

An 'other' narrative of the Sea': Reading J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*

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Abstract

In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, British and American naval records show a great number of women on board. They travelled as mistresses of sailors or were officially signed as wives of ship captains and officials. Some even acquired fame by serving in the Royal Navy. But they had to resort to disguise and secrecy for the success of their ventures. Also, there were pirate queens and light-house keepers; and tales of sightings of mythical 'sirens' and mermaids were not unknown in the history of seafaring.

However, despite a huge treasure trove of testimonies of female adventurers at sea, ironically they have been ignored in our modern discourses or literary practices. Also the representation of women in naval literature operates chiefly under the male gaze, where women hardly have a voice of their own. This phalo-centric representation can be witnessed in the fictions of Daniel Defoe, Tobias Smollet, Jane Austen and Joseph Conrad, where the role of women rarely appear in direct proximity with the sea.

Considering the woman connection with the sea, and the marginalized discourses of sea-literature and importance of women, sea and territory as an interdisciplinary site for understanding gender, geography and cultural literature needs to further explored. The present paper attempts to delve into the novel *Foe* (1986) by J.M. Coetzee to analyze the world of gendered sea narratives as well as show how for a woman a quest on the sea becomes a quest for identity. While doing so, the paper would expose the undercurrent of naval history, sea adventure and literary fiction.

Key words: seafaring, women, discourse, gender, *Foe*.