



COLONIZATION, CIVILIZATION, AND RESISTANCE IN J.M. COETZEE'S WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS: A CRITICAL SURVEY

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Abstract:

The novel "Waiting for the Barbarians" explores the process of colonization, depicting how European settlers arrived in uncharted African territories and established their dominance. Under the guise of "civilization," they employed deceitful tactics to label Indigenous people as barbaric or uncivilized. The narrative provides a comprehensive view of settlement and subjugation. European settlers often used binary terms, such as "civilized" versus "barbaric," to justify their actions. The story of the blind girl reveals the pain and power dynamics at play, illustrating how the powerful settlers sought to suppress the Indigenous people of African society. The novel emphasises how the colonization process was carried out under the pretense of bringing civilization.

Keywords: *Colonisation, Civilisation, Barbaric Punishment, Wicked Techniques by Settlers.*

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Introduction:

'*Waiting for the Barbarians*', is an important novel by the South African writer J.M. Coetzee, published in 1980, years after, his return to teaching at South African University, most of the part was written in the U.S. *Waiting for the Barbarians* narrates an abundance of witnesses of real geographies of pain, which have been unleashed by the iron regime of colonizers in the history of South African colonialism. This fundamental text, for the first time in the sequence of novels, reveals torture, oppression, and subjugation made by colonization and apartheid regimes. *Waiting for the Barbarians*' narratives is very coherent in contemporary in the context of South Africa. The apartheid government responded to the Sharpeville Massacre (1960), the Soweto School Rising (1976), and the Students' Emancipation Movements brutally suppressed by the mighty government. The demands

and dissents of people were suppressed by the government's machinery very cruelly. The national party gained control in 1948 and it unleashed severe mechanisms to tackle issues of non-White people. Pan African Congress(PAC) is a radical organization of African movement that stresses that South Africa is only for Black people other people are invaders whereas African National Congress(ANC) is a comparatively mild organization that stresses the emancipation of Black people from under the shield of the apartheid system, South Africa is for all the people but the system should be faired and all the flawed laws should be scrapped. Because of the fundamental differences, these two organizations divided philosophically.

The title of the novel is taken from a poem written in 1904 by the Greek poet Constantine Cavafy. The



narrator of the novel is a Magistrate, he is a chief administrator of a small town. The town remains in constant fear that barbarians are planning to attack. Colonel Joll is a high-ranking officer, who has come to investigate rumors of an impending barbarians' uprising, he is an egoistic person and offers the gravest punishment to imprisoned people. Joll continues torture despite Magistrates' objections. Many imprisoned people were killed during the interrogation. When Joll leaves for another garrison, the guilty sense Magistrate tries to save other prisoners. One day, he encounters a blind girl who is partially blind and maimed by his iron regime. Magistrate started a sensual relationship with her. The magistrate organizes a trip along with a few soldiers to leave the girl at her people's place. When he returns to the garrison, officials of the empire accuse the magistrate of allegedly conspiring with barbarians and he is imprisoned. His position was superseded by another official of the Bureau.

The panorama of the empire reflects the feudal mentality; the dominant power tries to impose its culture and political mandate on others. Binary discussion, Civilised vs Enemy or Others creates negative caprice among the indigenous culture. By using a different mechanism, they tried to rationalize imperialist violence. The power-hold group tries to glorify the myths of their superiority over poor and powerless people. The colonial process has explained in this novel, how the power-hungry colonizers destroyed the culture of nomads and made intrusion of their migrant culture on them. This novel entails stringent and inhumane punishment of tribes for incorporating their rules of the system. Male sexuality depicts power-hungry people trying to establish dominance over a woman by exploiting her sexually. Power has been exercised in the form of offering torture, physically, sexually, and emotionally. The magistrate doesn't harm the girl, but he takes undue

advantage of it, even though the girl is unable to express her deep sorrow and mental anguish, her feelings remain unexpressed. Her silence speaks louder than words, it is the story of the unexpressed mind that creates a reasonable impact on the sensitive mind and which underscores the cruelty of colonization. Eventually, it creates terror in society. 'Barbarians' is a derogatory term that has been used by colonizers to identify others. They attempt to do justification of violence, hatred, myth, etc. in the name of civilisation. They created a dichotomy of cold-hot, good-bad, and native-other to define their concept of civilization.

Transformation is a constant occurrence in the social setup. Change is the law of nature. What transformations affected the social institutions; are narrated through appropriate characters. The Magistrate's quest for identity reveals the status quo of the incumbent policymakers and ruling class of African society. It is the narration about the present, past, and future of Africa. The magistrate struggles to escape from the dark history of the territory and visualisation for the future in the present time is transformative. The magistrate is an agent of a reformative section of the empire one who understands the plight of the barbarians, natives, and other people of the region. Cultural conflicts lead to contradictions among the heterogeneous groups of Africa. Everyone is struggling for their identity except the people of the empire.

J.M. Coetzee's '*Waiting for the Barbarians*', is the chronicle struggle between an idealistic village, the Magistrate, and the imperial officials, who attack the neighboring 'barbarians. The Magistrate's resistance to imperial practice and attitudes causes him to become an enemy of his people. The Magistrate is the transformative figure of the novel, emphatically, he tries to bring justice for tribal and other deprived sections of the society. His nature brings many



hostilities for him. He lost designation, power, and existence in support of marginalized people in society. About that a famous critic Robert M. Post, in his book, *Oppression in the Fiction of J.M. Coetzee*, writes, “By siding with the oppressed, he has become one of them” (Critique Winter1986). His character transformed from being a representative of Western civilized justice, he stands as a staunch protector of human rights.

The magistrate’s role was to manifest justice for the Nomadic and barbarians, he mixed with native people fully. It is observed chemical properties of his personality transformed in favor of the native people of South Africa. He loses his White identity. As a worshiper of humanism, he does not come out from the protected compartment of White wholeheartedly. Although he is an empathizer of tribal his sympathy does not go beyond a certain level. We can find out the chemical properties of his personality, where he loses his white identity. He continues to act according to an imperial and hegemonic discourse which he has been enhancing his superiority. He resumes his office after the empire's defeat on the frontier side. But no other non-white person could resume work like him. It reflects the feudal mentality of the system and society. That is the post-truth of the apartheid regime of South Africa. The magistrate wants to become the central figure of the movement, but he fails to understand the real feelings of the natives, and he is completely unable to deliver the real misery of marginalized people. It is the post-colonial text that defines the power struggle of colonizers and the quest for the survival of non-white people. It is hegemonic discourse to underline they are one of them.

It explores the colonizers' notions about civilization. They claim that they are civilized people while treating tribal people as uncivilized. This dichotomy is useful for them to impose their culture on other people. They attempt to subjugate tribal people for

modern civilization. It is an effective strategy to demoralize other people.

A barbarian girl is a central figure in the, ‘*Waiting for the Barbarians*’. She is marginalized both the way literally and metaphorically. She does not express her mental anguish she prefers to remain silent. Metaphorically, she does not occupy the place in the novel. The portrayal of the character is simple. She was crippled, maimed, and made blind by coercive measures of the authority. Her reaction is baffling to the reader. She has been exploited physically and psychologically by the empire’s agents and even she was abandoned by her fellow nomads. When the magistrate asks her reaction to her punishment, her response is a long silence. She says: “I am tired of thinking” (44). She was suppressed psychologically, sexually, and mentally and she is not in a position to express her feelings. It is the failure of the government to ensure confidence in the freedom of expression. It is a critical comment on the apartheid system, common people were not allowed to express their straightforward views. Terror, inhumane mechanisms, and flawed laws are responsible for the suffocation of common people.

She has been sexually exploited by a man who is the agent of the empire. During the physical acts, she remains passive. She reflects neither interest nor disinterest. Her silence speaks much more than the Magistrate’s narrations. The magistrate was unable to reveal the girl's feelings. Her feelings are blank, senseless, and passive. He failed to enter her mind. Her passiveness in the sexual act put him introspective mood. He does not get excited even though the act is collaborative. It was the union of two opposite bodies mechanically. Sensation in the act could not lead them closer. Both of them have ambiguous reactions. He puzzled over her response: “I continue to rub her body till I too relax and am overtaken with sleep. I experience no excitement during this the most



collaborative act we have yet undertaken” (47). It recovers a cynical way of satisfaction. The magistrate expects that she should be active during the sexual intercourse but how can a girl who is under the custody of the empire and far away from her family be ready for intruder’s sex? Her inability and helplessness are reflected in her silence. But unfortunately, the Magistrate failed to understand.

Gayatri Spivak a famous contemporary critic, says in her book, *Can the Subaltern Speak*, Woman is the object in the male-dominated society. Her conditions become even worse in the colonized world. Subjugation within subjugation made women more miserable, and torture became prevalent in the colonized territory. To understand a woman’s character in the colonized world, it is a difficult task. Because a woman has been exploited in a double way, first from the patriarchal setup of the society and second from the system of the colonizers. Women’s condition in the colonized territory is worse. She says:

“Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual differences is doubly affected. The question is not of female participants in the insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labor, for both of which there is ‘evidence’. It is, rather, that, both as an object of colonialist historiography and as the subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow....” (*London and New York, 1995*)

The novel pleads discussion of the existence of oppressors and oppressed. It is the fight for a new civilization. Magistrate says in his words:

“We have been here more than a hundred years, we have reclaimed land from the desert

and built irrigation works and planted fields and built solid homes and put a wall around our town, but they still think of us as visitors, transients” (55).

The novel incorporates the theme of sex, nudity, and violence, it has logical importance to understand the masculine mentality of the colonizers. It unleashes vulgarity and obscenity. It is an important aspect of the plot and setting of the text. It is a complex and intricate texture of truth. As J.M. Coetzee later explains in his interviews, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, Ed. David Attwell

“In 1980 I published a novel (Waiting for the Barbarians) about the impact of the torture chamber on the life of a man of conscience. Torture has exerted a dark fascination on many other South African writers. Why should be so? There are, it seems to me, two reasons. The first is that relations in the torture room provide a metaphor, bare and extreme, for relations between authoritarianism and its victims. In the torture room, unlimited force is exerted upon the physical being of an individual in the twilight of legal illegality, with the purpose. If not of destroying him, then at least of destroying the kernel of resistance within him.... the fact that the torture room is a site of extreme human experience, assessable to no one save the participants, is the second reason why the novelist, in particular, should be fascinated by it” (Harvard UP, 1992).

Flaunting the human body is a sign of modernity in the view of Western thinkers. It is being called a normal phenomenon. Coetzee has portrayed the character of ‘Magistrate’, he is a womanizer, and for physical satisfaction, he needs a woman. He does not bother about from which background she represents/ belongs. Whether she is a lady, girl, or barbarian in his angle



such classification is meaningless, the only thing he knows is to fulfill the sexual urge. Coetzee uses very flowery language to narrate copulation.

In the, *'Waiting for the Barbarian'* J.M. Coetzee undermined traditional concepts. Time and space are important factors for history and it is equally important for civilization. This novel does display historical chronology. He has used non-historical things to highlight history. It breaks the sense of traditional history, time, space, location, etc. it is disrupted. Although it undermines historical chronology, it makes visible the impact of colonization and the conflict between colonizers and tribal people. Coetzee J.M. says in his interview, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, Ed. David Attwell

“The novel *'Waiting for the Barbarians'* asks the question: why does one choose the side of justice when it is not in one's material interest to do so? The Magistrate gives rather a platonic answer: because we are born with the idea of justice” (Harvard UP, 1992)

David Cook a British academic critic, in his book, *African Literature: A Critical View*, says, civilization is important for the social, political, and cultural development of modern society. Unfortunately, South African society became sluggish due to the cultural conflict between the two forces that is oppressors and oppressed. In subtle words David says: “The new civilization, it is supposed to acquire, but it is neither prepares for functions of a European mode of life nor African life. It is left floundering between the two social forces” (Longman, 1997)

Colonizers neglected the principle of optimum use of natural resources and it made a disastrous impact on the eco-system. Colonel Joll is a representative of the iron regime who is rigid and stubborn whereas, the Magistrate stands for change. It is indicating their eco-sensitivity. The meddling of colonizers turned the region eco-sensitive. Ecology of the region:

“He tells me about the last great drive he rode in, when thousands of deer, and bears were slain, so many that a mountain of carcasses had to be left to rot ('which was a pity'). I tell him about the great flocks of geese and ducks that descend on the lake every year in their migrations and about native ways of trapping them” (01).

The principles of civilization have been broken down by old means of society. This new process of civilization turns a diversified society towards a chaotic order. It cannot be applied to all people equally; one prism of any policy or globalisation is not exclusively useful for the healthy development of society.

Gallagher, Susan Van Zanten says in his book, *A Story of South Africa: J.M. Coetzee's Fiction in Context*, he reflects the view on the novel:

'Waiting for the Barbarians', “Although the effects of Coetzee's technique is to reveal truths about any oppressive society that employs torture as a technique, *Waiting for the Barbarians* also is inescapably tied to South Africa not only by its echoes of contemporary events but also by its historical production as a novel written by a south Africa in 1979” (Harvard UP, 1991)

J.M. Coetzee's novel, *'Waiting for the Barbarians'* was published, when South Africa was on the verge of a general holocaust. There were constant clashes between colonizers and colonized forces. Tremendous upheaval occurred on behalf of the Black Conscious movement. The reaction of the government was unprecedented in its brutality. Police organized mass arrests, and people were put in police custody. A large number of the freedom fighters died in police custody. Uprising made Africa vulnerable. Everywhere chaotic order transcended over the entire institutions of South Africa. This novel fuelled the narratives of the



oppressors and oppressed at the world level. If the writer can make narratives on the flammable problems, that is the success of the great writer. As a writer, J.M. Coetzee succeeded in it. Therefore, he is considered a versatile writer on diverse and burning topics of society.

Through the novel J.M. Coetzee has taken a position to explain the makeover of the apartheid society. Magistrate's quest for identity reveals false facets of the regime. In colonisation brutality applied to silent voice. It is the narration about the past, present, and future of South Africa and it relates to the political structure of the country. The writer uses different linguistic terms, use of allegories to define the intensity of punishment. Eventually, colonizers' binary discussion of Civilisation vs Barbarism failed. Their image comes out as Barbarians rather than Civilised, in the domain of the literary spectrum. It is explored throughout the novel.

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