

# Destabilizing The Dominion Of Language: A Deconstructive Reading Of J.M. Coetzee's Foe

Hanifa Rahman

Research Scholar, Dept of English, Assam

*Abstract: In reading any of J.M.Coetzee's novels, one is struck by the prominence in these works of issues relating to language and the way language affects the human mind. Although each novel has unique characteristics, in all of his texts the author sets out to investigate the role language plays in the constitution of identity (whether of an individual, a nation or a race).*

*Coetzee's novel Foe (1986) has been widely heralded as a postcolonial re-telling of Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe (1719).This paper is an attempt to undertake a deconstructive reading of the novel and to show the novel as a testament to the limitations of language as an expression of truth, and as the anti-thesis of silence specifically emphasizing on the power of non-verbal communication represented through the character of Friday. At the same time the paper also critically examines the prominent postcolonial notion of the 'othering' of the colonized and how the novel brings to light significant issues regarding the politics of representation in relation to voice, agency and identity of the colonized.*

**Keywords:** Language, deconstruction, non-verbal communication, agency, voice, Postcolonialism.

## I. INTRODUCTION

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Coetzee's novel Foe (1986) has been widely heralded as a postcolonial re-telling of Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe (1719).This paper is an attempt to undertake a deconstructive reading of the novel and to show the novel as a testament to the limitations of language as an expression of truth, and as the anti-thesis of silence specifically emphasizing on the power of non-verbal communication represented through the character of Friday. At the same time the paper also attempts to critically examine the prominent postcolonial notion of the 'othering' of the colonized and how the novel brings to light significant issues regarding the politics of representation in relation to voice, agency and identity of the colonized.

## II. DISCUSSION

The novel begins with the female protagonist, Susan Barton's account of her harrowing adventure on an isolated island with Crusoe and the black slave Friday. In relating her story of shipwreck and her life on cruso's island, Susan Barton explores the boundaries of reality and truth contra-fiction. Susan is driven by the strong inclination to recount her life story after she is rescued from Cruso's island. She desperately tries to find a writer who can transform her story into a presentable one that will be accepted by the public. However this enterprise encounters numerous problems when Foe, the writer, has to hide from creditors and Susan cannot locate him for a long time. When she does find him eventually, they differ in opinion about the emphasis the ultimate story should bear. Determining language's limits, Susan disputes the emphasis placed by Foe on the product and on the consumerization of profit-oriented fiction. In her letters she asserts the importance of integrity for a work of art, undermining her patron by asking: "If I cannot come forward, as author, and swear to the truth of my tale, what will be the worth of it ?" [pg.40].

Attempting to resist his influence, Susan fortifies her linguistic struggle against Foe's manipulation of fiction's veracity by proclaiming: "I thought.. you had no regard for the truth. I forgot you are a writer...it is all a matter of words and the number of words, is it not?" [pg.94].

If, this conflict between Susan and Foe is placed metaphorically it exposes the very limitation of language to portray reality adequately. Seen as such then the disappearance of Foe, and Susan's search for him can be read as a search for adequate representation. When Susan ultimately finds him or when she finds language, she struggles with Foe – who subjects her story to all sorts of limitations; an allegory for the rules and regulations of language itself – since she realizes that the instrument of language resists actual meaning or experience. This significantly echoes Jacques Derrida's very notion of the 'infinite play' of language and that "language bears within itself the necessity of its own critique" and thus inevitably undermines its own claim to have a determinate meaning. In many instances in the novel, Susan is herself seen emphasizing the potentially deceptive nature of verbal communication: "the tongue belongs to the world of play, whereas the heart belongs to the world of earnest..." [pg.85].

Foe too seems to challenge the authority of verbal communication. He disputes the supremacy of the spoken tongue over writing: which Derrida termed as the phenomena of 'phono-centrism'. In his conversation with Susan Foe states,

"Writing is not doomed to be the shadow of speech... we are accustomed to believe that believe that our world was created by God speaking the word; but I ask, may it not rather be that he wrote it, wrote a word so long we have yet to come to the end of it? May it not be that God continually writes the world, the world and all that is of a writing without speech. Speech is but a means through which the word may be uttered, it is not the word itself." [pg.142-43].

In doing so, he indicates that writing is not a fallen manifestation of speech but indeed precedes it. Applying such linguistic observations to the novel, it becomes clear that Foe's potency as a text for deconstruction lies in its author's questioning the ability of language to represent reality adequately.

In this context, the character of Friday bears utmost importance. In his untranslatability, since he is tongueless, he may be envisaged as a subaltern. However, applying the linguistic observations, Friday's silence can be strongly contested neither as a sign of submission nor merely a strategy of passive resistance, but rather, a counter strategy through which the other preserves, even asserts, its anterior status and in doing so interrogates the very fixity of dominant power structures and positions. Thus it is conceivable that Friday 'intentionally' evades Susan's persistent efforts to make him speak or write. He even seems to mock her efforts as is evident in the lines when Susan ponders, "Could it be that somewhere within him he was laughing at my efforts to bring him nearer to a state of speech?... Somewhere in the deepest recesses of those black pupils was there a spark of mockery?" [pg.135]

Towards the end of the third chapter Susan finds Friday seated at Foe's writing table. She exclaims, "But the man

seated at the table was not Foe. It was Friday, with Foe's robes on his back and Foe's wig, on his head. In his hand, poised over Foe's papers, he held a quill with a drop of black ink glistening at its tip." [pg.151]. This strong image suggests that Friday assumes authorship over 'his' story. Seen from the post-colonial lens, this powerful image (of a black slave seated in the place of a white author) is suggestive of the negation of the authority of the whites as being capable of representing the colonized and also the fact that it is only Friday who is capable of relating the true version of his story.

Friday is seen communicating but, not through the dominant mode i.e. 'language' but through his powerful non-verbal communicative skills. Friday continually resists Susan's efforts to make him acquainted with language. He seems to present his story through an alternative of verbal communication. Unlike Susan, Friday is highly receptive of the dynamically liberating influence of music-making and dancing. Susan exclaims, "Friday did not understand the words... Friday understood tones." [pg.141] Hence, the key to decoding his identity is hidden in the gestures and movements which depict the story of his suffering: "He utters himself only in music and dancing, which are to speech as cries and shouts are to words..." [pg.142] Friday expresses himself through various forms of dances and rituals which are incomprehensible to Susan. On the island Susan hears him playing – a 'tune of six notes' on a soprano recorder, or flute. Later she sees him floating on a log of wood in the sea scattering flowers, and in London he spins around disguised in Foe's robe and wig.

Thus Friday finds a method of communicating in his own idiosyncratic terms. However, no one is seen paying much heed to them. Susan, although curious to know his story and set him free, does not seem to understand or does not care for what Friday is trying to say. Such sights, rather, unsettles Susan who admits, "I shiver as I watch Friday dancing in the kitchen with his robes whirling about him and the wig flapping on his head." [pg.132]. For her, there are just two ways of expression: speech and writing. And thus Susan is perplexed when Friday is unable to write when she teaches him to do so. She complains to Foe, "Mr. Foe, I must have my freedom. It is becoming more than I can bear! Friday is the tyrant riding on my shoulders... Friday will not learn... if there is a portal to his faculties, it is closed, or I cannot find it." [pg.147]. Thus Susan is seen ignoring Friday's all other efforts of communication.

The African critic Ayobami Kehinde, calls such an example of perceiving the colonized people not as they are, but as the colonizer's want to see them, as savages and cannibals, "a creation of the West" (99). Another critic Ania Loomba writes in her book *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* that, "the vast new worlds encountered by European travelers were interpreted by them through ideological filters, or ways of seeing, provided by their own cultures and societies." In other words, the way of perceiving the colonized people was convenient for the west, it justified the exploitation of the people and their countries. In the novel, Foe utters the same thing to Susan: "For as long his desires are dark to us, we continue to use him as we wish." [pg.148].

This in turn brings to light the power and politics of language where by means of silencing the 'other' the

colonizers gain power over them. The indication of Friday's lack of tongue is an example of treating him like a savage because the 'savages were not supposed to have language or history.' Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her article, *Theory in the Margin* mentions that "barbarians by definition do not speak language." Thus, Friday's silence is also interpreted by Susan and Crusoe as impenetrable. But it is not so. Friday makes his own efforts of communication. His truth is witnessed through non-verbal communication via the medium of the performing arts, in its variety of forms. Throughout the novel, Friday destabilizes the dominion of language – as "expression of reason" – over other forms of consciousness, proclaiming his truth via the media of music and dance.

### III. CONCLUSION

Significantly, the last part i.e. chapter four of the novel too seems to echo the problematics of language and meaning. This last section seems to be surrealistic because of the difficulties to grasp what goes on. Several critics, such as Probyn and Suarez interpret this passage in different ways, with only one thing in common that: Susan loses her narrative power here, and that someone else, an unnamed and ungendered narrator takes over. In this obscure part coherency is ultimately lost and meaning is challenged and destabilized. Beginning, middle and end seem to merge together turning this part into the empty core of the novel.

To conclude, it can be said that Coetzee's novels in general and particularly *Foe* – although explicitly set in contemporary South Africa, when examined from a broader perspective, represent an attempt to formulate more general propositions about human reality which transcend their South

African settings and could be considered as a narrative investigation of the same problematics that have been the focus of much theoretical discussion (structuralist and post-structuralist in particular) during the last decades.

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