

# The Author's Foes: Polyphonic Narrative Techniques in J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*

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## Abstract

In this study, the notions of dialogism and polyphony are investigated in Coetzee's novel, *Foe* (1986). Coetzee has been viewed by many critics as a novelist whose oeuvre deals with the issues of voice and authority. Throughout his novels, characters struggle to represent distinct social stratifications and function as countervoices to the absolute author's voice. This study examines how the form of narration and also the silence of the characters are symptomatic of the author's disposition toward having a polyphonic novel. It is argued that the heteroglot nature of the novel is in accordance with Coetzee's resolution to overturn the authority of its canonical eighteenth-century island story, *Robinson Crusoe*. Bakhtin's ideas on the inter-subjective nature of meaning and also the democratic essence of modern novel are appropriate for such enquiry of this novel.

**Key Terms:** *Foe*; Dialogism; Polyphony; J. M. Coetzee; Mikhail Bakhtin; Silence.

## 1. Introduction

According to Bakhtin, novel is "is a phenomenon multiform in style and variform in speech and voice. In it the investigator is confronted with several heterogeneous stylistic unities, often located on different linguistic levels and subject to different stylistic controls" (1981, 98). Such a definition of this literary genre, and those of similar disposition, introduced an important and also controversial terminological duality to be considered in literary criticisms of novels thereafter: monologic and dialogic. Furthermore, this dichotomy led to the appearance of other interrelated and complementary critical pairs including monoglot/polyglot and monoglossia/heteroglossia.

To better understand dialogism, we should firstly know about its oppositional counterpart, monologism. Put simply, monology is a characteristic of those novels in which different narrative aspects (e.g. point of view and indirect speech of characters) are finally channeled toward one consciousness, that of the author's. Such a work, which in fact embraces most of the novels, renders the world around its characters perceivable only through the single consciousness of the absolute author. Conversely, in dialogic novels, the author's authority yields to that of the characters and their voices. Characters retain their own consciousness and presence in the novel through their continuous voicedness. Given freedom to act self-consciously, they are depicted not as images but ideas or precisely 'idea-forces' beyond the status of a mere character/hero. "All spatial-temporal values and all sense-content values", says Bakhtin, "are drawn toward and concentrated around these central emotional-volitional moments: I, the other, and I-for-the-other" (1993, 54) It is in such volitional interaction of 'I-the other' that dialogism is materialized in novel.