

## Voiceless Histories: Silence and the Archive in J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*

A Radha<sup>1\*</sup>, Dr. S Logarajan<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>PhD Research Scholar, Department of English, Annamalai University, Chidambaram 608002, Tamil Nadu, India

<sup>2</sup>Research Supervisor, Associate Professor, PG & Research Dept of English, Govt Arts College, C – Mutlur, Chidambaram 608002, Tamil Nadu, India

**\*Corresponding Author:** A Radha

<sup>\*</sup>PhD Research Scholar, Department of English, Annamalai University, Chidambaram 608002, Tamil Nadu, India

### Abstract

J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* presents a radical reconfiguration of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, centering on the silences within colonial narratives and the politics of representation. This paper explores the intersection of silence and archival absence in J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* through the lens of postcolonial and postmodern theory. By reimagining Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Coetzee interrogates the politics of voice, authorship, and historical representation, especially in colonial contexts. Central to the novel is the figure of Friday, a Black slave rendered voiceless, whose silence resists incorporation into the dominant narrative constructed by the narrator, Susan Barton, and the writer Foe. Rather than portraying Friday's muteness as mere erasure, the novel frames it as a form of resistance disrupting the authority of the colonial archive and exposing the limitations of language and narrative to capture subaltern experience. The paper argues that Foe destabilizes the idea of the archive as a neutral repository of truth and instead presents it as a colonial construct shaped by power, exclusion, and desire. Coetzee's use of metafiction and fragmented narration highlights how official histories are always incomplete, contingent, and complicit in silencing marginalized voices. Ultimately, this study reveals how Foe challenges readers to confront the ethical and epistemological dilemmas involved in speaking for the voiceless and recovering lost or suppressed histories.

**Keywords:** silence, archive, subaltern, historical representation, voiceless.

### Introduction

J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986) interrogates the assumptions of authorship, historical truth, and narrative authority. By retelling Robinson Crusoe from the perspective of Susan Barton and placing the mute Friday at the heart of the story, Coetzee subverts colonial mythologies. The novel confronts the limitations of archival knowledge and explores the concept of silence as a mode of resistance, complicity, and historical absence. The archive, as Michel Foucault argues, "The archive is the first law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events." (129) In *Foe*, the narrative is constructed through Susan Barton's attempts to document her experiences and shape them into a publishable story. Her efforts mirror the colonial impulse to collect, record, and fix meaning. Friday, however, resists this impulse through his silence, which defies her narrative. "Friday has no command of words and therefore no defense against being reshaped day by day in conformity with the desires of others." (189) Friday's muteness disrupts the colonial archive's claim to completeness and transparency. His body becomes a contested site inscribed upon, interpreted, but ultimately untranslatable.

### The Archive and Colonial Power

The archive, in both its physical and ideological forms, has long been implicated in the machinery of colonialism. As Michel Foucault and later thinkers such as Jacques Derrida have argued, the archive is not merely a passive collection of acts but an active force that determines what is remembered and what is forgotten. In the colonial context, archives were created to consolidate imperial authority, to categorize and control subject peoples, and to shape narratives about civilization, savagery, and progress. Coetzee dramatizes this process through Susan Barton's efforts to have her story published. Desperate to transform her experiences into a coherent narrative that would be accepted and commodified by the literary market, she seeks the help of the writer Foe. Her story, however, is not deemed sufficient on its own; it lacks the sensationalism, structure, and "truth" that would appeal to readers.

### Friday's Silence and the Voiceless Archive

The most potent symbol of the colonial archive's failure is Friday's silence. According to Susan Barton, Friday's tongue has been cut out, rendering him mute. This act of mutilation is not merely physical but symbolic of the systemic erasure of African voices in colonial narratives. In denying Friday the ability to speak, both literally and figuratively, the novel confronts the reader with the legacy of historical silencing that accompanied imperial expansion. Friday's muteness becomes a site of anxiety for Susan and for Foe. They repeatedly attempt to speak for him, to imagine what his story might be, or to compel him to participate in their narratives. Susan asks: "Is it not better to tell a story for Friday than to have none to tell?" (154) a question that encapsulates the well-meaning but ultimately paternalistic impulse to speak on

behalf of the silenced Other. Her question also echoes a colonial logic: if a voice is absent, it must be created, even if that creation involves projection and distortion.

Coetzee critiques not only colonialism but also the postcolonial urge to recover lost voices, particularly when that recovery is premised on the assumption that silence must be filled. The novel refuses to grant Friday a convenient narrative resolution. In doing so, Coetzee upholds the ethical demand to respect silence as silence, rather than attempting to convert it into speech that serves dominant frameworks.

### Metafiction and the Failure of the Archive

Coetzee's use of metafictional devices reinforces the instability of the archive. Susan's narrative is fraught with uncertainties, contradictions, and revisions. Her voice is filtered through Foe's pen, and the reader is never granted access to an objective account. Even Susan's own reliability is questioned, as she admits to forgetting details, altering events, or being unable to fully understand Friday. The fragmented and recursive structure of the novel mirrors the fractured nature of colonial history itself. In the final chapter, Coetzee shifts abruptly to a dreamlike, non-linear narrative voice, descending into Friday's world an underwater realm of silence and mystery. This ending defies closure and further destabilizes the idea of an authoritative archive. There is no final interpretation, no recovered history. The body becomes the last site of meaning, yet even this is unreadable. Friday's silence remains, a challenge to the reader's desire to decode and understand. The novel's structure thus mirrors its theme: the impossibility of fully reconstructing or accessing lost histories. The archive, as represented in *Foe*, is not only incomplete but fundamentally compromised by the assumptions, desires, and violences of its creators.

### Ethics of Archival Interpretation

Foe also raises ethical questions about who has the right to narrate history. Susan believes she is doing justice by telling Friday's story, yet her attempts are shaped by her own limitations and cultural biases. Foe, the professional writer, is even more overt in his manipulation, aiming to produce a marketable text rather than a faithful record. Coetzee uses these characters to explore how good intentions can still participate in colonial practices of appropriation and distortion. In refusing to provide a clear or comforting resolution, Coetzee suggests that some silences must remain unresolved. Rather than inserting a fabricated voice into the archive, he advocates for an ethical stance that acknowledges what cannot be known. Friday's silence, therefore, is not merely a lack but a presence a powerful indictment of the violence of colonial storytelling and a resistance to being assimilated into its archive. Silence as Historical Absence

Friday's silence signifies the erasure of African voices from historical narratives. His tongue, reportedly cut out, serves as a powerful symbol of forced silencing. Coetzee thus comments on the violence inherent in the colonial production of knowledge, where the Other is not only spoken for but silenced in the process. Drawing from Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Friday's silence can be read as an instance of the subaltern's speech being rendered impossible within dominant discourses. His presence in the text is a ghostly reminder of those lost voices that archives fail to preserve.

### Silence as Historical Absence

The most compelling embodiment of historical absence in *Foe* is Friday, whose tongue is said to have been cut out. This detail, whether literal or metaphorical, renders him voiceless in a text preoccupied with voice, authorship, and storytelling. Unlike Defoe's Crusoe, in which Friday becomes a convert and servant, Coetzee's Friday remains impenetrable, a figure of enigmatic silence. Susan Barton repeatedly expresses frustration at her inability to extract meaning from him. She asks,

What is the truth of Friday? Is it that he is mute or that he is dumb? You will say: he is neither, he is merely ignorant, merely uneducated. But is a man still ignorant when he has seen all there is to see and heard all there is to hear? Or do you conclude that Friday is not a man, or not a proper man? Then what is he? (121)

This enforced silence is a powerful metaphor for the subaltern experience within colonial history. As Gayatri Spivak argues in her seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", the subaltern is often denied voice within the dominant discourses of power, and even when attempts are made to recover or speak for the subaltern, the result is often a reinscription of silencing (Spivak 1988). Friday's silence thus reflects the colonial archive's failure to record the voices of the oppressed not because they had nothing to say, but because their speech was deemed irrelevant, unintelligible, or unworthy of documentation.

Silence in *Foe* functions as a critique of the colonial archive. The archive both as a metaphor and an institution is central to the creation of official histories. However, as theorists like Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida have noted, the archive is not a neutral repository of truth. It is an ideological construct that preserves certain narratives while excluding others. In *Foe*, Susan Barton's effort to tell her story and have it published reflects the struggle to inscribe alternative histories into this archive. Yet, even her story is subject to erasure and manipulation by the writer Foe, who seeks to reshape her narrative to fit the demands of fiction and public taste. Susan's anxiety about recording Friday's history mirrors the archival desire to "fill in" the silences of the past. She writes, "I say he is silent, and Friday keeps his silence. But is that silence a silence of the tongue only, or of the heart as well?" (119). Susan questions underscores the impossibility of fully knowing the past, especially when the subjects of that past have been systematically deprived of

the means to tell their stories. Rather than offering a triumphant recovery of lost voices, Coetzee confronts the reader with the limits of narrative and the ethics of representation.

### **Silence as a Postcolonial Resistance**

While Friday's silence may initially appear as a symbol of victimhood or absence, it also possesses a counter-hegemonic power. In refusing to speak or being unable to Friday resists being co-opted into the narrative structures imposed by his white interlocutors. His silence is not simply a void to be filled but a space of resistance, a refusal to comply with the colonial and literary expectations of speech, confession, or narrative closure. Édouard Glissant's concept of the "right to opacity" becomes particularly relevant here. In *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant argues,

The right to opacity would be, in short, the simplest equivalent of the right to difference... We clamor for the right to opacity for everyone. Not just for the Other near us in the framework of some two-way exoticism, but for the Other within us as well. We demand the right to a 'secret garden' that does not yield to the transparency demanded by the Enlightenment's tyrannical project of universal comprehension. (190)

Friday's refusal or inability to be interpreted may thus be read as an assertion of this right to opacity. His silence disrupts the narrative coherence that Susan and Foe attempt to impose and underscores the ethical dilemma of speaking for the historically silenced.

### **The Female Voice and the Layers of Silencing**

Coetzee complicates the theme of historical absence further by making Susan Barton the narrator. Although she occupies a more privileged position than Friday, she is also silenced in various ways. Her attempts to narrate her story and control its meaning are undermined by Foe's editorial authority. She becomes a symbol of women's erasure from the canon of literature and history, echoing feminist critiques of male-authored narratives that exclude or distort women's voices. Susan's partial success in telling her story juxtaposed with Friday's absolute silence creates a hierarchy of absence. While her story is manipulated, at least fragments of it survive. Friday's, by contrast, remains irretrievably lost. This tension amplifies the novel's message about the differentiated nature of silencing and the layered complexities of marginalization within the historical record. In most novels, silence is overcome by revelation or resolution. In *Foe*, however, Coetzee refuses closure. The novel ends with a surreal descent into the silent, watery world where Friday lies. The narrator says:

His mouth opens. From inside him 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. Soft and cold, dark and unending, it beats against my eyelids, against the skin of my face. ( 157).

The history Friday carries is beyond articulation and comprehension. This refusal of narrative resolution reflects Coetzee's postmodern sensibility. He undermines the reader's desire for a coherent ending or a recovered truth. Instead, Foe leaves us in the unsettling space of uncertainty a space that mirrors the historical reality of colonial silencing. By doing so, Coetzee offers a profound commentary on the limits of fiction and the impossibility of fully recuperating the past.

### **The Unreliable Narrator and the Fragmented Archive**

Susan Barton, the protagonist and narrator of *Foe*, seeks to have her story of survival, shipwreck, and colonial encounter recorded and published. Her voice dominates much of the novel, yet her narration is riddled with contradictions, omissions, and uncertainties. Coetzee constructs Susan not as a transparent medium of truth but as a self-conscious narrator who is frequently unsure of her memories, motivations, and even of the events she recounts. She admits her lapses in memory and repeatedly questions the accuracy of her own account. At one point, she writes:

I do not know how to tell this story. I do not know how to begin. I have told it to myself so many times, in so many different ways, that now it is worn smooth as a pebble in the sea, and I can no longer tell what is true and what imagined. (51).

Susan's narration is personal, fragmentary, and fraught with self-doubt. Her unreliability is compounded by her interactions with Mr. Foe, the professional writer she enlists to transform her tale into a publishable narrative. Foe manipulates her story, embellishing it with sensational details and urging Susan to include a rape scene to attract readers. The very idea of truth becomes negotiable, dependent on narrative structure, market demand, and authorial authority. Thus, Susan's story, shaped by both her own limitations and Foe's interventions, mirrors the instability and artificiality of historical narrative.

### **Construction of History**

Coetzee draws on postmodern and postcolonial theories of historiography to expose how archives are constructed through omission as much as inclusion. Michel Foucault's argument in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* that archives shape the discourse of history by determining what is sayable and knowable resonates deeply in *Foe*. Susan's narrative is itself an attempt to archive her experiences, yet the resulting text is unstable and compromised. Her letters, which constitute the bulk of the novel, remain unanswered, and it is unclear whether they were ever sent or received. This

epistolary structure creates a fragmented textual archive within the novel, one that leaves the reader uncertain of context, chronology, and authenticity. The absence of corroboration or external verification for Susan's account mirrors the gaps that haunt colonial archives where the voices of women, slaves, and indigenous peoples are often missing or distorted. Friday's muteness (he is presumed to have had his tongue cut out) prevents him from contributing to the archive of narrative. He is a living void, a subject who has experienced history but cannot record it. Susan attempts to interpret his gestures and expressions, but her efforts often result in projection or fantasy. She writes: "Friday has no command of words and therefore no defence against being reshaped day by day in conformity with the desires of others." (121). Coetzee draws attention to the colonial tendency to speak for the subaltern, constructing their histories without their consent or input. As Gayatri Spivak famously argues in "Can the Subaltern Speak?", attempts to recover subaltern voices are often subsumed within the same structures of power that silenced them in the first place (Spivak 1988). Friday's silence is both a symbol of historical erasure and a critique of the archival impulse to narrate what cannot be fully known.

### Metafictional Disruption and Narrative Instability

Coetzee's use of metafictional techniques in *Foe* further destabilizes the authority of the narrative and mirrors the fragmented nature of history itself. The novel constantly reminds the reader of its own fictionality. The shifting narrative voices, the layered structure (Susan's letters, her dialogues with Foe, and the cryptic final chapter), and the absence of clear resolution all function to problematize the idea of a singular, reliable truth.

The final chapter of the novel, narrated by an anonymous and disembodied observer, further disorients the reader. This section moves into a dream-like, surreal landscape where the boundaries between past and present, fact and fiction, collapse. The narrator explores a house possibly the house of Foe encountering bodies, silence, and an underwater world that metaphorically represents submerged histories. Friday is found lying still, and from his mouth pours a stream of water: "From inside him comes a slow stream, without breath, without interruption. It flows up through his body and out upon the floor." (157). The image powerfully encapsulates the idea of a story that exists but remains unrecoverable history rendered as elemental and unreachable. This refusal of closure reflects postmodern skepticism toward grand narratives and definitive meanings. Linda Hutcheon argues in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, "problematizes the very possibility of historical knowledge" (92). Coetzee, through *Foe*, embodies this approach by demonstrating how history is shaped by perspective, language, and power.

### Silence as Resistance

Friday's silence rendered physically by the claim that his tongue was cut out is at the center of Coetzee's novel. While his voicelessness is clearly a marker of colonial violence and dehumanization, Coetzee complicates this portrayal by refusing to "recover" Friday's voice. Instead of supplying him with an internal monologue or letting him speak through Susan or Foe, Coetzee preserves his silence throughout the novel. Far from being merely a passive condition, this silence becomes an act of resistance a refusal to be co-opted or translated.

Susan Barton repeatedly struggles to make sense of Friday. She tries to interpret his gestures, imagines what he might say if he could speak, and attempts to construct a history for him. Yet, she is constantly thwarted. As she writes, "Friday has no command of words and therefore no defence against being reshaped day by day in conformity with the desires of others" (121). Ironically, it is this very absence of speech that shields Friday from complete colonization. His silence leaves him unreadable, uncontainable, and thus unknowable within the frameworks Susan and Foe try to impose. In this way, Friday's silence becomes a form of strategic opacity, echoing Édouard Glissant's concept in *Poetics of Relation* of the "right to opacity." According to Glissant, oppressed peoples should not be forced into transparency or comprehension according to Western standards. Their right to remain opaque is a form of resistance to domination and assimilation. Friday's muteness, whether imposed or chosen, thus serves as a powerful disruption of the colonial desire to catalog, categorize, and control.

### Silence as Rejection of Narrative Control

Susan's desire to have her story written and published by the writer Foe introduces another dimension to the theme of silence: the tension between authorship and authority. While Susan seeks to have her voice heard, she also wishes to include Friday's story in her narrative, even though she admits she does not know what it is. She confesses: "The story of Friday is not a story of words. It is a story that must be told by silence." (142) This paradox lies at the heart of the novel: how does one represent the unrepresentable? Friday's silence frustrates the narrative compulsion to make sense of the world, to turn experience into coherent, consumable stories.

Coetzee refuses closure and denies readers a full understanding of Friday's past or his inner life. The result is not simply absence, but resistance to narrative closure. Foe's attempts to rewrite Susan's story according to popular tastes reflect how dominant cultures reshape subaltern experiences. Friday's refusal or inability to contribute verbally to the narrative undermines this literary colonization. In resisting incorporation into a coherent plot, he destabilizes the very notion of truth and authenticity in fiction and history.



### Silence as Ethical Challenge

Friday's silence also poses an ethical challenge to both the characters and the readers of *Foe*. Susan is torn between her desire to speak for Friday and her awareness of the violence inherent in doing so. Her efforts to interpret his gestures, provide him with a history, or imagine his thoughts are consistently shown to be speculative and self-serving. Coetzee, by maintaining Friday's opacity, critiques the liberal humanist impulse to "give voice" to the oppressed, revealing how this often masks a deeper need to manage or appropriate the other's story. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", is particularly relevant here. Spivak critiques Western intellectuals who attempt to recover or represent subaltern voices, arguing that these efforts often result in further silencing.

Friday's silence in *Foe* dramatizes this predicament. Instead of being spoken for, he remains silent, confronting readers with the uncomfortable reality that some stories cannot and should not be told on behalf of others. This silence demands an ethical response not a quest to decode or speak for the voiceless, but recognition of the limits of knowledge and representation. As Derek Attridge notes, *Foe* challenges readers to "read responsibly," acknowledging the singularity and unknowability of the other. Friday's silence resists appropriation and insists on an encounter with otherness that remains unresolved.

### Conclusion

In *Foe*, silence functions as a critique of the colonial archive and its epistemological limitations. Through Friday, Coetzee exposes the inadequacies of Western historiography and the violence of speaking for the 'Other'. He presents the archive not as a neutral space of preservation, but as a colonial construct that excludes, distorts, and erases. Through the character of Susan Barton, he explores how even well-intentioned narratives are shaped by power dynamics. Friday's voicelessness stands as a stark reminder of the millions of lives excluded from the historical record, not because they lacked experiences or insight, but because colonial structures deemed them unworthy of preservation. His silence is both a wound and a weapon marking a traumatic historical erasure and resisting assimilation into imposed narratives. Rather than offering the comfort of recovered speech, *Foe* insists that some silences are irretrievable and must be acknowledged as such. In this way, the novel becomes a deeply postcolonial and postmodern meditation on the politics of voice, memory, and loss.

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