

## **CRUSOE IN POST-COLONIAL TIMES: AN ANALYSIS OF *FOE* BY COETZEE**

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*Foe*, the 1986 novel of the Nobel Laureate John Maxwell Coetzee, is a radical re-invention of the story of Robinson Crusoe. Some stories are so timeless that no matter how much times has passed, they still remain relevant to the readers and the audience, overcoming the barriers of time and space. Over time, however, they need to be reinterpreted, using the metaphors and idioms more appropriate of the age. Sometimes the retelling is done in order to view the story from a different political, social, ideological or intellectual perspective.

No story or writer can escape its times. We see with the glasses we are given by the society, we perceive with the conditioning that is provided to us by our environment and upbringing. Our five sense are dependent upon the geography and the time in which we live and thus by the very definition of time and place they restrict our narrative and stop it from being truly universal. Our time and place are the prisms through which we view our world and form a world view. It is impossible to come out of it.

Though, it is possible to reinterpret a story according to the needs and understanding of the times. Repeated reinterpretations balance the narrative and restore the harmony.

*Robinson Crusoe* was written in the colonial times, from a strictly colonial perspective. It was an age of European exploration, of great and extremely courageous explorers who braved every hazard with a single minded attention of exploring the world and claiming it for their respective master, be it a colonial state or a feudal landlord. They were nevertheless cruel racists, sexists, misogynists and Eurocentric egomaniacs with civilizational myopia.

The story of Robinson Crusoe is told from this perspective. It is the story of a white colonial explorer who got lost on a New World Island, found a slave, was relatively kind to him but nevertheless treated him as a sub-human brute with no human feelings at all. Friday is a chattel in the traditional story of Robinson Crusoe, just because he is black.<sup>1</sup>

J M Coetzee, in his stand against colonialism and his penchant for reinterpreting the works of great masters (*The Master of St. Petersburg* is another of his great reinterpretation), took the story to a spin and turned the table on the colonial perspective. The resulting story, *Foe*, is a post-colonial narrative in which a white colonial European master mistreated a black man.

It is the early eighteenth century, and Susan Barton, the heroine of the novel, finds herself adrift in a ship in the Atlantic Ocean.

“Foe is the story of Susan Barton who, returning to England after two years' unsuccessful searching for her missing, possibly abducted, daughter in Bahia, has been cast off a ship by its mutinous crew.”<sup>2</sup>

She has lost her child somewhere in the New World and that is why she is searching for her and in the process she is caught in the events of a mutinous ship cast bound for the New World. But fate has quite another adventure in store for her. The ship is wrecked and is cast ashore on a desert island remote from anywhere.

She thinks that it is the end of her but then she finds two men living on the island all by themselves. They are the sole inhabitants of the island: a white man named Cruso and his dumb slave Friday. She gets to know the two men and slowly gets intimate with Cruso, becoming virtually his wife on the island. They while away the time at island with Cruso telling her stories about the island and other things that happened with him. She gets to know a lot about the strange events that happened and her European sensibilities are shaken a lot.<sup>3</sup>

After a while, the lot of three is saved by a passing ship and they are given a lift to the Old World, their home. But the return journey is not so smooth. Cruso falls ill and does not survive the return journey, giving up the ghost on the open sea. It is only Susan Barton and the tongue-less slave Friday who reach the shores of England.

It is not easy to get ahead in the busy streets of London for both her and Friday, but Susan is determined to have her story, to have Cruso's story told to the benefit of the world. At first, she tries her own hand at it but soon realizes that she is not good with words and does not write what generally sells with in the world. She then approaches a writer, Daniel Foe (a spin on the name of the original writer), an eminent man of letters who has just what she needs, a gift with words. She goes to him and tells him all her stories, all the things that happened to her and all the things that Cruso told that had happened with him. She hopes that Foe will tell the story of Cruso truthfully to the world.

But things do not turn out quite that way. Crusoe is dead, no longer present on this earth to confirm what is being written about him and Friday is tongueless, unable to communicate to the world what he went with, what really transpired with him and Susan Barton's objections are dismissed by Foe as he says that she does not know what sells with the public and that is why Foe starts choosing some stories over others, rejecting some, picking some. And even with the stories that he picks, he changes them a little, sometimes more than a little to the point that they are no longer recognizable from plain lie or just daylight imagination, all in the name of what will sell and what will not sell.

The only three people who were capable of telling the world the truth about what happened are unable to do so. One, the white master who came to realize what was true and how the white man treats the black man and people from other races, is dead and hence silenced. His testimony is not going to be heard in the world.

Friday is speechless as his tongue was cut out by his previous masters, who preceded Crusoe. Also he is not considered human enough by the Europeans in London. To add to his misery, he is also not able to say anything as his tongue was cut out. So the story which could have been sympathetic to the black man and the injustices met out to him can never be confirmed by him.<sup>4</sup>

Susan Barton is the only one remaining who can tell and confirm the truth. But she is a woman and hence not in the power of changing and controlling the narrative of the novel and also of life. She is silenced by the more 'practical' voice of Foe, who is a typical misogynistic white superiority complex ridden male. He changes the narrative so much that the story becomes unrecognizable. Hence, Coetzee is telling us how much the original story of Robinson Crusoe must have been and how it was interpreted by the world.

The two themes which come out of this retelling of the story of Robinson Crusoe are the power struggles and the problem of language. The first problem of power struggles is the age-long problem of the victor and the vanquished. The victors tell the story they want and the voice of the vanquished is lost to posterity.

In the story of Robinson Crusoe, in the real history of the world, it was Europe which attacked the New World and Africa and enslaved them. The Europeans were militarily victorious and so it was their stories that were told. The voices of the blacks were suppressed. They were relegated to the realm of the sub-humans and it was supposed that they had no

human voice or sensibility of their own. In the story of Robinson Crusoe, the hero meets a black man on the island as Crusoe saves him and as the man is black, he makes him his slave. The slave Friday devotes his entire life to Crusoe but when Crusoe is returning back to England he just sells Friday like chattel.

On the other hand, there is the voice of Susan Barton. Coetzee has narrated the misogynistic tale of history in which women were dispossessed and removed from the positions of power. They had the heart to sympathize with the downtrodden but not the positions of power to make any change. It was a world dominated by chauvinistic, misogynistic males who did not care for the sensibilities of women. Any story told by men was not how a woman would view the world. Half of humanity had no voice and that is portrayed in *Foe* by the helplessness of Susan Barton and her ultimate failure in telling the true story of Cruso. It is a brilliant rendering of the age of colonialism.

Then there is also the minority voice of Cruso himself, those few men who understood Eurocentrism. But his death in this novel signifies that their voices were drowned in the colonial storm that was brewing at that time and that place.

Another beautiful theme of the novel *Foe* is the theme of the inability of language to express the story. In some way, Coetzee is telling that telling truth is impossible. The writer always distorts it and in the process the truth gets lost somewhere. Every narrative is a faulty narrative. The writer cares about what is going to sell in the market. He is not concerned about truth. In this brilliant portrayal of the psyche of a writer, Coetzee is telling that writers are not concerned by truth but by the perceived beauty of the narrative, about what will the audience, the readers will think of as beautiful.

In a masterstroke, Coetzee takes, 'foe' out from the 'Defoe', the original writer of the story of Robinson Crusoe and makes it the writer of the story of Cruso in his story. Hence 'Defoe' becomes 'Foe', which linguistically means an enemy. In a way, Coetzee is telling us that it is the fault of the writer that we are not able to know the true story, that it is writer who is the real enemy of the truth.

## REFERENCES

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- <sup>1</sup> Defoe, Daniel. *Robinson Crusoe: The Complete Adventures (Vol.1 - Vol.2)*. New York: CreateSpace, 2013.
- <sup>2</sup> Mehigan, Tim. *A Companion to the Works of J. M. Coetzee (Studies in English and American Literature and Culture)*. Boston: Camden House, 2014. p. 95.
- <sup>3</sup> Coetzee, J M. *Foe*. London: Penguin Books, 1988.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 118.