

THE POLITICS OF THE CORPOREAL IN J.M. COETZEE'S *WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS*

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(Abstract)

Colonial incursion into different societies and cultures tends to marginalize and oppress the experiences and identity of the native population. The socio-political changes brought about by imperialism create an imbalance in power and representation between the colonizers and the natives. This paper attempts to study how the nuances of contact are problematized in the corporeal. The novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* written by J.M. Coetzee penetratingly studies how the subjugation of natives through violence and force manifests in the corporeal, and how this in turn is an effective tool of socio-political control in a colonial set-up. It will also explore how dehumanizing the body is a method of cultural imperialism exercised by colonizers.

Keywords: corporeal, desire, stereotype, mission, culture, native

Introduction

The novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* by J.M. Coetzee offers a sustained exploration of the dynamics of colonialism and imperialism in a colonized setting. Coetzee has played a central role in the interrogation of colonialism and its effects in his writings. Being born in South Africa and having lived the better part of his life in the country, it is appropriate that his novels are studied in terms of the discussions surrounding postcolonialism. The selected novel offers a system of colonial set-up in which a study of the colonial corporeal symbolism and complexities of colonial social pathology can be conducted.

The setting of *Waiting for the Barbarians* (hereafter, *Barbarians*) is as enigmatic as its narrative style. Much of the events in the novel take place in a military-style encampment, where the unnamed narrator and protagonist- simply called the Magistrate- is stationed. The camp is surrounded by a desert-like terrain, with frequent mentions of the 'river-people' and the 'barbarians' who live in a faraway land. The camp is populated with soldiers and natives. It is made apparent that the soldiers are stationed there to rule over the natives under the command of the ruling power only referred to as the Empire. The colonized country itself is unnamed. According to Michael Valdez Moses:

Coetzee's reluctance to supply the precise historical coordinates of his story stems not merely from political discretion or postmodern literary proclivities, but more deeply from his commitment to explore disturbing questions that cannot be answered by the outcome of current political developments in South Africa. (116)

The native people in *Barbarians* are controlled by the excessive physical violence and brutality of the military wing of the Empire. The brutish Colonel Joll is the representative of the Third Bureau, a much feared organization within the Empire entrusted with the task of subduing the natives through sheer brutality. The so-called 'barbarians' are caught as prisoners on the numerous raids of the soldiers and flogged and beaten in public so that it instills fear in the hearts of the natives. Though Joll and the Magistrate are both representatives of the Empire, their perspective on ruling take different shapes as the Magistrate cannot make sense of the violence. The difference in their tactics and approaches is important for underscoring the contradictions of the mission of colonialism.

Mission and control:

The author perhaps tries to diverge from the image of the typical colonial ruler through the character of the Magistrate. The Magistrate attempts to atone for the violence of the Empire by returning the barbarian girl to her people. Though he might not be a militaristic

sadist like Joll, he falls into the category of what Elleke Boehmer calls a ‘colonial idealist’ (59). Though he loathes Joll’s tactics, he is acting in a ‘drama of colonial self-making’, where he ‘realizes himself by imposing his rule on another culture’ (59). The journey he undertakes to return the barbarian girl is to appease his own guilt. On his return, he is branded a madman by Colonel Joll and his men and becomes their prisoner. But the novel ends with the Magistrate resuming legal administration of the land after Colonel Joll and his men leave the land disenchanted and unable to defeat the barbarians.

In commenting on postcolonial ideas and discourse, it is important to note that recording history or experiences is not an easy task for a writer. Coetzee has declined to give his setting and his major characters in *Barbarians* a name. Further, the native populations in the novel are not one homogenous unit. There are the river-people who live not far from the military encampment that are relatively peaceful and the barbarians who live far away and according to the soldiers, are constantly preparing to invade the Empire. Leela Gandhi has said that the postcolonial deference to the “homogenising and all-inclusive category ‘colonialism’ fails, first, to account for the differences in the culturally and historically variegated forms of both colonization and anti-colonial struggle” (168).

It is therefore necessary to acknowledge the different forms of colonization felt across cultures. There could be two reasons for Coetzee in *Barbarians* in deliberately refusing to give the colonized country a name. One, to show that there is a deep incommensurability in the experiences of colonialism, and secondly, that there is also a translational element to the colonial experience as imperialism cannot be limited to one culture only. Aijaz Ahmad echoes this statement in his critique of postcolonialism by stating that “. . .the fundamental effect of constructing this globalized trans-historicity of colonialism is one of evacuating the very meaning of the word and dispersing that meaning so wide that we can no longer speak of determinate structure. . .” (9).

In *Barbarians*, it is evident that Coetzee is critical of the socio-political changes brought about by the colonial incursion of the Empire. The Empire uses force and violence to control the native population and to beat them into submission. The social issues and pathologies that arise out of the imbalance of power are frequently demonstrated through the use of the human body as a metaphor. The Magistrate starts a relationship with an unnamed, disfigured, partially blind barbarian girl which involves a strange ritual of intimacy – the washing of the barbarian girl’s body by the Magistrate. Through this relationship, the author offers an interrogation of the colonizer’s construction of the native body. The Magistrate feels a sense of calm washing the disfigured legs of the barbarian girl every night before bed. He essentially ‘use(s) her body in a foreign way’ (Coetzee 32) for his own needs. The strange intimacy with the girl drives away his nightmares as the ritual is followed by him “overcome with sleep as if poleaxed’ (33) as these ‘dreamless spells are like death to me, or enchantment, blank, outside time’ (33).

The act of the intimate and strange treatment of the barbarian girl’s body for the benefit of the Magistrate is indicative of the colonizer’s appropriation of a native’s body and assumption that it exists merely to serve him. The Magistrate’s concerns reflect Boehmer’s statement about the relationship between a native and a colonizer, that ‘there is the self-consciously superior white man. . .believing himself disconnected from native life’ (61). The act of the Magistrate is not because he has genuine affection for the girl; it is just that the close proximity of her body drives away his nightmares and helps him sleep. Boehmer reiterates, “The European in the Empire rejects the native, yet he also requires the native’s presence in order to experience to the full his own being. . .” (62).

The fascination of the magistrate with the barbarian girl’s body communicates an awareness of the author of totalizing stereotypes in the discourse of colonizers and in popular culture about the body of the native. Colonial discourses have served to create and perpetuate

stereotypes about native populations (Pearson 28). The author's critique also shines a light on the synchronic function of the racial stereotype. According to Homi Bhabha, this stereotype also functions as a fixed, dehistoricized form of 'knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always in place, already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated and therefore recurs in changing historical and discursive conjunctures' (66). There is no taking into account the history of the native by the colonizer, in this case the Magistrate, regarding the past life of the barbarian girl. What he only deigns to know is that her disfigurement was a result of violence inflicted by the soldiers upon her body, and her body is now essentially under his control, as she 'yields to everything' (32). It does not dawn on the Magistrate the sheer imbalance of power between himself and the girl to question why the girl does not protest against his intimate touches. In fact, he is lost in the sensuality and intimacy of the act, and he closes his eyes 'to savour the blissful giddiness' (30). The experience becomes one-sided as the Magistrate is oblivious to the effects his actions have on the girl.

The Magistrate's failure to distinguish the barbarian girl from the other native prisoners when they first arrived at the encampment is indicative of the method of 'ethnographic synecdoche, a practice whereby a cultural whole is putatively apprehended through attending closely to one or more of its parts' (Clifford 31). The girl is present in the encampment because she was brought as a prisoner, along with her people, in the first place. Try as he might, the Magistrate cannot remember ever seeing the girl amongst the prisoners when they were first brought to the barracks. He admits that he is supposed to know and be able to tell her face apart from the others as he revisits his memory, but he is unable to do so. He says his eye 'passed over her, but (he) has no memory of that passage' because the girl was still 'unmarked' (36). The evidence of violence on the girl is what distinguishes her from the others in the eyes of the Magistrate; otherwise there is nothing distinctive about the girl.

Although the Magistrate believes that he is objective in his assessment of the girl's character, his words echo that of the colonial discourse regarding native peoples in his inability to differentiate the girl from the other natives before she was disfigured by the soldiers. In a sense, it is the marking of the girl by violence that gives her individuality and distinction in the eyes of the Magistrate. This sentiment echoes the tendency of colonial writing to generalize the appearance and experience of native peoples. Colonial writing also often fails to accommodate differing and contradictory processes in the struggle against oppression. These struggles could be, in Dipesh Chakrabarty's words, the 'plural and heterogeneous struggles whose outcomes are never predictable, even retrospectively, in accordance with the schemas which seek to naturalize and domesticate this heterogeneity' (20).

Power and desire:

In analyzing the perspective of the Magistrate when it comes to his attitude regarding the women population, it is important to acknowledge the semblance and similitude of his character with his predecessors in postcolonial writing. Robert Young has talked about 'the sexual economy of (colonial) desire' (90) in that colonial rulers often tend to stereotype their colonies as sexual paradise where the behaviour of the natives is hedonistic when it comes to sex. The Magistrate is not exempt from the tendency to sexualize the female body. Before he is acquainted with the barbarian girl, he frequents brothels at night and soon after his return from delivering the barbarian girl, he embarks on a sexual relationship with a native girl. What the Magistrate remarks on about his latest relationship after his return from the wild is that the girl has four children, with the implication that the fathers are all different men (Coetzee 165). This implication is again an unconscious indictment of the native population as sexually licentious; in this case especially the females.

In the encounters between the females and the Magistrate when it comes to matters of the corporeal, the stark imbalance of power is striking. Homi Bhabha has said that within colonial discourse, 'the body is always simultaneously inscribed in both the economy of pleasure and desire and the economy of discourse, domination and power'. He also says that 'colonial power 'demands an articulation of racial and sexual forms of difference' (67). The sexual encounters the Magistrate has with the women expose the relationship between sexual desire and the desire for domination. It cannot be lost to the Magistrate that the women he has liaisons with are also indebted of him for the security and sustenance he provides. He remarks on how yielding and obliging the women are to his actions and questions. In this context, it has to be pointed out that the women might not have a choice but to be and do so. These relationships also expose the nuances of the difference between the magistrate and the women, identifying the construction of otherness in the colonial context based on their body and sexuality.

The Magistrate's perception of the female native body evokes the colonial preconception about a native people's sexuality. It is reminiscent of what Frantz Fanon had said in *Black Skin, White Masks*:

Every intellectual gain requires a loss in sexual potential. The civilized white man retains an irrational longing for unusual eras of sexual licence, of orgiastic scenes, of unpunished rapes, or unrepressed incest. In one way these fantasies respond to Freud's life instinct. Projecting his own desires on to the Negro, the white man behaves as if the Negro really had them. (117)

The Magistrate is complicit in this recognition of the 'other' in his female companions. Though his attitude is detached, he does see the body of his female companions as something that will provide him solace and comfort, and drive away his nightmares. There is no recognition of the women as distinct individuals, but rather a means through which he

can appease his guilt. His approach to them is in his own mind a stark departure from the brutalities of men like Colonel Joll, and perhaps in this differentiation he is complicit in the perpetuation of a stereotype. The female bodies bluntly function as objects of sexual obsessions and intimate desires. Despite the obvious disfigurement of the barbarian girl, her body is still aestheticized as a giver of solace and comfort.

The projection of the desires of the Magistrate onto the body of the women suggests the concept of binarism in this particular context. By detaching and distancing himself from the women, the Magistrate insists on being in opposition to the sexuality of the women. It is evident that he clearly does not see his sexuality on the same plane as those of the women. There is a ground of contestation between sensuality and Puritanism; with the native women being sensual objects of desire in the face of a rational man like the Magistrate who could not see himself more different from the native women. The fact that the barbarian girl remains unnamed throughout the novel is also significant. It is as if giving her a name would endow personality and individuality on her, and perhaps would force the Magistrate to see her as a person. It is appropriate that from the perspective of the Magistrate, she is devoid of a name and thus of individuality, and that she exists solely as an object of obsession and intimacy.

The denial of individuality to the native women also disavows individual difference which in turn functions as an assimilation of culture. This act obscured the individual and collective identity of the natives and dispossesses them of their history. It is necessary to accept and engage with the complexities of the different people and their different struggles in *Barbarians* in order to claim a semblance of individuality and identity in the face of forced monocultural conformity.

Conclusion:

The authorial voice of Coetzee in creating a disfigured barbarian girl serves the purpose of highlighting the social pathologies prevalent in the colonial society. The author

also implies that these social problems are caused by the political corruption and violence of the Empire. The girl's disfigurement is a result of brutality of the Empire to subdue the native population, and it is interesting to note that it is the female body that takes centre-stage as a testament to this which evokes Robert Young's statement "the orthodox hierarchy of gender is confirmed and reaffirmed at the level of race" (111). Though the native population suffers from the cruelty of the Empire with no discrimination of sex, it is the barbarian girl's body that becomes a symbol of this cruelty.

Coetzee draws attention to the issue of the politics of the corporeal in a colonial set-up in *Barbarians*. He does this to examine the representation of native cultures in colonial writing and to develop a perspective regarding cultural differences. Colonial writing has often made universalist claims regarding geography, history and sexuality and this universalism must be rejected in postcolonial literature because 'whenever a universal signification is claimed for a work, . . . Eurocentric norms and practices are promoted. . .and all others correspondingly relegated to subsidiary, marginalized roles" (Barry 186).

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