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The Coloniser and the Colonised: A Study of Colonial Discourse and Race in J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*

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Abstract:

In any colonial system, the identity of the colonised is distorted through colonial discourse. Very often, colonial discourse denigrates the racial identity of the colonial subject within a binary system of the civilised and the barbarian. This idea is deftly explored by the South Africa born novelist J. M. Coetzee in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980). In the novel, Coetzee raises questions on the process of colonial identity formation which is hegemonic in nature. The novel focusses on the Magistrate who embodies a marginalised section of the Empire. His thoughtful commentary on the evils of the Empire represents a coloniser's sense of guilt for belonging, though unwillingly, to a tradition of oppression. In this paper, an attempt is made to understand those subtle lines of demarcation that differentiate a coloniser from a colonised. In doing so, the ambivalent nature of the colonial discourse vis-à-vis the concept of racial identity will be made manifest.

Keywords: Colonisation, Coloniser, Oppression, Violence, Race.

Colonial discourse refers to the set of prejudiced viewpoints about the colonised natives that the colonial master holds and internalises as a part of the colonial mission. An important aspect of the colonial discourse is the construction of the coloniser's identity vis-à-vis the colonial subject. The line of demarcation between the coloniser and the colonised is usually determined by several factors which include language, culture, religion and race among others. Whereas other factors are man-made and subject to change in the course of history, race is apparently taken as a fixed biological marker of one's identity within the constructed world of colonial discourse. However, this assumed centrality of race in determining the identities of the coloniser and the colonised is interrogated by J. M. Coetzee in his much talked-about novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980). A South Africa born novelist, J. M. Coetzee is a Nobel Laureate and the first author to win the Booker Prize twice. Growing up during the apartheid regime, J. M. Coetzee has had a first-hand experience of the racial prejudices and atrocities that characterise every colonial rule. The novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* is thus an honest reflection of the deep critical insight that Coetzee possesses on the issues of race and colonial discourse.

Waiting for the Barbarians is the story of an unnamed colonial Empire's struggle against its self-imposed imaginations of a fearful colonial resistance. As a novel projecting life at a settler colony, *Waiting for the Barbarians* emphasises how colonial discourse constructs the identity of the natives. The use of the pejorative term "barbarians" to denote

the nomadic tribes living in the outskirts of the frontier is an example of colonial discourse in operation. Such a derogatory representation of the native populations may be termed to as the “othering” (Boehmer 75) of the colonial subjects by the coloniser. During their long colonial history, the Europeans have continuously tried to project the colonised peoples as lesser beings in relation to them: less human, less civilised, as child or savage, or headless mass (Boehmer 76). In fact, the negation of the native civilisation and culture has remained an essential part of any colonial enterprise. Coetzee's novel is a fine attempt to highlight this idea. The novel depicts how the unnamed Empire see the native tribes as “barbarians” who are supposedly of an inferior rank both culturally and racially. But at a deeper level, the novel also provides an insight into the conflicts arising within the coloniser's mind. In so doing, it explores the complex nuances that characterise the definitions of the coloniser and the colonised.

It is revealed in the novel that albeit different nomadic tribes speaking different tongues inhabit the outskirts of the frontier town, the inhabitants of the Empire largely ignore these differences among the tribes. This is particularly so in the case of Colonel Joll, a representative of the Third Bureau of the Empire. It seems as if he considers every native as an enemy to the Empire. The Magistrate is shocked to see that Joll's expeditionary forces have brought to the outpost innocent prisoners who have no information regarding the supposed barbarian attack. Enraged by Joll's immaturity in dealing with the natives, the Magistrate lashes out at one of the soldiers: “...did no one tell him [Colonel Joll] these prisoners are useless to him? Did no one tell him the difference between fishermen with nets and wild nomad horsemen with bows? Did no one tell him they don't even speak the same language” (25-26)? Through the Magistrate's words, one can appreciate that Colonel Joll's actions here represent the typical coloniser's habit of generalising the native populations as a homogenous entity.

The people of the frontier town, under the impact of colonial discourse, consider physical ugliness as an essential feature of the native tribes. This is evident when the Magistrate narrates one particular incidence in the novel: “Three weeks ago a little girl was raped ... Her friends claim a barbarian did it. They saw him running away into the reeds. They recognized him as a barbarian by his ugliness” (164). Here it is noticeable that ugliness is assumed as a typical physical trait of a barbarian. Even the Magistrate himself, who apparently represents the voice of conscience, is unable to escape this colonial discourse. On one particular instance he describes the native prisoners thus: “...they stand in a hopeless little knot in the corner of the yard, nomads and fisherfolk together, sick, famished, damaged, terrified. It would be best ... if these ugly people were obliterated from the face of the earth and we swore to make a new start, to run an empire in which there would be no more injustice, no more pain” (34). The Magistrate uses different adjectives such as “sick”, “famished”, “damaged” and “terrified” and they at first seem to emphasise his empathy for the innocent native people who have been forcibly kept as captives in the yard. But when he addresses them as “ugly people”, the element of empathy in his voice gets replaced by an element of disgust for these people. Their ugliness grows so unbearable to him that he cannot stand their sight and expresses a strong desire to exterminate these people once and for all.

The Magistrate's interaction with the barbarian girl is an important event in the novel. Though the girl's racial identity is not clear, she is described as having non-European features such as "straight black eyebrows" (36) and "glossy black hair" (36). His treatment of the girl is marked by ambiguity. On the one hand he sympathises with her, but on the other hand his mind is fixated to her physical shortcomings. The Magistrate's aversion to the ugliness of the barbarian girl becomes most apparent when he describes her physical features:

I realize that if I took a pencil to sketch her face I would not know where to start. Is she truly so featureless? With an effort I concentrate my mind on her. I see a figure in a cap and heavy shapeless coat standing unsteadily, bent forward, straddle-legged, supporting itself on sticks. How ugly, I say to myself. My mouth forms the ugly word. I am surprised by it but I do not resist: she is ugly, ugly. (64)

The girl appears featureless and plain to him. However, her ugliness brings out two kinds of reaction from him. On the one hand, her ugliness surprises him. The Magistrate maintains that he has an "old delight in the warmth and shapeliness of women's bodies" (62). But the barbarian girl lacks the typical feminine qualities that can attract him towards her. He is surprised that the presence of the barbarian girl elicits no sensual thoughts in him. But on the other hand, he does not "resist" (64) this sense of surprise. This is because he thinks that she is, after all, a barbarian who is supposed to be unattractive and ugly. The Magistrate's rationality is blinded by the colonial discourse that to be a barbarian is to be ugly.

In the colonial system, there is always a cautious attempt on the part of the coloniser to shun any contact with the colonised. Frantz Fanon observes: "The native ... is the corrosive element, destroying all that comes near him; he is the deforming element, disfiguring all that has to do with beauty or morality; he is the depository of maleficent powers, the unconscious and irretrievable instrument of blind forces" (41). The colonised is looked at as a malevolent force and it is assumed that the coloniser will lose their sense of civilisation if they come into contact with these malevolent beings. This idea is not untrue in the life of the Magistrate. In the absence of any barbarian prisoners his life in the frontier town had been going on peacefully. But he loses his peace of mind once the barbarian prisoners arrive. He is greatly moved by their sufferings and turns into a sympathiser of the natives. His sympathy for the prisoners, particularly the barbarian girl, brings about his doom. Eventually, he is robbed of his position and honour, and transformed into an unwanted outcast in the Empire.

The root cause of the Magistrate's fall is his concern for the natives. The colonial system creates a permanent barrier between the worlds of the coloniser and the colonised. The Magistrate ignores the presence of this barrier and is subsequently punished by the Empire. The barbarian girl provides him with a chance to realise the fact of colonial oppression. Particularly, her physical deformity combined with her troubled personal history arouses the Magistrate's curiosity in her. He remarks: "It has been growing more and more clear to me that until the marks on this girl's body are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her" (44). It appears to him that an understanding of the marks on her body will enable him to understand the evils of the colonial system itself. However, at the same time, his

desire to “decipher” the marks on her body relegates her to the status of a mere object of scrutiny.

The concept of violence remains central to an understanding of the relation between the coloniser and the colonised. Regarding the concept of violence, Michel Foucault observes:

All human behaviour is scheduled and programmed through rationality ... What is most dangerous in violence is its rationality. Of course violence itself is terrible. But the deepest root of violence and its permanence come out of the form of the rationality we use. The idea has been that if we live in the world of reason, we can get rid of violence. This is quite wrong. (4)

Foucault proposes that two apparently discordant concepts such as violence and rationality can co-exist side by side. Colonel Joll's treatment of his prisoners seems to be in accordance with this Foucaultian perspective. Joll explains to the Magistrate how there is a special method of forcing a native prisoner to confess: ““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” (9-10). Joll is here rationalising the use of violence. He logically tries to justify the torturing of the captives. His rationality in this case is based on the make-belief that one can get truth through an application of force, as the Magistrate puts quite aptly: “Pain is truth; all else is subject to doubt. That is what I bear away from my conversation with Colonel Joll” (10). The readers thus come to see that colonial discourse can make a coloniser blind to the pain of the colonised.

In the colonial system, the rationalisation of pain and violence results in a dehumanisation of the colonised. It is a condition whereby the receiver of pain, the colonised, loses their human attributes in the eyes of the perpetrator of pain, the coloniser. In a particular scene of the novel the Magistrate describes how the soldiers of the Empire treat a group of barbarian captives just like animals: “A simple loop of wire runs through the flesh of each man's hands and through holes pierced in his cheeks. “It makes them meek as lambs,” I remember being told by a soldier who had once seen the trick: “they think of nothing but how to keep very still” (139). The barbarian captives are treated as if they are mere mechanical objects or speechless animals. Especially, the comparison of the prisoners to lambs is a clear act of dehumanisation. On another instance, the Magistrate compares an aboriginal fishermen family to animals while describing their manner of eating bread: “They stuff their mouths with this manna, chewing fast, not raising their eyes. A woman spits masticated bread into her palm and feeds her baby. I motion for more bread. We stand watching them eat as though they are strange animals” (26). Such a dehumanisation of the colonised is again expressed in these lines: “For a few days the fisherfolk are a diversion, with their strange gabbling, their vast appetites, their animal shamelessness, their volatile tempers” (28). Clearly, it appears that even the Magistrate fails to recognise that despite their supposed beastliness, the fisherman family are fellow humans with the same human feelings and emotions. However, the same Magistrate is later relegated to the status of an animal when the Empire imprisons

him for helping the barbarian girl. He says: “I live like a starved beast at the back door, kept alive perhaps only as evidence of the animal that skulks within every barbarian-lover” (165). The use of the animal imagery suggests that anyone who cares for barbarians has distanced themselves from the light of civilisation and thus deserve to be treated like animals.

The comparison of the colonised to animals, however, is a typical colonial practice. By emphasising the inhumanity of the colonised or by presenting them sub-humans, the coloniser tries to glorify their own human qualities. But Aime Cesaire believes that such a colonial practice has the opposite effect. He maintains:

... colonial conquest, which is based on contempt for the native and justified by that contempt, inevitably tends to change him who undertakes it; that the colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as an animal, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform himself into an animal. (5)

According to Cesaire, colonial violence or the practising of colonial discourse is a self-defeating act as it serves to dehumanise the coloniser themselves. By treating the colonised subjects as animals, the coloniser negates their own humanity and descends to beastliness. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the Magistrate emphasises this point when he lashes out at Colonel Joll:

“Those pitiable prisoners you brought in — are *they* the enemy I must fear? Is that what you say? *You* are the enemy, Colonel!” I can restrain myself no longer. I pound the desk with my fist. “*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! (153)

In a tone of deep sarcasm, the Magistrate accuses Colonel Joll of committing “filthy barbarities” against the so-called barbarians. Here Coetzee seems to hint at the idea that colonial discourse involves an element of hypocrisy in that those who call themselves civilised never act in a civilised manner. Hence, Colonel Joll is shown as falling from the height of civilisation to the depths of barbarity owing to his lack of humanity.

In the book *Peace and Democratic Society*, Amartya Sen talks about violence which seems relevant also in the context of postcolonial studies. Sen maintains: “Violence is the most recognizable form of disrespect, a very public indicator that respect and understanding have broken down” (61). While Foucault believes that violence and rationality can go hand in hand (4), Sen pronounces that an act of violence is an act of showing disrespect to someone. In that sense, rationalisation of violence in Foucaultian discourse becomes a rationalisation of the act of showing disrespect to someone. This situation is very much existent within a colonial system where the colonial master has no respect for the natives and their culture. Thus, in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the settlers of the frontier town look down upon the nomads – the native inhabitants – as inferior populations. But the Magistrate, as a man of conscience, discards this kind of attitude as far from being rational. He raises a serious question: “How do you eradicate contempt, especially when that contempt is founded on nothing more substantial than differences in table manners, variations in the structure of the

eyelid?" (70) The Magistrate is deeply unsettled by the fact that the colonisers' hatred for the colonised is based merely on cultural and racial grounds. He is in favour of maintaining a respectful attitude towards the native tribes who are racially and culturally different from the settlers. But he also believes that if necessary the natives must earn this respect even by means of violent acts. He says: "I wish that these barbarians would rise up and teach us a lesson, so that we would learn to respect them" (70). In a broader sense, the Magistrate here emphasises the necessity of a mutual respect among different human populations. In this regard, Tagore's viewpoint on the equality of human races seems relevant. Tagore says: "It is regrettable that any race or nation should claim divine favouritism and assume inherent superiority to all others in the scheme of creation" (1239). Evidently, the very foundation of any colonial mission is laid on the idea of inequality of human races. Tagore seeks to counter this very notion of inequality of races and envisions a world devoid of racial conflicts. In Coetzee's novel the Magistrate's attempt to recognise the respectability of the natives is reminiscent of Tagore's viewpoint.

The Magistrate's fight against the oppressive colonial system not only establishes him as a sympathiser-coloniser but seeks to disrupt the imaginary line that separates the coloniser from the colonised. In their edited book *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin observe:

As a geographical myth the centre/margin binarism leads by logical extension to such absurdities as the idea that all people in colonies are marginalised while nobody at the imperial centre can be marginalised; or, more crudely, that whites are the colonisers and blacks the colonised. Obviously if we try to find the centre of the empire, we will never find it ... because this structural notion omits the institutions and process by which power is disseminated and maintained. (213)

The three authors here expose the danger of arriving at a clear-cut division between the coloniser and the colonised. This is because the very concept of a colonial centre, as they see it, is unstable and wrought with absurdities. They emphasise that marginalisation can occur even within the colonial centre itself. In such a case, a lower-rank coloniser may be rendered voiceless or subjugated by those who hold a comparatively superior rank. Whether it will be convenient to label such a marginalised coloniser as a colonised is a potentially problematic idea. From this particular angle, it seems that the notion of race loses its functionality as a determiner of colonial relationship. The fact of colonialism thereby transcends the boundaries of racial identities and enters the realm of power-politics whereby the powerful oppresses the powerless or the less powerful. In Coetzee's novel, The Magistrate's case is a similar one. He is virtually powerless before Colonel Joll and the Warrant Officer Mandel who are provided with special powers by the Empire. His difference of opinion with them makes him lose his privileged position and he is treated as a traitor.

Taking our cue from Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, we may say that the Magistrate clearly falls into the category of the marginalised coloniser. He asserts his distanced position from the Empire thus: "...my alliance with the guardians of the Empire is over, I have set myself in opposition, the bond is broken, I am a free man" (106). To adhere to the rules set by the Empire had been like a burden on him, but he has now liberated himself from that burden.

However, such a freedom does not come without incurring the displeasure of the agents of the Empire. Thus, Colonel Joll tells the Magistrate: “You seem to want to make a name for yourself as the One Just Man, the man who is prepared to sacrifice his freedom to his principles” (152). Apparently, Colonel Joll mocks at the Magistrate’s humanitarian concern for the natives. He further tells the Magistrate that “to people in this town you are not the One Just Man, you are simply a clown, a madman” (152). Thus, the Magistrate’s fight against colonial injustice turns him into an outcast among his own people.

But despite harbouring a sense of sympathy for the natives, the Magistrate can actually do nothing to help them. He can merely regret his involvement in the colonial system and express his own guilt. He observes: “When some men suffer unjustly,” I said to myself, “it is the fate of those who witness their suffering to suffer the shame of it” (185). Such an acknowledgement of colonial injustices transforms the Magistrate into a voice of morality. In other words, one may assume that the Magistrate’s character represents the unrecorded voice of the sympathiser-coloniser in the long history of colonisation.

Towards the end of the novel the Magistrate is seen philosophising on the nature of colonial history. He wishes to go down in the colonial history as a person who despite being a coloniser himself never supports the colonial system: “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” (206). He eventually realises that colonial history always misrepresents the colonised populations. But such a misrepresentation may not exist forever as he believes that the colonised people would someday rise against such a colonial master-narrative. The Magistrate foresees a day when history will be rewritten from the perspective of the colonised — the oppressed and subjugated. It will be a history free from the impositions of colonial discourse, a history where the race and cultures of the colonised will find a justified representation. The ending of the novel is a symbolic one. It suggests that perhaps the supposed barbarian attack on the Empire is a necessary step towards a rewriting of the history of the colonised peoples.

Coetzee’s novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*, thus, is a gripping tale of colonial aggression and the native people’s resistance to it. By bringing up themes like racial violence and oppression of the marginalised within a carefully constructed fictional setting, Coetzee probably intends to escape censure of the contemporary apartheid government. One cannot also overlook the possibility of an allegorical reading of the text because Coetzee’s work seems to form a commentary on the theme of universal colonialism. Nevertheless, while commenting on Coetzee’s work it is imperative to eschew any tone of finality. This is because Coetzee is a clever writer who is difficult to pigeonhole. His inscrutability as a writer is reflected in his own comment: “I hope that a certain spirit of resistance is ingrained in my books; ultimately I hope they have the strength to resist whatever readings I impose on them” (“An Interview”). Clearly enough, Coetzee wants his works to be free from the intellectual burden of absolute interpretability. Thus, in keeping with such an astute stance of the author, *Waiting for the Barbarians* could be read as a text that offers unending insights into the issues of colonial discourse and race within the colonial system.

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