

**A Study of Gender Equality and Intersecting Inequalities in J. M. Coetzee's
*Foe***

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Abstract:

This study investigates the complex aspects of gender inequality and how it interacts with other types of inequalities. The study explores how different characters are portrayed, with a focus on Mr. Cruso, Mr. Foe and Susan Barton, the female protagonist. Coetzee critically investigates the colonial undertones, power dynamics, and social constraints that accompany gender roles. The story deftly navigates the nexus of gender, class, race, ethnicity, and locality, providing a deep understanding of how these disparities interact and feed off one another. The study demonstrates the author's deft use of narrative techniques to disentangle the intricate network of social institutions. It sheds light on the ongoing struggles faced by marginalised people who are subjected to several forms of oppression. Susan Barton, a castaway on a remote island, defies social norms and gender boundaries while exhibiting resilience. The novel's genius resides in its capacity to analyse power relationships and societal institutions, exposing the connections between female injustice and more general racial and class difficulties while also challenging the colonial framework that perpetuates these inequalities.

Keywords: Gender, intersection, equality, infanticide, violence, injustice, binary, patriarchy

Introduction

Gender equality refers to the state of having equal access to resources and opportunities, including decision-making and economic participation, regardless of one's gender. It also refers to the equal value placed on various behaviours, aspirations, and needs, regardless of one's gender. This concept is sometimes referred to as sexual equality or equality of the sexes. UNICEF defines gender equality as "women and men, and girls and boys, enjoy the same rights, resources, opportunities and protections. It does not require that

girls and boys, or women and men, be the same, or that they be treated exactly alike.” The United Nations has seventeen sustainable development goals, and gender equality is the fifth one as of 2017. However, gender equality does not recognise gender identities other than those associated with men or women. Gender equality is closely related to women's rights, goes beyond equal representation, and frequently necessitates policy changes. Globally, ending harmful practices against women and girls—such as sex trafficking, femicide, sexual violence during conflict, the gender wage gap, and other oppressive measures—is essential to attaining gender equality. However, women are still far more likely than men to be impoverished and illiterate, even despite numerous international agreements upholding their human rights. They have less access to financing, jobs, training, and property ownership. This is partially due to outdated perceptions that associate women with being housewives and mothers rather than the family's primary breadwinners. Women are significantly more likely to become victims of domestic abuse and are far less likely than men to get involved in politics. Due to its hierarchical nature, gender creates disparities that converge with other social and economic issues. Other discriminatory criteria, including age, region, ethnicity, financial status, handicap, gender identity, and sexual orientation, are intertwined with gender-based prejudice. A sociological analytical framework known as intersectionality helps to explain how the social and political identities of individuals and groups lead to various combinations of privilege and discrimination. Gender is an example of these characteristics.

The Condition of Women at Present

Women continue to experience discrimination and inequality based on their gender in many regions of the world. This can take many different forms, such as restricted access to healthcare, work, and educational possibilities. There is a widespread problem of physical, sexual, and psychological abuse against women. Many women are also impacted by harmful cultural practices like female genital mutilation (FGM), human trafficking, and domestic violence. Global access to high-quality healthcare varies. Accessing family planning, maternal care, and reproductive health services might be difficult for certain women. Even with the tremendous advancements, there are still differences in schooling across different areas. Girls' access to education may be restricted in some places by cultural norms and financial considerations. Gender discrimination in the workplace is still a problem, impacting many women's career prospects, wage parity, and overall professional growth. Frequently, there are not enough women in positions of political leadership. Even with the advancements, more gender diversity is still required in political decision-making bodies. Legal systems around women's rights vary throughout the world. While some nations may not have laws protecting women from violence and discrimination, others may have achieved significant progress in this area. Forced labour, sexual exploitation, and human trafficking disproportionately affect women and girls' quality of life. In certain areas, child marriage is still common, depriving girls of their youth and chances for an education. Women's rights and opportunities can be impacted by cultural customs and norms. Women's lives can be

impacted by harmful customs, including honour killings, violence associated with dowries, and mobility limitations.

A Synopsis of the Novel, *Foe*

J. M. Coetzee *Foe* (1986) reimagines the original story of Daniel Defoe's novel *Robinson Crusoe* (1791), a white castaway, Crusoe, on an island and his black manservant, Friday. He introduces a female protagonist and a writer called Daniel Foe. Susan Barton is in search of her kidnapped daughter, who is, Barton thinks, taken off to a new world. While she was going to Lisbon on a ship, there was a mutiny on the ship. The captain of the ship was killed, and Barton was stripped of her dress except her petticoat and both of them were discarded on a raft. She finds Cruso, a white man stranded on the island with his tongueless black servant, Friday, complacent with the way of life on the island, just eating and sleeping. After one year, they were rescued by a ship. Cruso dies on his way to England. In England, with Friday, she wants to publish her experience on the island in the form of a book, but she feels that her writing would not meet the popular appeal. She convinces a popular novelist, Daniel Foe, to write about her experiences, but he says that her adventure in search of a daughter can be an episode in a book and could not be a book itself. She also sleeps with him in the process of book writing. He wants to write about Cruso's adventure in detail, and her experience only a part of it. The story of Barton takes a twist when someone else comes, a daughter of Barton whom she has never met in her life. Foe, incurred in debt, neither has the time nor the energy to write about anything. The major themes of the novel are language and power, gender discrimination, racism, the slave trade, and colonialism.

An Analysis of Gender Equality and Intersecting Inequalities in *Foe*

The novel, *Foe*, begins with Susan Barton, the female protagonist of the novel, adrift on an island near Brazil where she finds Cruso and his manservant Friday. There was a mutiny on the ship she was travelling on for some reason. The captain of the ship was killed, and Mrs Barton was stripped except for her petticoat and insulted for hours together before she was cast away. She was, then, cast adrift along with the dead body of the captain by the crew to her fate in the sea:

There I lay sprawled on the hot sand, my head filled with the orange blaze of the sun, my petticoat (which was all I had left with) baking dry upon me, tired, grateful like all the saved... And all at once, though I had remained dry-eyed through all the insults done me on board ship and through hours of despair when I was alone on the waves with the captain lying dead at my feet, a handspike jutting from his eye socket, I fell crying. (*Foe* 5, 9)

Why was he treated like that and cast away with the dead captain on a boat? What was the crime she committed to be treated like that? She could not find the answer to these questions. The same thing resonates in another novel of Coetzee, *Disgrace*, where Lucy asks the same question after she was gang raped by three men. She does not do anything to hurt them, but she, being a lesbian and independent woman, questions the patriarchal customs of

society. Mrs. Barton says, “The heart of man is a dark forest- that is one of the sayings they have in Brazil” (*Foe* 11).

Violence, crime, assault and exploitation (both physical and sexual), rape, subjugation and objectification based on gender against women is a very common phenomenon found across the world, irrespective of economic development and literacy rate. It is not a twentieth- or twenty-first-century phenomenon; this goes back to the ages as old as human civilisation in most of the countries in the world. The only difference is the intensity of gender-based inequality as most of the cultures, both the East and the West, are patriarchal. The stripping of women can be found across the world. In the Mahabharata, Draupadi was stripped of her dress after her husbands' loss in the game of dice in front of the elders of the family. Mukhtaran Bibi (also known as Mukhtar Mai), a Pakistani woman, was gang raped and paraded naked through the village for no fault of her own. A woman was stripped, paraded naked and assaulted in Belagavi in the state of Karnataka after her son eloped with a girl. These kinds of inhumane and shameful incidents are not only violence against women but also human rights violations.

Violence against women and girls is one of the most prominent gender-based as well as human rights violations taking place every day in every nook and corner of the globe. It has a very serious long-term as well as short-term psychological, physical and economic impact on women and girls, denying them equal and active participation in society. The different kinds of violence against women are intimate partner violence, sexual violence (sexual harassment, rape, corrective rape, and sexual violence in conflict, femicide (killing of a woman or a girl because of their gender), human trafficking, female genital mutation, child, early and forced marriage, online or technology-facilitated (ICT and other digital tools) violence, cyberbullying, non-consensual sexting, doxing (release of private and sensitive information in public and identifying information about the victim without consent).

Intersectionality helps to explain the discrimination and prejudice faced by women beyond gender inequality, such as caste, sex, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, religion, disability, height, age, weight, species and physical appearance. Mrs. Barton's mother marries a French man who comes to England to escape persecution. She has to undergo certain trials and tribulations because of this, and his surname was Berton, but it changed to a mispronunciation of English people. This shows the carelessness and negligence of a group of people for the culture and language of another group. The nationality, ethnicity and religion of people and their practices affect the lives of people, especially women. Why was there such hatred and ill-will against Hindu and Sikh women during partition? Because these two religions treated Muslims like untouchables, and marrying their daughters to them was a sin and they protected their women as if they were the repository of culture and traditions. This belief enraged the other community to target Hindu and Sikh women during partition, and many of them were raped and killed. This is the case in most of the societies.

The life of Susan Barton was going on normally like anyone else until her daughter was abducted and transported (human trafficking) to a new world (continental landmass of North and South America). She goes in search of her missing daughter but to no avail. She reaches different parts of the world in the process and experiences the inequalities that most women and girls experience such as femicide, infanticide, sexual exploitation, sexual favour and racial discrimination that are prevalent across the world, “Two years ago my only daughter was abducted and conveyed to the New World by an Englishman, a factor and agent in the carrying trade. I followed in search of her” (*Foe* 10). The trade of people for forced labour, sexual slavery, or commercial sexual exploitation is known as human trafficking. The UN defines human trafficking especially of women and children, as, “The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, using threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, the abuse of power or a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having [control](#) over another person, for exploitation”. After drug dealing and arms trafficking, human trafficking is the third-largest criminal activity in the globe and it is the fastest-growing transnational criminal activity. Human trafficking includes the trafficking of children, sex trafficking, labour trafficking, organ trade and fraud factory. It affects the emotional, physical, economic, social, biological and mental well-being of women and children. It is not only an issue of gender inequality but also a blatant violation of human rights. According to the National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB), 1.31 million women and girls are missing between 2019 and 2021 in India. They are abducted because of their gender or for being a woman. The patriarchal society has a very negative opinion about women across the world, subjugated and exploited in all possible manner, and negative terms of the binary oppositions are like emotional, weak, dirty, nature, passive, dependent, deceitful, etc. are associated with women to make them lesser human beings and deny them equality.

Men have stereotypical opinions of women in all aspects of life and never consider them equal despite women's achievements in all fields. Men expect women and girls to be emotional and accommodating to the needs of men and not make independent decisions without the permission of men. Women are expected to take care of kids and household duties and leave outside work to menfolk. Women are told to take up mild jobs like teaching and nursing and leave jobs like engineering, military and police to men. Crusoe does not want Mrs Barton to go out with him as if she is weak and does not take care of herself, “Before setting out to perform his island duties, Crusoe gave me his knife and warned me not to venture from the castle; for if the apes, he said, would not be as wary of a woman as they were of him and Friday” (*Foe* 15). Crusoe, like a true follower of patriarchal ideology, thinks of Mrs Barton and Friday as property and does not allow them to act independently. The independence of women appears like a threat to the men, and they try to control them by threatening, raping, beating, honour killing, murdering, and isolating women to make them fall in line. Lucy Lurie, a lesbian and independent woman in the novel *Disgrace*, was gang raped because she does not fit into the traditional role of a woman by her dress and attitude,

and she was a victim of corrective rape. Time and again, Cruso behaves as if he is a dictator and owns the island and the people on it, including Mrs. Barton, “‘I do not wish to hear of your desire,’ Cruso said” (*Foe* 36).

Women are supposed to depend on men at different stages of their lives. In the beginning, they have to depend on their fathers; after marriage, their husbands; and in old age on their sons. If they move about independently without men, they are looked down upon, and their character will be questioned and ill-treated by society. When Susan Barton was rescued after a year on the island, the captain of the ship suggests she call Cruso her husband. If people came to know that she was going alone and mutiny on the ship, people would think what kind of woman she was. She, even though she does not like it, accepts the captain’s suggestion to say that they were shipwrecked together. In many third-world countries, there is not much improvement in the condition of women: “If the story of Bahia and the mutineers got about, he said, it would not easily be understood what kind of woman I was” (*Foe* 42). The same rule does not apply to men. They go anywhere, at any time and do whatever they like. Nobody would question their character, but when it comes to women, it is a great crime and sin.

Female experiences and writing are considered inferior to those of male writers. If we study the literary history of any state, it is the male writers who have taken away a major share in creative and critical writing. Some of the writers had to take male pseudonyms to get their work published or copy the writing style of men to get their works published just because of their gender or for being a woman. Amry Anne Evans wrote under the pseudonym of George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell as Cotton Mather Mills, and Louisa May Alcott as AM Barnard to get their work published. While going to England after being rescued from the island, the captain of the ship suggests Mrs. Barton write about her experience, as nobody had written about the experiences of female castaways. But suggests that she, being a woman, does not have the skill to write to attract the reader and must engage a male writer, and he will write the book. She has to lie about certain things in the book to make it more interesting and declare herself Mrs Cruso. Daniel Foe, the writer, says that Mrs. Barton’s experience in search of her daughter can only be an episode in the book that will be about Mr. Cruso. He, like an agent of patriarchal ideology, thinks a feminine experience is not worth reading as an independent but can only be part of a book about a man. He also sleeps with her as he is preparing to write the book, but he does not write any book on the life of Mrs. Barton, “But there are no stories of daughters searching for mothers. There are no stories of such quests because they do not occur. They are not part of life” (*Foe* 78).

Sexual exploitation of women is a very common phenomenon across the world. No profession or industry is an exception to it. Whether it is television or film or advertisement industry or any profession for that matter tries to sexually exploit women. The Me-Too Movement, the latest development in feminism, is about women expressing their experience

of sexual assault, harassment, forced confinement, sexual slavery and rape at the hand of men, “We were stopped on the Windsor Road by two drunken soldiers who made their intention on my person all too plain. I broke away and took to the fields and escaped...” (*Foe* 101). While a particular community was agitating for reservation in 2016, a group of miscreants pelted stones at the cars stranded and women in the cars were sexually assaulted and raped; their male companions were beaten when they tried to prevent the act in Murthal on the National Highway- 1 that connects New Delhi to Chandigarh. Women did not report to the police due to social taboos and political influence. Many such cases go unreported every day across the country as well as the world. Sexual assault and rape are grave offences against women's bodily and mental integrity as well as against everyone's right to freedom, security, dignity and equality.

Gendercide/female infanticide or gender-selective killing is the deliberate killing of baby girls in preference to baby boys, as many low-status values are associated with the birth of females. Gendercide is very common in third-world countries, though it is prevalent in patriarchal societies across the world. The causes of gender-selective killings are strong cultural desire/preference for sons, earning power of the gender, retirement security of parents, dowry economics, marital expenses, unsafe environment for women and girls, women thought as a symbol of honour and respect of the family and increased violence against women and girls in the society. The United Nations report says that about 2000 unborn girls are aborted every day and about 460000 girls are missing at birth each year between 2013 and 2017 in India. This shows gender-based inequality and discrimination in society. When Mrs. Barton was going to Bristol with Friday in search of Mr. Foe's hiding place, she found a baby girl just born an hour or two ago in the ditch wrapped in cloth. She searched around but found no one around. There was a cluster of houses, and she wanted to go to every doorstep and ask whose baby it was. But did not do so because she thought the people might think that she was trying to get rid of the baby. Hence, she left the baby to die in the ditch and moved on. This happens to many newborn baby girls in the world.

But when I began to unwind the wrapping cloth, I found it to be bloody, and I was afraid to go on... So, I went on and unwrapped the body, stillborn or perhaps stifled, all bloody with the afterbirth, of a little girl, perfectly formed, her hands clenched up by her ears, her features peaceful, barely an hour or two in the world. Whose child was she? The field around us was empty. (*Foe* 105)

People across the world do not want to have baby girls because women need the constant support of men, and they cannot be allowed to go wherever, whenever, and with whoever, or alone to most places in society. If a woman freely moves alone, she will be thought of as a characterless woman or a prostitute and bring a bad name to her family. That is one of the reasons to kill or desert newborn baby girls: “A woman who goes abroad freely

is thought a whore. I was thought a whore” (*Foe* 115). These are certain instances of gender-based discrimination and intersectional inequalities.

Causes for Gender Inequality

There are many causes for gender-based and other forms of inequality against women. Even though we have made a lot of developments in science and technology and other fields, women still have less access to quality education compared to men. This makes women less desirable and will affect their future. Lack of employment equality and job segregation in favour of men in society makes people desire baby boys rather than baby girls. As per the research by the World Bank, more than one billion do not have legal protection for domestic economic and sexual violence, which are indispensable for women to live and thrive in freedom. Lack of bodily autonomy and reproductive freedom means more than 200 million people have children and depend on others, and lose their freedom. Where there is no religious freedom in society, women become vulnerable to cruelty and gender bias. The present condition is the best example of the worst kind of gender inequality due to a lack of religious freedom. The intersectional inequalities due to religion, caste, colour, ethnicity, height, and weight also affect gender-based bias. A white woman's job opportunities in the USA are different from those of a coloured woman, and an upper caste woman has better jobs and salaries than a woman from the lower strata of life. This leads to gender inequality. Above all, the social mindset of the people based on patriarchal ideology affects gender-based equality.

Measures to Stop Gender Discrimination

Gender discrimination refers to the unfair treatment of individuals based on their gender identity, resulting in unequal pay, sexual harassment, and limited access to rights like healthcare and education. It is a systemic issue that requires individual introspection and adaptation. The World Economic Forum predicts that achieving gender equality will take 135.6 years, highlighting the need for a comprehensive approach to combating gender discrimination. Providing equal access to education is an important step towards gender equality. Education makes women aware of cruelty and discrimination taking place due to a person's gender. Empowering women in the workplace by giving equal pay, paid child care leave, revision of salaries, and consideration for top posts in the organisation. Protecting the sexual and reproductive rights of women is a step forward towards gender equality. A woman should decide whether she wants to have a child, and if yes, when it should be. Now it is the male members of the family who make decisions on these issues. There is a dire need for the proper implementation of legal protective methods for cruelty and discrimination against women. There is a big gap in gender equality in political representation in all the countries of the world. Since it is the legislative body that makes laws in any country, adequate representation. Eliminating the intersectional obstacles that prevent women from entering politics, such as funding restrictions, increased domestic obligations (such as child care), and societal and cultural prejudices, can improve political representation. More political education can also support women's empowerment.

Conclusion

This research article has revealed a rich landscape of themes, characters, and narrative techniques that illuminate the complexities of power dynamics and social hierarchies by examining the intricate tapestry of gender equality and intersecting inequalities within John Maxwell Coetzee's novel *Foe*. By closely examining the heroine Susan Barton's fight for agency and voice, the piece highlights the numerous obstacles that women in patriarchal societies endure. Susan's journey from marginalisation to assertion provides an insightful lens through which to look at the complex relationship between the desire for autonomy and gender discrimination. In the end, *Foe* proves to be a thought-provoking and challenging work that challenges readers to interact with issues of social justice and gender equality in fresh and enlightening ways. Coetzee's work prompts us to envision more inclusive and equitable possibilities in society at large, as well as in the literary world, by addressing the complex issues of identity and power.

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