

WHAT COETZEE SAYS IN WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS - STORY OR HISTORY?

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Abstract:

While the magistrate took the side of the barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the reader as well as the colonel Joll and the Third Bureau become puzzled. What actually J.M.Coetzee is doing in this novel! More perplexing fact is that the coloniser took the side of the colonised! Well, that's what Coetzee does here and later on in most of his novels like resignation of Lucy in *Disgrace*, implicit complicity of Magda in *In the Heart of the Country*, finding warmth of Mrs.Curren in the embrace of Vercueil in *Age of Iron*. After all, what seems to be interesting to me here is magistrate's own equivocal nature regarding the Apartheid past, the sexual relationship with the barbarian girl. The only possible way for a writer to seek recourse to it is by every possible means of language, words and history. But who speaks the story of this history in *Waiting for the Barbarians*? Coetzee? Magistrate? Or the silence of the barbarian girl? The art of storytelling has eventually problematised the history. The quest for history in the wounds of the girl has something archetypal about it. He narrates the wooden slips to the Third Bureau as the story of oppression of the imperial systems over the barbarian natives even though he cannot decipher them. Published in 1980, *Waiting for the Barbarians* speaks on behalf of the magistrate who wants to disentangle himself from the oppressive social system under imperial regime. This paper would also focus on the process of this subversion of the 'coloniser' to be one of the colonised.

Keywords – Apartheid, Coloniser, Colonised, Coetzee, Narratives, Centre, Periphery

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Counter narratives have always been an issue of great importance and challenge and it is much more problematic if it has to do something with postcolonial subject. Many commonwealth literatures and formerly colonised countries gave and have been giving birth to this particular kind of narrative that questions the western position of 'Centre'. After all, what Caliban says in *The Tempest* to Prospero on the ground of education and language seems very much prominent here-

“ You taught me language! My profit on it

Is I know how to curse.” (I,ii,364-365)

Counter narratives play with the language with which they have been subjugated for centuries long. The ironic point is this, that the linguistic pride of 'Centre' turned upside down in the hands of 'Periphery' as it becomes an instrumental tool to play it back to 'Centre'. One important point through which colonialism takes place is the so called 'white study' or Eurocentric study of non-white texts. But, what is inherent in all these is language, the mechanism of which gives a centrifugal authority and power. The idea of determining and categorising a text gives power to the authority which is akin to the power achieved by Adam in the post-lapsarian world. Not only that, even after the Independence and national movement of many countries the same underplay of language play continues to exist. That is why we have neo-colonisation, globalisation and imperialistic attitude of First world countries over the rest of the world. The process of educating the natives through the language of the 'master' is something that has always been a desire for the coloniser and the new language and new world outlook happen to be alluring to the natives. In South Africa and many other African countries the process has become so fatal that even after the Independence, the native masters took the position of the former western masters and started a new dichotomy of internal colonisation. Whether be it racial or cultural, the case is same.

Like many African countries, South Africa falls in the apartheid era where many black and coloured South Africans were oppressed and tortured in the name of racial segregation. Roughly from 1950s to 1980s millions of people suffered the inhuman history which finally got terminated through the establishment of Truth and Reconciliation

Commission in 1995-96 under South African Department of Justice and Constitutional Development. The objectives of this commission is to have the details of the oppression and mostly to settle down reconciliation between oppressor and oppressed by means of setting up Justice. The Justice that the commission seeks is restorative justice, not retributive and it has to be placed by means of truth. Commission regarded the Truth as the 'Road to Reconciliation'.

Now, published in 1980 and much before the establishment of Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* seems to foresee what Commission later thought. After not getting satisfactory report on barbarian uprising from the magistrate, the representative of the Third Bureau, Colonel Joll begins to torture the barbarian to seek out the 'truth'. Though no such 'truth' came out. In fact, what Coetzee tries to show here is the twofold manifestations of justice- restorative and retributive; the processes adopted by the magistrate and the Colonel Joll respectively. One by reconciliation; one by torture.

In the novel, the magistrate does not do his duty as the imperial regime and the Third Bureau want him to do. His mingling with the barbarians conforms to the fact, at least as it was perceived by the Third Bureau, that he is one of the barbarians. Now, another important idea comes up here regarding the coloniser who refuses to be the coloniser. Albert Memmi makes an interesting point regarding this issue in his celebrated book *The Coloniser and The Colonised* that the coloniser who refuses to be the coloniser simply adopts the colonised-

“The colony is not made up only of Europeans! Refusing the colonizers, damned by them: let him [coloniser] adopt the colonized people and be adopted by them; let him become a turncoat.” (*The Coloniser and the Colonised*, 66)

The subversion of role of the coloniser happens to be dangerous as the coloniser half distances himself from the position that history and authority impose on him. Thereby, the coloniser or half-coloniser suffers from an inner conflict that sometimes reaches for an aesthetic quality in literature. For instance, the narrative of the magistrate. The first issue that arrives from his narrative is who is actually telling the whole story. Entire fiction has been narrated by the magistrate. But the point is in Coetzee the problem of narrativisation is so specific that it creates huge generic dispute. One comparative look in his fictions shows that a complete fiction like *Waiting for the Barbarians* is spoken in first person narrative, whereas an autobiographical fiction like *Boyhood* or *Youth* is recounted in third person narration by 'he'. Coetzee is obsessed with third person narration as his 2003 Nobel Prize winning lecture *He and His Man* bears witness to it. The idea of subjective displacement from the prejudiced consciousness is something that distances himself from his historical self. What his characters are facing has also been undergone by himself as his comment “All writing is autobiography” proves. At least it suggests that Coetzee puts his historical self into writing. But why Coetzee puts 'I' in *Waiting for the Barbarians*? One point is the era. Coetzee cannot deny the apartheid era. The publication of the novel is 1980, still in apartheid

era. So, in that age, how can he distance himself from his historical self? Even if he does so, will he be true to his reader and to his self? The period demands immediate urge to put oneself in the position unlike the age which produces fictions like *Boyhood* or *Youth*. The 'I' created in the novel is further a product of his memories and his alliance with his present historical self.

The magistrate tells of his additional duty, part of his hobby, to excavate the ruined places of his terrain where he gets hold of some wooden slips with something inscribed on it which he cannot decipher. When Colonel Joll suspects the magistrate to be one of them and orders him to read out the story of wooden slips, the magistrate recounts the history of oppression of the imperial regime over the natives. Here comes the narrative problem regarding story and history. The magistrate represents something to the regime which is not even present there. A slight parallel study of misreading occurs in the text. The Colonel 'misreads' the magistrate and thinks of him as one of the barbarians. The magistrate misreads the wooden slips as he does not know the actual meaning of the language- "I look at lines of characters written by a stranger long since dead. I do not even know whether to read from right to left or from left to right...I have no idea what they stand for" (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 148). This misreading creates an absence in the text as Derrida would have it. Nothing is stable in the text and nothing has a stable meaning. The magistrate imposes another meaning on slips in spite of having its original meaning- "See there is only a single character. It is the barbarian character war, but it has other senses too. It can stand for vengeance, and, if you turn it upside down like this, it can be made to read justice. There is no knowing which sense is intended" (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 150). He goes further to describe the slips as "a domestic journal", "plan of war" or as "a history of the last years of the Empire" (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 150). The shifting of meanings changes the track of story and questions the actuality of history. He delves into the wounds and blindness of the barbarian girl for the barbaric history imposed on them but cannot decipher a word, as he remains unable to decode the 'message' on the wooden slips because it is something that falls into the category of native tradition and culture that can only be deciphered by natives, not by 'Centre', the coloniser. This particular scene finds a corollary reference in Peter Carry's novel *Jack Maggs*. In this novel, Jack Maggs writes to his son Henry Phipps in a certain way that can only be understood by them, not by Tobias Oates, his master (*Jack Maggs*, ch. 21,26,27). Both novels juxtapose silence and speech superbly. The silence of the barbarian girl finds its way out in the wooden slips and the silence of Jack Maggs in the novel takes its turn to speak in his secret coded letters to his son. The idea this theme of storytelling evolves is about the authority of the story. Who gets to tell the story? What we have to take as final document on history of colonialism- the torture and violence on barbarians or the apparent 'misreading' of the wooden slips? The mark of whipped past on Jack Maggs's back or the letters to the son from a father? The minute undercurrent of metanarrative shows something that is marked by resistance literature in literary level and anti-colonial resistance in historical level. The language of the 'margin' knows how to author a story in its own way. The problem of understanding the language of the other goes so far that when the girl actually begins to tell her story, the magistrate did not understand fully as it was somewhat of a pidgin kind.

Later on when he goes to give her back to her natives he actually regrets for not having learnt the language she speaks (Waiting for the Barbarians, 97). She is of an enigmatic stature and quality that the outsider cannot understand which is almost like the first impression of the bush and the jungle on the mind of Marlow in Heart of Darkness. The otherness creates a terror in the regime that has to be subjugated at any cost. In fact, in Coetzee the epiphanic arrival of marginal language arrives as a protest to the authority. In Foe, at the end of the novel there is a scene where Susan mistakenly assumes Friday to be Foe. Friday actually dons the dress of Foe, positions himself in his chair and writes on Foe's paper holding Foe's pen. Also in the last chapter, Susan tries to open Friday's mouth but what comes out is "the sounds of the island"(Foe,151,154). Sometimes the language comes up in violent form. The language of rape finds its manifestations in the rape of Lucy in Disgrace, rape and humiliation of Magda by Hendrik in In the Heart of the Country. The magistrate goes one step ahead in the novel to cure the girl's blindness and wash her tortured ankle regularly. By doing so his position is humiliated and 'tortured' in a sense. The magistrate's humanitarian attitude is extremely praiseworthy. He also 'degrades' his position at the hands of his own imperial regime when he goes to give the girl back to her natives. They completely mistook him. The magistrate's personal plight, suffering becomes somewhat political in the context of era and the country where the novel was written. This ritualistic mode of sacrifice gives him a chance of self-revelation.

Coetzee took the name of the title from a poem by C.P.Cavafy having the same name. But there are certain deviations from the poem which further questions the orientation of the novel. In Cavafy, Roman Empire is on the verge of destruction; hence hope for the barbarians to come and take over the systems. But ultimately they never come as they do not exist. In Coetzee, as Dominic Head puts it, the barbarism takes on two levels- firstly, Colonel Joll's fear for the barbaric uprising; secondly, the magistrate finds the torture of Joll very much barbaric (The Cambridge Introduction to J.M.Coetzee, 49-50). How the force of the coloniser becomes the identity of the colonised is evident from the brutal marks on the face of the girl, the word 'ENEMY' written on the backs of the barbarians. This is something that a postcolonial text questions that 'Centre' has turned the unreachable 'Periphery' into a subject, not treating as individual. Torture, violence, oppression become the essential tool for the coloniser to impose their ideology upon the colonised. The marks on her body are the subject and source of history for the magistrate. He studies them as he studies the wooden slips; but both remain inscrutable to him. On one level, torture lands up the magistrate and the barbarian girl on the same ground as the magistrate once recounts of his own plight in the hands of the regime- "I hear the blow coming and turn to meet it. It catches me full across the face. "I am blind" I think, staggering back into the blackness that instantly falls" (Waiting for the Barbarians, 144). Both become blind at a certain point by inhuman torture.

The magistrate suffers from both linguistic and sexual failure. Not only the girl, but the dreams of the magistrate lack identity metaphorically and allegorically as the snowman the children make does not have arms. He cannot enter the castle (Waiting for the Barbarians, 207). The ideological shift towards the 'margin' is to a great extent attested by his writing at the end of the novel where he wishes to write outside history, tearing himself

from the era- “ I think: “ I wanted to live outside history. I wanted to live outside the history that Empire imposes on its subjects, even its lost subjects. I never wished it for the barbarians that they should have the history of Empire laid upon them” ” (Waiting for the Barbarians, 206). The metaphysical vision of the magistrate incorporates something lyrical in his philosophical prosaic passage. What Coetzee does here is a recurrent theme in postcolonial literature of having space with history. Juxtaposing the place with narratives creates a generic identity of territorial text or textual territory that unquestionably challenges the white settler literature. The ending of the novel gives a striking feature of postcolonial literature of merging topographical influence on the text. The text is no longer a story but a history of another identity with a new orthographic stature that has enough potentiality to break through the central generic authority and the pride to father a story. The magistrates creates his own narratives that linguistically become counter-narrative for the major authorship of Coetzee himself as the author of this fiction and the barbaric authorship of Apartheid South Africa. The interest in narrativisation opens the door of perception for the magistrate that offers him a new methodology for his self-discovery. An assertion of new transcendental identity in accordance with the acceptance of new culture on the part of the magistrate is strikingly evocative. Breaking the circle of historical self of the author, the magistrate, the sub-writer, creates his own circle with his own ideology, like what Stephen does in his diary entries in the last chapter of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (Ch..5, 270-276), creating his own sub-textual oasis with an aesthetic transformation from the busy huddle of historical author.

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