



Susan's De-Marginalization in *Foe* from the Perspective of Feminism

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Abstract

Coetzee's *Foe*, the rewriting of *Robinson Crusoe*, tells a story about how Susan, a female castaway and a character absent in Defoe's original text, challenges Crusoe and Foe, and how she pursues the right to speak for Friday. As a marginalized woman in the patriarchal society, the process of de-marginalization of Susan is a topic worth exploring. Thus, with the assistance of Beauvoir's existential feminism, this thesis attempts to explore Susan's de-marginalization in novel *Foe* through analyzing the crescendo of Susan's voice and Susan's quest for authorship. The study draws a conclusion that Susan's gradual loud voice from silence to cry-out and the process of Susan's quest for authorship illustrate that the process of her de-marginalization in patriarchal society is successful because of the awakening of her feminine consciousness and her transformation from "the Other" to "the Self" during the process. In addition, this paper can provide a new perspective on women's de-marginalization in literature.

Subject Areas

Literature

Keywords

Foe, Susan, De-Marginalization, Beauvoir's Existential Feminism

1. Introduction

Foe, published in 1986, is the fifth novel of South African writer J. M. Coetzee who won the Nobel Prize in 2003 and the Booker Prize twice. *Foe*, set in 18th century, is a poignant contemporary rewriting of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. It tells a story about how Susan, a female castaway and a character absent in

Defoe's original text, challenges Crusoe and Foe, and how she pursues the right to speak for Friday. Through depictions of Susan's complex relationships with Crusoe, Foe and Friday, Susan's marginal status is especially noticeable. Hence, this thesis attempts to explore Susan's de-marginalization in *Foe* from the perspective of feminism through the analysis of the crescendo of female voice and Susan's quest for authorship.

The thesis consists of an introduction, a main body of three parts and a conclusion. The introduction briefly introduces J. M. Coetzee, the novel *Foe* and the structure of the thesis. The main body will be divided into three parts. The first part is the literature review. It sums up relevant researches on *Foe* at home and abroad. After the review of researches, a research gap in *Foe* emerges. Part two is the theoretical guidance. It elaborates on Beauvoir's existential feminism theory from two angles including existence and essence, "the Other" and "the Self", which are adopted throughout the research. The third part is the main one, which sheds light on Susan's de-marginalization on the basis of existential feminism theory and this part is comprised of two sections. The first probes into the crescendo of Susan's voice in the light of "existence and essence". The second illuminates Susan's quest for authorship on the basis of "the Other" and "the Self".

Finally, this paper draws a conclusion that though the novel finally focuses on Susan's failure to tell Friday's story and her complete submission to patriarchal system, however, in the process, the increasing feminist awareness of Susan Barton and Susan's de-marginalization can be seen as a successful point. She challenges patriarchal authority through the crescendo of her voice from silence to cry-out and her transformation from "the Other" to "the Self".

2. Literature Review

Foe, the rewriting of *Robinson Crusoe*, has attracted great attention from home and abroad. Numerous researchers have conducted a variety of studies from the perspectives of post-colonialism, feminism, deconstruction and intertextuality.

2.1. Previous Studies on *Foe* Abroad

Studies abroad mainly focus on the perspectives of post-colonialism and feminism. Post-colonialism has been a hot topic abroad. Many critics interpret *Foe* from postcolonial perspective. Under the colonial oppression, the colonized are forced to be silent. Therefore, scholars studying post-colonialism usually focus on the theme of "silence" in Coetzee's novel. Spivak (1990) in his article "Theory in the Margin: Coetzee's *Foe* reading Defoe's Crusoe/Roxana", argues that silence can be identified as resistance. To his mind, He regards Friday's silence as a revolt against colonialism [1]. Farahbakhsh and Mohammad (2017) also concur with the same idea that muteness can be a way of resistance. They argue that Friday is an active character with strong resistance consciousness because he always keeps silent against Susan and successfully forces Susan to change her strategy several times [2].

Female figure in *Foe* also attracts great attention. Yet the majority of researches on the feminism center on “struggle” of women in the patriarchal society. Mehrabadi and Pirnajmuddin (2012) in article “(Hi)story in Search of Author(ity): Feminine Narration in J. M. Coetzee’s *Foe*”, argue that in Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, women are deprived of the right to speak, while Coetzee makes woman the narrator of his rewriting work, which is a model of postcolonial works [3]. However, Azam (2018) holds that Susan constantly submits to and be deeply influenced by male hegemony in the process of seeking “substance”, by arranging so Coetzee accentuates the struggle of women in the patriarchal society under the postcolonial context [4]. He reports that Susan never possesses discourse power for she prefers and chooses to be silent in the face of male power. Suadah (2019) also concurs with the same opinion. She concludes that Susan personally chooses to be silence to leave an impression on readers that she is likely to be unheard by men [5].

2.2. Previous Studies on *Foe* at Home

In China, studies on *Foe* are mainly about deconstruction and intertextuality. The perspective of deconstruction could well illustrate the process of how Coetzee deconstructs Defoe’s canonical work. Researches on deconstruction mainly focus on the deconstruction of textual content and the narrative strategy. Li (2007) analyzes Coetzee’s deconstruction of *Robinson Crusoe* in *Foe* from three aspects: textual content, textual form and colonial discourse [6]. She argues that in the process of rewriting *Robinson Crusoe*, Coetzee deconstructs the setting, plot and character and interrogates the grand narrative since the Enlightenment, posits a challenge to the universal hegemony, and expresses his human concern on the coexistence of all nations. Li (2013) analyzes the deconstruction in *Foe* from the perspective of multi-faceted dualistic deconstruction tendency. She argues that the real concerns of Coetzee are to forgo closure and to build a dialogue that opens up a real respect and understanding [7]. Moreover, some scholars pay attention to the deconstruction of narrative strategy. Wang and Zhang (2010) analyze the narrative strategy in *Foe* by using theory of narratology. They analyze the dynamic first-person narration and stress that multiple narration from the feminist perspective in *Foe* is a deconstruction of the authority of colonial literature [8].

Most of the research papers center on intertextuality since there is an inherent similarity between *Foe* and *Robinson Crusoe*. Xin (2007) admits the intertextual relationship between *Foe* and *Robinson Crusoe*, and argues that *Foe* subverts the authority of colonial literature represented by Defoe’s work and raises the questions of Eurocentric authority and the history of South Africa [9]. In her opinion, Coetzee chooses the canonical text as the target and challenges the European traditional discourse. Coetzee sees the superiority of the white, colonialism and racism hidden in *Robinson Crusoe*, and creates a lite piece intertextual to the canon.

2.3. Research Gap

In short, researches have been made on *Foe* from various perspectives including post-colonialism, feminism, deconstruction and intertextuality. Few papers talk about demarginalization in *Foe*. Similar to my study, scholars interpret female character in *Foe* from the perspective of feminism and focus on “struggle” of women in the patriarchal society. However, few of them talk about the process of de-marginalization of female character in *Foe*. Therefore, there’s still room for further research on *Foe* from feminism. With the help of Beauvoir’s existential Feminism, this thesis is devoted to bridging the gap, aiming to explore the process of female character Susan’s de-marginalization in *Foe*.

3. Theoretical Guidance—Beauvoir’s Existential Feminism

This paper will employ Simone De Beauvoir’s Existential Feminism to interpret Susan’s De-marginalization in *Foe*. Simone De Beauvoir is a prominent French existentialist philosopher whose research on women’s issues makes her one of the most famous Western feminists of the 20th century. As the initiator of feminism, Beauvoir plays an enlightening role in the awakening of female consciousness in the world. Her work *The Second Sex*, a “Bible” for women, brings an existentialist approach to feminist ideas. It has become one of the most important feminist works of the 20th century. Influenced by the existentialist Sartre, Beauvoir put forward the idea of existential feminism. The concepts “Existence”, “Essence”, “the Other” and “the Self” are the key points to understand existential feminism. Therefore, we need to figure out existence and essence, “the Other” and “the Self”.

3.1. Existence vs. Essence

Influenced by the existentialist Sartre’s “Existence precedes Essence”, Simone De Beauvoir believes that we are born without purpose and must carve out an authentic existence for ourselves, choosing what to become [10]. In applying this idea to the notion of “woman”, she asks us to separate the biological entity (the bodily form which females are born into) from femininity, which is a social construct. Since any construct is open to change and interpretation, this means that there are many ways of “being a woman” [10]; there is room for existential choice. In the introduction to *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir (1972) states the position explicitly: “One is not born but becomes a woman”. Women have the same impulse and ability to transcend themselves as men do.

3.2. “The Other” vs. “the Self”

“Representation of the world is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view”—Simone De Beauvoir, 1956 [11].

Simone De Beauvoir writes in her book *The Second Sex* that throughout history, the standard measure of what we take to be human, both in philosophy and society at large, has been a peculiarly male view. Some philosophers have been

explicit in equating full humanity with maleness. It is for this reason that Beauvoir says that “the Self” of philosophical knowledge is defined by patriarchal norm, and the binary pair—the female—is therefore something else, which she calls “the Other”. “The Self” is active and knowing, whereas “the Other” is all that “the Self” rejects: passivity, voicelessness, and powerlessness. Beauvoir believes that women must free themselves both from the idea that they must be like men, and from the passivity that society has induced in them. Living a truly authentic existence carries more risk than accepting a role handed down by society, but it is the only path to equality and freedom.

4. Susan’s De-Marginalization

4.1. The Crescendo of Susan’s Voice: Transformation from Femininity to Existential Choice

“Crescendo” is a musical term. It metaphorically refers to a gradually loud Susan’s voice in *Foe*. This section aims to explore Susan’s De-marginalization through the analysis of the crescendo of Susan’s voice. Her voice changes from silence to cry-out illustrating her transformation from holding back to having the courage to face patriarchy, which means Susan transcends femininity constructed by patriarchy society and voices for her true self. It is actually a way of de-marginalization.

4.1.1. Susan’s Silence

In *Foe*, Crusoe’s island is a metaphor for patriarchal society, and Crusoe represents patriarchal domination. Susan, a female in a marginal status, thus chooses to be silent when facing male authority. For example, before Crusoe goes out to make a routine inspection of the island, he gives Susan a knife for self-defence and demands Susan not to leave his residence, yet the reason given by Crusoe is that the apes outside are not afraid of woman. And he even said to Susan “while you live under my roof you will do as I instruct!” [12]. Then, Susan complies with Crusoe’s request to stay in his castle. It makes us conjure up the concept “female domain”, which emerges because industrial revolution leads to the emergence of different domains of activity for men and women [13]. The female domain emphasizes femininity, where it is generally accepted that women should fulfill their roles as wives and mothers and that, in the home, women must be pure, pious, gentle, kind and obedient, and more than that, women are inherently fragile, incompetent and innocent, thus male protection is needed to protect them from the evils of society [14]. Because of this femininity constructed by social and patriarchal system at that time and her marginal status as a newly arrived and female, Susan is unable to be completely independent and separate from Crusoe, thus she chooses to be silent and become a “woman” under the patriarchal rule, and still cannot carve out an authentic existence for herself, choosing what she wants to be. However, it does not mean that Susan’s voluntary silence is a complete submission to male authority; her feminine consciousness actually

keeps in the process of awakening.

4.1.2. Susan's Cry-Out

Although Susan is under patriarchal rule, represented by Crusoe, she is still boldly in revolt. Her voice gradually changes from silence to cry-out, for instance, Susan's request for a pair of shoes. Susan has no extra clothes or shoes, and she cannot always walk without shoes. But when she repeatedly asks Crusoe, Crusoe shows his reluctance several times, only asking Susan to be more patient because he would make a good pair of shoes for her, then remains no action. When Susan retorts to Crusoe in the rough sandals she has made by herself, "patience has turned me into a prisoner" [12], Crusoe throws away all of the materials left in exasperation. Ren (2014) consider the image shoes as "a marker for civilization", because it is Adam and Eve who are enlightened and understand shame and so cover their naked bodies with clothing, hence shoes in here become the symbol of civilization [15]. However, this study tends to take the image shoes as a representation of discourse power not just civilization. In Crusoe's patriarchal rule, shoes are made by men and given to women, just as men forcibly give women certain characteristics. Susan's decision to make her own shoes is a reflection of her voice "cry-out" and struggle for discourse power. This example illustrates that Susan realizes her marginalized status, and her stronger feminine consciousness makes her voice for her true self and transcends patriarchal structure. It is actually a great progress in carving out an authentic existence for herself and de-marginalizing.

In short, Susan's gradual loud voice from silence to cry-out shows that the awakening process of her feminine consciousness. She tries to get rid off marginal status and the femininity given by patriarchal society, transcending traditional rule and making an new existential choice to be truly self.

4.2. Susan's Quest for Authorship: Transformation from "the Other" to "the Self"

The quest for authorship of Susan actually has gone through a process of development, from the submission to traditional female status to her query about patriarchal authority of male writers then to her quest for her own authorship. This section aims to explore the process of Susan's quest for authorship and analyze how does she transform from "the Other" to "the Self" and achieve the goal of demarginalization.

4.2.1. Susan's Submission to Traditional Female Status

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir argues that men set themselves up in the role of the subject and name women as "the Other". Women are constructed by men, by whole social structures and traditions. Women's creative potential has been suppressed by the patriarchy, while men control "truth" and power. As a result, women have lost their vitality and become "the Other". In *Foe*, It is after Susan's talk with the captain on her voyage back, she is encouraged by him to turn her

island experience into a story, a truthful story. It is a story you should set down in writing and offer to the booksellers [12]. The captain's words have intrigued in her the idea of narrating the island story. But as a woman in the patriarchal society, Susan is not confident of her creative ability from the very beginning. She thinks the only way is to find a writer for her to finish this task, thus she seeks help from Mr. Foe. From this example, Susan's subconsciousness of seeking for male writer's help illustrates that Susan's submission to her traditional female status and to be "the Other". To some extent, this patriarchal norm suppresses woman's attempt and creativity on writing.

4.2.2. Susan's Query about Patriarchal Authority of Male Writers

Because of Susan's submission to her traditional female status and lack of confidence at the beginning, she asks Mr. Foe for help. However, in her contact with Foe, she becomes less and less trustful of his ability and work. Thus, Susan begins to query about the male writer's authority. Foe tries to explore more details of their story on the island in order to make the story more intriguing. His version includes five parts: "the loss of the daughter; the quest for the daughter in Brazil; abandonment of the quest, and the adventure of the island; assumption of the quest by the daughter; and reunion of the daughter with her mother". He argues that the island story lacks variety and it should be written as a mere section of his version. He even tends to add episodes which do not actually exist in her story. On the contrary, Susan considers it unnecessary to reveal a whole history of her existence, and she is against his construction of the story which fails to tell the truth. From this example, it can be seen that under the control of Foe's patriarchal authority, Susan realizes that her life is determined by Foe's authority and authority, and thus it has become a story without anything left. Susan's query about Foe's authority means that her role of "the Other" begin to be changed and her attempt to breakthrough of marginalized status. She gradually transforms from "the Other" to "the Self".

4.2.3. Susan's Quest for Her Own Authorship

According to Beauvoir, "the Self" is active and knowing, whereas "the Other" is all that "the Self" rejects: passivity, voicelessness, and powerlessness. In the process of Susan's quest for authorship, she actually has transformed from "the Other" to "the Self". Susan, as a woman in a marginalized status, hopes to narrate her story according to her own will, but she discovers that Foe always indulges in outrageous adaptation of her story. Foe ignores the truth of her narrative and divides the story into five parts, and thus Susan is against his conception. "I lived there too, I was no bird of passage, no gannet or albatross, to circle the island once and dip a wing and then fly on over the boundless ocean. Return to me the substance I have lost, Mr Foe: that is my entreaty" [12]. Susan determines to trace her lost substance by relating her island story. She challenges the patriarchal authority and is eager to gain the true substance by relating her own story. She struggles against gender inequality in the patriarchal discourse and

attempts to recover the right to speak for the marginalized group. The opposition between Susan and Mr. Foe for the discourse power of the story is the embodiment of female writers' struggle in the patriarchal society, which has a great significance to the subversion of authorial authority.

5. Conclusions

With the assistance of Beauvoir's existential feminism, this thesis attempts to explore Susan's de-marginalization in novel *Foe* through analyzing the crescendo of Susan's voice and Susan's quest for authorship.

By examining the crescendo of Susan's voice, the study finds that Susan's voice changes from silence to cry-out illustrating her transformation from holding back to having the courage to face patriarchy, which means Susan transcends femininity constructed by patriarchy society and voices for her true self. Besides, the process of Susan's quest for authorship shows Susan's transformation from "the Other" to "the Self".

Susan's gradual loud voice from silence to cry-out and the process of Susan's quest for authorship illustrate that the process of her de-marginalization in patriarchal society is successful because of the awakening of her feminine consciousness and her transformation from "the Other" to "the Self" during the process. In addition, this paper can provide a new perspective on women's de-marginalization in literature.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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