

Grand Narrative Rethought: A Postmodernist Reading of J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*

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Abstract: The eminent French Marxist theorist, Louis Althusser, views society not as a monolithic whole, but as consisting of “ideological state apparatuses” presented through diverse institutions such as religious, educational, legal, familial, political, cultural and literary institutions. Each of which is marked by a “relative autonomy” and the ideology of which is exercised by a kind of discourse which ultimately gratifies the demand and interests of the ruling class. Foucault visualizes discourse as controlled by power- politics which work through language, culture, knowledge, customs and conventions. But, Postmodernism breaks down all such concepts, posing a denial and subversion of the authority. Hence, postmodern texts resort to metafiction which typically includes alternative narratives and parodies them. Set against the 18th century established canonical text, *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe, Coetzee's counter canonical novel, *Foe*, deliberately parodies the structural pattern of the father novel by inverting the roles assigned to the characters in *Robinson Crusoe* and by adopting an epistolary technique. The neglected, oppressed and enslaved character, Friday, epitomizing master-slave dialectic is foregrounded and though he is robbed of his power of speech, he builds up a resistance against the authority as Susan Burton firmly speaks in favour of 'giving voice' to Friday. At the end of the novel, we see that Friday becomes the controller of the story of the readers. Thus the novel ends on a note of renunciation and repudiation of the authority. The present paper proposes to analyze the novel, *Foe*, in the light of this theoretical proposition and to show how the novel typifies postmodernism.

Keywords: Marginality, Resistance, Giving voice, Subversion, Parody

I

Postmodern texts refer to those literary works which resort to metafiction, literally meaning fiction about fiction. In a metafiction, the novelist's departure from and parodying of novelistic conventions is deliberate and drawing of attention of the readers to its own fictional status is open and clear. So, metafiction is self-referential and “can play an extremely important role vis-à-vis the establishment of a particular ideological position in a work of fiction” (Hawthorn, 2003, p. 208). Thus, metafictional representation shows that postmodernist novelists make a typical inclusion of alternative narratives in the same text i.e. a postmodern text becomes in fact, to quote from Julia Kristeva, an

“intertext”. The concept of the “Other” is very crucial in the formulation of the theory of postmodernism. The postmodernist theoretician, Heidegger views 'Otherness' as material and historical alterity. Foucault conceives of it as covering criminality, madness, foreigners, strangers and women. Derrida sees it as 'remainder' and the most influential postmodern theorist Lyotard calls it 'event'. In her *Postcolonial Theory : A Critical Introduction* Leela Gandhi has very nicely drawn implicit parallel among these multifarious concepts of the “Other”: “The Poststructuralist/postmodern postulation of the 'unthought', the 'remainder' and the 'event' is crucial for its illustration of the unsustainable discrepancy between the finitude of the thinking rational subject and the infinite variety of the world- which is simply in excess of what 'Western man' can, or does, think”(Gandhi, 2012, p. 40). Foucault visualizes discourse as controlled by power politics which is plotted against the ruled and oppressed class by the dominant class which tries to establish its supremacy through language, culture, institutional representation, knowledge, customs and convention. In a passage quoted from an essay by Lyotard by Leela Gandhi in her above-cited critical work, we note how postmodernism tries to subvert the notion of the grand narratives' overcoming of a specific cultural identity to promote the concept of universality:

The grand narratives of legitimation which characterise modernity in the West . . . are cosmopolitical, as Kant would say. They involve precisely an 'overcoming' (*de'pasement*) of the particular cultural identity in favour of a universal civic identity. But how such an overcoming can take place is not apparent (Gandhi, 2012, p. 41)¹

The distinguished Marxist theorist of France, Louis Althusser structures the framework of society not as a monolithic whole, but as constituted by “ideological state apparatuses” presenting themselves in the form of diverse institutions such as religious, educational, legal, familial, political, cultural and literary institutions each of which is characterized by a “relative autonomy” and the ideology of which is put into force by a kind of discourse which ultimately gratifies the demand and interests of the ruling class i.e a discourse regulated by power politics---the establishment of the power of the dominant class-as Althusser himself has put it in his most influential essay, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* in his book, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*: “If the ISAs 'function' massively and predominantly by ideology, what unifies their diversity is precisely this functioning, insofar as the ideology by which they function is always in fact unified, despite its diversity and its contradiction, *beneath the ruling ideology*, which is the ideology of 'the ruling class'” (Althusser, 2006, p. 98).

II

In the present paper I propose to make an appraisal of the Nobel laureate J.M. Coetzee's counter canonical novel, *Foe* (1986) in the light of the above-discussed theoretical propositions and to show how the novel under discussion typifies postmodernism. The slender novel, *Foe* has provoked a legion of critical issues pertaining to 'writing,' 'authority',

'power', 'voice', 'patriarchy' and exhibits how the authorial gaze remains fixed on a neglected and enslaved protagonist, Friday throughout the novel. A very close and exhaustive reading of the novel will give the readers an insight into its fine texture which though explicitly seems to have been woven against Susan Barton's pursuing the celebrated litterateur of England, Daniel Foe for her firm and stern resolution to have her story of the desolate and desert island told and faithfully divulged to the world is implicitly woven against the story of the marginalized figure, Friday. The foregrounding of Friday insinuates a denial and subversion of authority --- the very core of postmodernism. Here, Coetzee has probed into the politics of language and has made use of parody and pastiches, the essence of postmodern texts and has written back against the established 18th century canonical text, *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe, paying special heed to the inversion of roles assigned to the characters in *Robinson Crusoe*. Thus, Coetzee has self-consciously reversed character delineation as done by the pre-eminent novelist. *Robinson Crusoe*, the story of the shipwrecked wanderer, Crusoe who succeeds in structuring an ordered world in a remote island which was his kingdom and of which he was the king with his three subjects --Man Friday, his father and a Spaniard ----tells us how Crusoe nurtured a commercial mindset and a feeling of superiority over his subjects whom he colonized by very tactfully making them realize that they owed their lives to him as he was the saviour of their lives. Hence, it is a tale of a small colonized island which stands in for an entire nation which remains under the grip of the colonizers. Crusoe himself regards the island as his own island and the novel itself speaks of the emergence of the mercantile classes in England:

Here I stayed about twenty days, left them supplies of all necessary things, and particularly of arms, powder, shot, clothes, tools, and two workmen, which I brought from England with me, viz., a carpenter and a smith. Besides this, I shared the island into parts with them, reserved to myself the property of the whole, but gave them such parts respectively as they agree on and having settled all things with them, and engaged them not to leave the place, I left them there (Defoe, 2005, p.298)².

In *Foe*, Susan Barton substitutes Crusoe and the garrulous and light-complexioned Friday of *Robinson Crusoe* has been turned into a tongueless and black-skinned servant and the island exposing physical presences in *Robinson Crusoe* has been changed into a place which metaphorically moves with the bodies inhabiting it. Susan is bent on composing a true story of the island, while Foe is trying to reshape her story by fictionalizing it. He introduces a girl as Susan's lost daughter; but Susan refuses to accept her as her beloved daughter and then becomes dubious about the identity of the girl. She assesses herself not as a worthy and proficient storyteller, but as a poor storyteller who fails to narrate her story impeccably. She makes a submission to Foe with a view to propitiating him. But, ironically she is seduced and tyrannized by storytelling itself. Here, Coetzee has very deftly demonstrated the power

of language which in Foucauldian analysis is exerted by the dominant class. In *Foe*, Coetzee has intentionally parodied the structural pattern of *Robinson Crusoe* by inserting numerous letters written by Susan to the man of letters, Foe into the frame of the novel and by replacing Daniel Defoe's materially shaped island opening up many possibilities with adequate conditions by a sterile island signifying only hardship and suffering for sustenance. The second longest section of the novel throws light on the epistolary technique taken up by Susan with the intention of parodying Robinson Crusoe's journals and the epistles covertly or overtly addressed to Foe interrogate the genuineness of the stories written by literary personalities as they lay emphasis on the point that the stories are mere fabrications with fictional accounts. The great difficulty in smoothly recording the veracious story is the muteness of Friday who is the epitome of master slave dialectic as Susan repeatedly asks Crusoe who brutally cut off the tongue of Friday in order to make him subservient and speechless. Crusoe's reply is heard by Susan as well as the readers going through the novel with rapt attention. The reply is of paramount importance in the context of the novel as Crusoe clearly states that the slavers removed the tongue of Friday as they treated him as a cannibal and wanted to prevent him from communicating his own story. So, Susan feels from the bottom of her heart that a merciless and inhuman deed was enacted by the slavers only for the satisfaction of their abominable interests. She fully understands that Friday was made perfectly to perform the part of a slave; so, he is acquainted with a very small vocabulary again signifying the politics in the exercise of the power of language:

"How many words of English does Friday know?" I asked. "As many as he needs," replied Crusoe. "This is not "England, we have no need of a great stock of words." (Coetzee, 2010, p.21)³

Crusoe's response very palpably highlights the cruel and heartless practice of turning people into slaves treated as commodities till the time of their utility by the callous European colonizers in the African continent. So, Susan desperately speaks in favour of making Friday speak in order to build up resistance against the self-centered masters. Therefore, what she informs Foe is very vital here:

'In the letters you did not read', I said, 'I told you of my conviction that, if the story seems stupid, that is only because it so doggedly holds its silence. The shadow whose lack you feel is there: it is the loss of Friday's tongue.' Foe made no reply, and I went on. 'The story of Friday's tongue is a story unable to be told, or unable to be told by me. That is to say many stories can be told of Friday's tongue, but the true story is buried within Friday who is mute. The true story will not be heard till by art we have found a means of giving voice to Friday. (Coetzee, 2010, p. 117-118)

This lengthy quotation carries a special connotation because it bears manifold symbolical purports. The most striking implication of 'giving voice' to a speechless slave who is relegated to the background is the attachment of special importance to a peripheral character, hinting at the process of de-authorization. Authorship as well as authority is to be

challenged and ignored as Friday's voice will imply his control and command over the act of storytelling, negating that of the white writer, Foe and this undermining of authority will be absolutely advocated by Susan Barton as she considers herself to be incapable of conveying the story to the world truly and as she comprehends on a compassionate ground the case of Friday who is no longer a black Negro for her, but a man with immense potentiality. As Friday has been robbed of his precious speech organ i.e. his tongue, he can only speak through physical gestures. The forceful taking away of his capacity to speak by the slavers makes him manipulate things. This manipulation of objects by him, his cannibal nature in the eyes of the colonizers pose a kind of menace to them and the appreciation of his storytelling rings the death-knell of the stereotyped notion of the dominance of the ruling class. Thus, Coetzee sounds very critical and ironical here, denying hegemonic control of the rulers as this is not the case of the willing submission of the ruled to the ruler.

The very ending of the novel seems to be allegorized by the novelist as beneath the superficial meaning of the final section runs an undercurrent of symbolical meaning. Here the other self of Friday intensely desires to be felt, seen and understood. Derek Attridge in his *J.M Coetzee and The Ethics of Reading* states very forcefully that, "Yet it is important to remember that it is only from the point of view of his oppressors (however well meaning) that Friday figures as an absolute absence" (Attridge, 2004, p. 83) and also argues that "Foe, in particular, focuses on what might be considered the most fundamental narrative of bourgeois culture not only to examine the processes of canonization and legitimization implicit in it and in its popular success, but also to bring forcefully to its readers' attention the silences which those processes generate and upon which they depend : in particular, a gender silence and a race silence" (Attridge, 2004, p. 83). The unidentified narrator pays visit to Foe's house twice, generating two kinds of encounters with the scene of authorship . He visualizes the dead bodies of Foe, Burton and the girl, but he sees Friday alive and hears a voice's call : "From his mouth, without a breath, issue the sounds of the island" (*Foe*, 2010, P.154). Then the narrator notices a plaque on the wall reading *Daniel Defoe, Author* . In the second sequence, he sees again these protagonists dead and Friday seems to be dead, but not in reality dead. He says:

This is a place where bodies are their own signs. It is the home of Friday. He turns and turns till he lies at full length, his face to my face ... His mouth opens. From inside him comes a slow stream, without breath, without interruption. It flows up through his body and out upon me... (*Foe*, 2010, p 157) .

David Attwell has very exquisitely summed up this final section: "Friday's home is the body: his existence is a facticity that simply asserts its own priorities" (J.M Coetzee, 1993, p. 116). Thus it is Friday who holds the fulcrum of attention of the readers and the novel ends on a note of renunciation and repudiation of the authority and of the force

exercised by it. So, we can conclude that the novel partakes of the elements which underlie a postmodern text and make it a typical postmodern text.

Endnotes :

1. I have specifically quoted this pithy passage with a view to showing one important thing that as the universal achievement by the grand narrative is doubted, there is a hint at the undermining of this concept as postmodernism seems to hinder and withstand this 'overcoming'.
2. Actually the novel, *Robinson Crusoe*, was published in 1719, and the passage quoted from the novel appears in its 2005 edition of the UBS Publishers Distributors Private Limited.
3. Originally J.M.Coetzee's *Foe* was published in 1986 and the book was published in Penguin Book in 1987 and reissued in this edition in 2010 from where the passage is quoted.

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