A Bakhtinian Dialogic Study of the Voice of Friday in J. M. Coetzee’s Foe

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Abstract. The paper studies the dialogic features of the tongueless of Friday in Foe as a non-westerner in postmodern and postcolonial context from Bakhtinian dialogism to expose hegemony in Robinson Crusoe. The real cause of silence of Friday originated from colonial writing and western discourse instead of his body. Otherwise, only the body as an existence can disclose and speak.

Keywords: foe, dialogue, Friday, voice.

1. Introduction
John Maxwell Coetzee is the winner of the Noble Prize in literature in 2003, the fourth African writer to be honoured this prize, and the second South African after Nadine Gordimer. Foe, “one of Coetzee’s most discussed of his novels” [1], is famous for his re-writing and re-vision of Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe. In this novel, Coetzee depicts the story of Susan Barton—a female castaway. Though it seems still an adventure story, the form and the emphasis have changed a lot. By weaving the biography of Daniel Defoe—one of the “fathers” of English novel and his works—especially Robinson Crusoe, Moll Flanders, and Roxana: the Fortunate Mistress into one fictional world, Coetzee not only makes Foe evidently intertextual, but also foregrounds the technique of writing and the fictionality of the novel. In Foe, Coetzee occupies himself with many contemporary issues, for instance, the reliability of language, the power of representation, the responsibility to the Other, the boundary between fiction and reality, the voice of the Other in history and in literature, and so forth.

2. Literature review
Since its publication in 1986, it has attracted many critics and produced some fine critiques so far. Studies have focused on various aspects of Foe from different perspectives such as postcolonialism, feminism, intertextual theory and so on.

Postmodernism and postcolonialism usually are applied in the analysis of Foe. Interpretations to it from the intersection of postmodernism and postcolonialism have yielded readers enlightening and helpful critical articles. Marni Gauthier in his article points out that Coetzee in Foe uses the narrator Susan as a “belated traveler” to do “a belated reading of Robinson Crusoe” [2]. By so doing, Coetzee makes us aware of the elided voice of female in Robinson Crusoe and the voiceless state of Friday. By
re-writing from the perspective of the marginalized and “the ex-centric”, Foe touches upon the issues that both postmodernism and postcolonialism are mainly concerned with such as race and gender.

The lack of female voice in Robinson Crusoe and the appearance of Susan Barton as the narrator in Foe have aroused the curiosity of feminist critics. Peter E. Morgan asserts that Robinson Crusoe is “ripe for retelling” as a myth [3]. Susan Barton in Foe as “an every woman” re-experiences the journey of Robinson Crusoe to enter into the past in an attempt to expose the process of “the elided female” in Defoe’s society and also in contemporary society.

Foe, has inevitably attracted many critics to analyze its intertextual devices. Most of the analyses are mainly concerned about its intertextuality with Robinson Crusoe and Roxana or the Fortunate Mistress by Daniel Defoe such as Tisha Turk’s “In the Canon’s Mouth: Rhetoric and Narration in Historiographic Metafiction”. Tisha Turk points out Foe gives the reader the illusion that Defoe splits Coetzee’s story into two, by importing characters from its intertexts and incorporating a version of Defoe[4].

It is no doubt that there exists the possibility of reviewing these fine critiques without missing some insightful points and articles. After the above brief literature review, we are rewarded by finding that few critics have applied Bakhtin’s dialogism to the study of Foe. Hayes’s analysis of the huge influence of the Dostoevsky’s Crime and Punishment to Foe’s structure and ending has inspired the author of this essay to systematically study Foe by adopting the perspective of Bakhtin’s dialogism.

Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895—1975) has exerted great influences not only on literary studies but also on philosophy, semiotics, cultural studies, anthropology, feminism and post-colonial studies, Marxism, ethics and so on.

For Bakhtin, dialogism or dialogue is the term that dominates his thinking and even reaches the height of possessing the philosophical meaning. Instead of being confined to the analysis of the literary works, dialogism or dialogue also penetrates into his thinking of human being’s daily life. For Bakhtin, dialogue has infiltrated into every aspect of life.

Like the dialogic nature of life, Bakhtin also points out the nature of word is also dialogic. According to Bakhtin, “The word is born in a dialogue as a living rejoinder within it; the word is shaped in dialogic interaction with an alien word that is already in the object. A word forms a concept of its own object in a dialogic way” [5]. The birth and formation of a word is dialogic by nature. From this idea, Bakhtin further develops his dialogic theory into any verbal communication. He believes dialogue in the broad sense can mean not only face-to-face verbal communication between persons, but also any type of verbal communication such as a book. According to him, finally, dialogic relationship not only exists possibly among language styles, social dialects and so on, but also possibly among “different intelligent phenomena” if only “these phenomena are expressed in some semiotic material” [6].

3. The implied dialogue between Friday in Robinson Crusoe and Friday in Foe

3.1. Defoe’s Friday in Robinson Crusoe

In Robinson Crusoe, there is no denying that Crusoe is the center of the whole book. Crusoe’s achievements in wealth and in spirit dramatize the ambition of the up-rising capitalism in the eighteenth century. As the center of the whole narrative, Crusoe is surrounded by some ciphers to successfully highlight his dominating position. One of the ciphers is female characters who are so extremely marginalized that their voice can not be heard. Another obvious cipher is Friday, the colonized. The transition of Defoe’s Friday from a “cannibal” to a good servant also represents Friday’s change from a native to a colonized.

In Robinson Crusoe, after the “savage” saved has awakened from his rest, the first thing Crusoe has to do with him is to name him. And then Crusoe teaches Friday to speak English. The first word Friday has learned to say is “Master”, which refers to Crusoe. Crusoe naturally turns into a master of Friday and also the capitalized “Master”, while Friday a servant of Crusoe and also the capitalized “Servant”. Friday’s conducts further strengthen this kind of master-servant relationship. The moment Friday is
rescued, he approaches Crusoe, “kneeling down every ten or twelve steps” [7]. “At length he came close to me, and then he kneeled down again, kissed the ground, and laid his head upon the ground, and taking me by the foot, set my foot upon his head” [7]. It seems to Crusoe that this act of Friday is “in token of swearing to be my slave forever” [7]. Friday’s act like this repeats again, before Crusoe names him. Crusoe’s depiction of Friday here foregrounds the willingness of Friday to be a servant. For a servant, loyalty to the master is of vital importance. Crusoe’s various trials of the loyalty of Friday show that Friday is not only useful, but also always honest and kind to Crusoe. Friday is so loyal that he even is reluctant to leave Crusoe for his own country.

Among Crusoe’s conducts to recast Friday from a “cannibal” into a “normal” man, one stinking one is to indoctrinate Friday with the Western Christianity. In fact, Friday has his own God—an “old Benamuckee”, and different way to pray. Having known Friday’s religion, Crusoe tries to “instruct him in the knowledge of the true God” [7]. On one hand, Crusoe strives to show Friday’s religion is “a cheat” [7]. On the other hand, he tries every means to make Friday believe in Christianity. When Friday questions the existence of God by asking “why God no kill the Devil, so make him no more do wicked [?]”, Crusoe at first does not know how to answer, then “pretends not to hear him” [7], and sends him out. In order to convince Friday of the redemption of man, Crusoe has a long conversation with him and admits that he has “more sincerity than knowledge in all the methods” he adopts[7]. In this way, Crusoe finally turns Friday into “a good Christian” [7].

3.2. Coetzee’s Friday in Foe
In Foe, by implanting a female narrator Susan Barton into Robinson Crusoe, Coetzee makes the long-time silence of women in literature, in history and in society clearly presented before the reader. In the meantime, another crucial issue—the cruelty of being colonized with Friday as the representative also appears in the narrative of Susan Barton. In Foe, Coetzee not only demonstrates the atrocity of the colonizer’s treatment of the colonized, but also constructs Friday’s subjectivity as a human being without being entrapped in the Western culture by elaborating on the tongue of Friday.

In Foe, when the narrator Susan Barton is cast away on the shore of Cruso’s island, it is Friday that first discovers her and carries her to Cruso’s encampment on the back. According to Susan Barton, Friday is a black “Negro with a head of fuzzy wool, naked save for a pair of rough drawers” [8]. He has a “flat face”, two “small dull eyes”, a “broad nose”, two “thick lips” and his skin is “not black but a dark grey” and dry[8]. These features of Friday evidently tell the reader he is a black from Africa, probably South Africa. Friday as a black from Africa also gives a detectable evidence that Foe actually refers to South African. When Susan Barton sees Friday has “a spear”, her first impression is that Friday is a cannibal. Such an impression obviously suggests Defoe’s Friday and the stereotype popularized by Defoe’s Friday, that the native living on the island are “cannibals” waiting to be conquered by the Westerner.

The cutting off of the tongue of Friday in Foe is one of the most violent acts that have been performed on Friday though who has done that remains always unknown to the reader and also one of the mysteries that Susan Barton desperately wants to solve. The tongueless Friday without doubt lacks the ability to speak. Therefore, the past of Friday, including who has cut off his tongue and why, loses the most authoritative source to explain. Moreover, Cruso, the owner of Friday, “growing old on his island kingdom” [8], gives different explanations so that Susan Barton finally cannot tell “what was truth, what was lies, and what was mere rambling” [8]. After arriving in England, Susan Barton reflects that the truth may be that Cruso cuts off Friday’s tongue in order to prevent him from telling the fact to others. So finally the tongue of Friday becomes a mystery to Susan Barton and the reader.

However, the tongueless Friday does not disappear as a body. Instead, when observed more carefully, it can be found that when Susan Barton comes closer to and gets more knowledge of Friday, the subjectivity of Friday grows much stronger instead of being in silence all the time. In fact, Friday has his own affection and the subjectivity as a human being. The only lack for Friday is a tongue to speak, and what cannot be forgotten is that Friday lives in the culture of the West all the time in Barton’s
narrative. Susan Barton’s view on Friday exposes the widely spread stereotypes of the colonized in the West. Without the ability to speak, Friday shows his subjectivity through his distorted body and makes sure of his existence.

3.3. The implied dialogue between them
In Foe, by reconstructing Friday, Coetzee creates a seemingly more real Friday and forms a dialogue with Defoe’s Friday to interrogate the authenticity of Defoe’s Friday. The tonguelessness of Friday not only brings to remembrance the atrocities of the colonizer in history, but also makes the reader aware of the silences of the colonized in literature and in history in the West.

In fact, although Friday has no tongue to speak for himself, he uses his tortured body as a weapon to ensure his existence. According to Marais, in Coetzee’s work, “[S]ilence empowers the other as guardian” of the margin [3]. By endowing Friday’s silence with power, Coetzee’s Friday not only avoids being entrapped by the master’s language to some extent, but also forms Friday’s uniqueness. The silence of Friday makes sure of his independence and also constitutes his unfinality as a character. The unfinality is one of the most important features of Dostoevsky’s heroes and guarantees dialogues between characters to last for ever. The features of the tongueless Friday ensure the dialogue between Coetzee’s Friday and Defoe’s Friday. By forming a dialogue with Defoe’s Friday, Coetzee not only interrogates the authenticity of Defoe’s Friday, but also unmasks the hegemony in literature, in writing and in language.

In Foe, the missing tongue of Friday means a lot for the reader and also brings many problems of Defoe’s Friday to light. The tonguelessness of Friday in Foe lays bare Defoe’s Friday in the state of being silent. Because of the lack of tongue, Crusoe can narrate Friday according to his own will freely. Crusoe compiles the past of Friday based on his own imagination and makes Friday his “shadowy creature” in many aspects[8]. For example, Friday’s doubt about Christianity is the doubt of the Westerner about their religion. After Crusoe has fully prepared materially and spiritually, the appearance of Friday is only to serve a basis for the colonizer to force him into the history of the West. From a “cannibal” to “a good Christian”, Friday finally symbolically enters into the culture of the West and caters for the imagination of the westerner for the native. The tongueless Friday in Foe discloses that the image of Defoe’s Friday is projected from the colonizer’s own imagination for their filthy purpose rather than from facts, and thus oppugns the reliability of Defoe’s Friday as a native with his own voice.

The mute Friday in Foe questions the transparency and neutrality of language as a tool of communication. Defoe’s Friday is turned into a normal servant with the help of language, and Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe spreads the stereotype of Friday as an inferior servant in English. One of the main causes is Friday lives in the master’s language. The hegemony in language in Foe is evident. And according to Marais, in Coetzee’s works, language is often closely connected with empire. Aware of the hegemony in language, Coetzee to some extent succeeds avoiding it by foregrounding the painful body of Friday in language. In the final scene, the water from Friday’s mouth “runs northward and southward to the ends of the earth” [8]. Here the water of course symbolically flows back to the empire to claim Friday’s right.

In the dialogue between these two Fridays, Coetzee takes advantage of his tongueless Friday to disclose the atrocities of the colonialism. And the silence of Friday also brings the hegemony in literature, in writing and in language to the attention of the reader in the West.

4. Summary
By re-visiting Robinson Crusoe, Coetzee’s Foe successfully constitutes an implied dialogue with it. Through such a dialogue, Coetzee interrogates Defoe’s “canon” by giving the reader an illusion that Defoe has appropriated the story of Coetzee for his hidden purpose.

The tongueless Friday in Foe brings the ferocity of colonialism to light. The tongue of Coetzee’s Friday not only makes the reliability of Defoe’s Friday questionable, but also makes the reader realize
the hegemony in writing and in language in the West. Finally, the water from Friday’s mouth covering the earth indicates his efforts to return to the empire to claim his right in the English classic.

The mysteries around the characters in Foe arouse the interests of the reader for them and also keep independence and unfinality of the characters by distancing them from the author. By this means, the borderzones between the characters produce ever-lasting dialogues, the great dialogue between Foe and Robinson Crusoe is just one of them. The open-ending of Foe further keeps dialogues going on. Realizing the dialogic features of Foe is beneficial for us to understand it.

References