



ISSN 2278 – 0211 (Online)

Tongue-Tied: Writing Post-Colonial History in Coetzee's *Foe* and Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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Abstract:

*Colonialist and post-colonialist discourse wants to tell the story of colonization and its aftermath. While colonialist forces have the tendency to side with the imperial projects while the post-colonial forces wish to rewrite the story, putting forth the issues of the subaltern. But in both the cases it is often observed that the subaltern and his tale is 'adjusted' and 'accommodated' into the norms of the two competing discourses. The 'true' subaltern has no voice in the story or history in fiction. Even if it gets a chance to speak, it is pre-conditioned. J.M. Coetzee in his novel *Foe* and Salman Rushdie in his novel *Midnight's Children* deal with this problematic of writing history from the post-colonial or colonial perspective. *Foe* deals with the impossibility of telling the colonizer's tale without the story of the subaltern. If the story of the subaltern or the colonized is not told, it creates a void in the story of the colonizer which cannot be filled. *Foe* also illustrates the resistance offered by the subject in writing his tale, even though the author may sympathize with his situation. The definitions offered by both the discourses do not suffice the tale the native wishes to tell. Salman Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* deals with the problematic of giving meaning to a text which has only a single author or text. Meaning making in the post-colonial sense points to the impossibility of accommodating history to fit any purpose. The tale belongs to none and it belongs to everybody, it is personal and universal at the same time. History writing fails to come to any conclusive meaning when the author asserts his authority over the text.*

This paper proposes to study the problems raised by history writing in post-colonial literature in the two novels by Salman Rushdie and J.M.Coetzee. it tries to bring out the similarities in the texts and how both of the fail to come into meaning owing to the disagreement amongst the different voices in the tales.

Key words: post-colonial writing, history, voices in a narrative

Both J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* deal with the problematic of writing history in the colonial context. Here, both use colonialism and post-colonialism as a condition rather than as an essential part of the narrative. Post-colonial writing is used to address difficulties in writing history and simply in 'writing' as a whole. Both use the central characters of their novels, Friday and Susan Barton in *Foe* and Saleem Sinai in *Midnight's Children* whose personal histories are used to represent universal experiences, especially in the post-colonial context.

Homi Bhabha talks about the act of remembering as a painful phenomenon where offending memories are released from the unconscious. In Coetzee's *Foe*, Friday, an African slave, is deprived of his tongue. Who has done the mutilation has not been ascertained in the text, one can only guess. Susan Barton wishes to write her story to earn name, fame and money. She feels it is story, she has absolute authority over the meaning of the text and she wants *Foe* only to make it more consumable for the readers. As she herself lacks the power of creativity, she seeks refuge with *Foe*, an eminent writer of the time. But as she tells her story for *Foe* to record, she finds that without knowing the story of Friday, she cannot tell her own story. She exists in the story only in relation with Friday. Not only Friday's right to tell his story has been taken away from him with the mutilation of his tongue, Friday also does not share a common language with Susan so that she could learn his story from him. Friday's situation thus takes away the right of Susan too, from telling her story to the world. Her story without being supported by the story of Friday, lacks reliability. Nobody would believe her.

Use of unreliable narrator is a technique used both by Coetzee and Rushdie to ascertain the fact- the impossibility of writing history from the past. Post-colonial writing of history, rather than recovering the history of the ruled and the ruler, only points out to the impossibility of recovering history from the pages of the past time. By using post-colonial writing as a tool to illustrate the politics of writing history, the writers pose a challenge to the much acclaimed process of remembering and the role of memory in post-colonial writing.

Saleem Sinai in *Midnight's Children* intentionally lies to the readers. He is unwilling to reveal his past or pasts and instead wants to create a story for himself which also crumbles down as he reaches the end. He misplaces dates and incidences and he is cock-sure about incidences that occurred when his grandfather was a young man. The writer wittily asserts the politics of memory in remembering where the story teller lies to the readers and again it is also seen that the story teller is also cheated by the story itself—the impossibility of knowing the story in the actual story told by the two authors.

Both the stories are narratives of post-colonial experiences and speak of the impossibility of telling the tale to the readers. *Midnight's Children* finds it impossible to control the story of the novel, allegorically presented in the Midnight Children's Conference where none of them is willing to listen to the other. This frenzy of different histories disagreeing with each other to form a homogenized vision can be observed in the members of the Midnight's Children Conference having different stories to tell, none of them succeeds to take over and their leader, Saleem Sinai, from whose pen the story flows, is forced to retreat. Allegorically, the author has no control over his characters in writing history. In the postcolonial condition, the author Saleem Sinai, silences the other voices in the tale and proceeds to tell a story of its own but it becomes impossible for him to sew the torn gaps and the story crumbles no matter how much he tries to hold it together. He being the author tries to safeguard the central position for himself but the agents of history keep displacing him from his central place.

On the other hand, Coetzee in his novel *Foe* problematizes the use of the narrator to convince the same results. The chief story teller is Susan Barton, a female castaway, who is forced to seek refuge with Crusoe, an English adventurer who lives in an island inhabited only by himself and his slave Friday, an African slave. After living with them for a few days, they are rescued by a Bristol-bound ship. Crusoe dies and Susan Barton and Friday make it to the shore, though penniless. It becomes difficult for them to make their two ends meet. Susan wants Foe, an eminent writer in whose household she stays. Susan wants Foe to write a novel out of her story, her adventures as a castaway, her stay with Crusoe and Friday in the island, in the hope of earning money and getting rich.

Though the author reveals that there are tricks in the trade of writing as any other producer wishes to convince the consumer of his product, the novel is more about Susan Barton's struggle in making Friday speak, in her language. Susan tries very hard to make him learn her language. She feels she has failed miserably as Friday does not acknowledge the efforts in ways known to her. As the story of Friday is an essential part of Susan's story, she fights to get information out of him but the only thing she could do is guess. Little she knows about him except that he was a slave and his mutilated tongue. But the greater problem faced by Susan who wishes to tell Friday's story is that she does not know if Friday is aware of his identity as a former slave whom she has set free. It appears as though the logic of freedom and bondage as understood by Susan has not entered Friday's mind in the same form. His behavior, as he travels with Susan shows the line of demarcation between slavery and bondage is not acknowledged by Friday. Regarding his mutilated tongue, she can only guess that it was cut off by his master or masters but could not be certain that he himself or his own people had not mutilated him.

The impossibility of telling Friday's tale is an allegory to the whole process of writing, the impossibility of telling an authentic tale. The story, the past, the fiction is eternally free and refuses to be shackled by reality or any form of recording. The past is live; fiction is organic, having a voice of its own. The truth deludes the author and he has no control over the meaning that he is trying to make. Friday's locked tongue ensures that no certificate of authenticity is to be given to the narrator who wants to tell his tale.

Saleem Sinai, while narrating his tale of the *Midnight's Children*, too makes mistakes as admitted by Rushdie when he talks of the 'errata' of the novel. He says that mistakes or unreliability of narration not only proves the impossibility of truth but also establishes beyond doubt that writing of history or past to suit one's present purposes, using memory as the tool. Saleem Sinai is cutting up history to give himself the central role, just the difference is that Saleem Sinai cutting into the history of a nation and Susan Barton wants to tell Friday's story to bring authenticity to her own tale. Salman Rushdie says, "He [Saleem] is remembering, of course, and one of the simplest truths about any set of memories is that many of them will be false.....Therefore, as I wrote the novel, and whenever a conflict arose between literal and remembered truth, I would favour the remembered version." He not only admits the act of storytelling as a process of certifying one's 'lies' and also throws light on the questionability of post-colonial history, just like other histories of not being all that correct.

Similar to the subaltern who is not allowed to speak, does not get the chance to tell his or her story, the subaltern by himself keeping quiet takes his story with himself and ultimately obliterates history of both the oppressor and the oppressed. The problem faced by Susan Barton and Foe in reading Friday's muteness is same as represented by the problem of writing of personal or national history by Saleem Sinai in *Midnight's Children*. History, personal or universal, is a collection of gaps because there is no way a historian can take a peek into the time which is past. As Susan tells of Friday's silence in *Foe*, "To tell my story and be silent on Friday's tongue is no better than offering a book for sale with pages in it quietly left empty."

Thus, the white person's history is incomplete without the black person's tale. The author tries to stress on the complementary existence of the two dichotomies. As illustrated by Lidan Lin, writing about South Africa means writing about the process of colonization, the crux of which, to be sure, is the gradual constitution of the master/slave dialectics, one that exerts to squeeze the natives to the margins of humanity. To write about South Africa, then, is to reveal how such an active/passive dichotomy is constituted, consolidated and sustained; it is after all, to write a history of humiliation, dehumanization and subjection. This means that the exclusion of either the colonizer or the colonized from this kind of writing will distort history. Here, Coetzee's belief that writing about South Africa should be no different from writing the history of colonization and its subsequent residues should not surprise us. Friday's condition in *Foe* may be the condition of any slave anywhere in the world and Friday's actual origin or geographical position is not pointed out. Friday does not "remember" his native place.

Contrary to what is believed of writing of the history of colonial subject where its 'past' is erased and it is instead given a colour of the master's choice, here in *Foe*, Coetzee shows how the African slave resists the writing of his story. At the level of writing the text illustrates how the writer's authority is defined by his subject and Friday does not accommodate himself to the story which Foe tries to write. In the scene where Friday puts on Foe's robes and dances to his own rhythm, is an allegorical representation of the act of composition of the colonial history where there can be no absolute truth because of the non-participation of the 'colonized'. Foe, with his pen and paper, Susan Barton with her persuasions, fail to write the past, deluded by Friday with his silence. Putting on Foe's robes, Friday asserts his authorship over his own story.

Foe is Coetzee's deliberate attempt at presenting the problems in post-colonial writing of history where writers are out of the context cannot place themselves in the colonized perspective and those who can identify themselves with the colonized get geographically and spatially too specific because of which the history becomes the history of a particular situation instead of the history of colonization Friday with his silence stands against the colonial forces of Susan Barton and Foe and refuse to fit into the colonialist discourse which would make him a subject to the story where else with his silence, he is the master of his tale.

The last chapter of the novel, in a post-structuralist way, motivates the writer to believe that there can be no absolute meaning; the signifier deceives the signified for eternity but it is the signifier in the process of signifying or acquiring meaning is held to be of much greater importance. However, in the last chapter we also have an ultimate glimpse of the author's statement, as Dolezel states, "Friday is a possible author, but in an impossible world whose signs do not signify, whose authors give up authority" (221-222). Thus, in a story without any author, the silent Friday tells his tale and is ultimately engulfed by it. In post-colonial writing of history, it is possible for the subaltern to have his presence felt only when its voice is absent, or else as it happened in *Robinson Crusoe* by Defoe, Friday's tale would have been the story told by Crusoe.

Where Spivak asks "Can the subaltern speak?", the answer from *Foe* and *Midnight's Children* would be simply that the subaltern does speak, when it does not speak. Post-colonial writing of history cannot be the history of one party only. Colonialist discourse may try to fix the meaning, the story of the native, the native revolts by choosing to be silent, jeopardizing the tale told by the colonizer.

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