

The Oppressive nature in J.M Coetzee *Waiting for the Barbarians*

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Abstract:

This article aims to analyze the theme of oppression in J.M. Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*, which depicts the atrocities committed by an unnamed Empire against the native people living at the border of its territory. The article argues that Coetzee's novel is not only a critique of the colonial and apartheid regimes in South Africa, but also a reflection on the global historical process of neoliberalism, which is an extension of colonialism. The article examines how Coetzee uses various literary devices, such as symbolism, allegory, and characterization, to expose the colonial discourse, the contradiction inherent in the discourse of Empire, and the failure of a liberal humanist to resist or challenge the neoliberal tide. The article also explores how Coetzee portrays the effects of oppression on the human psyche and identity, as well as on the possibility of ethical and political action. The article concludes that Coetzee's novel is a powerful and relevant work of world literature that invites readers to question their own complicity in the oppressive systems that shape our world.

Keywords:

J.M Coetzee, Waiting, Oppressive Nature, Fiction, Culture

I. Introduction

A. Background Information on J.M Coetzee

Professor J.M. Coetzee attended the University of Texas and the University of Cape Town after being born in South Africa in 1940. In order to fill a number of positions at the University of Cape Town, including Distinguished Professor of Literature, he went back to his native South Africa. In addition to fiction, he also wrote nonfiction works like *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (1988) and *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* (1974). His first book, *Dusklands*, was published in 1974. (1992). He holds an honorary position at the University of Adelaide and also translates works of Dutch and Afrikaans literature. In 2003, he received the Nobel Prize in Literature, and in 2001, he was made a knight in the Order of the Dutch Lion.

B. Overview of Waiting for Barbarians

1. Summary

Waiting for the Barbarians is a 1980 novel written by John Maxwell Coetzee, a South African and Australian novelist who won the 2003 Nobel Prize for Literature. It is a cautionary tale of what happens when the pursuit of conquest becomes the central operating motivation of any empire. The novel begins with a description of Colonel Joll, a visiting military representative of the Empire, who arrives at the settlement armed with emergency powers to lead a campaign against the Indigenous nomadic peoples of the desert. The Magistrate of the town, who serves as the first-person narrator, recognizes that the quiet and peaceful life to which he has become accustomed is about to end. He eventually positions himself as an opponent to Joll though the Magistrate has far less power. The Magistrate is drawn to a girl who has been maimed and partially blinded by Joll and her men. He offers her boarding and a job as a maid, which the girl takes out of necessity. The Magistrate realizes that as a measure of rectifying the wrongs committed against her, he should return her to her people. When the outfit returns to the settlement, the civil guards arrest and imprison the Magistrate. Mandel is the chief warrant officer in charge of the Magistrate's imprisonment and torture, and he is deprived of food, water, clean living quarters, and other basic necessities. He is beaten and his imprisonment culminates in a public humiliation. The magistrate is hog-tied and suspended above the ground until he screams for mercy. He survives as a beggar and preys on the sympathies of some of the women in town. The situation in the town has become increasingly ominous, and Joll's army has been away pursuing the Indigenous nomadic peoples. A rider appears on horseback, leading to panic and the civil guard abandoning the settlement. The Magistrate assumes his former role as the leader of the town, but this time he is not a representative of the Empire. The Magistrate sends a soldier to the town to steal supplies from Joll, who has lost his sunglasses. The soldier reveals the details of what happened to Joll's army, which retreated and lured the nomadic people into the mountains. After Joll's retreat, the town is cut off from the Empire and preparations for winter continue."("Waiting for the Barbarians Summary and Study Guide | SuperSummary")

2. Reception

"It's not clear quite what era you're in. The place seems dislocated in time, an imperial outpost somewhere in the desert, its manners and materials evidently imported from some far-off capital. It looks hot and hazy and a little quaint, as if everyone knows they're playing their parts in a reassuring period piece—dusty pack animals moving slowly in the sun, staff murmuring to one another as they prepare food. *Waiting for the Barbarians* is an adaptation of J.M. Coetzee's 1980 novel, in which time and place likewise remain unfixed and allegorical, with many important characters unnamed: the warrant officer, the magistrate, the girl. Yet despite its nostalgic trappings, the film, Colombian

director *Ciro Guerra's* English-language debut, soon reveals itself as timely in the extreme: This is a parable of the good cop.

You know it because into the very first scene sweeps an unmistakable bad cop: pale, smirking *Johnny Depp* in all-black military garb, complete with an ankle-length cape fit for the angel of death. His eyes are invisible behind small, round sunglasses, which are remarked on as a bizarre new contraption. You can't tell what he's thinking but you can bet it's monstrous. *Depp* plays *Colonel Joll*, sent from imperial headquarters to inspect the settlement and investigate the activities of the nomadic people who live off the surrounding land. He is greeted by the magistrate (*Mark Rylance*), a courteous, sensitive man with a weather-beaten face, dressed head-to-toe in beige clothing that matches the landscape, as if he has devised an inoffensive way to coexist with it. Beside him *Depp*, raising his glasses to show off his unlined skin, looks comically sinister. Soon he's explaining his methodical approach to interrogations, pausing as he goes, with the air of a connoisseur: "First lies. Then pressure. Then more lies, then more pressure. Then more lies, more pressure, and then comes the break. After the break, more pressure. And then at last, the truth." He is confident he can identify that special tone of truth when he hears it, perhaps because truth here is instrumental—there comes a point when a subject will give up whatever *Joll* has decided to extract. "Pain is truth; all else is subject to doubt."

The desired truth in this case is that terrifying barbarian hordes have been preparing an assault on the settlement, and the Empire must send out its own expeditionary troops to subdue them, pushing the insurgent natives back into the mountains. It's clear at once that the magistrate is in for degradations that will tax his mind to its limits, yet he holds fast to his British politeness. (Though no particular nation is mentioned, all the administrators, soldiers, and policemen lean with relish into mustache-twirling English enunciation.) Before long, he's encountering the truth's first casualties—*Joll's* leavings, traumatized and half-dead people.

The tortures seem like metaphors. The town observes a string of prisoners, attached by a length of wire threaded through their jaws, so that they move delicately, watch one another, stay quiet. The magistrate takes one of the first victims to live with him in his rooms, a young woman with broken feet, her eyes burned with hot tongs so that she can only see around the edges, tilting her head. This is in part a film about not seeing what you can't bear to see, no matter the contortions required to keep on not seeing it, and many shots reinforce that idea: The magistrate, trying to ascertain just what *Joll's* team has done to some captured nomads, questions junior soldiers in the dark, turning his back to them; a small group crosses the desert in a sandstorm, the whole screen a blur of illegible forms.

The magistrate is, he announces early on, a man of no great ambition. Conquest isn't his thing. He'll be content with a legacy of "three lines in the imperial gazette" as someone who, with a nudge here and there, "kept the world on its course." For most of his career, we understand, he has been able to do this without too much exertion, moral or physical, and so the arrival of the bad cops, lusting to police the perimeter and expand it, causes him shock and distress. As things get worse, he asks one of this new breed of torturers how he finds it possible to eat with friends and family after carrying out his tasks. But his own appetites are robust, and he acknowledges that the native people don't enjoy his presence and haven't consented to it. They are the ones stuck waiting, hoping to outlast the Empire.

The magistrate treats the young woman (*Gana Bayarsaikhan*) with kindness, and, Christ-like, washes her injured feet. He even decides, at considerable risk to himself, to take her into the mountains to find someone who can help her back to what remains of her family. He examines her scars gently and

presents himself as in every way different from her torturers. “You should tell me everything,” he says, when she hesitates to reveal what was done to her. “Tell them the truth,” he says when they encounter a group of men in the foothills, and she gives him a skeptical look in return. Why would he want her to tell her people what really happened on his watch?

Coetzee’s novel is narrated by the magistrate, but here much of his soul-searching must be conveyed visually. The most disturbing thing about Joll’s sunglasses is that you can see your own reflection in them. Empire is as much a question of extraction, domination, and the ever-present threat of torture as it is of gentle cultivation, studying local artifacts, reading the classics, sipping a cocktail in the shade. The one rests on the other.

After returning from his mission in the desert, the magistrate has a precipitous fall, and his sometime fiefdom starts to decline along with him. He is arrested, robbed of his comforts, accused of treason, humiliated in the public square as he attempts to take a stand for reason and decency. There’s a quietly disorienting scene in which the disheveled magistrate appears in his own expropriated office before Joll and a younger colleague, played by Depp’s cinematic heir, Robert Pattinson. To see two generations of teen idol turned arthouse star, their striking bone structures repurposed for camp villainy, feels a bit like a joke about the barbarism at the heart of our civilization, how both crude and sophisticated are the tastes expressed by our collective unconscious. You can imagine the last of us recognizing Johnny Depp’s face, rather than Lady Liberty’s, poking out of the sandy rubble of the future.

The policemen mock the ruined magistrate for his moral vanity, for posing as “the one just man.” When he appeals to the rules, the law, he is sneered at: The rules can be altered or ignored at whim. “We have no record of you,” one of them tells him. And in these borderlands, anything can be removed from the record: “There is no history here.” In the book, Coetzee’s magistrate thinks that empire itself “has created the time of history ... located its existence not in the smooth recurrent spinning time of the cycle of the seasons but in the jagged time of rise and fall, of beginning and end, of catastrophe.” Hunting down its scapegoats by day, “By night it feeds on images of disaster: the sack of cities, the rape of populations, pyramids of bones, acres of desolation.”

Waiting for the Barbarians shares its title with the Cavafy poem that ends “those people were a kind of solution.” The so-called barbarians stand in for that other, lesser person—coded as foreign, threatening, criminal—who can be used to scare the populace and justify any authoritarian measures. This person doesn’t exist but needs to be invented. It’s easy to create an enemy at home or abroad, but not so easy to control the consequences. Rylance’s bemused face, the magistrate’s consciousness that he has aged without growing out of his central illusions, carries a familiar pathos. His oasis is now being run by brutes—bullying and killing, burning through resources rather than measuring them out slowly, judiciously. He doesn’t recognize himself in his leaders, and feels he can’t have chosen or enabled them. But we do produce our leaders, and our enforcers—our cops—as well.
"(Haas)

II. Themes and Motifs

Oppression

Oppression as a basic colonial element dehumanizes both oppressor and oppressed. Therefore, different national movements are presented as radical and violent in their methods; emerged to be hostile against the aggression of colonialism. Political and ideological representations lead natives to think of the colonizers as dependents who live on the blood of others without doing their moral duties. The colonized masses realize that their aims and aspirations would remain silent under the canon of the colonizers' authorities. Thus, they resort to violence to shake the colonizer off his shoulder (Said 1994)-. Coetzee presents the magistrate's torture in his colony to the table, showing the hypocritical attitude of the empire of being civilized as opposite to the barbarians. He highlights this hypocrisy, assuming that behind moral civilizations, there are inhuman violent practices incompatible with this cultured civilization (Coetzee 1980). Colonel Joll is presented to make use of his torture as a form of neo-colonial method to let his power take over people living across his empire. He apparently celebrates his torture methods, offering inhuman concept where the victims are used to achieve an end. Significantly, the novel introduces the idea of torture as evil and inhuman leads to tragic and harmful consequences. "Looking at him I wonder how he felt the very first time: did he, invited as an apprentice to twist the pincers or turn the screw or whatever it is they do, shudder even a little to know that at that instant he was trespassing into the forbidden? I find myself wondering too whether he has a private ritual of purification, carried out behind closed doors, to enable him to return and break bread with other men" (Coetzee 1980, Ch1, p.19). The magistrate wonders how the empire army men such as Joll and Mandel torture people without mercy and pity, returning to normal life and break bread with their men as if nothing happened. He rather suggests ritual of purification to wash their guilt to pave the way to find place in human peaceful life. Coetzee proposes devilish characters who do not want to purify themselves from terrible deeds they perform.

1. Identity Formation

Cultural identity emphasizes problems of developing a national identity after a colonial rule. In other words, it describes different ways writers compose from national cultural points of view in light of colonizers' existence. Culture differences are means used by the invaders to justify colonialism through introducing bad image of the colonized as 'inferiors'. The struggles of identity, history, and future possibilities often occur in the metropolis, ironically, with the aid of postcolonial structures of power, such as universities. Some post-colonial critics aim at finding cultural distinctiveness to lay a bar towards national independence. They write about the conflicting interests of the natives under and after colonialism. (Soyinka 1965).

Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* examines the representation of the magistrate's culture in Western discourse. Accordingly, the magistrate lacks cultural fitting, suffering from insecurity, double consciousness and fearing the immoral practices of the imperialists. Thus, the novel deals with magistrate's cultural identity in relation to the colonizer, embodied by Colonel Joll, personified by the barbarian female. Though he stands against the brutality of the empire, he also describes the tribal population of Africa as lazy, corrupt and dirty (Derek, 1997).

The protagonist is manipulated to encounter the colonizers' opposite culture, placed as a point of contact to manifest the cultural gaps between two different lifestyles. The readers see the magistrate as an organizer to the oppressive imperial system, helping Colonel Joll to achieve his attacks on the barbarians, "Dissatisfaction, necessity to confirm one's uniqueness, and need unquestionable reference points". (Saunders 2001:119), shaping the identity of the magistrate. In other words, he is gathered between two opposite cultural truths of the imperial superior world and the imperialized inferior world. Although he is a business supporter to the empire, he is useless in the presence of

Colonel Joll. "The use of irony becomes a common trope in post-colonial discourses". (Ashcroft 2001). "For me, at this moment, striding away from the crowd, what has become important above all is that I should neither be contaminated by the atrocity that is about to be committed nor poison myself with impotent hatred of its perpetrators. I cannot save the prisoners, therefore let me save myself. Let it at the very least be said, if it ever comes to be said, if there is ever anyone in some remote future interested to know the way we lived, that in this farthest outpost of the Empire of light there existed one man who in his heart was not a barbarian" (Coetzee 1980, Ch4, p.140).

III. Conclusion

Waiting for the Barbarians has frequently been depicted as a show concerning colonialism primarily because the imperialist Joll and his followers steal barbarians' land, ruling and enslaving them immorally, executing their rules on people badly, showing sense of superiority. Unquestionably, Coetzee employs the destruction of the empire as a liberation to ordinary people willing to get rid of all their life burdens and live normally and equally. The magistrate's metaphors and expressions are best examples to prevail justice and liberalism in a situation of darkness and human unfairness. The barbarian girl is framed as a frail human, endures greed, hate and destruction of racist military through physical assaults, left with scars on her body. J.M Coetzee purposefully uses nameless protagonist, nomad girl and empire to advocate his values with no bias to any race, nation, religion...etc. There have been an investigative medium exhorting readers to contest those traditional stereotypes of the New World natives, understanding them as different or gigantic, and unaware of European language and cultures, but not incapable of being civilized. Coetzee in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, neither supports nor faces the procedure of colonization, but he attempts his best to reveal both sides of issues and let the readers decide whether it is legitimate or not. Shortly, he manipulates various postcolonial devices for worthy purposes that serve his realistic experience, without which the action of his novel would not have been fully developed and his tragedies would have been regarded as being dull, insipid and superficial.

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