

Post-Colonial Discourse: The Impact of Imperial Elements on J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*

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Abstract: Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* is an active representative example of post-colonial novel in which a lot of postcolonial concepts and themes are highlighted. The novel revolves around the post-colonial literary theory involving: certain notions such as language, knowledge, imperialism, identity, struggle, gender problems, and oppression, as depicted in the characters and events. In this novel, the protagonist, a nameless magistrate, struggles to show eventual military, political, physical and knowledgeable power to rule over tribal nomads (i.e. an intellectual magistrate in border settlement controlled by foreign invaders seeks balance between civil life and tribal one). The aim of this paper is to account for the post-colonial elements employed in Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*, focusing on the purposes and functions of these elements in creating sense of realism, nationalism, and witty-persuasive arguments. These divisive elements help Coetzee to present his novel more effectively, more understandably, more persuasively, and more emotionally i.e. these elements are intended to convince, motivate, unify and drive people in the direction of certain goals.

Keywords: J.M. Coetzee, post-colonialism, imperialism

1. Introduction

The mid of the 20th century witnessed a new-born literary discourse called 'Post-colonial Literature' in many countries around the world, paving the way towards constructing a national body that can be both socially and culturally reinforcing political formation. Thus, this new literature was unique, commonly written in prose to detect the effects of imperial subsequences both before and after colonial periods. Critically, it represents indigenous histories and lost socio-cultural traditions of

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marginalized individuals. Furthermore, Post-colonialism deals with oppression, racism, subjugation and ethnic segregation accompanied with dominance, concentrating on building missing colonized identities and national existence. Post-colonial narration tends to find a space for those who have been silenced by colonial ideologies as well as finding a space for the existence of the "Other". (Clayton 1994:153).

Likewise, post-colonial characters are requested to operate words and expressions reflecting impression of rationality and innovation, making easy comprehension in a delightful manner. On their part, readers can derive attractiveness from sharing with characters an entirely new mode of understanding an idea. Hence, the use of a refined language loaded with vocabulary rich with many post-colonial elements helps *Coetzee* to arouse and exhibit sharp portrayals, considered as characteristic features of the post-colonial society, manifested by intellectuality from which readers can gain witty and imaginative appearances.

The following sections are dedicated to the recognition of the post-colonial strategies employed in *Coetzee's Waiting for the Barbarians* involving various sorts of functions such as focus, beauty, reality, association, clarification, assertion, disposition, arrangement, decoration, variety... etc. But before boarding on exploring these elements, it is important to start with giving a brief account of Coetzee's biography, the theme, plot and context of *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

2. John Maxwell Coetzee: Biography

Born in February 9, 1940 in African countryside atmospheres in Cape Town, South African, critic and novelist, John Maxwell Coetzee was a lawyer of his city government. He became English literature professor in 1972. Growing up in African culture, he found himself not fitting into it, decided to join English classes claiming to be Catholic. His childhood showed his early concerns with English literature, especially when he isolated himself from his neighboring rural children. Since his young age, he did not comprehend the issue of racism in South Africa. (Coetzee, 2004). Coetzee's post-colonial novels were enriched by universal frame rather than regional one. He tends to clarify all the dilemmas and sufferings African people were living under. Additionally, moral and spiritual evidences were his narration cornerstone in the light of cultural and political structure. "Coetzee utilizes sufferings and obstacles to make up a national existence aiming at forming particular cultural identities" (Di Michele 1996: 157).

3. Waiting for the Barbarians

Waiting for the Barbarians is a political allegory, published in 1980, written during Apartheid time in South Africa in indefinite historical period. It is a product of colonial period, presents a contemporary conflict between indigenous people (known as barbarians by the colonizers) and imperial center. The novel shed light on the issues of racism, imperial expansion and cultural dissimilarities in an entertaining fictional way

where the empire is fictionalized, depicting sense of torture and people's lust to harm their enemies. Coetzee wittily creates his nameless protagonist to judge the confrontations between colonized and colonizer, holding the responsibility to stand peaceful among the brutality of the empire. (Head, 1997).

4. Plot Summary

The novel opens with unnamed civil character, works as magistrate in a border area controlled by unnamed empire. The mysterious colonial empire suppresses barbarians living across the borders. Its rising action starts when an imperial army colonel named Joll performs brutal strategies, obliging his victims to utter what is in his favor. The magistrate's life witnesses a great turn when he gets along with a young tortured barbarian girl, then their relationship turns to be sexual. After returning the girl back to her barbarians, he is accused to have dealings with the barbarians and has been sent to prison by an officer called Mandel. Meanwhile, Mandel tells him about the empire plan to wage an attack against the barbarians. Though he asks for fair trail, he was brutalized and tortured severely. Switching to poverty, the magistrate has successfully won the trust of his village people again. At the end, the empire begins to fade and loose its strength in fighting against barbarians, chaos begins to take over. (Coetzee, 1980).

5. Themes

Waiting for the Barbarians sails on several subjects, such as power, imperialism, colonialism, rape, interrogation, male sexuality, fear and power. It exposes physical violence done against the tribal communities of the South African colonized population. Paranoia is clearly seen to impose colonizers' cultural and political norms by setting the colonized (the other) as an enemy. Furthermore, male sexuality is examined by Coetzee through his fictional character 'the magistrate', also power is shown complex, doomed in dualistic relationships between characters. Rape as a mean to steal and seize is explored by the magistrate's sexual affair with the young barbarian girl. He assumes that she never gets back home as a whole woman due to her affairs with him as she is confined with tribal traditions. (Dovey, 1996).

6. Context of *Waiting for the Barbarians*

As a product of political conflicts in post-colonial South Africa, the novel is about the existential struggle between native nomadic inhabitants and imperial invaders, representing indigenous people encountering European traditions and moral values. Generally, the author's intention is obvious to build refusal spirit against the violence acted by the Europeans to dominate one's own nation. Equally, there is a manifestation of mismatch between the West and Africa, the novelist produces the relationship between the magistrate and the young barbarian tortured girl to describe

cultural differences between tribal traditions and civil ones.. Inner guilt, physical torture and power consequences of imperialism are noticed as opposite to the aspiration of common African people during colonial period. Coetzee lays down the notion of colonialism as a physical project by engaging characters of nomads being violated and dehumanized. He expresses his problematic truths, through the magistrates, who during the course of the novel does not intend to attach himself with the empire policy. (Moses, 1993:53).

7. Post-colonial Elements

As a universal discourse, postcolonial discourse can be found in most countries and languages of the world as it covers a widespread variety of strategies and beliefs. These strategies are often manipulated to address problems and consequences of colonization of a country, particularly problems involving the political and cultural freedom of earlier conquered people. It mainly proposes the issues of existential conflicts. In this respect, certain elements are introduced to label the ideas accounting for what post-colonialism reflects.

It has been noted that *Waiting for the Barbarians* suggests various types of post-colonial elements to achieve the purpose behind its existence; the following sections endeavor to identify the use of these devices in this novel focusing on the function and contribution of each element to the establishment of rational and realistic sense.

8. Colonialism

Colonialism can be defined as the achievement of the colonialists by oppressive force, of raw material, manpower from the colonies, extra markets and extra resources. The colonialists, while committing such violation and cruelty against the natives and their lands to convince themselves that they stand on high moral grounds. The notion of colonialism is clearly depicted in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (Okara, 1964).

Waiting for the Barbarians marks a binary formulation of (civilized and superior) and (primitive and inferior) as its main argument. As far as colonialism is concerned, there is construction of self and other, made by the imperial strategy to take over. (Attridge, 2004: 42). The novelist embodies sense of fear of indigenous 'other' and the terror of imperialists, resulting from stereotypical images of the 'other'. "Coetzee introduces moral protagonist, aiming at opposing oppressing colonial system". (Head 2009:48). Further, the colonial subject is exposed to be more than purposeful cultural imperial mission, emerging from physical violation effecting colonized lives. Inherently, torturing nomadic Africans, intervening their lifestyle, damaging their fields, uprooting their fields and burning their shores, labels Coetzee's novel as anti-colonial representation.

Colonial elements are shown in the arrival of the imperial masses, preparing to fight and arrest the native barbarian enemies as they plan to wage an attack against the

brutal empire. Coetzee nominates native Africans as 'Barbarians' to shed light on imperial strategy of 'othering' anti-imperial masses. Similarly, the magistrate's sexual affairs with depressed young barbarian girl offer the dark colonial implication for exploiting the life of a weak nomadic girl through the power he possesses. The fictional depicted place in the novel represents colonial indication, the border colony is a colonial town bounded by a fence, enclosed by a valley inhabited by the barbarians, stands for a threat to the stability of the empire.

"The new men of Empire are the ones who believe in fresh starts, new chapters, clean pages; I struggle on with the old story, hoping that before it is finished it will reveal to me why it was that I thought it worth the trouble" (Coetzee 1980, Ch1, p.34).

These lines offer colonial impression of Coetzee's novel, revealing the amounts of hatred the imperial army men direct towards the people living across the border. The antagonist Joll humiliates any outer individual, turning the magistrate's base from liberal zone to an imperial citadel, declaring a war against the barbarian nomads. Obviously, the conversations between Joll and the magistrate reveals a true sense of pain Joll suffers from, for being devoted to hear truths about the painful situation of the barbarians, though the only truth he wants is to make the barbarians suffer. On his part, being imprisoned, the magistrate comprehends the situation of being tormented, offering readers more obvious sense of strategic othering. (Craps, 2007:63).

9. Metanarrative Discourse

Post-colonial metanarrative element displays colonizers' intention to embrace a certain discourse they aim at. Europeans are seen to control and rule over weak people, presented as the chosen and the rulers of the earth. They are expected to civilize and enlighten darker people. Clearly, colonizing discourse is not about civilization or enlightenment, but about severe economic exploitation, told and repeated by the colonizers. Postcolonial authors like to draw attention to the way narratives are constructed, especially how they are always told from a certain point of view. (Tiffin1987: 20).

It is I who am seducing myself, out of vanity, into these meanings and correspondences. What depravity is it that is creeping upon me? I search for secrets and answers, no matter how bizarre, like an old woman reading tea-leaves. There is nothing to link me with torturers, people who sit waiting like beetles in dark cellars. How can I believe that a bed is anything but a bed, a woman's body anything but a site of joy? (Coetzee 1980, Ch2, p.61).

The barbarians' self-identity is presented as marginalized and banished in the eye of the invaders. The metaphoric torture the barbarian girl faces, categorizes her also as a victim, labelling torture as an effective factor in building discourses and histories. Significantly, there is symbolism of the clash between the primitive between the young

girl and the magistrate, presenting a needful suggestion for political recovery to resolve conflicts between different cultures of barbarians and Europeans. Likewise, there is credit of damage as power impositions, both the young girl's scars and blinded eyes exposes the harm performed by the imperialists to their supposed enemies in Africa. At a final point, Coetzee's narration questions the European consideration of barbarians, whether they are humans or animals (Castillo, 1886:84).

10. Re-writing History

Re-writing colonial texts from a post-colonial standard is a powerful method of finding the oppositional relationship between 'self' and 'other', achieved through European canon. Post-colonial writers focus on experiences, history, and the culture of dominated society, recognizing the effects of colonization in shaping and reshaping them. Appropriating works such as *Waiting for the Barbarians* by J.M. Coetzee allow postcolonial writers to treat the European literary tradition in various ways. They may challenge it, appropriate it, or respect it, but in any case they will not lose their own subjectivity in the process (Slemon, 1987).

The protagonist exhibits the notion of history and time as shaping deeper sense of nature as a great cycle away from mere historical records. The concept of repeating history is questioned, where human history is thought of as self-repeating, arising from cycle of non-human nature. The magistrate presents his life as not secluded from the world it comes across, but associated with events and times come before it. Similarly, his point of view of human society is far away from imperial soldiers' perspective gazing at his colony. They carelessly obey their leaders, pushing themselves in practices of hatred and violation against the barbarians. (Durrant, 1999: 88).

Coetzee seemingly criticizes historical heritage, his protagonist produces moral framework within South African liberal context. He accounts for Christian liberalism to achieve social justice through tolerance and reconciliation by engaging literary connections with religious tragedies. Equally, the relationship between the magistrate and the barbarian girl proposes a true essence of liberalism, lies in rejecting aggression. The magistrate is seen merciful with her, washing her feet, employing her as a maid. Eventually, the author dreams of creating an organized society viewing history periodically, not corrupted by economics and cultures.

“This is not the scene I dreamed of. Like much else nowadays I leave it feeling stupid, like a man who lost his way long ago but presses on along a road that may lead nowhere” (Coetzee 1980, Ch6, p.207).

He shows his disapproval of the events taking place between the empire and the barbarians, clarifying his viewpoint on the inhuman acts of the empire towards the African population on the border of his settlement.

11. Oppressive Strategy

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.

12. 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).

13. Otherness and Struggle for Independence

The main focus of the post-colonialism is to seek for the ways in which imperial powers and regimes distort the realities and the experiences they lived in these colonized nations, identifying the several ways by which colonizers tried to attribute inferiority status to colonized countries or nations and its people. Furthermore, it also shows many methods of literature in colonizing nations to operate images, scenes, traditions, language and so on in colonized countries (Young, 1995).

Coetzee amazingly sets his intention to call for independence through manipulating characters of double duties, the magistrate, after released from prison, gets back to the nomad people, doing good deeds to them. He ends his novel at the point of doubt of the loyal men to both Colonel Joll and his assistance Mandel, shifting from being devoted to imperial policy to stand against it. Ultimately, he proposes the notion of obedience as a spark to build explosive reaction of people to all what is oppressive and destructive, planning to get their independence from tyrannical regimes (Eckstein, 1998:111).

The magistrate's siding with the imperialists leads to the process of 'othering' the barbarians. There is the idea of duty performance rather than independent free thinking; soldiers of the empire follow their leaders' commands outside their conscience. Suggestively, the readers are given the magistrate to build up conscience of a person living within brutal system to clarify the distance between evil and good, though he is stained with that evil.

“I am aware of the source of my elation: my alliance with the guardians of the Empire is over, I have set myself in opposition, the bond is broken, I am a free man. Who would not smile? But what a dangerous joy! It should not be so easy to attain salvation. And is there any principle behind my opposition? Have I not simply been provoked into a reaction by the sight of one of the new barbarians usurping my desk and pawing my papers? (Coetzee 1980, Ch3, p.106).

14. Female's Gender Problems

Post-colonial theory highlights female's gender difficulties living under dominant imperial massive centers. It accounts for problems of the nature of race and power, were forcefully made by imperial consequences of colonizing a nation. The gender oppression leads many female writers to appear to defend their rights through valid writings and speak up against male dominance, calling for woman independent literary representation. Further, women writers have not only failed to read gender issues at the cross sections of race and class, they have also ignored the importance of socio-historical and cultural context in examining the condition of "Third World" women. (Spivak, 1985)

Waiting for the Barbarians is an example of how female is treated as an object, though she is tortured and powerless, living under the decisions of male dominance. It is obvious that the magistrate feels merciful on this barbarian homeless girl, after assuming his illogical odd sexual intercourse with her. His sexual oddness lies in his inability to fully understand the barbarian girl, for he often tends to expose her body lost and deformed parts. In other words, the barbarians girl seems to have a different view on the world around her, a world spoiled her body, subjected her to torture and putting her in danger. (Coetzee, 2001:397). Sex is shown as revealing the bad attitude of the empire strategy towards the barbarians, represented by brutal military campaigns. The barbarian female torture is a product of the empire policy of oppressing the 'other' no matter what gender he or she is. Moreover, the author inherently brings the psychological state of the magistrate as being an old male seeking for his sexual identity (Urquhart, 2006).

“But more often in the very act of caressing her I am overcome with sleep as if polelaxed, fall into oblivion sprawled upon her body, and wake an hour or two later dizzy, confused, thirsty. These dreamless spells are like death to me, or enchantment, black, outside time” (Coetzee, 1980, Ch2, p.43).

15. Language and Communication

Waiting for the Barbarians investigates language manipulation strategy done by oppressive single entity, controlling over means of communication to initiate its grip and power over weak masses. Essentially, the imperial ideology in Coetzee's novel rejects any attributive meaning or symbolism outside its logic. The magistrate tries to set new standards of understanding life by shifting from the empire to his native people. More elaborately, during the course of the novel, it seems difficult for language to deliver the sufferings and plights of the imperialized African masses (Coetzee, 1982).

Similarly, language and communication are confined to tyranny and marginalization, the empire men use torture and writing to inscribe power and fear among the barbarians, removing the means of communication of 'other'. Evidently, the magistrate attempts to create meaning of barbarians experiences, or even imposes his own meaning onto the barbarians, but he fails for he is defined within the space of the empire strategic system. Therefore, his communication with the barbarian girl is noticed as entirely inadequate.

The knot loops in upon itself;
I cannot find the end," he thinks.

(Coetzee 1980, Ch1, p.30)

"I continue to swoop and circle around the irreducible figure of the girl, casting one net of meaning after another over her"

(Coetzee 1980, ch4, p.110).

16. 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 post-colonial 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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