

The Man Who Refused to Play the Game: A Postcolonial Existential Reading of the Magistrate in Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*

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Abstract:

Set in an unnamed African Empire, J.M Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* is a postcolonial text which exposes the machinery of imperialism and its rhetoric of 'we' and 'they'/'Other.' As the title refers, the novel shows how the mechanism of the Empire creates the Barbarians. This people is the Other which every postcolonial study try to give voice to. Instead of focusing on the Barbarians, this paper actually try to turn heads towards the protagonist of the novel, the Magistrate, who actually serves the Empire. The paper tries to show how the Magistrate becomes an Other within the system. The Magistrate is the employee of the Empire, a part of the system that tortures and oppresses the real occupants of the land. But, the sympathies that the Magistrate cast upon these people, his reluctance to tag them as barbarians and be a part of the repressive system, makes him an 'outsider'. The Magistrate thus faces an existential crisis which leads him to a state of dilemma. He can neither be a part of the system nor become one among the barbarians. He thus becomes a man with no labels or groups to attach with. The paper attempts to show how within a postcolonial world a man becomes an outsider, how the postcolonial sympathies made an individual a stranger to the whole world.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Existentialism, Self, Other, Barbarians

Waiting for the Barbarians (1980) is a disturbing love story about "wanting to possess another person and to turn that person inside-out as though she were a puzzle to be solved", commented the Swedish Academy. The novel takes its title from the poem of the same name "Waiting for the Barbarians", written a century ago (1904) by the Constantine Cavafy, a Greek writer. The poem provides the novel with the essential premise, that in order for something like an empire to exist, it must have something to exist against-an opposite; an Other, against which to define itself. The poem speaks of the need of the Other in order to create the feeling of nationalism.

Waiting is at the heart of the poem. It shows an allegorically unknown empire waiting for the arrival of the barbarians. It is made clear in the poem that the idea of waiting is something continuously deferred, so that the waiting is endless. The empire has come to a

stasis, it has left its state of power, and is waiting for the unknown. They wait for the barbarians to come and take up the job of rulemaking demolishing the laws of the empire.

The absence of the Other exposes the falsity of the construction of the self as better or superior. As in Coetzee's novel, the poem ends on an uncertain note and an intimation that waiting will continue:

Because night has fallen and the barbarians haven't come.

And some of our men just in from the border say

there are no barbarians any longer.

Now what's going to happen to us without barbarians?

Those people were a kind of solution. (32-36)

The Empire constructs the truth and reality for others and it forces the people to believe in this truth which they claim as the absolute. In this context, Joll elaborates on 'all he does': "I am speaking of a situation in which I am probing for the truth, in which I have to exert pressure to find it. First I get lies, you see- this is what happens- first lies, then pressure, then more lies, then more pressure, then the break, then more pressure, then the truth. That is how you get the truth." (5) The way in which the colonial power uses violence as a measure to suppress the Other, and make them to believe in their reality can be seen in the opinion of the Colonel.

Thus the Empire creates the false idea of an imminent barbarian attack. It creates the false idea of a rebelling group of people with arms which at any time may break in and destroy and disrupt the stability that the Empire promises. Coetzee thus shows the way in which power uses the idea of a persisting threat to suppress those who oppose them. Threat also enables the Empire to control its population and in agreement with its propagandas. So Joll leads an expedition in search of 'rebels' and the result is the capture of a group of nomads in chains, terrified and mute. The possibility that the barbarians may be innocent of any revolutionary plans is brushed aside by Colonel Joll in the previous remarkable description of how he conducts his interrogations. Simply, because he is looking for the truth which is required to be true by the Empire and where he really succeeds when he tortures a boy taking what he wants.

In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Coetzee explores the moral, political and personal dilemma facing a colonized nation. The Magistrate, a colonizer is labelled as an Other in due course of time. His identity with the Empire keeps changing even from the beginning of the novel. He shows his reluctance to listen to screams of torture which is meted out to the prisoners at the hands of Colonel Joll. And this becomes the Magistrate's first sign of refusing to belong to the Empire and thus a beginning for his transformation. In the second part of the novel, when the barbarian girl is tortured the Magistrate takes her to his apartment and tries to cleanse himself or rather purge himself from the sins committed on the Other by washing her and cleansing himself. He tries hard to escape from his identity with the Empire by entertaining associations with the barbarian girl. He questions her in order to find out what the Empire has done to its barbarian other. Yet, the Magistrate is helpless and is not able to

derive any meaning from the wounded body of the girl. The girl like most of Coetzee's silent figures is silent to the core. She remains a cipher and is not given a voice to tell her own story. The tortured body of the girl is as incomprehensible, as is her identity. And to read the unspeaking Other is difficult for the Magistrate.

Though the Magistrate fails to decode the being of the girl, he is sensitive enough to understand the depths of the pain inflicted upon her. He can feel for her, which compels him to return her back to her people. On his encounter with her tribe he realises that he cannot become one among the natives. He realises that his position within the whole system is not something positioned in the centre or at the margin, its somewhere beyond both. This realisation makes his existence difficult.

Waiting for the Barbarians is structured around many "failed" interpretive acts that deconstruct the magistrate's attempts at understanding. The magistrate, a self-conscious narrator, tries and fails to understand his relationship to the Empire. He is torn between being complicit with the Empire and assuming a liberal humanist stance; he is a prime manifestation of the ambivalence of colonial discourse, as someone who serves an Empire and yet is unable to understand its machinations. The magistrate also fails to understand the secrets of the tortured body of the barbarian girl as well as those of his own aging body and dreams. Above all, he fails to decipher the archaic script on the wooden slips he finds in the desert. Toward the end, he fails to write a history of the Empire and its frontier settlement. Such failures demonstrate that the magistrate fails as a reader and as a writer, respectively. Simply put, he fails to discover meaning in language, and the abortive interpretive acts he is engaged with make language, reading, and interpretation, we contend, the novel's major theme.

The life of the Magistrate can be traced to three phases. The first begins with the novel. It is the period when he is the Magistrate of the frontier. His position then is that of a representative of the repressive measures of the coloniser. Second phase begins with the arrival of the third bureau and Colonel Joll. The violence that Joll puts on the natives who are called barbarians and accused of organising an armed uprising, fills deep disgust within the Magistrate for the Empire. This is followed by his act of taking in the barbarian girl and returning her. This turn of the Magistrate makes him the enemy of the state, a barbarian. Thus during this phase the Magistrate shows postcolonial tendencies. In the third phase, the Magistrate is shown by Coetzee as a 'man' who is neither a coloniser nor a colonised. From this point of view originates his existential crisis. The non-adherence of the Magistrate makes him a stranger to all the system. Thus he becomes an outsider to the society around him.

The identity of the Magistrate thus becomes a fragmented one, its inconsistencies are similar to that of a post-modern identity. His personality is that which contains many dilemmas in an unresolved manner. His position as a trapped figure is ironical as he who is in power finds himself in a position unable to yield it. Bill Ashcroft in his work *"Irony, Allegory and Empire: Waiting for the Barbarians and In the Heart of the Country"* speaks of the position of the Magistrate so:

The magistrate's position is deeply "ironic". As a magistrate he is the representative and upholder of imperial law, yet his complacent and refined, self-indulgent but humane administration, his disdain for the gross excesses of Colonel Joll and the

secret police, mean that his position is profoundly ambiguous. His face turned in two directions, he is both judge and judged, law and transgressor, protector and enemy, imperial official and imperial outcast. He is, in fact, an embodiment of the profound and disabling ambivalence of imperial rule, of imperial discourse itself. (104)

In this context the concept of the 'tribe' said by the German philosopher Nietzsche becomes relevant. He speaks of the condition of the man who tries to go beyond the overwhelming forces. The resulting emotion for such an individual according to Nietzsche is loneliness and fear. But he asserts that the privilege of owning oneself is much greater. Friedrich Nietzsche clearly speaks of the predicament of the Magistrate. He refuses to join the 'tribe' of the coloniser and the colonised which makes him lonely. He can neither be a part of the coloniser nor that of the colonised. He is just a 'man' with no groups to belong to, no affiliations of ideology. His predicament is that of an individual who refuse to fall in accordance to the orders of any institution. He refuses to be labelled as one among any. This makes him 'lonely'. But as the philosopher had asserted, the Magistrate owns himself. His reward is the gratification got from being true to oneself, to one's own being.

The novel is a powerful postcolonial work of Coetzee that shows the fate of a man who refuses to be contained within any discourses of the society. It shows the brutality that the colonising power puts upon the colonised. Violence and torture thus becomes a part of the novel. The growth of the Magistrate from a coloniser to the colonised then into a position beyond all these categorisation can be seen in the novel.

As Nietzsche said the 'loneliness' of the Magistrate is caused because of difficulty to join any 'tribe'. He can neither associate himself with the coloniser or completely with colonised. Thus he finds it difficult to make meaning of his existence, a typical existential crisis. In the end he revolts and alienates himself from all these. His re-entry into the position of the Magistrate, seen at the end of the novel, is not as a coloniser nor as a colonised but as a man, an individual who want an existence beyond all classifications.

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