



“Who is Writing Me”? Conflicts of Identity and the Narrative Voice in J M Coetzee’s Retelling of *Robinson Crusoe* as *Foe*

By

Dr Huma Javed Subzposh

Professor, Department of English

DDU Gorakhpur University, Gorakhpur

Email: huma.subzposh@outlook.com

In her *Tempests After Shakespeare*, where Chantal Zabus cites *The Tempest* as the interpellative dream text of the seventeenth century, she also refers to Daniel Defoe’s *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* as the “interpellative dream-text” of the Eighteenth century, suggesting that Defoe’s classic castaway tale belongs to a tradition of repeatable master narratives. The notion that the repeatable pre-text is already engaged in a process of self-deconstruction is a variation of the assumption that (re)writers return to canonical European texts in order to challenge a stable, unified literary tradition that serves to legitimise and naturalise European imperialism.

It seems inevitable that the task of refuting the existence of a stable “discourse of colonialism” would eventually lead one to Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, a novel which many regard as the ultimate imperialist text, the seemingly unconquerable champion of the colonial literary army. Since its publication in 1719, *Robinson Crusoe* has captured the imagination of generations of readers and has indeed, as Zabus suggests, become one of the “interpellative dream-texts”, or template texts, which “serve as pre-text to others and underwrite them” (Zabus 1). In his *Mapping Men and Empire: A Geography of Adventure*, Richard Phillips asserts that “among the books of travel and discovery published in the modern period none has made a greater impression on geographical imaginations than *Robinson Crusoe*, the single most famous, representative and influential adventure story of the time” (Phillips 22).

The tale of *Robinson Crusoe* has been modified, over-simplified and otherwise appropriated to serve the agenda of British Imperialism. Even those critics who acknowledge this process of distortion and appropriation continue to propagate the myth of Crusoe and Friday as the paradigms of the coloniser and the colonised, comparable to Prospero and Caliban, establishing the text as the ultimate symbol of imperial expansion. In spite of a lengthy exploration of the ways in which *Robinson Crusoe* has been appropriated as Imperialist myth, Richard Phillips establishes the text as instrumental in enforcing British constructions of race, class, gender, religion and language over the marginal societies:

Robinson Crusoe and other adventure stories mapped many aspects of Britain (“home”) in relation to the island. They mapped a world view that placed Britain at the (imperial) centre and colonies like Crusoe’s island at the margins. They mapped British constructions of race (roughly speaking, white Crusoe in relation to non-white ‘savages’), its class system (Crusoe as master, Friday as slave), its gender (Crusoe as masculine, nature as feminine), religion (Crusoe as Christian, ‘savages’ as non-Christians) and language (Crusoe has spoken and written command of the English language, Friday is relatively mute). (Phillips 17)

The notion that Robinsonades such as *The Coral Island* “spelled out” what Defoe’s pre-text “seemed only to suggest to Victorian Britons” (Phillips 36), does not only suggest the mere amplification and repetition of racist colonial assumptions prevalent in the original text, but rather the modification of *Robinson Crusoe* to adhere to the ideology of British imperialism. Here, all elements of ambiguity and self-doubt within the original text are made explicit, and in the process, *Robinson Crusoe* is divested of all its complexities and ambiguities and reduced to a simple tale of colonial triumph and expansion.

This “colonial” myth proves particularly useful to those scholars intent on opposing or “writing back” to what has been categorised as an oppressive, hegemonic discourse of colonialism. Richard Phillips’s assertion that *Robinson Crusoe* maps British constructions of race, class, gender and religion in relation to marginal localities has got some truth behind it. The figure of Robinson Crusoe is representative of British as well as Christian Enlightenment and his superiority over a wholly inferior and disruptive other, Pagan and uncivilised, is upheld throughout the novel.

Due to the numerous adaptations, abridgements and editions of *Robinson Crusoe* in existence, it is likely that many readers will remember *Robinson Crusoe* only as a man who, after being shipwrecked on a desert island, encounters a tribe of cannibalistic savages, acquires one as his loyal slave whom he names Friday because he found him on a Friday and either kills or converts the rest of the “heathens”. However, no such definite binaries between self and other, coloniser and colonised, and master and slave can be found in Defoe’s original text. In fact, *Robinson Crusoe* is permeated with self-reflection and doubt in which he is not too certain of presenting the image of the ideal sovereign colonial subject in opposition to an inferior Other as Defoe realistically explores the weaknesses and shortcomings of his protagonist.

The relationship between Robinson Crusoe and Friday cannot be viewed in terms of a simple master/slave dichotomy. Considering the fact that Crusoe was himself once a slave to a Moor in Sallee, the distinction between Friday, the slave and Crusoe, the master, becomes even more problematic. The matter is even further complicated by the fact that these two cross the boundaries between self and other in terms of their appearance.

Crusoe also dresses Friday in attire similar to his own, creating a “double”. The copy of *Robinson Crusoe* printed in 1945, sports “fifty-two illustrations by J.D. Watson”, one of which depicts Crusoe dressing Friday. In this illustration it is difficult to distinguish between Friday and Crusoe as both of them are dressed similarly in distinctive European attire.

It is these moments of ambivalence within Defoe’s novel that serve as a catalyst for J.M Coetzee’s *Foe*, Coetzee’s adaptation of Defoe’s text explicitly illustrates the ways in which a postcolonial rewriting can go beyond mere narrow political concern with the existence of unequal power relations in the original work in order to explore a broader range of issues. Coetzee’s rewriting of *Robinson Crusoe* is concerned with illustrating the impossibility of reducing Defoe’s novel to mere Imperialist propaganda.

Foe returns to something of the complexity of the colonial encounter, acknowledging that such ambivalence is already evident in Defoe’s text, but has been overwritten by the various and pervasive Crusoe myths. Coetzee’s *Foe* can be read as a response to the ways in which the novel has been appropriated in the service of colonialism through the formation of myth. Secondly, the novel is also concerned with the very process of rewriting itself, and self-consciously dramatizes the anxieties associated with literary writing and rewriting.

Foe, in addition to being a postcolonial treatise on the power relations between the coloniser and the colonised, is a postmodern take on the authenticity of narration, the relationship between the text, the author and the reader. It is not only a reproduction of the plot and events of *Robinson Crusoe*; as meta-fiction, it is concerned more with the actual writing of Crusoe’s tale than with Crusoe’s island experience. In *Foe*, the actual story of *Robinson Crusoe* is taken as read and an additional year is added to the original Crusoe experience in which we are introduced to Susan Barton, a female castaway on Crusoe’s island. The

story is centred around her experiences on the island—both Crusoe and Friday are seen through her perspective—as well as her attempts to get their story properly written by one Daniel Foe, the author figure who is a take on Daniel Defoe. *Foe* is both a rewriting of, and a metafiction about, *Robinson Crusoe*'s plot, theme, technique and the actual process of writing. It can also be called a prequel, not to the incidents in *Robinson Crusoe*, but to the actual writing down of the novel by Defoe which Coetzee tries to imaginatively reproduce in *Foe*. The main concern of the novel is not with events which have taken place on the island or beyond it, but with the struggles over the narration and the publication of those events. As Ina Grabe succinctly puts it, in paying more attention to the telling of the story than the story itself, the novel clearly participates in postmodernism's favouring of the signifier over the signified (Grabe 147–48).

In *Foe*, we find the elimination of all elements that create the colonial Crusoe myth such as the element of adventure, the triumph of logic and reason and the work ethic that forces Robinson Crusoe to work systematically and diligently even when he is all alone on the island and not answerable to anyone for his actions. Coetzee removes the romantic notions of *Robinson Crusoe* and suggests that those elements that have been glorified and exaggerated in colonial discourse are in fact unnecessary and redundant.

Coetzee locates *Foe* in the discursive field of postcolonialism in peculiarly South African terms. Friday's differentiation within the South African situation is quite specific. As Coetzee himself has noted, in *Robinson Crusoe* "Friday is a handsome Carib youth with near-European features. In *Foe* he is an African" ("Two Interviews" 463). "The man squatted down beside me," says Susan, "He was black: a Negro with a head of fuzzy wool, naked save for a pair of rough drawers. I lifted myself and studied the flat face, the small dull eyes, the broad nose, the thick lips, the skin not black but dark grey, dry as if coated with dust" (Coetzee 5–6). Friday's placement within the postcolonial discourse as the colonised is most clearly rendered, however, in his mutilation and lack of speech. David Atwell refers to Friday's enforced silence as "Coetzee's unique, and uniquely South African, contribution to the tradition of Robinsonades spawned by Defoe" (108). He further writes:

Coetzee's protagonists represent the ambiguous condition of postcoloniality that South Africa inhabits. Coetzee allows the representation of Friday to be shaped by the obvious political and epistemological limitations of colonial discourse, a position from which even the critical, self-consciously marginal, and feminist colonial discourse represented by Susan cannot entirely escape. (Atwell 108)

Whilst Defoe's Crusoe is characterised by a strong urge for meaningful activity and a desire to improve his living conditions, fervently creating shelters, furniture, earthen-ware, umbrellas, canoes and much more with the many tools he retrieved from his ship's wreckage in an attempt to maintain the semblance of civilisation, Coetzee's Crusoe possesses only a knife and creates only the bare necessities, such as a bed and shelter. Crusoe's terraces, which he toils over on a daily basis, are built in the hope that future castaways will cultivate them, for unlike Crusoe he is not fortunate enough to accidentally sow a few cobs of corn. Crusoe says: "The planting is reserved for those who come after us and have the foresight to bring seed. I only clear the ground for them. Clearing ground and piling stones is little enough, but it is better than sitting in idleness" (Coetzee 33). Susan Barton, the female castaway washed up on Crusoe's island in the last year of his exile, is perplexed by this fruitless labour:

When I passed the terraces and saw this man, no longer young, labouring in the heat of the day to lift a great stone out of the earth or patiently chopping at the grass, while he waited year after year for some saviour castaway to arrive in a boat with a sack of corn at his feet, I found it a foolish kind of agriculture.. (Coetzee 34)

Similarly, Crusoe's reliance on Calvinistic logic and reason, which results in meticulous making of lists and tables of what is good and bad in his circumstances, the keeping of a remarkably accurate calendar and making regular entries in his journal, is also ignored by Coetzee. Crusoe refuses to keep any

written account of his island solitude, stubbornly insisting that “nothing is forgotten” and that nothing he has “forgotten is worth the remembering” (Coetzee 17). Once again, Susan Barton is baffled by this omission or refusal to make a record:

Cruso kept no journal, perhaps because he lacked paper and ink, but more likely, I now believe, because he lacked the inclination to keep one, or, if he ever possessed the inclination, had lost it. I searched the poles that supported the roof, and the legs of the bed, but found no carvings, not even notches to indicate that he counted the years of his banishment or the cycles of the moon. (Coetzee 17)

Foe reintroduces Robinson Crusoe as Cruso; a variation that points to the distinction between Defoe’s Calvinistic, enlightened man and Coetzee’s postmodern narrative subject. Coetzee distinguishes his castaway from Defoe’s not only by calling him Cruso rather than Crusoe but also by deviating from the well-established story line and characterisation in Defoe’s classic. The character of Cruso in *Foe* is nothing like the hardworking, determined hero of Defoe. He is passively unconcerned with the passage of time or maintaining a record of the time spent on the island. On the contrary, it is Susan who urges Cruso to think of the future, to extend himself beyond his sterile dominion over his kingdom, she who urges him to keep some record of his stay on the island. He has also not been able to salvage anything of value from the ship, no tools or seeds or roots to help him in rebuilding a life for himself, no pens and paper with which to maintain a journal of his days on the island. Against Cruso’s ardent desire to have a table and a chair “for without these I was not able to enjoy the few comforts I had in the world; I could not write or eat, or do several things, with so much pleasure without a table: so I went to work”. (Defoe 102), Susan affirms that “in the hut Cruso had a narrow bed which was all his furniture” (Coetzee 9). Later on in the novel she tells Friday:

Does it not speak volumes that the first and only piece of furniture your master fashioned was a bed? How different would it not have been had he built a table and stool, and extended his ingenuity to the manufacture of ink and writing tablets, and then sat down to keep an authentic journal of his exile day by day, which we might have brought back to England with us, and sold to a bookseller, and so saved ourselves this embroilment with Mr Foe. (Coetzee 82)

We must remember that all these things Defoe’s hero has done in his desire to maintain some semblance of civilisation on the island. Coetzee’s version seems to claim authenticity for his own version of the island experience as true and real and the reality of *Robinson Crusoe* as an idealised fabrication of the truth, a supposedly common technique of eighteenth century novelist. The first concern of Crusoe after saving his life and all that he can salvage from the ship, is to build himself a boat in which he ultimately succeeds, Coetzee’s Cruso dismisses the idea as useless:

“May I ask sir” said I after a while, “why in all these years have you not built a boat and made your escape from the island?”

“And where should I escape to?” he replied smiling to himself as though no answer were possible”

“Why you might sail to the coast of Brazil or meet a ship and be saved”

“Brazil is hundreds of miles distant, and full of cannibals,” said he. “As for sailing ships, we shall see sailing ships as well and better by staying at home.” (Coetzee 13)

Instead of being the optimistic pioneer of Defoe’s story who spends more than twenty eight years on the island and still has preserved his diehard spirit to the extent that he takes active part in the battle to rescue the Spanish ship which in turn rescues him from the island, and has the will to rebuild his own and Friday’s life anew after reaching England, Coetzee’s Cruso is a postmodern existentialist who is unable to make a meaningful life for himself on the island and who, on the other hand, dies on the voyage back to England as he finds himself unable to exist in a world beyond the island. Susan even questions the authenticity of the story told by Cruso about his island experience, and so forbears telling Cruso’s story from his perspective:

I would gladly now recount to you the history of this singular Cruso, as I heard it from his own lips. But the stories he told me were so various, and so hard to reconcile one with another, so in the end I did not know what was truth, what lies, and what was mere rambling. (Coetzee 11-12)

So instead, Susan tells her own story and claims authenticity for her account of Cruso as the pathetic figure who has to be rescued against his wishes: *Foe* is narrated from the perspective of Susan Barton, a female castaway who is believed to be based on the protagonist of *Roxana* (Peter Childs 101), another novel written in the form of a fictitious narrative by Defoe. Throughout the novel she is called Roxana but more than halfway into the novel Defoe reveals that she has a lost daughter named Susan and that her daughter is named after her—“She was my own name” (*Roxana* 252). Coetzee takes the island conditions of *Robinson Crusoe* and overlays them with the narrative of Defoe's *Roxana*, whose picaresque feminine hero's real name is Susan and the echoes of whose life can be felt in the cursory life history of Susan Barton recorded in the novel before she comes to Cruso's island and thus adding another layer of intertextuality to the rewritten text.

In Coetzee's *Foe* Susan Barton is also a woman who has lost her daughter to some slave traders. Returning from Bahia, where she has been searching for a lost daughter, Susan Barton is cast off the ship after a mutiny by the sailors, along with the dead body of the Captain who had been her lover on the ship and who is killed during the mutiny. She swims ashore and finds herself on the island inhabited by Cruso and Friday. She lives there for almost a year before being rescued by a passing merchantman. Cruso dies on board the ship going back to England and after their return to England, Susan finds herself in a marginal position. Her only interest in life is now the successful retelling of the story of the island and she has to acknowledge that she can never succeed in telling Cruso's story unless she delves into Friday's past. The realisation that the lost history of Friday is a gaping hole in her narrative leads her to some critical reflection on his life history and she tries to reconstruct his identity by presenting before Friday various pictures and images connected with her island experience and the stories told by Cruso and trying to gauge his reactions.

Despite Susan's new devotion to uncovering Friday's true story, her efforts are necessarily hampered by Friday's inability to speak, the fact that his tongue has been quite literally cut out. Failing to give voice to Friday's mysterious internal world leads to her introspective musings regarding her own involvement in his misrepresentation:

Friday has no command of words and therefore no defence against being re-shaped day by day in conformity with the desires of others... No matter what he is to himself...what he is to the world is what I make of him. (Coetzee 121-122)

Once she arrives in England, Susan writes a memoir of her time on the island which she titles “The Female Castaway”, and seeks out the author, Foe, to have her story retold and get it published. Coetzee's novel comprises four parts; beginning with Susan's memoir, it continues in a series of letters addressed to Foe, letters that cannot be posted and do not reach him because he is in hiding to avoid his creditors and his whereabouts are not known, it proceeds to an account of Susan's relationship with Foe and her struggle to retain control over her story and its meaning and it ends with a sequence spoken by an unnamed narrator (possibly standing for Coetzee himself) who revises the history as we know it and dissolves the narration in an act of authorial renunciation. Throughout the novel, Friday's silent and enigmatic presence gains in significance until it overwhelms the entire narrative at the end.

Once she reaches England, Susan becomes marginal to her own story. “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: a being without substance, a ghost beside the true body of Cruso. Is that the fate of all story tellers?” (Coetzee 51).

The second part of the novel is written in the form of Susan's letters addressed to Foe, the novelist to whom she entrusts her own, and her version of Cruso's, story, though later she has misgivings about her role in the narration, “Who but Cruso, who is no more could truly tell you Cruso's story? I should have said less about him, more about myself...for though my story gives the truth, it does not give the substance of the truth” (Coetzee 51).

Susan increasingly becomes desirous of exercising the same authoritative self-possession as that of Foe, the proposed author of Cruso's story. "I was intended not to be the mother of my story, but to beget it", she says to Foe, reversing their genders. "It is not I who am the intended but you" (Coetzee 126). But the acknowledgment of the joint parentage of her narrative brings her to realise the dilemma of being the author or the source, or being the author as well as the source. Dedicating her life to the telling of her story but being compelled to deliver that story through another, Susan is beset with doubts as to the manipulation of the truth through the forces outside the narrative:

"In the beginning I thought I would tell you the story of the island and, being done with that, return to my former life. But now all my life grows to be story and there is nothing of my own left to me. I thought I was myself and this girl a creature from another order speaking words you made up for her. But now I am full of doubt. Nothing is left to me but doubt itself. Who is speaking me?" (Coetzee 131)

The transference effect of narrating, of speaking for oneself as another, or speaking for another as oneself, means that the responsibility of narration can never be one's own alone; narration can never be self-authorship or pure paternal begetting. It is for this reason that Susan Barton's narrative, or the narration of how her narrative came to be silenced in the writing of Foe—the author who represents Defoe, and as such his writing with all its shortcomings and enforced silences, must stand for the original *Robinson Crusoe*—joins with another, even more profound loss of voice—that of the tongueless Friday. In another significant departure from the Defoe's text, Friday is depicted as having had his tongue ripped out by the slavers who try to capture him and as such has nothing to say for himself. Foe is confident that he and Susan can decipher the non-speech of Friday, can penetrate to his heart. In this, of course, Coetzee is meditating on the unending possibilities, and the responsibility of those who undertake to speak on behalf of others, those who have had no voice, or those who have been silenced, in the classical narratives of the established canon. To rewrite the narratives of the past is to undo and rectify the remissions of that "eternal and inhuman wakefulness" of self-present consciousness, to allow those blinks of the eye, "the cracks and chinks through which another voice, other voices speak in our lives" (Coetzee 30). But such rewriting must also take care that it speak in the voice of the other only in that self's terms whose silences can be as varied as the articulations and speeches of other selves. Susan warns Foe that:

You err most tellingly in failing to distinguish between my silences and the silences of a being such as Friday. Friday has no command of words and therefore no defence against being reshaped day by day in conformity with the desire of others. I say he is a cannibal and he becomes a cannibal; I say he is a laundryman and he becomes a laundryman. (Coetzee 121)

Coetzee presents this commitment to the other in the final chapters of *Foe*. In these chapters, a first-person narrator, an "I" who may be Foe or Defoe, or Susan or Coetzee himself, or some compound of them all, begins to rewrite the rewritten narrative which Susan Barton has already provided. The dreamlike quest of this "I" is for the speech of Friday, a speech below, or before the speech that always drowns his speech. It takes the "I" deep in dream or vision, first to Foe's room, where he lies with Susan, Friday asleep at their feet, and then into the waters off Cruso's island, where Susan Barton and her Captain lie drowned, along with Friday. Somehow an unidentifiable voice comes out of Friday's mouth, which passes into some form of speech through his interlocutor :

His mouth opens. From inside him comes a slow stream, without breath, without interruption. It flows up through his body and out upon me; it passes through the cabin, through the wreck; washing the cliffs and shores of the island, it runs northward and southward to the ends of the earth. (*Foe* 154)

Friday remains a silence not only in this re-writing of Defoe's narrative, but also in Daniel Defoe's original text. Coetzee suggests that there is a gap and a silence surrounding Friday in *Robinson Crusoe* which he has tried to express symbolically by the cutting off of his tongue in *Foe*. To make the voice of Friday articulate would be to betray it sentimentally into self-present intelligibility, for the comfort of the guilty self; but not to articulate its silences would be an even worse betrayal. The voice that it ends up speaking belongs to no one, consists in or occupies the space of its giving, the sacrifice of itself. It is not possible to judge *Foe*'s combination of the gift of voice to the other with the refusal to credit that other with as anything but a negativity, as a certain curbing of the gift, as a donation which reverts to the credit of the self seemingly dispossessed. Coetzee's novel itself provides the image of just such a recursive structure, in Susan's document of manumission hung like a yoke around Friday's neck, the gift of freedom given in a language the exclusion from which marks the very impossibility of freedom for Friday, making him "the helpless captive of my desire to have our story told" (*Foe* 150), such acknowledgements of the difficulty of giving freedom unconditionally on Susan's and Coetzee's part guarantee no immunity for the novel itself against the dangers of reversion to the mentality of the slave-owner and the colonist.

As the novel progresses, Susan Barton becomes increasingly involved in her role as representative of the silenced other, at times displaying remarkable insight into Friday's plight and trying to understand his innermost feelings. Susan also acknowledges the role she plays in Friday's oppression, admitting to using language to gain power over him:

I tell myself I talk to Friday to educate him out of darkness and silence. But is that the truth? There are times when benevolence deserts me and I use words only as the shortest way to subject him to my will.... I understand, that is to say, why a man will choose to be a slave owner. (Coetzee 60)

Coetzee shows a close connection growing between Susan Barton and Friday. Susan's struggle to uncover Friday's true story, and their consequent entanglement, allows Coetzee to engage with an unsettling moment within Defoe's original text: the notion that there is "a silence surrounding Friday" (Coetzee 142). Coetzee suggests that "in every story there is a silence, some sight concealed, some word unspoken" and "till we have spoken the unspoken we have not come to the heart of the story." (Coetzee 141) *Foe* attempts to give voice to the unspoken in its pre-text, and does so by staging an intimate relationship between self and other, an entanglement that is already at the heart of the story of *Robinson Crusoe*.

Temporarily abandoned by *Foe* when, like his historical original, he flees London to escape his creditors, Susan tries to write her own story, to take possession of her own life, declaring "Your pen, your ink, I know, but somehow the pen becomes mine while I write with it" (Coetzee 66) and later "I am a free woman who asserts her freedom by telling her story according to her own desire" (Coetzee 131). In so doing, Susan is attempting to rewrite the story of male self-origination of which *Robinson Crusoe* is the archetype, even sitting at *Foe*'s desk and supplanting him as the historian in control of the narrative:

Endeavouring, as she puts it, "to be a father to my story", Susan must also resist the deceitful fatherhood of *Foe*, who sends to her a young girl claiming to be Susan's own long lost daughter in search of whom she had originally started from England and travelled to Bahia, a small island close to Brazil. It was from there that she boarded the ship that cast her off on *Cruso*'s island after a mutiny by the sailors in which the captain is killed and Susan is molested, though the details of these incidents are not dwelt upon, "As for Bahia, it is by choice that I say so little of it. The story I desire to be known by is the story of the island" (Coetzee 120-21). Susan rejects the story of her supposed daughter who also claims to be named Susan Barton. She accuses *Foe* of having taken advantage of the information she has handed out to him and trying to tamper the true story in order to make it more interesting and coherent:

Taken in all, it is a narrative with a beginning and an end....lacking only a substantial and varied middle, in the place where *Cruso* spent too much time tilling the terraces and I too much time tramping the shores. Once you proposed to supply a middle by inventing

cannibals and pirates. These I would not accept because they were not the truth. Now you propose to reduce the island to an episode in the history of a woman in search of a lost daughter. This too I reject. (Coetzee 121)

Susan's struggle to write the story of the island also serves to dramatize the problems associated with the rewritten postcolonial text. As a writer attempting to represent or rewrite the silenced other, Susan can also be closely linked to the postcolonial author. The obstacles she encounters in her attempts to write the story of Friday thus mirror, in an exaggerated form, those encountered by the postcolonial author during the process of rewriting. Susan's narrative is not only hampered by her inability to uncover Friday's true story and hence her inability to represent him accurately, but also by certain anxieties of influence she is vulnerable to as a female narrator. These obstacles reflect the concerns of the postcolonial text dependent on its colonial pre-text.

As a female coming to writing, Susan is confronted with a question posed in Gilbert and Gubar's "Infection in the Sentence": "What does it mean to be a woman writer in a culture whose fundamental definitions of literary authority are... both overtly and covertly patriarchal?" (Gilbert and Gubar 45-46). During the time in which Foe is forced into hiding due to unpaid debts, Susan not only takes up residence in his house, but also usurps the position of storyteller. As a woman coming to writing, an art form that has always, as Hélène Cixous suggests in her *The Laugh of the Medusa*, "been one with the phallogocentric tradition", Susan is necessarily hampered by certain anxieties of influence. She seems mindful of the assumption that she is intruding on traditionally male territory, and that the tools she is using are not supposed to be originally hers:

The task of assuming the supposedly masculine role of storyteller is seen not only as a burden, but also as a task that is overseen by the other male writers or critics. The "taskmaster" then is the male literary precursor, a looming and sinister patriarchal presence that restricts the female writer. The notion that an unseen, masculine "taskmaster" is somehow controlling Susan's narrative is prevalent throughout the text. Susan is acutely conscious of the fact that she is not in command of her own narrative:

Susan's anxieties of influence and her fear of somehow being controlled by external forces can be said to mirror the concerns of the rewritten postcolonial text, which also frequently displays an acute awareness of the fact that it is a dependent text, inextricably linked to and confined by the matrix text. This self-conscious element seems to emerge as a conscious effort of not succumbing to the ideology it seeks to contradict. Thus, the rewritten text becomes pre-occupied with its struggle to maintain its original aim of subverting the Imperial discourse while trying to negotiate its dependence on the colonial text.

In the light of this connection, the masculine taskmaster can also be seen as the western literary tradition as a force that restricts the postcolonial narrative. Susan's question, "And you: who are you?" (Coetzee 133), then, acquires several layers of meaning. This question is not only directed at Foe the character, but also at the people who are "speaking" her: Foe the author and Coetzee himself. Susan Barton's questioning of her position as an autonomous narrator, now reflects on the author himself. *Foe*, then, seems to be exploring the anxieties of influence experienced by the postcolonial author, who, like Susan, usurps the position of storyteller and the art of writing itself.

Foe is a complex novel with multiple layers of reference not only to *Robinson Crusoe* but to the contemporary postmodern theories. It is an attempt to understand the original work from the perspective of 20th century critical consciousness and as such, is not merely an oppositional counter discourse or writing back but a kind of palimpsest, a term introduced by Gerard Genette in his *Palimpsestes* (1982), a manuscript page or papyrus which has been washed clean or erased and can be used for a new text, still retaining impressions of the original.

Works Cited

- Atwell, David. *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.
- Childs, Peter. Ed. *Postcolonial Theory and English Literature*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999.
- Cixous, Helene. "The Laugh of the Medusa". *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*. Eds. Elaine Marks and Isabella de Courtivron. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980.
- Coetzee, J.M.. *Foe*. London: Penguin, 1986.
- Defoe, Daniel. *Robinson Crusoe*. 1719. London: Penguin, 2003.
- Genette, Gerard. *Palimpseste: Literature in the Second Degree*. Trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997.
- Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. *The Mad Woman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Eighteenth Century Literary Imagination*. 1979. New Haven and London: Yale Nota Bene (Yale University Press), 2000.
- Phillips, Richard. *Mapping Men and Empire: A Geography of Adventure*. London: Routledge, 1997.
- Zabus, Chantal. *Tempests After Shakespeare*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002