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'History's Castaways': Fiction, History,Memory and the Other

Literary revisions of History and the question of Testimony in J.M Coetzee's *Foe*

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Abstract

The recognition of the very act of writing as a use of power is significant. Re- writing the archive, therefore, re appropriates the very instrument of oppression as an instrument of subversion – using the written word to counter the written word. Written as a response or a counter-history to Defoe's classic *Robinson Crusoe*, the very conception and writing of a text like *Foe* is a political act. What makes it even more significant is that Coetzee writes a female

first person narrative as a response to a male centric narrative. The fact that she is a white woman further complicates the novel when she is placed vis a vis Friday.

Literature has long been recognised as steeped in the conditions in which it is written, with or without authorial intention. *Robinson Crusoe,* though clearly a work of fiction, is not just an enthralling and Romantic description of the indomitable human spirit. It borrowed heavily from the official Colonial archives and from unofficial travel accounts whose authenticity was even more suspect.

My paper would seek to examine the process of writing a counter history through literature and whether literature could be considered a legitimate medium for registering such a protest.

Keywords- Oppression, subversion, Colonial.

'The Editor believes the thing to be just a History of Fact,

neither is there any Appearance of Fiction in it…'

Daniel Defoe[i]

The 'History of Fact' has undergone tremendous change since the beginning of the 20th century. Losing its unquestioned authority as an 'objective' discourse, history has been exposed as a narrative – its power play apparent in the question of whose account is legitimised and whose is relegated to the margins. The academic impulse to read 'against the grain' is predicated on our

ability to see history 'bottom up'[ii] .Ann Stoler, in her essay on Colonial archives, said, 'As part of a wider impulse, we are no longer studying things, but the making of them', emphasising on a shift from 'archive-as-source' to 'archive-as-subject'.[iii] It is significant that it was not only *what* was written, but the very fact of *writing* that was put under scrutiny. The imperialistic impulse itself can be attributed to what Samuel Purchas, in 1625, called "literall advantage" - the advantage of writing[iv]. This hierarchy pushed Oral cultures to the periphery and rendered them 'Uncivilised'; as the realm of, what Michael Chapman calls, 'the child mind'.[v] Many were subsequently lost; a loss of memory and identity Coetzee's Susan Barton laments,"We are the castaways of God as we are the castaways of history. That is the origin of our feeling of solitude." [vi]

This paper seeks to examine the efficacy of literature in the process of preserving memory. Through a close reading of J.M. Coetzee's *Foe,* this paper seeks to establish how fiction can be seen as an effective tool for re-writing colonial history, and, most significantly, in attempts to revive lost histories – to use the written word to counter the written word.

'Is writing not a fine thing, Friday? Are you not filled with joy to know that you will live forever, after a manner? '[vii]

Written history is an enduring document. The colonial enterprise was premised on, not just its military prowess, but its power over the systems of knowledge. [viii] Said, in his seminal *Orientalism,* called the Orient 'all absence', a creation of the 'Occident' to construct a 'foil' for itself. [ix]

Working in tandem with history-writing is the development of the discipline of ethnography – the need to 'know' and categorise the 'New World'. As Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin succinctly

assert 'this business of knowing underpinned imperial dominance and became the mode by which they were increasingly persuaded to know themselves that is, as subordinate to Europe.'[x]

The 'Print of a Man's naked Foot on the Shore'[xi], marks the entry of Friday into the text that anticipates the formation of the modern Novel[xii] -*Robinson Crusoe*. He remains little more than that throughout the narrative.

'You do great much good ...you teach Wild Mans be good, sober, tame Mans; you tell them know God, pray God, and live New Life.'

Friday, *Robinson Crusoe*

The eponymous hero, Crusoe, saves Friday from a band of cannibals, because he felt it was 'Time to get me a Servant, or perhaps a Companion…'[xiii] What is significant in this fictionalised account of the Other, is the way in which it mirrors and even exaggerates the stereotypes spawned by the accounts of the 'discovery' of the New World. Friday is his 'Creature'[xiv] and Defoe takes care to give him more Amerindian than Negroid features[xv]. He is a 'comely, handsome fellow… his hair was long and black, not curl'd like Wool…The colour of his skin was not quite black, but very tawny…"[xvi]. The underlying principle that it is his physical characteristics, coupled with his willing obedience, that redeem him and make him more human is not lost to the reader. Even his countenance "had all the Sweetness and Softness of an European."[xvii] Crusoe teaches him the very rudiments of the markers of civilisation to make him 'useful, handy, and helpful'[xviii]. Friday, by this point in the text, stands for the colonised subject - unquestioningly accepting the demonization of his culture and readily offering himself for the continuation of the Enterprise. He is in complete collusion with the very power that subjugates

him. An example of this is the quote I started this section with. Friday is different from a Caliban. In his 'Nature' 'nurture' does, in fact, 'stick'[xix]. His benevolent 'Master' not just saves his physical self but also his heathen soul from the eternal damnation his fellow natives would be subjected to. The hegemony of the colonialist discourse of Enlightenment and Civilization, therefore, lies exposed.

George Lamming and Abdul JanMohamed stress on the importance of a literary text as a site of cultural control[xx]. The claim of 'Truth' that the Preface makes reflects JanMohamed's assertion that 'While the surface of each colonialist text purports to represent specific encounters with specific varieties of the racial Other, the subtext valorises the superiority of European cultures… the mirror that reflects the colonialist's self image.'[xxi] Friday's position as subordinate to Crusoe is never questioned in the narrative and his essence as a character seems to emanate only in his selfless devotion to his white Master. The importance of a work of fiction in propagating the accepted modes of racial behaviour can be seen in, what Bhabha calls, 'signs taken as wonders'. The 'emblem of the English book' is one of the most important means by which the coloniser controls the imagination and the aspirations of the colonised, because the book assumes a greater authority than the experiences of the colonised peoples themselves[xxii]. Thus we have the formation of the canon, wherein a text wreaking of deeply embedded racial stereotypes, abound in images of the White coloniser being the unquestioned 'monarch of all he surveys' ,can masquerade as a children's book of adventure. Re- reading and responding to the canon, therefore, suggests an attempt to re- write history – to undo the demonization of native cultures that centuries of Euro-centric consolidation of knowledge has wrought.

'*Friday has no command of words and therefore no defence from 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.'*

Susan Barton, *Foe*

Coetzee's *Foe,* often called a Post-Modern Robinsonade, defies any attempt for singular interpretation. It is popularly seen as the Post Colonial response to *Robinson Crusoe*. As such, the very fact of attempting such a narrative is a political act. But seeing it only as a Post Colonial response is limiting; as Coetzee himself in an interview with Rian Malan had said, "I would not wish to deny you your reading."[xxiii] It departs from convention in various ways, even in the attempt at writing a counter narrative. Coetzee's Friday is not given a voice, he is tongueless. Critic Denis Donaghue argues that though Susan is occupied by the responsibility of knowing Friday's past, '…it hardly matters whether Cruso or a slave-owner cut out Friday's tongue, the deed is done.' [xxiv]But it is his tonguelessness that form the crux of the narrative. His inability to speak makes Susan conscious of her own tongue and the power she wields because of it. The' deed' might be done but its repercussions and its meaning at the symbolic level makes the excavation of Friday's past an essential exercise. His lack of speech signifies a hole in the narrative; his past is lost to the reader as it is to Barton and Foe. Barton says to Foe, "I am a substantial being with a substantial history in the world".[xxv]It is the lack of it that denies Friday his substance. In the attempt to empower him, Barton forces her interpretation of substantiality onto him – creating a Chinese box effect wherein she subsumes Friday's story in an attempt to represent him and hers , in turn, is manipulated by Foe. In her attempt to pry out a memory by making 'the air thick with words', she ends up using words "only as the shortest way to subject him to my will".[xxvi] Friday is open to manipulation both by the narrator Barton and by the writer

Foe and this aligns him to Fabian's assertion that '…to become a Victim the Other must be written *at*(as in "shot at") with literacy serving as a weapon of subjugation and discipline'. [xxvii]What remains of his tongue is the stub – the almost complete loss of native Oral history is presented through the body of the native. Unlike its precursor, this narrative is conscious of his subjugation. He is therefore 'outside'[xxviii] history as his past remains an elusive mystery, the sense of which is heightened by his tonguelessness.

Barton problematizes the Written versus Oral debate by calling writing a "shadow of speech". The Written (the need to know and preserve Friday's history), is therefore, made to stand for the loss of the Oral (the physical removal of Friday's tongue). Foe's position as the coloniser, set to control both Barton's and Friday's stories, is apparent -"No one is so deprived that he cannot write."[xxix]

Barton's need to represent Friday echoes the same 'permission to speak'[xxx] that Said attributes to the Subaltern Studies school of thought. The question of *who* speaks for the subject and the very fact of speaking *for* brings in the problem of representation. Is the attempt to represent the subaltern not an act of power? Does the attempt to introduce Friday to the world of letters inflict further violence on him?

'But what we can accept in life we cannot accept in history. To tell my story and to 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!'(pg 67)

Barton's assertion (the quote above) about history's blank pages offers a critique of the Euro centric model of history writing. Spivak's[xxxi] question of 'can the subaltern speak?' is given a new dimension. Can Friday speak even after the very instrument have speech has been wrenched away from him? Can writing shed its oppressive past? Fabian calls this the 'anthropologist's dilemma',[xxxii] a remnant of colonial oppression, how can a counter discourse be written using the mechanism of the dominant one poses a vital question. Various metaphors are used throughout *Foe* for the need to develop alternative means of arriving at Friday's past. Foe tells Barton – "The true story will not be heard till by *art* we have found a means of giving voice to Friday" (emphasis added). The attempt of writing a 'true story' through 'art' seems oxymoronic. Coetzee, himself, as Michael Chapman[xxxiii] writes, had said that '…what we have are parables which, according to Coetzee, are favoured by the 'marginalised' groups that are not part of the main currents of History.' It mirrors Ashcroft, Griffths and Tiffin's argument that "the colonised have entered the 'discursive plane'… through *Literary writing*, which legitimise the otherwise forbidden entries into the intellectual battlefield of European thought."[xxxiv] It signals a re appropriation of the very instrument of oppression into an instrument of subversion. As Spivak answers,"…the subaltern has spoken, and his readings of the colonial text recover a native voice."[xxxv] A re reading of *Crusoe* brought Friday into the limelight – his inability to speak only heightens this interest.

The echoes of the need for literature or 'art' in other disciplines, further emphasises its importance. Fabian calls the accomplishments of poet and ethnographer Paul Friedrich, who argues for 'poesis as an alternative to representationist conceptions of language and culture', "one of the most important theoretical advances in recent anthropology"[xxxvi]. In oral societies which preserve memory in terms of a mythic past, the notion of the literary becomes even more significant[xxxvii]. Though conflating the literary and the mythic is problematic, both stand for alternative means of arriving at the past.

Stoler quoting Jean and John Comaroff's invitation to "create new colonial archives of our own" says that '…it entails both giving attention to new sources and to different ways of approaching and reading those we already have.'[xxxviii] Attempts to re-write the canon reflect precisely this. It recognises the absence and the silence of the colonised subject in colonial literature. Defoe's Friday is given a past, is given speech and expression, but only through his 'Master's' perspective. As a character he remains a shadow of his Master. Coetzee's Friday, though bereft of the means of speech, is central to the narrative. Though mediated through Foe and Barton, Friday seems to thwart all their attempts to confine his past (and present) into a narrative of their own. He remains as much of a mystery as his past. As Barton realises to her dismay, his singing is not a way in which he wishes to communicate with her. His creative outpourings are for himself. The 18th century Friday's presence is but an absence and the 20th century Friday re-appropriates that narratorial silence– his silence becomes his presence. The latter speaks through his body, but does not feel the need to converse or to express himself to anyone else.

"...to open Friday's mouth and hear what it holds: silence, perhaps, or a roar, like the roar of a seashell held to the ear."

To say that Coetzee has spoken for the colonised subject through his 'woolly haired' Friday is too simplistic a conclusion. . In 1994, Patrick McGrath, in *The New York Times* claimed that Coetzee has 'consistently returned in his fiction to the linkage of language and power, the idea that those without voices cease to signify, figuratively and literally. His most explicit expression of the theme is the novel *Foe.*"[xxxix] But its various layers are virtually impenetrable – much like its silent protagonist. What is apparent though is that through its complex narrative, *Foe* asks uncomfortable questions about how memory is preserved to form history and how that exploits the vulnerable. As Barton talks of her history and what she wants remembered she exposes her story for manipulation through art. It is the 'dash of colour' to make her story palatable that eventually leads to her being written out of history. Whereas, in Friday the exact opposite is played out. 'Art' becomes the 'button' that the 'buttonhole' of his absent history needs.

In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech,[xl] Coetzee revisits Crusoe and the art of storytelling as a mode of preserving memory. The weary and bedraggled Cruso becomes Robin. Robin, as an old man in Bristol, has gotten used to solitude and laments that 'there is too much speech' in the world. Examining both these texts together bring to the fore Coetzee's own ambivalence towards writing and history. What is significant though is that he places great emphasis on the need for literary expression - "For it seems to him now that there are but a handful of stories in the world; and if the young are to be forbidden to prey upon the old then they must sit forever in silence."[xli] It is through these 'stories' that the history of the world is unravelled.

The Latin American writers used the phantasmagoria of Magical Realism to voice the truths of colonial atrocities that had been written out of history. The Meta narrative and the dream-like quality of the ending places *Foe* in the same tradition. What remains constant is the potency of literature to recreate a past; a past deadened and written out of history by centuries of Colonial

denigration. Marquez, in his Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech,[xlii] had said, "…we, the inventors of tales, who will believe anything, feel entitled to believe that it is not yet too late to engage in the creation of the opposite utopia … where the races condemned to one hundred years of solitude will have, at last and forever, a second opportunity on earth." It is this 'solitude' that Barton seems to gesture towards – this isolation from the past. Coetzee doesn't seem to share the same singular Utopian vision; but 'history's castaways' take centre stage in his fiction and question the authenticity of history – of a discourse that denies them a past and therefore an existence.

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[x] Ibid. 8, Introduction to Part I,' Issues and Debates',p.11+

[xi] Ibid.1,p.112. It is because of the foot print that Crusoe begins to suspect the presence of another man in the island.

[xii] Ibid. Preface,p.vii

[xiii] Ibid.1, p.146

[xiv] Ibid. p.166

[xv] 'Her Man Friday', Donaghue Denis, Late City Final Edition Section 7; Page 1, Column 1; Book Review Desk ,1987

[xvi] Ibid.1,p.148 - 149

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[xviii] Ibid. 1. p. 152

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