

# Women and the Sea: A Reading of J.M. Coetzee's Novel *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. 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 phallogentric 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 its 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.*

From the earliest times sea has been regarded as a male domain. Fishermen laboured around the coasts with nets and lines while their wives stayed on shore to mind their homes and rear their children. Later adventurers and explorers set sail across the oceans in search of new lands hoping to make their names and their fortunes from their discoveries. The conspicuous absence of women in sea narratives

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has often been questioned. In this paper, I shall attempt to look into the marginalization of women in sea narratives historically and in literature through J.M. Coetzee's novel *Foe* (1986).

### **Historical Background**

Recent surge in nautical literary studies gradually brings to the fore several undocumented voyages undertaken by women during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While some traveled as the wives or mistresses of captains, some were smuggled aboard by officers or by seamen of the lower deck. Also, there have been several instances of young women disguised in men's attire working along with the male sailors, undetected for several years. To cite a few examples, in 1807 when Lieutenant William Berry of *HMS Hazard* was charged with homosexuality (or the "sin of sodomy," as it was known during the period) with a boy of the crew, one of the principal witnesses at the court-martial was Elizabeth Bowden, a fourteen year old girl. Elizabeth was listed on the ship's log book as a boy of the third class, and she appeared in the court in a man's attire of long jacket and blue trousers. An investigation into the ship's crew revealed that she had been aboard the ship *Hazard* for six weeks, in the guise of a boy before her fellow shipmates discovered her sex. After the discovery, Elizabeth received a separate apartment aboard to sleep and performed her duties as an attendant to the officers of the ship. One of the most famous female sailors, Hannah Snell, spent four and a half years serving in the army and navy as a man in the 1740s<sup>1</sup>.

Both in the British Navy and the United States Navy, there are plenty of unrecorded instances of the wives of boatswains, carpenters and cooks going to the warships. They often dispensed with the duties of a nurse in times of need. However, no official record show exactly how many women performed such duties on board, except in an obscure seaman's memoirs or in any eventual transcript of court martial. However, the journal of the ships' surgeons are a valuable key to such information as they record

childbirths upon the ship or the outbreak of venereal disease among the crew owing to their engagements with prostitutes, smuggled on board. In 1812 Captain John Fyffe, commander of the *HMS Indefatigable* took the unusual step of including twelve women in his crew, who were permitted to go on land twice a week or only on market days and strictly abided by the rules of the ship.<sup>2</sup> In the nineteenth century, a number of women accompanied their husbands (captains of the ship) in their voyage on merchant ships. In several cases they had to take the charge of the ship when the captain fell ill. In the year 1856, Mary Patten was nineteen years old and pregnant by four months when her husband Joshua Patten, the captain suddenly fell ill as they approached Cape Horn. As no other men in the crew had the knowledge of navigation, she took charge at the helm for fifty-six days and sailed the clipper ship *Neptune's Car* around Cape Horn to San Francisco.<sup>3</sup> Mary Patten became the first female commander of an American merchant vessel. Among other heroic achievements of women at sea includes the daring venture of the light house keepers Grace Darling and Ida Lewis. In 1838, Grace Darling, the daughter of the light house keeper of the islands helped to rescue the survivors of a shipwrecked paddle steamer off the coast of Northumberland. Ida Lewis, the American light house keeper was in charge of the light house Lime Rock, in the harbour of Newport, Rhode Islands. With her first rescue mission in 1854, she successfully saved as many as eighteen lives during the fifty-four years of her life.<sup>4</sup>

The famous women pirates Anne Bonny and Mary Read were much known for their notoriety during the later seventeenth century and early eighteenth century. Dian H. Murray in her book *Pirates of South China Coast, 1790-1810*, mentions the famous Chinese pirate Cheng Shih, who rose from the position of a prostitute in the city of Canton to the leader of a formidable pirate group after 1801, (as a widow of the pirate Cheng I), the Red Flag fleet of pirate ships, comprising of eighty-thousand men and eighteen-hundred ships

approximately. She operated in the South China Sea during the Qing dynasty, and remained undefeated despite repeated attempts by the Qing Dynasty officials, the Portuguese Royal Navy and the East India Company to counter her unbridled reign of piracy.<sup>5</sup> While these adventures of women hardly received any authorial attention in fact or fiction, one such adventure narrative of a Scottish shipwrecked castaway (Alexander Selkirk), became a timeless literary classic: Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*.

### **Myths of the Sea: Sirens, Mermaids and Ships**

Mermaids and sirens in nautical lore were represented as *femme fatales*; as creatures of ethereal beauty, who caused shipwrecks and lured sailors to their doom. The earliest written description of the sirens in literature appears in Homer's *Odyssey*. Mermaids have been compared to the 'temptress' Eve, emblematic of female vanity and sensuality; her fish tail a close semblance to Satan.

According to the popular beliefs in Ancient Greece, water was the female element and women had mystical powers over the waves. This belief was contradicted by another superstition which justified women being prohibited upon ships during voyages as they were the harbinger of bad luck posed to be ill omens. The Great Goddess of the Cretans was not only a deity of fertility but also had powers over the course of the sun and the stars and offered protection to sailors on their voyages.<sup>6</sup> When the Greeks adopted the Egyptian goddess Isis, she became the patron deity of the seafarers and Greek ships were often named after her. 'In an era before Christ, sailors in distress would appeal to an appropriate goddess, and in Christian times, they prayed to Virgin Mary for deliverance from the perils of the sea.'<sup>7</sup> The very name of the Virgin Mary was derived from the Latin name for water, the symbol of her purity and her blue cloak represented the sea, the sky and the eternity. Perhaps in this dichotomy between the deity and a temptress, lie the roots of the ambivalent attitude towards women in the maritime universe.

### ***Robinson Crusoe and Foe***

The conspicuous absence of a strong female character in the works of Joseph Conrad, Herman Melville, James Fenimore Cooper, (the notable architects of the nautical fiction genre), leaves much to the speculation of maritime literary scholars regarding the position and role of women in maritime literature. Since the focus of the paper is J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986), I would like to concentrate on its eighteenth century canonical ground text *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) by Daniel Defoe and its subverted reiteration in the form *Foe*, by J.M. Coetzee. In *Foe*, Coetzee merges both the narratives of *Roxana* (1724) and *Robinson Crusoe*, so as to bring into light the motifs of the novel. *Robinson Crusoe*, (being among the finest castaway novels) mirrored the spirit of conquest and imperialism of the eighteenth century English man, when after vanquishing the Spanish and French on the ocean frontiers, the British were propelled to the heights of glory and splendour as the most formidable power with the tremendous expertise over the waves<sup>8</sup>. *Robinson Crusoe* was an allegory of imperial conquest, an ode to the white man's ability and prowess to master an unfamiliar environment in the face of insurmountable odds, taming 'virgin' islands to build an empire. Robinson Crusoe stands as a representative of the white man who saves and liberates a native (whom he christens as Friday), from the imminent death at the hands of other native 'cannibals' only to enslave him to become his devoted subject, whom he later on his journey back to Europe, trades as a slave. Again, Defoe's narrative lacks a prominent female character.

We know that the original had no room for women. There was the typecast mother; the benevolent widow whose role it was to play the benevolent widow; the nameless wife who was married and died in the conditional mode in one sentence so that Crusoe could leave for the East Indies in the very year of the founding of the Bank of England;<sup>9</sup>

*Foe* is a subversion of this male-centric narrative. Coetzee revisits

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Defoe's imperial premise, but makes a woman the protagonist of this postmodern and postcolonial cast-away narrative. *Foe* is narrated from the perspective of Susan Barton, the female cast-away protagonist of the novel and Coetzee makes some deliberate alterations in Defoe's narrative, beginning with the change in the name Cruso (not Defoe's Crusoe). In the novel, Coetzee articulates the castaway novel's central motif of social disconnection or being 'cast-away' through Susan Barton's existential isolation, a condition that is exemplified by her struggle to have her story told. Susan's story has a conventional beginning. Unlike Crusoe, who embarked on the sea for the love of the waves and disregarded life at home, Susan sets out on a voyage to Bahia to find her long lost daughter, who was kidnapped by an Englishman and sent to the New World. She does not find her daughter and while returning on a merchant ship, is abandoned on the sea by the mutinous crew with a boat and a dead captain. Later, a shipwrecked Susan is washed upon the shores of Cruso's island and is found by Friday. Susan Barton meets a recluse Cruso on the island, who refuses to engage in any productive work or harbour any hope of a rescue. Friday, Cruso's servant, is mute and serves him devotedly. Cruso's island is not an imperial dream but an island of sloth and inactivity, very much like that of the lotos-eaters in *Odysseus*.

There was too little desire in Cruso and Friday: too little desire to escape, too little desire for a new life. I ask myself what past historians of the castaway state have done- whether in despair they have not begun to make up lies.<sup>10</sup>

Susan is left to survive with her ruminations about Cruso and Friday and is much intrigued by the fact that Cruso does not keep a journal to record his adventures upon the island, or his tryst with destiny (as the eighteenth century Robinson Crusoe would perceive it) and is content with building terraces and walls upon the slopes of the island, in the futile hope that someday, another castaway might appear on the island with grains to sow. However, at the same time Cruso, Susan mentions, has given up all hope of rescue. Susan on her

frequent detours around the island discovers little except observing Friday at his daily chores and once at his ritualistic feat on the sea (scattering flowers in the ocean). Through Susan, Coetzee also questions the eighteenth-century male-centric imperialism, which began at sea. Cruso's death upon the voyage back home, might be perceived as the death of the meta[grand]-narrative of imperialism, and in Friday and Susan survive the marginalized elements (the 'fringe narrative' of the 'other' in the imperial-colonial design: the voiceless woman and the ignoble slave) of the grandiloquent enterprise. Susan resorts to a male author Foe to iterate this truth. Her assumption that she does not have enough hold on language to write her narrative, is another way of Coetzee's stating the idea that was much prevalent in the eighteenth century; an idea which was also instrumental in engendering the phrase "silly women's novel": a man's narrative being more socially acceptable than a woman writing down her own story. Thus, the sea narrative here becomes the praxis for the contestation of male/female ideologies.

Most of the sea stories, including cast-away tales and voyage narratives, revolve around the motif of searching for one's identity. Here too, Susan seeks to rediscover her identity by having her story of the island narrated by the author Foe (as Defoe was originally called). The island, for Susan and her days of survival upon it becomes a way perpetuating her identity as an Englishwoman, marooned in the Atlantic by the Portuguese mutineers, as a bold adventuress, as a repository of all Cruso left behind in the form of the island. However, her journey in England begins with the identity of Cruso's wife. Susan in vain attempts to cajole Mr. Foe into penning her aspect and perspective of the story. Mr. Foe is bent to give her narrative the form of a woman's quest for her long-lost daughter of which the island is but a passing hurdle Susan survives. Susan argues that the island is her story. The sea, the shipwreck, her trials and tribulations of survival both on the open sea after being marooned and the island, is her story. She called it "The Female Castaway. Being a True Account of a year spent of a Desert Island.

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With Many Strange Circumstances Never Hitherto Related.”<sup>11</sup> Susan intended her narrative to be a sea story of survival of the woman, for the woman and objectively, by the woman. However the very reluctance of Foe to pen the memoir of a female castaway, against the glorious narrative of one man who survived a shipwreck all by himself and spent lonely years upon an unknown land, reveals the sad reality of how the woman’s voice gets suppressed in a man’s world. Susan rebels against Foe’s imposition of a simplistic narrative upon her, exclaiming,

[T]he story I desire to be known is the story of the island. You call it an episode, but I call it a story in its own right. It commences with my being cast away there and concludes with the death of Cruso and the return of Friday and myself to England, full of new hope.<sup>12</sup>

In this context, it might be observed that when Susan later refuses to accept the little girl Susan as her daughter, she refuses to conform to the stereotypical ‘feminine’ roles of motherhood imposed by the society in order to divert a woman from her objective. She calls her ‘father born’ implying Foe as the “father,” a representative of the patriarchal society. She thus resists Foe’s attempt at reducing the “larger story” of the island to an episode in the history of a woman’s search for her lost daughter. Coetzee gives Susan the voice to choose, the right which has always been denied in the man’s world of nautical tales. Through Susan he questions history; a maritime history, written from a male perspective, which either ignores such narratives of female cast-aways or heaps the burden of the hearth and assurance of the stability of the shore to prevent their spirit of adventure from gaining momentum. As Susan points out that she is not the story of her Bahia life, which she spent in looking for her daughter; a helpless, lonely woman, with nothing but fate to lead her through life. Rather she is the story of the island; the story of Cruso, herself and Friday and their exploits and adventures on the island before being rescued and being a free woman, she has the right to choose. It might not be resonant with the ‘bloody doings on the high



seas or the licentiousness of the Brazilians,'<sup>13</sup> nevertheless it is the truth which needs to be told. Thus, the island here becomes the metaphor of liberation and freedom, which gives a voice to mute narratives of Susan and Friday. In the book *Coetzee* (1997), the author Dominic Head comments that the question of truth in competing versions of the Crusoe story is focused in *Foe*, not on Crusoe himself, but on the marginalized figures of Susan Barton and Friday<sup>14</sup>. In the case of Susan Barton, this complicates the Defoe connection, as she is a version of the eponymous heroine Roxana, (coincidentally, whose first name is also Susan). Following the premise that Susan Barton's story of the island is the *Ur*-text of *Crusoe*, we must conclude that she is effaced from this text of Defoe's and placed in another (*Roxana*). In this sense the novel represents a repression of female experience which is rechanneled according to the desires of a patriarchal author.<sup>15</sup>

However, another aspect of Susan's narrative requires evaluation too. Susan's relationship with Friday problematizes her narrative as a woman seeking truth and freedom through her story. It is not a traditional master-servant relationship. In *Susan and Friday*, we see a subversion of the original Crusoe-Friday master and servant imperialist equation. On the one hand Susan realizes that Friday is an intrinsic part of the story because Friday imbibes the spirit of the island, while on the other she repeatedly attempts to articulate her own speech in Friday's silence. She can hardly see beyond the notion of Friday ('shadowy creature' as had been her first impression of him on the island) being a cannibal on the island. Even in England, Susan, time and again recurses to her idea of Friday being a cannibal. Instead of understanding Friday's silence, she attempts to convey the mores of civilization to him. Thus, Susan too falls into the patriarchal trope of assuming control over Friday. Friday's silence can be interpreted as a resistance to colonial language, an antithesis to Shakespeare's Caliban in his play *The Tempest* (1610-1611), who learns Prospero's language only to insult him in his own tongue. Thus, with Friday, Susan fails to realize the meaning of freedom and

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unknowingly becomes a representative of the white man, as a woman trying to bring the light of rationality and enlightenment in the form of speech to Friday. Though Susan acknowledges that there is a difference in her and Friday's silence, yet to her Friday's silence is chaos, a gaping hole in her linear castaway narrative. And in attempting to give her speech to Friday, she tries to create 'order out of chaos.'<sup>16</sup> Spivak in her article 'Theory in the Margin: Coetzee's *Foe* Reading Defoe's *Crusoe/Roxana*' states that Susan is 'the colonialist who gives the native speech and the metropolitan anti-imperialist who wants to give the native voice.'<sup>17</sup> However, in her foiled attempts to give her voice to Friday, Susan once again fails to articulate her story; Friday was the sole companion and witness to her life on the island and his silence serves a major blow to the credulity of Susan's narrative, especially when her male authorial voice Foe is unwilling to recognize Susan as the hero of her own story. It might be a pertinent observation that whereas Friday's silence is a choice and powerful in its own articulation, Susan's speech is beset with "silence," superimposed by patriarchy. For Susan, the island becomes a room of her own, which gives meaning to her silenced identity, which is lost in the vast sea of a male-dominated world; first as Cruso, and then as Foe.

### **Conclusion:**

Richard Begam rightly argues that 'In *Foe* Coetzee seeks to represent the unrepresented as unrepresented to show precisely the necessity of enabling them to represent themselves.' In *Foe*, Coetzee merges both imperialistic and the gendered perspective of nautical fiction (castaway narratives). Susan Barton reflects the concept of the woman as the 'other' as explained by Simone de Beauvoir.

[...] humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being... she is the incidental, the inessential... as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the absolute, she is the Other.<sup>18</sup>

Again, in Friday, we find the colonial “non-white” as the “other.” Both Cruso and Foe become instruments of affecting both these forms of marginalization. Cruso seeks surrender and obeisance from both Friday and Susan, while himself remaining passive; Foe is indifferent to both. The island becomes a space for the enactment of the ideals of gender and racial discrimination. The sea becomes instrumental in bringing about the proper culmination of the novel. The novel begins with the sea and shipwreck and concludes with the author persona entering the novel in an epiphanic moment, to find the subjects subsumed in the depths of the ocean.

Coetzee's *Foe* perhaps is among the very few texts which gives woman a voice in the masculine maritime dimension or reveals, how a woman's voice is lost in the narrative of man. Susan mirrors the same spirit of adventure like that of Defoe's protagonist Crusoe, but is denied the fulfillment of her claim to fame as a female castaway. Maritime fiction written by women, with females as protagonists, like Susan Kerslake's *Penumbra* (1984), and autobiographical fiction on the lives of the real women who went to sea like Hannah Snell and Mary Anne Talbot in Nathaniel Coverly Jr.'s *The Surprising Adventures of Almira Paul* (1816), do not feature in the mainstream corpus of Nautical Fiction even today. Janice Kulyuk Keefer, very aptly points out in the article 'Recent Maritime Fiction: Women and Words,' that women writers of Maritime fiction have had to struggle not only to find a place in the male-dominated world of maritime fiction, but also, counter the misrepresented ideas about women in relation to maritime literature and culture.<sup>19</sup> Further study on the contribution and role of women to the maritime world can definitely open several avenues of research into the maritime literature, and Coetzee's text *Foe* can surely be a stepping stone for the forthcoming scholarly ventures into an unexplored arena of the feminine nautical universe.

**Endnotes :**

<sup>1</sup>Marilyn Clay, *18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century Women at Sea* (USA: Regency Plume

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Publication, 2014), pp. 37-42.

<sup>2</sup> Roy Adkins and Lesley Adkins, *Jack Tar: Life in Nelson's Navy* (London: Hachette Digital, 2008), accessed 10 February 2019, google books preview, <https://books.google.co.in/books?id=dz9Mm4ht2QMC>.

<sup>3</sup> Susan J. Stark, *Female Tars: Women Aboard Ship in the Age of Sail* (USA: Naval Institute Press, 1996), p.2.

<sup>4</sup> David Cordingly, *Seafaring Women* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2007), pp. 10-12.

<sup>5</sup> Jane Yolen, *Women Pirates Around the World* (Watertown: Charlesbridge, 2010), pp.81-89.

<sup>6</sup> Fletcher S. Bassett, *Legends and Superstitions of the Sea and the Sailors* (Chicago: Morill, Higgins and Co., 1892), pp.55-60.

<sup>7</sup> Cordingly, *Seafaring Women*, pp. 20-24.

<sup>8</sup> See G.A. Sambrook, ed. *Sea Voyages of Exploration* (St. Martin's Street, London: Macmillan and Co., 1964); S. Love Ronald, *Maritime Exploration in the Age of Discovery: 1415-1800* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2006); Frank B. Goodrich, *Man upon the Sea or a History of Maritime Exploration and Discovery* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott and Co., 1858); Charles Rathbone Low, *Maritime Discovery: A History of Maritime Exploration from the Earliest Times* (Bloomsbury, London: Newman and Co., 1881); Lincoln Paine, *The Sea and Civilization: A Maritime History of the World* (Great Britain: Atlantic Books, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Theory in Margin: Coetzee's *Foe* Reading Defoe's *Crusoe/Roxana*,' *English in Africa* 17.2 (1990): 1-15.

<sup>10</sup> J.M. Coetzee, *Foe* (London: Penguin Books, 1987), p. 88.

<sup>11</sup> Coetzee, *Foe*, p.67.

<sup>12</sup> Coetzee, *Foe*, p.121.

<sup>13</sup> Coetzee, *Foe*, p.138.

<sup>14</sup> The character of Susan Barton also challenges the entire credo of the

eighteenth and nineteenth century adventure fiction, which was almost entirely beset with show of male prowess. Friday carries with him the general uncanny or the *unheimlich* of island topography to the mainland of London, where the *order* of civilization asserts itself over the *chaos* of the island and the sea. This has been further elaborated later in the article.

<sup>15</sup> Dominic Head, *Coetzee* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 115.

<sup>16</sup> Mary Klages, *Literary Theory: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), p.168.

<sup>17</sup> Spivak, 'Theory in Margin,' p. 14.

<sup>18</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: David Campbell Publishers, 1993), p.vi.

<sup>19</sup> Janice Kulyk Keefer, 'Recent Maritime Fiction: Women and Words,' *Studies in Canadian Literature/ Études en littérature canadienne* 11.2 (1986): pp. 1-5.