

# AUTHORSHIP & AUTHORITY: FAILURE OF DISCOURSE & RESURRECTION OF AUTHOR IN J.M. COETZEE'S *FOE*

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## ABSTRACT:

J.M. Coetzee's oeuvre with metafictional narrative simultaneously engages and disengages, locates and dislocates a reader and does not allow him to forget his 'readerly' position within a fictive world. *Foe* (1986) offers a metafictional narrative that engages a reader within the thematic tangle of the fiction and at the same time disengages him out of the fiction. The engrossed reader gets busier in formulating the theoretical stance of authorship and authority instead of basking in the fictive world. Coetzee's non-theorised and un-ceremonial opinion against Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault finds vent in this novel. It questions the very concept of Foucauldian idea of Discourse and its exercise of power i.e. authority. It further challenges Barthes' as well as Foucauldian claim of the death of the author. In *Foe*, Coetzee devises his story as the hitherto untold and unknown story prior to the publication of Daniel Defoe's classic travelogue *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), a story spoken by a male narrator (Crusoe), wherein the original female voice and experience remain unheard. Coetzee fictionalises Defoe as Foe and prepares us to see him as a tyrannical author who supposedly worked upon the female experience and invented a story by excluding whatever that was 'female' in it; whereupon, Coetzee delves deeper into authorial anxiety of a female narrator who intends to let the world know the unique experience of her castaway life through a book which she cannot write herself but has to depend on Foe, the author. This paper, within its limited scope, intends to inspect how the issue of authorship and authority is projected, and how theoretical stances of both Foucault and Barthes are challenged.

**Key Words:** Author, Authority, Narrative, Discourse.

## INTRODUCTION:

J.M. Coetzee himself mentioned in one of his interviews that chief concern in *Foe* is authorship. The same issue of authorship and the author's authority is also dealt in a number of fictions such as *Elizabeth Costello*, *Slow Man*, *Diary of a Bed Year*, *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime*. In *Foe*, Susan Barton is constantly suffering from the feeling of insecurity about the future of her story, which is, in her own words "a sorry limping affair". (*Foe* 47) She fears of not only not being heard but also the distortion of her voice and version of her story. One obvious reason lies in her submission of her story to a male author for its shaping, who she unwillingly considers "know(s) how to set in right". (*Foe* 47) Susan is doubtful about the prospect of this second hand narrative with regard to the true expression of her voice and her subject. In attempting to do away with her doubt and her feeling of insecurity, she resorts to the power of discourse. She employs an engaging discourse through her correspondences to control how the story should be projected including assigning limited role and scope to other figures namely Cruso and Friday, the first portrayed (in Susan's discourse) as a man with few words and the last portrayed as a man with no words (silence). But the discursive power of Susan's narrative seemingly fails to control Foe the author.

When Foe contradicts Susan to highlight the story either as a lady's search for her missing daughter in Bahia, Africa or to bring in the fabricated story of Cruso being besieged by the cannibals, in order to make it reader friendly or to meet the expectation of readers, she cannot concede with the proposal. She retorts very

strongly and gives vent to her anger and wants very specifically to highlight her experience of a castaway woman's life:

“Dear Mr Foe,

I am growing to understand why you wanted Cruso to have a musket and be besieged by cannibals. I thought it was a sign you had no regard for the truth. I forgot you are a writer who knows above all how many words can be sucked from cannibal feast, how few from a woman cowering from the wind. It is all a matter of words and the number of words, is it not?” (*Foe* 94)

The story of her experience that she has conceived, metaphorically, turns out to be her true child she wants to give birth to and at any cost she must see it born. She feels more and more possessive and maniac for the birth of her story: *The Female Castaway. Being a True Account of a Year Spent on a Desert Island. With Many Strange Circumstances Never Hitherto Related.* (*Foe* 67) But she regrets her inability to ‘mother’ her story. She admits the limitation of her ‘pen’ which is ‘dull, and vacant and without life’. (*Foe* 126) Her agony and the pain she feels are revealed when she confesses to Foe: “I was intended not to be the Mother of my story, but to beget it. It is not I who am the intended, but you.” (*Foe* 126)

Undeniably, the principal concern of the novel *Foe* is authorship and authority. Coetzee himself asserts: “My novel *Foe*, if it is about any single subject, is about authorship... sole author, sole creator.” (ST pp4-6) Susan Barton is not the author. She gradually realizes that she is only a character in her own story. Therefore, she loses the authority that she wishes to hold so tight. Once realised that she cannot hold the authority, she tries recklessly to prove that she is the authority and she is trying only to transmit the narrative authority to Foe. [Fausto Boni defines ‘transmission’ of narrative in following terms: “Transmitting, in the sense of sending a text beyond a given context of individual, local, or temporal nature, would appear to be one of the functions of literature as a form of human expression.... A relationship between the author and the reader would then emerge based on transmission and hybridization.”] This she does in order to control the authorship. She wants to give shape to her story as she wants. But she is full of doubt with the intention and purport of Foe, the author. In her attempt to pass / transmit / transfer the authority, Susan tries to persuade Foe to exclude few incidents such as her experience of being a single and unmarried mother; the account of the life spent in Bahia in search of her daughter; the details of how Cruso managed to survive in the secluded island; and last but not the least, the influence that Friday brought in her life, if any. Instead, Susan wants Foe to highlight her woman experience as a castaway in a secluded island accompanied by two male counterparts- one suffering from mental infirmity and another a speechless cannibal slave. Throughout the entire novel Susan is pulled by and fixed in the middle of the tensions between the successful implementation of what she wants and what Foe might ultimately produce.

In *Foe*, Coetzee simultaneously deals with the question of marginality that which is deterrent to a woman’s aspiration for being an author. The reason may be attributed to her lack of education as a ‘marginalised’ woman from early 18<sup>th</sup> century. She turns to Foe for the task and that is the beginning of all major problems with Susan’s story and its authorship and authority. Susan anticipates the fear of an androcentric representation of her story which might endanger the uniqueness of her female experience. She fears of being marginalised in her own story and turn into ‘a being without substance, a ghost beside the true body of Cruso’ (*Foe* 51) This fear of being cornered from the centre and losing the ‘substantiality’ by the shadow of a phallogocentric presence, possesses her like an obsession and exerts an influence in her own narrative (or say discourse). She begins to belittle and sometime add extra colour of insignificance to many parts of her story related to Cruso as well as Friday. She employs her power, a narrator’s power for either inclusion or exclusion of anything as she chooses. For Susan, ‘pen’ itself turns out a phallus symbol that cannot reflect the experience of her deep dark inside. She feels an instinctive pressure to recoil back to her deep and dark ‘substantiality’ instead of turning a ‘ghost’ or a shadow or into an ‘angel in the house’ or a ‘madwoman in the attic’ or a more dangerous ‘other’ – “the devil, the witch, and the whore”.

## THE NARRATIVE & THE DISCOURSE:

Michel Foucault in his characteristic cryptic way comments in the essay *The Order of Discourse*: “There is, I believe, a third group of procedures which permit the control of discourses. This time it is not a matter of mastering their powers or averting the unpredictability of their appearance, but of determining the condition of their application, of imposing a certain number of rules on the individuals who hold them, and thus of not permitting everyone to have access to them.” (Foucault 48) We may assume after Foucault that Susan being a narrator holds the discourse, and so far she holds the discourse, she holds the power/authority. Through her narrative, she builds an ‘order of discourse’ in which she places others commensurate to the need of her discourse and supposedly eliminates all those aspects of a certain incident or of a person/character that might hamper her ‘order of discourse’ or her power: the authorial power specifically. This is where is lying the cause of her feeling of insecurity because when she imposes the authority of narrative upon Foe for transporting the same power through story, she falls in the trap of doubt and disbelief about proper and exact importation and implication of her narratives, her discourse, and its order. She is in doubt because she is not sanguine if she has been able to properly convey the facts and experiences to Foe or if Foe has believed truly in her story or if Foe would convey the same through the intended story. The only man who could testify to her claims was Friday but he is ‘tongue-less’ to speak his words; the Portuguese ship captain is already killed by mutineers; Crusoe dies on his way back to England; also there is no evidence to her claim that she was in search of her missing daughter and lived for two years in Bahia in Africa and that eventually she became a castaway after the captain of the Portuguese ship was killed.

Noticeably, Friday is silent or voiceless. The reason stated is that Friday's tongue was cut off by the slave traders. Critic like Benita Parry takes the issue doubtfully and implies that it was actually fabricated by the narrator for the sake of her narrative. Parry further suggests that it could be Friday's deliberate act of silence to withdraw from the narrator Susan's discourse which is ‘Eurocentric’. Subscribing to Parry's argument we may add that since Susan is European herself and Friday is African and since Susan is the narrator and holding the discursive power, she cannot allow Friday to participate in her Eurocentric order of discourse, probably in fear of disrupting her own narrative and unknowingly causing/raising another issue of considerable significance. Two subsequent actions of Susan would go to testify this claim: first, when Susan gets seriously obsessed with the urge to tell her story to the world, she decides to set Friday free and send him back to his own country which she is finally unable to do on apparently valid ground, but it is actually her inability to remove the body that bears the proof or the evidence of her discourse; secondly, Susan narrates her horrified discovery that Friday was not only ‘tongue-less’ but also castrated which may be seen as Susan's attempt to cast away Friday from both the ambits of phallogocentric criticism and androcentric discourse.

## AUTHORSHIP & AUTHORITY:

The issues of authorship and authority together build up the onus of Coetzee's oeuvre. But nowhere has he elaborated his stance other than the thematic presentation in his fictions. However, Coetzee mentions about his preoccupation in his autobiographical story-telling to David Attwell and that too in third person narrative: “In the first half of this story – a story spoken in a wavering voice, for the speaker is not only blind, but written as he is as a white South African into the latter half of the twentieth century, disabled, disqualified – a man-who-writes reacts to the situation he finds himself in of being without authority, writing without authority.” (Attwell 392) Chris Danta opines the similarity of Coetzee's philosophical stance with the nineteenth century Danish Philosopher Soren Kierkegaard. In his essay *Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, Kierkegaard writes: “As a writer, I am a peculiar sort of genius neither more nor less – absolutely without authority and therefore completely dependent on his own liquidation so as never to become, for anyone, an authority.” Coetzee himself refers to Kierkegaard in *Diary of a Bad Year*, in which JC (John Coetzee), the protagonist makes the following remark: “*Learn to speak without authority*, says Kierkegaard. By copying Kierkegaard's words here, I make Kierkegaard into an authority. Authority cannot be taught, cannot be learned.” (Diary 151) JC after Kierkegaard's suggestion holds the conviction that authority cannot be learned, neither can be taught but it can be earned. Chris Danta goes further to eliding

JC with JMC (John Maxwell Coetzee) and risks to see this as Coetzee's own theoretical stance (which probably Coetzee himself would disapprove).

Now, the pertinent question is: how does Coetzee exemplify *Foe* as a challenge to the theoretical stand of both Foucault and Barthes related to their pronouncement of the death of the author? Both Foucault and Barthes were post-structuralists in their respective theoretical approaches. Coetzee's view on Foucault is a lesser known topic except a single line spoken by JC in *Diary of a Bad Year*. However, Coetzee's admiration for Barthes is noted by David Attwell in his book *J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing*. Attwell records Coetzee's pursuit after 'impersonality theory' with both T.S. Eliot and Barthes: "Two of Coetzee's most powerful forebears are T.S. Eliot and Roland Barthes. These mentors arrived in Coetzee's developing artistic universe at different times, though at the right time in each case, and in the right order." (Attwell 3) It is noteworthy that Coetzee's ideas of authorship and of authority closely follow the 'impersonality theory' but it's not the same.

JC in *Diary of a Bad Year* argues that Plato invested the authority with the author for what he wrote or composed and on that ground he was right and justified to expel them out of his ideal republic. The Greek and Roman epic poets invoked their Muse to come and live in them while composing their poetry. JC continues his argument by telling that "the god can be invoked, but does not necessarily come." This was but an attempt to leave their 'authority' and invest the same with the respective Muse/god. JC's contention is that the author can leave or endeavour to leave his authority but cannot deny the reality upon which he is rooted; neither can he dupe the 'real' source/sources from which he has drawn his characters or incidents or both. The same conviction is reiterated by John, the hero in Coetzee's fictional autobiography *Youth*. John's logical contention is that Flaubert's Emma in *Madam Bovary* is surely a fictional character, therefore not 'real', with whom he might never meet in the streets, but he would surely meet another lady like Emma, for "Emma was not created out of nothing: she had her origin in the flesh and blood experiences of her author, experiences that were then subjected to the transfiguring fire of art..." Alexander Effe, the critic, does not validate this logic, instead calls it a 'false logic' from the logic's point of view but goes on to theoretically approve the same by applying narratological concept of 'metalepsis': "...the logic behind this understanding is not quite right, for an ethics of writing and reading, and I consider the utility of the narratological concept of metalepsis for understanding John's logic." (Effe 8) "From a functional point of view, metalepsis can be defined as the shift of a figure within a text (usually a character or a narrator) from one narrative level to another, marking a transgression of ontological borders. This procedure makes the reader or addressee aware of the fictional status of a text and ensures the maintenance of a specifically aesthetic distance, thereby counteracting any experience of immersion in the literary work." (OCD) Within a metafictional narrative structure, such as in *Foe*, the art of metalepsis alerts a reader about the kinship and/or the resemblance of a specific character or an incident with another character or incident already known to him. The reader is able to recognise this and may appreciate the author for doing so. The reader may further judge how well it is done by the author. Thus, while reading *Foe* the reader instinctively begins to compare and differentiate with his reading of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. The reader, who once read Defoe's fiction, now reads Coetzee's fiction (or the inverse). Therefore, the question of reader's birth is absurd as was claimed by Barthes: "the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author." Again, the author of *Robinson Crusoe*, is enlivened in Coetzee's *Foe* and after JC in *Diary of a Bad Year*, we can say that Defoe earns the authority that does not allow to consider him 'dead' ('resurrection of author') and thereby challenging Foucauldian view that 'the mark of the writer (author) is reduced to nothing more than the singularity of his absence; he must assume the role of the dead man in the game of writing.'

## CONCLUSION:

Susan Barton continues her discourse through her correspondence and narratives. Her primary target was to hold the discourse and hold the power (read authority) within the story over Cruso, Friday and chiefly over Foe. Whereas, Cruso's towering figure is successfully dismantled by her discourse, but Foe (the tyrant

author?) does not fall into the spell of this discourse. Summarily, this is (what I mean as) the ‘failure of discourse’ in its exercise of power. He neither grants her authority nor applies his own authority. For Susan shunning off authority is equal to turning into a ghost, a non-substantial object. She begins to doubt in everything real and in reality itself. She turns a victim in the trap of her own story telling. Foe wants to take her out from the trap she has fallen into. However, the novel ends, summarily keeping it unknown to the readers whether Susan could come out of the trap or about Foe’s final working out with Susan’s story.

As a re-telling of *Robinson Crusoe*, *Foe* is surely a variation (manipulation) or a kind of parody of the original story. The same story was again manipulated in Coetzee’s Nobel Lecture entitled *He and His Man*. For Coetzee, it is an investigation and also experimentation into the nature of coexistence of fact and fiction, the relation between author and reality, and the exploration of authorship and authority. Thus, *Foe* is a fiction that fictionalises Defoe as Foe and invests with him the authority (Defoe earns it) for the discourse (such as Hegelian master/slave dialectic) he has created in *Robinson Crusoe*, and thereby challenging both Foucault and Barthes.

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