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Bhabha's Parody of the Master-Slave Relationship in J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*: Friday's Resistance and Susan's Chicanery

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ABSTRACT

The present paper studies John Maxwell Coetzee's *Foe* (1986) from Homi K. Bhabha's standpoint which parodies the conventional definition of master and slave. Unlike the conventional view that the slave is a passive being under the ultimate dominion of his/her master, Bhabha, by parodying the Master-Slave relationship through his concept of 'ambivalence', reveals that in particular moments the slave shows resistance and, thus, is an active agent. In Coetzee's novel, Friday—Cruso's and later Susan's slave—through various forms of resistance, like silence and disobedience, not only abrogates all of her attempts to dominate him, but also obliges her to change her strategy of dealing with him. He, although a slave, not only refuses to communicate in any way with Susan, but also refuses to obey her commands frustrating her in every possible way. In the end, the paper concludes that the colonised—in the novel represented by Friday—is not a passive figure as pictured in various colonial sources; instead, he/she is an active figure and has a significant role in shaping the colonizer's strategy of dealing with him/her.

Keywords: Ambivalence, cultural studies, stereotype, master-slave relationship, parody, Resistance, Subaltern

INTRODUCTION

The present research answers the following question: *How does Coetzee use 'ambivalence' to parody the master-slave relationship?* The research study's Coetzee's novel from Bhabha's point of view and seeks to unveil the "hybrid" situation in the novel and the "ambivalent" and parodied master-slave relationship between Susan and Friday. It will show Susan's incompetence and Friday's resistance which, for short moments, inverts the master and slave relationship thereby undermining the essentialist view of thinkers like Renan

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and Hegel. The paper begins with a brief explanation of the concept of parody and its relationship to ambivalence. This is followed by a brief account of Hegel's master-slave dialectic, before examining the master-slave relationship in Foe through Bhabha's parodic concept of 'ambivalence'.

Colonial ideology divides humanity into two essential groups namely masters and slaves. Focusing on this essentialist colonial idea, the contemporary post-colonial critic Homi K. Bhabha, refutes this master-slave model with his concepts of 'ambivalence,' 'hybridity,' and 'resistance.' These concepts become tools for parodying the master-slave relationship. In fact, "... in Homi Bhabha's formulations...the one who engages in mimicry or parody is in the oppressed position and is trying to subvert the dominant discourse" (Tobin, 1999, p. 90) Unlike Renan, Hegel and other essentialists, where human beings are presented as having either master-like essence or slave-like essence, Bhabha suggests "there are moments when the colonized were able to resist the dominance exercised over them" revealing "the active agency of the colonized" (Huddart, 2006, p. 1). He puts forward the question "Must we always polarize in order to polemicize?" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 19). Thus, for Bhabha, the slave is not a permanently passive, dominated, and compliant figure; on the contrary, he is "an active agent" who limits the authority of his master and sometimes forces him to change his strategy and approach.

John Maxwell Coetzee's *Foe* (1986) present's a scenario where the essentialist master-slave relationship seems to be distorted and undermined. Thus, in the novel, we see how Friday, a black slave, resists his master, Susan Barton, and obliges her to change her strategy to control him, an act which can be seen as a moment of defeat and retreat of the colonizer.

DISCUSSION

The present section begins with the definition of parody and ambivalence and their literary functions before elaborating Bhabha's use of these concepts. There is also a short description of Hegel's master-slave dialectic following which post-colonial concepts used by Bhabha is applied to Coetzee's *Foe* to display he (Coetzee) undermines the post-colonial master or slave essentialist view of humanity.

The critic, Dwight Macdonald mentions that "Parody is making a new wine that tastes like the old but has a slightly lethal effect" (Macdonald, 1960, p. 559). Implied in this definition is the point that a parody "imitates" and "distorts" a previously existing work or concept and as such it has two functions: Firstly, it undermines the authority of the work which it imitates and secondly, it presents a new discourse and a new dimension of the previous work or concept. Abrams (1999) says that "a parody imitates the serious manner and characteristic features of a particular literary work, or the distinctive style of a particular author, or a typical stylistic and other features of a serious literary genre, and deflates the original by applying the imitation to a lowly or comically inappropriate subject"

(p. 26). Thus, "deflation" of a discourse becomes the main function of parody and the result of this "deflation" is the emergence of a new discourse which challenges its authoritative predecessor. In the following pages, "destruction and reconstruction are two simultaneous aspects of parody" (Chohan, 2013, p. 120).

Of the many writers who have used parody to bring forward a new discourse is Bhabha's theory that "the authority of dominant nations and ideas is never as complete as it seems, because it is always marked by anxiety, something that enables the dominated to fight" (Huddart, 2006, p. 1). That is, the colonizer always has a definition for the colonized or the slave and strives to bring the colonized as close as possible to that definition. However, there is never a one to one transparent relationship between that definition of the slave and the real world slave; concerning the definition of the slave, the colonized is "almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 86). In other words, there are "moments in which the colonizer was less powerful than was apparent, moments when the colonized were able to resist the dominance exercised over them" (p. 86). It is in these moments that the situation seems to be covered with a mist of 'ambivalence'—Bhabha's key term. He describes ambivalence as follows:

> The 'true' is always marked and informed by the ambivalence of the process of emergence itself, the productivity of meanings that construct counter-knowledges *in medias res*, in the very act of agonism, within the terms of negotiation (rather than a negation). (p. 22).

Through 'ambivalence' Bhabha parody's the Hegelian master-slave relationship which is based on the essentialist belief that "Man is never simply man. He is always, necessarily, and essentially, either Master or Slave" (Hegel, 1807/2009, p. 8).

George W. F. Hegel's polarized master-slave model can easily be traced to "that ahistorical nineteenth-century polarity of Orient and Occident which, in the name of progress, unleashed the exclusionary imperialist ideologies of self and other" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 19). Hegel believes that "Man is Self-consciousness" and it is this quality that makes him "essentially different from animals" (Kojève, 1980, p. 3). In his view, "man becomes conscious of himself at the moment when—for the 'first' time—he says 'I'" (p. 3). Thus, being conscious of objects implies an awareness of the self as a subject facing an object. However, it also means that a subject is an object in the eyes of another subject. Consequently, the awareness of another's awareness of oneself is what we call self-consciousness. That is, when we see ourselves through the eyes of another, we gain self-awareness. When this happens, each subject attempts to make the other recognize his rights and reality. This attempt leads to "a fight to death for 'recognition'" (p. 7). It is only through "securing the *voluntary recognition* of his self-determination by another self-determining being" (Buchwalter, 2012, p.

133) that the subjects gain human value. But noteworthy is the fact that if all the human beings were to follow this process, no human being would survive, for each would strive to death for the recognition of his dignity by the other self-consciousness. Subsequently, no recognition can be achieved for one cannot expect to be recognized by a corpse. Thus, the survival of the other party is vital for any recognition to take place. Therefore, what happens is that "One of the parties to the struggle begins to realize that life, which he was hitherto willing to risk for recognition, is just as 'essential' or important to him as recognition. Death would mean the absolute end of all possibilities" (Williams, 1997, p. 61). As a result, he gives up his desire to be recognized in order to preserve his existence. In this situation, he "may well be recognized as a person; but he has not attained the truth of this recognition as an independent self-consciousness" (Hegel, 1807/2009, p. 114). Hereby, the victor spares his life and usurps his autonomy. The victor becomes the Master while the complacent becomes the Slave. These two "exist as two opposed shapes of consciousness; one is the independent consciousness whose essential nature is to be for itself, the other is the dependent consciousness whose essential nature is simply to live or to be for another" (p. 115). In this way, Hegel formulates his essentialist definition of humanity—"Man is never simply man. He is always, necessarily, and essentially, either Master or Slave" (Kojève, 1980, p.8).

This Hegelian model accords with Bhabha's 'stereotype.' Stereotyping is the strategy that the colonizer uses to define, describe and determine the 'other.' That is, the colonizer is dependent on the concept of 'fixity' for constructing and defining the inferiority of the 'other.' According to Huddart (2006), "through racist jokes, cinematic images, and other forms of representation, the colonizer circulates stereotypes about the laziness or stupidity of the colonized population. These stereotypes seem to be a stable if false foundation upon which colonialism bases its power..." (p. 24). The disastrous effects of such stereotyping can be noticed in the words of Chicago sociologist, W. I. Thomas: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (1928, p. 527). Therefore, if people accept something as true, then they are likely to build their beliefs on this foundation and act according to it. However, Bhabha unmasks this veiled aspect of the stereotype by expressing the fact that:

> The stereotype is not a simplification because it is a false representation of a given reality. It is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that, in denying the play of difference... constitutes a problem for the representation of the subject in significations of psychic and social relations. (1994, p. 75)

This "fixity," according to Bhabha, "is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and

daemonic repetition" (p.66). In accordance with Bhabha's words, Patrick Brantlinger says that "stereotypes always differ from themselves: they are always more 'ambivalent' and contradictory than they seem. Hence, they are always relational and plural rather than singular" (2011, p. 13). 'Ambivalence' is the essential quality of the 'stereotype.' Bhabha explains this ambivalence in terms of Lacanian "mirror stage": "Like the mirror phase 'the fullness' of the stereotype—its image as identity—is always threatened by 'lack'" (1994, p. 77). This "lack" exists because "colonial discourse is then a complex articulation of...the forms of narcissistic and aggressive identification" (p. 77) in that the colonizer expresses his dominant status aggressively to the colonized but is always anxious regarding his own identity because he knows that his identity is tied to the identity of the colonized. Consequently, due to his dependence on the colonized, his previously assumed stable identity turns into a shaky and unstable identity. This can be viewed as a crack in the Hegelian Master-Slave model. Based on this view, neither the colonizer is an absolute master, nor is the colonized an absolute slave. As a result, in certain circumstances, the colonizer might lose his dominance or the slave might gain the ability to show resistance.

J. M. Coetzee's novel, *Foe* (1986), displays a similar parodic model of the master-slave relationship. The novel is woven around Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), but with numerous changes which makes the novel a parody of the master-slave relationship. It is written from the perspective of Susan Barton, a castaway who drifts in a boat to Cruso's island where she encounters both Cruso and Friday. Susan steps on the island with the same colonial mentality which dominated contemporary Europe and the Americas. The novel opens with a contrast made by Susan: She describes herself as "a flower of the sea, like an anemone, like a jellyfish of the kind you see in the waters of Brazil", but pictures Friday as "A dark shadow," and "a Negro with a head of fuzzy wool" (Coetzee, 1986, p. 5). Further, she notices that "At his side he had a spear" and concludes that she has "come to an island of cannibals" (p.6). Friday takes her to Cruso. On meeting Cruso, and noticing that he is "a European" with "green" eyes, the first thing that strikes her mind is that he must be a "mutineer, set ashore by a merciful captain, with one of the Negroes of the island, whom he has made his servant" (p.8). Being raised in a colonial culture, her mind has accepted the colonial ideology and she sees the Negro only as a "cannibal" or a "servant"—the typical colonial stereotype. For instance, "U. B. Philips 'believed that the African Negroes were inferior in intelligence to whites; thus, they were fit only for work on southern plantation'" (as cited in Rothstein, 1995, p. 141). Or "Darwin's cousin Sir Francis Galton, founder of the 'science' of eugenics, believed that 'the average intellectual standard of the negro race is some two grades below our own'. A 'very large' number of black people were 'half-witted' (Fryer, 1984, p. 180). Such pseudo-

scientific views backed colonial ideology upon which Americans and Europeans built their worldview. Like other "whites" of her time, Susan also displays similar traits; for example the morning of the day after her arrival on the island, when she woke up in her "bed" before the stove which Friday was trying to "blow...into life," she said that she "was ashamed that he should see me abed, but then I reminded myself of how free the ladies of Bahia were before their servants, and so felt better" (Coetzee, 1986, p. 14).

As the plot unfolds, Susan exposes her colonial attitude for her, Friday was a "creature" (Coetzee, 1986, p. 24) like other animals. His value did not go beyond that of an animal. Thus, she says, "My first thought was that Friday was like a dog that heeds but one master" (p. 21). Or in other instances, she compares Friday to a "cat" (p. 27) and a "horse" (p. 42). This also displays the other perspective through which coloureds are presented in colonial ideology:

> Two types of natives were tolerated by colonialism. First, there were *mechanical men*, mimic men, aides to whites, natives who were reduced to a more instrumentality or appendage of whites, and thereby exhibited little creativity and initiative. Second, there were the natives who were dehumanized to the level of *tamed animals*, and were thereby expected to be devoid of reason. (Hall, 1977, p. 198)

Thus, for Susun, Friday lacks the value and personality that every human being possesses. Unlike Cruso, who is a white man and according to her has a soul, the blacks lack essence and are like other non-human animates. And even if colonial mentality considers them as human beings, it views them as savage and uncivilized, and in need of "white" enlightenment. In her book, *The Post-colonial Critic* (1990), Gayatri Spivak asserts this point: "when the colonizers come to a world, they encounter it as uninscribed earth upon which they write their inscriptions" (p. 129). On one occasion, Susan asks Cruso why he hadn't taught Friday more words and helped him to master English in order to "civilize" him: "Yet would it not have lightened your solitude had Friday been master of English?...you might have brought home to him some of the blessings of civilization and made him a better man" (Coetzee, 1986, p. 22). Thus, Susan sees Friday as a being with a lesser value than herself and Cruso.

Based on these colonialist presumptions, Susan tries to play the role of a master towards Friday, to only face disappointment when she encounters resistance on his part; and which he displays through disobedience and negligence. Through silent, non-violent disobedience, Friday tries to hinder Susan's attempts to dominate and control his soul and identity. Disobedience gives him the ability to avoid a passive existence making him a dynamic element in the master-slave relationship. When he played "over and over again on his little reed flute a tune of six

notes, always the same," Susan felt annoyed and "one day [she] marched over and dashed the flute from his hands" (Coetzee, 1986, p.27-8). However, a few days later, "Friday took out his flute and began to play his damnable tune," frustrating Susan to the extent that she "believed [herself] in a madhouse" (p.28). Later, Susan and Friday are rescued from the island and taken to England. In England, at Foe's house, Friday discovers Foe's robes. Wearing them, he starts "dancing" (p. 92) and when Susan attempts to stop him, she fails: "In the grip of dancing he is not himself...I call his name and am ignored, I put out a hand and am brushed aside" (p. 92). Friday ignores her, an act which can be seen as an act of defiance. Further, when Susan decides to take the robes away from him and secretly enters his room, she notices that he [is] awake, his hands already gripping the robe, which was spread over the bed, as though he read [her] thoughts" (p. 92). The text shows that Friday is not a very complacent slave; on the contrary, he is a slave who shows resistance and limits his master's dominion forcing her, in some instances, to "retreat" making the conventional definition of master and slave ambivalent (p. 92). As such, he blurs the traditionally accepted border marking the difference between master and slave.

Another, more subtle kind of resistance which Friday shows is "silence." Friday "has no tongue," because, Cruso says that "the slavers" cut it out (Coetzee, 1986, p. 23). Although Friday's silence is imposed on him, there are some instances in the text which suggest that his silence can be interpreted as a resistance to communication. Susan was aware that Friday was very fond of playing his reed flute. After arriving in England and settling in Foe's house, one day it occurred to her that "if there were any language accessible to Friday, it would be the language of music" (p. 96). This can be seen when Friday started to play his flute and Susan also did likewise, imitating the tune, but after a while she "could not restrain [herself] from varying the tune" and "was sure Friday would follow her" (p. 97). However, Friday paid no heed to her and "persisted in the old tune," thus, refusing to follow her and, as a result, to communicate with her (p. 97). His persistence to play his own tune, rather than that of Susan's can be interpreted as his desire to have and follow his own culture and identity, rather than complying with that of Susan's. In another attempt to communicate with Friday, Susan decides to teach him to write, giving him a slate and a chalk which to write words like "house" and "ship," he chooses to write recurring alphabets like "h-s-h-s-h-s" (p. 146). He writes the letters in an order that suggests he did not wish to learn. In another instance, when Susan and Foe were talking, Susan notices that Friday had the slate in his hands and "was filling it with a design of, as it seemed, leaves and flowers" (p. 147). However, coming closer, she noticed that they "were eyes, open eyes, each set upon a human foot" (p. 147). When she tried to snatch the slate away from him in order to show it to Foe, "Friday put three fingers into his mouth and wet them with spittle

and rubbed the slate clean" (p. 147). Such acts show that Friday can, but deliberately refuses to communicate. Friday's silence is so impressive and forceful that Susan feels completely helpless against it:

> ...a silence that rose up the stairway like smoke....Before long I could not breathe, I would feel I was stifling in my bed. My lungs, my heart, my head were full of black smoke. I had to spring up and open the curtains and put my head outside and breathe fresh air.... (p. 118)

In her book, *Old Myths-Modern Empires* (2005), Michela Canepari-Labib asserts that "Friday's rejection of the master's language comes to represent the silence intrinsic to the concept of canon" and also "as a strategy of opposition and a resistance of his attempted obliteration by the colonizers" (p.241).

It is possible to read Friday's silence as representing his resistance towards Susan's attempt to write her book that will incorporate Friday's past. If Friday is seen as representing the colonized, then Susan's attempt to unveil and write Friday's story can be seen as the colonizer's attempt to define, delineate, and write the colonized society's history from the colonizer's perspective. As pointed out above, the Orientalist and the colonial historian has always tried to define and describe the non-western Others in a particular way in order "to universalize their meaning within its own cultural and academic discourse" and "having opened up the chasm of cultural difference, a mediator or metaphor of otherness", he (the colonial historian) creates a space in which "The Other is cited, quoted, framed, illuminated, encased in the shot/reverse-shot strategy of a serial enlightenment" making "Narrative and the cultural politics of difference" a "closed circle of interpretation" (Bhabha, 1994, p.40). Therefore, the history of the Other written by the colonial historian is actually a "strategy of containment where the Other text is forever the exegetical horizon of difference, never the active agent of articulation" (p.40). The same strategy is adopted by Susan when she views Friday as a mere savage in need of guidance towards "salvation" as defined by the West. In the novel, she tries to teach Friday English and make him use a spoon. She tries to inject her European culture into Friday's identity in order to alter his identity for her own benefit. Therefore, just as the colonizer views the colony as a "settling place which was unsettled" Susan views Friday as "an uninscribed earth upon which" she can "write [her] inscriptions" (Spivak, 1990, p.129). Thus, her delineation of Friday's past cannot be expected to be fair and unprejudiced. Friday's reluctance to cooperate with Susan and his resistance shows that he "refuses to be 'saved' by Susan's narrative and to be translated into mere (English) linguistic signs" (Canepari-Labib, 2005, p. 241). He refuses to be a picture portrayed by Susan. Silence gives Friday the ability to escape slavery and

the dominance of his master. It even gives him the power to make his master retreat questioning her authority as master.

Her authority being challenged by Friday, Susan, who is his master and represents the colonizer, is compelled to retreat and change her strategy in dealing with him. She becomes aware that if she intends to preserve her status as Friday's master and retain her dominance and control over him, she has to alter her game plan. As such, she pretends to be Friday's well-wisher who intends to set him free, but does not do so because of her concern for him. For instance, when the ship—which "rescued" Susan, Cruso, and Friday from the island— anchored on the beach, Susan asks the sailors to catch Friday and bring him on board for he did not wish to leave the island. When the crew catch Friday and bring him on board, Susan, turning to Friday, says that "They will bring us back to England, which is your master's home, and there you will be free" (Coetzee, 1986, p. 41). But when in England, she tries to keep him as her slave, writing to Foe that she "is turning Friday into a laundryman" because she thinks "idleness will destroy him" (again the same well-wisher's gesture) (p. 56). Later, she once more repeats her promise of setting Friday free, but never keeps her promise: "You will have money with which to buy your way to Africa or Brazil, as the desire moves you..." (p. 58). Or elsewhere, she notices Friday's "toes curl on the floorboards or the cobblestones" and hints "that he craves the softness of the earth under his feet" (p. 59). She writes to Foe: "How I wish there were a garden I could take him to!" as if she felt pity for him (p. 59). However, she continues: "Could he and I not visit your garden in Stoke Newington?...'Spade, Friday!' I should whisper, offering the spade to his hand; and then: 'Dig!'—which is a word master taught him—'Turn over the soil, pile up the weeds for burning" (p. 59).

Further, she tries to teach him English for she is the only link between Friday and his environment (the British society). Language becomes a means of "civilizing" Friday and gaining dominance and control over him; it is the means through which she can shape his thoughts which, previously, were not dominated by any (Western) culture. She mentions that "*Watch* and *Do*: those are my two principal words for Friday, and with them I accomplish much" (Coetzee, 1986, p. 59). She starts teaching him English: "While he works I teach him the names of things. I hold up a spoon and say 'Spoon, Friday!' and hold out my hand to receive the spoon; hoping thus that in time the word Spoon will echo in his mind" (p. 59). Or "'Broom, Friday!' I say, and make motions of sweeping, and press the broom into his hand" (p. 59). Thus, she does not intend to teach him in order to make him capable of living in the British society; instead, she is teaching him the daily chores a slave must perform. She reads him stories, although she "expect[s] no sign that he has understood" with the "hope that if I make the air around him thick with words, memories will be reborn in him" (p. 59). However,

all of Susan's attempts are in vain. Unable to break Friday's resistance, enter his inner world, and interpret his "black" soul, Susan has no choice but to accept that "he is himself, Friday is Friday" (p. 122). As a result, it is through silence that Friday resists being colonized and defeats the colonizing system which intends to chain him with its culture.

CONCLUSION

The present research shows how John Maxwell Coetzee's novel, *Foe* (1986), can be viewed as a parody of the colonial Master-Slave relationship. Susan's colonialist mentality views non-Europeans, especially blacks, as inferior beings. Based on this mentality, she tries to assume the role of a master against Friday and tries to dominate him. However, Friday by being silent and reserved and by paying no heed to Susan's commands, proves that he cannot be dominated. It can be concluded that Friday, by resisting and disobeying Susan, creates an atmosphere of 'ambivalence' in which the conventional definitions of master and slave are lost and thus, parodied. Through disobedience on the one hand, and silence on the other, he chains Susan abrogating all her attempts to dominate and control his self. In the novel, Coetzee displays that although the colonizer controls the freedom of the colonized, there are moments in which the colonized resists the colonizer and at times, even makes him retreat. Thus, Friday (the slave) is not a permanently passive, dominated, and compliant figure; on the contrary, he is "an active agent" who limits the authority of his master and sometimes forces her to change her strategy and approach towards him.

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