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USE OF VIOLENCE AS EMPIRE'S RESISTANCE TO EXISTENTIAL CRISIS IN  
J.M. COETZEE'S *WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS*

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ABSTRACT

The atmosphere created on the backdrop of *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) is a vicious ground of dissatisfaction for both the empire and the so called 'barbarians': for both it is the existential crisis – for the former it is to maintain the existence in the capacity of a coloniser, and for the latter it is to regain the former realm of existence. The empire carries a dual identity of an imperialist as well as a coloniser. Coetzee in his fiction uses no particular place or time. The story is set in an unknown frontier of an unnamed empire, therefore, projected on a spatial and universal level. The empire is shown as a coloniser and as functional as an imperialist force to spread colonial territory beyond its present line of control. The so called 'barbarians' are the colonised and also the target of the empire's imperialist enterprise. The empire is trapped in a created compulsion of both maintaining and enhancing their colony; whereas the 'barbarians' are fallen in a compulsion of safeguarding their freedom, identity and ethnicity. Coetzee depicts that the 'barbarians' either are not in a position to strike back for reclaiming their lost freedom or do not strike for reasons unknown or the concept of 'barbarians' itself is a hypothesis or a mental construct by the empire that literally does not exist. Whatever the case, the 'barbarians' are not barbaric in their action. Coetzee seems to reverse ironically the identity of the empire as barbaric and the so called 'barbarians' as the righteous and indigenous natives of the state forcefully occupied by the empire. On this ground, the present essay intends to analyse why and how the empire engages the means of violence and torture as coercive and repressive force to combat their existential crisis. In the conclusive portion of my essay, I would endeavour to see how Coetzee has fictionalised the theoretical stand of Foucault in connection with the coloniser's use of torture and terror to maintain its colonial authority.

Keywords: Existence, Crisis, Empire, Violence.

INTRODUCTION

J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* may rightly be called an attempt to fictionalising his political concern with regard to the institution of Apartheid in South Africa. Ever since its publication in 1980, the novel has been rigorously studied as a critique of Colonialism and the Imperialist's use of the mechanism of violence and torture from a postcolonial point of view. Kailash C. Baral in his

introduction to *J. M. Coetzee – Critical Perspectives*, remarks that Coetzee is "perhaps the only one who is rigorously engaged in exploring the ontological and other issues crucial to the fictional discourse...choosing his own voice of articulation and in particular, locating himself in the complex historical past and in the fractured social present of post-apartheid South Africa." (1) Coetzee started to write this novel in November, 1977, while in USA. In

the previous year, the world witnessed the Soweto Uprise, followed by Steve Biko's death in police custody in September, 1977. The South African Apartheid regime took every possible coercive means to curb the riot which was again sparked by Biko's death. Police were given full freedom to shoot down any suspected rebel. Huge number of black people died unnatural death and a lot many died in detention. There were criticisms from all fronts of the world against the South African white govt. Media was restricted from reporting of the incidents. Foreign journalists were asked to leave South Africa. Journalists and writers writing on the issue were put behind the bars or lynched to death. Reports of violence, state sponsored torture, killing, detention were not allowed to be reported in media. The censors exercised their reckless power by state aid. Every column of a newspaper article or a magazine, or any book to be published were brought under censorship cuts first then only allowed for printing, or publishing. Coetzee himself had expressed his view on this media censorship and state's unethical exercise of coercive power on media in his essay *Giving Offence: Essays on Censorship*: "The institution of censorship puts power into the hands of persons with a judgmental, bureaucratic cast of mind that is bad for the cultural and even spiritual life of the community." (2) Thus, Coetzee's deliberate choice for an unspecified locale with the unidentified magistrate and the only named character of Colonel Joll of unknown background or imperial lineage, directly points to his preoccupation with South African contemporary socio-political condition. However, as stated earlier, Coetzee projects the novel on a spatial level and thereby incorporating issues which are however not central to South Africa any longer, but gained the currency of universality which we are happy to categorise under the banner of postcolonial discourse.

### EXISTENTIAL CRISIS

In the beginning of the essay, let us recall Samuel Beckett's 1952 absurdist drama *Waiting for Godot*. At once it brings to our mind a titular similarity with our present interest, and Coetzee may have thought its thematic concern as analogous with that of his own. Estragon and Vladimir are seen waiting for

someone named Godot, who is supposedly a very influential and powerful person in the drama. But Godot never comes within the span of the drama as we read it or watch it on the stage. However, there is possibility of his coming some other day. The drama ends with this positive note but leaves many questions unanswered. It is not clear why Estragon and Vladimir were waiting for Godot. But we can assume that Estragon and Vladimir suffered an existential crisis in the absence of Godot and it was aggravated more by the postponement of Godot's arrival. They went on to ask each other what they could do or should do, though did not find any answer for themselves. They proposed to move away but did not move. Indeed, Beckett suggests that their existence is dependent upon Godot or / and his final arrival, therefore, they must continue with the act of waiting without doing anything meaningful. Now, let us consider Constantine P. Cavafy's 1904 poem, also entitled *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and that which Coetzee adopted for his fiction. First, let us read the last few lines from the poem:

"Why this sudden bewilderment, this confusion?

(How serious people's faces have become.)

Why are the streets and squares emptying so rapidly,

Everyone going home lost in thought?

Because night has fallen and the barbarians haven't come.

And some of our men just in from the border say

There are no barbarians any longer.

Now what's going to happen to us without barbarians?

Those people were a kind of solution." (3)

As Godot never arrived in Beckett's drama, so did the barbarians in Cavafy's poem. The entire city of Rome comes out in exultation to welcome the barbarians, but 'sudden bewilderment' and 'confusion' grasp them and 'everyone going home lost in thought', because not only that 'the barbarians haven't come' but also there is report that 'there are no barbarians any longer'. Cavafy poses a serious question: what is going to happen to the people of Rome without barbarians? The answer

is unknown but of course the barbarians in the poem 'were a kind of solution' to the Romans. The Romans are fallen into an unspecified but a serious problem without the existence of the barbarians. Doubtlessly, the problem is related to their existence. The Romans defined and identified themselves with respect to those Barbarians who lived beyond the border of their country. But, since 'barbarians' are no longer there, the Romans have fallen into their own existential crisis.

The idea of existential crisis is a theoretical offshoot of the philosophy known as Existentialism. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche are considered the unequivocal fathers of existentialism. Existentialism is the philosophy of 'Being', coupled with its inherent fear of encountering the danger of Nothingness. The experience of existential crisis of the coloniser and that of the colonised are different. For the coloniser, the experience is well deliberated in the following lines by B.B. Homayra and A. Eshita: "Colonialism is a state of mind fuelled by the superciliousness of superiority originated from supremacy in complexion, economic solvency and crude political ideology. It imperialistically creates existential crisis by absorbing inner spirits of any free man. This tyrannical philosophy endows the colonizers with immense despotic empowerment to rule people who are considered as unruly blended with animalistic attitude." (4) Indeed, the fact that the coloniser's mind set as superior to the colonised in all respect, socially, culturally, economically, and politically, is the root cause behind the fixity with existential crisis for the coloniser. As in their essay, B.B. Homayra and A. Eshita further points out how George Orwell was 'de-existentialised' under the compulsive strains of the circumstantial pressure and shot the elephant in *Shooting an Elephant*, likewise, the colonisers also fall under similar strains or pressure once their superiority is anyhow challenged.

### **VIOLENCE AS RESISTANCE**

Apropos to the progress of this essay, it is highly pertinent to understand the exact signification of the term 'violence'. Frantz Fanon in his *The Wretched of the Earth* (first published in 1961), enumerated colonialism as a "violence in its natural state and it will only yield when confronted

with greater violence." (5) Fanon's advocacy for counter-violence holds that the coloniser applies 'violence' which the colonisers do not call 'violence' but call it 'force' (therefore, legal). But what is 'force' from the colonisers' point of view, is 'violence' to Fanon and to the colonised people as well. The distinguishing feature separating violence from 'force' is that violence is used to describe illegitimate, illegal, arbitrary, unpredictable and aggressive actions whereas 'force' is used in most societies to describe actions of government agencies enforcing the law. Force is defined as actions that are legitimate, regulated, reactive and defensive in nature. (6) It is actually the question of legality or an ideological or ethical biasness or a political outlook that constructs the meaning of the word 'violence'.

Postcolonial critics have unanimously agreed on the use of violence as a machinery of colonialism's defence of its ubiquitous power, its maintenance and continuity. Therefore, violence is a kind of shield and a medium of 'Resistance' to keep their superiority and the sovereignty insulated. The colonial system, as Samuel Kalman observed, operated violence with its different facets that included not only the physical torture but also a planned and systematic method to phase out gradually everything that was ethnic or indigenous and superimpose the coloniser's cultural practices from dress code to food habit and from education to religion. (7) The colonial historians saw this as the coloniser's endeavour toward civilizing and modernizing the savage, uncouth natives and the critics of colonialism saw it in terms of 'hegemony'.

In this essay, when we anatomise 'violence' with respect to the novel in discussion, (to be frank), we either empathise with the 'barbarians' or think from their point of view. Indeed, Coetzee himself sees the colonisers as inevitable perpetrators of violence with its multiple facets of torture that the colonisers employ in order to maintain their existence, or say survival, with the pre-defined and ideologically held belief of superiority over the colonised 'other'.

These are very relevant questions to ask now: Is there a theme of waiting in *Waiting for the Barbarians*? Who are waiting for the 'barbarians'? Why are they waiting for the 'barbarians'? Do the

'barbarians' ever come? Another very fundamental question is that: who are 'barbarians'? The people whom the colonisers in the novel address and identify as 'barbarians' are actually, according to the Magistrate, the fishermen of the adjoining areas and the 'nomads' who come during winter for their trades and go back. Coetzee never shows that these people are ever in a true capacity to strike against their superior masters / colonisers. Basically, the implication as well as the application of the term 'barbarians' is hypothetical and a mental construct in Coetzee's novel. The logic behind construction as well as application of this term is an attempt to self-defining the position of superiority and existential validity in the capacity of a coloniser. Hence, in order to maintain that position of superiority and existential validity, the coloniser must use violence and torture.

Answering to the above series of questions, one must confess that there is literally no act of 'waiting for the barbarians' by the empire in the novel, since there was actually no 'barbarians' in the frontier. Theoretically, and not practically, the colonisers were waiting for the 'barbarians', in order to reinforce their identity. More than the arrival of 'barbarians' in the novel, the urge of producing/fabricating them or/and validating their presence along the frontier was greater for the colonisers. Colonel Joll either knew it well or ignored (which is itself an act of violence) the knowledge that there was actually no barbarian in the frontier. From the reports of the Magistrate, Colonel must have understood that the old man was not a barbarian, yet he had to prove it that he was one of them (barbarians). And to prove this, Colonel Joll had to kill the old man by inhuman torture. This is an instance of extreme physical violence. Colonel was either non-responsive or elusive in response to the Magistrate because he knew that if the Magistrate was true, then the Empire must be false. If Colonel would have been convinced by the Magistrate, summarily the whole edifice of the Empire's Colonial enterprise must have crumbled. We see Colonel Joll searching adamantly for 'truth'. Neither the Magistrate nor a reader can really understand what Joll really means by his finding for 'truth' or what is actually the 'truth' being searched for. Examine his

answer to the Magistrate's query about how one knows that a man speaks the truth: "There is a certain tone... A certain tone enters the voice of a man who is telling the truth. Training and experience teach us to recognize that tone." (8) This is basically a non-sense answer. And Colonel Joll also knew that it is non-sense. It is actually an attempt either to befool or avoid the Magistrate since the latter's sympathetic adrenaline rush for the 'barbarians' was ultimately harmful for the empire and caused threat to the empire's establishment. Colonel Joll is but a representative of the empire. Being coloniser, his finding for 'truth' is rather an attempt to construct the 'truth' as the coloniser wants it. For this Joll himself distorts the 'truth' while reporting the reason of death of the old man during the so called interrogation process. Colonel Joll has been sent to find out the 'truth' by his higher authority since there was concern that "the barbarian tribes of the north and west might at last be uniting." (9) It will be in fact no exaggeration to assume that it was rather rest and not the unrest of the 'barbarians' at the frontier that brought sweat to the imperialist bosses. While the 'barbarians' are at rest, the empire must be at unrest and turn violent.

It is noticeable that there is a certain gap of communication between and among the hierarchies of the colonial administration in the context of our present novel. This may be a created one as is common in administrative exercises. We see that after killing the old man, Colonel Joll reports otherwise and mentions of violence on the part of the old man which is, as mentioned earlier, a distortion of fact and an act of violence. The Magistrate is equally a responsible culprit in distorting the same fact. Therefore, the reporting itself causes spread of wrong message to their next level. The ethics of communication is violated. This is just an instance and there are more such examples. Colonel Joll is introduced as an officer of the Third Bureau. It may be assumed that he is a visitor sent by his immediate higher officers who never having visited the frontiers collected reports of rising barbarian activity/unrest along the frontier. Presumably, the reports had no real basis or validity. There is also a gap of communication between the

Magistrate and the Colonel. Being higher officer, Colonel Joll does not mind to pay attention to what the Magistrate says or reports. Instead, Colonel Joll staunchly devotes and deploys himself and his men in finding out the 'barbarians'. Literally unable to find the 'barbarians', he ends up constructing the fabricated 'truth' and prepares fighting against the 'barbarians' that subsequently ends miserably. This gap of communication between and among the imperialist authorities is also a reason why the imperialists needed to resort to 'violence' at both their individual and collective levels to extract the 'truth' or rather bring out the fabricated 'truth'. The Magistrate, whose feelings have an empathetic connection with the 'barbarians', is also a culprit of same offence and a perpetrator of violence in his own individual way, particularly in his relationship with the 'barbarian' girl. The Magistrate admits how like a difficult map, he endeavoured to decipher the 'body' of the girl and yet was unable to read it complete or read it full. It was his failure and the failure of his conscious self as a coloniser. It was also the failure of the coloniser to decode the message in the 'body' of the colonised 'other'.

## CONCLUSION

Michel Foucault in the first chapter of *Discipline and Punish* writes: "If torture was so strongly embedded in legal practice, it was because it revealed truth and showed the operation of power. It assured the articulation of the written on the oral, the secret on the public, the procedure of investigation on the operation of the confession; it made it possible to reproduce the crime on the visible body of the criminal." (10) If we think *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) as a 'body' of text, Coetzee therefore 'revealed the truth' and 'showed the operation of power' of the coloniser and their articulation of the self defined identity of superiority and their impeccable, persistent and inflexible endeavour to superimpose that identity of superiority on the colonised 'other' and in the process their inadvertent crime of violence and torture 'on the visible body' of the so called 'barbarians'. *Waiting for the Barbarians* is no doubt a depiction of exceptional violence and torture at both physical and psychological levels. Coetzee goes deeper to analyse the reasons and the means of

such tortures. Failure of communication, challenge to meet the existential validity, challenge to bear and maintain the Coloniser's Sovereignty – all join together to make the colonisers violent and aggressive. Reading *Waiting for the Barbarians* exposes a condition of psychosis with the colonisers – a disruptive, non-concomitant mental framework which they constantly endeavour to keep compact and unified. It also exposes the colonial administrative framework or system which at its every hierarchic level felt a dissociated engagement which however was carried out diligently and mechanically. Individual sympathy or empathy had no place within the framework, neither any humanitarian ground to work upon. Torture was regarded as 'a kind of solution' and an indispensable tool of power politics.

Michel Foucault had mentioned of three distinct types of tortures, namely 'Interrogational', 'Spectacular' and the 'Terroristic'. Colonel Joll's torture of the old man and the boy and subsequent killing of the old man falls in this first type. Secondly, Colonel Joll's physical torture against the captured fishermen as 'barbarians' as well as the tortures the Magistrate was made victim of, fall in the second type of Foucauldian division. As the term implies, this type of torture, according to Foucault, intends to make it a public show with the motive to disseminate a certain message and instil fear in the mind of the possible defaulters. The body of the criminal is the prime target of this show. "Not only must people know, they must see with their own eyes. Because they must be made to be afraid; but also because they must be the witnesses, the guarantors, of the punishment, and because they must to a certain extent take part in it." (11) Finally, Colonel Joll's expedition to hunt down the so called 'barbarians' on a prejudiced and fabricated context may be categorised the third type of torture as per Foucault. It may be surmised that Coetzee had fictionalised, as was mentioned in the Introduction, the Foucault's observations of levels of tortures.

Hence, violence has been a machinery of Resistance for the coloniser to combat his own fear and doubt and to reinforce and maintain his existence and superior civilized identity compared to the colonised 'other'. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*,

the empire attributed the name and created the identity of the 'barbarians'. It was but a theoretical underpinning to work upon practically in order to define their own identity. As mentioned earlier, the colonised 'barbarians' had never been aggressive, neither they showed any motive of retaliation; instead they were silent, passive and non-reactive. They seem to have resigned to their fate and accepted the superiority of the colonisers. Unfortunately, this silent, passive and non-reactive behaviour of the 'barbarians' threatened the empire's foundation of civilization. Thus, Coetzee lays bare the wrong juxtaposition of meaning and signification of the dichotomy of barbarity and civilization in the context of colonialism.

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