

UCLA

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies

Title

Post-Colonial African Literature as Counter-Discourse: J.M. Coetzee's Foe and the Reworking of the Canon

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4ph014jj>

Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 32(3)

ISSN

0041-5715

Author

Kehinde, Ayobami

Publication Date

2006

DOI

10.5070/F7323016508

Copyright Information

Copyright 2006 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

Post-Colonial African Literature as Counter-Discourse: J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* and the Reworking of the Canon

Ayobami Kehinde

Abstract

Post-colonial African novels have become veritable weapons used to dismantle the hegemonic boundaries and determinants that create unequal relations of power, based on binary oppositions such as Us and Them, First World and Third World, White and Black, Colonizer and Colonized, etc. Actually, the African novel occupies a central position in the criticism of colonial portrayals of the African continent and people. It has been crossing boundaries and assaulting walls imposed by History upon the horizon of the continent whose aspirations it has been striving to articulate. It is on the basis of the foregoing background that I examine how post-colonial African novelists have used their novels to facilitate the transgression of boundaries and subversion of hegemonic rigidities previously mapped out in precursor literary canonical texts about Africa and Africans. Since Defoe is representative enough in the canon of colonialist discourse, the paper focuses on one of his texts (Robinson Crusoe), and it also examines a work of a post-colonial African novelist (Coetzee) as a riposte to Defoe's. The critique of canonical works has been a strong current in postcolonial writings. Coetzee's fiction is one of such attempts to engage in dialectical intertextuality with existing canonical works that present negative stereotypes of black peoples. It can be read as a post-colonial and feminist rewriting of Defoe's text with the deliberate aim

of rejecting its canonical formulation of colonial encounter and sexism. The central thesis of Coetzee's discourse in his fiction, as discussed in this paper, is to posit that African history did not begin with the continent's contact and subsequent destruction by the European colonialists. Rather than being the beginning, this period signalled the end of the beauty, communality and reciprocity characteristic of the way of the African past. The paper also suggests that textuality should cease to be a 'battle ground' for orchestrating and illuminating the binary opposition between the colonizer and the colonized. Rather, canonical and non-canonical texts should be a means of promoting racial and gender harmony, equality, concord and global peace.

Introduction

The ugly period of colonialism in Africa has affected the people's language, education, religion, artistic sensibilities and popular culture. African Post-colonial novels have therefore become veritable weapons for dismantling the hegemonic boundaries and the determinants that create unequal relations of power, based on binary oppositions such as "Us" and "Them"; "First-World" and "Third-World"; "White" and "Black", "Colonizer" and "Colonized". It is therefore true to say that the primary concern of most post-colonial African novelists is to salvage the history of their people that colonialism has manipulated (Preckshot 2003; Said 1983) and to critique colonial portrayals of the African continent and her people. Growing in part from a history of active resistance to colonialism, the African novel has been crossing boundaries and assaulting walls imposed by History upon the continent whose aspirations it has been striving to articulate. The average African novelist responds to the urgency and inevitability of this historic mission; he or she needs to put the record straight and illuminate the threshold between past and present, thought and action, self and other, and Africa and the world.

In this paper, I examine how post-colonial African novelists use their texts to transgress boundaries and subvert hegemonic rigidities previously mapped out in precursor literary canonical texts about Africa and her people. Since Daniel Defoe is an important representative figure in the canon of colonialist discourse, I focus on his 1719 novel, *Robinson Crusoe*. I also examine a work by the post-colonial African novelist and 2003 Nobel Laureate, J.M Coetzee as parallel to Defoe's. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986) is one of a number of postmodernist attempts

to engage in dialectical intertextuality with existing canonical works that present negative stereotypes of Africa and Africans.

Central to this paper are two theoretical concepts in tense interplay with each other: colonialist discourse and globalization. In this paper colonialist discourse—a concept popularized by Edward Said in his “Representing the Colonized” (1989)—refers to knowledge of Africa constructed by the West to bolster its colonizing interests. It prioritizes the divide between the West and its Others. The concept of globalization—the increasing interconnectedness of different parts of the world—seeks to challenge these borders and has consequences for the ways in which people see themselves and others. Therefore, this paper concentrates on the dialogue between two texts that represent these concepts, one a colonialist discourse and the other a novel concerned with elaborating a new and globalized knowledge of Africa.

Coetzee's *Foe* employs a consistent repertoire of common postcolonial themes. In particular, it critiques the ubiquity of stereotypes while creating a voice for the most powerless and poorest members of the global community. I should say, however, that since many post-colonial writers have repeatedly explored these fundamental issues, it is difficult to argue that Coetzee's work inaugurates a new approach or theme for African post-colonial fiction. But as soon as one turns away from issues of thematic content and begins to look at issues of literary form, one notices that Coetzee's work immediately departs from the ordinary, the predictable and routine. Each time he revisits these post-colonial themes, he finds extraordinary new ways to explore them with insight, imagination and complexity. In the case of *Foe*, much of

the novel's innovation stems from its dialectical interaction with the colonial discourse embodied in *Robinson Crusoe*.

The Culture of Misrepresentation of Africa(ns) in Western Canonical Works

A century of European (British and French mainly, but also Portuguese, German, Italian and Spanish) colonization has left behind an African continent dazed, bewildered and confused. This is why modern African writers see the need for and profess a commitment to the restoration of African values. In fact, the Western world equates knowledge, modernity, modernization, civilization, progress and development to itself, while it views the Third World from the perspective of the antithesis of these positive qualities (wa Thiong'o 2000). Such negative stereotypes are perpetrated by a system of education, which encourages all the errors and falsehoods about Africa/Africans. Writing on the jaundiced portrayal of Africa/Africans in Western canonical works, Edward Wilmot Blyden asserted over a hundred years ago that:

All our traditions and experiences are connected with a foreign race- we have no poetry but that of our taskmasters. The songs which live in our ears and are often on our lips are the songs we heard sung by those who shouted while we groaned and lamented. They sang of their history, which was the history of our degradation. They recited their triumphs, which contained the records of our humiliation. To our great misfortune, we learned their prejudices and

their passions, and thought we had their aspirations and their power (1990:91).

Africa and Africans are given negative images in Western books of geography, history, and travel; and in novels and Hollywood films about the continent. In these texts and records, Africans are misrepresented and portrayed as caricatures. Unfortunately, Africans themselves are obliged to study such pernicious teachings. Thus, they see the jaundiced descriptions of their landscape and the exotic qualities of its people as proper descriptors about their race and their home, embracing, or at least assenting, to errors and falsehoods about themselves. Reacting to this mistake, Chinua Achebe (1965) declares that if he were God, he would "regard as the very worst our acceptance, for whatever reason, of racial inferiority" (32). He further comments that his role as a writer is that of an educator who seeks to help his society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of vilification and self-denigration.

Homi Bhabha (1988) also declares that Western newspapers and quasi-scientific works are replete with a wide range of stereotypes. He condemns the shifting subject positions assigned to the colonized in colonial texts. He then suggests that African writers should strive to liberate the colonized from its debased inscription as Europe's monolithic and shackled Other. In a similar fashion, Andrew Milner and Jeff Browitt (1991) dwell on the inscriptions of stereotypes of Africa/Africans in Western religious canonical texts (the Bible in particular). Expanding on Milner and Browitt, Dennis Walder (1998) asserts that the Western canons of texts are dotted with a whole complex of conservative, authoritarian attitudes,

which supposedly buttress the liberal-democratic (bourgeois) states of Europe and North Africa.

The colonization of Africa is explicit in the physical domination and control of its vast geographical territory by the colonial world and its cronies. This kind of control is inescapably the most visible because of its total physical and material presence. However, this physical presence, domination, and control of Africa by the colonizer is sustained by a series or range of concepts implicitly constructed in the minds of the colonized. Therefore, more than the power of the cannon, it is canonical knowledge that establishes the power of the colonizer "I" over the colonized "Other" (Foucault 1980). It should also be stressed that available records of Africa's history handed down by the Europeans are far from being a disinterested account of Africa and instead are interested constructs of European representational narratives. This view is supported by Ania Loomba who argues that "the vast new world (Africa included) encountered by European travelers was interpreted by them through ideological filters, or ways of seeing, provided by their own culture" (1998: 71).

The English novel is the "terra firma" where the self-consolidating project of the West is launched, and *Robinson Crusoe* is an inaugural text in the English novel tradition. It is also an early eighteenth-century testament to the superiority of rational civilization over nature and savagery, a text that foregrounds the developing British Empire's self-representation through encounters with its colonial Others. Crusoe, the eponymous hero of the novel anticipates the Hegelian Master. A postcolonial reading of the novel reveals that Defoe discloses—however unwittingly—some deeper ideological operations. Western colonialism is not content with pillaging human and

material resources to sustain and consolidate its power over its colonies; it has to destroy the indigenous cultures and values (religion, language, dressing codes, etc) and supplant them with distorted and totally ambivalent versions. As Frantz Fanon (1967:168) asserts:

Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it. This work of devaluing pre-colonial history takes on a dialectical significance today.

By distorting the history and culture of Africa, the colonizer has created a new set of values for the African. Consequently, just as the subject fashioned by Orientalism, the African has equally become a creation of the West.

On 'his' island, Crusoe attempts to subjugate all of nature, including Friday, his manservant. The founding principle of subjugation is brute force, as he uses his gun to save Friday from his captors (and to silently threaten Friday into obedience). He then begins a program of imposing cultural imperialism. The first method in this program is a linguistic one. Crusoe gives Friday his new name without bothering to enquire about his real name. He instructs Friday to call him "Master." He thus initiates Friday into the rites of the English with a view to making him just an incipient bilingual subject. He teaches him just the aspects of the English language needed for the master-servant relationship— to make Friday useful, handy and dependent. The master-servant orders suggest how Africans and other 'natives' have been tabulated and

classified by the West throughout colonial (and neocolonial) history. The second method is theological and 'altruistic.' Crusoe's attitude to Friday's religion is akin to the later imperialist missionary attitudes to the indigenous religions they encountered on African soil. Crusoe sees African traditional religion as blindly ignorant pagan creed. He believes that his own (Western) God is the true God, and that he is doing Friday an invaluable service by converting him. As constructed moral and cultural inferiors, indigenous people are 'naturally' suited to work for Westerners. When Crusoe wants to build a boat, for instance, he assigns Friday and his father the dirty and difficult task, while the Spaniard is merely to supervise. Perhaps to justify such incipient tyranny, Crusoe sees all natives as savages (marked most of all by their cannibalism) and constantly refers to them as such:

All my apprehensions were buried in the thoughts of such a pitch of inhuman, hellish brutality, and the horror of the degeneracy of human nature, which though I had heard of often, yet I never had so near a view of before; in short, I turned away my face from the horrid spectacle (163).

With tongue, pen, gun, and Bible, Crusoe is able to assert his superiority and assume a new mantle of power. He is a 'Master' who controls and thus can exploit his environment—a budding imperialist conveniently furnished with an inferior Other to reflect, even constitute, the superior Self.

James Joyce also identifies some prototypes of colonial experience in Robinson Crusoe in forms of

colonization, subjugation, exploitation, and Christianization of the colonized. To him:

The true symbol of the British conquest is Robinson Crusoe, who cast away on a desert island, in his pocket a knife and a pipe, becomes an architect, a carpenter, a knife grinder, an astronomer, a baker, a shipwright, a potter, a saddler, a farmer, a tailor, an umbrella maker and a clergyman. He is the true prototype of the British colonist, as Friday (the trusty savage who arrives on an unlucky day) is the symbol of the subject races (Quoted from Susan Gallagher, 1991:170).

Throughout *Robinson Crusoe*, the protagonist embodies Western mercantile capitalism through his money-making schemes and his moral lapses, most notably, selling the Moorish boy with whom he escaped from the Turkish pirates for sixty pieces of silver. He is grounded in a colonial economy, engaging in the slave trade, investing profits, and hoarding gold on the island. On the other hand, the natives, represented by Friday, are depicted as careless, self-indulgent individuals who lack forethought or reflections. This is why the white man who has a life of reason, introspection and faith, intervenes, like the Almighty God, to civilize the savage Other!

Although Friday is described specifically as not-black, and as possessing non-Negroid features, he represents the Black Africans in *Robinson Crusoe* even more than he represents Amerindians (which he presumably is). The novel is set on a New World island; British colonialism at that time was centered in the

Caribbean and its slave-based plantation economy. As most native Caribs, Arawaks and Tainos had been annihilated through war and disease, slaves were supplied from Africa. The triangular trade itself blurred spatial boundaries, and by importing a new 'native Other' to replace the old 'native Other,' blurred ethnic distinctions as well. Everyone who is not white becomes 'black.' It is precisely this developing Manichean dichotomy, a direct consequence of the myth of civilization based on repression, that *Robinson Crusoe* records.

In line with the formulations of Niyi Osundare (1993), we see that in Defoe's *Crusoe*, the Western European self is equated with futurity, vision, civilization, rationality, language and light. Conversely, the depiction of the non-European (the Amerindian, the African) in the text is an absolute negation of the Other. The black is associated with pre-history, savagery, cannibalism, unconsciousness, silence, and darkness. Crusoe, the archetypal Western man, assumes the posture of a king, a prince, a governor, a general, and a field marshal. He is worried by the sense of his self-assumed greatness. He suffers the pang of delusions of grandeur seeing himself as some kind of God. This temper is especially reflected in his unconscious; in his dreams, he rescues a savage from his enemies. The so-called savage kneels down to Crusoe as a sign of reverence, praying to him for assistance.

To a great extent, Crusoe has the passion of racial consciousness. In fact, he is "an unlikable man for [a] hero" (Palmer 1986: 10), an egoist who has little interest in anyone but himself. In his portrayal of Africans and Amerindians, Defoe expresses an opinion common to his contemporaries. *Robinson Crusoe* articulates the European attitude about the peoples of Africa and the Americas that

structured an expanding imperialist venture. Although once considered a model for alternative Rousseauian concepts of education and growing up, the 'Robinsonade' and its protagonist, Crusoe, have had to face harsh criticism. In fact, Crusoe, his kith and kin, and Defoe, the author, are guilty of ethnocentrism, logocentrism, proto-imperialism, and even megalomania. Crusoe is not a role model in this multicultural, pluralistic world of ours. Instead, he plays a role that begs to be rewritten – thus the existence of alternative versions of the Robinson myth in post-colonial fiction, including Coetzee's *Foe*.

Countering Misrepresentation: Post-Colonial Literature in Dialogue with Western Canonical Works

What is today known as colonial discourse, post-colonial theory, or postcolonialism is an offshoot of the anti-colonial activism and writings of such nationalists as Leopold Sedar Senghor, Frantz Fanon, and Amilcar Cabral (Ashcroft, et al. 1989; Schipper 1996; Zukogi 2002). The early writings of the nationalists set the tone, pace, and character of the debate in the field today. The publication of four key texts, whose views many Africans share, also energized the tempo of counter-discourse in Africa. These texts are Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (originally published posthumously in 1961); Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972); Edward Said's *Orientalism* (originally published in 1978); and Chinweizu et al's *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* (1980). These counter-hegemonic texts decentered, even undermined the intellectual heritage of the Western Academy while questioning the foundational assumptions behind the Western colonial, imperial, and neo-colonial project.

During this same period, African writers such as Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa'Thiongo critiqued European imperialism; a significant portion of contemporary African literature has been preoccupied with reworking Western canonical works. This is a logical and natural response because African contact with Europe has greatly impacted their socio-cultural, political, economic, and psychological wellbeing. The psychic dislocation and physical debilitation that this contact has created is so enormous that it rarely escapes the critical attention of African writers; and more recently, of the post-colonial discourse analyst. As Ime Ikiddeh claims in his 'Forward' to Ngugi's *Homecoming*, "There can be no end to the discussion of [the] African encounter with Europe because the wounds inflicted touched the very springs of life and have remained unhealed because they are constantly being gashed open again with more subtle, more lethal weapons" (1972: xii).

The fundamental engagement of African literature is with the colonial presence in Africa, dismantling its dehumanizing assumptions and resisting its pernicious consequences. The African novel, in particular, reflects an evolving consciousness at once historical, cultural, and political. It strives to counter the negative picture of Africa and Africans promulgated by some European writers, including Joyce Cary, Graham Greene, Joseph Conrad, Ryder Haggard, Daniel Defoe, and William Shakespeare. Even as African novelists seek to interrogate and modify European racism and exploitation (Schipper 1996), in literature as well as in practice, they use their writings to "bridge" the cultural gap between Blacks and Whites. Their reactions to precursor colonial canonical works have emphasized their own differences and unique qualities. They claim their own culture, aesthetics, history, and

essence. This nationalist temper is also reflected in many movements (like Pan Africanism, the Black Renaissance, Negritude, and Black Consciousness) that search for African roots and black traditions. In Schipper's words, "The medium of the novel proved very suitable to the needs of African writers who wanted to address colonial reality as they have experienced it. In their work, the novelists uprooted the myth that riches and power make the white man superior" (1996: 37-38).

African writers see the need to tell the story of their people and their continent. According to Ernest Emenyonu, any attempt to relinquish this God-given right would "allow foolish foresters stray in and mistake the middle of a mighty African baobab for an African tree trunk" (2002: 4). The idea that only one group of privileged people (in this case, Europeans) is capable of interpreting the world should be interrogated. For instance, Achebe, in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and his other polemical writings, claims that the missionaries and explorers have lied about Africa. He argues that the depictions of the human and political landscapes of Africa enshrined in Western canonical works are biased and ignorant. Achebe thereby assumes the task of reclaiming the African story from the Europeans and asserts the primacy of African culture. To Achebe (1965), the ultimate service of African writers to their people is to make African society regain belief in itself and put away the complexities of years of denigration and self-abasement.

Inheriting Achebe's legacy, contemporary African critics and writers are required to act with integrity and dedication. This is because the colonial discourses about Africa and Africans need to be subjected to further reworking with the aim of correcting erroneous notions about Africa and Africans. In the words of Walder, "Éthese

works require a new sense of their place in the changing world of today, if they are to retain their freshness and relevance" (1998: 4). These reworkings often take the form of "national allegories," as Fredric Jameson (1986) suggests; or appear as inversions of black/white or center/periphery binaries as in the work of Fanon, Said, Salman Rushdie, and Gayatri Spivak; or question the binary structures of thought as in the work of Homi Bhabha. African authors must keep responding not only to the burdens of the past but also to the exigencies of the present and the challenges of the future.

Salman Rushdie (1982), in a much quoted statement, writes that, "The Empire writes back with a vengeance" to the imperial "centre". He admits that postcolonial writing is imbued with nationalist assertions which involve the "Other," claiming itself as central and self-determining by questioning the basis of European and British metaphysics. The postcolonial writers therefore challenge the world-view that can polarize centre and periphery in the first place. For his part, Fanon (1967) sees the dichotomy of the colonizer and colonized as a product of a 'manicheism delirium,' the result of which is a radical division into paired oppositions, such as good and evil, true and false, and white and black. This dichotomy is absolutely privileged in the discourse of the colonial relationship. Thus, the colonial discourse needs new liberating narratives to free the colonized from this disabling position. Therefore, the central 'postcolonialist' argument is that "postcolonial culture has entailed a revolt of the margin against the metropolis, the periphery against the centre, in which experience has become 'uncentred,' pluralistic and nefarious" (Ashcroft et al, 1989: 12).

In his "Representing the Colonized," Said (1989) prioritizes narratives which take the Third World seriously

by placing what it has to say on equal terms with its own explanations. Also, Gayatri Spivak (1994) is highly critical of the current intellectual enterprise of constituting the colonial subject as Other in her "Can the Subaltern Speak?" No place is created for the subaltern to speak, as colonialism's narrativization of African culture effaces all traces of African voices. Anne Maxwell (1991) believes that postcolonial critics should concentrate on articulating the margins and gaining control of the way in which the marginalized are represented, and that the postcolonial intellectual should break with the paradigms of representation that promote antagonism between the First and Third Worlds.

J.M Coetzee's *Foe* and the Debunking of Racial and Patriarchal Egoism in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*

Chinua Achebe, J.M Coetzee, Wilson Harris, George Lamming, Patrick White, Margaret Atwood, Jean Rhys and other postcolonial writers have rewritten particular works from the English canon "with a view to restructuring European 'realities' in postcolonial terms, not simply by reversing the hierarchical order, but by interrogating the philosophical assumptions on which that order was based" (Ashcroft et al. 1995: 33). The African story continues to be (re)told by postcolonial writers. When Coetzee's *Foe* was published in 1986, it added to the growing corpus of counter-discursive writing in postcolonial literature. However, before turning to the text, it is germane to clear some grounds. Just as Coetzee is among the most critically revered of world writers, he is also one of the most misunderstood and misrepresented African writers. This is the opinion of critics like Kwaku Korang and Andre Viola, who observe the difficulty in

Coetzee's fiction of reconciling a liberal humanist approach with the reality of the oppressive power hegemonies in South Africa, which negate such a vision. However, I believe that carefully considering the various systems of oppression with which Coetzee's novels contend provides a powerful antidote to viewing him as an 'apolitical' relativist. The informed critic of Coetzee's fiction should be less concerned with the fiction's absolute or historical truth than with its fictional truth as embodied in the narrative. His works engage with a vast literary heritage, question the authority invested in literary discourse, and investigate power dynamics, political oppression and ethical responsibility.

Foe is one of the most powerful responses to the 'Robinsonian' myth ever written. It raises some central postcolonial issues, including the following: who will write, that is, who takes up the position of power, pen in hand; who will remain silent, referring to both the issues of silencing and speech; and how do colonial regimes distribute and exercise power, and, in consequence, create zones of powerlessness? Attempting to demythologize a dominant knowledge about empire, *Foe* is imbued with a 'fresh' paradigm; its textual universe is tailored towards not only revisiting but also retracting the long line of epistemic violence foisted on the psyche and intellect of the Other. The text seeks to uncover the silence and oppression at the heart of Defoe's classic novel in order to identify the power of anti-colonial as well as colonial discourse.

Coetzee slips through the operations of various critical unfoldings in Defoe's canonical text and sets up another text as a relatively autonomous but supplementary interlocutor, which seems to add to and substitute the original at the same time. According to David Attwell,

"although it is true that his novels are nourished by their relationship with canonical Western literature, it is equally true that through his complicated postcoloniality, he brings that situation to light and finds fictional forms wherein it can be objectified, named and questioned" (1993: 4-5). *Foe* deliberately rejects *Robinson Crusoe's* canonical formulation of the colonial encounter and addresses the silences and prejudices in its precursor, while actually invading and deconstructing the economic utopia of Crusoe's island.

Coetzee does this by recasting both Defoe (the author) and his protagonist (Crusoe) as minor characters within a woman-centered narrative, thereby distorting and twisting the 'truths' that the reader assumes from Defoe's original. A character omitted from and silenced by Defoe's account (the female) is foregrounded in Coetzee's version through the narrator Susan, an English woman marooned for a year on the island with Cruso and Friday. The optimistic Robinson Crusoe, in *Foe*, becomes Cruso, a weak-minded mountain of insecurity who, unlike the original protagonist, lives sullenly on a desolate island with only a few tools, no gun, no Bible, no writing utensils, and no records. He labors every day to construct gigantic terraces, walled by stone, which stand empty and barren, for he has nothing to plant. In Crusoe's island, there are no providential seeds, spiritual or natural. Such meaningless construction also symbolizes the hollowness at the core of Empire-building. Crusoe as colonist manqué is not only impotent but also ludicrous.

Perhaps most significantly, Friday becomes an eccentric mute with whom the real secrets of the story exist. Furthermore, Coetzee demystifies the racial slippage surrounding Friday. Coetzee has stated that in *Robinson Crusoe*, "Friday is a handsome Carib youth with near

European features. In *Foe*, he is an African" (1987: 463). By transforming the light-skinned, delicately-featured Amerindian into a woolly-haired, thick-lipped, dark complexioned Negro, Coetzee makes visible the racist subtext that drives Defoe's novel, colonialism in the Caribbean, and imperialism in Africa. Reading *Foe* allegorically, then, suggests a reaction against imperialism and white supremacy. As Derek Attridge maintains, *Foe* represents

...a mode of fiction that explores the ideological basis of canonization, that draws attention to the existing canon, that thematizes the role of race, class, and gender in the process of cultural acceptance and exclusion, and that, while speaking from a marginal location, addresses the question of marginality – such a mode of fiction would have to be seen as engaged in an attempt to break the silence in which so many are caught, even if it does so by literary means that have traditionally been celebrated as characterizing canonic art (1992: 217).

While *Foe* re-writes a canonical text from marginal perspectives, it still demonstrates the power of the original to command the desire for imitation; it also exposes the silences and contradictions of the precursor text. *Foe* privileges the intersection or partial overlap between the postmodern and the postcolonial in contemporary cultures, with reference to its resistance to the monologic meta-narratives of modernism and realism (in arts), to Orientalism (in cultural anthropology), to colonialism and

racism (in geopolitical history, fundamentalism and nativism) and to patriarchy (in gender relations). Here, I want to emphasize how the novel's stylistic and ideological strategies challenge established ways of writing about race. For instance, the resolution of the plot is an ideologically sensitive site for this challenge. It contradicts the typical ending of the colonial texts, which asserts that choice is over and that the growth of character or the capacity for defining action has ceased.

The core of Coetzee's *Foe* lies in the deconstruction of established literary styles and conventional roles assigned to blacks and women—beginning, as Silvia Nagy-Zekmi has explained, in reference to feminist and postcolonial theory, “by simply subverting images of existing hierarchies (gender/ class/ culture/ race) in a patriarchal or colonial setting” (2002:1). *Foe* reworks *Robinson Crusoe*'s representation of black identity in general, and female identity in particular; of the values of the colonizer and those of the colonized; and of the forces of patriarchy. Friday (the archetypal black man, the oppressed race) and Susan (the womenfolk) in *Foe* transgress social taboos, as part of Coetzee's depiction of colonized/ female resistance to colonial/ patriarchal power.

Although Friday seems to be an object of colonial knowledge due to his tongueless-ness, he, like the black world, has his own story to tell even though a monocultural, metropolitan discourse cannot hear it. He seems to be the embodiment of a world of self-absorption, without self-consciousness, without the Cartesian split of self and other, without desire. Yet his silence is not an ontological state but a social condition imposed upon him by those in power. He therefore represents all human beings who have been silenced because of their race,

gender, or class. The apparent inaccessibility of his world to the Europeans in the story is an artist's devastating judgment of the crippling anti-humanist consequences of colonialism and racism on the self-confident white world. To Dick Penner, "Friday's muteness can be read as a symbol of the inexpressible psychic damage absorbed by blacks under racist conditions" (1989: 124). Yet his speechlessness, through negative inversion, becomes a symbol of a pre-capitalist Africa where history was transmitted and lived with full articulation, authenticity, and authority.

Furthermore, Friday's muteness marks Coetzee's rejection of the limited authority of the 'canon.' This rejection takes partial shape in formal innovations and subversions of generic expectations. Throughout the novel, Friday's silence and enigmatic presence gain power until they overwhelm the narrator at the end. Friday's detachment causes the hole in Susan's narrative and is the primary cause of Susan's uncertain narrative voice. In the last two sections of the novel, Friday, as a symbol of the black world, gains in stature as the site of a shimmering, indeterminate potency that has the power to engulf and cancel Susan's narrative, and ultimately, Coetzee's novel itself. This is an instance of the problem of closure. Friday, the radical black man, possesses the key to the ideologically sensitive site of the narrative. He cannot give voice to this key, and no external discourse could adequately represent his knowledge. Coetzee does not allow Susan the authority to construct the racial difference. Susan's discourse (as well as the novel's) cannot appropriate the image of Africa and Africans, thereby contradicting the endings of typical colonial texts, which assert that choice is over and that the growth of character or the capacity for defining action has ceased.

In frustration, Susan comments, "I do not know how these matters can be written of in a book" (120). It is precisely Friday's lack of speech and the collapse of narrative voice by Susan that enter a challenge to the literary canon in *Foe*.

Friday's own writing—his marks on the slate—shows him to be the "wholly Other" (Spivak 1990: 20). Writing is a means for him to prove that he is a human being and not an ordinary thing. For instance, Friday installs himself at Crusoe's desk, assuming the position of authorship with a quill pen in hand. The embarrassed Susan intervenes and tells Crusoe, "he will foul your papers," but Crusoe replies, "my papers are fouled enough, he can make them no worse" (151). This interchange upsets expectations of mastery (the white man and his literary canon), and it has been precipitated by Friday's silent, subversive assumption of 'Western' prerogatives.

Such subversive assumptions become points of 'education' for Susan, who now believes that all races are equal: "We are all alive, we are all substantial, we are all in the same world" (152). Thus, *Foe*, like much post-colonial literature, rests upon a single ethico-discursive principle: the right of formerly unrepresented human groups to speak for and represent themselves in political and intellectual domains which normally exclude them. These domains usurp their signifying and representing functions, and override their historical reality. Susan must unravel the mystery of Friday's silence as well as the silence surrounding him in order to see into the 'eyes' of the island. Friday has the ability to override both Susan's desire for authorization and Crusoe's ability to grant it. Friday possesses the history that Susan is unable to tell, and it will not be heard until there is a means of giving voice to Friday. *Foe* is suggesting that the world's harmony

and true 'progress' will improve if there is mutual respect and cross-fertilization of ideas. Friday's voice, to wit the black world's voice, will not only liberate himself, but also Susan (and, the reader assumes, the European world represented by the archetypal Crusoe). This is because her story is dependent upon the meaning of Friday's character, and, therefore, that of the black world. Therefore, in *Foe*, the reader witnesses a gradual development towards and a concern for giving voice to the Other—long silenced in literary history. Consequently, the "subaltern has spoken, and his readings of the colonial text recover a native voice" (Spivak 1990: 110). In *Foe*, Coetzee uses a strategy of reading and writing that will "speak to," as distinct from "speaking for," the historically subaltern (wo)man. Although this involves an act of the imagination, it is a profoundly viable vision.

Coetzee has shifted the emphasis from the ostensibly unmediated narrative of *Robinson Crusoe* to the informed intelligence of multiple points of view. Foe, the fictional meta-author, would have preferred a replication of the story as it occurs in Defoe's text. Foe wants to control the story of Susan and Friday; he is more interested in what will sell than the truth of the story. He finds the story lacking in exotic circumstances—for instance, a threat of cannibals landing on the island, as found in the original text. Susan, in her feminist temper, retorts: "What I saw, I wrote. I saw no cannibals; and if they came after nightfall and fled before the dawn, they left no footprint behind" (54).

In addition, as a racist and a misogynist, Foe wants the significance and meaning of Friday's life to determine Susan's story. This is to suggest that authorship and authority are equivalent. Throughout much of the novel, however, Susan resists Foe's authority and insists on

telling her own story. Susan wonders: if stories give people their identities, and stories are written by others, do people really exist for themselves?

The concluding image of the novel envisions a future when people exist as full individuals and when an equal exchange is possible among races. Susan lies face-to-face with Friday underwater, and feels "a slow stream, without breath, without interruption" (157) coming from inside him and beating against her eyelids—against the skin of her face. This is Coetzee's articulation of a strong desire for reciprocal speech from the victims of colonization—a cross-cultural dialogue. This image positively reinforces the ironic thesis developed throughout *Foe*: that African history did not begin with the continent's contact and subsequent destruction by the European colonialists. Rather than the beginning of African history, the colonial period signals the end of the beauty, communality and reciprocity characteristic of African culture. In the post-colonial era, it is the task of African literature to reclaim that which has been misappropriated and to reconstruct that which was been damaged, even destroyed. In fact, the tone and the narrative voice of the novel give it with the authority to function as a counter-discourse.

Conclusion

I have argued that Coetzee's *Foe* serves as a counter-text to the dominant discourse of representation in general, and to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* in particular. Such counter-discourse is quite necessary because knowledge about the Other, whether seen as Oriental, as African, as Caribbean, or aboriginal, is neatly packaged and disseminated through the medium of Western

literature and travelogue. Consequently, one strong reason for the emergence of postcolonial theory has been to re-think the European representations of non-Europeans and their cultures. To this end, Coetzee, like other postcolonial African writers, has undermined dominant notions of history by contradicting, challenging, or disrupting the prevailing discourse (Said 1993: xxiv). Yet beyond the foisted haze, the Africa that Coetzee depicts in the novel is whole: a community at peace with itself, whose pristine values are crystallized in the beauty of relationship, community, and above all, reciprocity.

I wish to suggest that textuality should cease to be a 'battle ground' for orchestrating and illuminating the binary opposition between the colonizer and the colonized. Rather, canonical and non-canonical texts should be a means of promoting racial harmony, equality, and concord. This is in alliance with Bhabha's opinion that textuality should have more to offer in the way of hope for the oppressed. In his words:

Must we always polarize in order to polemicise? Are we trapped in a politics of struggle where the representation of social antagonisms and social contradictions can take no other form than a binary of theory versus politics? Can the aim of freedom or knowledge be the simple inversion of the relation of oppressor and oppressed, margin and periphery, negative image and positive image? (1988: 5)

What is needed in this millennium is the ability of disparate races and ethnic groups to come together to confront the challenges posed by globalization. Contemporary writers, scholars, and critics need to articulate alternatives based on inclusiveness and the full diversity of experiences. If an enduring racial harmony prevailed, people of all ages, backgrounds, and races would have space to exercise their creativity, leadership capability, and imagination. In this way, we would be able to work collaboratively and strategically to create a world where many visions can co-exist.

References

- Achebe, Chinua (1958) *Things Fall Apart*. London: Heinemann.
- (1965). "The Novelist as Teacher." *New Statesman*, 29 January 160-170.
- (1988). *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays, 1965-1987*. London: Heinemann.
- Ashcroft, B; G Griffiths and H. Tiffin (1989). *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures*. New York: Routledge.
- (1995). *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*. London: Routledge.
- Attridge, Derek (1992). "Oppressive Silence: J.M Coetzee *Foe* and the Politics of the Canon." In Karen Lawrence (ed.) *Decolonizing the Tradition: New View of Twentieth-Century "British" Literary Canons*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. 212-238.
- Attwell, David (1993). *J.M. Coetzee – South Africa and the Politics of Writing*. California: University of California Press.
- Bhabha, Homi (1988). "The Commitment to Theory." *New Formations*, Vol. 5, 1-19.
- (1994). *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Blyden, Edward Wilmot (1887/ 1990). *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*. Chesapeake, New York: ECA.
- Cary, Joyce (1951). *Mister Johnson*. New York: Harper.
- Chinweizu; Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike (1980). *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension.

- Coetzee, J.M (1986). *Foe*. London: Secker and Warburg.
- (1987). "Two Interviews by Tony Morphet 1983 and 1987." *Triquarterly*. No 62, 454-464.
- Defoe, Daniel (1719/ 1994). *Robinson Crusoe*. London: Penguin.
- Emenyonu, N. Ernest (2000). "Nationalism and the Creative Talent (An Address to the Association of Nigerian Authors)." In Ernest Emenyonu (ed.) *Goatskin Bags and Wisdom – New Critical Perspectives on African Literature*. Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 377-386.
- (2002). "Telling Our Story – A Keynote Address at the 15th International Conference on African Literature and the English Language (ICALEL)," at the University of Calabar, Nigeria, May 7-11.
- Fanon, Frantz (1967). *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press.
- (1970). *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Constance Farrington. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin.
- Foucault, Michel (1980). *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. Colin Gordon (ed.). Brighton: Harvester.
- Gallagher, Susan V (1991). *A Story of South Africa: J.M. Coetzee's Fiction in Context*. London: Harvard University Press.
- Jameson, Fredric (1986). "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism." *Social Text*. Vol. 15, 65-88.
- Jan Mohammed, Abdul R. (1983). *Manichean Aesthetics: The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Korang, Kwaku Larbi (1998). "An Allegory of Rereading: Post-Colonialism, Resistance and J.M Coetzee's

- Foe*." In Sue Kossew (ed.), *Critical Essays on J.M. Coetzee*. New York: G.K Hall and Co. 180-197.
- Kossew, Sue (1998). "Introduction." In Sue Kossew (ed.), *Critical Essays on J.M. Coetzee*. New York: G.K Hall and Co, 1-17.
- (2003). "The Politics of Shame and Redemption in J.M Coetzee's *Disgrace*." *Research in African Literatures*, 34: 2, 155-162.
- Lomba, A. and Kegan Paul (1998). *Colonialism/ Post-Colonialism*. London: Routledge.
- McVeagh, John (1969). "The Blasted Race of Old Cham, Daniel Defoe and the African." *Ibadan Studies in English*. Vol 1, No 2, 85-109.
- Milner, Andrew and Jeff Browitt (1991). *Contemporary Cultural Theory- An Introduction*. London: Routledge.
- Nagy-Zekmi, Silvia (2002). "Tradition and Transgression in the Novels of Assia Djebar and Aicha Lemsine." *Research in African Literatures*. Vol.33, No 3, 1-13.
- Ngugi, wa Thiong'o (1972). *Homecoming*. London: Heinemann.
- (2000). "Europhonism, Universities and the Magic Fountain: The Future of African Literature and Scholarship." *Research in African Literatures*. Vol 31, No. 1, 1-22.
- Osundare, Niyi (1993). *African Literature and the Crisis of Post-Structuralist Theorizing*. Ibadan: Options Books.
- Palmer, Eustace (1986). *Studies on the English Novel*. Ibadan: African University Press.
- Penner, Dick (1989). *Countries of the Mind: The Fiction of J.M Coetzee*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood.

- Preckshot, Judith (2003). "An Historical Obsession: Counternarration in Rachid Mimouni's *Tombeza*." *Research in Africa Literatures*. Vol. 34, No 2, 155-162.
- Rodney, Walter (1972). *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. London: Boyle-L'ouverture Publishers.
- Rushdie, Salman (1982). "The Empire Writes Back with Vengeance." *London Times* (July), 334-45.
- Said, Edward W (1978). *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- (1983). *The World, the Text and the Critic*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 31-53.
- (1986). "Intellectuals in the Post-Colonial World," *Salmagundi*. Vol. 70, No 71, 44-66.
- (1989). "Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocuters." *Critical Inquiry*. 15: 3, 205-225.
- (1993). *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Chatto and Windus.
- Schipper, Minneke (1999). *Imagining Insiders: Africa and the Question of Belonging*. New York: Cassell.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (1990). "Theory in the Margin: Coetzee's *Foe* Reading Defoe's *Crusoe/Roxana*." *English in Africa*. Vol. 17, No 2, 1-23.
- (1994). "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (eds.) *Colonial and Post-Colonial Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press. 66-111.
- Tiffin, Helen (1987). "Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse." *KUNAPIPI*, Vol 9, No 3, 17-34.
- Valdiz, Moses M. (1991). "Caliban and his Precursors: The Politics of Literary History and the Third World." In David Perkins (ed.) *Theoretical Issues*

- in Literary History*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 206-226.
- Viola, André (1999). "J.M Coetzee: Romancier Sud Africaine." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*. L'Harmattan, Vol. 6, 69-78.
- Walder, Dennis (1998). *Post-Colonial Literatures in English – History, Language, Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Zukogi, Maikudi Abubakar (2002). "The Post-Colonial Text as Counter-Discourse: A Re-reading of Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*." A Paper Presented at the 15th International Conference of African Literature and the English Language (ICALEL), University of Calabar, Nigeria. May 7-11.