Michaela Frey

"Who is speaking me?": Moments of (Mis)Translation in J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*

Abstract: In his metafictional novel *Foe* (1986), the South African author J. M. Coetzee rewrites Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. He significantly alters the popular narrative by including a female protagonist as the narrator and a black Friday who is mute. Not only does Coetzee translate the popular Robinsonade into the female voice of Susan Barton; in the novel, she herself seeks to have her story set down in writing by an author in order to gain fame. Lastly, Susan and the author called Foe try to ascribe to the silent Friday a story, for he can neither speak nor understand their language. This essay regards these features using the concept of cultural translation, which emerged in the course of post-structuralist approaches and is now often applied in post-colonial contexts. By considering translation not as a singular transfer from one language into another, but as an action that always happens in distinct socio-political circumstances, translation is seen as a decidedly political act. Thus, this essay analyses how the moments of translation in *Foe* display the relationship of author and translator, and how translations can manipulate the original text. These will be looked at through mechanisms of exclusiveness, such as the canonization of texts and the struggle of marginalized voices to be heard. As a result, the analysis will show how the novel self-reflexively negotiates the power of authorship, language, and how stories are constructed and controlled.

Keywords: authorship, cultural translation, rewriting, post-colonial studies

Commenting on literary translations of his works,[1] the South African author J. M. Coetzee discusses the power of translators: "The words are written; I cannot control the associations they awaken. But my translator is not so powerless" (2005, 144). It requires trust to hand over your text to translators and includes a sense of loss of control, Coetzee admits (2005, 141). But in contrast to this seemingly powerful status, translators are often invisible actors who find themselves rarely printed on book-covers and only mentioned briefly on the initial pages. They hold an ambiguous position as they walk a fine line between faithful reproduction of the original text and free subjective interpretation. Coetzee himself

1 In his essay "Roads to Translation" (2005), Coetzee examines the issue of translation of his own works.

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partly negotiates this issue in his metafictional novel *Foe* (1986) by including a re-writing of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. This essay discusses Coetzee's novel in regards to aspects of cultural translation. In addition to the author's choice to appropriate Defoe's highly canonized story, I want to analyse translational processes through the function of three protagonists Susan, Friday and Foe and their relation to Defoe's original story.

The interest in translation studies began in the middle of the twentieth century. Inspired by Walter Benjamin's essay "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers" (1921), in which he argues that the task of literary translators is not merely a transmission of content but also of the way in which it is expressed, deconstructivist theories suggested that a translation always adds a different meaning to the original text.[2] Later on, post-structuralist approaches raised awareness of the socio-political circumstances in which translations are produced: translation was regarded as a political as well as a self-reflexive act (Buden 2005, 75). These thoughts led to the turn of cultural translation in the 1990s, in which translation also serves as a metaphor for describing a model of a new emancipatory practice. Post-colonial thinker Homi K. Bhabha, for instance, mentions cultural translation in his concept of hybridity, which describes the creation of a third space between two cultural oppositions. Hence, mimetic acts of colonizers through the colonized turn into acts of cultural translation, during which originality can be subverted (Rath 2011, 29). Translation in Bhabha's sense becomes a political expression of cultural mimicry which serves to "desacralize [...] the transparent assumptions of cultural supremacy" and "demands a contextual specificity, a historical differentiation *within* minority positions" (Bhabha 1994, 327; emphasis in original).

The novel *Foe* has often been discussed in a post-colonial context, due to the re-writing and the inclusion of an enslaved, black character. However, it also prompts questions about the silencing of the female voice and the power of language. Scott Bishop, for instance, notes that *Foe* "is a distinctly political novel which forces the reader into the political experience of doubting author, authorial voice, and authority" (1990, 56). Similarly, David Attwell states that the novel ends "with an image in which the absolute limits of its own powers of authorization and signification are defined" (1993, 117), and according to Dominic Head, the novel invites readers to "speculate about [...] the issue of how stories are constructed and who controls them" (1997, 115). Thus, *Foe* criticizes colonial power structures as

2 In his essay "Des tours de Babel" (1985), Jacques Derrida focuses on the untranslatability of proper nouns, whereby "Babel" itself serves him as an example for the impossibility of translation. Similarly, Paul de Man argues that the relationship between rhetoric and grammar in language is never stable and is therefore unreliable, as is apparent in the relationship between original and translation (see Schahadat 2013, 32).

well as their literary promotion in the Western canon. In an essay, Coetzee himself has pointed out the problematic depiction of Friday in Defoe's novel:[3]

> *Robinson Crusoe* is unabashed propaganda for the extension of British mercantile power in the New World and the establishment of new British colonies. As for the native peoples of the Americas and the obstacle they represent, all one need say is that Defoe chooses to represent them as cannibals. The treatment Crusoe metes out to them is accordingly savage. (Coetzee 2002, 24)

Accordingly, Coetzee presents a significantly altered narrative in his novel. The eponymous character Foe evokes ambiguous associations in the reader. While the name orthographically hints at Daniel Defoe, its semantical meaning "enemy" foreshadows the difficult relationship between Susan and Foe. Similarly, Coetzee modified the name of Defoe's main character, Crusoe, by dropping the "-e." The conception of Cruso, who is surprisingly indifferent to his exilic state, also starkly differs from the figure, as the description of the female narrator, Susan Barton, illustrates: "His heart was set on remaining to his dying day king of his tiny realm" (Coetzee 1986, 13–14). He neither keeps a journal as "he lacked the inclination to keep one" (16) nor shares stories about his previous life or of the circumstances that led to his arrival on the island (12). Hence, Susan assumes, "Cruso rescued will be a deep disappointment to the world; the idea of Cruso on his island is a better thing than the true Cruso tight-lipped and sullen in an alien England" (34–35). The character Friday, in Coetzee's novel, is a mute African slave whose tongue has been cut out, probably by slave traders (22–23). Due to his muteness and inability to write or fully understand the English language, Friday's figure epitomizes "the absence of speech" (Turk 2011, 300). He inherits an ambiguous position, that of the subordinated slave to Cruso and Susan who, however, refuses to assimilate to their system by remaining mute and not submitting to language despite their efforts. Another startling alteration is the introduction of a female protagonist: The narrator Susan reports her experience on the island, the return to England, and her ensuing effort to write down her adventures into a best-selling story.

The plot begins when Susan – who searches for her lost daughter in Brazil – shipwrecks and finds herself on an island where she encounters Cruso and Friday. During the plot, all three are rescued, but on the way back to England Cruso dies. In England, Susan consults an author, Foe, to write down her adventures on the island. In contrast to Friday and Cruso, who take on the roles of minor charac-

3 Head notes that Coetzee does not disapprove of Defoe's novel: "Coetzee's response to Defoe is complex. He has spoken of *Foe* as a tribute to eighteenth-century prose style, indicating that he is after something more responsive than a simple pastiche of his models" (1997, 113).

ters and are "but grim shades of Defoe's originals" (Rao 2013, 42), Susan is the protagonist of the story and it is through her voice that the narrative is presented. She is, as Narasimha K. Rao puts it, "a teller of tales, and she carries the central theme of Coetzee's *Foe*, the nature of narrative art" (2013, 42).

This adds another twist to the story, as the novel eventually suggests that Susan, as the female figure, was concealed and left out of the popular *Crusoe* narrative.[4] Coetzee's rewriting eventually implies that *Foe* is the urtext of *Robinson Crusoe*, as the more authentic and trustworthy narrative than the heroic and adventurous tale of Crusoe. This also includes the figure of Friday as the cannibalistic savage who is educated with the help of European mastery but still subordinate. In Coetzee's novel, however, he remains silent and resistant to the attempts of "civilizing" him. Coetzee's rewriting is a conscious act of manipulation which unveils colonial and patriarchal structures in *Robinson Crusoe*, as it gives a voice to "the ghostly absences, exclusions and silences of everything that did not eventually become part of the 'official' story" (Park Sorensen 2010, 100). According to André Lefevere, the manipulation of the original text is also an inevitable occurrence in translational processes. In his book *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*, he argues that rewritings are (un)intentionally influenced by ideologies and thus "manipulate literature to function in a given society in a given way" (Lefevere 1992, vii). This can be meant in either an enriching or a restricting way:

> Rewritings can introduce new concepts, new genres, new devices and the history of translation is the history also of literary innovation, of the shaping of power of one culture upon another. But rewriting can also repress innovation, distort and contain, and in an age of ever increasing manipulation of all kinds, the study of manipulation processes of literature as exemplified by translation can help us towards a greater awareness of the world in which we live. (Lefevere 1992, vii)

Foe's narrative is thus an attempt to undermine canonical structures, "even if it did so by literary means that have traditionally been elaborated as characterising canonic art" (Attridge 1996, 171).[5] Negotiating questions of authorship, it self-reflexively emphasizes the narrative's own constructed nature and intentionally alters the original to undermine colonial and patriarchal structures in *Robinson Crusoe*.

4 Several critics also mention the parallel between the protagonist, Susan, and Defoe's Roxana in the eponymous novel, claiming that Roxana resurfaces in the figure of Susan, for example Head (1997, 115): "If we lay this second transtextual reference over the first, we find a number of interpretive problems lying in wait. 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*)."

5 Nevertheless, this endeavour seems to remain double-edged: "even if it challenges the western canon," it "itself reproduces or promotes mechanisms by which canonicity as such functions" (Park Sorensen 2010, 97).

Coetzee's decision to include the female figure of Susan as a narrator also raises questions of authorship and the power of translators. Upon being rescued from the island by the boat, the captain advises her to write down her story and sell it: "There has never before to my knowledge, been a female castaway of our nation. It will cause a great stir" (Coetzee 1986, 40). Susan, however, is not confident enough to possess enough artistic capability to compose the story herself: "A liveliness is lost in the writing down which must be supplied by art, and I have no art" (40). Back in England, she asks Foe, an "author who had heard many confessions and [was] reputed a very secret man" (48) to write it for her. Financial success and fame are her main goals, as she confesses to Friday: "Mr Foe is weaving [...] a story which will make us famous throughout the land, and rich too" (58). Nevertheless, writing down her story also becomes, as she later realizes, an act of reclaiming her identity. Throughout the story, her name is altered several times: she mentions that her last name was "properly Berton, but, as happens, it become corrupted in the mouths of strangers" (10), while on the rescuing ship she becomes "known as Mrs Cruso to all on board" (42). Additionally, she is often associated with ghostly appearances:[6] "When I reflect on my story I seem to exist only as the one who came, the one who witnessed, the one who longed to be gone: a being without substance, a ghost beside the true body of Cruso. Is that the fate of all storytellers?" (51). Susan represents a character who is unable to express herself and who speaks "from a position of marginality in relation to the canon, its recognized literary forms, and its masculinist dominance" (Rao 2013, 41).

This position becomes even clearer as Susan asks Foe to write down her story and insists that she "will not have any lies told" (Coetzee 1986, 40). Foe, however, wants to alter the original tale into a more adventurous one to meet the expectations of a reading audience and gain greater financial success. He includes cannibals and even sends a woman, who claims to be Susan's long-lost daughter, to her house for a more spectacular ending. Susan objects these plans: "You once proposed to supply a middle by inventing cannibals and pirates. These I would not accept because they were not the truth. Now you proposed to reduce the island to an episode in the history of a woman in search of a lost daughter. This too I reject" (Coetzee 1986, 121). Her awareness of her dependence on Foe as an author and his power over her story grows: "Will you not bear it in mind, however, that my life is drearily suspended till your writing is done?" (63). While Foe takes over the role of a "Godlike author," who turns into the translator of her story, as

6 In another instance Susan writes to Foe, when she and Friday move into his house: "We will disturb nothing. When you return we will vanish like ghosts, without complaint" (Coetzee 1986, 64).

he "sees the narrative as an artefact that has to be constructed" (Almargo Jiménez 2005, 11), Susan fears losing her authority and identity: "But now all my life grows to be story and there is nothing of my own left in me. [...] Nothing is left to me but doubt. I am doubt itself. Who is speaking me? Am I a phantom too? To what order do I belong? And you: who are you?" (Coetzee 1986, 133). Reading Foe's effort of rewriting Susan's story as a moment of translation highlights the difficulties between author and translator as well as original and translation. Foe – initially intended by Susan to be the phantom-like author through whom she will gain the ability to make her voice heard by others – evolves into an independent author who seeks to leave a visible mark on Susan's story. He interprets Susan's story according to his own art, whereby he takes the place of the author. While Susan insists on the original version, "she becomes increasingly aware of its unsuitability for the established canon" (Attridge 1996, 176). According to Lefevere, the process of canonization is dominated by "very concrete factors" that can be clearly determined when looking at "issues such as power, ideology, institution, and manipulation" (1992, 2). Foe's translation shows the ambiguous relationship between translation and original and the power structures inherent in it. It also hints at marginalized texts that are often authorized, adjusted, and manipulated by their translators. Susan, nevertheless, is an ambiguous character, as she opposes Foe's alterations: "It is still in my power to guide and amend. Above all, to withhold. By such means do I still endeavour to be father to my story" (Coetzee 1986, 123). Attridge argues that the struggle of authorship over Susan's tale hints at the "processes of authorship, empowerment, validation and silencing in a narrative that is constantly aware of the problems inherent in its own acts of representation" (Attridge 1996, 184). Admittedly, Coetzee thereby also reflects on his own status as a canonized author who was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, as he too "shares the powerful position of an author like Foe/Defoe" (Rao 2013, 41). By depicting the power structures between the gendered figures of Susan and Foe, Coetzee negotiates how less established or marginalized authors struggle to have their voices heard in the canonized industry of literature.

While Susan's efforts to construct an identity and gain a voice through her tale display the adversarial relations between original and copy, Friday's speechlessness negotiates the mistranslations and resistance of marginalized voices. The violent mutilation of his tongue, and thereby his lack of speech, as well as his physical appearance (as described by Susan), determine Friday culturally as the Other. Although Friday saves the shipwrecked woman and brings her to Cruso's encampment, Susan is immediately scared by Friday's appearance. Because of the spear he carries and his position as a servant to Cruso, she regards him as a cannibal and slave (Coetzee 1986, 6, 21). The moment she beholds – or more precisely does not behold – Friday's mutilated tongue is also the moment in which

she is confronted with the impossibility of "reading" his story, as she sees "nothing in the dark save the glint of teeth white as ivory" (22) in his mouth. Since Friday "has no understanding of words or power of speech" (39), his cut-out tongue becomes "the sign of his oppression" as well as of "absolute otherness" (Attridge 1996, 183). From that moment onwards she realizes that she can understand neither his character, his thoughts, nor his past:

> It was no comfort that his mutilation was secret, closed behind his lips (as some other mutilations are hidden by clothing), that outwardly he was like any Negro. Indeed, it was the very secretness of his loss that caused me to shrink from him. I could not speak, while he was about, without being aware how lively were the movements of the tongue in my own mouth. (Coetzee 1986, 24)

Due to this confrontation with Friday's condition, Susan feels a need to tell his story, yet she knows nothing of his past. Eventually, by writing down her tale, she does not only seek to establish an identity for herself, but also for Friday. Foe's story should become a "story, which is your story, and your master's, and mine" (Coetzee 1986, 58). Additionally, she wants to teach Friday to understand the English language, as she believes that she can "educate him out of darkness and silence" (61). As Friday already understands some words in English, Susan is well aware of the power of language a means to control, oppress, as well as form an identity. Yet, here, in contrast to her relation with Foe, it is her, who exercises power over Friday: "There are times when benevolence deserts me and I use words only as the shortest way to subject him to my will" (61).

However, Coetzee's novel does not fail to point out that power through language can also be resisted. Towards the end of the novel, there is an instant in which Susan believes that she and Friday have found a mutual level of communication. When Friday starts to play on a flute that he finds in Foe's house, Susan realizes "that if there were any languages accessible to Friday, it would be the language of music" (Coetzee 1986, 96). She accompanies him, yet when she plays a melody that differs from Friday's, he sticks with his own tune, and the hope for a harmonious, mutual communication, is shattered: "I was sure Friday would follow me. But no, Friday persisted in the old tune, and the two tunes placed together formed no pleasing counterpoint, but on the contrary jangled and jarred" (98). Friday's character stays unreadable for Susan, precisely because she believes it is her responsibility to translate Friday's story: "It is for us to open Friday's mouth and hear what it holds: silence, perhaps, or a roar, like the roar of a seashell held to the ear" (142). It is, however, Friday's untranslatability that enables his resistance, which Foe fails to realise: "We must make Friday's silence speak, as well as the silence surrounding Friday" (142), since "as long as he is dumb we can tell ourselves his desires are dark to us and continue to use him as we wish" (148).

In her essay "The Politics of Translation" in *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak discusses the task of the female translator in literary translation and suggests to regard translation as a strategy to "get around the confines of one's 'identity,'" since language "allow[s] us to make sense of things, of ourselves" (Spivak 1993, 179). Translation is thus a space in which identity can be negotiated: "The translator earns permission to transgress from the trace of the other – before memory – in the closest places of the self" (Spivak 1993, 180). In this sense, translation becomes – similar to Bhabha – a space of encounter and negotiation of difference. The intimate encounter in the translational process is thus also a moment of understanding. This process of translation, according to Spivak, where she considers non-Western texts (written by women) is often worked out insufficiently, as the translator cannot enter a dialogue with the text or is not willing to do so (Spivak 1993, 181). This may be because "the experience of contained alterity in an unknown language spoken in a different cultural milieu is uncanny" (Spivak 1993, 181). Spivak's reflections can be applied to *Foe*, as Susan, who fails to translate Friday's speechlessness into her own language, is not willing to enter into an equal dialogue with Friday. Even though Friday's figure can be manipulated by those in control of language as they wish, it remains an unsolvable riddle to them, as Almargo Jiménez points out:

> Thus Friday becomes what the language of others turns him into. His speechlessness turns him into an incomplete sign, a sign castrated, amputated of one of its elements. As incomplete sign, he can only be a signifier which lacks a signified, more so because it lacks the possibility of ever being complete since the only element that could possibly "narrate" its origin for us is missing and Susan's attempts to find out are riddled with all sorts of problems: prejudice, received ideas, and wrong assumptions. (Almargo Jiménez 2005, 18)

The figure of Friday resists a clear "reading," as it is impossible to attach "a final authoritative meaning to [him]" (Rao 2013, 45). This ambiguity is further encouraged in the final chapter, in which a new, unnamed narrator gives a voice to Friday's silence. Here, the dead bodies of Foe and Susan lie in bed, while Friday is still alive in his alcove. Yet this place "is not a place of words. Each syllable, as it comes out, is caught and filled with water and diffused. This is a place where bodies are their own signs. It is the home of Friday" (Coetzee 1986, 157). The end opens the possibility of a reading that foregrounds "the post-colonial moment" (Head 1997, 124): Friday not only outlives Susan and Foe but also undermines the construct of their language. The words are dissolved into signs and Susan, who is "desperate to translate, faithfully, the figure of Friday into the story" (Head 1997, 106) to ascribe to Friday a history and an identity, fails in her attempt, as she is unable to comprehend his Otherness. Translating Friday gains a double meaning: On the one hand, Susan and Foe translate him into a figure of cannibalistic ori-

gins and speculate about his past and his wishes, and thereby exercise power over him. On the other hand, Friday's silence is also a silent resistance to their attempts. Susan and Foe ultimately fail to attach a final meaning to him, since he displays a sign that they cannot read. Furthermore, it has also been pointed out by critics that Friday's muteness opposes the exclusiveness of the canon (Kehinde 2006, 112). Friday's silence therefore turns into a sign for the voicelessness of works excluded by the canon:

> *Foe*'s most telling challenge to the literary canon, therefore, is not its insistence upon cultural construction and validation (an insistence to which we have become accustomed in postmodern writing); it is its representation, through this most powerful of non-representations, of the silence which is constitutive of canonicity itself. (Attridge 1996, 180)

The moments of translation in *Foe* – the rewriting of the Robinson narrative, Foe authoring Susan's story, and the mistranslation of Friday by Susan and Foe – negotiate the questions of canonization, authorship, and the power of translators. As Park Sorensen writes, "*Foe* seems to open an arcade of foreignness in which the 'original' and the 'translation', and the figures of these two terms, may possibly recognize one another in their shared otherness" (2010, 107). The deliberate discrepancies between Crusoe's and Coetzee's plot unveil issues such as patriarchal and colonial structures in the original story. These moments of translation create a space of dialogue between original and translation in which the new perspectives of marginalized positions are made visible. Similarly, Foe's attempt to translate Susan's story into a more adventurous one highlights the relationship between author and translator and the power relations inherent therein. It particularly emphasizes the position of marginalized or less powerful texts that are adjusted to a new socio-cultural or political context when translated into a different culture. Lastly, Susan's and Foe's efforts to translate Friday into their own story show that translational processes always imply an encounter with the Other. Even though both assimilate Friday to their desires, they ultimately fail to comprehend him. *Foe* not only raises awareness of the exclusive structures of the canon, it also addresses the power of language when speaking for others and translating, respectively.

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Michaela Frey is currently working on her Ph.D. project on contemporary British nature poetry in times of climate crisis at the English department of the University of Basel. She graduated in "English Literature and Culture" and "Comparative Literature" from the University of Munich and University College Cork. She went on to complete her Master's degree in "European Literatures and Cultures" at the University of Freiburg. Her research interests include ecocriticism, contemporary poetry, post-colonialism and literary markets. She holds a Ph.D. scholarship from the Heinrich-Böll-Foundation.