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**Woman got Grit: How *Foe* challenges 17th century female stereotypes**

Throughout history, certain groups of people have been marginalized based on biological factors, like sex, skin color, and disabilities. For centuries women have often been a faction of those treated unfairly and unequally, such as being denied basic rights. Women, from prostitutes to scientists, who did not fit the set norm of being wives and mothers, were often considered improper and any eminent actions or discoveries were nearly forgotten. Past literature portrays the relationships between women and society for readers, demonstrating the true treatments and the importance of women, either through characterization as ‘quiet’ or ‘feeble’, or, perhaps, not including a woman as a main character at all. One novel, *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe, paints the adventures of the title character, Robinson Crusoe, as a castaway in the late 17th century, though with very few notable female characters. In his novel *Foe*, J. M. Coetzee challenges the notion of weak females during the 17th century by recreating Defoe’s story through a woman’s point of view of not only surviving as a castaway, but surviving as a changed woman in English society.

In the beginning of the novel, Susan is found by the reader struggling to row alone in the sea, having been cast-away, though soon finds salvation in a nearby island with two male inhabitants: Cruso and Friday. Susan, during her time among them, comes to be in awe of Cruso and his tales, describing that “He is a truly kingly figure; he is the true king of his island...Might he not justly be deemed a hero who had braved the wilderness and slain the monster of solitude and returned fortified by his victory?” (Coetzee, 37-38). The characterization of “kingly” and “hero” impresses upon the reader that Susan holds Cruso in high regards, mostly for the deeds that he committed for survival. However, when she full-on names him “the true king of his island”, this suggests that she has labeled herself as nearly inferior to him, and thus that she must depend upon him without choice, like many women of the 17th century in regards with the men in their lives. Susan continues, describing Cruso as a “hero” who “braved” the life of a castaway. In a way, this disregards her own experiences, having been exiled from a ship after a mutiny and having found land, and once again throws herself into a lesser category in comparison to the actions of Cruso.

As the novel continues, Susan begins to change her views, discovering that her story is just as important as Cruso’s, explaining that “Who but Cruso...could truly tell you Cruso’s story? I should have said less about him, more about myself....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,” (Coetzee, 51). When Susan reflects back on her time as a castaway, she realizes the focal point of her memories was Cruso, rather than herself. When she claims that she “exist” and “came”, she describes that she was nothing but a shadow, or more specifically, a “ghost” that haunted the story of Cruso. The idea that she’s a phantom in her own memories once again supports the inferiority of a female character, where she idolizes a male for his actions and forgetting herself in the process.

While the story progresses, so does Susan’s realization of her own self worth, which is apparent when she construes “But if he thought by angry looks to inspire me to fear and slavish obedience, he soon found he was mistaken,” (Coetzee, 20). Susan negates Cruso’s rules with the use of “but”, outlining that she will no longer follow his word, but follow her own senses. This is also also supported when she describes his law as “slavish”, classifying that if she were to follow Cruso’s wishes, then her own freedom is trickled down to that of a slave: completely diminished. In addition, “mistaken” suggests a rebellious undertone that also shoots down Cruso’s rules, adding more evidence to support the idea of her independence.

Susan’s awareness of her inner strength is continued with the thought that “No doubt I might have freed myself, for I was stronger than he,” (Coetzee, 30). In relation to Susan, the interpretation of “stronger” can go two ways: she means that she is physically stronger than him, mostly due to being younger and in better health; but may also describe that she is “stronger” than him in willpower, where she is determined to be rescued and maintain her newly realized independence, rather than remain meek within the rules that Cruso binds her with.

Looking back on the events that led her to the island, Susan reflects on her travels to find her daughter, and the culture that she experienced. She explains that “‘A woman who goes abroad freely is thought a whore. But there are so many whores there (Bahia), or, as I prefer to call them, free women, that I was not daunted,’” (Coetzee, 115). Susan recognizes the stereotypes of women that are similar between countries and cultures, but also the stigma that surrounds those that do not stick to the protocol of a proper female. By discussing how a woman who travels “abroad freely” is seen as a “whore”, describes the treatment of women during the 17th century, to show how women who choose to do as they please are labeled with the same stigma and names as those who have to sell themselves for money. This leads the reader to understand that if a woman does not perform what is expected of her, then she somehow has corrupted herself and is useless.

However, Susan contradicts this notion, claiming that “The world is more various than we ever give it credit for - that is one of the lessons I was taught by Bahia,” (Coetzee, 69). “Various”, in this sentence, suggests that perhaps the women in Bahia who are abroad counter the idea of uselessness. It can be inferred that the “whores” of Bahia are able to overcome the stigma of their label, and make a proper life for themselves in the way that they see fit. This, in turn, may have inspired Susan to act of her own free-will, having lived among the examples of a free-woman during her own travels and takes her experiences to realize her own self-worth.

Under the influence that her story would be more sellable if it were written by a man, she somewhat ‘sells her soul’ to the author Foe, with whom her relationship is complicated, shifting between understanding and fighting-words. At one point she analyzes his character, clarifying that “‘Yet here I am pouring out my darkest secrets to you! You are like one of those notorious libertines whom women arm themselves against, but against whom they are at last powerless, his very notoriety being the seducer’s shrewdest weapon,’” (Coetzee, 120). Susan personifies the women as “powerless”, suggesting that she is realizing the feebleness and poor treatment of women in society is due to the behavior and actions of men. Furthermore, the characterization of “notorious” and “libertine” paint that men, Foe included, are only out for themselves in order to satisfy their needs, and will do anything to placate those desires. Here, Susan turns the tables, somewhat calling out men for their promiscuous ways, which they are not denied nor shamed for, which are the same acts that pose the opposite reaction for women, who are seen as improper and “whores” on society. This can point out the inequality between men and women in regards to similar events, how women are shamed for the same things that a man may do without punishment, further recognizing the inequality between the sexes.

Finally, Susan becomes fully self-aware. She defends that “I am a free woman who asserts her freedom by telling her story according to her own desire,’” (Coetzee, 131). The use of “free” along with “freedom” asserts Susan’s self-dependence and her recognition as an individual who is not inferior to another person, namely, a man. By maintaining her claims of “her own desire”, Susan personifies the challenges against the societal norms and expectations set for women during her time period, along with the ideals that women, in fact, could have been and were strong in character. This can resolve that the treatment that was dealt to women who did as they pleased is the only thing that can be considered improper rather than the women themselves.

In total, Coetzee challenges the notion of weak females, not only in society of his characters’ time period, but also in literature circa 1700 as well. Through Susan, he demonstrates and intertwines the challenges of being a castaway and later on, a survivor, with the difficulties and growth of a woman in behavior and characteristics. Susan Barton’s perspective as a survivor, not only of being on the island, but as a nearly ‘reborn’ member of English society who has drastically changed due to her experiences, she represents, in a way, the clashing of what was considered proper behavior and the behavior of improper women within this specific time period. Overall, Coetzee adds a new aspect to what a woman should and could have been like, rather not should have not have been in the eyes of 17th century English society.

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