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## Construction of the other in J.M. Coetzee's *waiting for the Barbarians*

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### Abstract

The construction of the other as hostile, strange and different is necessary for the existence of the self. The normativity of the self is always already contingent on the abnormality of the other. In Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* the construction of the myth of barbarians as deviant and living at the fringes of the empire then becomes essential for the 'civilized'. The paper traces the process of other station in the novel via which identities are categorized and solidified.

**Keywords:** civilized, barbarian, other, identity, power, discipline

### Introduction

"Human kind  
Cannot bear very much reality"  
-T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*

"There's a man all over for you, blaming his boots the faults of his feet."  
-Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*

The tag 'barbarian' is an epithet and not an essence; the self abjects its other by designating it as the 'barbarian'. The irony of the title, plot and theme of J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* is that the construction of the identity of the barbarian is contingent upon a perspective and a limit necessary for fashioning the 'self' as civilized, human and normative. In the novel, Coetzee tells the story of an imaginary Empire, set in an unspecified place and time, yet recognizable as a universalized or that allegorized version of South Africa during the Apartheid. The Empire has to guard its limit embodied as the Town, against the paranoid fear of its other— the nomadic, ethnic minority outside the boundaries of the Town. Coetzee's novel interrogates through this stark fable several anomalies in the binary operations between the human and inhuman, the civilized and the primitive, administration and violence, defense and torture. Both the coloniser and the colonised can be assigned with the marker 'barbarian' in different ways. The authoritarian and the ruthless colonial aggressor with his disciplinary and punitive cruelties is an barbarian entity itself against the ethics of human rights and the marginalized, pre-modern ethnic people living on the fringes of the Empire are labeled 'barbarian' which is an Eurocentric stereotype. By calling the imaginary enemy barbaric, the brutal imperialistic force can justify itself in spite of its own inhumanities. Therefore, the novel explores the myth of the barbarians as imperial construct and critiques the colonial project as a monstrous crime against humanity.

The novel is narrated by the Magistrate of a border-town demarcating the space of civilization from the zone of barbarians. The Magistrate's voice is ambivalent in terms of its role in the discourse of the Empire and the barbarians. On one hand, his voice comments bitterly of the 'new barbarians', that is, the cold-blooded Third Bureau led by Colonel Joll. On the other hand, he indirectly and unwittingly participates as per his function of administering and maintaining the limiting structure of the Empire against the barbarians, in the collective uncertainty and anxiety regarding the unknown other. The Gestapo-like Third Bureau claims that the barbarians are preparing to mutiny and thus, arrests a group of nomads to interrogate, torture, and crush in the name of military protection to the Empire. The Magistrate finds himself against the Third Bureau through three events that apparently locates him as the enemy of the Empire: firstly, his insistence that the torture of innocent tribesmen be stopped because it is a crime against humanity; secondly, his attempt to

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catharsise his sense of guilt by acting as a restorative, remedial and hospitable support to the Blind Woman after she was maimed by the atrocities of the Third Bureau; and thirdly, his venturing out into the alien territory of the barbaric other living on the other side of the desert which makes him a suspect of espionage.

Unable to control the inhuman anarchy of the 'civilised' military the Magistrate dissociates himself from the coercive methodologies of the imperial project. He does not become the romantic defender of the barbarians but acts with human sympathies, that can read as both a purgation of his guilt and the discourse of humanity freed from the discourse of civilization at whose deep centre there lays a core of institutionalized violence. Finally, neither the Magistrate's humanity vanishes nor can Colonel Joll establish any concrete evidence of imperial victory over the rebellious barbarians.

Through this novel J. M. Coetzee offers us a number of insights into the dark fascination of the western mind regarding the barbarian other. Firstly, state violence is equally barbaric although validated in the name of law. Secondly, the body of the *other's other*, that is, the Blind Woman is a site of contestation between imperial 'barbarism' and ethnic barbarism; racial conflict and gendered or sexualized conflict operate together through her body showing that the woman question is an important component of the Empire question. Thirdly, although sympathetic, the Magistrate cannot penetrate and master the barbarian other either sexually or linguistically showing that the two sides of the Empire are forever severed from each other because of the stereotypes of hierarchised difference. Fourthly, the Magistrate's storytelling acts as a surrogate for Coetzee's indictment of Apartheid. And last but not the least, the ambiguity of the barbarian's inaudible voice of self-representation puts the question of Empire/Barbarian dichotomy into dizzying height of paradox— 'can the subaltern speak?' and the impossibility of self-accessing the voice of the barbarians (Spivak, 1999)<sup>[4]</sup>. In the light of the above discussion it is confirmed that *Waiting for the Barbarians* is a political allegory aimed at unsettling the 'white man's burden' myth.

In Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the Magistrate is the narrator and the chief protagonist. He performs the role of the author's ideological spokesperson, a postcolonial critique of imperialism, human rights violation and racism. Literally, he is the administrative officer of a frontier town situated at the limits of modernity and primitivity or civilized and the barbarians.

The Magistrate discovers his jurisdiction suddenly encroached upon by Colonel Joll and his imperial army officially designated as the Third Bureau, deployed for investigating and regulating the supposedly secret rebellion of the 'barbarians'. Unable to resist the brutal methods adopted by Joll and his men, he feels collectively guilty of inhuman savagery in the name of national security. He gives shelter to a blind indigenous woman who has been left rootless, sightless and severely injured by the colonial 'interrogation'. However, unable to establish any meaningful intimacy with her, the Magistrate decides to venture into the unknown territory across the desert in order to reunite her with her people.

The expedition of the Magistrate to meet the barbarians is both a narrative event and an existential leap from *Being-in-itself* to a *Being-for-itself* as well as *Being-for-others* (Sartre, 2009)<sup>[3]</sup>. Through his expedition, the Magistrate experiences

an encounter with his other. The term 'barbarian' implies both the primitive nomads as well as the barbaric colonial administration epitomized by the inhuman disciplinary and punitive forces of the Third Bureau. The expedition to meet the 'new barbarians' forms a trajectory of his face-to-face meeting with his alterity— the nomads seen in a new light and the civilized army men seen as neo-savages.

The onward journey to the northern mountain was motivated by his desire to catharsise his sense of guilt in the physical and mental trauma of the Blind Woman. Before the journey he sits down to write two documents— an official record of his administrative goodwill and a confession of his psychological and spiritual unease; but he could not finish the latter.

The expedition begins during the limits of winter and spring suggesting that the Magistrate does not belong to the era of death and decay caused by racial hatred but he cannot, alone or completely, regenerate intimacy between the city and the barbarians. In the language of the Magistrate, "[t]he sun has risen but gives off no warmth." (63)

In the 'strange meeting' between the Magistrate and the barbarians, a number of surprising events take place. Firstly, the Magistrate adopts a completely unknown route to reach to the northern mountains, deserting the more regular trail. This is significant in the sense that it is not only a geographical journey but the self's voyage towards the alterity or the strange other. Secondly, the body of the Magistrate suddenly responds to the physical proximity of the Blind Woman for the first time during the journey through the desert. As long as the Magistrate was in the territory of the self, that is, the town bearing the history of the violence, his guilt prevented his eros. But in the land of the barbarians, in the desert of the otherness, their bodies wipe away the inhibitions and become hospitable towards each other's *jouissance*: "I feel her hand groping under my clothes... a ripple of sensual joy runs through me... in a minute five months of senseless hesitancy are wiped out and I am floating back into easy sensual oblivion" (69). Thirdly, during the expedition the Blind Woman is once again marginalized and authorised because of her menstruation. Even the servants treat her as untouchable and during the desert storm they would rather stay outside the tent than huddle together with her. Fourthly, the hardships of the journey are symbolic of the purgations and initiation rituals that we find in myths and epics. The Magistrate becomes the *Being-for-others* during the journey— his control, his power, his obsession, his guilt— every part of his self dissolve into the weakness of becoming-other. He meets and talks with the barbarians on their own ground not in an orientalist exoticism but in an uncanny bargain with otherness.

The Magistrate restores the Blind Woman to her own tribe but in the process had to bribe the barbarians, which shows their economic bargaining power and shrewdness; like the negative stereotype of primitive violence, the hyperbolic myth about the tribal people's innocence and ignorance is also dismantled. Ironically, the expedition proves that the barbarians are neither innately destructive nor 'noble savages'. While coming back with a heavy heart ironically it is spring. One of his men is injured at the foot, almost crippled by infected footsore. The entire troupe feels fatigued and exhausted and irritated because of the deglamourised end of their journey. At the gate of the city, the Magistrate expects a welcome back celebration but is promptly mobbed by military men and arrested for making a liaison with the

barbarians and put in the panopticon of discipline and punish.

Colonel Joll represents the coercive state power from whose perspective the barbarians are enemies and the transaction between the horsemen of the northern mountain and the Magistrate is suspected by the Third Bureau as an act of betrayal, a deal with the enemy, a breach of national security. Even before the expedition, the Magistrate was suspected to have entered an unholy alliance with the enemy by taking the ethnic woman into his bed. That is why the Magistrate is interrogated, imprisoned and tortured in the cell of his own office backyard. The Magistrate narrates the ordeal which he passes through during his arrest. His own story is identical to the imprisonment and persecution of the barbarian captives picked up by the soldiers of the Third Bureau. He is ill-fed, kept in unhygienic condition and circuted through physical pain behind the bars. Factual truth of the body as the receptacle of pain mingles during his interrogation and imprisonment with the philosophical truth about violence and barbarian nature. The torment through which the Blind Woman pass is redramatized on his own skin and in his own hunger, through his own sleeplessness and along his own fever— making the other's experience an object truth of the self. The incarceration of the Magistrate in his own lock-up is not a comic irony but a "body politic" showing how power, body and knowledge are enmeshed.

*Waiting for the Barbarians* also examines the difference between body and voice. The somatic vulnerability of the Magistrate does not choke the resistant discourse practiced by the Magistrate because even as a prisoner he warns criticizes, questions the military rule and its brutality on the civil society. In this regard the punishment of the Magistrate in the hands of the 'new barbarians' represents the conflict between humanity and totalitarianism, protest and genocide. Although Joll destroys the system of justice, the health of the prisoner, the power of civil government etcetera, he could not sadistically drown the voice of the Magistrate.

During an interrogation the Magistrate declares that he feels happy that he is tortured because that has helped him to know his enemy— not the barbarians, but the army. He tells the warrant officer that the peace is the norm between the self and the other until and unless, the self becomes cannibal: "We are at peace here...we have no enemies...unless we are the enemies" (76). Thus, it is apparent that being punished by the army of one's own government has given him freedom from the association with the totalizing social system. When forced to decipher the wooden slips, he reconstructs that the first slab reads war, but seen reversely it reads vengeance and upside down it reads justice.

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