

(Hi)story in Search of Author(ity): Feminine Narration in J.M.Coetzee's *Foe*

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Abstract

Considering women as marginalized in the patriarchal frames, postcolonial studies has given impetus to a more meticulous study of the (mis)representation of women in literature. In parallel, Post-colonial writers have tried to give voice to this silenced group. Deprived of a voice in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, the female is given prominence as the narrator of its postmodern rewriting, Coetzee's *Foe*. An exemplary postcolonial work in many respects, *Foe* also focuses the intersection of postcolonialism and feminism in its use of a female point of view. The present paper is an attempt to analyze the significance of this female narrator, Susan Barton, with regard to such postcolonial issues as resistance, identity and language. Central to the discussion is the modality of Coetzee's postmodern rewriting, that is, his employment of "historiographic metafiction" and its relevance to the postcolonial issues addressed.

Key words: J.M. Coetzee; *Foe*; Daniel Defoe; *Robinson Crusoe*; Historiographic metafiction; Colonialism; Feminine narration; History

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INTRODUCTION

According to Aijaz Ahmad, the world is divided between "those who make history and those who are mere objects

of it". He adds that such a classification reinvokes "Hegel's famous description of the master-slave relation to encapsulate the First-Third World opposition" (p. 79). Ahmad further explains that because in such a history the experience of the colonized is excluded, the Post-colonial writers tend to write about the oppression caused by such colonial historiography. Hence, Post-colonial writers tend to rewrite texts claiming to be historically factual in their attempts to disrupt the authority of the masters as makers and propagators of history. "If even minimally successful, the [Post-colonial writers'] readings will incite a degree of rage against the imperialist narrativization of history" (Spivak, *Three Women's*, p. 270) as they are to create a "counter-history" (Ibid. p. 274). Most post-colonial writers like Coetzee embark on this task by rewriting colonial canonical works with their claims on factuality, e.g. *Robinson Crusoe*, from the marginalized or even excluded points of view. As Derek Walcott puts it, "history is written, [...] it is a kind of literature without morality [...] [so] everything depends on whether we write this fiction through the memory of hero or of victim" (p. 370-371).

Except for the brief appearance of Crusoe's mother at the beginning, there are no female characters in Defoe's novel. This exclusion of women from the text implies the blatant suppression of their voice in the novel through the media of language which is a tool in the hands of the male master, Defoe. In the words of Marisa Huerta, *Robinson Crusoe* is "a masculinist new World romance" (p. 81). The present paper attempts at probing the ways through which Coetzee, applying postmodern techniques of writing, manages to counteract the discursive power of Defoe's novel, particularly as it concerns the issue of women. Defoe's novel, then, as an acclaimed pioneer of realism in the novel with its writer's claim to factuality seems to be an ideal text to be rewritten through a female point of view by a post-colonial writer.

Foe, then, is a postmodern revision of a realistic

canonical work. Though criticized by many as apolitical, postmodernism enacts political opposition, at least, through the form of metafiction. According to Catherine Burgass, historiographic metafiction is “a genre which foregrounds the narrative construction of history in direct opposition to those early-eighteenth-century fictions, such as *Robinson Crusoe*, which claimed to be real histories and were sometimes accepted as such” (p. 180). *Foe* exemplifies such an opposition by aiming to maintain the postmodern notion that reality is a textual construct. Historiographic metafiction “refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction”. Patricia Waugh contends that metafictional writers question the basis of reality by “turning inwards to their own medium of expression” (p. 11). Also, casting doubt on reality is related to Bhabha’s (1994) concept of resistance through mimicry which “conceals no presence behind its mask” (p. 88). It follows that pace realistic claims, there reality cannot be objectively presented; what is presented is just the linguistic making of reality through the text. The idea of resistance through mimicry is also closely related to the task of rewriting canonical master texts by post-colonial writers. They take the text and turn it into their own text, written from their points of view in their own words.

Patricia Waugh also regards the form of metafiction as a suitable one for the matter of rewriting as resistance in that metafictional writers “have come to focus on the notion that ‘everyday’ language endorses and sustains such power structures through a continuous process of naturalization whereby forms of oppression are constructed in apparently ‘innocent’ representations” (p. 11). She later adds that metafiction “sets up an opposition [which situates] its resistance within the form of the novel itself” (p. 11).

DISCUSSION

In *Foe*, Coetzee adds two major characters to its precedent novel’s characters: Susan Barton and Foe the novelist. Susan Barton is the narrator of *Foe*; she is a female castaway who is washed up on the island inhabited by Crusoe and Friday. After an uneventful stay on the island, the three are rescued: Crusoe dies on the homeward journey, and Susan and Friday are safely delivered to England, where Susan seeks out the author, Mr. Daniel Foe, in the hope of having her story written. The novel starts with “a quotation with no fixed origin” (Spivak, *Can the Subaltern*, p. 8) and then we realize that we are reading letters. Later we learn that Susan is addressing not the reader, but the writer, a man called Mr. Foe. As the writer’s last name, i.e. Foe, suggests, he is both her intended addressee and her antagonist, as it is revealed through Susan and Foe’s conflicts over the story to be written. On the whole, the overall effect of addressing the “Dear Writer” is to focus the novel’s immediate scope

onto its literary dimensions, which is the major feature of metafiction.

Studying Susan’s case in detail, we see that from the beginning she is obsessed with telling her story. As soon as she meets Crusoe she starts with: “Let me tell you my story, said I, for I am sure you are wondering who I am and how I come to be here” (p. 10). And although Crusoe does not at all seem to be interested she adds, “My name is Susan Barton, and I am a woman alone. My father was a Frenchman who fled to England to escape the persecutions in Flanders. His name was properly Breton, but, as happens, it became corrupted in the mouths of strangers. My mother was an Englishwoman (p. 10)”. This part reminds the reader of the first page of *Robinson Crusoe*. Like Crusoe, Susan is not originally English, at least, not on his father’s part, and her last name is also corrupted. Thus, not unlike Crusoe, she is trying to remake her *identity* through *writing*.

After they are saved, aboard the ship she tells her story to Captain Smith who suggests that she should get her story written. Nevertheless, being raised in a patriarchal society, Susan thinks that she has “no art” (p. 40) to write her story and the Captain ensures her that “the booksellers will hire a *man* to set your story to rights, and put a dash of colour too, here and there” (p. 40) (emphasis added). Disturbed with the idea of adding anything to her true (hi)story, she insists that “I will not have any lies told” (p. 40). Here we may sense a touch of resisting the patriarchal discourse. But she is not that resistant in that she has already acquiesced to the Captain’s suggestion, “‘I should tell you that Captain Smith had proposed that I call Crusoe my husband and declare we had been shipwrecked together, to make my path easier both on board and when we should come ashore in England[. . .]’” (p. 42). That is, she had agreed to pretend to be Crusoe’s wife, a conventional role for a woman. Simultaneous with her starting to temporarily assume the “Socially imposed identity” (Price, p. 12), she also starts to have doubts about her story and as a result her identity. As for the story, she asks herself: “why was it that so little of the island could be called extraordinary? Why were there no strange fruits, no serpents, no lions? Why did the cannibals never come? What will we tell folk in England when they take us to divert them? (p. 43)”; as for her identity, She wonders “what kind of woman was I in truth? (p. 42)”. And later in a letter to Foe she asks him: “Do you think of me, Mr Foe, as Mrs Crusoe or as a bold adventuress?” (p. 45). These roles are the two general categories available for Susan, as a female, to be placed in. One is conventional and the other unconventional, even bold. Which one she prefers and which one is preferred for her, will be discussed later.

Up to this point in the novel, we can sense that, as one of the tenets of metafictional novels in general, there is “a finely balanced tension between awareness of its literary-fictional condition and its desire to create imaginative realities” (Waugh, p. 130). Another strategy of metafiction

which is included here is the depiction of the character's search for an author. Such a strategy confirms her as being a mere story. In fact, Susan herself unconsciously admits this during her encounter with Foe. In search of identity through getting herself written, Susan presents herself to Foe as a woman who is "seeking a new situation." "You have not heard a *story* before like mine. I am new-returned from far-off parts. I have been a castaway on a desert island. And there I was the companion of a singular man," She adds (p. 48). She presents herself as a story worth attending to adding that "I am a figure of fortune, Mr Foe. I am the good fortune we are always hoping for" (p. 48) (emphasis added). The significance of this search for and the consequent introduction of the author to the novel are explained by Patricia Waugh:

Such an admission functions, however, merely to assert more emphatically that 'one' exists, 'one' is the source of this world, and 'one' is an author. However, once 'one' is recognized as itself a construction produced through textual relationships, then worlds, texts and authors are subsumed by language. From this point, the tension breaks down, the balance between the construction of realistic illusion and its deconstruction gives way; the metafictional tension of technique and counter-technique is dissolved, and metafictional elements are superseded by those of surrealism, the grotesque, randomness, cut-ups and fold-ins (p. 130).

As the author is itself a literary construct, we cannot trust his *authority*. Coetzee presents Defoe as Foe in his novel, and disrupts his authority in the presentation of *Robinson Crusoe*. He reminds the reader that "'authors' do not simply 'invent' novels [...] They are themselves 'invented' by readers who are 'authors', working through linguistic, artistic and cultural conventions, and so on" (Waugh, p. 134).

Moreover, Susan is not content with this author/character's insistence to add "lies" to her story. She even refuses to include the Bahia section in it. Of Bahia she briefly says "Bahia, and the life I had lived there, had taught me not to be dainty" (p. 19). We do not exactly know what kind of woman she was in Bahia, surely not the kind she desires to be known by now. Also, when Foe insists on her telling the story of Crusoe, though in *his* desired way, she feels intimidated by the shadow of this patriarchal presence on her own narrative. Sensing the frames the patriarchal author is trying to impose on her existence, she feels to be "a being without substance, a ghost beside the true body of Crusoe" (p. 51) and writes to Foe: "return to me the substance I have lost, Mr Foe: that is my entreaty. For though my story gives the truth, it does not give the substance of the truth"(p. 51). To erase the obsession Foe has with Crusoe's story, she resolves to present it as dull as her own is. The existence of cannibals and the frightening appearance of their footprints were of great significance in *Robinson Crusoe*; similarly, in *Foe* they are those exciting parts of Crusoe's story in which Foe is interested. Susan completely negates such an existence

in the following words: "As for the cannibals, I am not persuaded, despite Crusoe's fears, that there are cannibals in those oceans [...] I saw no cannibals; and if they came after nightfall and fled before the dawn, they left no footprints behind" (p. 54). She uses her power to tell the story to include whatever parts she chooses. This shows her gradual awareness of the power of words. Elsewhere, she tells Friday that Foe knows him by what she told Mr. Foe about him through "using words. That is part of the 'magic of words'" (p. 58) and to completely affirm it, she rhetorically asks Friday: "is writing not a fine thing, Friday?" (p. 58) She goes on to be more and more concerned with the words themselves rather than the story. She even comments on the power of words by hoping for tongueless Friday that one day he may recover his past by making "a bridge of words over which, when one day it is grown sturdy enough, he may cross to the time before Crusoe, the time before he lost his tongue, when he lived immersed in the prattle of words" (p. 60).

During the time that Foe is in a hiding place, Susan in effect lives in Foe's house and assumes his role as the author of the story. It is also during this period of authorship that she starts to think about the nature of writing and even comments on such notions as literature, writing and authority just as a critic does. This double role of author/critic is another disrupting element of metafictional novels. As Stonehill notes, "This notion of criticism *of* the text *within* the text offers a second guise in which literary history appears inside the self-conscious novel" (p. 8) (original emphasis). Stonehill also observes that:

The inclusion of self-directed literary criticism in these novels reminds the reader that he or she is reading a novel, but it does much more besides. By means of such criticism, the self-conscious novel challenges the assumptions upon which it itself is based. This rejection of complacency, this skeptical examination of its own validity dramatizes the question of what it is to be a novel into a central theme of the novel itself. The self-conscious novel characteristically contains in explicit form the esthetic criteria by which it seeks to be judged (p. 9).

If Susan were just a writer in this chapter, this might create at least a slight aura of authenticity around what she relates. To avoid this, she simultaneously questions what she writes in order to evade being interpreted as a reliable and authentic author. As a result, in the third chapter, the roles of the included author and critic come together in the character of Susan to dismantle the novel's claims to authenticity.

Mr. Foe's authority is not inaccessible now that Susan has his pen, his ink; she even claims that "the pen becomes mine while I write with it" (p. 66). She comes to realize that what gives Foe his power is not something inside him but it is the power of the pen, i.e. writing itself. It is not Susan but the pen itself which writes the title of her story: "The Female Castaway. Being a True Account of a Year Spent on a Desert Island. With Many Strange

Circumstances Never Hitherto Related” (p. 67). Graham Allen relates the power of the pen to its being a “traditional symbol of the phallus” (p. 145) and contends that,

In societies in which women are traditionally excluded from ‘serious’ literature, and even from formal education, the woman writer’s anxiety is concerned first and foremost with the culturally dominant images of women which would deny her access to intellectual and aesthetic achievement, which would marginalize her as an ‘angel in the house’ or as a dangerous ‘other’ (witch, madwoman, whore) (p. 145).

By assuming the patriarchal power of the pen, these two dominant images are the very images that Susan tries to avoid, by excluding the stories of her daughter and the Bahia part; respectively, she denies both the role of the angelic mother, and, possibly, a prostitute in Bahia, hence resisting being framed by the dominant constructions of feminine identity.

This awareness of the power of pen, however, has paradoxical effects on her. It also makes her aware of her situation as a woman, and more specifically as a female writer. She realizes that this very power is ultimately Foe’s. This fact is implied when Susan tells the girl, who pretends to be her daughter, that she is “father-born”, which suggests that the girl is one of the patriarchal frames forced upon her by Foe in order to impose on her the role of a mother. Under the pressure of the demands of Foe, she asks herself, “what past historians of the castaway state have done-whether in despair they have not begun to make up lies” (p. 88). Desperate as she is by her awareness, Susan finds out that if she wants to get her story published she should embellish it with invented circumstances or at least include in it those parts of her life she does not *choose* to tell:

I choose not to tell it because to no one, not even to you do I owe proof that I am a substantial being with a substantial history in the world. I choose rather to tell of the island, of myself and Cruso and Friday and what we three did there: for I am a free woman who asserts her freedom by telling her story according to her own desire (p. 131).

Therefore, as Macaskill and Colleran also observe, Susan Barton’s decision to tell her version of the island’s history implies that “Coetzee’s text will resist bondage to its patriarchal master text, will reread the Hegelian master/slave dialectic from a feminine perspective, will suggest correlations between the experiences of racial and sexual subjugation” (p. 440).

Susan later admits: “It is still in my power to guide and amend. *Above all, to withhold.* By such means do I still endeavour to be father to my story” (p. 123) (emphasis added). She chooses to use her power to withhold because her true voice will not be heard. She chooses silence. Realizing that she shares Friday’s marginalized space, she compares her silence with that of Friday and concludes that her silence is chosen and deliberate but Friday’s is imposed. Susan’s silence, however, does not seem to be

a completely deliberate one. It is imposed upon her by the society which silences the voice of the subaltern in general. In Spivak’s discussions in her essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” the crucial point is that the examples of subaltern resistance are always already filtered through dominant systems of political representation. As Spivak states, the ‘subaltern cannot speak’ means that “even when the subaltern makes an effort to the death to speak, she is not able to be heard” (Landry & Maclean, p. 292). This is not to suggest that particular disempowered groups cannot speak, but that their speech are not heard or recognized within dominant political systems of representation. Attridge elaborates,

All canons rest on exclusion; the voice they give to some can be heard only by virtue of the silence they impose on others. But it is not just a silencing by exclusion, it is a silencing by inclusion as well; any voice we can hear is by that very fact purged of its uniqueness and alterity (p. 82) (emphasis added).

Therefore, Susan in effect decides not to relate her story anymore, because she does not want to be misrepresented, or in Attridge’s terms, “to be silenced by inclusion”. On the whole, at the same time that Coetzee represents the story through the voice of a female narrator, he enacts her erasure from the novel to show how women are deprived of their rights and also to question the authenticity of Defoe’s text by suggesting that Susan was the true storyteller and Defoe just has (mis)used her tale. In fact, all the additional circumstances about Cruso that Foe suggests to be added to Susan’s story are present in Defoe’s story of Crusoe; for instance, he “wanted Cruso to have a musket and be besieged by cannibals” (p. 94), to keep a journal or built a boat. Their presence in Defoe’s work implies that it is the unfaithful rewriting of Susan’s story rather than *Foe* being the revision of *Robinson Crusoe*. Thus, the focus is shifted from *Robinson Crusoe* to *Foe*, from a work of a British colonialist novelist to the one by a South African postcolonial, and finally, from a text of imperialistic expansion to the disruption of colonial discourse to present the opposite, postcolonial discourse of resistance and objection. Considering society as “a continuous sign chain”, Spivak suggests that “the possibility of action lies in the dynamics of the disruption of this object [the social], the breaking and relinking of the chain” (*In Other Worlds*, p. 198). Therefore, as Susan gets frustrated by the tyrannical demands of Foe, instead of getting on with telling her story, she starts to inform the reader of the fragility of the nature of discursive constructions – writing, identity, authority of the writer – and, on the whole, in her own words, to “mock the art of writing” (p. 52) as an act of resistance. “Susan’s is the voice of analysis and assessment; hers are the concerns about clichés, unspecificity, and, most of all, authenticity” (Jones, p. 48).

Susan talks of Foe’s “multitude of castaway narratives [as] riddled with lies” (50). She criticizes Defoe’s

exclusion of female characters by reviewing Foe's thoughts:

... you will murmur to yourself: 'Better without the woman'. Yet where would you be without the woman? Would Crusoe have come to you of his own accord? Could you have made up Crusoe and Friday and the island with its fleas and apes and lizards? I think not. Many strengths you have, but invention is not one of them (p. 72).

Thus, at the same time that she reveals Foe's patriarchal thoughts about women, she questions Foe's creativity as a writer. She is implicitly reminding the reader of Defoe's alleged adaptation of Alexander Selkirk's story, a real castaway in the time of Defoe, or as it is suggested by *Foe*, Susan's tale. Pretending to be consistent with Foe's demand of strange circumstances, she makes "a list of all the strange circumstances" and then, teasing Foe, asks "are these enough strange circumstances to make a story of?" (p. 67). Contrary to the convention of depicting the island as an Edenic place, she talks of Crusoe's island as "not a garden of desire" (p. 86) to disrupt the pictures associated with Defoe's island. Finally, exhausted by Foe's compelling impositions, she wonders, "will the day ever arrive when we can make a story without strange circumstances?" (p. 67)

However, not only does Susan criticize Foe's writing in particular, but she also comments on language and writing in a more general stance. Talking sarcastically of writing she uses words such as "conjuring", "made up" and "lies", "a rambling occupation" (p. 135) or "divining" (p. 89). "As to God's writing," she adds, "my opinion is: If he writes, he employs a secret writing, which is not given to us" (p. 143). "The storyteller" she admits mockingly, "must *divine* which episodes of his history hold promise of fullness, and tease from them their hidden meanings, braiding, these together as one braids a rope" (p. 88-9) (emphasis added). By "divining" she does not mean assuming God-like authenticity for the writer but rather choosing from the already given material. Admitting that she "had not guessed it was so easy to be an author" (p. 93), later she suggests: "It is all a matter of words and number of words [...]" (p. 94). Having come to know reality and identity as linguistic constructions, she ends in doubting her identity, her being. She realizes that although she used "to trust in [...] [her] own authorship (p. 133)," she is just a character made by an author: "But now all my life grows to be story and there is nothing of my own left to me [...] now I am full of doubt. Nothing is left to me but doubt. I am doubt itself. Who is speaking me? Am I a phantom too? To what order do I belong? And you: who are you?" (p. 133). She does not limit the doubts just to her own being, but, in the last question, challenges Foe's identity as well and invites the reader to do so too. She asks "these questions because they are the questions any reader of our story will ask" (p. 86) or should ask. She finally manages to lead Foe to confess his doubts too.

As he admits: "In the life of writing books, I have often, believe me, been lost in the maze of doubting" (p. 135). On the whole, according to Jones, through these strategies "Coetzee is showing how novels get made, or not made. As in so many rewritings, the plot that takes over is the trajectory of the creative process" (p. 49).

CONCLUSION

"Mimicry is manifested in the covert positioning of the colonized subject, who, while seeking to reproduce, subverts imperial power" (Ahmad, p. 11). Though a postcolonial metafictional rewriting like *Foe* does not seek to directly show the falsity of what is (mis)presented, here in *Robinson Crusoe*, it questions the very foundation of all representation by focusing on its constructedness. Narrated by Susan, the text suggests that there could have been other points of views, previously excluded from the text and consequently from history. Hence, Coetzee's *Foe* "while speaking from a marginal location, addresses the question of marginality [...] in an attempt to break the silence in which so many are caught" (p. 217); It "becomes a subversive and liberating act for the (formerly) colonized" (McLeod, p. 106).

Coetzee seems to intimate the possibility of a dialogic space in which both the colonizer and the colonized are engaged in a reciprocal act of narrating and listening, e.g. through the interactions of Susan and Foe. Though this possibility seems to be indeed a remote one in world in which colonialist discourse has turned into an even more powerful neocolonialist, or even neo-imperialist, one, by addressing "the right to narrate", to use Bhabha's poignant phrase, novels such as *Foe* can sharpen our awareness of the urgency of the need for counterhegemonic narratives.

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