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1 author:

Shadi Neimneh
Hashemite University

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POSTCOLONIAL FEMINISM: SILENCE AND STORYTELLING IN J. M. COETZEE’S FOE

Dr. Shadi Neimneh

English Department, Hashemite University, Zarqa (JORDAN)
E-mails: shadistar2@yahoo.com, shadin@hu.edu.jo

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the intersections of feminism and postcolonialism as far as the issue of silence and storytelling is concerned. It does so by examining the characters of Friday and Susan Barton in J. M. Coetzee’s 1986 novel Foe. It is argued that colonialist ideology functions in the same way patriarchal ideology does with regard to the oppression of the racial other and women, respectively. Just as Friday is silenced on racial grounds, as an African slave with no access to power, Susan Barton is silenced as a woman pushed outside the canon of male authorship. Coetzee’s novel draws our attention to the dangers of appropriation inherent to any oppressive ideology. Importantly, the novel tackles the discursive resistance to colonialist and patriarchal ideologies via the resistant body of the mute Friday (a body that resists reduction to colonial language) and Susan Barton’s adamant attempts to get her story of island adventures told. By intertwining postcolonialism and feminism, Coetzee’s achievement, thus, is twofold: a critique of Western totalizing narratives and a doubling of the political and ideological thrust of his novel.

Key words: Coetzee, Fiction, Foe, Silence, Storytelling, Postcolonialism, Feminism, South African Literature

1. INTRODUCTION

In a short story entitled "As a Woman Grows Older," J. M. Coetzee presents us with this statement on ambivalence: "Where would the art of fiction be if there were no double meanings? What would life itself be if there were only heads or tails and nothing in between?" Ambivalence indicates double meanings, which, in turn, captures the postcolonial and feminist import of this article. Coetzee’s Foe (1986) is an ambivalent text in that it calls for a twofold reading highlighting the feminist and postcolonial import of the novel and their overlap. The postcolonial feminist content of the novel can be understood by looking at the somewhat similar plight of Susan Barton, the female narrator of most of the novel, and an African slave called Friday who appropriates Susan Barton’s story just as she, in turn, appropriates Cruso’s master narrative and resists the attempts of male authorship to appropriate her story. The novel writes back to a canonical text, Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe (1719). According to Helen Tiffin, however, Coetzee in this novel is writing back not only to “an English canonical text, but to the whole of the discursive field within which such a text operated and continues to operate in post-colonial worlds” (101). In Defoe’s eighteenth century novel, Crusoe owns slaves and becomes a plantation owner in Brazil. On the island, he takes Friday as a servant. In Foe, Coetzee offers a new perspective, with a woman’s story as its focus. Susan tries to get her story “The Female Castaway” told. In the process, she has to deal with the obstacles set by patriarchy and the void of Friday’s absent story. In conception, thus, the novel is deeply rooted in the biased, colonialist ideologies it negotiates.

The metafictional weight of this postmodern allegory stems from its self-reflexive preoccupation with the art of storytelling. Susan Barton, the main narrator, wants the story of her adventures on an island with a man named Cruso and his African slave, Friday, to be told by the writer Daniel Foe. She herself tells us Cruso’s history as she heard it from his lips, and tells him the story of her abducted...
daughter and her subsequent search for her in Brazil. She is surprised that Cruso keeps no journal of his life on the island or the story of his shipwreck. She also tells Captain Smith of the English ship that rescues her the story of her sojourn on the island. Susan writes a memoir and sends many letters to Foe detailing her story. They both negotiate the truthful representation of the whole history Foe is entrusted with writing. Storytelling, it is safe to claim, emerges as the novel’s main theme. Foe is, after all, a novel about “the nature of narrative art” (Penner 116). There are multiple, and competing, stories and narrators within this novel. Speech and storytelling (and alternatively silence) are the nuanced issues dominating the novel and the site of contested power relations.

Foe wants to write a story in which the island adventures are only an episode in a larger narrative involving Susan’s quest for and reunion with her daughter and a confrontation with cannibals. Susan, on the other hand, wants a story that focuses on her female experiences on the island. She attempts, thus, to exert some control over her representation by a patriarchal writer adhering to a literary canon like Foe. However, and in the midst of all this metafictional discussion of storytelling, Friday’s story remains a gap in the narrative, or as Susan puts it, “a puzzle or hole in the narrative” (121). She tells Foe in a letter, “To tell my story and be silent on Friday’s tongue is no better than offering a book for sale with pages in it quietly left empty. Yet the only tongue that can tell Friday’s secret is the tongue he has lost!” (67). Silent and mutilated as he is, Friday has no voice or history in the dominant Western discourses. His is a story that cannot be told by others. It can be appropriated, like Susan’s own story, but it cannot be an authentic one without Friday’s validation. In one sense, Susan and Friday reject being represented in colonialist language or patriarchal discourse. They have to find their own language and communicate it in their own ways, not using the “phallic” tongue/pen of patriarchal literary creativity presided over by a writer like Foe.

While it is easy to discern Coetzee’s metafictional rewriting of Daniel Defoe’s classic Robinson Crusoe, what is more important, I believe, is the postcolonial and feminist import of the novel. The issue of how both women and colonized people can represent themselves, or have a voice to do so, is crucial to our understanding of Coetzee’s novel. According to Lois Tyson, “patriarchal subjugation of women is analogous to colonial subjugation of indigenous populations” (423). Moreover, Tyson argues that feminist criticism deals with how literature as a cultural production “reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social, and psychological oppresion of women” (83). Like postcolonial studies, feminism deals with and resists various sources of oppression. While patriarchy treats women as different and other to male expectations, colonialism treats the colonized as different and other to colonialist ideologies. Othering is a common fate for women and the colonized. This articulates the common grounds of feminism and postcolonialism and their convergence in what we can call “postcolonial feminism.” Having a voice, speaking, and more importantly, getting heard, are important issues the novel raises. While silence in this article’s title seems the opposite of storytelling, silence itself, we will see, is a form of alternative storytelling. The oppressed, postcolonial and feminist theories seem to argue, seek “finding ways to think, speak, and create that are not dominated by the ideology of the oppressor” (Tyson 423). The novel, thus, explores ways and means of discursive resistance, specifically with relation to women and the oppressed other. By aligning the concerns of feminism with those of postcolonialism, Coetzee is augmenting the political potential and the ideological orientation of his novel. Such an argument gains special importance if taken into the context of accusations of political irrelevance leveled at Coetzee’s work within the realist tradition of South African apartheid writing.

While Lidan Lin uses the “rhetoric of simultaneity” to argue that Coetzee’s novels offer a new mode of postcolonial discourse whereby the relation between the colonizer and colonized is a simultaneous, essential one and the discourse is “characterized by postcolonial authors’ willingness to de-essentialize the uniqueness of colonial oppression by bringing it to bear on similar human experiences outside the historical specificity of colonialism”, I argue that this logic of simultaneity can be applied to the novel in a different sense in which gender relations bear upon a context of oppression. In Foe, Friday and Susan are both trapped within oppressive systems. The imperial magistrate and the tortured barbarian girl in Coetzee’s Waiting for the Barbarians (1980) also partake in being the objects of imperial violence. In Age of Iron (1990), the white Mrs. Curren and the colored Vercueil are in a similar condition of subalternity, the former being old and diseased and the latter being homeless and marginalized. Therefore, postcolonialism in Coetzee is strongly linked to a feminist vision. It also acquires strong ethical and political dimensions. According to Michael Chapman, one goal for the postcolonial project is “to stimulate our students, and ourselves, to see afresh, and comparatively, across worlds. In this, a literary turn may achieve an ethical dimension” (18). Postcolonialism makes us ethically see things across the fields of race and gender.

Coetzee calls attention to his work as postcolonial literature in an often-quoted interview with Stephen Watson by saying that his work on South Africa is only part of “a wider historical situation to
do with colonialism, late colonialism, neo-colonialism” (23). Dealing with the general ramifications of colonialism, Coetzee's work also touches on feminist themes because women can be viewed as complicit with imperial (and typically patriarchal) missions or victims of such missions. Double colonization, in the case of native women, does not come as a surprising fact. Although Foe does not directly tackle the double colonization of women since Susan Barton is a white woman speaking the white man's language and assuming the master's position with relation to Friday, the notion of double colonization comes handy if we consider the oppression she faces together with that faced by Friday. Moreover, Susan Barton as a white female narrator illustrates Coetzee's "own tendency to identify with the position of white women as both complicit with, and victimized by, patriarchal and colonial institutions like those of apartheid and literary production” (Wright 13). Gender and race, combined, allow for such twofold oppression. And although some critics have already pointed out Coetzee's preoccupation with the issues of race and gender in his work (Wright 12), my goal is to stress the political value of combining postcolonial and feminist rhetoric within one literary work. Both movements and theories have been separately viewed as empowering to women and the racial other. Their utilization in one novel doubles the novel’s political and ideological orientation.

**Coetzee's Foe: Postcolonial Silence and Feminist Storytelling**

I. Friday

Postcolonial feminism focuses on various forms of oppression arising from racism and sexism, including patriarchy and gender inequalities. In the words of Louise Racine, "postcolonial feminist approaches unpack the cultural, historical, social, and economic factors that intersect to shape different oppressive contexts that affect health and well-being” (18). Racial oppression is somewhat related to patriarchal oppression, and hence the overlap between feminism and postcolonialism. Susan, as a woman trying to access the power of authorship and thus partake in dominant discourses, is like Friday in that she is a marginal figure cast in the role of the silenced other for lack of self-representation. Unlike Susan, however, Friday neither speaks nor writes; thus, he cannot tell his story. While it is difficult for Susan to tell her story, it is almost impossible for Friday to tell his.

Imperialism has violently silenced, and possibly emasculated, Friday. When he spins in Foe's robe, he reveals his mutilated body to Susan (119). When he dances in Foe's dress and wig, she tells Foe she is "confounded that [she] gaped without shame at what had hitherto been veiled from [her]. For though [she] had seen Friday naked before, it had been only from a distance …” (119). She continues describing the same ambiguous scene in a language that gives more room for doubt: “In the distance nothing was still and yet everything was still. The *whirling robe* was a scarlet bell settled upon Friday's shoulders and enclosing him; Friday was the dark pillar at its centre. What had been hidden from me was revealed. I saw; or, I should say, my eyes were open to what was present to them” (my emphasis; 119). Susan's language is ambiguous, for she does not directly articulate Friday's genital wound. However, this body is doubly ambiguaged because she looks at his open mouth but cannot see anything in the dark (22). Friday's mutilated state, whether the loss of his tongue or male genitals and whether he was violated by his master Cruso or slavers, is put to question because what is more important within the postcolonial frame of the novel is the trope of such mutilation. The violated body of Friday is a trope for colonial silencing of enslaved and native people, which is why the novel constantly puts to doubt Friday's body. Be it castration or decapitation (i.e. loss of tongue), or even both, the status of Friday's body is a cultural one of lack of agency and enforced silencing. Susan articulates the ambiguous nature of Friday's whole story:

‘Cruso gazed steadily back at me. Though I cannot now swear to it, I believe he was smiling. “Perhaps the slavers, who are Moors, hold the tongue to be a delicacy,” he said. “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: who he was, where his home lay, how it came about that he was taken. Perhaps they cut out the tongue of every cannibal they took, as a punishment. How will we ever know the truth?” (23)

Within the account Susan gives, Cruso's ultimate question is particularly significant. The truth behind Friday's story is difficult to find because Friday is more than a slave. He stands for a collective history of oppression and violation passing without questioning. His story is buried within him, and his body is the text on which colonial oppression is violently inscribed.

Friday's lost tongue, like his possible genital "wound," stands for an absence (120). Susan's efforts to teach him to write result in a series of empty circles on paper, probably a symbolic sign of his sexual and communicative lack. Susan is marginalized by virtue of her gender, while Friday is
marginalized due to his race—which is at the heart of the nexus between postcolonialism and feminism. Elleke Boehmer argues that the violated body of the colonized speaks: "Representing its own silence, the colonized body speaks; uttering its wounds, it negates its muted condition" (272). And Arthur Frank similarly argues: "The ill body is certainly not mute—it speaks eloquently in pains and symptoms—but it is inarticulate" (2). Friday's body speaks despite its silence and signifies beyond words. While attempts to give it a voice end up in appropriation of its own voice, it is normal for such a body to signify alternatively.

Susan describes Friday to Foe as "a hole in the narrative" (121). Trying to give voice to his mute body, Susan says: "It is for us to descend into the mouth (since we speak in figures). It is for us to open Friday's mouth and hear what it holds: silence, perhaps, or a roar, like the roar of a seashell held to the ear" (142). Friday's body speaks beyond itself, and silence has its own agency. Friday's mute body is its own text, its own story. Friday's home, we are told by the narrator toward the end of the novel, "is not a place of words. Each syllable, as it comes out, is caught and filled with water and diffused. This is a place where bodies are their own signs" (157). If language cannot speak Friday without violence and manipulation, it is the body that is set as an alternative to this language of the colonizer. The new narrator at the end of the book has "sympathies expanding beyond all systems to reach the defeated, the silenced" (Donoghue). The unnamed narrator describes, in a dreamlike, surrealistic manner, his descent into a wreck where the bodies of Foe, Susan, and Friday are found. From Friday's open mouth, we are told, "comes a slow stream, without breath, without interruption. It flows up through his body and out upon me; it passes through the cabin, through the wreck; washing the cliffs and shores of the island, it runs northward and southward to the ends of the earth" (157). This scene is highly symbolic. While Friday remains mute throughout the novel, it is only now that he opens his mouth and the others keep silent. We wonder if this is meant to signify a future time when the silenced will speak out and have authority over their representation. The wordless, continuous stream coming out of Friday's mouth probably indicates a repressed history that, though unrepresented, is still there. Because Friday has a history, he also has a story, but it is a story that resists being told in the colonial language of Cruso or Susan.

A mute Friday, like a silenced Susan Barton, is a trope for colonial oppression. Loss of tongue is tantamount to decapitation, i.e. silence and loss of mastery. In “Castration or Decapitation?” the feminist critic Helene Cixous argues that in a patriarchal culture “Women have no choice other than to be decapitated, and in any case the moral is that if they don't actually lose their heads by the sword, they only keep them on condition that they lose them”—lose them, that is, to complete silence, turned into automatons” (emphasis original; 43). Loss of head is tantamount to silence and loss of one's tongue, to exclusion from the symbolic realm of language and patriarchal discourse. The main argument of Cixous is that masculinity is ordered by castration anxiety while femininity is ordered by lack and absence, i.e. decapitation (46). Women, she contends,

"always inhabit the place of silence, or at most make it echo with their singing. And neither is to their benefit, for they remain outside knowledge" (49). Cixous adds, in symbolic terms that can be applied to Friday as well as Susan, the following statements:

"Silence: silence is the mark of hysteria. The great hysterics have lost speech, they are aphonie, and at times have lost more than speech: they are pushed to the point of choking, nothing gets through. They are decapitated, their tongues are cut off and what talks isn't heard because it's the body that talks, and man doesn't hear the body" (49). Susan’s story is not heard by Foe and Cruso, men who exploit her and distort her story. Her fate is that of symbolic “decapitation.” And importantly, Friday is symbolically “castrated” by those he is not able to identify with as an African slave. In one way or another, silencing is a form of reducing one to the level of the body. The feminist rhetoric of Cixous is equally postcolonial in logic and as far as language is concerned. It is Friday actually who comes to fully represent the trope of “decapitation” she employs. However, the colonized body emerges as a resistant materiality that cannot be accommodated by the colonizer’s language. It is no wonder that, in an interview with David Attwell in Doubling the Point, Coetzee underscores the authority of the body in pain over discourse: "Whatever else, the body is not 'that which is not,' and the power that it is is the pain it feels. The body with its pain becomes a counter to the endless trial of doubt" (248). While Susan's language of Friday communicates nothing but doubt, Friday's body cannot be doubted. It speaks in its own defiant terms and against dominant discourses. The colonizer's language is no adequate medium for containing the historical sufferings of the colonized.

II. Susan Barton

Just as the enslaved Friday is silenced by racial discourses, Susan is also silenced by patriarchal ones. She is silenced by the canon of male authorship and the masculine realm of the symbolic. Susan tries to resist the silence she is subjected to as a female writer and to contribute to
patriarchal discourses by telling a story that Foe should listen to and re-write. In a sense, she wants to “father” her story but she lacks the art an established male writer can add to her island story. Back in London, she replies to a captain when he encourages her to write her story, “A liveliness is lost in the writing down which must be supplied by art, and I have no art” (40). She wants to be “a free woman who asserts her freedom by telling her story according to her own desire” (131), but she is aware that she needs the artifice a writer like Foe can provide to make her story sellable. In a sense, Barton is articulating imposed differences between masculine and feminine language. More importantly, she is confessing her inferior position when it comes to fiction writing, a realm dominated by men. While Foe wants the story to focus on Susan’s quest for her daughter so that it becomes marketable, she wants it a story about her island adventures. Their ideological clash regarding the account to be written reflects the power of dominant discourses from which women are often excluded or to which they have to conform.

She disagrees with Foe about the structure of her story as mentioned earlier. She becomes preoccupied with telling or even knowing the story of how Friday lost his tongue, but she cannot achieve this because the mute Friday, whose tongue was cut out by slavers according to Cruso, cannot tell his own story. As Susan says: “The story of Friday’s tongue is a story unable to be told, or unable to be told by me. That is to say, many stories can be told of Friday’s tongue, but the true story is buried within Friday, who is mute. The true story will not be heard till by art we have found a new means of giving voice to Friday” (118). The deconstructive gap in her story is the loss of Friday’s tongue, which she wants to account for in her story via artistic means. Susan becomes fixated on telling Friday’s story. Her story becomes inseparable from Friday’s, for their histories of oppression are somewhat similar. However, Susan, in the very act of trying to tell Friday’s story, is complicit in oppressing him and speaking for him. Discourse remains hegemonic, a form of epistemic violence exercised on the subaltern. Silence, by contrast, is as bad as speaking in a foreign tongue or conforming to the expectations of the master’s discourse. Both deprive of agency and can result in objectification.

In the absence of a legitimate account from Friday himself, his story lacks the authority of the legitimating subject. Moreover, the dubious nature of Friday’s lost tongue makes it difficult to ascertain whether Friday chooses not to talk or is simply incapable of doing so. There is a difference between passive silence and a willful desire to withhold one’s story. Friday is essentially a figure for the colonized native who cannot speak. The fact that he has no tongue brings to the forefront the theme of a “linguistic imperialism” at the level of language and communication. Having that Friday is silent, who can represent or speak for him without being complicit in his oppression? The novel tackles this issue in that Susan, we can argue, is subjecting Friday in the way Cruso did. For example, Susan feels obliged to take care of him, educate him, and help him return to his native Africa. Friday is the other she is ethically responsible for. However, she confesses that: “There are times when benevolence deserts me and I use words only as the shortest way to subject him to my will” (60). As she begins to try to teach him more words in Foe’s home, she is aware of her potential complicity in Friday’s oppression in language: “At such times I understand why Cruso preferred not to disturb his muteness. I understand, that is to say, why a man will choose to be a slaveholder” (60-61). Susan is aware that she can manipulate Friday because of his adamant silence. He occupies the positionality she dictates for him. Susan says of Friday: “I say he is a cannibal and he becomes a cannibal; I say he is a laundryman and he becomes a laundryman. What is the truth of Friday?” (121). Language is a handy tool in the hand of the colonizer, and in this regard Susan is complicit with the colonizer. There are, hence, layers of oppression. Friday emerges as the object of twofold oppression. By contrast, Susan emerges as an oppressor and an oppressed woman. And as an oppressor, she is aware of the discursive violence that can be effected in words:

Friday has no command of words and therefore no defence against being re-shaped day by day in conformity with the desires of others. … No matter what he is to himself (is he anything to himself?—how can he tell us?), what he is to the world is what I make of him. Therefore the silence of Friday is a helpless silence. … Whereas the silence I keep regarding Bahia and other matters is chosen and purposeful: it is my own silence. (121-122)

Susan complains about how Friday’s silence, not having a story, paradoxically reduces him to a linguistic construct or a fictive status. Coetzee probably wants us to be aware of our potential complicity in furthering the oppression of the oppressed. Moreover, Coetzee significantly juxtaposes Friday’s silence against Susan Barton’s own marginalized status and search for a voice.
The other, be it the racial other or the female principle, are both in a position of subalternity. And writing gives authors an agency or deprives them of it within biased discourses. Susan complains: "When I reflect on my story I seem to exist only as the one who came, the one who longed to be gone: a being without substance, a ghost beside the true body of Cruso. Is that the fate of all storytellers? Yet I was as much a body as Cruso. I ate and drank, I woke and slept, I longed" (51). An untold (unpublished) story is similar to a non-existing one. Susan further complains: "In the beginning I thought I would tell you the story of the island and, being done with that, return to my former life. But now all my life grows to be a story and there is nothing of my own self left to me. … But now I am full of doubt. Nothing is left to me but doubt. I am doubt itself. Who is speaking me? Am I a phantom too? To what order do I belong?" (133). In the absence of a written account of her life, Susan seems to lose track of things. Like Friday, she is passively spoken for rather than speaking. Denis Donoghue argues that in Foe "the political parable issues from Friday's tonguelessness." Such a parable, I would add, also issues from Susan's silence within a patriarchal canon of authorship. The fact that Susan's and Friday's difficult stories are intertwined indicates their common fate of marginalization and uneasy relationship to predominant language. Foe, Cruso, the unnamed narrators, and even the narrative voice of Coetzee himself all seem potential sources of appropriating the story of the other. And in Susan's case, Friday—despite his apparent silence—appropriates her story. The novel, in a sense, becomes Susan's attempt to make sense of Friday's presence in her life. In this interplay between postcolonial themes and feminist ones, it is as if Coetzee seems to privilege the former, as hinted at by the ending of the novel whereby only Friday's body is still somewhat alive and from which issues an encompassing story beyond words.

II. Speech and Silence in Coetzee's Fiction

Friday, it seems to me, is not the first silenced or oppressed character in Coetzee's fiction. The barbarian girl in Waiting for the Barbarians (1980) is a silenced other as well. The girl is tortured by an imperial representative, Colonel Joll, to tell a story about the uprising of her people. Joll wrings a confession from her silent, resisting body through torture. The magistrate tries but fails to have her tell the story of her torture by Joll. Her language, however, is not easily understood because, as a barbarian, her language does not fall within the linguistic norms of the Empire. The magistrate himself does not care to fathom her tongue. He feels guilty when he tries to hand her to her people for spending idle nights of sensual pleasure without learning her language. She, like Friday, comes to represent the tortured, silenced body through colonial violence. Michael K in Life and Times of Michael K (1983) is also silenced in a sense. He has a harelip that distorts his speech. He leads a life of utter seclusion, spending many days in the mountains and on a deserted farm to flee the ongoing civil war in Cape Town. He also keeps silent when the medical officer in the rehabilitation camp urges him to tell his story. Just as with Foe, silence in this novel is culturally enforced on the downtrodden. Again, silence—as the opposite of speech—is a postcolonial and feminist trope for subjugation. Within the political and allegorical frame of Coetzee's work, the silence of each character is symptomatic of the universal oppression of minority or unprivileged groups of people.

And Vercueil in Age of Iron (1990) is a taciturn alcoholic and a homeless black man living in South Africa under the apartheid regime. As with Foe, it is a white woman—Mrs. Curren—who tries to be ethically responsible toward Vercueil and listen to his story. We can safely claim that the theme of silence and its counterpart, speech, figures prominently in Coetzee's fiction. The common thing about such silent or reticent figures mentioned above is that they are marginalized to allow for colonial powers to define themselves as the self that dominates the discourse of representation and truth. Silencing the other is a means of achieving a fixity desired in colonial discourse and reducing the silenced to the functions of the body through torture, mutilation, hungering, and alcoholism. However, silence can be a means of passive resistance against the status quo. It might be a manifestation of discontent or injustice. Coetzee's fiction provides a rich ground for all such claims. In Foe, Friday's silence can be understood as a form of disavowal whereby the colonizer's language is rejected altogether. For Friday and Susan to communicate their stories and have a voice, they have to learn to speak outside the oppressor's codes of knowledge and cultural expectations. Until such an end is achieved, the body speaks its own language by rejecting easy rendering or even erasure.

Coda

One sense in which “representation” is used by Gayatri Spivak is politically “speaking for” (28). Spivak, capturing the overlap between feminism and postcolonialism, articulates double-silencing of colonized women: “If, in the contest of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (32). Spivak is presenting her thesis that in the absence of a listening subject and institutional agency the subaltern cannot speak. She,
therefore, articulates power relations in terms of speech and silence. The oppressed get silenced, and the oppressors impose their speech over the objects of their oppression. On the other hand, post-colonial literature is characterized by its "subversive" potential and is constituted in "counter-discursive rather than homologous practices" (Tiffin 99) to dismantle dominant discourses or simply expose their assumptions. In reaction to the "ideological epistemic violence" Spivak employs drawing on Foucault whereby dominant discourses determine the way of seeing the world (31), alternative ways of self-expression or disseminating knowledge can overthrow existing epistemes. In Foe, Coetzee is writing back to the dominant canon of white and male authorship associated with writers like Defoe. He succeeds in shifting the focus from Cruso to Susan Barton and, within Susan Barton's account, the focus shifts to Friday the mute slave against Susan's wishes. Language has been an instrumental tool of oppression and the exercise of colonial power. The margins seem to subvert the center. Susan and Friday resist the colonial language of the canon associated with Foe. The novel negotiates, however, the authority of the oppressed and suffering subject to speak for itself and beyond the oppressor's language. Moreover, the novel articulates the difficulty of representing oppression, especially when the speaking subject—Coetzee's narrators and Susan—are complicit in such oppression.

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