



RESEARCH PAPER

Silenced Voices and Orientalist Structures: A Postcolonial Reading of J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*

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ABSTRACT

This study attempts to analyze the mechanisms of silencing and narrative control in Coetzee's novel Foe through Edward Said's theory Orientalism. The study examines how the novel critiques colonial strategies of domination through representation and silencing, employing McKee's textual analysis with close reading method. Said's notion of Orientalism provides a lens through which the silencing of the character Friday is examined. It is argued that Friday becomes an embodiment of the colonized subject who is deprived not only of voice but of agency and history, replicating the Orientalist mechanism of dehumanization. Moreover, it is also emphasized that the silencing extends beyond Friday to encompass Susan Barton, whose narrative is restructured and altered by the male author Foe. This re-authoring echoes the imperial inclination to correct and rewrite indigenous and feminine voices, thereby underlining the epistemic violence that Said identifies as central to colonial discourse. Through its metafictional framework, the novel Foe confuses the construction of truth and authorship and authority while endorsing Said's concept about Western society's tendency to imagine one historical truth. Findings reveal that Foe does not merely depict silencing as a thematic concern, but it shows that colonial narratives suppress subaltern identities like Susan's story is challenged by the male author Daniel Foe in the book. Coetzee challenges the authority of the colonial text by foregrounding the gaps, absences, and erasures that constitute it, thus inviting readers to question the validity of dominant historical and literary traditions

Keywords: Foe, post colonialism, Said's Orientalism, subaltern silence, epistemic violence

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Introduction

J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986) presents a profound literary engagement with the legacy of colonialism, authorship, and the politics of representation. A postcolonial rewriting of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Coetzee's novel revisits the well-known narrative of survival and civilization through a radically different lens- one that centers on the silenced, the omitted, and the marginalized. By reimagining the castaway story with a focus on the characters of Friday, a tongueless African slave, and Susan Barton, a woman seeking authorship of her own experiences, *Foe* interrogates not only the colonial values embedded in Defoe's text but also the very structures of storytelling and voice (Coetzee, 1986; Attwell, 1993). Rather than merely retelling *Robinson Crusoe*, Coetzee subverts its imperial logic, exposing the erasures and injustices that underpin canonical narratives of empire (Attridge, 2004).

The novel's metafictional nature further confuses traditional ideas of authorship and authority. Susan Barton's mission to tell her story is repeatedly frustrated by the fictional author Foe, whose revisions prioritize marketable fiction over truth and authenticity. Meanwhile, Friday's inability or refusal to speak becomes the most haunting silence in the novel, forcing the reader to confront the limits of language, empathy, and representation (Wright, 2006). Friday's voicelessness emerges not merely as a device, but as a central ethical and philosophical problem that disrupts the Western desire to know, classify, and control the Other (Spivak, 1988).

This paper draws upon Edward Said's theory Orientalism as a critical framework to analyze the mechanisms of silencing and narrative control in Foe. Said (1978) conceptualizes Orientalism as a Western discourse that constructs the East—and more broadly, colonized peoples—as inferior, voiceless, and dependent. In this model, the colonizer assumes the authority to speak for the colonized, reducing them to objects of Western knowledge and control. This framework provides a lens through which Coetzee's portrayal of Friday's muteness and Susan Barton's narrative displacement can be understood as symbolic of larger colonial and patriarchal ideologies (Moore-Gilbert, 1997; Said, 1978). This paper analyzes how Coetzee's Foe criticizes the colonial history of literature through Said's theory; yet simultaneously prompts readers to evaluate narrative power structures through Spivak's epistemic violence framework.

Research Objectives are:

1. To investigate Coetzee's representation of silencing in colonial discourse
2. To analyze the patriarchal and colonial domination of Coetzee's character Susan Barton through lens of Said's theory of Orientalism

Research Questions:

1. How does Coetzee represent the silencing of the colonized characters in his novel Foe?
2. In what ways does Susan Barton's story display the domination patterns from both patriarchal society and colonial administration through the lens of Said's theory of Orientalism?

Literature Review

Previous studies have examined the reimagined version of Robinson Crusoe published by J.M. Coetzee in 1986 since it investigates voice along with power structures and narrative authority. The text addresses how colonial narratives control and suppress oppressed voices which makes it an essential work for postcolonial studies about linguistic representation.

Attwell (1993) explains that the metafictional techniques Coetzee (1986) employs in his writing lead him to dismantle imperial stories which ignore native people. Coetzee (1986) uses his self-referential presentation in the novel to reveal colonial discourse patterns and to establish multiple approaches for interpreting colonial relationships. He further added that Coetzee (1986) disrupts imperialist historical control through his narrative by restoring the stories and voices of the colonized to prominence. On the other hand, Attridge (2004) studies the way Coetzee uses ethical queries throughout his novel. According to Attridge, Foe effectively makes readers examine their ethical producer and consumer role in literature while handling vulnerable voices. Through its examination of representation, the novel exposes violence within creating understanding of

language barriers as well as narrative structures and power divisions. Through his character Friday in *Foe*, Coetzee presents an ethical conflict which results from colonial domination producing verbal silence. The novel pushes readers to evaluate their active or counteractive part in sustaining exclusions and silences through structures of power. The text requires readers to connect ethically through reading due to postcolonial interests about representation politics alongside the necessity to amplify past voices of oppression.

Likewise, Wright (2006) follows Spivak's notion of Subaltern from her critical essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" to analyze the silence of Friday. In a critical analysis Wright (2006) argues that Friday in *Foe* remains silent with purpose to challenge Western readers who expect everything to be easily understood. Through his silence, Friday demonstrates active rejection against Western efforts to turn the colonized into understandable subjects while revealing Western ignorance and colonial simplification of those different from themselves. Wright (2006) demonstrates how Coetzee (1986) employs Friday's unwillingness to speak to question reader assumptions regarding voice expression and subaltern representation. Friday's refusal to speak functions as an effective demonstration of the Western intellectual system that depends on suppressing native voices and their presence.

The above mentioned studies are relevant to this study because they deal with the problem of silence and its mechanism in Coetzee's novel *Foe*. However, these researches are limited to Friday's character only. This present study also considers Susan and her agency which is suppressed by the dominant narrative. The theoretical work of Said's *Orientalism* (1978) provides an apt approach for understanding the power dynamics between speech and suppression in *Foe*. Through *Orientalism* Said (1978) shows the Orient was fabricated by Europeans as an unknowable area requiring their explanation because it was styled as obscured and defective. Susan Barton and Friday in *Foe* (1986) face varying forms of narrative domination which the novel uses to keep them outside discursive spaces according to Coetzee. The silence imposed on Friday serves a parallel function to Said's (1978) theory of colonized people's being muted while Barton fails to metamorphose colonial tropes because imperial frameworks restrict her. The novel illustrates both the criticism of colonial knowing methods and shows what happens ethically when colonized people are portrayed in literature.

In a recent study, through their analysis, Soundarraj and Devaraj (2023) show how *Foe* by Coetzee contributes to the imperial opposition movement through its demonstration of fabricated historical depictions from colonial writings. Susan Barton's attempts to achieve an uncorrupted account of her experiences align with the struggles of colonial peoples whose stories imperial powers either distorted or eliminated. The absence of speech on Friday serves to demonstrate through powerful means how language becomes inadequate for disrupting colonial narratives.

On the other hand, Neimneh (2014) describes postcolonial feminism as a method to analyze the theme of silence. The novel introduces Susan Barton as a character controlled by patriarchal patterns of dominance. Friday's enslavement makes her a subject of colonization while she takes on the role of master for controlling him. While the previous researchers have contributed to the postcolonial criticism, this research integrates Edward Said's theory of *Orientalism* to produce findings about simultaneous colonial and gendered silencing in *Foe*. Furthermore, by addressing the metafictional ethics of narration and situating the novel within a broader educational and

decolonial context, the article advances existing scholarship and invites future comparative and interdisciplinary studies.

This paper contributes to the existing scholarship by focusing on how Said's (1978) concept of Orientalist silencing materializes in Foe's narrative structure, character dynamics, and the ethical concerns surrounding representation. By examining the novel through the lens of Orientalism, this study explores how Coetzee's (1986) metafictional strategies subvert colonial narratives and the ways in which colonial silencing is both exposed and resisted. In doing so, the paper seeks to extend the current critical conversations around Coetzee's work, offering a deeper understanding of how Foe engages with and critiques the colonial legacy of knowledge production and representation.

Research Methodology

This study adopts textual analysis as a research method, following Alan McKee (2003), who calls it an 'educated guess' that requires analyzing a text in a wider public context along with the context of the text. "When we perform textual analysis on a text, we make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text." (McKee, 2003, p. 3). He defines it as a "way of gathering and analyzing information in an academic research" (McKee, 2003, p.1). The current study adopts the methodology because it helps in constructing the meaning of the text and supports in the integration of the theoretical framework. By adopting this methodology, the research examines how narrative strategies and textual representation reflect the colonial legacy of knowledge production and representation.

Theoretical Framework: Edward Said's Orientalism and Postcolonial Critique in Foe

Said's Orientalism (1978) provides the theoretical foundation for this study, offering a critical lens through which the intersections of power, representation, and knowledge within colonial discourse can be explored. Said (1978) demonstrates in Orientalism how Western knowledge about the Orient operated as more than academic pursuit because it served to maintain colonial control. He demonstrates that knowledge is always intertwined with power relations, as the Orient is repeatedly portrayed as exotic, irrational, and subordinate to Western control. The Western dichotomy between self and the Orient served two purposes: first it established Western superiority through dichotomizing then it cemented Oriental dependency by demonstrating the need for Western rule. According to Said (1978) Western knowledge systems showed their active role as instruments of colonial power while serving the goal of dominating Eastern territories and peoples. The intellectual approach provides essential knowledge to understand colonial discourse operations throughout imperial political systems as well as cultural and literary expressions. The concept of Orientalism serves as a crucial tool in Coetzee's Foe to illustrate how colonial representation and suppression operate during the colonial era. Coetzee redraws the colonial tale of exploration and cultural advancement from Robinson Crusoe by creating his own postcolonial version which analyzes how colonial origins shape literary authorship as well as the creation of empirical knowledge. Colonial discourse manifests through the enforced silence of Friday as Crusoe silences this character and prohibits his presence in the story. Through his silence on Friday's part Coetzee shows how colonized people lost their ability to speak as the colonial discourse excluded their voices both by suppression and complete erasure. Through

eliminating Friday's speech, Coetzee examines how colonialism imposes absolute silence on colonized people who exist as subhuman subjects whose lived experiences remain untranslated and insignificant.

Said's (1978) theory provides a framework for analyzing *Foe* as a text that both reflects and resists colonial epistemologies. Through the novel's fragmented narrative and metafictional structure, Coetzee subverts traditional representations of colonial authority. Through its fragmented structure the text destroys the united colonial tale which challenges what counts as fundamental knowledge and denies any immutable truth. Through his critique of colonial discourse Coetzee's *Foe* reveals the epistemic violence of colonialism so people can understand how Western literature misrepresents and appropriates experiences of colonized peoples. Through Said's (1978) Orientalist framework the reader gains a deeper understanding of *Foe* which extends beyond colonial criticism to uncover systemized colonial thought within cultural creation. Double paradoxes within the text function as a postcolonial work because they combine both active colonial representation analysis with the subversive narrative structure that challenges colonial artifacts. Coetzee reveals the harmful inherent nature of these discourses while demonstrating the ethical duty held by readers and authors to face colonial history in literature and throughout all societies. The work of Said (1978) gives scholars a strong analytical tool to study *Foe*'s critique against imperialistic language systems. This analysis of Coetzee's novel shows how he writes about silenced non-European characters like Friday alongside the narrative power struggles which Susan Barton faces so that readers understand the representation's crucial role in postcolonial fiction. Through his analysis *Foe* presents both an assessment of colonial knowledge violence and a revolutionary examination of storytelling potential in experiences of colonial past.

Analysis and Discussion

The Voiceless Subaltern and the Orientalist Other

The study argues that Coetzee deals with the Voiceless Subaltern and the Orientalist Other. The ability of Friday to stay silent serves as a central element of *Foe*'s postcolonial analysis to demonstrate how colonial authorities silence subaltern voices. Susan Barton remarks, "Friday has no tongue. Friday has no command of words and therefore, no understanding of the world" (Coetzee, 1986, p. 142). This statement encapsulates a Western epistemological bias that equates speech with consciousness, agency, and even humanity. Through this representation, Coetzee (1986) shows the ideological structures of domination and suppression in the colonial discourse. Said (1978) explains in *Orientalism* that colonial domination and suppression is not only limited to military or economic, but it is discursive too, where the colonized are systematically constructed as passive, voiceless and 'Othered' to rationalize domination and control.

Moreover, the silence on Friday serves as a metaphorical representation of the "epistemic violence" according to Spivak (1988). Spivak (1988) explains that the subaltern faces more than passive dismissal from representation because the discourse supposedly representing them intentionally blocks their ability to speak. The inability of Friday to speak functions as an ideological product which transcends natural or biological limitations. Coetzee (1986) chooses to leave Friday's silence untold in order to reject colonial and Orientalist patterns which would

reduce foreign figures into recognizable Western understandings. The lack of dialogue functions as an active mode of opposition according to Wright (2006). Instead of creating artificial dialogue for Friday Coetzee (1986) chooses to show his silence as an intentional barrier against Western readers who derive dominance from having complete knowledge of stories. Friday's unavailability generates frustrated feelings which represent a purposeful authorial decision rather than being a structural issue. Colonial agents attempt to overwrite the brutal sign of colonial violence which is his severed tongue by creating their own interpretations and stories. The reading presents Friday's body as a "text" which colonial knowledge cannot decipher effectively which makes readers understand their inadequate grasp of things.

Through his silence Friday exposes the controlling behavior of linguistic imperialism which asserts Western speech patterns as required for accessing knowledge or truth. In his writing Thiong'o (1986) rejects how postcolonial societies endorse colonial languages above all others. Coetzee (1986) employs a parallel artistic move in *Foe* to demonstrate how adhering to dominant linguistic practices makes individuals eligible for human status.

Susan Barton: Gendered Silencing and the Intersections of Power

While Friday is symbolically silenced by race and colonialism, Susan Barton experiences a parallel marginalization based on gender. Although she serves as the novel's ostensible narrator, Susan's voice is repeatedly undermined by the supposed character, Daniel Foe, who represents patriarchal and authorial authority. Susan's struggle to "author" her experience is met with Foe's insistence on reshaping her narrative to fit established literary conventions. Her protest, "It is not the story I would have told. It is not the story of myself" (Coetzee, 1986, p. 126), reveals the gendered dynamics of narrative control and authorship. Said's theory, while primarily concerned with East-West binaries, also provides useful insights into how gender intersects with colonial structures. As Gilbert (1997) explains, Orientalism and patriarchy often operate in tandem, both relying on representational regimes that marginalize those perceived as "other"—be they colonized peoples or women. Susan's displacement by Foe reflects what Spivak describes as a "double silencing": her gendered position renders her story vulnerable to erasure, even as she attempts to mediate Friday's experience. In trying to tell Friday's story, Susan becomes implicated in the same system of narrative appropriation she wishes to resist.

The previous researchers such as Attridge (2004) and Wright (2006) argue that Susan occupies a deeply ambiguous position. While she sympathizes with Friday and seeks to understand his suffering, she ultimately reproduces colonial hierarchies by attempting to speak for him. Her gestures of empathy do not translate into genuine recognition of Friday's autonomy; instead, they often reassert her own authority as narrator. This paradox reflects Coetzee's critique of liberal humanism, which, while well-intentioned, often fails to acknowledge the structural inequalities that shape power and voice. The novel thus reveals how patriarchal and colonial systems work in tandem to silence marginalized voices, both female and racialized.

Metafiction and Ethics of Representation

One of Foe's most powerful contributions to postcolonial discourse lies in its metafictional structure. By making the act of storytelling itself the novel's central concern, Coetzee (1986) invites readers to question the ethics of representation. The novel does not merely critique

colonialism as a historical event; it interrogates the very processes by which stories are told, identities constructed, and voices authorized or excluded. The final pages, where an unnamed narrator explores Friday's body and finds a "hole, a mouth that is not a mouth" (Coetzee, 1986, p. 157), offer a haunting image of narrative failure. This mouth—an emblem of both speech and its absence—symbolizes the limits of representation and the violence of interpretive mastery.

As Said (1978) emphasizes, Orientalism is not merely a body of ideas but a "discourse" of power, in which knowledge production becomes a form of control. In this context, the desire to "know" Friday—his thoughts, his past, his pain—is a form of colonization. Coetzee (1986) frustrates this desire by withholding Friday's interiority, thereby challenging the assumption that all subjects can be made legible through Western narrative frameworks. In doing so, he echoes Spivak's (1988) question: "Can the subaltern speak?" Coetzee's (1986) answer seems to be: perhaps, but not in ways that the dominant discourse can understand or represent. This refusal to resolve the novel through conventional closure—no confession, no redemption, no clear resolution—serves as a postcolonial intervention. The fragmented narrative structure and shifting points of view resist the teleology of colonial adventure narratives, which typically assert European mastery over the unknown. Instead, Coetzee's (1986) *Foe* leaves the reader in a state of interpretive uncertainty, highlighting the ethical stakes of storytelling. Who has the right to tell whose story? What adverse impacts occur when we attempt to voice those who are silenced? Does any attempt at critical expression ever succeed in avoiding existing power structures?

The study identifies multiple connected insights that expose the postcolonial elements in Coetzee's *Foe*. The silence of Friday represents both physical coercion from colonial power as well as intellectual suppression of indigenous knowledge. According to Said (1978) and Spivak (1988) imperial discourse requires silencing colonized subjects because this establishes their eliminated voice to validate colonial control. The novel analyzes the dual effects of colonialism and gender by following Susan Barton's story. The fact that Susan fails to control both her personal story as well as her misguided attempt to tell Friday's story demonstrates a major flaw in how women and non-Western people lack authority over their accounts. Coetzee (1986) examines power dynamics through authorship by critiquing both imperial authority and patriarchy to display diverse operations of power.

Additionally, the novel's metafictional structure foregrounds the ethics of narrative itself. *Foe* presents narrative storytelling through dramatic conflict to initiate analysis about how narratives construct our historical perceptions alongside shaping personal identities and other cultural categories in society. Throughout the narrative the reader experiences the story's relentless refusal of closure because they themselves seek narrative completion and resolution. Through his writing, Coetzee (1986) created a literary postcolonial resistance which challenges Western knowledge and defends the untranslatable nature of others. The story presents a complex view of silence and speech by demonstrating that each category can serve as a form of resistance. Friday remains silent not out of submissiveness but because his right to opacity maintains a veil of mystery which Glissant (1997) interprets as "opacity". As Coetzee (1986) demonstrates in his work *Foe*, he follows decolonial scholars who state that freedom comes from maintaining your own ways of knowing instead of adopting mainstream cultural standards.

Conclusion

Through *Foe* Coetzee powerfully addresses postcolonial issues by revealing the destructive aspects as well as suppression that dominate established narrative systems. This investigation leads to the main finding that *Foe* dismantles colonial discourse traditions by employing intentional narrative gaps and absence and silence to challenge power structures around representation methods. *Foe* produces an extended analysis of colonizer-author power through its staging of Friday's silencing while repositioning Susan Barton in stories of colonial narrative. Through his work Coetzee (1986) disassembles colonial adventure narratives through unresolved interpretive gaps which make space for readers to encounter moral aspects hidden within silence instead of traditional happy endings.

The importance of this study emerges from its disclosure of ethical issues associated with narration practices within postcolonial literature. Said's Orientalism framework demonstrates how Coetzee's *Foe* examines Western systems of Other construction which strengthen power structures that oppress minority groups. Through its structural components the silence of Friday communicates the restricted capabilities of colonial languages to represent things accurately. According to Said's theory, the hidden challenge in this novel targets the Western claim to use classification for mastering colonial beings. According to Spivak, the subaltern concept enables analysis of Friday's unremitting silence since it represents his decision to deny entry into hegemonic discourse at all costs. The silences act as protest because they demonstrate the absolute barrier that exists when trying to present or speak on behalf of subaltern individuals through established narrative structures.

This academic research contributes value to ongoing intellectual discussions about decolonizing literature along with knowledge creation methods. *Foe* serves as a vital literary work that enables critical examination of the responsibilities among authors, critics and readers in our present time which sees voice and visibility and marginalization issues dominate global discourse. The present study faces its main limitation when it depends on Western theoretical frameworks because including indigenous epistemologies and global South perspectives would expand analytical understanding of narrative power dynamics. Future researchers should engage with diverse narrative traditions instead of following Eurocentric frameworks which can foster inclusivity and strengthen marginalized voices within postcolonial and decolonial discourse. Moreover, the study suggests that scholars should focus on examining narrative gaps and silences as an ethical site of inquiry instead of interpretive absences.

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