



“The Canon Reworked: J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* And Postcolonial African Counter-Discourse”

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how post-colonial African novels, particularly those by J.M. Coetzee, serve as powerful tools to challenge and deconstruct the hegemonic structures that perpetuate unequal power relations. These structures are often framed in binary oppositions such as Us and Them, First World and Third World, White and Black, Colonizer and Colonized. African novels play a pivotal role in critiquing colonial portrayals of the African continent and its people, crossing boundaries and confronting the historical constraints imposed upon Africa's aspirations. This paper delves into the ways post-colonial African novelists use their works to facilitate the transgression of boundaries and the subversion of hegemonic rigidities previously mapped out in precursor literary canonical texts about Africa and Africans. A central focus is on J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*, which serves as a post-colonial and feminist rewriting of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Through this rewriting, Coetzee engages in a dialectical intertextuality with Defoe's canonical work, presenting a counter-narrative that subverts its colonialist and patriarchal undertones. The analysis highlights how Coetzee's *Foe* critiques the stereotypes and rigidities established by colonialist discourse, offering a platform for marginalized voices and providing a profound commentary on the post-colonial condition. This critique of canonical works is a significant trend in post-colonial literature, with Coetzee's fiction exemplifying the broader movement of revisiting and reinterpreting classic texts to reflect post-colonial realities and challenge historical injustices. By reworking the canon, post-colonial African novelists not only reclaim their narratives but also contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities and nuances of post-colonial identity and discourse.

Keywords: Post-colonial literature, African novels, binary oppositions, hegemonic structures, intertextuality, Daniel Defoe, J.M. Coetzee, *Foe*, *Robinson Crusoe*, counter-discourse.

1. INTRODUCTION

The adverse impact of colonialism on Africa is evident in the realms of language, education, religion, artistic sensibilities, and popular culture. Consequently, African post-colonial novels have emerged as crucial tools for dismantling hegemonic boundaries and determinants that create unequal power relations based on binary oppositions such as "Us" and "Them," "First World" and "Third World," "White" and "Black," and "Colonizer" and "Colonized." The primary objective of most post-colonial African novelists is to reclaim and accurately represent the history of their people, which colonialism has often distorted (Preckshot, 2003; Said, 1983). These writers critically examine colonial portrayals of Africa and its people, challenging the misrepresentations and stereotypes that have been perpetuated over centuries.

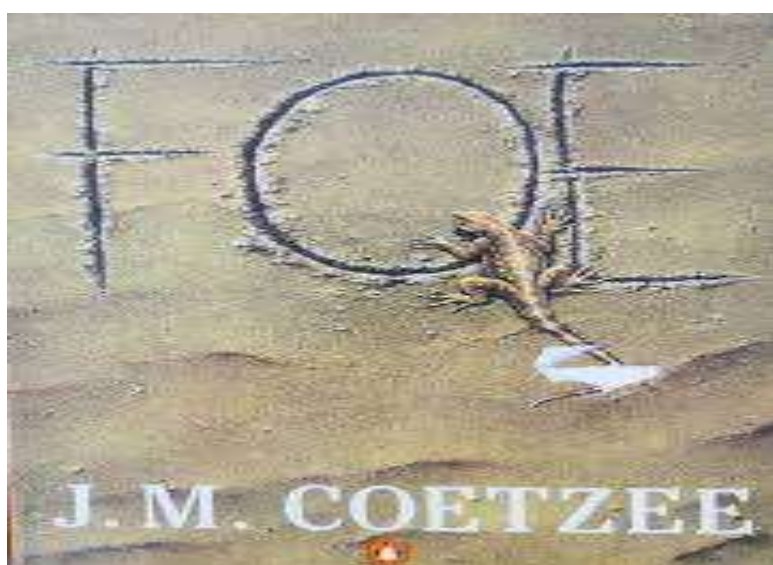
Emerging from a history of active resistance to colonialism, the African novel transcends boundaries and challenges historical constraints imposed on the continent. The typical African novelist addresses the pressing need to set the record straight, illuminating the threshold between past and present, thought and action, self and other, and Africa and the wider world. This paper examines how post-colonial African novelists use their texts to transgress boundaries and subvert the rigidities previously mapped out in canonical literary texts about Africa.

Given Daniel Defoe's significant role in the canon of colonialist discourse, this study focuses on his 1719 novel, *Robinson Crusoe*. In parallel, it examines *Foe* (1986) by post-colonial African novelist and 2003 Nobel

Laureate J.M. Coetzee. *Foe* represents one of many post-modernist attempts to engage in dialectical intertextuality with canonical works that perpetuate negative stereotypes of Africa and Africans. This paper revolves around two theoretical concepts in intense interplay: colonialist discourse and globalization.

In this context, colonialist discourse—a concept popularized by Edward Said in "Representing the Colonized" (1989)—refers to the Western construction of knowledge about Africa to support its colonizing interests, prioritizing the division between the West and its 'Others'. Said's work has highlighted how these constructed narratives served to justify and maintain colonial dominance, often at the expense of accurate and respectful representations of African societies. On the other hand, globalization, which emphasizes the increasing interconnectedness of different parts of the world, seeks to challenge these borders and has significant implications for how people perceive themselves and others. Globalization facilitates a more nuanced and interconnected understanding of identities and histories, challenging the simplistic binaries often found in colonial discourse.

Consequently, this paper focuses on the dialogue between two texts representing these concepts—one rooted in colonialist discourse and the other in elaborating a new and globalized understanding of Africa. By examining Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Coetzee's *Foe*, the study explores how post-colonial African novelists engage with and critique the literary canon, highlighting the ongoing relevance of post-colonial perspectives in understanding both historical and contemporary issues.



<https://ikesbooks.com/products/jm-coetzee-foe>

1.1 Coetzee's *Foe* and Post-Colonial Themes

J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* is a pivotal work in the canon of post-colonial literature, engaging deeply with issues of representation, power, and identity. The novel critiques the persistent stereotypes in Western literature and amplifies the voices of marginalized individuals, reflecting Coetzee's broader aim of challenging and deconstructing colonial narratives. *Foe* serves as a meta-narrative that reconsiders the colonial discourse present in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, providing a critical lens through which to view the legacy of colonialism and the portrayal of the "Other."

Coetzee's *Foe* does not merely replicate post-colonial themes; it reinvents them through innovative literary techniques. The novel employs a dialectical interaction with the colonial text of *Robinson Crusoe*, subverting its imperialistic underpinnings. By reimagining the story from the perspectives of previously silenced characters, such as Friday, Coetzee offers a critique of the colonial lens that Defoe's narrative perpetuates. The novel's engagement with intertextuality challenges readers to reexamine the traditional narratives that have long been accepted as truth.

1.2 The Culture of Misrepresentation in Western Canonical Works

The legacy of European colonization has had a profound impact on the representation of Africa and its people in Western literature and thought. This misrepresentation is rooted in a long history of colonial dominance and is perpetuated through various forms of Western media, including literature, history, and geography. Western societies often construct their own identity in opposition to the "Other," viewing themselves as embodiments of progress, civilization, and modernity, while depicting the Third World as the antithesis of these qualities (wa Thiong'o, 2000).

This misrepresentation is not a mere oversight but a deliberate cultural construct aimed at maintaining power dynamics. The educational systems in Western countries often perpetuate these stereotypes, reinforcing erroneous and demeaning portrayals of Africa. This cultural bias extends into literature and media, where

Africa is frequently depicted through a lens of exoticism and primitivism, further entrenching negative stereotypes.

Edward Wilmot Blyden's critique, written over a century ago, highlights the deep-seated nature of these prejudices. Blyden lamented that African culture was often overshadowed by the influences of colonial masters, resulting in a skewed representation of African traditions and experiences. His observations underscore how colonial narratives have shaped both external perceptions of Africa and internalized self-views among Africans.

2. STEREOTYPES IN WESTERN MEDIA

Western media, including books, films, and documentaries, has long perpetuated negative stereotypes about Africa. These portrayals often reduce complex societies to simplistic and exoticized images, reinforcing harmful clichés about African people and cultures. This misrepresentation has significant consequences, as it shapes the perceptions of both Western audiences and Africans themselves. The pervasive nature of these stereotypes means that Africans are frequently confronted with images that distort their reality and identity.

The internalization of these stereotypes can lead to a diminished sense of self-worth and identity among Africans, who may come to view themselves through the distorted lens presented by Western media. This self-perception is a direct result of prolonged exposure to negative and dehumanizing representations.



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2.1 Coetzee's Literary Innovations

J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* stands out for its innovative approach to literary form and content. Coetzee's work engages in a sophisticated intertextual dialogue with canonical texts such as Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. By reworking the narrative and presenting alternative perspectives, Coetzee not only critiques the colonial discourse but also offers a new way of understanding post-colonial identities.

The novel's structure, which includes the insertion of a narrative voice that challenges the dominant colonial perspective, exemplifies Coetzee's literary innovation. Through this reworking, Coetzee highlights the power dynamics inherent in storytelling and challenges the authority of traditional narratives. His focus on marginalized voices and alternative viewpoints disrupts colonialist discourses and contributes to a more nuanced understanding of post-colonial experiences.

3. CRITIQUE OF STEREOTYPES AND CANONICAL TEXTS

Homi Bhabha (1988) argues that Western newspapers and quasi-scientific literature are filled with a range of stereotypes about the colonized. He critiques the fluid and shifting roles assigned to colonized subjects in colonial texts and suggests that African writers should work towards liberating these subjects from their demeaning portrayal as Europe's simplistic and oppressed "Other" (Bhabha, 1988).

Similarly, Andrew Milner and Jelf Browittl (1991) explore how Western religious texts, particularly the Bible, perpetuate stereotypes about Africa and its people. Dennis Walder (1998) expands on their work by asserting that the Western canon of texts is replete with conservative and authoritarian attitudes that ostensibly support the liberal-democratic states of Europe and North America. Walder emphasizes that the physical domination of Africa by colonizers is highly visible, but this control is also sustained through conceptual frameworks ingrained in the minds of the colonized. Thus, it is not just the material presence of colonial power but the canonical knowledge that reinforces the authority of the colonizer over the colonized (Foucault, 1980).

Furthermore, records of Africa's history provided by Europeans are not neutral accounts but are influenced by European representational narratives. Ania Loomba (1998) supports this view, arguing that European travelers interpreted the "new world," including Africa, through ideological lenses shaped by their own culture. The English novel, particularly *Robinson Crusoe*, is a key text in this discourse. This early eighteenth-century novel reflects the superiority of rational civilization over nature and savagery, showcasing the British Empire's self-representation through its colonial encounters. Crusoe, the protagonist, embodies the Hegelian Master, and a postcolonial reading reveals that Defoe inadvertently exposes deeper ideological processes. Western colonialism, beyond exploiting human and material resources, aimed to obliterate indigenous cultures and values, replacing them with distorted and ambiguous versions. Frantz Fanon (1967) asserts that colonialism is not satisfied with merely subjugating a people but also distorts and devalues their past. This process of devaluing pre-colonial history is crucial for understanding the dialectical impact of colonialism today (Fanon, 1967).

3.1 Colonial Construction of African Identity in Robinson Crusoe

By altering Africa's history and culture, colonizers have established new values for the African subject, similar to how Orientalism constructs the image of the "Orient." In Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, this process of creation is evident in the protagonist's interactions with Friday, his servant. Crusoe's approach to subjugation is characterized by brute force and cultural imposition. He uses violence to rescue Friday from his captors, simultaneously using his power to coerce Friday into obedience (Defoe, 1986).

Crusoe's cultural imperialism begins with a linguistic strategy. He renames Friday without considering his original name and imposes the title "Master" upon himself. Through this act, Crusoe initiates Friday into English customs, aiming to make him a bilingual subject but only in a way that reinforces the master-servant dynamic. This process of indoctrination highlights how the West has historically categorized and controlled Africans and other colonized peoples (Defoe, 1986).

The second method of control is theological and ostensibly altruistic. Crusoe views Friday's traditional religion as ignorant and pagan, reflecting the later attitudes of imperialist missionaries toward indigenous religions in Africa. Crusoe believes that converting Friday to Christianity is a benevolent act, viewing his own Western religion as the sole true faith. This belief supports the notion that indigenous people are naturally suited to serve Westerners. For instance, when Crusoe needs to build a boat, he assigns the arduous tasks to Friday and his father, while he himself or the Spaniard supervises, underscoring the hierarchical view of native labor (Defoe, 1986).

Crusoe's derogatory view of native people is further exemplified in his depiction of them as savages, marked primarily by their cannibalism. He reflects on his experiences with a sense of horror and revulsion, as he describes the natives' brutality as an extreme manifestation of human degeneracy: "All my apprehensions were buried in the thought of such a pitch of inhuman, hellish brutality, and the horror of the degeneracy of human nature, which, though I had heard of often, yet I never had so near a view of before; in short, I turned away my face from the horrid spectacle" (Defoe, 1986).

4. ADDRESSING MISREPRESENTATION: THE ROLE OF POST-COLONIAL LITERATURE IN ENGAGING WITH WESTERN CANONICAL TEXTS

Post-colonial theory, an extension of anti-colonial activism from influential figures such as Léopold Sédar Senghor, Frantz Fanon, and Amílcar Cabral (Ashcroft et al., 1989; Schipper, 1996; Zukogi, 2002), plays a crucial role in countering colonial narratives. The foundational writings of these early nationalists laid the groundwork for contemporary post-colonial discourse. Key texts that have significantly influenced African counter-discourse include Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972), Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), and Chinweizu et al.'s *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* (1980). These works critically challenge the intellectual legacy of Western academia and question the underlying assumptions of Western colonial and neo-colonial agendas.

4.1 African Literary Responses to European Imperialism

During this era, African authors such as Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o have critically examined European imperialism. A significant portion of contemporary African literature is dedicated to reinterpreting Western canonical works. This response is a natural consequence of the profound impact of European contact on African social, cultural, political, economic, and psychological states. The extensive trauma resulting from this contact often evades critical examination by African writers and post-colonial discourse analysts. A. L. Kiddle notes in his introduction to Ngũgĩ's *Homecoming* that the discussion about Africa's interaction with Europe remains ongoing due to the persistent and deep-seated impact of these historical wounds (1972: xii).

4.2 Deconstructing Colonial Narratives through African Literature

African literature actively engages with colonialism by challenging its dehumanizing assumptions and resisting its negative effects. The African novel, in particular, reflects a growing historical, cultural, and political consciousness. These works strive to counteract the negative images of Africa and Africans perpetuated by

European writers such as Joyce Cary, Graham Greene, Joseph Conrad, Rider Haggard, Daniel Defoe, and William Shakespeare. African novelists seek to confront and modify European racism and exploitation, using their literature to bridge cultural divides between Black and White communities. Their works emphasize their unique cultural identities and reject the myth of European superiority based on wealth and power (Schipper, 1996).

4.3 The Impact of Nationalist Movements on African Literature

Nationalist movements such as Pan-Africanism, the Black Renaissance, Negritude, and Black Consciousness have further contributed to African literature's exploration of cultural roots and traditions. According to Schipper, the novel has proven to be an effective medium for African writers who wish to address the realities of colonialism. These authors challenge the notion that European power and wealth imply superiority (Schipper, 1996: 37-38).

4.4 Reclaiming the African Narrative

Ernest Emenyonu emphasizes the importance of African writers in telling their own stories, arguing that relinquishing this right would lead to misrepresentation of African culture. Achebe, in works such as *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and his other writings, contends that missionaries and explorers have misrepresented Africa. He asserts that Western canonical works often portray Africa and its people with bias and ignorance. Achebe's goal is to reclaim the African narrative from European distortions and to assert the significance of African culture. For Achebe (1965), the primary role of African writers is to help their society regain self-belief and overcome the historical complexities of denigration and self-abasement.

5. CONCLUSION

J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* serves as a significant work within the framework of post-colonial African literature, offering a sophisticated reworking of Western canonical texts and contributing to the broader discourse on colonial representation. By engaging critically with Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Coetzee not only reexamines the colonial narratives embedded in such texts but also presents a nuanced critique of the power dynamics that have historically marginalized African voices.

In *Foe*, Coetzee challenges the entrenched stereotypes and assumptions perpetuated by colonial literature. The novel's innovative approach lies in its intertextual dialogue with *Robinson Crusoe*, subverting the traditional narrative to reveal the complexities and injustices of colonial discourse. Through the character of Friday and the novel's exploration of power and representation, Coetzee exposes the underlying mechanisms of colonial control and its impact on both the colonizer and the colonized.

The critical engagement with canonical Western texts in *Foe* reflects a broader trend within post-colonial African literature. African writers have long sought to dismantle the colonial legacies that have shaped perceptions of their cultures and histories. By revising and critiquing these Western narratives, they not only reclaim their own stories but also challenge the dominant paradigms that have historically depicted Africa in a distorted and demeaning light.

Coetzee's work aligns with the objectives of post-colonial discourse, which aims to uncover and critique the power structures embedded in colonial texts. It underscores the importance of giving voice to previously silenced perspectives and rethinking historical and cultural representations. Through *Foe*, Coetzee contributes to a re-evaluation of canonical works, demonstrating how literature can be a powerful tool for both resistance and reimagining.

In conclusion, *Foe* exemplifies the transformative potential of post-colonial literature in reworking and reinterpreting canonical texts. It highlights the ongoing relevance of post-colonial counter-discourse in addressing historical injustices and fostering a more inclusive and accurate understanding of global narratives. Coetzee's novel is a testament to the power of literature to challenge entrenched stereotypes and offer new perspectives on the complexities of colonial and post-colonial identities.

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