

Silence as a Subaltern Strategy of Resistance in Coetzee's Foe

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الصمت كاستراتيجية لمقاومة التابعة في رواية (فو) لـ (كوتزي)

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Abstract:-

The present research studies silence as subaltern's strategy of resistance in J. M. Coetzee's Foe (1986). Coetzee, the Noble Prize winner in 2003, is a white African novelist who indirectly refers to apartheid in South Africa in his novel. Based on the views of the Subaltern Studies concerning the agency and the ability of the subaltern to decide their fate, this paper challenges Spivak's notion of the inability of the subaltern to use language as a means of resistance strategy. Coetzee illuminates his subaltern position, through the intertextual context of his novel, in relation with Daniel Defoe as the founder of colonial novelistic tradition. Susan Barton shows the failure of the subaltern due to her recourse to colonial language to express herself. The subaltern can creatively employ silence as a strategy of resistance against pervasive discourses. As a subaltern, Friday's silent language features inaccessibility, and therefore, it prevents him from being represented by Susan's narrative. In Foe, silence functions as an active strategy that preserves Friday's subaltern identity, and consequently, it turns into the core of the novel.

Key Words: Subaltern Studies , Foe , Silence , Resistance .

المخلص:-

تناول هذه المقالة الصمت كاستراتيجية المقاومة في رواية فول ((ج. م. كوتزي)).

كوتزي الحائز علي جائزة نوبل في عام ٢٠٠٣ رواي إفريقياي أبيض يعكس بشكل مباشر قضية التمييز العنصري في جنوب إفريقيا في روايته. استنادا إلى نظرية دراسات التابعين فيما بفاعلية و قدرة التابع في تحديد مصيره تتحدي هذه المقالة نظرية ((اسيوك)) عن عدم قدرة التابعين علي استخدام اللغة كأداة لاستراتيجية المقاومة. من خلال بنية التناص لروايته يكشف كوتزي عن وجهة نظره التي تستند إلى نظرية التابعين فيما يتعلق ب((دانييل ديفو)) كمؤسس لتقليد الرواية الاستعمارية.

تظهر سوزان بارتون عدم فائدة لجوء التابعين إلى اللغة الاستعمارية للتعبير عن روايته. يمكن أن يستفيد التابع بشكل خلاق من الصمت كأداة لمقاومة الخطاب المتشهر. بصفتها تابعا فإن لغة فراي دي الصامتة ليست مفهومة للمستعمرين وبالتالي تمنع رواية سوزان من تحقيق تمثيل فراي دي. في رواية فو يلعب الصمت دورا استراتيجية فاعلة تحافظ علي هوية التبعية لفراي دي و نتيجة لذلك يصبح المحور الرئيسي للرواية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: دراسات التابعين، رواية فو، الصمت، المقاومة.

1. Introduction

When apartheid was still ruling over South African society, J. M. Coetzee wrote *Foe* (1986). Though not regarded Coetzee's masterpiece, it is one of the prominent works of the novelist knitting together different issues such as intertextuality, post colonialism, and language. Coetzee's indirect reference to South Africa's contemporary cultural, political, and social context will be made visible through a focus on the issues dealt with in the novel. In fact, it is the very indirectness of the novel that gives it an enduring quality to be read freshly in all times and to be applicable universally to all conditions, for example subalternity, parallel to that of South Africa under apartheid dominance.

This research studies Coetzee's *Foe* from the perspective of Subaltern Studies to discover the role of the subaltern language in the novel. It shows how Coetzee establishes the context of subalternity through the characters of the novel: Friday, Susan and Mr. Foe. In this novel, Coetzee indicates his conception of subalternity is founded on a definition of subalternity as power differential. The Power struggle presented through the contests of the characters of the novel to possess and control the narrative voice is an illustration of the transaction between the subaltern and the colonizer.

Having outlined the principles of subaltern studies founded by Ranajit Guha, the present article takes a critical stance towards Spivak's classic article "Can the Subaltern Speak" (1988) in which she asserts her disappointment for the inability of the subaltern to speak for him/ herself. It is also discussed that Coetzee's *Foe* locates him in a subaltern position in relation with Daniel Defoe and his novel (*Robinson Crusoe*, 1719). Then, considering Susan and Friday as two different subaltern classes, the two language strategies of subaltern resistance employed by Susan and Friday are contrasted to uncover the power of Friday's silence. This study claims that *Foe* portrays the agency of the subaltern through the introduction of Friday's active silence. His silence prevents him from being represented and appropriated by the dominant colonial language and discourse.

1.1 Discussion

This study is based on theoretical concepts of Subaltern Studies to approach Coetzee's *Foe*. In the coming sections of the present

research there will follow an introduction and analysis of the concept of the subaltern. The theorization of this section will invest on the dynamicity and agency of the subaltern to resist in the condition of subalternity. Then, Coetzee's Foe will be exposed to theoretical findings of the above-mentioned view to survey the resisting power of Friday, as a subaltern.

2.1 Subaltern Studies

India forms the context for the rise of Subaltern Studies in Ranajit Guha's edition of the first volume of Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society (1982). Among the scholars who contributed to this volume Guha was the prominent figure who edited the first six volumes of the book. Generally speaking, Subaltern Studies is an intervention on Indian historiography to expose that it was rendered by "colonialist eliticism and nationalist eliticism" (Guha "Aspects" 1). The scholars of this approach have attempted to show the silence of the subalterns, as politically and socially marginalized groups, in Indian colonial and nationalist historiography. Hence, it is this very silenced subaltern history to which they draw attention and offer subaltern voice.

In his manifesto-like article "On Some Aspects of the History of Colonial India" (1982), Guha sheds light on the shortcomings of Indian nationalist historiography and outlines the basic principles of Subaltern Studies. By underlining the elitist aspect of the historiography of Indian nationalism and British colonialism in India, he explains their structural similarities. "Both these varieties of eliticism share the prejudice that the making of the Indian nation and the development of the consciousness –nationalism- ... were exclusively or predominantly elite achievements" ("Aspects" 1), observes Guha. Taking "the several versions" of Indian nationalist historiography into account, he asserts that

the commonality to them all is to uphold Indian nationalism as a phenomenal expression of the native elite with the antagonistic aspect of their relation to the colonial regime made, against all evidence, to look larger than its collaborationist aspect, their role as promoters of the cause of the people than that as exploiters and oppressors. (emphasis added, 2)

This kind of historical writing pushes the history of the people into negligence. Guha believes “it fails to acknowledge, far less interpret, the contribution made by the people on their own, that is, independently of the elite to the making and the development of this nationalism” (3). In fact, Guha’s discussion of the example of Indian nationalism leads us to the issue of representation and its consequent transformations (a discussion of it in relation with the subaltern will follow). The Indian nationalist eliticism has just occupied the empty place of colonialism in India after its delivery from British colonial dominance, while the oppressive colonial structures are kept untouched.

What is absent in this historiography is the history of the subalterns. Though the term subaltern has been introduced by Gramsci, Guha makes no reference to the origin of the term when he is talking of the history of the subaltern. His use of the term defines it as those groups who are “constituting the mass of the labouring population and the intermediate strata in town and country- that is the people” (4). The common characteristics of these people is their “subordination ... in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way” (Guha, *Subaltern Studies* vii). For Guha, the subalterns are independent because they “neither originated from elite politics nor did [their] existence depend on the latter” (“Aspects” 4). Another prominent feature of the subaltern domain is its “resistance to elite domination” (5). This does not mean that these two separate domains are always in an antagonistic relationship; rather, there are moments of overlap and co-existence between them (6). It is also impossible to deny that “the Indian bourgeoisie” has failed “to speak for the nation” (Guha “Aspects” 5).

What is clear in Guha’s classic article is the agency he finds in the subaltern classes. “The politics of the people” (Guha “Aspects” 4) possesses the potential to subvert dominance, both colonial and nationalist, and to appropriate the process of representation by which the subaltern is rendered. Of course, Guha confesses that the efforts from “the domain of subaltern politics were not, on their own, powerful enough to develop the nationalist movement into a full-fledged struggle for national liberation” (6). This way he opens the way for various theorizations to “blossom” (7) and to offer strategies for enforcing subaltern agency.

The issue of the agency of the subaltern and the relevant struggle to achieve it is problematic. Any attempt on the part of the subalterns, or non-subalterns, to increase the subaltern's political consciousness will lead to a new position in which the subaltern will be no longer subaltern "or at least is demonstrably on the way to emerging from its subordinate position" (Gramsci, qtd in Rabasa 131). On the other hand, there is the warning that the notion of giving voice to the subaltern should not give rise to a kind of reverse ethnocentrism (Maharaj 8). Guha's theorization of the subaltern identity is founded not on essentialism but on power differentialism (Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 284). The issues of difference in power and subordination define the condition of subalternity. Is it really possible to gain power and agency, and meanwhile, remain subaltern? To answer this question it is necessary to consider the ideas of another scholar of subaltern studies, that is, Spivak.

Gayatri Ch. Spivak's notion of the agency of the subaltern has undergone some modifications since the first time she expressed her disappointment in this regard in her classic article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988). Investigating the agency of the female subaltern in relation to her ability to "speak" for herself in the colonial context, Spivak concludes her article by the notorious sentence: "The subaltern cannot speak" (104). Meantime, Spivak regards change as the central feature of Subaltern Studies (3) in "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography" (1988), contributed to this field of study. Of course, she softens the negative answer she gave to the question about the ability of the subaltern to speak in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999). She observes that "I was so unnerved by this failure of communication that, in the first version of this text, I wrote, in the accents of passionate lament: the subaltern cannot speak! It was an inadvisable remark" (308). This brief historical tracking of Spivak's modification of her notion concerning the subaltern speech shows an increasing attention to subaltern agency.

A major challenge for Spivak's theoretical efforts to display the ability of the subaltern to speech lies in the tools that she finds the subaltern has access to. That is, the colonial language by which the subaltern attempts to present her/ himself. The origin of the subaltern's inability to speak does not pertain to the issue of subaltern agency but to the fact that the subaltern surrenders her/

himself to the process of representation through application of the colonial language. To put it another way, it is the chosen means of representation, colonial language, which freezes the agency of the subaltern.

The subaltern, before of all, has to consciously resist the colonial dominance and hegemony through not allowing the colonial power to represent him/ her. Pasquale Verdicchio argues there are two ways for the representation of subaltern cultures: “descriptions or representations by outsiders or ... through the expressions of their own” (1). A major objection to Spivak’s insistence for the inability of the subaltern to speak is why the subaltern has to speak, when it ends in the subaltern’s transformation of identity and culture through means of representation. In fact, when the act of speech paves the ground for any type of subjugation, one of the possible ways to subvert such a subjugation is silence. Spivak’s famous question might be modified to “Can the subaltern be silent?”

The subalterns’ silence is an active means of resistance. Such a silence, as a language strategy of resistance, is charged with subaltern agency. Gramsci says “the subaltern have no history: [that is to say] there are no traces of their history in the historical documents of the past” (qtd. in Green 10). This statement correctly points to the way subaltern agency freezes when the subaltern is subjugated through colonial language. The resisting strategy of silence keeps the subaltern’s history untold and presents it as a maze to the colonial discourse. The silent history of the subaltern functions in two ways: First, it stops to be represented by the outsiders or through non-subaltern means of representation. The identity and culture of the subaltern remains inaccessible to appropriating forces. Second, the silence of the subaltern makes the dominant culture to recognize the existence of the subaltern culture and this will lead to the co-existence of cultures. Finally, Subaltern silence makes it possible to transcend the limiting and limited borders of colonial dominance and endows the subaltern with a new voice resisting to be possessed by the powers of representation. Subaltern silence, indeed, is the voice of the subaltern that pushes the dominant forces to remain speechless to hear its voice. An outstanding example of the subaltern silence is presented by J. M. Coetzee in his *Foe* (1986) through the character of Friday. The

following section will focus on this novel to show the potentials and agency of subaltern silence.

2.2 Subaltern's Silence in Foe

Coetzee's *Foe* establishes an intertextual link with Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). This intertextuality comes into existence through setting (the unknown island), characters (*Crusoe*, *Friday*, *Mr. Foe*) and common themes (ship-wreck, colonialism, master-slave relationship, subalternity and etc.). In fact, Defoe's novel functions as a novelistic tradition on which Coetzee's work is founded. Defoe, as the father of English novel, and his classic work, *Robinson Crusoe*, give life to the canon of traditional novel that Coetzee finds it necessary to show his link with it, and therefore, to be credited by it. Such an intertextual tie indicates also the colonial situation in which Coetzee and his novel might get engaged. Coetzee is a South African white novelist whose relation with the Western novelistic canon seems to be intricate. As a white Afrikaner, his situation in the black African society is controversial, meanwhile, his application of English language and of a western literary form (novel) adds further complexity to it.

Coetzee's social and political position can be regarded from a subaltern stance. To present a norm for being subaltern, Spivak quotes the definition employed by subaltern historians as "everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism" (qtd. in Rickel 166). To approach Coetzee and his works based on such a definition seems paradoxical. Since he belongs to the class of white Afrikaners who were administrating apartheid state in South Africa. Besides, Coetzee as a white African writer has access to the imperialistic tradition of novel-writing and his success is due to his benefit from that tradition. But, there is another quality in Coetzee and his fiction that proves his disconnection with "cultural imperialism": his critique of colonialism and his offering of a strategy of resistance, which is best portrayed in *Foe* (a detailed discussion of it will follow). Hence, the paradox of Coetzee's subaltern situation is resolved if we consider his opposition to the issue of colonialism in Africa, which is rendered in his novels. To put it in another way, it is possible to remain subaltern within the discourse of imperialism and self-consciously limit one's access to the means of dominance through a critique of it. In relation to Coetzee's investment on western

canon, it must be asserted that his reliance on the western novelistic tradition is associated with authorial agency, which makes it possible for Coetzee to give voice to the subaltern oppression and to find a space in the heart of a western canon to express subaltern voices. Derek Attridge in "Oppressive Silences: J. M. Coetzee's Foe and the Politics of Canonization" (1996) shows how Coetzee in Foe brings together the issue of application of literary canonization and cultural exclusion.

Coetzee's use of intertextuality in Foe is possible to be located in the context of subalternity to approach his novel freshly. The intertextual context of Foe stages for us a situation in which the subaltern and the dominant are symbolically brought into light. Considering the relation of Foe and Robinson Crusoe from the perspective of subaltern studies, the former takes on the role of a subaltern literary work in its relation with the latter, which is one of the foundations of a dominant literary canon. In fact, Coetzee portrays in Foe the margin and the center of the canon of western novel-writing. It makes us to notice how the formation of a literary canon functions through "kind of voicing and silencing" that is exerted by "our cultural and political practices" (Attridge 168). In a parallel way, Guha states that the origin of "the inadequacy of elitist historiography" lies in "the narrow and partial view of politics to which it is committed by virtue of its class outlook" (Subaltern Studies 3). Elitist historiography has silenced the history of the people in the same way that the canon of western novel excludes fictions that are not in conformity to its norms. The question of the subalternity of Coetzee will be more vivid through the intertextual context that puts both the African Coetzee and the British Defoe in one picture. The implied hierarchy here is based on what the subaltern and the dominant are defined: differential in power. Enumerating the sources of influence in Subaltern Studies, Lee observes the emergence "of a new social and labor" history in Britain advocated "history from below" (3). The relation between Coetzee and Defoe could also be approached from the same perspective. Coetzee gives voice to the life and history of the subaltern, himself one of them, who are ignored and silenced by the dominant colonial and literary discourses.

Coetzee achieves the agency of a subaltern in his dealing with the canon of western novel and in relation with Robinson Crusoe

through writing back to the colonial canon and symbol (Defoe's novel) by employing some colonial structures. Subaltern Studies' scholars theorize some strategies whose purpose is to write outside the dominant discourse and look for "forms of power/knowledge that oppress subaltern people" and provide "liberating alternatives" (Ludden 20). Approaching Foe from the subaltern view, Benita Parry directs our attention to an essential issue by an important question: How Coetzee's work "grounded in the cognitive systems of the West" (150) can contribute to subaltern cause whereas "the cognitive traditions and customs of South Africa's indigenous peoples were derogated and ignored" (158-9). Before all, we have to bear in mind that subaltern Studies do not design a solid dichotomy between the subaltern and the dominant domain, though it claims the autonomy of the former (Guha, Subaltern Studies I 6). Besides, it is needed to note that such an application of western intellectual tools can be found in the theorizations of subaltern scholars. It is enough to regard the influence of Gramsci, Foucault, Marx, and others to see that the theoretical foundation of Subaltern Studies is made up of "cognitive systems of the west" (Parry 150). Therefore, Coetzee's employment of novel form does not imply that he is deprived of introducing a subaltern strategy of resistance in Foe.

Coetzee's taking part with the subaltern is displayed, in Foe, in the first page of the novel when Susan has just arrived the island as a castaway. Sprawling on the shore, she describes Friday as such: "A dark shadow fell upon me, not of a cloud but of a man with a dazzling halo about him" (Foe 5). This air of majesty is created through linking Friday's shadow to that of a cloud and his silence, which is central in the rest of the novel. There is a sense of inaccessibility about Friday. If Friday's first image is placed beside the first image of Cruso described by Susan, it will help to know more about Friday. "At the gate of the encampment stood a man, dark-skinned and heavily bearded" (8), says Susan. Friday is associated with sort of mystique. This quality is preserved by his silence throughout the novel.

The narrative of the first part, which is complete in itself, raises the issue of subalternity through its intertextual structure. It shows how the narrative voice gives report of everything in the island ranging from Susan, Cruso, Friday, and their daily tasks to the

surrounding island and its constant winds and stormy rains. In Susan's narrative the subaltern is presented in terms of race (Friday) and gender (Susan). Susan's subalternity is double. Since she is a female in the patriarchal, colonial island of Cruso, and also, because "[t]here has never before ... been a female castaway" (Foe 40) in Robinsonade stories.

Coetzee displays the two subaltern classes to survey two different ways of subaltern resistance. Susan's narrative could be assumed as an attempt on the part of a female subaltern to make her identity recognized. She is in a power struggle with Cruso within the framework of her narrative. Her settling in the island, Cruso's territory, is overshadowed by Cruso's command, for example, "not to venture from his castle; for the apes, he said, would not be as wary of a woman as they were of him and Friday" (Foe 15). When she disobeys his order by venturing out, Cruso cries angrily "while you live under my roof you will do as I instruct" (20). Susan's plan to get rid of patriarchal suppression should be explored in her efforts to have her story of the island written down by Mr. Foe as she wishes it. Her effort is reminiscent of Spivak's notion of the inability of the female subaltern to speak ("Can the Subaltern Speak?"). Confessing she has "no art" (Foe 40) for writing down her story, she feels the need to depend on Mr. Foe to "set [her] story to rights" (40). This way, Coetzee underlines the question of representation as a means for appropriation of the subaltern in colonial discourse. Even the metafictional feature of the novel in the next two parts of the novel is of no help for Susan to direct the narration of her story along the line she insists in. Her arguments with Mr. Foe over how to narrate her story of the island encounters sheer disappointment in the final chapter of the novel by the intervention of an authorial voice who dispossess Susan and Mr. Foe of any narrative voice. Susan's ability to speak fades away throughout the first three chapters and dies out in last one.

Coetzee's strategy for "the speaking of the subaltern" is indicated in Friday's silence. Susan's narrative is both suppressed and suppressing through representation. The suppressed aspect of her narrative was detailed above. Meanwhile, it has a suppressive function in relation to Friday. Susan's narrative in the first part of the novel focuses on Friday since his silence is a challenge to

representation. Susan explains “[h]itherto I had found Friday a shadowy creature and paid him little more attention than I would have given any house-slave in Brazil” (Foe 24). Finding Friday’s subaltern history and identity inaccessible by the time he is silent, Susan asks Crusoe the reason for his not teaching English to Friday to enjoy “the pleasures of conversation”, to bring “home to him some of the blessings of civilization and make him a better man” (22). It is the very process of subjugating the subaltern to which Susan is also exposed when she insists to speak within the colonial discourse. In fact, Coetzee refers to the subaltern’s strategy of resistance through the question that Susan asks: “What benefit is there in a life of silence?” (22). Being inspired by Spivak’s notion concerning the ability of the subaltern to speech, I propose the notion that one strategy for the subaltern to resist is to remain silent when the ruling discourse intends to appropriate him through representation.

The mutilated Friday in Foe is far more powerful in resistance than Friday in Robinson Crusoe. Like Susan, Defoe’s Friday is powerless due to his willingness to be represented through the colonial language. That is why his subaltern identity is limited to being a cannibal, whereas Coetzee’s Friday is featured by his silence throughout the novel. Trying to put distinction between her narrative silences and those of Friday, Susan fails to see the power behind Friday’s strategy of silence. She claims “Friday has no command of words and therefore no defence against being re-shaped day by day in conformity with the desires of others. I say he is a cannibal and he becomes a cannibal; I say he is a laundryman and he becomes a laundryman” (121). Imagining Mr. Foe’s responses that focus on Friday’s “essence” (subaltern identity), Susan continues to explain that what Friday is has no significance since Friday is “what I make of him” (122). “Therefore the silence of Friday is a helpless silence. He is the child of his silence, a child unborn, a child waiting to be born that cannot be born” (122), concludes Susan. Opposed to Susan’s reasoning, Friday’s silence is pregnant with his subalternity. Attridge truly states “if he [Friday] could have his tongue restored to him, he would melt into a class which is already constituted and socially placed by a pervasive discourse” (183-4).

Friday’s silence is the source of his agency. It is even sometimes thought-provoking for Susan. Listing the mysteries she has found in

the island, she asks Friday: "what were you about when you paddled out to sea upon your log and scattered petals on the water?" (86-7). Mysteries such as this indicate the failures of the dominant discourse to appropriate the subaltern. Susan confesses her failure by observing that "to tell my story and be silent on Friday's tongue is no better than offering a book for sale with pages it quietly left empty" (67). The struggle for power, which occurs between Susan and Friday, could also imply that subaltern classes might get involved in a competition to win dominance over one another. It is here that we come to know that Friday's silence is charged with activity.

As a strategy to give voice to Friday, Coetzee characterizes the subaltern with the ability to remain silent. This silence makes Friday distinct in playing flute, dancing, dressing, and writing. Basing his argument on Spivak's notion of "marginal space" from which the subaltern speaks, Kim observes that to Friday, dancing cannot be any medium of communication to be shared with others; it signifies space and time in which Friday can be himself completely. Thus, we might conclude that Friday's silence results not from his tonguelessness but from his willful choice to protect his own space from other's invasion. (30)

When Friday is given a slate to write upon, he writes in his own way of writing: "row upon row of eyes upon feet: walking feet" (*Foe* 147). Head believes that this image evokes "slaves being forced to journey to places of enslavement; but they also suggest a sense of being witness, of a history of oppression that is not forgotten" (65).

Friday's silence is the only voice heard in the last part of the play. It leads the reader to the submerged history of the subaltern, symbolized by the sunken ship. His silence is heard from throughout the novel and it grows louder as the reader gets to the end of *Foe*. The last scene of the novel shows how the silence of the subaltern rises from the bed of the sea and "runs northward and southward to the ends of the earth" (*Foe* 157).

3. Conclusion

The present study shows Coetzee's *Foe* can be read in the light of fundamental theories of Subaltern Studies. The intertextual context of the novel puts the novelist in a subaltern position in relation to Daniel Defoe and his novel *Robinson Crusoe*. This offers him the

opportunity to subvert the colonial dominance and the imperial novelistic canon. Foe presents also two ways of resistance, advocated by Susan and Friday respectively. Uncovering Susan's strategy to speak her subalternity in the colonial language disappointing, as Spivak argues, it is discussed that Friday's silence proves to be a successful strategy of resistance against colonial representation and appropriation. Friday offers a new way for the subaltern to speak, that is, silence.

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