

His-Story and Her-Story: A Comparative Study of Robinson Crusoe and Foe

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Abstract

History is often said to be his-story owing to it being exclusively written by men about men. It consists of heroic as well as tragic tales of men, heroic and tragic both terms being exploited by Aristotle in the context of men again. Literature of any nation or language is also History *per se* as it reflects the ethos of the time in which it is created, and can also be called His-story because of dominant presence of male voices on the literary horizon for centuries. It is only after the surge of movements and theories like Feminism and Postcolonialism, that Her-story started to surface up in literary works. *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe (first published in 1719) and *Foe* by J. M. Coetzee (rewriting of *Robinson Crusoe*, first published in 1986) are the two works showcasing this transition in focus from His-story to Her-story. Whereas one tells the story of a male castaway Robinson Crusoe who turns out to be a powerful, colonial patriarch, completely avoiding the existence of woman; the other tells the story of Susan Barton, a female castaway introduced by Coetzee into the world of Crusoe (Cruso here). Coetzee has not altogether done away, however, with the centuries long suppression of female voice as he introduces the fictional character of Foe (modelled on the writer Daniel Defoe) whom Susan wants to pen the story of her stay on 'Cruso's island'. Novel for a major part revolves around Susan's efforts to get her story written and published the way she wants it to, with Foe insisting on giving it a new direction and plot disregarding Susan's concern for the story of Friday (Cruso's black manservant on the island whom Susan brings with her to the mainland, Cruso having died on the ship). Susan wants to tell the (hi)story of Friday's silencing (his tongue having cut off) and thus make a place for herself in the history, but for Foe, the story is not attractive enough as the truth is too boring to be told nakedly. This paper, thus attempts a comparative analysis of both the works, focusing on how difficult it is to get Her-story told without it being influenced by his-story or his opinions, thereby drawing our attention to the fact that no voice or no story is entirely original and thus reliable.

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Robinson Crusoe by Daniel Defoe, first published in 1719 and often credited as marking the beginning of English novel, is considered the most representative colonial work. It showcases Robinson Crusoe, the eponymous protagonist of the novel, as an invincible, all-sufficient colonial patriarch who can live all by himself absolutely independent of everyone. The most striking feature of the novel is the absence of any female character in it. This absence can be taken to have both positive as well as negative implications vis-à-vis the role and place of women in the 18th century. Taken generally in the context of basic human society and environment, this absence denotes the extent of marginalization of women in those times. It shows how insignificant women have been in the patriarchal narratives of heroism and how easy it was to do away with them. Moreover, this complete absence of woman in the life of Crusoe on the island and then his emergence as a mighty figure – industrious, self-sufficient, just like a god of small things – may be a conscious effort on the part of the writer to show the benign effects of this absence, women thus being considered as an obstruction in the way of realizing the full potential of a man. On the other hand, if we consider Robinson Crusoe as a master narrative of colonialism, this absence can be taken positively, colonialism being solely a male enterprise. Thus, it keeps women free of the guilt of the biggest oppression of mankind by casting them off the scene.

However, the *Robinson Crusoe* has to still bear the verdict that while giving comprehensive account of all the episodes narrated in it, the thing rendered too insignificant by the protagonist to be mentioned is 'woman'. He not only describes his surroundings in great detail, but gives detailed insights to his readers about his mental workings,

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but there is no mention of the need for female companionship, let alone of basic human drives such as desire, sexuality, or lust. This absence of woman in Defoe's work has been felt so acutely that there have been efforts to undo this, both in cinema and literature, most radical of them being the novel written by J. M. Coetzee entitled *Foe*. The *Foe*, published in 1986, completely subverts the original Crusoe's narrative as Susan Barton is washed ashore as a castaway at Crusoe's island, thus breaking the monopoly of men over the 'castaway' theme by trying to make it the story of a 'female castaway' – a thing that never existed before, because women's lives were not supposed to be meant for such adventures. Her inclusion adds postcolonial dimension to the most acclaimed colonial tale as the novel documents her efforts to dig out the story of the silencing of Friday and to get her island story told in its original form so as to draw the attention of the readers to such silent histories or historical silences. She strongly resists the temptation of converting her story into something else by changing its focus to make it aesthetically more appealing as repeatedly recommended by Mr. Foe (the fictional character drawn on the writer Daniel Defoe), to attract more readers so that it can be a commercial success. Crusoe here is not the Defoe's mighty colonizer, but an ordinary man subject to all human frailty, as Coetzee deprives him of all his wisdom, power, and insight. The story of his island is no longer an unchallenged colonial tale as Susan casts doubts on his narrative.

Susan Barton, besides making up for the absence of female in the Defoe's text, serves Coetzee's text in a variety of ways. Her intrusion into Crusoe's territory challenges his monopoly over the old text and exposes Crusoe's ungodliness as he still gets subdued by basic human urges upon seeing a woman after long years. She defies Crusoe's authority and mastership by setting tasks upon him and questioning his narrative of the island and of Friday. However, "As Susan Barton's refusal to see Crusoe and Friday in their own terms is mirrored by Foe's refusal to write her story according to the pattern devised by her, the novel largely becomes the account of tension between her wish to author her story and the impossibility of doing so." (Silva, 2006, p. 99-100). Susan's assertion of her authorship against Foe's dictating attitude is a subtle comment upon the whimsical representations of the "other" in colonial writings which often present distorted accounts to serve and protect the interests of the colonizers. It also exposes the patriarchal practice of defining women's lives, their desires, their needs, their strengths and their limitations, leading to their 'otherization' by men, their accounts often not representing the reality again. The novel can be read allegorically at different levels, albeit its focus on the issues of authoring or voicing on behalf of the marginalized and silenced subjects.

The plot also draws upon *Roxana*, another novel by Defoe published in 1724, which narrates the story of a mother in search of her lost daughter. Susan Barton is also a mother searching for her lost or kidnapped daughter as she comes to Bahia. After the failure to accomplish her task, she embarks on the journey back to her home (Lisbon) on a ship, but gets shipwrecked and reaches Crusoe's island instead. However, the Crusoe whom she meets on the island is not the Defoe's invincible 'Crusoe' having a godly aura. He is a commonplace man in his old age; his old age leading to his diminishing power and strength having symbolic connotations i.e. it represents the declining power of Colonialism – racial as well as gendered one. He consumes all his time and strength in preparing barren terraces as he has nothing to grow, which implies the futility of the systems based on exploitation on the basis of binaries of gender and race. Unlike Defoe's Crusoe, Coetzee's "Crusoe" is not intelligent and industrious enough to ransack some basic but important tools from the shipwreck so that he could make his life easy on the lonely island by carving out some useful things for him, or to save some grains to cultivate the wild island, or to keep a journal of his time spent on the island, neither is he enthusiastic enough to attract some rescue team by keeping a fire lit all the time on the shore. Coetzee completely topples the colonial text by Defoe as he shifts the focus of the narrative from the story of Crusoe to the story of Friday and by converting a male-centered text into a female-centered text.

Susan, like Coetzee's other white female characters caught in the patriarchal colonial setup, holds an ambivalent position between the colonizer and the colonized – of colonizer because of belonging to the white race, as well as that of colonized due to being a woman. She is well aware of this position as she writes self-reflexively. According to Brian Macaskill and Teresa Dovey, this self-reflexive mode serves as a tool for Coetzee to write in 'the middle voice' that is to write from a neutral position which is neither active nor passive. This reflects Coetzee's own position in South Africa as a white male author and academician, ascribing him to a complex position of being both powerful and powerless. Coetzee, like Susan, is a writer who writes 'without authority' (Coetzee, 1992, p. 392) because the authority accorded to him by his white male identity in South Africa is the one rejected and dismantled by him all over his oeuvre due to its association with the abuses of power. Coetzee identifies his own authority with that of Susan Barton, the "unsuccessful author" of *Foe*. This act of undoing his own authority by projecting it onto a feminine character, thus exposing it to vulnerability, is Coetzee's way to oppose and disavow the misuse of power in a society based on racial hierarchy. "Susan Barton's disabled authorial voice allows Coetzee to register, through her, a rejection of the colonialist, humanist discourse represented by *Foe*, and also a sense of complicity in it." (Probyn, 2002, p. 26)

The mute Friday in the novel, however, is shown as the universal symbol of oppression and subjugation. Friday's silence is a predominating theme of the novel: his silence registering the most powerful presence all through. Narrator's conjecture of different scenes to find out truth behind Friday's silence is an attempt to document the fact that one can be silenced in different ways and for different purposes and also highlights the scope for the manipulation or distortion of the truth to serve the purpose of the teller as Crusoe gives a number of reasons while trying to explain Friday's muteness: "Perhaps the slavers, who are Moors, hold the tongue to be a delicacy, ... or perhaps they grew weary of listening to Friday's wails of grief, that went on day and night. Perhaps they wanted to prevent him from ever telling his story... Perhaps they cut out the tongue of every cannibal they took, as a punishment. How will we ever know the truth?" (Coetzee, 2010, p. 23). Friday's lost tongue is a manifestation of all the lost and concealed truth, bearing witness to all the histories of racial and gendered subjugation. Since it is an irrecoverable loss, there is no way to find out the reliable truth as only the lost voices could have been trusted and not the various superficial interpretations of them by others

The projection of white female narrator as "unsuccessful author" shows how unauthorised and unstable the proprietorship of the white women is over the act of 'writing', and how her writing lacks recognition under any established literary form. This also highlights how women have been denied access to literacy, to writing, and hence to representation, due to their marginalisation under patriarchy. Susan's silence, however, on certain matters that Foe wants her to tell about in her proposed story of the island is a manifestation of her power to resist the patriarchal dictate. She does not allow him to make amendments to her story. It's being her story, it is her right to choose what to tell as well as what to "omit", and somebody else cannot decide what is more important and what is less important. This is an assertion on the part of Susan to get her existence acknowledged by the authoritarian Foe. By showcasing Susan's untiring efforts to get her story "begetted" by Foe and Foe's unwillingness to accept it unaltered as he tries to thrust his own altercations, Coetzee attempts to show that one can be silenced in spite of speaking up long and loud if others are not willing to listen or choose not to believe him/her. Susan is aware of this powerlessness to get heard as she comments: "As long as you close your ears to me, mistrusting every word I say as a word of slavery, poisoned, do you serve me any better than the slavers served Friday when they robbed him of his tongue?" (Coetzee, 2010, p. 150).

This attitude of Foe can be attributed as a reason for the absence of women's voices for thousands of years from the archives of the world's history and literature. Why is it that almost all the names we know from the history as great thinkers and philosophers of their times are male? Foe's insistence to change the story told by Susan might be a manifestation of long existing male bias regarding the intellectual equality of women. Coetzee also elsewhere talks about this notion of women lacking the artistic spark, as he says in *Youth*, one of the books of his fictional autobiographical trio: "It is in quest of the fire they lack, the fire of love, that women pursue artists and give themselves to them." (Coetzee, 2003, p. 66). Thus, women presumably cannot be artists according to him, they rather pose danger to that "inner flame" burning in the artists which they themselves do not possess, and thus should not be trusted as he says:

As for women who flock after artists, they cannot wholly be trusted. For just as the spirit of artist is both flame and fever, so the woman who yearns to be licked by tongues of flame will at the same time do her best to quench the fever and bring down the artist to common ground. Therefore, women have to be resisted even when they are loved. They cannot be allowed close enough to the flame to nip it out. (Coetzee, 2003, p. 31).

Susan's struggle with Foe to get her story accepted as possessing its own merit is thus a long existing fight between the gendered binary of man and woman as different creatures, one considered superior while other being rendered as wanting – wanting in intellect. It is in this very novel Foe that Coetzee, through Susan, tries to rationalize this lack on the part of women on intellectual and artistic front which can be termed as an attempt to justify the absence of women voices which is actually a result of the gendered attitudes cultivated under the age-old patriarchy. The credit for the production of all art and creativity in the world is traditionally assigned to the Muse.

Different fields of productivity are presided over by different Muses (nine sister goddesses in Greek mythology). A muse inspires the artist and helps him accomplish their task with ease. Since all muses are goddesses – female figures who visit male artists and inspire them, women are deprived of such an inspiration as there exists no male muse, and thus cannot accomplish such great works of art as men do. That is what Susan realizes and wishes for while making efforts to write the story of her being a castaway on the island of Crusoe: "The Muse is a woman, a goddess, who visits poets in the night and begets stories upon them. ... I wished that there were such a being as a man-Muse, a youthful god who visited authoresses in the night and made their pens flow." (Coetzee, 2010, p. 126). Susan is thus made to cast doubt upon her creative and artistic capability since Foe is not ready to get her story published without accepting his interventions in the plot.

Coetzee's *Foe*, dealing with the question and rights of authorship, serves as a critique of censorship that the authors and artists are subjected to, particularly the strong censorship rules prevalent in the then South Africa under the apartheid government. The cold war that ensues between Susan and Foe regarding the story of Crusoe's island is a reflection of the war between the artists and the authorities bent upon muffling their free voices, Foe representing the power and authority. Defoe's Crusoe could tell his story as he wished after returning from his long adventure at the island – nobody intervened to question his authority to author his story, neither did anybody try to impose a more palpable version of the narrative, unlike in the case of Susan who never succeeds in getting her story published, because she doesn't yield to Foe's demands for alterations. Coetzee asserts the rights of an author upon his or her story along with highlighting the difficulties in getting one's true voice heard and acknowledged.

The question confronting us here is how much does Susan's story count as compared to the story of Crusoe? Coetzee makes us ponder over the harrowing absence of the female voice and its authority by giving us the figure of Foe who wishes to censor her version of the tale. Though it is actually the story of Friday's silence and helplessness that Susan wants to tell, but Foe's impertinent attitude of lending a deaf ear to Susan's pleas for allowing her story to focus on the issues that seem real and important to her is what turns it into a fight against the patriarchal notions of women being suitable only to deal with the mundane aspects of life and not with big questions involving a long history of suppression and subjugation. "Susan wants to "father" her story into history" (Spivak, 1990, p. 8) by making it a story of Friday who stands for all those who had been silenced and marginalized for centuries under colonialism, whereas Foe wants it to revolve around the events in Susan's own life like the kidnapping of her daughter, and her quest to find the lost girl.

Coetzee's depiction of Foe's character as a famous and lofty writer but one who believes in manipulating the history for personal gains rather than being committed to telling the truth compels the readers to doubt the reliability of all historical narratives, since they have always been open for manipulation in the hands of men, thus history substantially presenting "his-story" rather than truth in its entirety. However, Susan's efforts to keep her story free of the lies recommended by Foe makes us to think how different it might have been if it were "her-story" rather, because for most of the part, women have only been mute spectators of history with little active participation in its making, history being largely a narrative of the exploits of men in powerful positions. The novel also brings to the forefront the fact that no matter how much she asserts, 'her-story' cannot remain immune to the influences of 'his-story'.

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