



CULTURAL ROOTLESSNESS AND DIASPORIC SENSIBILITY
IN JOHN MAXWELL COETZEE'S *FOE*

SWAPNILA

Research Scholar
Department of English & MEL
University of Lucknow, Lucknow



SWAPNILA

Article information
Received:14/8/2021
Accepted: 12/09/2021
Published online:16/09/2021
doi: [10.33329/ijelr.8.3.152](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.8.3.152)

ABSTRACT

Racial discrimination and identity dilemmas are the important pillars of post-colonial age. Cultural rootlessness gives birth to alienation and identity crisis. Social structure is deeply concerned by the powers executing within its dimension. Powerful and powerless are in the opposition creating the real picture of post-colonial period that bears frustration, separation, diasporic circumstances and dilemmas of identity in South Africa. Whether apartheid has ended constitutionally but practically it is still prevalent and experienced by the country. Apartheid grants political rights only to small minority of people of the population signifying whites while blacks had always been denied from the legal structures. *Foe* exposes that how slavery has ruined humanity, lead to devastation and crushed their identity and also separates them from their own cultural roots and origin.

J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986) serves as a counter-canonical text to the readers that discloses muted voices and blurred identities and depicts the struggle of a white lady Susan Barton who is always searching her daughter in Bahia and then unfortunately reaches to an island where she met other two chief characters of the novel, Cruso and Friday. In the whole novel Susan and Friday are searching for their roots. The present paper analyzes and depicts the mental conditions and experiences of the characters in the novel and the dilemmas of cultural rootlessness, alienation, racial conflicts, gender bias and struggles for identity.

Keywords: Diaspora, Cultural rootlessness, Migration, Identity crisis, Gender bias.

INTRODUCTION

John Maxwell Coetzee is a South African writer and Nobel Prize winner published his novel *Foe* in 1986. *Foe* not only gained popularity but at the same time faces critical appraisal in South Africa upon its publication. Through this novel *Foe*, we are introduced back to Robinson Crusoe's island and hence to the kingdom of Daniel Defoe's fictions. The story of *Robinson Crusoe* and *Foe* has very close resemblance to each other. The novel *Foe* analyzes on the skill of fiction writing and suggests an investigation of political and racial crises. It narrates the interesting thrill and adventure of Eighteenth century travelogues accentuated by the familiar themes of survival

from the plundering pirates and revolts, the castaway, the child kidnapping, the alleged brute. This novel characterises the sober moralizing mindset of the eighteenth century literature having scope for self-impulsiveness initiating a self-vigilant form of modern novel. In every familiar argument of Diaspora, Coetzee's name comes first as diaspora writer concerning the South African Diaspora.

Coetzee tries to condemn the injustices through *Foe* to expose the fears and reveals the anxieties of the South Africans. Apartheid gave birth to racial discrimination and was once the horrifying political structure of South African colonialism. It creates division among black majority and white minority in South African society that results in racial conflicts, gender inequality, alienation and identity crisis. This creates a scene of shattered status of post colonial being. Coetzee portrays the society's own thriving legal crisis. South Africa has severe impacts of industrial revolution that results in subtle transformation of South African society which leads to migration. And this migration becomes the tool for the white supremacy to subjugate blacks and subjugation creates a sense of dislocation and separation from one's own culture, customs, thoughts and beliefs. This paper discusses the diasporic sensibility of the characters in the novels and will also talk about cultural rootlessness as well.

As Alan Patan has rightly denounces the thought of racism and alienation in such words:

Even where the estrangement and alienation is greatest, the fact of race is omnipresent. It is the English novel of South Africa that has recognized this truth; it is the English novel of South Africa that is therefore nearest and truest to South African life. This I take to be the greatest achievement of our English South African literature, not that it deals with race, but that it deals with life. (Patan 149-150)

Coetzee's literary pieces are the evidences of the banished life of human beings, their languages and multi-cultural identity. In *Foe*, Coetzee depicts the diasporic characters like Susan, Cruso and Friday, their experiences of displacement and homesickness in the exotic land. Diasporas are the hyphenated peoples feeling awkward with their current status or real identities. Their practice provides some gestures of the ideologies, distinctions and obligations which may have driven the acts of movement or migration. Pramod K. Nayar rightly describes the dilemmas of immigrants, "Much of diasporic writing explores the theme of an original home. This original home as now lost-due to their exile-is constantly worked into the imagination and myth of the displaced individual/community. Nostalgia is therefore a key theme in diasporic writing". (191)

When individual or groups migrate from one country to another, one culture to another culture, for economic, political or academic reasons, there is a complete possibility for change in individual cultural and traditional identity which gives birth to alienation and cultural rootlessness. The tremendous cause of cultural gaps and nostalgia is migration and displacement. Migration creates connection to areas of source and destination and can break statistical, economic and communal structures to develop a new cultural identity. In this regard, Stuart Hall states that:

The process of forced and "free" migration have become a global phenomenon of the so-called "post-colonial" world. Though they seem to invoke an origin in a historical past with which they continue to correspond, actually identities are about questions of using the resource of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not "who we are" or "where we came from," so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves: not the so-called return to roots but a coming-to-terms-with our "routes". (392-403)

In *Foe*, Susan reaches an island when she's in search of her daughter and there she met Cruso and Friday. Cruso tells her about how he reaches to this island but there is no account of Friday's migration or how he reaches to this island and his silence give no idea and makes this difficult to know his past. And this type of situation puts Coetzee's characters in the diasporic circumstances and a sense of alienation, longing for

homeland leads to the creation of diaspora writings and quest for self-realization. Coetzee himself has multi-cultural background so he is too unable to claim to which culture he ultimately belongs. Coetzee himself wishes to acquire his own real identity. The expatriate inhabits a minimal or indefinite position where he rests upon the edge of past and grants the destiny to take its own way.

Andrew Gurr has rightly expressed this diasporic responsiveness in the following words, "Deracination exile and alienation in varying forms are the conditions of existence for the modern writer over. The basic response of such conditions is search for identity, the quest for home through self discovery or self-realization". (Gurr 14)

Coetzee's *Foe* written in late-apartheid not only talks about the power potential of narratives but also fuels the argument over the political restraints that discourses should perform. As Brian Macaskill and Jeanne Colleran explains, "The charge most commonly levelled against Coetzee by South African critics is that of political quiescence, of producing novels that neither sufficiently address nor affirm the contiguities between the literary domain and historical-economic political realities" (432). Coetzee may be deliberately does not pursuit to depict black's perspectives, in fact he suggest grand-narratives that remarks on the difficulties of speaking efforts for people whose status one cannot possess. Moreover, as Attridge insists, "Coetzee's allegorical fiction possesses not only the fervour of Apartheidic literature, but also a universality that places him within the literary canon" (212-238). A postcolonial critic Homi K. Bhabha, remarks on the comments of Frantz Fanon's *Black skin, White Masks* that memory is the essential and at times unpredictable connection between imperialism and the question of cultural identity. He states, "Remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the trauma of the present". (90)

This shows a connection to the character of Friday in *Foe*, whose apparent mysterious behaviour caused by anguishes that he had gone through as a juvenile, and whose existence was entirely devastated by the colonizers and other mean corrupt authorities.

The term identity concerns with the title or any kind of identification mark which offers a person to be known by others. A person's identity is apparent by this label. Peter Katzenstein rightly says on identity that, "The term [identity] (by convention) references mutually constructed and evolving images of self and other." (59)

Foe aims on nature, narrative and imagery and inquires that who dwells in silence are contemplative feedbacks to the questions of expression and repressing, opposing Coetzee in his new debut as an eminent South African novelist. *Foe* redefines the prevalent tendencies and breaks off the traditional illusions. In the novel, Cruso is the hero who is a gloomy or pessimistic clod having no spirit, fantasy or cravings. Susan is female castaway who is shattered on his island and into his shallow presence. Friday, who is a deprived Negro presented as silenced character or the victim of colonization, is a servant of Cruso on island, and is not able to tell his past and sufferings because of his speechlessness. And Mr. Daniel Foe who is a writer in the novel, wanted to recreate and transform Susan's story into a popular fiction in his own way. As a white English man he is also presented as an oppressor and the symbol of imperialism and white supremacy. So the story revolves round these major characters in the novel.

In *Foe*, Susan Barton the protagonist of the novel is a socially, culturally hidden woman who appears throughout the whole novel, accompanying Friday along with her, as she is his shadow. The story starts from the point when a white English woman Susan Barton, a female protagonist is searching her daughter in Bahia, reaches on an island where she meets a 62 years. Old European man Cruso, who is old, sullen and hostile by nature. He gives various details of his previous life, his family, his experience on island and about his black servant Friday. Susan surprises that Cruso keeps no account of his life on the island and just passes his life only by the assistance of his slave Friday. Susan motivates Cruso to maintain a daily account but he denies by saying that, "Nothing I have forgotten is worth the remembering". (*Foe* 17)

Susan, Cruso and Friday pass a pathetic life on the island completely at the mercy of the basics. In brief, according to Susan's speech in *Foe*,

"Once I asked Cruso whether he knew no way of fashioning a lamp or a candle so that we should not have to retire when darkness fell, like brutes. Cruso responded in the following words: "Which is easier: to learn to see in dark, or to kill a whale and seethe it down for the sake of a candle?" There were many tart retorts I might have made; but, remembering my vow, I held my tongue. The simple truth was, Cruso would brook no change on his island". (Foe 27)

Susan asks Cruso if he knows about lightening a lamp or candle, so they should not live in darkness at night as animals do. But Cruso said that to see in dark is easier than to kill a whale for the sake of a candle. Once she also asks Cruso about why he is clearing the ground and piling stones whether for plantation or building terraces? Cruso replies that, "The planting is not for us," said he. " We have nothing to plant- that is our misfortune" (Foe 33). Cruso gets passive about any change on island.

Cruso tells Susan that slave traders cut Friday's tongue and by the day he is silenced. But Susan doubts on Cruso whether he has cut Friday's tongue or the slave traders. She amazingly asks Cruso,

"The slavers cut out his tongue and sold him into slavery? The slave-hunters of Africa? But surely he was a mere child when they took him. Why would they cut out a child's tongue? 'Cruso gazed steadily back at me. Though I cannot now swear to it, I believe he was smiling. " Perhaps the slavers, who are Moors, hold the tongue to be a delicacy," he said. "Or perhaps they grew weary of listening to Friday's wails of grief, that went on day and night. Perhaps Perhaps they wanted to prevent him from ever telling his story: who he was, where his home lay, how it came about that he was taken." (Foe 23)

Friday is represented as the victim of racial brutalities and oppression who serves as a subject that beholds his life and loyalty to his Lord Cruso.

In the novel Susan is unwillingly forced and destined to accept Friday's guardianship and as Cruso's nurse and at some extent as wife, she claims that, "it was I who shared Cruso's bed and closed Crusoe's eyes as it is I who have disposal of all that Crusoe leaves behind, which is the story of his island" (Foe 45). Cruso is living a primitive life on island, not willing to leave the island he resides over there with primitive tools. When Cruso gets ill, Susan nurses him and later has sex with him. On the island Susan felt that Cruso is like a monarchical character afterwards, they rescued by a fleeting mariner Cruso whose already sick dies on a sail Susan and Friday behind him to make their own way to England. Now muted Friday having no identity of his origin, unable to express his thoughts or we can say thoughtless. We can assume that in the character of benumb Friday, Coetzee tries to reflect the white man's or an oppressor's strain which is a prominent theme in itself. Friday and his speechlessness turns into a burden for the white man and white lady. Later Susan tackles to teach Friday to learn to communicate but he shows very less improvement. His muteness becomes the hindrance in the path of gaining his identity and recognition. Cruso never let Susan know how and why Friday had exactly lost his voice. Susan struggles all her life to give him speech but she feels that she is wasting her time on Friday. Susan concludes, "the unnatural years Friday had spent with Cruso had deadened his heart, making him cold, incurious like an animal wrapt entirely in itself" (Foe 70).

But at the same time she expresses her doubt that for Friday how it can be possible to know the meaning of freedom if he not even knows his name. For Friday freedom is just a word like any other word. She asserts, "As to Friday, how can Friday know what freedom means when he barely knows his name"... "Freedom is a word like any other word. It is a puff of air, seven letters on a slate" (Foe 148-149).

Susan outlines a memoir, "The Female Castaway" when she enters in England and looks for a writer. Simultaneously, Susan's struggles for seeking her daughter left as vain strivings. The failures of finding her daughter and the truth of futile search has profound impacts on her mind which drives her to persuade Mr. Foe

in recording her experiences and accounts. In the story, Susan's daughter sometimes emerges as dead child and sometimes as ghost implored up by the wizard, Mr. Foe. Susan abandons her daughter at that moment when a young girl comes to her calling herself as Susan's daughter and Susan as her mother. Afterwards, Susan in Mr. Foe's house creeps into his bed. Later the story proceeds with the details of Susan-Foe relationship and her attempt to possess the story and its essence and ends on the conclusion voiced by the narrator (probably Coetzee himself).

The subjects of marginality and colonialism generously makes us understood the smoothening and striking style of concluding the novel. Coetzee in this novel rightly denounces such themes and concerned about the questions of power and dominance. However, it is not clear who cut Friday's tongue, but the narratives demonstrates that the realm and the imperialism has suppressed some and enfolded the voices of others. The only way to resist the asserted cultural supremacy is Friday's silence reversing his back towards European effort to have his tale uttered. Friday symbolises the tyranny and oppression and as the subaltern being in novel and Coetzee asks through the novel, can the subaltern speak and who will claim to speak for Friday, who can reveal what actually had happened with Friday?

'The story of Friday's tongue is a story 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.' (Foe 118)

In *Foe*, Susan shows her helplessness in having her story published because the publishers in England wouldn't accept to publish a story which is written by a female writer, so she decides to hire a writer Mr. Daniel Foe and stresses to write the facts only not anything imaginary. But, for Mr. Foe the story of Susan seems boring and tasteless, without adventures of island, without innovative creations so he wants to blend the story with imagination and fantasies but she refuses and says, "I will not have any lies told" (Foe 40). "The shadow whose lack you feel is there: it is the loss of Friday's tongue." (Foe 117)

Mr. Foe offers Susan to present Friday's story in the own way but she refuses. He says, "The true story will not be heard till by art we have found a means of giving voice to Friday" (Foe 118). "We must make Friday's silence speak, as well as the silence surrounding Friday" (Foe 142).

This aspect shows the gender bias amongst the society and cruel brutalities towards woman's rights in patriarchal society. Gender bias or gender inequality refers the unequal treatments among men and women. Gender system rests in our hierarchical system; flourishes from discrimination, either rationally or culturally established. Simone de Beauvoir also claims that, "woman", and by extension, any gender, is an historical situation rather than a natural fact. (*The Second Sex* 38)

However, suppression, patriarchal tyrannies, discrimination, physical and sexual violence, social injustices becomes the part of a South African woman's life. South African black woman undergoes triple negligence- race, social class and sexism. Patriarchal dominance tries to suppress the female voices and redefines her bleak identity as he wishes. It suggests that there is very less or we can say no scope for female writings in South Africa. This presents a striking picture of male domination and gender discrimination in the country. Susan in *Foe* is represented as the victim in the hands of patriarchy and colonisation. Mr. Foe transformed the original story into an adventurous tale and turns dull story of Susan and Friday more thrilling on the island because he is much more concerned with the success of novel rather than to voice her real story. She finds herself totally ignored from the story as it will serve the purchase of the book. So she addresses him a letter telling her frustrations and desire to remove her totally from the story:

"...you will murmur to yourself: "Better without the woman." Yet where would you be without the woman? Would Crusoe have come to you of his own accord? Could you have made up Crusoe and Friday and the island with its fleas and apes and lizards? I think not. Many strengths you have, but invention is not one of them". (Foe 72)

...

"I choose rather to tell 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* 131)

Coetzee uses women's causes to offer a criticism of patriarchal universal principles that gives authority to the concepts of discrimination, allegiance and identity inside the twofold resistance of male/female, black/white and superior/inferior. Susan Barton represents herself as the symbol of minority, the oppressed and the speechless other. On the one hand she opposes the attempts of Mr. Foe from misrepresenting her story and at the same time unknowingly masters Friday's story herself as she explicate his speechlessness. Susan made all her attempts towards depicting a story of the island. She finds her story as the only story which would gain her the status of a writer through which she would be able to revive her identity. And at the end of the novel, story talks about the sound of prison and lament for liberation. It also indicates towards the desires of subjugated and muted wants to influence the people all over the world. The useless effort of making Friday's sound heard is put back by an effort at making it ocular for others. The stream that comes out from Friday's body resembles to the image of the flow of discourse or a tone that rests lifetime inaudible and the writer urges the reader to feel a muted voice in such lines:

"His mouth opens. From inside him comes a slow stream, without breath, without interruption. It flows up through his body and out upon me; it passes through the cabin, through the wreck; washing the cliffs and shores of the island, it runs northward and southward to the ends of the earth. Soft and cold, dark and unending, it beats against my eyelids, against the skin of my face." (*Foe* 157)

CONCLUSION

On the above discussion, *Foe* represents the diasporic circumstances and cultural longings through the characters Susan Barton, Cruso and Friday. This paper tries to give an insight into the life of suppressed that Coetzee well represented and gives them voice through his novel *Foe*. Richard Begam states that, "In *Foe*, Coetzee seeks to represent the unrepresented as unrepresented to show precisely the necessity of enabling them to represent themselves" (111-130). Interacting to the person who does not know our language is very much difficult. It is problematic to speak for the problems of others or to assume the history without knowing the desires and self images of a silenced man, who is unable to express himself. The novel *Foe* reveals the political and social crisis implicit in the representation of other culture, community and age in history. Friday's silence offers an idea to Susan to tell the story and to Mr. Foe makes him unable to characterise as something other than a static figure. So, the quest for identity and portrayal of that identity continues as an unanswered riddle. The novel *Foe* depicts a heart tearing phenomenon of human life in the South African framework as well as on global perspective.

Works Cited

- Abrams, M. H., and Geoffrey Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Cengage Learning India Private Limited, 2015.
- Andrew, Gurr. *Writers in Exile: The Identity of Home in Modern Literature*. The Harvester Press, 1981, p. 14.
- Attridge, Derek. "Oppressive Silence: J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* and the Politics of the canon." Ed. Karen R. Lawrence. *Decolonizing Tradition: New Views of Twentieth-Century 'British' Literary Canons*. Urbana, IL: UP of Illinois, (1992): 212-238.
- Begam, Richard. "Silence and Must(e)ilation: White Writing in J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 93.1 (1994): 111-130.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Psychology Press, 2004, p. 90.
- Coetzee, J. M. *Foe*. Secker & Warburg, 1986.

de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley. Vintage Books, 1974, p. 38.

Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory*. Ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 392-403.

Katzenstein, Peter. *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*. New York Columbia University Press, 1996, p. 59.

Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English. Seventh edition. Pearson Education Limited, 2009.

Nayar, Pramod K. *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction*. Pearson Longman, 2008, p. 191.

Patan Alan, "The South African Novel in English" in proceeding of Conference of University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, July 1957, pp. 149-150.

Rickel, Jennifer. "Speaking of Human Rights: Narrative Voice and the Paradox of the Unspeakable in J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* and *Disgrace*." *Journal of Narrative Theory*, vol. 43 no. 2, 2013, pp. 160-185.
