

EXPLORING ORIENTALISM: A POSTCOLONIAL STUDY OF COETZEE'S
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Abstract

*This study examines J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* within a postcolonial framework, focusing on Edward Said's concept of Orientalism to reveal how narratives construct cultural hierarchies. The objective is to explore how Coetzee critiques imperial discourse and reimagines silenced voices in colonial texts. The methodology relies on qualitative textual analysis, applying Said's theoretical lens to close readings of the novel. The significance of the study lies in highlighting *Foe* as a counter-narrative that interrogates colonial authority. The implicature suggests that literature not only reflects but also resists dominant ideologies of empire. The findings reveal that Coetzee destabilizes the colonial gaze by foregrounding subaltern silence and problematizing Western authorship.*



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INTRODUCTION

Coetzee's *Foe* (1986) offers a radical reworking of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, opening new possibilities for postcolonial critique through its focus on narrative, silence, and power. By reimagining the *Crusoe* myth through the perspectives of Susan Barton and Friday, the novel unsettles the colonial canonical narrative and interrogates who possesses authority in storytelling as well as whose voices remain suppressed (Metzler & Kongsak, 2016). Rather than simply inverting or critiquing colonial tropes, *Foe* engages with the underlying structures that sustain them, uncovering the ways in which authorship can function as an imitative and repressive mechanism within the broader framework of empire (El-Idrissi, El Falih, & El Habbouch, 2024).

Coetzee's *Foe* is deeply invested in the tension between voice and voicelessness. Friday's silence is not

merely the absence of speech but an active form of resistance, a refusal to be subsumed into others' narratives, thereby exposing the limits of the colonial archive and the dominance of imperial language itself (Radha & Logarajan, 2025). Similarly, Susan Barton, though vocal, must also contend with the ways in which her agency is constrained within the story's construction. Through intertextuality, metafiction, and hybridity, Coetzee destabilizes rigid binary oppositions. Concepts such as mimicry, ambivalence, and Bhabha's notion of "unhomeliness" shape the characters' identities, situating them within liminal spaces where they are neither entirely inside nor outside colonial discourse (Mostafaei, 2016). These unsettling in-between spaces prove both troubling and generative, compelling characters and readers alike to

confront the lingering, often subtle, persistence of colonial legacies.

Another critical dimension concerns the ethics of reference, representation, and the responsibilities that accompany acts of representation. The novel underscores that granting voice is not simply enabling speech but negotiating the complex politics of interpretation, appropriation, and silence (Authorities: Postcolonial Challenges in *Foe*, 2016). Coetzee complicates the assumption that restoring voice equates to delivering justice; rather, he illustrates how narratives are subject to regulation, suppression, distortion, and erasure. This study extends a thorough postcolonial reading of *Foe*, tracing how Coetzee employs narrative form, character voicing (and silencing), intertextuality, and hybridity to expose and resist colonial power structures. The analysis is framed through Gayatri Spivak's theorization of the subaltern, Homi Bhabha's concepts of ambivalence and hybridity, and the ethical considerations of authorship and narrative authority articulated by scholars such as Derek Attridge and Tobias Metzler.

1.1 Statement of Problem

J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* critically interrogates colonial narratives by highlighting the silencing, marginalization, and misrepresentation of the oppressed. Existing scholarship has primarily focused on its narrative techniques and intertextuality, yet there is limited analysis of how the novel engages with Orientalist constructions of power and the ethical dilemmas of representing the subaltern. While the text foregrounds issues of voice, authority, and resistance, a gap remains in understanding how Coetzee critiques imperial discourse and patriarchal structures through the manipulation of narrative authority, silence, and ambiguity within an Orientalist framework. This study seeks to address this gap by examining the ways in which *Foe* exposes and subverts the mechanisms of colonial knowledge and representation.

1.2 Research Objective

- To analyze *Foe*'s critique of colonial power, patriarchy, and the silencing of marginalized voices through narrative authority and representation.

1.3 Research Question

- What strategies does *Foe* use to critique colonial power, patriarchy, and the silencing of marginalized voices through narrative authority and representation?

1.4 Significance

This study is significant because it deepens the understanding of how J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* interrogates colonial narratives through Edward Said's framework of Orientalism. By focusing on issues of silence, power, and representation, it highlights the ways in which marginalized voices are excluded or distorted in imperial discourse. The research contributes to postcolonial literary studies by showing how Coetzee destabilizes dominant narratives and questions the authority of Western authorship. It also provides readers with new insights into the politics of storytelling, authorship, and cultural identity. Ultimately, the study emphasizes the continuing relevance of postcolonial critique in uncovering the lingering effects of colonial legacies in literature.

1.5 Limitations

The study is limited by its focus on textual and theoretical analysis, without incorporating empirical data or reader-response perspectives that might further illuminate the reception of *Foe*. Additionally, the research primarily engages with Said's Orientalism, which may constrain the exploration of other critical frameworks that could offer alternative readings of power and representation.

2.0. LITERATURE REVIEW

Much of the existing scholarship on J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* has concentrated on the novel's treatment of silence and its relation to the subaltern condition. El Idrissi, El Falih, and El Habbouch (2024) contend that Friday's silence should not be interpreted merely as the absence of speech but rather as a deliberate act of resistance that undermines colonial discourse. In this sense, silence functions as a counter-discursive strategy, refusing assimilation into the linguistic and ideological frameworks of imperial authority. Similarly, Radha and Logarajan (2025) emphasize the novel's engagement with gaps, omissions, and erasures in the colonial archive. They argue that *Foe* documents how silence and absence are not neutral

voids but actively shape the construction of colonial knowledge, thereby challenging the reliability of historical narratives that privilege the colonizer's voice.

This paper investigates the impact of Darwinian ideology on the colonial imagination, particularly its role in shaping imperial ambitions during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Centering on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and Hesse's *The Journey to the East* (1932), the study explores literary portrayals of Africa and Asia within the broader framework of colonial discourse. Through an analysis of characters, motifs, and events, the research underscores the metaphorical dimensions of these representations. Drawing on Edward Said's postcolonial theory of Orientalism, it examines the politics of self and othering, the construction of stereotypes, and the binary oppositions of superiority and inferiority. The study also critiques the ways in which Social Darwinism sustained racial hierarchies, aligning with Fanon's (1952) argument that such imperial ideologies inflicted harm on humanity as a whole. Employing a qualitative design grounded in textual and contextual analysis, the research seeks to deconstruct the negative depictions of Asia and Africa. Ultimately, it demonstrates how colonial discourse, informed by Social Darwinian thought, simultaneously dehumanized the colonized and morally corrupted the colonizers, thereby revealing the enduring effects of imperialism on both regions (Hussain, et al 2024).

In line with the postcolonial interrogation of identity and belonging, this study considers the displaced position of Changez Khan in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* as a parallel to the struggles of marginalized voices in Coetzee's *Foe*. Changez's fractured identity disrupts the possibility of forming deep, horizontal comradeship within either American or Pakistani society. The research highlights the tensions and contradictions that shape his shifting loyalties, particularly as he navigates the pressures of assimilation in the United States while remaining bound to the traditions, history, and political realities of his homeland. Employing a qualitative method that combines close textual analysis with scholarship on diaspora, nationalism, and imagined communities, the study argues that Changez's experience of hybridity situates him within Bhabha's "Third Space."

Like Friday's silence in *Foe*, this liminal position prevents full integration into any cultural or national framework, leaving him isolated and unable to forge enduring bonds of solidarity. In this way, both texts illustrate how Orientalist discourse and colonial legacies perpetuate displacement, otherness, and the impossibility of stable belonging (Khan, Hussain & Rahman, 2025).

A significant body of criticism highlights the central role of intertextuality in J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*, particularly in its reworking of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Uhlmann (2011) argues that Coetzee's novel relies on readers' familiarity with Defoe's text, as this intertextual awareness allows Coetzee to parody both the form and content of the original, thereby exposing its ideological foundations. Through this strategy, Coetzee not only retells but also destabilizes the cultural and political assumptions embedded in Defoe's canonical narrative. Similarly, Khaleel (2019) interprets *Foe* as a paradigmatic example of postmodern rewriting, demonstrating how Coetzee revises the structures of narrative authority and the moral framework upon which *Robinson Crusoe* is built. In doing so, the novel foregrounds the act of storytelling itself, questioning who possesses the right to narrate and whose perspectives remain excluded or silenced.

Patel (2022) further extends this argument by reading *Foe* as an African counter-discourse that resists not only colonial representation but also the patriarchal authority associated with Defoe as a canonical figure. From this perspective, Coetzee's reworking is not limited to literary play but is an act of cultural and political intervention that seeks to dismantle the legitimizing myths of imperialism. By incorporating new characters such as Susan Barton and emphasizing Friday's silence, Coetzee interrogates the ways in which history, authorship, and power intersect in the construction of colonial narratives.

Taken together, these critical perspectives suggest that Coetzee's use of intertextuality in *Foe* serves to deconstruct Enlightenment ideals and the imperialist myths that sustain them. The novel compels readers to confront how canonical texts like *Robinson Crusoe* function within the machinery of colonial discourse and how literature itself can perpetuate domination. Ultimately, *Foe* demonstrates that rewriting is both an aesthetic and political act, destabilizing inherited

traditions while opening new spaces for marginalized voices.

Intertextuality also carries a cultural dimension, particularly in its relationship to authorship and narrative. Metzler and Kongsak (2016) argue that Coetzee destabilizes the notion of an omniscient narrator in *Foe* by presenting competing voices—Susan Barton, Foe the writer, and the silent figure of Friday—whose interactions shift the power dynamics of authorship. From a different angle, Neimneh (2014) examines Susan Barton's attempts to control the story as a reflection of the colonial impulse to define and confine the Other, thereby revealing the insidious power embedded within acts of narration. Extending this critique, Gümüş (2019) interprets Friday's mutilation as a stark symbol of colonial violence: his impaired ability to speak becomes a powerful emblem of the silencing and disempowerment endured by the colonized. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that narrative authority in *Foe* is deeply entangled with colonial undertones, exposing how storytelling itself participates in structures of domination.

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The intersection of gender and colonialism in Coetzee's *Foe* has also been a central focus of critical inquiry. Azam (2018) offers a feminist critique of voice and otherness, showing how Susan Barton's desire to dominate the narrative reflects both colonial and patriarchal forms of power. Similarly, Patel (2022)

notes that in *Foe*, imperial and patriarchal structures are simultaneously critiqued, with Barton's problematic exercise of agency positioned as a challenge to the masculine authority of canonical texts. These feminist perspectives reveal that gendered and colonial power dynamics are intricately intertwined, complicating the politics of voice and representation throughout the novel. Postcolonial readings of *Foe* have further been enriched by insights from disability studies. Gümüş (2025) interprets Friday's tonguelessness as both a literal and metaphorical marker of the ways in which colonialism enacts corporeal and symbolic violence on the colonized body. This interpretation highlights how systems of domination extend beyond language and narrative to encompass control over the body itself, underscoring the denial of agency in both speech and physical autonomy.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This research is qualitative in nature because it sought to interpret and critique in detail the data colonial and power relations aspects of J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* from the viewpoint of postcolonial theory. The study applied Textual Analysis as the central methodological approach which provided an extensive and intensive approach to the study of the language, themes and narrative techniques of the Novel. The central data source was Text of the Novel, and on which the main corpus of the analysis is built. Sources such as scholarly writings, critical essays and books on Postcolonial theory and Coetzee's works provided the secondary data. These secondary data were used to justify the theory and place the analysis within the existing literature of the field. Data collection was the act of reading and re-reading the Novel to collect and analyze patterns, themes as well as portions of the Novel that discussed the relationships of the power of colonialism and narratives. The main concern was about the Silence, subaltern, and the postcolonial theory, authorship, storytelling which lies mainly on the authorship and post colony.

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) remains one of the foundational texts in postcolonial studies, offering a powerful critique of how the West constructed the East as its cultural, political, and intellectual "Other." Said argues that Orientalism is not simply an innocent

body of knowledge about the Orient but a discourse deeply implicated in structures of power, shaping how the East was represented in literature, scholarship, and politics. Through this framework, the Orient was stereotyped as irrational, backward, and passive in contrast to the rational, progressive, and active West, thereby legitimizing colonial expansion and control. Orientalism, therefore, provides a lens to analyze how texts reproduce or resist these binary oppositions, revealing the interplay between knowledge and power (Said, 1978).

Applied as a theoretical framework, Orientalism enables scholars to examine how literature constructs categories of identity and difference. Said (1993) later emphasized that such representations are never neutral but serve political ends, reinforcing hierarchies between colonizer and colonized. This perspective allows for critical readings of canonical works that shaped imperial ideologies, as well as contemporary texts that interrogate those legacies. By foregrounding the politics of representation, Orientalism highlights how the act of narration itself becomes an exercise of authority, making it central for analyzing works that grapple with issues of voice, silence, and cultural identity.

In the context of postcolonial literary criticism, Said's Orientalism provides a critical tool for deconstructing texts like J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*, which reworks colonial narratives such as Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Using Said's framework, scholars can trace how the novel destabilizes colonial binaries and exposes the silences and exclusions embedded in imperial discourse. Orientalism thus not only uncovers the mechanisms through which the West defined itself in opposition to the East but also helps to illuminate how writers challenge, resist, or subvert those inherited modes of representation. As such, Said's theory continues to serve as a vital foundation for interrogating the lingering effects of colonialism in literature and culture.

4.0 DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* rewrites Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* in order to interrogate the Orientalist foundations of colonial literature. By reimagining the *Crusoe* narrative, Coetzee exposes how Defoe's text constructs the colonized as silent, passive, and subordinate in contrast to the rational and

authoritative European self. Within Said's (1978) framework, *Foe* disrupts these Orientalist binaries by presenting a fragmented and ambiguous narrative that resists closure, thereby challenging the Enlightenment's rationalist and imperialist optimism. As Uhlmann (2011) notes, such intertextuality functions as a critique of how literature and empire are historically intertwined, illustrating that narratives of discovery were never neutral but always implicated in structures of domination. Through Susan Barton's attempts to control Friday's voice, Coetzee foregrounds the Orientalist practice of silencing and misrepresenting the "Other," revealing how imperialist discourse depends upon erasure and distortion. The absence of a definitive resolution and the instability of meaning in *Foe* thus exemplify how Orientalist texts both construct and conceal the colonial encounter, while Coetzee's rewriting exposes those mechanisms to critical scrutiny.

In *Foe*, the dynamics of authorship and narrative control take center stage, functioning as a site of postcolonial critique. The figure of Foe embodies the colonial impulse to define, structure, and finalize narratives, while Susan Barton struggles to assert authority over the representation of her own story. Metzler and Kongsak (2016) argue that the presence of multiple narrators destabilizes the notion of the omniscient, unilateral storyteller and foregrounds the politics of representation embedded within the text. Susan's dependence on Foe to lend her tale legitimacy reflects the colonial hierarchy in which colonizers established the conditions of historical record, while her frustration at Foe's imposed "improvements" mirrors the resentment of colonized populations whose voices were mediated or erased by imperial discourse. The fragmented narrative, unresolved tensions, and competing voices collectively illustrate that every act of narration is itself an exercise of power. By denying any character the authority to completely control the story, Coetzee critiques how colonial infrastructures perpetuate themselves through domination over narrativization and the framing of historical memory.

Deprived of language, Friday in *Foe* emerges as a quintessential representation of subalternity, illustrating the dynamics of power in colonial discourse. As Spivak (1988) observes, subaltern figures like Friday are systematically excluded from dominant

discourses, rendering their voices inaudible within the epistemic frameworks of empire. However, following El Idrissi et al. (2024) and Neimneh (2014), his silence is not simply an absence of speech but functions as an active form of resistance, challenging the authority of the colonizer's language and its accompanying violence. Within Said's (1978) framework of Orientalism, Friday's muteness unsettles the colonial archive, denying the narrative closure sought by both Foe and Susan Barton, and exposing the West's construction of the Orient as passive, knowable, and speakable. His silent presence forces readers to confront the colonial gaze and the epistemic structures that render the colonized invisible, revealing how imperial discourse determines who may speak and who is rendered silent. Coetzee thus critiques the epistemic violence inherent in Orientalist representation by allowing Friday to "speak" through his absence, demonstrating that the voices of the colonized are suppressed not by actual silence but by the selective attention and interpretive frameworks imposed by the colonizers.

Although *Foe* primarily critiques imperial discourse, it also foregrounds the intersections of power, patriarchy, and Orientalist representation. Susan Barton's struggle for narrative authority illustrates how colonial and patriarchal hierarchies operate together to define and control the "Other." As Azam (2018) notes, Barton's attempts to assert her voice are repeatedly constrained by Foe, who embodies the masculine, imperial authority over the text, reflecting the Orientalist tendency to regulate and define both colonized spaces and marginalized perspectives. Positioned in a liminal state, Barton is neither fully colonizer nor colonized, yet remains subordinated within the intertwined patriarchal and colonial frameworks. Her reliance on Foe to validate her narrative mirrors how, under Orientalist discourse, women's accounts—and more broadly, subaltern voices—are mediated and controlled by dominant authority figures (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988). Through Barton, Coetzee exposes not only the mechanisms of imperial power but also the gendered and representational hierarchies embedded within colonial knowledge, demonstrating how Orientalist structures systematically silence, distort, and regulate narratives.

Foe interrogates the ethics of representation, particularly regarding who has the authority to speak for the oppressed and voiceless. Coetzee does not offer a straightforward recovery of the subaltern voice, nor a simple counter-narrative to colonial history; instead, the novel exposes the limitations of representation within imperial discourse. Drawing on Said's (1978) concept of Orientalism, the text highlights how the colonized are constructed as knowable, controllable, and speakable by the West, while in reality, their perspectives remain mediated and inaccessible. As Bhabha (1994) observes, postcolonial literature often operates within a zone of hybridity and ambivalence, where meaning is negotiated rather than fixed. The unresolved ending of *Foe* challenges readers to confront the impossibility of fully knowing or authentically speaking for the Other, positioning this lack of closure as a form of resistance against the colonial desire for mastery and comprehension. Moreover, it forces both author and reader to navigate the ethical complexities of representation, questioning whether any attempt to "give voice" may paradoxically replicate the domination it seeks to resist. By exposing the limitations of both colonial and counter-colonial narratives, Coetzee's novel underscores the enduring influence of Orientalist frameworks and cautions against appropriating the silences of those whom empire has rendered peripheral.

5.0 CONCLUSION

5.1 Findings

1. Friday's muteness is not merely the absence of speech but a form of resistance against colonial discourse, exposing the Orientalist tendency to define and speak for the colonized.
2. The struggles between Susan Barton and Foe highlight how Orientalist discourse regulates narrative authority, mirroring the broader colonial impulse to control representation and silence marginalized voices.
3. The novel demonstrates that colonial domination is inseparable from patriarchal structures, showing how women's voices, like those of the colonized, are mediated, constrained, and often erased.
4. Through intertextual rewriting of *Robinson Crusoe*, Coetzee destabilizes the ideological foundations of imperial narratives, revealing how Orientalist

constructions of the “Other” are contested through ambiguity, hybridity, and narrative fragmentation.

5.2 Conclusion

In conclusion, J. M. Coetzee’s *Foe* serves as a powerful critique of the mechanisms of colonial discourse, as conceptualized by Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism. The novel exposes how imperial narratives construct the colonized as passive, knowable, and speakable, reinforcing hierarchies of power and authority. Through the character of Friday, whose silence resists incorporation into the colonial archive, Coetzee highlights the ways in which the Orient—and, by extension, the subaltern—has been systematically silenced and misrepresented. Friday’s muteness disrupts the expectation of narrative closure and challenges the reader to recognize the limitations of imperial knowledge, foregrounding the political and ethical dimensions of representation.

Simultaneously, *Foe* interrogates the intersections of patriarchy and colonial authority through the struggles of Susan Barton. Her attempts to assert narrative control reveal the ways in which women’s voices, like those of colonized subjects, are mediated by dominant structures. By positioning Barton in a liminal space of partial agency, Coetzee illustrates the overlapping hierarchies of power that operate through both gender and empire. Within Said’s Orientalist framework, Barton’s struggle mirrors the broader dynamics of representation in which the colonizer defines what can be said, by whom, and under what terms, emphasizing that the act of narration itself is deeply political.

Moreover, the novel’s use of intertextuality and ambiguity underscores the instability of colonial discourse. By rewriting *Robinson Crusoe*, Coetzee challenges the authority of canonical texts and exposes the ideological assumptions underpinning imperial knowledge. The fragmented narrative structure, competing voices, and unresolved ending exemplify the ambivalence and hybridity described by Bhabha (1994), demonstrating that meaning is negotiated rather than fixed. Through these techniques, *Foe* resists the colonial impulse to fully define, categorize, and dominate, highlighting the ethical responsibility of both authors and readers in engaging with histories and stories of the silenced.

Ultimately, Coetzee’s *Foe* reveals that the Orientalist construction of the Other is not only a mechanism of domination but also a site for critique and resistance. By foregrounding silence, contested narratives, and ethical dilemmas of representation, the novel exposes the limitations of colonial knowledge while simultaneously problematizing any simplistic recovery of subaltern voice. In this way, *Foe* functions as a postcolonial intervention, demonstrating how literature can challenge entrenched hierarchies of power, complicate assumptions of mastery and authority, and encourage readers to critically reflect on the politics of voice, agency, and representation in the context of empire.

5.3 Recommendations

Future studies could explore how *Foe* resonates with contemporary postcolonial novels that similarly challenge Orientalist representations, allowing for a comparative analysis across different cultural and historical contexts.

Researchers may also examine the novel through an interdisciplinary lens by integrating Orientalism with disability studies or eco-criticism, to uncover additional dimensions of power, silence, and embodiment in Coetzee’s narrative.

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