

Female Representations as Symbols of Ethical Revival

The art of writing keeps leading me through and out of my accepted self into new areas of freedom and self. Now I know why such art is considered dangerous by many people and societies. It threatens, it challenges, it subverts who and what we are at any given time [.]¹

Mao Tse-tung once said: “Women hold up half the sky [.]”² Self-expressive as it is, this statement, alongside emphasizing the importance of female agency in society, also demands if women have, indeed, acquired the appropriate social and cultural status due to them as the constitutive half of the human race. This paper uses literature’s peripheral vision to highlight how gender discrimination is deeply inscribed into literary, historical and cultural discourses to legitimize and reproduce unequal relations of power between men and women, inhibiting women’s full participation in economic and social spheres. Referring to some texts from J.M.Coetzee and Albert Wendt’s fiction, which employ a female narrative perspective, the paper suggests a reevaluation of biased structures of role differentiations that not only hinder individual growth and well-being but continue to thwart viable initiatives for development and change. Cultural transformation as a reinterpretation of value systems is critical for a feasible model of development, one which is not culturally and socially retrogressive and allows autonomy to all its participants.

J.M.Coetzee’s female narrator, Susan Barton in his novel *Foe*³ presents a similar struggle for self-autonomy and cultural recognition. A complex reworking of the classical text of *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe, *Foe* as a subversive text principally preoccupies itself

¹ Albert Wendt, *Ola*, (Auckland: Random House, 1991), 114.

² Quoted by Elise Boulding and Heather Parker, “Women and Development” in *Introducing Global Issues*, Fourth Edition, eds. Michael T. Snarr and D. Neill Snarr, (USA; UK: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2008), 185.

³ J.M.Coetzee, *Foe*. (London: Martin Secker & Warburg, 1986).

with an “interrogation of authority.”⁴ Encoded in historical and literary representation, Coetzee targets the notion of ‘authority’ that takes its strength from the protection and projection of colonial, patriarchal or hegemonic views. Defoe’s work fits into the category of ‘guide literature’, which provided religious and political advice encoded in narrative⁵ and *Robinson Crusoe* is a popular eighteenth-century example of guide literature. For the eighteenth-century audience, Defoe’s Crusoe was more than an adventurer; he embodied a way of life and the aspirations of the Western man. Crusoe presents a life of adventure, which fulfills all expectations associated with guide fiction. Defoe asserts Crusoe’s grand narrative in his third volume of *Robinson Crusoe*:

[T]he story, though Allegorical, is also Historical; and that it is the beautiful Representation of a Life of unexampled Misfortunes, and of a Variety not be met with in the World, sincerely adapted to, and intended for the common good of Mankind, and designed at first, *as it is now farther apply’d*, to the most serious Uses possible.⁶

It was the ‘most serious uses’ of the text that would earn Defoe a rich and respectable social position. The serious uses of his text would involve social, moral, political and racial bearings; in fact it was to serve as a model for the Western ideological framework long after Defoe was dead.

Coetzee’s Susan, in *Foe*, strives to invert this Western ideological model that viewed her as inferior to men and restricts her social relevance. Defoe’s Crusoe is shipwrecked and shares his island with a black savage by the name of Friday. The relationship between these two men is based on confirmed notions of Crusoe’s racial and cultural dominance over the mute black slave. Friday’s individual and social perspective is absent in Crusoe’s narrative of human resilience and spiritual triumph. In this paternalistic Crusoe world another absence is the lack of a female viewpoint. It is important to note that women find virtually no or only marginal significance in Crusoe’s world (mostly to reinforce or

⁴ Words on *Foe* taken from J.M.Coetzee’s interview in *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, Ed. David Attwell, 243-250. (Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press, 1992), 247.

⁵ J. Paul Hunter, “The Puritan Emblematic Tradition” in Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Sources, Criticism*, ed. Michael Shinagel, (New York: Norton & Company Inc, 1975), 266-274.

⁶ Daniel Defoe, “Autobiography: *Robinson Crusoe* as Allegorical History” in Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, ed. Michael Shinagel, 258-262. (New York: Norton & Company Inc, 1975), 259.

reflect a male standpoint).⁷ This absence of a female perspective speaks volumes about Defoe's inability to imagine a role for women in a tale about public achievement and cultural recognition. The women of Defoe's narrative are as disempowered as Friday. It is this absence of a viewpoint that Coetzee targets through Susan's attempt to acquire a public voice by telling her story, and thus re-writing the story of all those silenced in the chapters of history.

Susan Barton's journey begins with the search for her lost daughter. Her ship is destroyed and she is cast away at sea. Susan ends up on a deserted island, occupied only by Crusoe⁸ and his man servant Friday. Susan is taken to Crusoe's encampment and she lives with the two men until all three are rescued. She decides to tell the story of her adventure and hires Mr. Foe, a reputable writer, to write the story for her. But Susan realizes that Foe is unable to do justice to her story and discovers that his motivation in telling her story is the hope of maximum monetary gain and not the accuracy of factual representation. Contesting Foe's view on how her story needs to be written, she takes on the role of the author herself. *Foe* traces Susan's journey towards appropriating a public voice for the female subject. At a significant point in this journey she writes: "the pen becomes mine while I write with it."⁹

Coetzee rediscovers Crusoe's island from the perspective of a woman. Through Susan, Coetzee explores the role of the adventure narrative genre in the colonial imagination. He engages with issues of sexism in *Robinson Crusoe* and, most importantly, focuses on the absence of a female point of view in that novel. Moreover, the novel shows literature's potential to reinforce established stereotypes and promote cultural and political bias. The story of *Foe* suggests an artist's resistance to predetermined literary and cultural beliefs. The novel implies decolonization by criticizing Western literary culture for its patronage of the project of colonialism. Patriarchy, which is another form of colonization targeted through *Foe*, views women as unable to tell their own stories and adds to the disparity of

⁷ Crusoe's mother satisfies her narrative function by aligning her voice with the dominant social voice of his father.

⁸ In Coetzee's *Foe* Crusoe is spelt differently from the classical *Robinson Crusoe* story erasing the 'e' at the end. All quotations are taken from the 1986 edition.

⁹ Coetzee, *Foe*, 66.

power in society. As Friday's plight is given a voice through her, Susan resists the identity/ self-perception culture imposes on her:

I am a free woman who asserts her freedom by telling her story according to her own desire.¹⁰

In Susan's assertion of her right to speech, *Foe* seeks a figurative release from forms of manipulation and oppression practised as acceptable cultural norms in Defoe's narrative.

Derek Attridge¹¹ questions Coetzee's ability to take sides with the politically and culturally repressed because his cultural and literary position may associate him with the oppressor. He goes on to maintain that such an association with a cultural superstructure may be the expression of a conscious or unconscious, personal and aesthetic need: writers need "to locate themselves within an established literary culture, rather than presenting themselves as an assault on that culture."¹² While focusing on *Robinson Crusoe* as a text with an ideological agenda, Coetzee creates an oppositional postcolonial consciousness in *Foe*. This consciousness/conscience embodied in Susan Barton allows Coetzee transcendence from an incriminating racial and cultural heritage.

Susan's character acknowledges the lack of freedom in individual reality and presents a gendered struggle against the available dominant literary/ social discourse, which, in her case, fails to acknowledge the experience of a female castaway and her journey of survival. In accordance with the colonial imagination, such a female substitute for Crusoe neither falls within the popular adventure hero image nor allows Susan cultural acceptance. Refusing the image that her contextual reality imposes on her, Susan "continued to trust in [her] own authorship."¹³ Her new-found authorship is economically viable and is not restricted by her cultural and gender reality. Her character symbolizes historical misrepresentation of the female subject and hopes to evolve a culture nourished

¹⁰ Coetzee, *Foe*, 131.

¹¹ Derek Attridge. "Oppressive Silence: J.M.Coetzee's *Foe* and the Politics of Canonization" in *Critical Perspectives on J.M.Coetzee*. ed. Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson. (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1996), 168-191.

¹² Attridge, 169.

¹³ Coetzee, *Foe*, 133.

by “human-focused approaches,”¹⁴ one that hopes to “improve the productivity and production of our human capital of which women form 50%.

Susan’s story is set in the past but has significant connotations for a contemporary reality, which still upholds patriarchal configurations, many times through ambiguous and deceptive means, and continues to reproduce prejudiced and partial views about women and their role in society. So the globe-trotting female narrator of Albert Wendt’s eponymous novel *Ola*¹⁵ engages in a passionate questioning of her contemporary reality and the essentialist attitudes and familiar stereotypes that dictate and dominate social behaviour in the spheres of gender, race and national identity. She attempts to expose the ideologically oppressive, uni-dimensional and static nature of social reality and the “hypocritical public morality of our societies.”¹⁶

From the moment we’re born we’re fed on words / language; we are controlled by words; we are classified/ described/ identified, etc., by words; we’re enslaved by language as prescribed by those who control our societies.¹⁷

Ola refuses to be “fed on words” and attempts to redefine a personal model of the feminine, which is free of a racially or culturally codified set of rules that distorts or silences the female voice. For the women traditionally considered subservient in some cultures, the experience of colonization made worse their plight and social oppression:

The colonial world was no place for a woman,...it was a man’s world, demanding pioneering, martial and organizational skills, and the achievements of those in the shape of conquered lands and people were celebrated in a series of male-oriented myths: mateship, the mounties, explorers, freedom fighters, bushrangers, missionaries.¹⁸

In *Ola*, Wendt’s self-reflexive textual practice acknowledges a male-dominated culture and how it has led to the development of language as a highly political and discriminating medium of representation. Historical and literary representations of women have been

¹⁴ Gloria Nikoi, *Gender and Development*, 1993 Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Lectures, (Cape Coast, University of Cape Coast, 1998), 110.

¹⁵ Albert Wendt, *Ola*, (Auckland: Random House, 1991).

¹⁶ Wendt, *Ola*, 39.

¹⁷ Wendt, *Ola*, 39.

¹⁸ Kirsten Holst Peterson & Anna Rutherford, eds. *A Double Colonization: Colonial and Post-Colonial Women’s Writing*, (London: Dangaroo Press, 1986), 9.

presented mainly from the viewpoint of a one-sided male perspective.¹⁹ Wendt's book appears to concur the feminist perspective which recognizes that "language itself has been colonized by the male experience, and...[thus the] need to find a language which can describe female experience adequately"²⁰ is not just necessary but essential for social equality and well being.

Both Coetzee and Wendt's novels question conventional hierarchies enacted through "patriarchy" and the "literary institutions", which have historically undermined women's experiences, projecting them primarily as sexual objects.²¹ As the ethos of the colonies, and then that of the emerging settler societies, was predominantly male dominated a major aspect of decolonization involves the unshackling of the female voice. Ola asserts:

Females are *fed* to believe they mustn't use four-letter words, write/talk about sexual matters openly/frankly. For me this has been one of the most difficult taboos to break free of—it's like trying to be free of my very breath (my 'stereotyped' self) and to learn new ways of breathing and speaking.²²

By employing a female narrative perspective, in *Ola*, Wendt symbolizes the relinquishing of male control over female representation.

Ola's initial call for social justice is a direct response to patriarchal discourses that stereotype, dominate and thwart female agency. Here I take a similar view of 'patriarchy' as explained by Maja Mikula:

Patriarchy is not...a homogenous system of male authority, but rather as a set of contextualized manifestations of gendered domination, which can only be adequately examined by looking at their interrelationship with class, race, ethnicity and sexuality.²³

¹⁹ For a detailed study on the re-evaluation of female representations in literature see *Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives* ed. Susan Koppelman Cornillon, (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1972).

²⁰ Kirsten Holst Peterson & Anna Rutherford, eds. *A Double Colonization: Colonial and Post-Colonial Women's Writing*, 10.

²¹ Josephine Dodd. "The South African Literary Establishment and the Textual Production of 'Woman': J.M.Coetzee and Lewis Nkosi in *South African Feminisms: Writing, Theory, and Criticism 1990-1994* Ed. M.J.Daymond. (New York & London: Garland Publishing, Inc, 1996), 327-340.

²² Wendt, *Ola*, 39.

²³ Maja Mikula, ed. *Women, Activism and Social Change: Routledge Research in Gender and Society*, (London; New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2005), 1.

As a Samoan, Ola challenges a traditionally subservient female role along with the Western female model, which she finds to be equally biased, restrictive and deterministic. She challenges the prescribed boundaries of her gendered identity by talking openly and uninhibitedly about her sexuality, her needs and indiscretions, defying a culturally codified female image that, she feels, “has been one of the most difficult taboos to break free of.”²⁴ Thus the novel explores gender as not a given but a cultural performance that rejects “inner truth” of (female) desire and possibly represses genuine or authentic sexual identity, making gender “a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real.”²⁵ Focusing on gender as one of the mediums that facilitate and reinforce regimes of power/discourse and equates her ability to write about her sexuality with a new sense of freedom:

[M]y first real attempt to be free in my writing—took much embarrassment and a lot of painful revisions to trap on paper. It was like turning my skin inside out.²⁶

Ola’s character represents the possibility of freedom from a “hegemonic conceptual scheme”, which seeks to compartmentalize female behaviour and hinders complete self-realization and personal fulfillment. Ola’s questioning of her pre-conceived culturally imposed gendered role is an effort to expose cultural models of male and female, which are stereotypical, unappreciative of difference and non-autonomous.

Subverting a fixed and widely accepted female role, she is what Susan Koppelman describes “the Woman as Hero,” in fictional representations:

[These] women are portrayed as whole people or as people in the process of creating or discovering their wholeness... Women are revealed as working, being political, creating, of living in relationships with other women, of being alive, adventuresome, self-determining, growing, making significant choices, questioning and finding viable answers and solutions—of being, in other words, human beings.²⁷

²⁴ Wendt, *Ola*, 39.

²⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York; London: Routledge, 1990), Preface.

²⁶ Wendt, *Ola*, 39.

²⁷ Susan Koppelman, ed. *Images of Women in Fiction*, Preface.

For Ola, the “process of creating and discovering her wholeness” means that she makes choices that do not fit the traditional stereotype of a woman and redefines her role in the house sphere; she resists the learning of chores considered as essential female skills:

Housework: used throughout our male-dominated planet as a means of enslaving us (women). I was fortunate my father and Aunt Fusi never let me do much housework—a very un-Samoan way of raising a child/girl. Washing dishes I detest most of all—everytime I do it I feel as if I’m washing myself down the plughole.

Cooking: once again, my father and Aunt Fusi let others do this while I stuck to my studies. Again, I grew up to be a very un-Samoan female, who even manages to burn water. I never had the touch/ inclination/call it what you will for this ‘art form’. (Love good cooking though.) Again, a weapon for enslaving us.²⁸

Refusing to be enslaved by society’s expectations and her Samoan culture’s model of essential female attributes, Ola is not interested in cooking, but she chooses *story writing* as that ‘art form’ which suggests the potential of escape from stereotypes that thwart and stunt human consciousness. She evokes Susan’s call for freedom who asserts: “I would rather be the author of my own story than have lies told about me.”²⁹

Rejecting her “accepted self” and venturing into “new areas of freedom and self”, Ola is Wendt’s fictional device to “threaten”, “challenge” and “subvert” the status-quo.³⁰ She exemplifies literary representation that can help “enhance[] the women’s perception of themselves, enabling them to develop the necessary self-confidence to push for change.”³¹

Pushing for social change, Wendt’s latest novel with a female narrator, *The Mango’s Kiss*, takes a critical look at his traditionally male-dominated Samoan context. The novel highlights how the advent of colonialism and its ideologically myopic value system blends extremely well with the traditionally deterministic view of the woman and leaves her doubly shackled. Pele, who describes what it means to be a woman in her world:

²⁸ Wendt, *Ola*, 161.

²⁹ Coetzee, *Foe*, 40.

³⁰ Wendt, *Ola*, 114.

³¹ Gloria Nikoi, *Gender and Development*, 113.

Their being women, in Satoan terms, was too narrow, and she didn't want to be like that, but she had to disguise her dissatisfaction...She wanted to be part of the alia, the building of it, but the way of Satoa, denied her that: she was a young woman, a child still, who had to stay away from what was male and adult. It was so unfair.³²

Forming the background to these biases of the indigenous culture and the racial inequality in the colonies is a long historical tradition, independent of any context, which views women as less than men, interpreting them in often narrow and fixed terms:

Indeed, Female human nature has been defined in the tradition in terms of such characteristics as emotionality, passivity, subservience, enslavement to passions, in capacity for rational, universalistic, or principled thinking, and the like, just the antithesis of the tradition's [male] *human nature*.³³

Wendt's Pele challenges the traditional understanding of women as emotional and impractical beings and her emergence as an extremely successful business woman in a highly competitive commercialized Western domain defies not only restrictions that her culture imposes on her but redefines, in Held's words, both the private and the public sphere:

The associations of the public, historically male sphere with the distinctively human, and of the household, historically a female sphere, with the merely natural and repetitious, have persisted, even though women have been permitted to venture into public space.³⁴

As Pele redefines the public sphere, she escapes entrenched gendered perceptions that trap people in compartmentalized and often deterministic societal roles. Pele's vision involves an individual and collective autonomy for herself and her people and emphasizes the importance of women's contribution a country's/community's socio-economic development.

³² Wendt, *The Mango's Kiss*, 137.

³³ Janet A. Kourany, ed. *Philosophy in a Feminist Voice: Critiques and Reconstructions*, (Princeton; New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), 6.

³⁴ Virginia Held, "Reconceptualizations in Ethics", in *Philosophy in a Feminist Voice: Critiques and Reconstructions*, 92-115, ed.Kourany, 94.

These dynamic female representations from Coetzee and Wendt's fiction are symbols of ethical revival and presents examples of literary work that serves as the *critical conscience* of a society. The most "serious uses" of this fiction, unlike Daniel Defoe, is to sensitize readers about gendered oppression and the vital need to change. Both Wendt and Coetzee's "guide literature" identifies a socially and culturally biased "patriarchal model [that still] pervades society:"

It has served as a template for all other social institutions, including education, economic life, civic and cultural life, and governance and defense of the state.

Because so many generations of humans have been socialized into the patriarchal model, the struggle to replace it with partnership between women and men will be a long one [.]³⁵

Alongside generating responsible public opinion about maximizing women's contribution to communal and national development in conditions of equity and peace, both Coetzee and Wendt follow a new "template" of "partnership between men and women:" one that promotes society's sense of community and social cohesion, and for all its citizens, acknowledges "interdependence [a]s a constant component of autonomy."³⁶

³⁵ Elise Boulding and Heather Parker, "Women and Development" in *Introducing Global Issues*, 187.

³⁶ Held, 108.