

**“This is not a place of words”: Analyzing the notion of flux  
and fixity in the Canon from *Robinson Crusoe* to John  
Maxwell Coetzee’s *Foe***

**Arnab Chatterjee**

Whenever the epithet ‘Canon’ enters any academic discussion, we are, perhaps drawn magically towards the very idea of an inclusionist approach that a ‘canonical’ writer may have used while penning his/her works that were, nevertheless meant to impart it a ‘universal’ dimension. Thus, while talking about the ‘Shakespearean’ canon or the ‘Dickensian’ canon, what irresistibly draws us to these writers is not only the all-embracing quality of their works, but also what the other ‘voices’ in the academia speak about them. This brings home to us the notion of “canonicity”, i.e. the very idea of the existence of a Canon and what goes into the making of the same. But there is also an undeniable fact that what would be considered “canonical” and what would be not is a process that is complex and intriguing in itself. This again brings us to the idea of a coterie recommending a particular Canon. Dr. Johnson in his “Preface to Shakespeare” may have opined that a hundred years are sufficient to test literary quality and to see whether a work has stood the test of time or not ( qtd. in Enright 131-61), but what this critic seems to be missing are those sundry factors that nevertheless come into play to re/de-structure a Canon again and again. Harold Bloom is of the view that a new writer is always acutely conscious of the great canonical authors who have gone before him/her, and the writer concerned would try to read a “parent text defensively” (qtd. in Abrams 125). It is a matter of a common

understanding that the processes through which a Canon is formed are complex and elusive in themselves—there are a whole troop of forces like individual preferences, the norms and standards of a particular ruling elite, the matrix of socio-economic forces at work in a particular signifying system and what is normally considered to be “normal” and “sane” against what is typically deemed to be “deviant” or “abnormal” that tend to determine a particular Canon.<sup>1</sup> This inevitably seems to validate the point that forces that are at the centre of a particular signifying system shall determine what would be deemed a ‘Canonical’ text, and what would be not. Thus, this valorization of a particular writer/text over the other often has a complex matrix of factors like race and ethnicity. American theatre at Broadway has been a witness to the ‘canonical’ plays being enacted from time to time, but at the fringes of the same have been writers and dramatists like Sam Shepherd who had to get their plays performed as “Off Broadway” or even “Off- Off Broadway”. Such subversive forces that threaten to ‘deconstruct’ the seeming fixity of a Canon or its canonicity has been the nodal point of investigation of poststructuralist theorists who may nevertheless be quite quick to point out the subtle ‘politics’ at play when certain questions do come forth: 1. What is a Canon? 2. Who determines it? 3. What determines it?

The very first question is then a bit difficult to answer, yet an attempt to define the same may be nevertheless made. Canon may, in a way, be seen to be the overall responses that go into the making of an emerging text more appealing to the audience that reads it or may come to read it over a period of time. Thus, *what* is a Canon is not rather a matter of capital importance than *what goes into making the same*. The second question “who determines it” is the one that has to deal with the whole gamut of the factors that go into determining canonicity itself: from the positive reviews of the newspapers, say what the American or Parisian newspapers had to say when Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952) was published, or what exactly happens when a writer wins the Nobel, to how well his/her book has been marketed. But the third question is the one that may seem to be the most intriguing one: “what” determines a work to be enduring, and hence “Canonical” in itself is the one that may be left to the readers itself, just as it is not very difficult to determine *why* Chaucer’s *Troilus and Cressida* ‘better’ than Henryson’s *The Testament of Cressida* and hence “canonical”.

Brian Crews in his essay “Postmodern Narrative: In search of an Alternative” is

pertinent enough to note: "When alternatives are found to existing conventions then we have an alternative system, an alternative possibility, an alternative reality, an alternative world..."(26). The idea that is re-inforced by this remark is that since a Canon would invariably seek to masquerade as a "grand-narrative" in itself—a self-certifying system, in the center of an academic circle, it would always be in the danger of being toppled from its former privileged position. A canon, since it is in one way, a discourse, would always be subject to the treachery of the warring forces present inside itself. If, to foreground something, there are other factors that need to be relegated to the rear, then what 'constitutes' or 'is' the Canon would invariably take into its consideration, though tacitly, what *is* or *should* be 'uncanonical' and hence 'unreadable', fit to be ignored. However, this seeming fixity of a Canon would always be questioned, for a canonical text's "unconscious" would always threaten to expose the gaps and fissures that have been sidelined for a 'better' inclusionist approach.

Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) is not only considered now to be a canonical text because it was one of the first of the written novels in the English language, but also because in the exploits of Crusoe, Defoe shows a typical utilitarian approach at play—not only did the then rising middle class of London admire it and gave it a status that one may call "canonical" in a nomenclature that we use today, but it is still so because of the ever eager spirit of humankind that does not know defeat, as William Faulkner too had admitted to have refused to accept "the end of man".<sup>2</sup>Based on the real life incident of Alexander Selkirk, who was marooned on a desert island of Juan Fernandez off the coast of Chile for years, Defoe found the tale not only suited to his own needs, but also penned it as part fiction, part reality when the ideas of the Enlightenment were gradually growing to their fullest, with emphasis on rationality and good sense. Crusoe 'tames' Man Friday, converts him to Christianity—the entire story is a subtle reflection of England's growing sea prowess and a steady rise as an imperial nation. The original narrative is also the celebration of man's newly found potential that has a latent power to tame Nature and the elements. Crusoe tames not only Friday, an 'object' of Nature itself just like the island, but even the island itself, asserting his superiority over all that comes in his way. of This not only helped to establish *Robinson Crusoe* as an important text at that point of time, but it even today, remains so as a text that seems to celebrate man's efforts to control wild nature and its changing moods. However, stories that we seem to know already have depths within themselves that yet remain to be explored. As Barbara Johnson in her *The*

*Critical Difference* (1980) has succinctly pointed out that “if anything is destroyed in a deconstructive reading, it is not the text, but the claim to unequivocal domination of one mode of signifying over another” (qtd. in Abrams 60). Defoe’s novel, as a seemingly ‘canonical’ text has then, already deconstructed itself as well when it ‘aspired’ to such a status, for a desire to be at the center of a signifying system would mean to be in the midst of those warring voices, hitherto unnoticed that are in Bhaktin’s chosen epithet, jostling for attention.

John Maxwell Coetzee’s *Foe* (1986) re-enacts this game of telling and re-telling, for, this time, the castaway is not a man like Robinson Crusoe, but a woman Susan Barton by name, who has been washed to this desert island. Barton has unwittingly come to this island, she had been to Bahia in order to look for her missing daughter, and on her way back home, was set on the turbulent waves to fend for herself, after the ship’s crew mutinied. After rowing for a considerable stretch of time, she came to Crusoe’s island. Barton has perhaps understood that she is to be counted to be the next to Friday, and the novelist takes the reader to a time when Crusoe is being depicted living on the island for many years. But the ‘alternative literature’ that the writer offers to us is striking— in *Foe*, Crusoe has no intention of either building a boat, salvaging his ship and thereby escaping to civilization, nor is he articulate enough. Man Friday is mute, and it is his muteness that becomes a central for Barton in the novel. True, Coetzee being trained a linguist and a computer language programmer early in his career dwells on the twin questions of language and silence, but we, as readers are somehow drawn to this binary opposition between language/non-language. This means that to read this novel as an alternative, deconstructive reading of the original *Robinson Crusoes* and witches us in an unresolvable ‘aporia’. Is Friday indeed dumb, or, as Barton surmises, his tongue has been ripped off by Crusoe himself to punish him and subdue his servant. Or is it possible that Friday came into the possession of Crusoe in this state. In one of the sections of the novel, Susan Barton asks Crusoe about this mystery of Friday’s dumbness, to this Crusoe catches Friday hair and commands him to “sing”, but what Barton could see was a black hole for a mouth and a grunting sound. However, Barton, in one of the chapters of the novel comes to a conclusion that. “till we have spoken the unspoken, we have not come to the heart of the story” (Coetzee 141). She seems to have finally understood that any signifier, missing from the troupe of the already existing ones would merely render meaning as pseudo-meaning only. Coetzee, through the mixed voices of Susan

Barton and Mr. Foe remarks: "In every story there is a silence, some sight concealed, some word unspoken, I believe. Till we have not spoken the unspoken we have not come to the heart of the story. I ask: Why was Friday drawn into such deadly peril, given that life on the island was without peril, and then saved?"(Coetzee 141).

After the death of Crusoe in *Foe*, which is in sharp contrast with the original 'canonical' text, Susan Barton is rescued by a ship and brought to England. In Clock Lane, she goes by the name of "Mrs. Crusoe", even though she had not undergone the nuptial ceremony with Crusoe on the island, except sharing a night or two with him. The act of calling herself not Susan Barton and "Mrs. Crusoe" is thus an effort on her part to be at the center of this popular castaway narrative— Previously Crusoe had owned Man Friday, now she does. She meets an enigmatic Mr. Foe ( or the author Daniel Defoe himself) in 1720 A.D., and she wants her story to be published by this man. Mr. Foe, however, has other intentions; he finds it more germane to bring the other story into limelight, that of Susan Barton's journey into Bahia and her exploits while she was searching for her lost daughter. ManFriday has been ultimately brought to civilization, but he is still silent as ever, seemingly aware of the uselessness of his speech that would, nevertheless be pregnant with his own world-view rather than that of Susan Barton's or Mr. Foe's. Susan Barton is puzzled by the wild dance of Friday after he has been brought to this part of the world by her— these whirling dances are perhaps an attempt by this enigmatic character to 'feel' his being, something that he in all probability fears to lose, having arrived in alien surroundings. He is then, a free floating signifier, without any signified as such, and hence a desire on our part to arrive at any 'coherent' meaning vis-à-vis his dance would imply entering into this game of signification that would necessitate one 'meta-language' to explain this act/language of Friday's dance. If Friday's dance is a sheer celebration of his newly-found freedom, something that stands in a sharp contrast to the original story of *Robinson Crusoe*, then it should be borne in mind that he does not give us any indication that he has a language to express it or not, for in the words of Mr. Foe, "Freedom is a word like any other word" (*Foe* 149). Thus it does not 'matter' to Friday whether he knows *what* he is doing or not. Friday's act of wearing Mr. Foe's wigs and robes and attempting to write at the very end of the narrative is a subject's desire to control the very order of signification, but Friday's efforts to write produce nothing but a huge smudge on the paper. This is what the novelist has been perhaps trying to hint at— that anybody, whether it be the writer of the narrative entitled *Robinson Crusoe*(1719), or the Mr.

Foe of Coetzee's *Foe* (1986) or even Susan Barton, with a desire to enter the complex textual labyrinth of a metafiction would never get beyond a mere "o" or "a". As Susan Barton remarks in a chapter:

“Whether writing is able to form itself out of nothing I am not competent to say’, I replied. ‘Perhaps it will do so for authors; it will not for me. As to Friday, I ask nevertheless: how can he be taught to write if there be no words within him, in his heart, for writing to reflect, but on the contrary only a turmoil of feelings and urges? As to Gods writing, my opinion is: *If he writes, he employs a secret writing, which is not given to us, who are part of that writing, to read*’ ”. (143; italics added)

When Susan Barton comes to know of the little girl who watches her house every day to be her own lost daughter, she refuses to believe her account, but what strikes her even more is that the girl introduces herself as “Susan Barton”. When she reports this to Mr. (De)Foe, he asks

If her accounts of Bahia are indeed true or not and whether the story of her lost daughter is also mere a fiction. Coetzee seems to be introducing yet another strand in this already enigmatic narrative— what if Susan Barton have been lost herself? She has searched for her daughter, has seen and suffered much, and has the seeming command of language( itself unstable) to narrate her tale, something that the child does not seem to have, except repeating again and again that she is the lost daughter of Susan. Thus Mr. Foe tells Susan Barton, who has become his sexual companion now that, “the island is not a story in itself... we can bring it to life only by setting it within a larger story.(...) It is like a loaf of bread . It will keep us alive , certainly, if we are starved of reading; but who will prefer it when there are tastier confections and pastries to be had?”(117)

Coetzee's novel, then, is not to be read as mere re-telling of an already 'known' narrative, but it is the one that comments on the art of storytelling itself. It is a novel where postcolonial enterprise tends to meet feminist concerns— Susan Barton not only partakes in the whole experience as a castaway, but also, to look it from one perspective, 'burrows' her way into a narrative hitherto populated by male figures. When she is back in England, the author Mr. De (Foe) is more interested in his own idea of getting the exploits of Barton at Bahia being published, than that of her own experiences as a female castaway in a God-forsaken island. Mr. Foe tries to turn

Susan Barton into his own invention, something that she is acutely conscious of. For Barton, the prime concern is her story, but for Mr. Foe, the most important aspect of Susan Barton's narrative is *how* it exactly gets told and the niceties connected with the same.

The novelist not only attempts to show *how* a canonical text like *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) keeps within itself the multifarious possibilities of being replaced by "alternative literatures" from "alternative cultures", but also that any such alternative reading is also fraught with the possibilities of further re-telling by the subtle engagement of alternative narratological strategies. In the final portions of the novel *Foe*, an unknown woman, who in all probability could be Susan Barton's alter-ego, or even the one who has come to search for her and the mysterious Mr. Foe after having read their story. She comes into a dark and murky room and turns the leaves of an old book that contains the words of the first sentence of the novel *Foe*, " 'At last I could row no further'" (155).<sup>1</sup> This unknown intruder has presumably come into the lodgings of Mr. (De )Foe, slimy and dusty as ever, and finds Susan Barton and the author in each other's embrace, an image that may be suggestive of a strong bond between the twin processes of *what* a story is all about and *how* it may get told. Coetzee seems to be quite critical of this whole business of story-telling; he seems to be skeptical even his own narratological strategies and the numerous possibilities for other stories to emerge from the same. Hence the sentence in the end of the novel, "...this is not a place of words" (*Foe* 157), and since "words" may always be in a state of being subject to changes due to the endless play of warring forces within a system of signification, always conveying less than what they are nevertheless "constrained to mean" (Cuddon 50). The novelist draw parallels between this fluid nature of meaning/interpretation and between the waters of the sea that is the same "as yesterday, as last year, as three hundred years ago" (*Coetzee* 157). Those numerous processes that would re/ de-structure the Canon would always be at work, and it all depends on exactly *how long* a seemingly 'Canonical' text can hold to its canonicity and claims to having achieved a unique artistic effect. In this regard, *Foe* (1986) is not only a text in which "the empire writes back" from a territory hitherto considered to be lying at the outer rims, at the periphery (South Africa), but it is also at pains to show that this very

attempt at “writing back” would be nevertheless attended by those forces that would *see* to it that no “writing back” is the final one.

#### Notes

1. Meyer Howard Abrams in his acclaimed *A Glossary of Literary Terms* seems to be highly skeptical of such terms that have been used either ‘loosely’ or often been taken for granted.
2. The final sections of the novel has striking similarities with a surrealist narrative with its emphasis on the content of the sub-conscious mind and matters fit for dreams.
3. “William Faulkner-Banquet Speech” *.Nobelprize.org*. NobelMediaAB2013. Web. 30 March 2014. <<http://www.nobelprize.org/nobelprizes/literature/laureates/1949/faulkner-speech.html>>.

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