

## Susan vs Friday: Coetzee's Foe

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Date of Submission: 09-09-2017

Date of acceptance: 23-11-2017

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### I. INTRODUCTION

How differently would the narrative have played out, if a woman was the protagonist of *Robinson Crusoe*? Whether it was this tantalizing speculation that inspired Coetzee in fashioning *Foe* is anybody's guess. Nonetheless, the introduction of a third character into the island, a female castaway in Susan Barton, is by far the most self-conscious inflection inflicted on Defoe's classic. Understandably, critical readings of the text have invariably seized upon Susan's portrayal as the focal point of attention. Most such readings, specifically those pursued from a feminist perspective, have tended to commend Susan as an iconic figure. Truth be said, there can be little doubt about the praises heaped on Susan's delineation in the narrative. For all practical purposes, it is she who initiates and orchestrates all the main events in the plot. She is for instance, the narrator of the story, the one responsible for the rescue, and most of all, the person who makes it possible for Defoe to come up with his novel at all. In character too Susan holds her own. She refuses to yield into despair despite the various difficulties enforced on her, does things her way without ever compromising on her prerogatives, and if this is not enough, retains her feminine charm exploiting it for all its worth. Yet regardless of all these merits, there is a flipside to Susan's personality that must be critically reckoned with. As much as she is a model of female empowerment, she also typifies the notion of ideological enslavement. This downside of her character, which for the most part remains implicit, comes out in her dealings with Friday. The essential aim of this paper is to bring to light this apparently oppressive albeit subconscious aspect of Susan's role in the narrative. To this end, it initially focuses on exploring the relatively peculiar nature of the association involving the two individuals in question, followed by an exposition of the covert fashion in which the subjugation is perpetrated, and how it is subsequently countered. It must of course be specified that the paper does not seek either to repudiate the feminist takes on the novel, or set in motion a disparaging evaluation of Susan's position in the narrative. All it strives to do is to sensitise the readers to the undercurrent of Eurocentrism that threatens to beset the evidently revisionist framework of the work.

There are several points of contention that jostle for critical attention in *Foe*. Perhaps the most baffling in this regard is the nature of the attachment that binds Susan and Friday together. What makes it so bizarre is the apparent purposelessness of it, specifically from the former's perspective. Friday is of practically no use to Susan. In fact, he is a dead weight to lug around, which makes it even worse. Yet she would not get rid of him, in spite of many opportunities to do so. In the island for instance, all she needed to do was not mention Friday to the captain or the crew. Neither would have known of even his existence, let alone his presence. Susan however, not only mentions but petitions the captain to have him fetched. Perhaps we might put it down to her feeling apprehensive about Cruso's wrath, but what about in England? Cruso dies during the return voyage, so there is no one she needs to be accountable to about Friday. All she had to do is take him to some isolated place and abandon him there. No one would ever know. After all, there is no one to care. Yet she does not. Finally, the most opportune moment presents itself in Bristol. Susan undertakes a tiring journey on foot with Friday to the port city with the intention of finding a captain who would be willing to take him to his homeland. However, when she does find one who agrees to do so, she backs off. Apparently at the last minute she discerns from the man's gestures that he is only plotting to sell Friday into slavery. Susan's withdrawal therefore may suggest a noble act on her part, but is nonetheless very peculiar. After all, if Friday's welfare was really her concern, she must not have gone to Bristol at all. In the first place, Susan does not know anyone in Bristol, whom she could trust with certainty. So there is no guarantee that any captain who accepts to take Friday would keep to his word. For all she knows, he might work Friday to his death in the ship, keep him as his personal slave, dump him at sea, the possibilities are endless. In the second place, even if she finds a genuine captain willing to keep to the bargain, where could he possibly drop off Friday? Susan is uncertain about the precise location of Friday's home. It is only a speculation on her part that it is either in Africa or Brazil, which is anything but practically

useful information. Worst of all, Susan is not even certain which of these two places contain Friday's home. The inevitable conclusion left to be drawn is that there is some kind of uncanny pull that keeps Susan bound to Friday. It is obvious that she wants to be rid of him, but still she cannot bring herself to let him go. What is this mysterious force that prevents Susan from parting with Friday? For the answer, it is the interchange between Susan and captain Smith we must turn to.

It must be specified at the outset that at the face of it, the conversation may seem utterly unrelated to the issue at hand. However, as it would subsequently suffice, it is what transpires between the two that ultimately comes to determine Susan's attitude with regard to Friday. The initial step towards realizing this apparently elusive connection is of course, to acquaint ourselves with the actual substance of the conversation. Probably the best way forward in this regard is to set forth the interchange verbatim. After all, it is fairly brief and saves the trouble of paraphrasing.

It is a story you should set down in writing and offer to the booksellers," he urged - "There has never before, to my knowledge, been a female castaway of our nation. It will cause a great stir.". I shook my head sadly. "As I relate it to you, my story passes the time well enough," I replied; "but what little I know of book-writing tells me its charm will quite vanish when it is set down baldly in print. A liveliness is lost in the writing down which must be supplied by art, and I have no art.". "As to art I cannot pronounce, being only a sailor," said Captain Smith; "but you may depend on it, the booksellers will hire a man to set your story to rights, and put in a dash of colour too, here and there (Coetzee 40).

It must be acknowledged that the captain's proposal is both original and plausible, though suggested in an abrupt and off-handed fashion. However, it is very unlikely that Susan would even give it a second thought, least of all pursue it. After all, her experiences on the island have been far from pleasant. Yet this is precisely what she does. In fact, rather than just pursuing it, she comes to make it the single most important quest of her life. What happens to make Susan so enamored with the idea is left open ended for speculation, but the significant point here is that without Friday Susan's undertaken mission cannot be realized. Susan's own words clarify why.

"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 (Coetzee 67).

Thus, it is ultimately her ambition to realize her island story in print that withholds Susan from abandoning Friday. After all, having him around is her only chance to solve the mystery of his muteness. With Cruso dead, it is only Friday from whom the secret can be possibly discerned. Of course, it is uncertain when she would be able to extract the secret, if at all she manages to do it. Nonetheless, the intensity of her passion to realize her publishing aspiration would not let Susan rest till she finds a means.

.....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 118).

Imparting voice to Friday may solve Susan's problem of publishing her island memoir, but in what way does it serve Friday? How does the whole thing stack up from Friday's perspective? There are two levels at which we can tackle this question. At the purely material level, one might argue that Friday being an equal stake holder to Susan in the enterprise, naturally stands to partake of the possible fame and wealth that may accrue from the project. This would obviously improve his lot in life substantially. As Susan explains  
There will be no more need for you to live in a cellar. You will have money with which to buy your way to Africa or Brazil, as the desire moves you, bearing fine gifts, and be reunited with your parents, if they remember you, and marry at last and have children, sons and daughters (Coetzee 58).

Alluring as these prospects are, what is the probability of them ever coming to pass. Given the kind of uncertain permutations involved, none can predict. The material angle is therefore a speculative exercise at best. The second level at which the issue may be addressed is the conceptual. This is relatively more immediate, realistic and most of all, does not involve any undue speculations into the future. The real point of contention here is the ideological ramifications at stake for Friday in the face of what Susan is trying to do. To explain, Susan's essential aim is to break Friday's silence, so that he could be incorporated into her story. In doing this, all she is striving to achieve, at least from her perspective, is make the island saga whole. However, what she is in effect doing, which she is probably not aware of, is fashion him into a discourse, her discourse. This is to say, she is endeavouring to configure him in terms of her occidental world view, which in both scope and significance besets Friday's own. Susan thus, is essentially seeking to mould Friday against his own self, alienate him from his real being. This is indeed ironic for Susan in actuality wants to liberate Friday from enslavement. One of the first thing she does after Cruso's death is in fact, inscribe a note proclaiming Friday's

freedom, which she hangs around his neck. Yet here too counter to her conscious wish, she only succeeds in affirming her desire for supremacy and control over Friday.

Friday is no more in subjection than my shadow is for following me around. He is not free, but he is not in subjection. He is his own master, in law, and has been since Cruso's death.' 'Nevertheless, Friday follows you: you do not follow Friday. The words you have written and hung around his neck say he is set free; but who, looking at Friday, will believe them?' (Coetzee 150).

The fact that she is not consciously responsible for the dire consequences ensuing from her actions, may exonerate Susan personally but is no cause for comfort. As a matter of fact, it only brings home the appallingly covert and gruesome feature of the problem. This is indeed a critical point to consider not just in view of the issue at hand, but that of postcolonial studies in general. At a time when the utility and relevance of postcolonialism is being increasingly questioned, the circumstances present a most persuasive and emphatic case for its retention. People may change, conscious perceptions may transform, but the colonial ideology continues to remain functional subconsciously. We therefore need postcolonial studies more than ever to successfully counter the deprivations of colonialism. Returning to the Conundrum of Friday, it may be safely assumed that the crux of the problem is relatively clear. It is not the person in Susan, but the western centric discourse that conditions her, which is really at fault. If Friday is to be truly liberated, then it is vital that the latter be confronted and subverted. In the present instance, this ultimately comes down to countering an evident case of phonocentrism on the part of Susan.

Phonocentrism signifies the idea of privileging speech over writing. According to the notion, the latter is only an extension of the former. Phonocentrism thus, is inherently bias. Yet it is this partial tendency that informs Susan's attempts to narrativise Friday. Though she knows fullwell that speaking is out of the question for him, Susan from the very beginning is obsessed with the idea of "giving voice to Friday" (Coetzee 118). The fact that she does not adopt writing as a viable alternative to break Friday's silence bears ample testimony to the point. In fact, as far as Susan is concerned, the very idea of writing is inconceivable without the precedence of speech.

How can he write if he cannot speak? Letters are the mirror of words. Even when we seem to write in silence, our writing is the manifest of a speech spoken within ourselves or to ourselves (Coetzee 142).

It must be clarified here that phonocentrism must not be regarded as merely a simplistic invocation of a prevalent prejudice. It is in fact, a concept that involves profound philosophical implications to contend with. To explain, by privileging the spoken word, it sanctions the presence of a pre-existent subject for reference. This by implication makes it resistant to textual freeplay, reinforcing the myth of a pre-given transcendental signified. For Derrida, this signals a hankering after origins or logocentrism, which he characterises as the seminal flaw in western metaphysics. Phonocentrism thus, is symptomatic of the defect that plagues the very heart of the western critical tradition. Susan's preoccupation concomitantly is not just an unwitting mistake, but a manifestation of this defect that underlies her intellectual lineage as an European. Countering it therefore assumes significance of utmost importance. How to go about it? The key is Friday.

The very persona of the man servant has been fashioned in such a manner that he epitomizes a retaliatory stance to what Susan is trying to do. It is notable that Friday remains obstinately unresponsive to any of Susan's promptings to break his silence. The unresponsiveness here is of course not owing to his depravity. After all, if it was solely his disability that is preventing him from communicating with Susan, he could have very well responded with some gestures. However, no matter what Susan tries, Friday remains obstinately stone-like. It seems more like a self-conscious decision on his part not to respond. It is not that he cannot but would not. The precise reason is not clear, but it is unmistakable that the posture signals an evident sense of defiance towards what Susan is trying to do. In any event, the strategy, if at all it is so, does work. Tiring of Friday's indifference, Susan seeks to break the impasse by striving to communicate with Friday in his own terms.

'While I was polishing the bass flute, and idly blowing a few notes upon it, it occurred to me that if there were any language accessible to Friday, it would be the language of music. So I closed the door and practised the blowing and the fingering as I had seen people do, till I could play Friday's little tune tolerably well (Coetzee 96).

The endeavour however, is relatively short lived. Susan gives it up before long recognizing it to be inevitably futile. Nonetheless the fact that she makes the attempt is critical for it not only signals her desperation to communicate with Friday, but more importantly implies a climb-down from her obsessive phonocentrism. This however, is only a start. The real challenge to her phonocentric obstinacy occurs when she tries teaching Friday how to write. The idea of course does not occur to Susan of her own accord. Indeed, when Foe suggests it to her, she is not too excited about the prospects. Nevertheless she reluctantly acquiesces to try, having run out of options. However, as with the flutes, her efforts are fleeting at best. Merely half a day elapses, before she gives it up for good. Yet unlike in the case of the former, this time her exertions do not go unrewarded.

I turned back to Friday, still busy at his writing. The paper before him was heavily smudged, as by a child unused to the pen, but there was writing on it, writing of a kind, rows and rows of the letter o tightly packed together. A second page lay at his elbow, fully written over, and it was the same (Coetzee 152).

Susan is at a loss to understand what it means, but Foe reassures her. " 'It is a beginning,' said Foe. 'Tomorrow you must teach him a'" (Coetzee 152). It is certainly a start but not as Foe supposes, of Friday reaching out to assimilate the English way of life by learning the language. In fact, he cannot possibly be more wrong. Foe has completely misconstrued the meaning of Friday's 'O'. Perhaps to put it more accurately, he has interpreted it from his own occidental perspective, failing to recognize it could mean something totally different from that of the latter's. Taking recourse to Defoe's original classic would serve to clarify matters here. The specific reference in this regard occurs in the notorious chapter 15 entitled *Friday's Education*, in the man servant's reply to Crusoe's musings on the Christian doctrine of God's omni-presence.

He told me one day, that if our God could hear us, up beyond the sun, he must needs be a greater God than their Benamuckee, who lived but a little way off, and yet could not hear till they went up to the great mountains where he dwelt to speak to them. I asked him if ever he went thither to speak to him. He said, "No; they never went that were young men; none went thither but the old men," whom he called their Oowokakee; that is, as I made him explain to me, their religious, or clergy; and that they went to say O (so he called saying prayers), and then came back and told them what Benamuckee said (Defoe 160).

'O' therefore does not denote an alphabet of the English tongue as Foe naively perceives it. It signifies the idea of native prayer, a primitive means of invoking the divine during pre-colonial times. Friday's action of penning the letter repeatedly thus, far from signaling compliance, actually represents a blatant gesture of defiance to the Eurocentric perspective of things. To be exact, it marks a concerted striving on the part of Friday to reclaim his indigenous roots, while simultaneously seeking to resurrect its tarnished identity. After all, colonial discourse sought to stamp its authority over native practices and beliefs primarily through casting them in a negative light. What Crusoe immediately sets out to do upon listening to Friday's words is ample testimony in this connection.

I endeavoured to clear up this fraud to my man Friday; and told him that the pretence of their old men going up to the mountains to say O to their god Benamuckee was a cheat; and their bringing word from thence what he said was much more so; that if they met with any answer, or spake with any one there, it must be with an evil spirit.... (Defoe 160).

Ultimately what Friday's action reinforces is a gesture of renunciation, where by he seeks to repudiate and resist the imposition of a western centric discourse. In this regard, it is noteworthy that he presents a striking contrast to Caliban, another popular model of postcolonial resistance. Caliban's favoured mode of defiance is to appropriate the mechanism of the dominant discourse and use it to get back at the colonizer. This is to say, he prefers to turn the tables on the colonisers by employing the tool by which they sought to subject the native in the first place. Friday however, is tellingly different. He contends to utterly discard any trace of colonial influence before striving to assert his native identity. This is to say, he adopts the more traditional method of decolonisation, in which no trace of the colonial discourse is permissible. Hence he takes recourse to a pre-colonial past that is untainted by the ideological depredations of colonisation. His act of wiping clean the slate containing the image of the walking eyes metaphorically reiterates this point.

While Foe and I spoke, Friday had settled himself on his mat with the slate. Glancing over his shoulder, I saw he was rilling it with a design of, as it seemed, leaves and flowers. But when I came closer I saw the leaves were eyes, open eyes, each set upon a human foot: row upon row of eyes upon feet: walking eyes. I reached out to take the slate, to show it to Foe, but Friday held tight to it. 'Give! Give me the slate, Friday!' I commanded. Whereupon, instead of obeying me, Friday put three fingers into his mouth and wet them with spittle and rubbed the slate clean (Coetzee 147).

The image is a trope for the idea of European enlightenment, and Friday erasing it clean before handing over the slate to Susan symbolises his utter rejection of its claims. Friday's 'O' thus evokes an indubitable challenge to Susan's phonocentrism, striking by implication at the very heart of traditional western thought. Perhaps a final innuendo in this connection is the manner in which Friday's 'o' reverses the conventional logic of speech over writing, much in the same way Derrida's neo-logism difference does. Derrida's term sounds similar in speech to the French noun difference. Hence if the disparity between the two is to be discerned, it is to the written form that we must inevitably take recourse. Similarly the 'O' by which the native priests of Friday's tribe invoked the blessings of their primitive Gods was supposedly spoken. Friday however, crippled by his muteness, can have access to it only by resorting to the written form.

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IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) is UGC approved Journal with Sl. No. 5070, Journal no. 49323.

Dr. V. Vijayalayan M. A *Susan vs Friday: Coetzee's Foe.*" IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS), vol. 22, no. 11, 2017, pp. 01-05.