

WAITING FOR BARBARIANS: A PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE OPPRESSOR AND THE OPPRESSED

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“In 1980 I published a novel about the impact of the
torture chamber on the life of a man of conscience.”

-(Coetzee, *Doubling* 363)

The present work represents the psychological aspect of intertextuality. Psychological perspective is generally a process of awakening a painful and ambivalent course that allows a deep understanding of humanity and growth on a positive note. *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) won the South Africa's most prestigious literary award, the CNA Prize, as well as the Geoffery Faber Memorial Prize, and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize. The novel depicts the conflict between a consciously vague empire, its subjects, an idealistic village magistrate and imperial officials to attack the neighboring “barbarians”. The story starts with the Magistrate as a part of the empire:

“I am a country magistrate, a responsible official in the service of the
Empire, serving out my days on this lazy frontier, waiting to retire”.

(*WFB* 8)

J.M. Coetzee has explored creative writing as a discourse of postcolonial oppression. Coetzee's unveiling of oppression in South Africa is described by David Atwell as "the nature and crisis of fiction-writing in South Africa today". The narrator of the novel is an old Magistrate who is in love with archaeology and hunting rather than governing individuals. He is waiting for his retirement. The appearance of Colonel Joll from the Third Bureau of Empire upsets his quiet existence, as he is firm to find enemies of Empire in a frontier town. Magistrate agitates at the cruelty of Colonel Joll towards prisoners in which he fails. Magistrate's relation with the barbarian girl and his act of sending her back to her people, labelled him as enemy of the empire which results in his imprisonment. The soldiers of the Empire set out to seek and fight the enemies of the empire, the barbarians but in the end are defeated. In the end the magistrate regains his leadership automatically. Dominic Head describes it as:

[...]it is [the magistrate] who focuses the condemnation of Empire, principally through an involved, painful, and ambivalent process of self-evaluation and self-critique: the uncovering of the magistrate's own complicity helps him to a deep understanding of the nature of Empire's imperialism, and to a burgeoning ethical stance. (Head 73)

The Magistrate lives a comfortable life in a frontier town at the outer limits of the Empire. His idea of relaxing days are near to its end when the Colonel starts his mission to question and torment native people to discover the truth about mysterious incidents that have occurred outside of town and a supposed uprising against Empire. With the arrival of Empire's militia the magistrate, apart from realising that the life he knew is never going to be the same, starts calling his prior concept of Empire into question. The rigorous actions of Colonel Joll and his assistant Officer Mandel shatter his belief in a peaceful life, a peaceful country. The report about a native man who has been killed during an interrogation initiates his regrets of becoming embroiled in the doings of Colonel Joll.

If I had only handed over these two absurd prisoners to the Colonel [...] if I had gone on a hunting trip for a few days, as I should have done, a visit up-river perhaps, and come back, and without reading it, or after skimming over it with an incurious eye, put my seal on his report, with no question about what the word investigation meant, what lay beneath it like a banshee beneath a stone - if I had done the wise thing, then perhaps I might now be able to return to my hunting and hawking and placid concupiscence while waiting for the provocations to cease and the tremors along the frontier to subside. (WFB 9)

It is an account of life of a man of conscience who wants to separate himself from an imperial administration. As Dominic Head has described, "The novel's narrator is the magistrate of the settlement, and it is his process of awakening- a painful and ambivalent process – that allows a deep understanding of imperialism to emerge." The text ends with the Magistrate as a physical artifact of the empire's history: "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." (WFB 156)

The magistrate's confrontation to colonial practices and manners reason him to become an opponent of his own people. As Robert M. Post writes, "By siding with the oppressed, he has become one of them." (72)

J. M. Coetzee has taken the title *Waiting for the Barbarian* from the poem of the same name by the Greek poet, C. P. Cavafy (1863–1933). Cavafy's poem portrays the Roman Empire, depraved, unstable, awaiting the arrival of 'the barbarians' who will take over the machinery of government. Dominic head has stated that the poem "presents an anticipation of decolonization which does not occur." (74) In the poem, the barbarians do not arrive in fact they cease to exist and no longer embody a kind of solution. Cavafy's poem categorize the conflicting dependence on the other that underpins imperialism; and it is this idea, which is present in *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

Waiting for the Barbarian observes psychology of power that exists between the oppressor and the oppressed. It is this need for power on the part of the oppressor that is dealt with in this work. Coetzee presents the story of an oppressive relationship through the voice of the oppressor. The Empire in both the novel and the poem is in a sense dependent upon an Other, a barbarian enemy to strengthen the national feeling of the state.

Barbarian is not a negative word as etymologically its, latin route is "barbarus" or Greek route is "barbaros" which means "foreign. Oxford English Dictionary defines barbarian as a

foreigner (181) and in the Empire's sense a stranger in the country the Empire seeks to colonize (191). Thus barbarians are those people whose language and customs differs from the Speaker's. The term was earlier used for those who are not Greek not Roman, or not Christian. The civilized people when viewing a terrain, society or natives unfamiliar to them attribute the derogative meaning of the word barbarian to them.

Constantine Cavafy's "*Waiting for the Barbarians*" (1904) and Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), are intertextual not only in title rather each text addresses the confusion and tension arising from waiting for the barbarians, though the implications of the wait and the likely outcomes differ significantly. Cavafy's poem Supplies the essential principle *i.e.* everything needs its opposite. For example Cold must have hot; inside must be what is not outside—and civilization needs barbarism. The poem describes that the barbarians gave a sense of harmony, however dark, to the citizens and their rulers. The fact that Cavafy calls the barbarians, "those people, a kind of solution" suggests how threats to a certain ideology, whether real or imagined, give the ruler the means to control his people through a worldview. Given that such captive worldviews are used to form national or racial identities, any search for identity is a search as much for sameness as for difference.

Coetzee gives emphasis to the fact that one who is associated with the dominant culture cannot truly see himself as a member of a marginalized culture because the dominant culture's national discourse has tacitly trained him to believe that its dominance is a result of its superiority or vice versa. For example the relation between the old magistrate and the barbarian girl was a conflict between Empire and the barbarians. When civilization overweighs barbarianism, the Magistrate is a redeemer of the young woman; but when barbarianism overweighs civilization, the Magistrate falls in love with her.

In the novel the mission of Joll into the barren region results in nothing. He is firm to find the barbarians who are planning to attack the Empire and is not hesitant to use cruel process, even against the magistrate, in order to get what he wants:

"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." (*WFB* 5)

As in Cavafy's poem Romans are eagerly awaiting the coming of the Barbarians and in this hope, all routine functions stop. Similarly Colonel Joll is presented as an investigator of Third Bureau who will examine the barbarians who are allegedly preparing a riot against the Empire's frontier post. The poet feels in the poem that no talk or discussion is appropriate from the point of view of the old establishment because they could not negotiate from a position of strength. They can only compromise weakly from an effete position. Colonel Joll represents Empire and he wears a strange thing *i.e.* sunglasses. His sunglasses represent a conflict between civilization and barbarianism. Colonel joll states "At home everyone wears them" (*WFB* 1) depicts that they have become a symbol of his civilization and social distinctiveness. When the magistrate finds out the benefits of the glasses he feels "he has the skin of a younger man". (*WFB* 1)

I have never seen anything like it: two little discs of glass suspended in front of his eyes in loops of wire. Is he blind? I could understand it if he wanted to hide blind eyes. But he is not blind. The discs are dark, they look opaque from the outside, but he can see through them.

(*WFB* 1)

The magistrate wants to find barbarism for a different expression. He senses a deep respect for barbarians who have been deprived of their land and feels sympathy for they have lived very close to them for so long in spite of being bullied and cheated. He desires at one time

“these barbarians would rise up and teach us a lesson, so that we would learn to respect them.” (WFB 50)

As Derek Wright too believes “The barbarians ...are really a mental fiction born of colonial paranoia and a political convenience.” (115) In reality the Magistrate finds barbarianism in the actions of Colonel Joll when he arrests him.

You are the enemy, you have made the war, and you have given them all the martyrs they need-starting not now but a year ago when you committed your first filthy barbarities here!

(WFB112)

The Magistrate wants to save himself from ontological entrapment and his journey towards awakening is full with ambivalence. Sam Durrant also asserts that the magistrate develops an unconscious desire to be tortured either to understand the torturer or to be cleared of his own conscience. He wishes to experience the similar pain and degradation as the barbarian girl has. In the process of distancing himself from the empire the magistrate only understands her transmission with “a seemingly perverse desire to be [the barbarian girl]” (46). Only by being tortured himself he can understand what the girl has gone through, be closer to her and, thus, distance himself from the Empire. Thus he identifies himself a mediator who is torn between the torturer and the tortured. The barbarian girl belongs to the society of nomads and for the magistrate she is a native of a free state. He rejects the imperial practices and expresses his wish:

“I watch her as she undresses, hoping to capture in her movements a hint of an old free state.” (WFB 36)

For the magistrate she is an embodiment of the injustice of imperialism. Dovey suggests that his action of returning barbarian girl to her people is “a gesture which he hopes will allow him to erect an identity for himself” (22) that he is also another resistant to the Empire. He also tries to distance himself from the imperial ways of torturing others and he mentions:

“there is nothing to link me with torturers, people who sit waiting like beetles in dark cellars ... I must assert my distance from Colonel Joll! I will not suffer for his crimes!” (WFB 48)

The Magistrate is self-conscious of the dual attention of Empire and the barbarian girl. Penner describes it as “double thought has literally become double vision” (81), as the Magistrate begins to imagine the sight of Joll with the dark glasses he himself senses obsessed with “the image of a face masked by two black glassy insect eyes from which there comes no reciprocal gaze but only my doubled image cast back at me” (WFB 47). The Magistrate wants to disclose the reality of imperialism and torture of officers and he tells the new officer: “They want an end to the spread of settlements across their land. They [the barbarians] want their land back, finally. They want to be free to move about with their flocks from pasture to pasture as they used to” (WFB 54). He supports others and states firmly that they are not barbarians as believed by Empire “the people we call barbarians are nomads, they migrate between the lowlands and the uplands every year, that is their way of life. They will never permit themselves to be bottled up in the mountains.” (WFB 54)

He takes the side of barbarians as he himself is tortured by the Empire and imprisoned in the barracks for his feelings towards barbarian girl and his act of returning to her people made him enemy He wishes “that these barbarians would rise up and teach us a lesson, so that we would learn to respect them.”(WFB 55)

His wish to better the relationships with the nomads has acquired him charge of disloyalty. Therefore, he becomes antagonist and not a servant of the Empire. He deems himself enlightened and defiance system of Empire as he says: “I have set myself in opposition, the bond is broken, I am a free man” (*WFB* 85). He does not consider barbarians as enemies rather he believes them as nomads.

Colonel Joll demonstrates his power over the magistrate and changes the setting of his office to make him understand supremacy of imperial

“He is trying, though somewhat too theatrically, to make a certain impression on me. The careful reorganization of my office from clutter and dustiness to this vacuous neatness, the slow swagger which he uses to cross the room, the measured insolence with which he examines me, are all meant to say something: not only that he is now in charge [...] but that he knows how to comport himself in an office, knows even how to introduce a note of functional elegance.” (*WB* 90)

Though Colonel Joll asserts to the Magistrate: “you think we are dealing with small groups of peaceful nomads. In fact we are dealing with a well organized enemy” (*WFB* 125) yet the Magistrate, confronts with Colonel Joll, and expresses his own opinion as he has grown into a free man: “you are the enemy, you have made the war” (*WFB*125). When he faces Mandel He states

I look into his clear blue eyes, as clear as if there were crystal lenses slipped over his eyeballs. He looks back at me. I have no idea what he sees. Thinking of him I have said the words *torture...torture* to myself, but they are strange words, and the more I repeat them the more strange they grow, till they lie like stones on my tongue.” (*WFB* 129)

The magistrate has been tortured and is charged with contracting a relationship with the barbarian girl. His request for clean clothes has been ignored. He was given a choice to wear either a women smoke or be naked *I.e.* either be a woman or an animal. He is called by Mandel and asked to run naked. He is asked then to skip by tying one end of the rope around his body to the tree. The magistrate looks at the children and states: “ Let us only pray that they do not imitate their elders’ game, or tomorrow there will be plague of little bodies dangling from the trees.” (*WFB* 133) Later he starves and describes: “ I smell of shit. I am not permitted to wash. The flies follow me everywhere, circling around the appetizing sore on my cheek.” (*WFB* 127) Coetzee refers specifically to the difficulty of writing the torture scenes in *Waiting for the Barbarians*:

For the writer the deeper problem is *not* to allow himself to be impaled on the dilemma proposed by the state, namely, either to ignore its obscenities or else to produce representations of them. The true challenge is: how not to play the game by the rules of the state, how to establish one’s own authority, how to imagine torture and death on one’s own terms. (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point* 364)

The magistrate feels pity when Colonel Joll rubs a handful of dust into each prisoner’s naked back and writes the word ENEMY (*WFB* 115) with a stick of charcoal.

“The word ‘ENEMY’ is written on their backs in charcoal, and they are then thrashed until the word is effaced.”(*WFB* 104)

Dominic Head has pointed it “As in cavafy’s poem the operation of Empire require the existence of the barbarian as enemy, and here the beating away of the charcoal inscriptions is an ironic purgation of the Manichean difference upon which Empire depends.”(77)

The magistrate in the course of his awakening has a psychological consequence on his mind. His fulfilled and unfulfilled desires lands in his dreams. His dreams reflect his relationship to the barbarian girl as well as his role in the Empire and its colonial politics. In the novel the magistrate sees seven dreams. Poyner claims that in them he “struggles to resolve (to interpret) his ambivalent relationship with [the barbarian girl], but which, in actuality, reinforces the failure of reciprocity that colours their relationship” (62). Head claims that “the dream sequence amounts to an accreted narrative of sublimation and human advancement (which belies the negativity of the final ‘nowhere’ in the novel)” (92). Sam Durrant argues that “in the dreams, both [the magistrate] and the girl take up the question of reparation” (45). In that sense the magistrate aims to imagine the girl as a healthy human before she was tortured and deformed. The first dream occurs after the assassination of old man during interrogation by Colonel Joll. The magistrate has not yet met the barbarian girl. In the dream the magistrate finds himself in the town square in which children are building a castle out of snow. The boundaries are covered with snow, sun has dissolved into the mist: “Walls, trees, houses have dwindled, lost their solidity, retired over the rim of the world.” (*WFB*10). Children are building a snow castle but as he approaches the children, they fade away except for one hooded girl sitting with her back to him. The dream presents a detailed insight into the magistrate’s psychological realism. He wants to be loyal towards Empire to which he is giving his services for a long time and his empathy for the tortured barbarians. Magistrate understands the cruelty of Empire. He feels restless and suspects that how Colonel Joll lives a normal life after such barbarity:

“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. Does he wash his hands very carefully, perhaps, or change all his clothes; or has the Bureau created new men who can pass without disquiet between the unclean and the clean? (*WFB*13)

The second dream takes place after the magistrate has invited the barbarian girl into his home for the first time and has seen her broken ankles. He wants to know what has happened in the prison during interrogation to the girl and the old man. The magistrate has talked to a soldier about the torturing of the barbarian girl. In the dream he again approaches the children building a snow castle and this time is able to see beneath the hood of the girl. All children fades in the air except one and even that child does not have a face He explains

“The face I see is blank, featureless; it is the face of an embryo or a tiny whale; it is not a face at all but another part of the human body that bulges under the skin; it is white; it is the snow itself. Between numb fingers I hold out a coin.” (*WFB* 40)

The magistrate offers coin to the girl but she ignores which shows her indifference towards not only the magistrate but also towards Empire. “The logic of this dream is to expiate (as the coin suggests) the ambivalence of the magistrate's earlier 'reading' of the scene: the figure is a child, the earlier hint of sexual availability expunged; the face is still resistant to the expectations and projections of the onlooker's gaze.” Dominic Head90-91

The third dream occurs after the magistrate’s conversation with Mandel. For the first time he discloses his disobedience towards Empire’s colonial practices. He wishes that the natives would “rise up and teach [them] a lesson, so that [they] would learn to respect them” (*WFB* 55). The magistrate approaches the children through heavy snow and this time the hooded child turns around and smiles at him. It is the girl, “a smiling child, the light sparkling on her teeth and glancing from her jet-black eyes” (*WFB* 57). In this dream the snow is much deeper than in the

others, the air so cold that his features are frozen so that he cannot smile or speak. The girl is again building a snow fort. He wants to tell her to put people into the fort she has been building but he cannot say a word. He cannot speak as his whole body seems to be covered in ice. This dream explains that the magistrate now understands the psychology of barbarian. Now he wants to clear his role in the Empire. His inner sight can not bear anymore tortures towards barbarians and he decides to take the girl to her people where she can live her life happily as the girl in the dream. He also wishes to fill the town with people and Poyner has emphasised that The empty town also “emphasises the lack of communion” (Poyner 63) Dominic Head describes it as “The detail in this dream is the major development: the snow fort the girl is building is actually a replica of the magistrate's walled town, though the model is empty of people.” (91)

The fourth dream takes of after the magistrate has been accused of treason and imprisoned. Just before the dream he mentions that he is forgetting the girl “what she looks like...the only memory on which I can absolutely rest is of my oiled hands sliding over her knees, her calves, her ankles.” (*WFB* 94-95) In this dream he does not see the smiling child rather he move towards a girl who is kneeling on the floor, her face covered by the cap of her coat. “The feet lie before me in the dust, disembodied, monstrous, two stranded fish, two huge potatoes” (*WFB* 95). He takes her ghostly feet and rubs them after she tells him they are sore. He attempts to comfort her and unwraps her bandaged feet, only to discover that they have become terrifying symbols of the torturer’s job. The magistrate feels as if it is the recapitulation of the beginning of his relationship with the girl. The girl is wearing the big coat she wore on the day they first met. In the dream everything seems bigger than its size. The magistrate was interested in wounds of the girl her huge feet and her small childlike body expresses the immeasurable injuries. His service of massaging and oiling her broken ankles gave him the opportunity to cover the deeds of Empire and Colonel Joll. In this brief section, Coetzee gracefully captures the essence of the novel: I enter the barracks gateway and face a yard as endless as the desert. There is no hope of reaching the other side, but I plod on, carrying the girl, the only key I have to the labyrinth, her head nodding against my shoulder, her dead feet dropping on the other side. (95)

The fifth dream appears immediately after the magistrate has been beaten up while trying to stop Colonel Joll from killing a barbarian with a hammer. He has become the revolutionary and victim of Empire who speaks out against Joll’s cruelties. His nose is broken and his skin welted and bleeding from the blows of a stick as he dreams of the girl. The magistrate thinks that the girl is making a “snow-castle or sandcastle,” but then he sees that it is a clay oven she has built. . “...mistaken, it is not a castle she has built but a clay oven (*WFB* 119) He realized that what she is holding out to me is “a loaf of bread still hot,” (*WFB* 120) She holds out her hands to offer him something. At first he sees it as a “shapeless lump” recalling his early vision of her face, but then he sees that she is offering him a loaf of steaming fresh-baked bread, a gesture as suggestive of a sacrament as his washing and oiling of her feet. This is a marked progression from his initial ambivalence about the barbarian girl, whom he finally sees clearly. She is baking bread and dressed up in her best clothes. The magistrate is overwhelmed by her attractiveness and filled with appreciation. She is wearing round cap embroidered in gold. Her hair is braided in a heavy plait which lies over her shoulder: there is gold thread work into the braid. ‘Why are you dressed in your best?’ I want to say: ‘I have never seen you looking so lovely’.” (*WFB* 120) Dreaming of barbarian girl in a healthy, happy state depicts his own conscience being partly healed as a result of standing up for the native people and fighting the Empire. It can further be interpreted as “a basic image for community, a kind of vision of basic human endurance” (Head 91). The baking

of bread, creating something rather precious in the difficult conditions of the desert, indicates “a beacon of hope” (Head 91). Poyner calls it “an act of fellowship.”

The sixth dream appears when Mandel leaves the place and the magistrate has regained some of his earlier position in Empire. The scene is once more the snow-covered square. He begins to walk, but he is “driven forward in a cloud of whirling snow”. (*WFB* 149) He thinks that the barbarian girl will not see him but “...she does turn and see him: “For an instant I have a vision of her face, the face of a child, flowing, healthy, smiling on me without alarm, before we collide” (*WFB* 149). When they collide the crash feels just “as faint as a stroke of a moth” (*WFB* 149). He does not want to touch her he tries “to look back, but all is lost from sight in the whiteness of the snow” (*WFB* 149). He feels pleased and content, “then I need not have been anxious after all!” (*WFB* 149). He finally have made peace with the situations and happy that he has not hurt her and she is aware of his presence. He is full of hope now. When he awakes, he feels his mouth covered in kisses, not from the girl, but from a stray dog wagging its tail.

The last dream occurs after Mandel and Joll and most of the inhabitants have abandoned the town in fear of an attack by the native people. He dreams of children building a snow man. “In the middle of the square there are children at play building a snowman...they are not alarmed...too busy to cast me a glance.” He resists his desire to interfere as he feels that they should add arms but he realized “It is not a bad snowman.” (*WFB* 170) In this dream he does not see any girl.

Dominic head (92) suggests “The dream sequence amounts to an accreted narrative of sublimation and human advancement which belies the negativity of the final 'nowhere' of the novel, and which is validated by an appeal to a mimetic moment in which the lessons drawn from the dream-visions can be 'actualized' for the character: the magistrate awakes into a new present in which the traces of Empire are eradicated from his identity.”

To conclude In Cavafy’s poem the whole city is in turmoil, awaiting the arrival of the barbarians. In the poem everything has stopped working and progress of Empire has stopped. As civilization expects “Because the barbarians are coming today.” The message that “There are no barbarians any longer” seems vague and poem ends with these lines:

And now, what’s going to happen to us without barbarians?

They were, those people, a kind of solution.

The barbarians do not arrive in spite of waiting which is an act of criticism for civilization. They were “a kind of solution” in both the novel and the poem. Though in neither of these works do the barbarians make an appearance yet they have taught a lesson of self-consciousness. In the beginning the magistrate is attentive towards Empire’s principles and cruel measures and longs for justice. In his sub-conscious mind he is committed to the Empire as Empire is his only identity. The magistrate is a man who dedicatedly works for the Empire as long as he is able to live a quiet and peaceful life. But when Empire practices injustice he makes a distance and becomes an opponent and antagonist without uncertainty or inner conflicts. In the end the magistrate is on its way of resistance and search for freedom. The end of the novel is a kind of chaos as the end of the poem was also a mess. In the novel oppressors lose control and the soldiers themselves turn into thieves. The Magistrate refuses to leave the place and decides to tell the truth. He expresses the sense of his lack of cultural belonging and a state of loss:

“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” (*WFB* 170).

Civilization has become a kind of prison which one has created for oneself and which has imposed dissection between self and other. As in Cavafy's poem, no barbarians are coming to save us, either because explorers or colonialists before us have killed the beasts or exterminated the barbarians, or because the "others" of civilization are outside the labyrinth and inaccessible to us. The title suddenly takes an unexpected meaning, as the installation suggests that the real danger to civilization comes from within.

Both the novel and poem expect to end oppression as Louis Althusser says, "the peculiarity of art is to make us see, make us perceive, make us feel something which alludes to reality...what art make us see is the ideology from which it is born, in which it bathes from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it alludes." (203) The novel has represented racial injustice, exploitation and violence of the colonizers. The awakening of the magistrate against cruelty of the oppressors and his wish to live with the natives who will commence a new society with constructive rule with their own leaders.

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