, which I define as the other, has meaning only in relation to me, as man/father, possessor of the phallus.*” Ann Rosalind Jones, “Writing the Body”, *The New Feminist Criticism*, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York ; Pantheon Books, 1985) 361-377.
10. Significantly, there is a hint that Friday’s penis might have been castrated, reminding one that the race Friday belongs to has been forcibly made to lose the right to represent themselves.
11. Daniel Defoe changed his family name from the original Foe to Defoe by the addition of the ennobling De, so as to erase the humble social origins of the family.
12. The fear that the ‘natives’ would indulge in a revolting act haunted the Europeans. Yet it is the white man Kurtz, in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899), who indulges in unspeakable rites.

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