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**Representation, Language, and Power in J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986)**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master degree in  
English Language, Literature, and Civilization

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this humble work to Naima my dear wife.

I also dedicate it to my daughter Maya and the coming baby.

As I dedicate it to my dear parents.

I also dedicate this thesis to Dr. N. Senhadji, the founder of the Department of English at the University of Béjaia, to Dr. S. Ketfi-Maouche, in charge of postgraduate studies, and to Mrs. F. Kaci, the head of the English Department at the aforementioned university.

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In memory of my deceased paternal grandfather "Jeddi Ahcene," may Allah bestow His benevolence upon him.

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## Abstract

The present thesis is a study of the issues of representation, language, and power in the novel *Foe* by the South African writer John Maxwell Coetzee and which is published in 1986. It is divided into two chapters:

The first chapter is a theoretical one in which we defined, analyzed, and discussed the issues related to our study within the framework of the postcolonial discourse. We also discussed the relation between postcolonialism and postmodernism, as well as that between postcolonialism and feminism.

The second chapter is a practical one in which we tackled the study of the issues of representation, language, and power in the novel *Foe*. In the first section we compared *Foe* to Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), the novel it rewrites, in terms of the settings and characters, as well as made references to other works by Defoe. In the second section we discussed the issue of representation in the novel in the framework of the conflict opposing Susan Barton, the central character, with Foe, the author she has hired, about the writing of her story. The third section dealt with the different aspects and views of language in the novel. The fourth section dealt with the relation between language and power in the novel. The fifth and final section dealt with silence and the location of meaning in the novel. And the conclusion of the thesis brought together our findings.

Key words: representation, language, power, Coetzee, *Foe*, *Robinson Crusoe*, postcolonialism, postmodernism, poststructuralism

# **Introduction**

Among the prominent figures of African literatures, the South African author John Maxwell Coetzee stands out of the others as he is white and writing under the grips of the Apartheid system of his country and also for his unique style and manipulation of language.

J.M. Coetzee was born in Cape Town, South Africa, in 1940. He published his first novel, *Dusklands*, in 1974. In 1984, Coetzee won the Booker Prize for *The Life & Times of Michael K* (1983). He also published three autobiographical works, *Boyhood* (1997), *Youth* (2000) and *Summertime* (2009). Coetzee won his second Booker Prize in 1999 for *Disgrace*. In 2003, he won the Nobel Prize for Literature. His more recent works include the 2013 novel *The Childhood of Jesus*.

One of his novels, entitled *Foe*, has attracted me, as it contains references to a classic of English literature, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), so I decided to work on it. Following its first publication in 1986 there emerged many scholarly reviews and studies:

Denis Donoghue in his review of the novel in the New York Times entitled "Her Man Friday"<sup>1</sup> notes that J.M. Coetzee in *Foe* has written a superb novel by reconsidering the events of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and presenting them from a new point of view: that of Susan Barton. He mainly concentrated on the fact that *Foe* is a rewriting of *Robinson Crusoe* and ignored other aspects of the novel.

Michael Wade in his review of Coetzee's *Foe*<sup>2</sup> states that "*Foe* is a hard nut. It is, among other things, a retelling of *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson*

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<sup>1</sup> Denis Donoghue. "Her Man Friday". New York Times 22 Feb, 1987. Accessed 15 Mar., 2017.  
<<http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/11/02/home/coetzee-foe.html>>

<sup>2</sup> Michael Wade. "*Foe* by J.M. Coetzee". Southern African Review of Books Vol. 2 (Winter 1987/1988). Accessed 15 Oct., 2005.  
<<http://www.uni-ulm.de/~rturrell/anthol1html/wade1.html>>

*Crusoe, Mariner by Daniel Defoe* (1719), though major variations.” In fact the reviewer concentrated on the retelling and overlooked other characteristics of the novel.

Dr. Ayo Kehinde in his article “Intertextuality and the Contemporary African Novel” sees the novel as a postmodern/postcolonial version of Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* which fills the silence of the precursor text and uncovers the hidden colonialism and oppression in the text.<sup>3</sup>

In “The Noise of Freedom: J.M. Coetzee’s *Foe*” Robert M. Post views the novel as another updating and retelling of the “myth” of Robinson Crusoe and naturally shows its author’s endorsement of the writing, beliefs, and philosophy of Daniel Defoe.<sup>4</sup>

But the aforementioned scholars and critics ignored the debate and conflict in the novel between the central character, Susan Barton and Daniel Foe, the author she has hired to write the story of her stay on the island of Cruso. It seems to us that it addresses the issues of representation, language and power. So how did J.M. Coetzee dealt with these issues in the novel?

To answer this question, we have decided to divide the dissertation into two chapters. The first chapter will be a theoretical one defining, analyzing, and discussing the different issues related to our theme in the postcolonial context. In the second chapter we will try to study the aforementioned issues in Coetzee’s novel applying postcolonial theory along the postmodern and poststructuralist theories. A conclusion will bring together our findings.

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<sup>3</sup> Ayo Kehinde. “Intertextuality and the Contemporary African Novel”. Nordic Journal of African Studies 12.3 (2003), p. 382

<sup>4</sup> Robert M. Post. “The Noise of Freedom: J.M. Coetzee’s *Foe*”. Critique 30.3 (1989), p. 143



**Chapter I :**  
**The Issues of Representation,**  
**Language, and Power in**  
**Postcolonial Studies**

## **I.1. Representation, language, and meaning:**

The concept of representation has come to occupy a new and important place in the study of culture. Representation connects meaning and language to culture. But what exactly do people mean by it? What does representation have to do with culture and meaning? One common-sense usage of the term is as follows: “Representation means using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people.” In fact, representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is exchanged between members of a culture. It does involve the use of language, of signs and images which stand for or represent things.<sup>1</sup>

To put it briefly, representation is the production of meaning through language. But how does the concept of representation connect meaning and language to culture? In order to explore this connection further, we will look at a number of different theories about how language is used to represent the world. Here we will draw a distinction between three different theories: the reflective, the intentional, and the constructionist approaches to representation.<sup>2</sup>

In the “reflective approach”, meaning is thought to lie in the object, person, idea or event in the real world, and language functions like a mirror, to *reflect* the true meaning as it already exists in the world. In the fourth century BC, the Greeks used the notion of “mimesis” to explain how language, even drawing and painting, mirrored or imitated Nature; they thought of Homer’s great poem, *The Iliad*, as ‘imitating’ a heroic series of events. So the theory which says that language works by simply reflecting or imitating the truth that is already there and fixed in the world, is sometimes called “mimetic.”<sup>3</sup> Of

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<sup>1</sup> Stuart Hall. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Cultural Practices*. London: Sage Publications, p. 15. [Google Books](http://www.books.google.com). Accessed. Feb. 22, 2017. <www.books.google.com>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24

course there is a certain obvious truth to mimetic theories of representation and. Remember also that there are many words, sounds and images which we fully well understand but which are entirely fictional or fantasy and refer to worlds which are wholly imaginary.

The second approach to meaning in representation argues the opposite case. It holds that it is the speaker, the author, who imposes his or her unique meaning on the world through language. Words mean what the author intends they should mean. This is the “intentional approach”. Again, there is some point to this argument since we all, as individuals, do use language to convey or communicate things which are special or unique to us, to our way of seeing the world.<sup>4</sup> However, as a general theory of representation through language, the intentional approach is also flawed. We cannot be the sole or unique source of meanings in language, since that would mean that we could express ourselves in entirely private languages. But the essence of language is communication and that, in turn, depends on shared linguistic conventions and shared codes. Language can never be wholly a private game. Our private intended meanings, however personal to us, have to enter into the rules, codes and convention of language to be shared and understood. Language is a social system through and through. This means that our private thoughts have to negotiate with all the other meanings for words or images which have been stored in language which our use of the language system will inevitably initiate into action.

The third approach recognizes this public, social character of language. It acknowledges that neither things in themselves nor the individual users of language can fix meaning in language. Things don't mean: we *construct* meaning, using representational systems – concepts and signs. Hence it is called the “constructionist approach” to meaning

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<sup>4</sup> Stuart Hall. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Cultural Practices*. London: Sage Publications, p. 25. [Google Books](https://www.google.com/books). Accessed. Feb. 22, 2017. <[www.books.google.com](http://www.books.google.com)>.

in language. According to this approach, we must not confuse the material world, where things and people exist, and the symbolic practices and processes through which representation, meaning and language operate. Constructivists do not deny the existence of the material world. However, it is not the material world which conveys meaning: it is the language system or whatever system we are using to represent our concepts.<sup>5</sup> It is social actors who use the conceptual systems of their culture and the conceptual systems of their culture and the linguistic and other representational systems to construct meaning, to make the world meaningful and to communicate about that world meaningfully to others.

## **I.2. Postcolonialism and postcolonial studies**

European imperialism took various forms in different times and places and proceeded both through conscious planning and provisional occurrences. As a result of this complex development something occurred for which the plan of imperial expansion had not bargained: the immensely prestigious and powerful imperial culture found itself appropriated in projects of counter-colonial resistance which drew upon the many different indigenous local and hybrid processes of self-determination to defy, erode and sometimes supplant the prodigious power of imperial cultural knowledge. Post-colonial literatures are a result of this interaction between imperial culture and the complex of indigenous cultural practices. As a consequence, ‘post-colonial theory’ has existed for a long time before that particular name was used to describe it. Once colonized peoples had cause to reflect on and express the tension which ensued from this problematic and contested, but eventually vibrant and powerful mixture of imperial language and local experience, post-

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<sup>5</sup> Stuart Hall. Representation: Cultural Representations and Cultural Practices. London: Sage Publications, p. 25. Google Books. Accessed. Feb. 22, 2017. <[www.books.google.com](http://www.books.google.com)>.

colonial ‘theory’ came into being.<sup>6</sup>

The term ‘post-colonial’ is resonant with all the ambiguity and complexity of the many different cultural experiences it implicates, and addresses all aspects of the colonial process from the beginning of colonial contact. Post-colonial critics and theorists should consider the full implications of restricting the meaning of the term to ‘after-colonialism’ or after-Independence. All post-colonial societies are still subject in one way or another to overt or subtle forms of neo-colonial domination, and independence has not solved this problem. The development of new élites within independent societies, often supported by neo-colonial institutions; the development of internal divisions based on racial, linguistic or religious discriminations; the continuing unequal treatment of indigenous peoples in settler/invader societies—all these testify to the fact that post-colonialism is a continuing process of resistance and reconstruction. This does not imply that post-colonial practices are seamless and homogeneous but indicates the impossibility of dealing with any part of the colonial process without considering its antecedents and consequences.<sup>7</sup>

Post-colonial theory involves discussion about experience of various kinds: migration, slavery, suppression, resistance, representation, difference, race, gender, place, and responses to the influential master discourses of imperial Europe such as history, philosophy and linguistics, and the fundamental experiences of speaking and writing by which all these come into being.<sup>8</sup>

In 1978, Edward Said published Orientalism, a work that has become the reference work for postcolonial studies. In it, he argues that Orientalism, which is the academic study

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<sup>6</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds. The Post-colonial Studies Reader. 1995. London: Routledge, 2003, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

of, and discourse, political and literary, about the Arabs, Islam, and the Middle East that primarily originated in England, France, and then the United States actually created the Orient to serve in Western imaginary as that colonized other. That Orient, he argues, does not exist in reality, for, “as a cultural apparatus Orientalism is all aggression, activity, judgment, will-to-truth, and knowledge.”<sup>9</sup>

In fact, Said is even sharper in his critique when he says, "My whole point about this system is not that it is a misrepresentation of some Oriental essence — in which I do not for a moment believe — but that it operates as representations usually do, for a purpose, according to a tendency, in a specific historical, intellectual, and even economic setting.”<sup>10</sup>

### **I.3. Language, discourse and postcolonial literature**

Literature is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “the body of writings produced in a particular country or period,”<sup>11</sup> while language is defined as “words and methods of combining them for the expression of thought.”<sup>12</sup>

The close connection between the two was formerly thought to be of little consequence, but Monroe Beardsley categorically states that it is important: “Since a literary work is a discourse, its parts are segments of language.”<sup>13</sup> This statement is true because literature cannot be reduced to a mere categorizing of language. It is also true that literature would not be possible dissociated from the means of communication provided by language. The relationship between literature and language, according to Abiola Irele, is “somewhat

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<sup>9</sup> Edward Said. Orientalism. London: Random House, 1978, p. 204.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> “Literature” Oxford English Dictionary. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> “Language” Oxford English Dictionary. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Monroe Beardsley. “The Language of Literature” In Essays on the Language of Literature. Seymour Chatman and Samuel R. Levin, eds. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967, p. 283. JSTOR. Accessed. Feb. 17, 2017. <<http://www.jstor.org>>.

equivalent to that between content and form.”<sup>14</sup> Thus the two are actually inseparable.

The choice of language in literary texts has become a topic of lively debate among postcolonial writers and scholars. The debate results from the important role that language plays in literature in general and the fascinating implication it has for postcolonial literature in particular.

Postcolonial studies have paid particular attention to the relationship between language and literature. One of the results of colonialism is that the languages of the former colonizers often remain the primary instrument of communication for the people of the former colonies, even after several decades after the death of colonialism. Although people in formerly colonized countries use their indigenous languages for communication, European languages also serve as common languages for many of them. For example, English is still the official language of Nigeria several decades after Nigerian independence.

Clearly, postcolonial writers are in an ambivalent position. On the one hand, their mission, stated or unstated, is to challenge the oppression of empire, and to restore pre-colonial dignity. As Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin assert in The Empire Writes Back, in an attempt to define postcolonial literature:

What each of these literatures [from the former European colonies] has in common beyond their special and distinctive regional characteristics is that they emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial center. It is this which makes them distinctively postcolonial.<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, in order to carry out their mission, postcolonial writers often find

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<sup>14</sup> Abiola Irele. The African Experience in Literature and Ideology. London: Heinemann, 1981, p. 43.

<sup>15</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. The Empire Writes Back. London: Routledge, 1989, p. 2.

that they are obliged to use the imperialist languages, the very languages which were used by colonizers to degrade African cultures.

This ambivalence can be better understood if we examine briefly the interrelationship between language and discourse, the latter also being an important concept in a postcolonial context.

Michel Foucault's discourse theory is very helpful to our understanding of the relationship between language and discourse. He sees that discourse is "a violence which we do to things."<sup>16</sup> According to Stephen Slemon's explanation, what Foucault means by this is that "discourse ... is the name for that language by which dominant groups within society constitute the fields of 'truth' through the imposition of specific knowledge, disciplines, and values."<sup>17</sup> In other words, discourse is a system of rules which regulates the meaning of reality. Among other things, it determines such standards as the inclusion of certain authors in a literary canon and the exclusion of others, and the definition of one language variety as "language" and others as "dialects."

It is obvious that discourse is very relevant to the postcolonial context in that it plays a vital part in the process of decolonization, just as it did in the process of colonization. Decolonization, according to Helen Tiffin, has "involved a radical dis/mantling of European codes and a post-colonial subversion and appropriation of the dominant European discourses."<sup>18</sup> That is, decolonization is a struggle between colonial

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<sup>16</sup> Michel Foucault. The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences. 1970. New York: Vintage Books, 1994, p. 67.

<sup>17</sup> Stephen Slemon. "Moments of Empire: Allegory/Counter-Discourse/Post-Colonial Writing." Kunapipi 9.3 (1987), p. 6. JSTOR. Accessed. Feb. 17, 2017. <<http://www.jstor.org>>.

<sup>18</sup> Helen Tiffin. "Post-colonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse." Kunapipi 9.3 (1987), p. 17. JSTOR. Accessed. Feb. 17, 2017. <<http://www.jstor.org>>.



discourse and postcolonial counter-discourse. On the one hand, the colonizers have been imposing and naturalizing imperialist power structures, assuming the privilege of being the only generators of truth. The formerly colonized people, as Tiffin claims, question and subvert colonial discourse. They thus challenge the imperialist hierarchy as inevitable, and deny colonial discourse its role in generating truth.

Based on this analysis, it seems that the process of decolonization is actually a struggle of power over truth. As Foucault points out:

in every society, the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality.<sup>19</sup>

Although the relationship between language and discourse is very close, it does not necessarily follow that English which serves the imperialist discourse, should be unanimously rejected by postcolonial writers. In fact, there has been an on-going debate between the proponents and opponents of literature written in European languages in formerly colonized societies. The two antagonistic groups both acknowledge that language is a carrier and reflection of culture and ideology; their different attitudes towards writing in European languages lie in the roles they think writers can play in this relationship.

#### **I.4. What is power?**

Power is defined in a great number of ways, but usually in one of two senses: 1) as the ability or skill to do something; or 2) as the possession of the capacity to dominate or control someone or something else. It is the second sense that has received the greatest

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<sup>19</sup> Michel Foucault. The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences. 1970. New York: Vintage Books, 1994, p. 52.

amount of critical attention. The crudest and probably oldest view is that the powerful are those who possess the greatest brute force. But, as Max Weber has pointed out, political power is not usually possessed or exercised in this way---those who possess and exercise “power” usually do so, not on the basis of the threat of physical violence, but on the basis of tradition, legal systems, ideology, consensus, etc. Classical Marxists believe that power is always in the hands of those who control the economic base, the means of production, and is exercised primarily in two ways: through the state's judicial and legislative functions (closely allied with the interests of the capitalist owners) and through the exploitation of the worker. Michel Foucault, in contrast, argues that “theories of government and the traditional analyses of their mechanisms certainly don't exhaust the field where power is exercised and where it functions.”<sup>20</sup>

Edward Said has also pointed out that by thinking of the idea of power in terms of hegemony, it is possible to conceive of it as resistive, allowing for combinations that meet the needs of a larger group than the power formation that currently exists.<sup>21</sup>

### **I.5. Postcolonialism and postmodernism**

‘Post-colonial’ as we define it does not mean ‘post-independence’, or ‘after colonialism’, for this would be to falsely ascribe an end to the colonial process. Post-colonialism, rather, begins from the very first moment of colonial contact. It is the discourse of oppositionality which colonialism brings into being. In this sense, post-colonial writing has a very long history. But it would be true to say that the intensification of theoretical interest in the post-colonial has coincided with the rise of postmodernism in Western society and this has led to both confusion and overlap between the two.

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<sup>20</sup> “Power.” The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism. Joseph Childers and Gary Hentzi, eds. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995. Literature Online. Accessed. July 26, 2004. <<http://lion.chadwyk.co.uk>>.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

Postmodernism is largely a reaction to the assumed certainty of scientific, or objective, efforts to explain reality. In essence, it stems from a recognition that reality is not simply mirrored in human understanding of it, but rather, is constructed as the mind tries to understand its own particular and personal reality. For this reason, postmodernism is highly skeptical of explanations which claim to be valid for all groups, cultures, traditions, or races, and instead focuses on the relative truths of each person. In the postmodern understanding, interpretation is everything; reality only comes into being through our interpretations of what the world means to us individually. Postmodernism relies on concrete experience over abstract principles, knowing always that the outcome of one's own experience will necessarily be fallible and relative, rather than certain and universal.<sup>22</sup>

Postmodernism is “post” because it denies the existence of any ultimate principles, and it lacks the optimism of there being a scientific, philosophical, or religious truth which will explain everything for everybody - a characteristic of the so-called “modern” mind. The paradox of the postmodern position is that, in placing all principles under the scrutiny of its skepticism, it must realize that even its own principles are not beyond questioning.<sup>23</sup>

The confusion between postcolonialism and postmodernism is caused partly by the fact that the major project of postmodernism: the deconstruction of the centralised, logocentric master narratives of European culture, is very similar to the post-colonial project of dismantling the Centre/Margin binarism of imperial discourse. The decentering

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<sup>22</sup> “Postmodernism.” PBS Glossary of Critical Terms. Accessed. 26 Feb., 2017. <<http://www.pbs.org/faithandreason/gen gloss/postm-body.html>>

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

of discourse, the focus on the significance of language and writing in the construction of experience, the use of the subversive strategies of mimicry, parody and irony—all these concerns overlap those of postmodernism and so a conflation of the two discourses has often occurred.<sup>24</sup>

Postcolonialism is not simply a kind of ‘postmodernism with politics’-- it is a sustained attention to the imperial process in colonial and neo-colonial societies, and an examination of the strategies to subvert the actual material and discursive effects of that process.

One way of comparing these two discourses is to compare the claims they make upon experience. We are often told, for instance, that we live in a ‘Postmodern Age’, and in this claim an essentially European (or trans-Atlantic) cultural movement makes yet again the same claim upon world history that other European movements have made in the past.<sup>25</sup>

Postmodernism, whether it is the cultural logic of late capitalism (as Frederic Jameson claims) or not, does not appear to be the primary framework within which most of the world’s population carries out its daily life. The response to this might be that nevertheless western postmodernism has had a subtle and undeniable effect upon the rest of the world, but this is only another way of saying that the imperial process of eurocentrism is still active. This activity itself becomes a subject for post-colonial reading.

For Kwame Anthony Appiah, “the post in post-colonialism is very different from that in postmodernism, for it is the post of a space-clearing gesture, a gesture which for

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<sup>24</sup> Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds. *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*. 1995. London: Routledge, 2003, p. 356.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 117-18.

him can sometimes be characterized as ‘post-realist’, ‘post-nativist’ and transnational rather than national categories which describe the ‘postmodernisation’ rather than the postmodernism of the postcolonial text.”<sup>26</sup>

The problems of representation in the post-colonial text assume a political dimension very different from the radical provisionality now accepted as fundamental to postmodernism.

### **I.6. Postcolonialism and feminism**

Women in many societies have been relegated to the position of ‘Other’, marginalized and, in a metaphorical sense, ‘colonized’, forced to pursue guerrilla warfare against imperial domination from positions deeply imbedded in, yet fundamentally alienated from, that absolute power. They share with colonized races and peoples an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and repression, and like them they have been forced to articulate their experiences in the language of their oppressors. Women, like post-colonial peoples, have had to construct a language of their own when their only available ‘tools’ are those of the ‘colonizer.’

As in post-colonial theory, language, ‘voice’, concepts of speech and silence, and concepts of mimicry have been important in feminist theory, together with the connections between literature and language, political activity, and the potential for social change. Recognizing that aesthetic value is not universal, that it does not reside within the text, but is historically and culturally specific, feminist critics reject the patriarchal bases of literary theory and criticism and seek to subvert them and show them to be relative, not absolute or axiomatic. Starting from potentially essentialist positions in the 1960s and 1970s feminist critics have moved away from biologicistic stances (often based on white, Anglo-

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<sup>26</sup> Kwame Appiah. “Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?” *Critical Inquiry* 17.2 (1992): 336. [JSTOR](http://www.jstor.org). Accessed. Feb. 17, 2017. <<http://www.jstor.org>>.

Saxon norms) towards more complex subversive positions and towards increasing recognition that the principle of ‘difference’, lying as it does at the very heart of their construction as ‘Other’, is basic to any contemporary feminist theory. Exclusivist or essentialist definitions which acted to marginalize other races or classes have increasingly been eroded, particularly through the work of influential critics like Alice Walker (for instance in her rewriting of Virginia Woolf’s famous reflections on the fate of Shakespeare had he been born a woman, ‘Judith Shakespeare’ (1983) or in the earlier work of Tillie Olsen (1978). Such writers criticize feminist theory for being middle class and Anglo-American in its assumptions. As a result, intersections of race, class, and gender have become increasingly important within the discourse of feminism.<sup>27</sup>

Thus the history and concerns of feminist theory have strong parallels with post-colonial theory. Feminist and post-colonial discourses both seek to reinstate the marginalized in the face of the dominant, and early feminist theory, like early nationalist post-colonial criticism, sought to invert the structures of domination, substituting, for instance, a female tradition or traditions in place of a male-dominated canon. But like post-colonial criticism, feminist criticism has now turned away from such simple inversions towards a questioning of forms and modes, to unmasking the assumptions upon which such canonical constructions are founded, moving first to make their obscure bases visible and then to destabilize them.<sup>28</sup>

In addition, both feminist and post-colonial critics have reread the classical texts, demonstrating clearly that a canon is produced by the intersection of a number of readings and reading assumptions legitimized in the privileging hierarchy of a ‘patriarchal’ or ‘metropolitan’ concept of ‘literature’. This offers the possibility of reconstructing the

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<sup>27</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. The Empire Writes Back. London: Routledge, 1989, pp. 172-173.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173.

canon, and not simply replacing it in an ‘exchange of texts’, since both discourses recognize that to change the canon is to do more than change the legitimized texts. It is to change the conditions of reading for all texts. It is important to note that in both cases these more sophisticated, reflexive possibilities only emerge after an initial (and understandable) resistance to theory itself, to that formalism which ‘sets theory above experience in its claims to dominance.’<sup>29</sup>

After the definition, clarification discussion of the different terms and issues related to our subject of study, we move in the next chapter to see, analyze, and discuss how they are being dealt with by J.M. Coetzee in his novel *Foe*.

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<sup>29</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. The Empire Writes Back. London: Routledge, 1989, pp. 173-174.

**Chapter II :**  
**Representation, Language, and**  
**Power in J.M. Coetzee's *Foe***



## **II.1. J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* and Daniel Defoe's Works:**

After reading the novel *Foe* written by the South African writer J.M. Coetzee and first published in 1986, we find that it is in major part a retelling or a rewriting of Daniel Defoe's well-known novel, *Robinson Crusoe*, which was first published in 1719. Besides this, the novel contains also references to other works by the English writer, Daniel Defoe, mainly *Roxana*.

But before embarking on the comparison of Coetzee's novel and Defoe's works, summaries of the two main novels are necessary.

### **II.1.1. Summaries of the two main novels:**

#### **II.1.1.1. Summary of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*<sup>1</sup>:**

Robinson Crusoe is an English young man of about eighteen years of age. Against his father's wishes, he runs away to sea to find adventure. He endures shipwreck, attack by pirates, and slavery before finally making his way to Brazil, where he sets up a plantation. Impatient to increase his profits, he sails with a group of planters to Guinea to bargain for slaves. During this voyage, they are assailed by a terrible storm and forced to abandon ship. Robinson Crusoe, the only survivor, is washed ashore on a desert island.

He was the only survivor, and he immediately began to build a shelter and search for food for survival. He tried to rescue as much as possible from the shipwrecked ship and save things that he thought was useful. He began to write in a journal so that he

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<sup>1</sup> Defoe, Daniel. *Robinson Crusoe*. 1719. Planet PDF. Accessed Feb. 12, 2017.  
<[http://www.planetpublish.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/Robinson\\_Crusoe\\_BT.pdf](http://www.planetpublish.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/Robinson_Crusoe_BT.pdf)>.  
All subsequent in-text page references to the novel will be to this edition.

would be able to remember what happened to him while he was on the island. He learned many useful skills, including fishing and farming. During his time on the island, Crusoe began to talk to God and reevaluate his religious beliefs.

After 15 years on the island, Crusoe discovered footprints in the sand but no signs of people. Years later, he spotted cannibals on the island. He spotted them again sometime later and noticed a victim escaping. Crusoe saved him, named him Friday and taught him how to speak English.

Crusoe and Friday were eventually rescued from the island after they helped the captain of the ship escape a mutiny. Once in England, Crusoe discovered that he was wealthy. He married and had three children, but Crusoe still wanted to continue his adventures.

#### **II.1.1.2. Summary of John Maxwell Coetzee's *Foe*<sup>2</sup>:**

Coetzee's novel, *Foe*, is divided into four parts:

Part I is the written account of the female castaway, Susan Barton, on Crusoe's island, in the form of a letter to the English author Daniel Foe whom she has met in England after her rescue from the island. She is of an English mother and a French father, having a daughter of the same name. The daughter is abducted by an Englishman and conveyed to the New World. Susan follows her to Brazil. She stays in Bahia Blanca for two years and does not find any trace of her daughter. Then she takes ship to Lisbon and becomes the captain's lover. On the voyage, the sailors mutiny, kill the captain and set Susan adrift in a small boat. She lands on an island, where she is found by a black man

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<sup>2</sup> Coetzee, J.M. *Foe*. 1986. London: Penguin Books, 2010.  
All subsequent in-text page references to the novel will be to this edition.

called “Friday” and brought to his master, here called “Cruso” (“e” omitted). Cruso is an irritable, lazy, arrogant fellow: he has lost interest in escaping from the island or even in recalling the events of his early life there. Friday on the other hand, has his tongue cut out, either by slave owners or by Cruso himself. After a year on the island, the three are rescued by an English ship, the John Hobart, under Captain Smith, but on the voyage back to England, Cruso dies longing for the island. The captain says she should put her story in a book. When she objects that she lacks art, he assures her that the booksellers will hire somebody to put it in shape.

In Part II Susan Barton recounts her efforts back in England, in the form of letters, to persuade Daniel Foe to turn her account of life on the island into a popular book of adventure. The letter soon becomes imaginings of Foe’s surroundings and life as he writes. Shortly thereafter, she loses contact with Foe who has left his house to escape arrest as a debtor. Susan and Friday move into Foe’s now empty house, and she begins to write her own story: “*The Female Castaway, Being a True Account of a Year Spent on a Desert Island, With Many Strange Circumstances Never Hitherto Related.*”

Susan Barton never stops writing to Foe, keeping the unsent letters stored in a chest near Foe’s desk. She writes to Foe about her attempts to communicate with Friday, about how she believes Foe to be responsible for sending to her a girl who claims to be her daughter, and how similar her life with Friday is to what it was on the island.

Part III of the novel, no longer in the epistolary mode, is Susan Barton’s first person account, in the present tense, relating what happens when she finds where Foe is hiding and goes to see him. Foe argues to Susan that the island story should be a mere episode in the quest novel he has in mind – search for the lost daughter, abandonment of the search and the adventure of the island, then the daughter assumes the search, and

finally the reunion of mother and daughter. Susan disagrees with this and engages in a debate about the writing of the story.

In Part IV the narrator is no longer Susan Barton. This narrator enters Foe's house and finds Foe and Barton side by side in bed, and they are pictured as dead. The narrator discovers that Friday, lying in the corner, has a faint pulse, and presses his/her ear to the mute Friday's mouth. Again, the narrator comes to the house, sees a plaque with the words "*Daniel Defoe, Author,*" enters the house and sees the couple in bed face to face, and Friday on the floor. This time the narrator notices a chain scar around Friday's neck. He opens the dispatch box next to Foe's desk and finds the first sheet of Barton's description to Foe of her story, which begins the novel: "*At last I could row no further.*" No longer reading but continuing Barton's words, the narrator slips overboard into the story and finds himself/herself diving into the wreck of what had probably been a slave ship. The narrator's time is now three hundred (300) years after the sinking of the ship. In a corner of the captain's room is Friday. Friday's mouth opens and out comes no word but a stream that flows up through his body and out upon the narrator; passes everywhere, and beats against the eyelids and the skin of the narrator's face.

### **I.1.2. Comparison between *Foe* and *Robinson Crusoe*:**

#### **II.1.2.1. Comparing the Settings:**

Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* takes place mainly on an island in the Atlantic Ocean whereas J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* takes place first on the island then in England.

Coetzee's island is different from that of Defoe. Whereas Defoe's island is alive with animals and luxurious with fruit and tall straight trees, Coetzee's island is a single rocky peak populated by monkeys and gulls, growing only bitter lettuce and stunted trees unfit for anything. It is not romantic at all. As the narrator, Susan Barton says: "It is not a

place of soft sands and shady trees where brooks run to quench the castaway's thirst and ripe fruit falls into his hand, where no more is asked of him than to drowse the days away till a ship calls to fetch him home" (*Foe*, p. 7), but it is: "a great rocky hill with a flat top, rising sharply from the sea on all sides except one, dotted with drab bushes that never flowered and never shed their leaves" (*Foe*, p. 7). She evokes the smell of seaweed, the omnipresence of fleas and ants, the intolerable wind, etc.

The two stories happened nearly in the same period, which is the late seventeenth and the early eighteenth centuries, but in the last part of J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*, the author brings us to the time of three hundred (300) years after the sinking of the ship, and which corresponds to 1986 the year of publication of the novel.

### **II.1.2.2. Comparing the Characters:**

#### **II.1.2.2.1. Robinson Crusoe(e):**

Coetzee's Robinson Crusoe is different from that of Defoe. The more obvious difference is in the name: Coetzee's character's name is spelled "Cruso" without the "e" of the original.

Defoe's Crusoe is a clever craftsman, tirelessly shaping his surroundings. He fortifies his stockade, builds a second shelter for his hunting expeditions, organizes, plans, and keeps a diary. In contrast, Coetzee's Crusoe is indifferent to his material comfort and surroundings, and keeps no diary. While Defoe's hero can narrate his past and present with detailed certainty, Coetzee's Crusoe kept no journal, and did not count the years of his captivity on the island. He is reticent and what he says about his past varies: sometimes he was a wealthy merchant, sometimes he was a poor cabin boy captured by the Moors. Once, in the midst of a high fever, he claims that Friday was a cannibal whom he rescued from being roasted and eaten by his fellow cannibals.

Whereas Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* strives hard and looks for any means to escape from the island, Coetzee's *Cruso* did not have any desire to escape from it. The latter accepts this life without appeal, and is reworking the Greek myth by labouring like Sisyphus in the building of terraces for agriculture. But when the narrator, Susan Barton asks him what he intends to plant, he answers: "The planting is not for us," ... "The planting is reserved for those who come after us and have the foresight to bring seed" (*Foe*, p 33). Whereas in *Robinson Crusoe* the first fifty pages describe Crusoe's upbringing and the events landing him on the island, *Foe* begins on the island and we never learn Cruso's past.

#### **II.1.2.2.2. Friday:**

Friday in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* is advantageously displayed, handsome, "very agreeable"<sup>3</sup> in colour, attractive in expression, and exemplary in nature. Adaptable, he immediately abandons cannibalism; put on goatskin clothes; and becomes a faithful Christian. He is so apt and cheerful that he reconciles Crusoe to island life.

Rather than the "comely, handsome, European-looking Carib with skin that is "not quite black but very tawny ... of a bright kind of dun olive colour that had in it something very agreeable"<sup>4</sup> of Defoe's story, Friday, in J.M. Coetzee's story, becomes a Negro African whose features and complexion are described by Susan Barton the narrator, as: "the flat face, the small dull eyes, the broad nose, the thick lips, the skin not black but a dark grey, dry as if coated with dust" (*Foe*, p. 6).

Furthermore, Friday, who in the original develops into a fairly adept user of Pidgin English, in Coetzee's text, becomes a mute whose tongue has been cut out either by slave

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<sup>3</sup> Daniel Defoe. *Robinson Crusoe*. 1719. [Planet PDF](#). Accessed Feb. 5, 2017, p. 327. <[http://www.planetpublish.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/Robinson\\_Crusoe\\_BT.pdf](http://www.planetpublish.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/Robinson_Crusoe_BT.pdf)>

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

owners or by Crusoe himself. More obviously, while Defoe's Friday is cheerful, good-natured, and friendly, Coetzee's Friday is mysterious, unemotional and enigmatic.

#### **II.1.2.2.3. Susan Barton:**

Susan Barton is a creation of J.M. Coetzee in *Foe*: she did not appear in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. She is an Englishwoman of a French father and an English mother. She is the narrator of all but the fourth and last part of *Foe*. She is addressing an English author named Foe and whom she has met in London, and wants him to turn the story of her one-year stay on the island inhabited by Robinson Crusoe and his servant, Friday, into a popular book of adventure. In fact, she is the central character of Coetzee's novel.

#### **II.1.2.2.4. Foe:**

Foe is another creation of Coetzee in *Foe*. He is an English author whom Susan Barton has met in London and whom she hired to write the story of the island and turn it into a popular book of adventure. Because of his heavy debts and his inability to pay them, Foe hides from the bailiffs. When Susan moves to his abandoned house and settles there, she finds papers containing accounts and confessions of thieves, highwaymen, adventurers, prostitutes, etc.

Susan Barton makes him responsible of sending her a girl claiming to be her lost daughter and whose name is the same as hers. Thus, Coetzee presents us an author who is manipulative and authoritative.

Through Coetzee's depiction of him, we find that this author resembles in many ways Daniel Defoe the famous author of *Robinson Crusoe* and whom we know that his original name was Daniel Foe and that he added "De" to his patronymic.

#### **I.1.3. References to Other Works by Defoe in *Foe*:**

In *Foe*, there are references not only to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* but to other works by the same author as well.

*Roxana* (1724) is the source of many references in *Foe*. Roxana's first name and her daughter's is Susan like that of the female narrator of *Foe* and also that of her lost daughter. Roxana's second husband was named "Brewer"; however, Coetzee changes that, having him be a brewer named George Lewes. In *Foe*, Foe creates a narrative for Susan in which she had maidservant named "Amy" or "Emmy", although Susan Barton denies it. Roxana does have a maidservant named Amy who eventually is responsible for the death of Susan's daughter.<sup>5</sup>

There are two other novels of Defoe's that are referenced in *Foe*: *Moll Flanders* (1722) and *Colonel Jack* (1722). Without naming her, Foe mentions that he has interviewed a woman whose history closely resembles Moll Flanders's (*Foe*, p. 56). Shortly after the reference to *Moll Flanders*, Jack, a neighborhood waif, appears and is given money. This character becomes Colonel Jack, the eponymous protagonist.<sup>6</sup>

Besides these, we find other works by Defoe that are referenced in Coetzee's novel. The captain who rescues Crusoe, Susan, and Friday is Captain Smith. In a novella by Defoe, *Adventures of Captain Gow* (1725), one of the aliases of the pirate Gow is Smith.<sup>7</sup> Later, when looking through Foe's papers, Susan sees writings that refer to *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) and *Dickory Cronke* (1719) (*Foe*, p. 50). Later, she reads to Friday about Mrs Veal and Mrs Barfield (*Foe*, pp. 58-59), two women who were the focus of Defoe's *Apparition of Mrs Veal* (1706), noting that Coetzee changes the latter's name from Bargrave.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Hardin. "Colonizing the Characters of Daniel Defoe: J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*." Notes on Contemporary Fiction 31.5 (2001), p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*



After having introduced the reader to Coetzee's novel and comparing it to its intertexts, we shall now analyze and discuss the issue of representation in it.

## **II.2. Representation in Coetzee's *Foe*:**

When the captain of the rescue ship in *Foe* suggests to Susan Barton, the main protagonist of the novel, to write her story down, she complains that she lacks art. But he assures her that the booksellers will hire somebody to put it in shape. So, she hires the English author, Foe, to do so. She begins with the traditional point of view about telling the story: she will recount what really happened, represent 'truth'. Foe is then to add 'art' to her story. Art, to Susan Barton, is "a liveliness" (*Foe*, p. 40) which will make the tale charming and interesting, but which need not affect the "true" story of Crusoe.

But Barton's difficulty with representing the true story begins immediately, as she writes:

I would gladly now recount to you the history of this singular Crusoe 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, that I was more and more driven to conclude age and isolation had taken their toll on his memory, and he no longer knew for sure what was truth, what was fancy. (*Foe*, p. 11-12)

We see from the start then that Crusoe's story is to be told by Foe, by way of Barton, by way of her memory of stories told her by the now-absent Crusoe who may not have known "what was truth, what fancy" (*Foe*, p. 12). This distancing of information from the 'source' disconcerts Barton, but does not keep her from believing that she can tell the true story.

After Susan Barton completes her version of the story, which she sends to Foe, she begins a dialogue with herself (also in letters to Foe): "Who but Crusoe, who is no more, could truly tell you Crusoe's story? I should have said less about him, more about

myself" (*Foe*, p. 51). Brian Macaskill and Jeanne Colleran see that with this concern Barton introduces the following question: can a 'reality' be represented exactly through language? But also: in the attempt at representation, whose story gets told? To think of 'someone's story' is to think of: 1) the events comprising the story to be told, 2) the ownership or authority of teller.<sup>9</sup> We agree with them as this distinction becomes clearest later in the novel when Foe asks Barton to tell him more of her life in Bahia as she searched for her daughter. Barton's indignant reply is: "Bahia is not part of my story" (*Foe*, p. 114). In terms of the story which she is determined to tell, Bahia is not relevant. But in the more encompassing story which Foe seems determined to tell, Bahia is most certainly part of her story. The 'true' story in this case is defined not so much by what it contains, but by the teller, by the frame of reference.

If it is the teller who determines what story gets told, then the teller must write from a position of some authority. But Barton, reflecting on her role, does not feel powerful:

When I reflect on my story I seem to exist only as the one who came, the one 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 storytellers? (*Foe*, p. 51)

Susan Naramore Maher suggests that Barton here posits the traditional opposition of substantial reality (the referent- here the true body of Cruso) and the ghostly representations (the sign) of the writer.<sup>10</sup> We see here that the writer and his [her] words

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<sup>9</sup> Brian Macaskill and Jeanne Colleran. "Reading History, Writing Heresy: The Resistance of Representation and the Representation of Resistance in J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*." *Contemporary Literature* 33.3 (1992), p. 437.

<sup>10</sup> Susan Naramore Maher. "Confronting Authority: J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* and the Remaking of *Robinson Crusoe*." *International Fiction Review* 18.1 (1991), p. 35.

are, in this equation, a mirror reflecting a solid truth. There is, in this view, a knowable real world that may be directly mediated through the mirror of words.

This is mimesis, the belief that there is an objective, real world that can be represented through words. And in this mimetic frame of reference, the fate of the storyteller is to be secondary, ghostly.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, Barton acknowledges the authority of Foe, to whom she pleads: “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” (*Foe*, p. 51).

### **II.3. Language in *Foe*:**

From the above, Aleid Fokkema considers that Barton's plea twinkles between a traditional realist point of view about language and a poststructuralist view. On the one hand, her faith in the term “truth” suggests something that is manifestly and unconditionally present and reachable through language. Her plea also suggests, however, that without the authority of another teller, her own subjectivity cannot be apprehended: she needs Foe to represent her “substance.”<sup>12</sup> The suggestion here, that reality is not mirrored by the words of the storyteller, but is, rather, brought to be by the teller, brings together two statements: that our perception of reality takes place first within language, and second, within the particular social, cultural, historical positions of the teller.

Later on Barton speaks to Friday (or rather, talking at him) about the power and magic of words in representing reality:

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<sup>11</sup> Susan Naramore Maher. “Confronting Authority: J.M. Coetzee’s *Foe* and the Remaking of *Robinson Crusoe*.” *International Fiction Review* 18.1 (1991), p. 36

<sup>12</sup> Aleid Fokkema. “Character as a subject in language: Some Reflections on J.M. Coetzee’s *Foe*.” *New Comparison* 9 (1990), p. 174.

Mr Foe has not met you, but he knows of you, from what I have told him, using words. That is part of the magic of words. Through the medium of words I have given Mr Foe the particulars of you and Mr Cruso and of my year on the island and the years you and Mr Cruso spent there alone, as far as I can supply them; and all these particulars Mr Foe is weaving into a story which will make us famous throughout the land and rich too. Is writing not a fine thing, Friday? Are you not filled with joy to know that you will live forever, after a manner? (*Foe*, p. 58)

This is the empirical view of language as that which reproduces reality, added to the romantic view of language as the vehicle for immortality.<sup>13</sup>

Barton's confidence in words again appears to mix a representational view of language with the poststructuralist concept of people as constituted by language as much as they are constituting of language, when she suggests that words would allow Friday to

cross to the time before Cruso, the time before he lost his tongue, when he lived immersed in the prattle of words as unthinking as a fish in water; from where he may by steps return, as far as he is able, to the world of words in which you, Mr Foe, and I, and other people live. (*Foe*, p. 60)

This is, at first, a representational view of language as that medium which provides a passageway to reality. But the concept of living in a world of words, in which it is the words themselves that constitute reality, in which would get back to in getting back to a previous life would be words, that is the poststructuralist view.<sup>14</sup>

From this point on Barton relies less on a belief in the possibility of direct apprehension of truth or reality, and instead, identifies an organizational principle to help her define what can and cannot be told. We refer here to her increasing emphasis on the importance of Friday's muteness:

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<sup>13</sup> Aleid Fokkema. "Character as a subject in language: Some Reflections on J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*." *New Comparison* 9 (1990), p. 175.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* , p. 176

Then there is the matter of Friday's tongue. On the island I accepted that I should never learn how Friday lost his tongue, as I accepted that I should never learn how the apes crossed the sea. But what we can accept in life we cannot accept in history. To tell my story and be silent on Friday's tongue is no better than offering a book for sale with pages in it quietly left empty. Yet the only tongue that can tell Friday's secret is the tongue he has lost! (*Foe*, p. 67)

Once again we see Barton's acceptance, despite her problems thus far, of the individual as somehow being able to represent his/her own life through language. What is new here is the role of Friday's silence - presented as "lack" of a tongue, and thus "lack" of speech - in the presentation of Barton's story. On one level, this is a reference to the lost ability of a people, of Friday as a slave, to speak. On a linguistic level, however, Barton's reference here is to the role that silence, lack, absence, otherness plays in our apprehension of meaning.

In her attempt to find out the "truth" of how Friday lost his tongue, Barton draws pictures which attempt possible representations of the deed:

'Friday might not know the meaning of the word "truth", I reasoned; nevertheless, if my picture stirred some recollection of truth, surely a cloud would pass over his gaze; for are the eyes not rightly called the mirrors of the soul?'

Yet even as I spoke I began to doubt myself. For if Friday's gaze indeed became troubled, might that not be because I came striding out of the house, demanding that he look at pictures, something I had never done before? Might the picture itself not confuse him? (*Foe*, p. 68)

Here is a recognition that no representation is pure or transparent, but that rather, the information received depends at the very least on the assumptions and projections of the representational method, as well as on the assumption that the method will have the same meaning from party to party:

“Is this a faithful representation of the man who cut out your tongue?” - was that what Friday, in his way, understood me to be asking? If so, what answer could he give but No? And even if it was a Moor who cut out his tongue, his Moor was likely an inch taller than mine, or an inch shorter; wore black or blue, not white; was bearded, not clean-shaven; had a straight knife, not a curved one; and so forth. (*Foe*, p. 70)

Richard Bigam contends that Barton's attempts to communicate with Friday, like her attempts to tell "Cruso's story," consistently reveal some of the shortcomings and maneuverings of a representational paradigm.<sup>15</sup> We agree with that since we notice that her discomfort increases as she realizes the self-creative potential of language in another one-sided conversation with Friday:

“Oh, Friday, how can I make you understand the cravings felt by those of us who live in a world of speech to have our questions answered ! It is like our desire, when we kiss someone, to feel the lips we kiss respond to us. ... “Be assured, Friday, by sitting at your bedside and talking of desire and kisses I do not mean to court you. This is no game in which each word has a second meaning, in which the words say “Statues are cold” and mean “Bodies are warm,” or say “I crave an answer” and mean “I crave an embrace.” (*Foe*, p. 79)

Barton appears to protest too much, as she struggles against the cognition of the multiplicity of language, in which words incorporate at least simultaneous and second meanings. The meaning of “Statues are cold” includes and takes place within the space between that phrase and “Bodies are warm.”

#### **II.4. Power and language in *Foe*:**

In *Foe* Susan Barton recognizes that power is part of language's equation when she speaks to *Foe*:

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

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<sup>15</sup> Richard Bigam. “Silence and Mut(e)ilation: White Writing in J.M. Coetzee’s *Foe*.” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 93.1 (1994), p. 119.

and therefore no defence against being re-shaped day by day in conformity with the desires of others. I say he is a cannibal and he becomes a cannibal; I say he is a laundryman and he becomes a laundryman. What is the truth of Friday? You will respond: he is neither cannibal nor laundryman, these are mere names, they do not touch his essence, he is a substantial body, he is himself, Friday is Friday. But that is not so. No matter what he is to himself (is he anything to himself? - how can he tell us?), what he is to the world is what I make of him. Therefore the silence of Friday is a helpless silence. He is a child of his silence, a child unborn, a child waiting to be born that cannot be born. Whereas the silence I keep regarding Bahia and other matters is chosen and purposeful: it is my own silence. (*Foe*, pp. 121-122).

Susan Barton has come a long way from her earlier reliance on truth as simply that which is represented by way of the mirror of words. Hers is now a discourse on power, a recognition of the ideological foundations of representation: who is allowed to speak, for whom, and to what purpose? She puts her finger exactly on this question of control when she states: "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" (*Foe*, p. 123). In referring to herself as "father," Barton emphasizes her position of authority. She continues to make the relationship between power and language clear when she says that the moral of a story Foe tells her "is that he has the last word who disposes over the greatest force" (*Foe*, p. 124). Macaskill and Colleran see that in bringing together the terms of force, power, father, and story, she identifies the link between the rationales of representation and logocentrism: the power of God, as the Father, embodies full Presence. This Presence is perceived as without lack, as an absolute and full Truth, as the Word, the Law.<sup>16</sup>

Susan Barton recognizes, finally, that to make control of a particular discourse is as close as one gets to controlling the depiction of one's life. Yet her final speeches indicate the instability of the power of telling one's own. Barton says to Foe:

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<sup>16</sup> Brian Macaskill and Jeanne Colleran. "Reading History, Writing Heresy: The Resistance of Representation and the Representation of Resistance in J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*." *Contemporary Literature* 33.3 (1992), p. 449.

"I am not a story, Mr. Foe. I may impress you as a story because I began my account of myself without preamble, slipping overboard into the water and striking out for the shore. But my life did not begin in the waves. There was a life before the water which stretched back to my desolate searchings in Brazil, thence to the years when my daughter was still with me; and so on back to the day I was born. All of which makes up a story I do 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. (*Foe*, p. 131)

Shortly after this speech, Susan begins to no longer trust in her own authorship:

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. ... Nothing is left to name 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? (*Foe*, p. 133)

These are, finally, poststructuralist questions about language and the locus of power as advocated by Michel Foucault.<sup>17</sup> No longer is Susan Barton someone who speaks of the story as that which represents truth or reality through language; rather, she speaks of her own life as story, as spoken, as first constituted by language, then shaped by a teller, and then reshaped by an audience, as her final question to Foe makes clear.

As an "author" within this novel, Foe is immediately suspect as someone who interferes with "reality," but where does his discourse position itself within the world of *Foe*: does he believe that his words can represent absolute truth? Does he see himself as someone who creates worlds through language? Although most of what we know about Foe comes from Susan Barton's point of view, Foe as author is consistently presented as godlike. Barton provides the analogy between Foe and God early on when she says, speaking of Foe's supposed menagerie of characters: "In Mr Foe's house there are many

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<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. 1970. New York: Vintage Books, 1994, p. 237.



mansions” (*Foe*, p. 77), rephrasing Christ's proclamation that “In my Father's house are many mansions.”<sup>18</sup> Macaskill and Colleran remark that this points the reader in a couple of directions. In the first, more traditional, view, this reinforces the concepts of Author as God the Father, as full Presence, and thus as the purveyor of ultimate Truth, the Word, the Law. On the other hand, if the author is godlike, then he or she need not be tied to an empirical world, and may create, within the possibilities of language, new worlds. In this latter, more postmodern view, the author recognizes that he/she cannot absolutely control the production and reception, (that is, the meaning) of language, the only tool at hand.<sup>19</sup>

### **II.5. Silence and the location of meaning in *Foe*:**

In *Foe* we need to look at how silence or absence provides the space in which meaning is located. We hear a conflicting message in the following Foe speech: “In every story there is a silence, some sight concealed, some word unspoken, I believe. Till we have spoken the unspoken we have not come to the heart of the story” (*Foe*, p. 14). His first sentence suggests that there is within every story, within language, a silence, blindness, the unspoken. To make this point is to acknowledge that language, each word, and thus, each concept, carries within it all other words and concepts that are different from it. The concept of “silence” is not just the opposite of “sound”; it incorporates this opposing concept within it. Without the concept of “sound”, “silence” is meaningless. Without the concept of “sight”, “blindness” is meaningless. Within the word “sight” is the word “blindness.” Each word differs from and incorporates its opposite. But the sentence of Foe's which follows - that we need to speak the unspoken in order to come to the heart of the story - does not acknowledge that each time we speak we speak the unspoken.

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<sup>18</sup> *John* 14:2

<sup>19</sup> Brian Macaskill and Jeanne Colleran. “Reading History, Writing Heresy: The Resistance of Representation and the Representation of Resistance in J.M. Coetzee’s *Foe*.” *Contemporary Literature* 33.3 (1992), p. 440

According to this way of looking at language, each word does not reflect and acknowledge all other words, but rather, has a unitary wholeness, a pure, singular meaning.

Both Foe and Susan Barton come to think of Friday's island ritual of paddling a log onto the ocean to strew petals over the sunken ship as the moment of silence which needs to be spoken in order to give meaning to their stories.

Susan Barton realizes that it is Friday's silence that has directed the meaning of all her story up to this point and that she must listen to that silence. She appears to acknowledge her own inability to control the story. She recognizes that her story does not represent a fullness to which she need only give words, but rather that its very constitution is silence. Although Susan Barton asks: "who will dive into the wreck?" of Friday's silence, we see that it can be neither Foe nor Susan Barton. Her story is, as she suspects, a prefiguring of another diver, of a narrator who dives into the wreck, but to listen, not to make someone speak.

Given the above, we are somewhat surprised to find within one of Foe's last speeches the most devastating pronouncement against belief in absolute representation, in which anything (idea or material object) has a matching word which will make the thing present in speech:

There is no need for us to know what freedom means, Susan. Freedom is a word like any word. It is a puff of air, seven letters on a slate. It is but the name we give to the desire you speak of, the desire to be free. What concerns us is the desire, not the name.'... 'If we devote ourselves to finding holes exactly shaped to house such great words as "Freedom, Honor, Bliss", I agree, we shall spend a lifetime slipping and sliding and searching, and all in vain. They are words without a home, wanderer like the planets, and that is an end of it. But you must ask yourself, Susan: as it was a slaver's stratagem to rob Friday of his tongue, may it not be a slaver's stratagem to hold him in subjection while we cavil over words in a dispute we know to be endless? (*Foe*, p. 149-50)

# **Conclusion**

South African author and critic John Maxwell Coetzee in his novel *Foe* (1986) has superbly dealt with the first novel in English by the English writer Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). He rewrote it and updated to the postcolonial and postmodern contexts.

We have seen that the settings of the two novels are different. Unlike the luxurious island of Defoe, Coetzee's is not romantic at all and is infested with monkeys, fleas, ants, and intolerable winds. As for the time, Coetzee takes us also to 1986 the year of the publication of the novel.

We have also seen that the characters of Coetzee's novel differ greatly from their eponymous correspondents in Defoe's novel: Coetzee's Cruso ("e" removed) is the opposite of Defoe's Robinson Crusoe. Unlike his predecessor, he has kept no journal, he is not interested in escape, and is not manipulative of his environment. As for Friday, he is African not Caribbean, and has his tongue mutilated. We have also found a female character named Susan Barton who was absent in the original and who strives to have the story of her stay in Cruso's island written. There is also the character of Daniel Foe whom Susan hires to write her story and who resembles in many ways to the author of Robinson Crusoe except that the "De" of his name was purposefully removed by Coetzee. Besides that Coetzee has made references to his other Defoe's works, mainly *Roxana* (1724).

The conflict about how to write the story of Susan Barton was an occasion of discussing the issues of representation, language, and power from different angles and stances.

Susan Barton wanted to recount what really happened on the island, to represent truth and Foe to add art. But difficulties arise. She then introduces the question whether a reality can be represented exactly through language. As she chooses not to include the story of her stay in Bahia, she introduces the view that it is the teller who determines what

story gets told. This is what is referred to as authority. Barton here posits the traditional opposition of substantial reality (the referent- here the true body of Cruso) and the ghostly representations (the sign) of the writer. We see here that the writer and his [her] words are, in this equation, a mirror reflecting a solid truth. There is, in this view, a knowable real world that may be directly mediated through the mirror of words.

Susan's suggestion that reality is not mirrored by the words of the storyteller, but is, rather, brought to be by the teller, brings together two statements: that our perception of reality takes place first within language, and second, within the particular social, cultural, historical positions of the teller.

We have also seen that power is part of language's equation. It is a recognition of the ideological foundations of representation: who is allowed to speak, for whom, and to what purpose? Susan also identifies the link between the rationales of representation and logocentrism: the power of God, as the Father, embodies full Presence.

We have also seen in *Foe* how silence or absence provides the space in which meaning is located. *Foe* suggests that there is within every story, within language, a silence, blindness, the unspoken. To make this point is to acknowledge that language, each word, and thus, each concept, carries within it all other words and concepts that are different from it.

Finally, Susan Barton realizes that it is Friday's silence that has directed the meaning of all her story up to this point and that she must listen to that silence. She appears to acknowledge her own inability to control the story. She recognizes that her story does not represent a fullness to which she need only give words, but rather that its very constitution is silence.

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## Abstract

Cette thèse est une étude des questions de représentation, la langue, et le pouvoir dans le roman intitulé *Foe* par l'auteur sud-africain John Maxwell Coetzee, et qui est publié en 1986. Notre travail est divisé en deux chapitres :

Le premier chapitre est théorique et dans lequel nous avons défini, analysé, et débattu les questions reliées à notre thème dans le cadre du discours postcolonial. Comme nous avons débattu la relation entre le postcolonialisme et le postmodernisme, et aussi entre le postcolonialisme et le féminisme.

Le deuxième chapitre est pratique et dans lequel nous avons entamé les questions de représentation, la langue, et le pouvoir dans le roman *Foe*. Dans la première section nous avons comparé *Foe* avec *Robinson Crusoé* de Daniel Defoe, le roman que ce premier réécrit, en termes du temps, du lieu, et des personnages, comme nous avons aussi fait des références à d'autres œuvres par Defoe. Dans la deuxième section nous avons débattu la représentation dans le roman dans le cadre du conflit qui oppose Susan Barton, le personnage central du roman, à Foe, l'auteur qu'elle a loué, à propos de l'écriture de son histoire. La troisième section s'articule sur les différents aspects de la langue dans le roman. Quant à la quatrième section, elle a eu pour sujet la relation entre la langue et le pouvoir dans le roman. Et la cinquième et dernière section était sur le silence et l'emplacement du sens dans le roman. La conclusion de la thèse a ramené ensemble nos trouvailles.

Mots-clés: représentation, langue, pouvoir, Coetzee, *Foe*, *Robinson Crusoé*, postcolonialisme, postmodernisme, poststructuralisme



## ملخص

تقدم هذه الأطروحة دراسة لمسائل التمثيل، اللغة، والسلطة في رواية "فو" للكاتب الجنوب افريقي جون مكسويل كوتزي والتي نشرها عام 1986. قسمنا هذا العمل الى فصلين:

الفصل الأول نظري وفيه قمنا بتعريف، تحليل ومناقشة المسائل المتعلقة بموضوعنا في الإطار الما بعد الاستعماري، كما ناقشنا أيضا العلاقة بين الما بعد الاستعمارية وما بعد الحداثة وكذلك بين الما بعد الاستعمارية والتحرر النسوية.

الفصل الثاني تطبيقي وفيه شرعنا في دراسة مسائل التمثيل، اللغة، والسلطة في رواية "فو". في الجزء الأول قمنا بالمقارنة بين هذه الرواية ورواية "روبنسون كروسو" للمؤلف الانجليزي دانيال دفو التي تقوم هذه الرواية بإعادة كتابتها من المنظور الما بعد الاستعماري. قمنا في الجزء الثاني بمناقشة مسألة التمثيل في الرواية من خلال الصراع بين سوزان بارتن الشخصية الرئيسية ودانيال فو الكاتب الذي قامت باستجاره حول كيفية كتابة قصتها. ويدور الجزء الثالث حول المظاهر المختلفة لمسألة اللغة في الرواية. ويعالج الجزء الرابع العلاقة بين اللغة والسلطة في الرواية. أما الجزء الخامس والأخير فهو حول مسألة الصمت وموضع المعنى في الرواية. والخاتمة تقدم حوصلة لكل ما وجدناه.

الكلمات الدالة: تمثيل، لغة، سلطة، كوتزي، فو، روبنسون كروسو، ما بعد الاستعماري، ما بعد

الحداثة، ما بعد البنيوية