

**IMPACTS OF APARTHEID ON J.M. COETZEE'S MAJOR
WORKS: WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS,
THE LIFE & TIMES OF MICHAEL K, AND BOYHOOD:
SCENES FROM PROVINCIAL LIFE**

**İrk Ayrımcılığı'nın, J. M. Coetzee'nin Barbarları
Beklerken, Michael K'nın Yaşamı ve Yaşadığı Dönem,
ve Taşra Hayatından Manzaralar Adlı Başlıca
Eserlerine Olan Etkisi**

Neslihan GÜNAYDIN¹

Abstract

South African author and academic, John Maxwell Coetzee is one of the most renowned writers who has won the Booker Prize twice and was awarded the 2003 Nobel Prize in Literature. He is well-known for his depiction of his native country both during and after apartheid. As a writer who is strongly influenced by his background of being born and brought up in South Africa during apartheid, Coetzee adopts anti-imperialist feelings and accordingly the traces of his personal beliefs and experiences can obviously be seen in his books. His sense of alienation in a multi-cultural society becomes the focus of many of his works. Dislocating and de-politicised features in Coetzee's writing add universalism into his novels and rescue him from the traditions of politically committed fiction. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that Coetzee both serves committed anti-apartheid writing and addresses the general, universal issues of humanity such as suffering, tyranny, racism or oppression through an interpretative method. It also aims at indicating that binary oppositions like civilized versus barbarians, black versus white or isolation, alienation and identity crisis are the major issues explored in J.M.Coetzee's major works. Therefore it is inferred from Coetzee's writing style that his works denote an allegorical attack on the apartheid system in which suffering, torture and violent deaths are inevitable as a result of the discrepancies between clashing races.

Key Words: *Civilized, empire, barbarian, the Other, apartheid, oppressed.*

Özet

Güney Afrikalı yazar ve akademisyen John Maxwell Coetzee, Booker ödülünü iki kez kazanmış ve 2003 Nobel Edebiyat ödülüne hak kazanmış en ünlü yazarlardan biridir. Hem ırk ayrımcılığı sürecinde, hem de sonrasında yapmış olduğu ülkesinin tasvirleriyle iyi bilinmektedir. İrk ayrımcılığının yoğun olduğu bir dönemde Güney Afrika'da doğmuş ve yetişmiş bir geçmişe sahip olup, üzerinde bunun güçlü etkilerini taşıyan bir yazar olarak Coetzee, imparatorluk karşıtı hisler taşımıştır ve dolayısıyla da kişisel inanç ve tecrübelerinin izleri kitaplarında açıkça görülebilmektedir. Çok kültürlü bir toplumdaki yabancılık hissi,

¹ Diğ. Süleyman Şah Üniversitesi, e-posta: ngunaydin@ssu.edu.tr

çoğu eserinin odak noktası olur. Coetzee'nin eserlerindeki “yerinden çıkarma” ve “politika-dışı” unsurlar romanlarına evrensellik katar ve onu siyasi roman geleneklerinden kurtarır. Bu yazının amacı, Coetzee'nin hem ırk ayrımcılığına karşı bir yazına hizmet ettiğini, hem de acı, zorba yönetim, ırkçılık ya da baskı gibi insanlığın genel ve evrensel konularına hitap ettiğini yorumlayıcı bir yöntemle göstermektir. Yazı, ayrıca, medeni-barbar, siyah-beyaz gibi ikili karşıtlıkların, soyutlanma, yabancılaşma ve kimlik krizinin J.M.Coetzee'nin başlıca eserlerinde araştırılan önemli konular olduğunu belirtmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu yüzden, Coetzee'nin yazı stilinden de anlaşılıyor ki, Coetzee'nin eserleri, çatışan ırkların bir sonucu olarak, acı, işkence ve şiddet içeren ölümleri kaçınılmaz olarak barındıran ırk ayrımcılığı sistemine alegorik bir saldırı niteliğindedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Medeni, imparator, barbar, Diğeri, ırk ayrımcılığı, ezilmiş.*

Impacts of Apartheid on J.M. Coetzee's Major Works: *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *The Life & Times of Michael K*, and *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life*
Introduction

South African author and academic, John Maxwell Coetzee is one of the most renowned writers who has won the Booker Prize twice and was awarded the 2003 Nobel Prize in Literature. He is well-known for his depiction of his native country both during and after apartheid. As a writer who is strongly influenced by his background of being born and brought up in South Africa during apartheid, Coetzee adopts anti-imperialist feelings and the traces of his personal beliefs and experiences can be seen in his books. His sense of alienation in a multi-cultural society becomes the focus of many of his works.

***Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980)**

Published in 1980, J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* is about the denunciation of apartheid regime in South Africa. It is possible to make a connection between the poem “Waiting for the Barbarians” by Greek-Egyptian poet Constantine P. Cavafy and Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* as well as an allusion to Samuel Beckett's existentialist play, *Waiting for Godot*. In Cavafy's poem the whole city is in disorder and waiting for the arrival of barbarians, “the Other”. Everybody anticipates their arrival endlessly as if barbarians were a solution to all their problems. However, as we see at the end of the poem, there are no barbarians coming and maybe, as Maria Boletsi points out in her article *The Travels of a Literary Topos: C.P.Cavafy's “Waiting for the Barbarians” and its Visual Restagings*, “barbarians are not out there, but within the civilized—a constitutive part of their being, which can assume productive functions when it is embraced as part of the self. The civilized citizens are barbarians to themselves, and it is up to them to transform this internal barbarism into a constructive cultural force”(Boletsi 11).

We come across the same psychology and fear in Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*. There are conflicts between barbarians and the civilized and the fear of invasion from the outside leads to violent attacks on barbarians and even within the civilization. In *Waiting for Barbarians* the empire questions: “what are these barbarians dissatisfied about? What do they want from us?” [...] “They want an end to the spread of settlements across their land. They want their land back, finally. They want to be free to move about with their flocks from pasture to pasture as they used to”(Coetzee 1980: 54). It is a clash of domination over land between the empire and barbarians who are denied their rights of their own land. Ironically they are regarded as barbarians when they invade, plunder and claim their rights on their villages. Fear of being invaded provokes the empire to take precautions against the Other who is tortured and imprisoned. Boletsi adds: “civilization becomes a prison we have constructed for ourselves by violently imposing divisions between self and other.”(4) Therefore, Coetzee explores the dichotomies of civilization and attempts to search for the ways of understanding the Other through the protagonist,

magistrate's affair with the blind girl. He depicts the anxiety of the empire about barbarians that can attempt imminent attacks:

In private I observed that once in every generation, without fail, there is an episode of hysteria about the barbarians. There is no woman living along the frontier who has not dreamed of a dark barbarian hand coming from under the bed to grip her ankle, no man who has not frightened himself with visions of the barbarians carousing in his home, breaking the plates, setting fire to the curtains, raping his daughters. These dreams are the consequence of too much ease. Show me a barbarian army and I will believe (Coetzee 1980: 9).

Actually Coetzee denotes the fabrication of the concept "barbarians" who are impatiently waited but do not appear ironically as if they intend to refute what has been said about themselves so far. In the novel there is the implication that the empire itself transforms the Other into the guise of "barbarians" and they take their place by their extreme and violent behaviors. The protagonist of *Waiting for the Barbarians* is the town's magistrate who is also the first-person narrator in the novel. The natives of the land are called "Barbarians". Throughout the novel the magistrate questions the legitimacy of imperialism and takes care of a blinded and crippled girl who is one of the victims of the civilization. The magistrate starts a sexual relationship with the girl, but later he decided to take her back to her people. The novel bears universal features as characters, victims, time and place are unspecified. The novel is nameless, timeless, and spaceless. Although South Africa is never mentioned, it is suggested. We can think the circumstances can be related to the situation of South Africa and the barbarians refer to the black population. Nevertheless, it is also possible to relate this apartheid situation with the situation of all other oppressed people all over the world as part of the general human condition. The narration in the present tense also allows for universalism.

The magistrate is called "traitor" when he takes the blind girl to her people without informing anyone and he is accused of conspiring with the enemy. His situation is a very clear example of how the civilization shows violence even on its own people. He is tortured and imprisoned like other barbarians and at that moment he starts to understand the feelings of the Other better. In her article entitled *Keys to the Labyrinth: Writing, Torture, and Coetzee's Barbarian Girl*, Jennifer Wenzel analyses the moment of violence and torture like this: "the pain that the girl and the magistrate experience effectively erases the significance of gender at the moment of their torture; both are subjected to pain that lies at the limits of human experience" (Wenzel 1996: 68). As understood from Wenzel's analysis, pain neutralizes every differential feature of human beings, such as age, gender, civilized or uncivilized. Everything loses their importance and just the pungent voice of the oppressed is echoed from the depth of their silenced hearts. The magistrate is not totally content with the empire and its unfair practices. Satirically, he has doubts about the integrity of the empire in which he is appointed as a man of law and justice: would I have dared to face the crowd to demand justice for these ridiculous barbarian prisoners with their backsides in the air. Justice: once that word is uttered, where will it all end? Easier to shout No! Easier to be beaten and made a martyr. Easier to lay my head on a block than to defend the cause of justice for the barbarians: for where can that argument lead but to laying down our arms and opening the Gates of the town to the people whose land we have raped? The old magistrate, defender of the rule of law, enemy in his own way of the State, assaulted and imprisoned, impregnable virtuous, is not without his own twinges of doubt (Coetzee 1980: 118).

Justice becomes the most looked-for concept for the magistrate who is seemingly the representative of the rule of law within the empire. Unable to defend themselves, barbarians feel deprived of their humanity when exposed to violence. It is not totally clear which part the magistrate supports, the civilization or barbarians? Maybe he is not the fervent critic of imperialism or eager defender of barbarians. Nevertheless, he emphasizes with the situation of barbarians during his moment of torture. Without any intent of taking responsibility he even wants to exclude himself from any derogatory actions or situations by expressing: "I wanted to live outside history. 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. How can I believe that that is cause for shame?"(Coetzee 1980: 169) Hence we can perceive *Waiting for the Barbarians* as an allegorical attack on the apartheid system in which suffering, torture and violent deaths are inevitable as a result of the discrepancies between clashing races and the system digs shameful memories into the minds of victims. By setting out from some stereotypes about victimized barbarians, the magistrate indicates the role of the empire in the corruption of barbarians and points out his antagonism against this hypocritical civilization:

It always pained me in the old days to see these people fall victim to the guile of shopkeepers, exchanging their goods for trinkets, lying drunk in the gutter, and confirming thereby the settler's litany of prejudice: that barbarians are lazy, immoral, filthy, stupid. Where civilization entailed the corruption of barbarian virtues and the creation of a dependent people, I decided, I was opposed to civilization; and upon this resolution I based the conduct of my administration.(I say this who now keep a barbarian girl for my bed) (Coetzee 1980: 41)

The unnamed woman is a captive barbarian and the magistrate's affair with her is a symbolic union in which the magistrate puts his colonial gaze on the native. Considering their relationship, we start to question the possibility of a union between different races. Granting the tender relationship between the magistrate and the barbarian girl we can feel a reunion is possible, but it does not seem so easy in real life, especially for the people of South Africa. The magistrate's symbolic union and frustration refer to his vain struggle of understanding the Other.

In the collapse of South African Apartheid this kind of novels became effective as they provoke people to take action. *Waiting for the Barbarians* is the mirror of a society divided by race and struggling under the weight of colonial projects. The magistrate's later position clearly indicates the self-destructive feature of the civilized empire against uncivilized barbarians. Once having a good position as a loyal officer in the civilization, the magistrate experiences a downfall. He is humiliated, tortured and imprisoned like others. Wenzel explains: "it is in the anguished cries the magistrate utters while being hung from the tree—cries that the spectators call "barbarian language"—that he comes closest to the truth of his position in the worlds of language and history. The suffering body cannot be reduced to "civilized" language, and civilization itself obstructs any protest made within its structure"(Wenzel 1996: 69).When we examine *Waiting for the Barbarians* closely, we perceive that the distinctions between the oppressor and the oppressed and between self and the other can be evaluated from another perspective, which is more reconciling, as a result of a close contact between two races and feeling the pain and torture the Other is exposed to.

The magistrate challenges the idea that the black population is doomed to be seen as "ugly, inferior, or evil" just because of their physical appearance and cultural differences.

The feeling of contempt black people were exposed to wherever they go turns the gaze of the magistrate from the empire onto the innocent and oppressed black people. In a way Coetzee defends the rights of oppressed races under the regime of apartheid in South Africa through the character of the magistrate who vacillates between pitiful feelings for black people and his dutiful position in the empire. The magistrate evidently assumes the role of the mouthpiece of the barbarians with these frank and sincere remarks:

see who gets short-weighted and cheated and shouted at and bullied. See who is forced to leave his womenfolk behind in the camp for fear they will be insulted by the soldiers. See who lies drunk in the gutter, and see who kicks him where he lies. It is this contempt for the barbarians, contempt which is shown by the meanest ostler or peasant farmer, that I as magistrate have had to contend with twenty years. 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? Shall I tell you what I sometimes wish? I wish that these barbarians would rise up and teach us a lesson, so that we would learn to respect them"(Coetzee 1980:55).

Therefore learning how to make contact between inside and outside and removing all artificial borders seem to be the only solution to turn internal barbarism into constructive functions that provide a conciliatory and respectful atmosphere for all races without any place to contempt.

The Life and Times of Michael K (1983)

Coetzee's first novel to win the Booker Prize, *The Life and Times of Michael K* is a story of hare-lipped, simple gardener Michael K, who starts a challenging journey from civil war-ridden urban South Africa to his mother's rural birthplace, Prince Albert during apartheid period in the 1970-80s. The novel takes place in a dystopian South Africa at a time when there is a civil war going on.

The novel is divided into 3 parts. The first part includes most of Michael's adventures until he is caught by the army and suspecting of helping the collaborators. The second part is narrated by a doctor at one of the camps he is sent to. Malnourished, Michael is kept under medical supervision and the doctor, intrigued by him, writes about him. Michael eventually escapes from the camp, and in the last part returns to the city he started out in.

The issue of "race" is not the focus of the novel. *The Life and Times of Michael K* is the story of the title character who does not feel like he is a part of a society. Because of his hare-lip, Michael K cannot get nourishment from his mother's breast. He is a simpleton and was institutionalized as a child. His hare lip makes him feel isolated and alienated in society, so he does not have an active role or contribute to anything. The novel is a story of isolation and survival as Michael K struggles to survive in nature rather than live in a civil-war ridden society which treats even his own people unfairly. When Michael arrives at the farm his mother mentioned, he finds the farm desolate and starts to live off the land in this farm. Later, one of the relatives of the real owners of the farm appears and commands him like a servant. "As becomes clear when Visagie, the grandson of the erstwhile owners of the farm, later dispossesses him of this residence and relocates him to the servants' quarters, the house suggests the self's need to affirm itself by dominating nature and others. It serves as a complex symbol of settlement, ownership and mastery", (Marais 2010:109) Mike Marais notes in *Literature and the Labour of Negation: J.M.Coetzee's Life&Times of Michael K*. Michael struggles to survive in the farm by tilling

the soil as an isolated man from society. Michael K is born with some disadvantages: dull and slow, fatherless, disfigured (hare lip). The doctor in the working camp depicts him as a weak character in the war of survival: “you are like a stick insect, Michaels, whose sole defence against a universe of predators is its bizarre shape”(Coetzee 1983: 149). Michael is not socially or politically engaged. He says “I am not in the war”(Coetzee 1983: 138). He comes across the harsh realities of the South-African life such as tyranny, guns, curfews or patrols in the orphanage he was sent to and all these dark sides of the society leave deep traces on his psyche.

Michael K starts to work as a gardener at the age of 15 in Cape Town, while his mother works as a domestic servant for an elderly couple. Suddenly the country goes into war and the place where they stay is attacked and vandalized. Michael loses his job. The purpose of the war is told to give minorities their dues as part of democratic idealism. “We are fighting this war so that minorities will have a say in their destinies”(Coetzee 1983: 157) Noel says. In South Africa this means the repression of the black majority by the white minority and it turns into a tyrannous shape. Michael K looks for his freedom in this oppressive and racist society by preferring a life in nature. He is like Robinson Crusoe, who leads his own life in his motherland. He prefers solitary existence. Noel brought out the register: “according to this’, he said, ‘Michaels is an arsonist. He is also an escapee from a labour camp. He was running a flourishing garden on an abandoned farm and feeding the local guerrilla population when he was captured. That is the story of Michaels” (Coetzee 1983: 131). These descriptions are some of the accusations Michael confronts because of some misunderstandings and superficial reasons. The doctor is ready to defend Michael against any accusation as he is interested in Michael’s story and struggles to understand him more than others. He is surprised by his coincident survival in the civil war despite his weak character and ambiguous identity. He suggests Extraordinary, though, that you should have survived thirty years in the shadows of the city, followed by a season footloose in the war zone (if one is to believe your story), and come out intact, when keeping you alive is like keeping the weakest pet duckling alive, or the runt of the cat’s litter, or a fledgling expelled from the nest. No papers, no money; no family, no friends, no sense of who you are. The obscurest of the obscure, so obscure as to be a prodigy (Coetzee 1983: 142).

The Life and Times of Michael K is the reflection of South Africa that made its own people dependents, prisoners and parasites whether they are black, white or colored. Coetzee avoids any kind of naming and shifts the focus from the issues of race to a more individual platform. Michael K’s simple but rebellious life can indicate the desire for an uninhibited and unoppressed life. In the second part of the novel, Michael is arrested and sent to a working camp. The doctor gives his first impression of him: “You saw him when they brought him in [...] he was a skeleton even then. He was living by himself on that farm of his free as a bird, eating the bread of freedom, yet he arrived here looking like a skeleton”(Coetzee 1983: 146). In the camp Michael refuses to eat and he retreats physically and socially. He goes far away from real life by cutting off his connection with the outer world. He stops talking and the doctor starts to write his story. The absence of language refers to Michael’s lack of control over his life. K’s otherness obstructs the medical officer’s effort to comprehend him and the diary in which the medical officer notes about Michael just shows his lack of control over Michael. The diary indicates Michael’s loss just as he imprisons himself to passivity through the absence of language in the farm. His passivity also signifies his uncompromising views about his society. In other words, we can consider that cutting off his relations with the world through lack of language indicates his desire to remain free from any controlling mechanism. The medical officer points out his opinion of him hopelessly:

you are never going to get sense out of him [...] he is a simpleton, and not even an interesting simpleton. He is a poor helpless soul who has been permitted to wander out on to the battlefield, if I may use that word, the battlefield of life, when he should have been shut away in an institution with high walls, stuffing cushions or watering the flower-beds [...] don't try beating a story out of him (Coetzee 1983: 141).

Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life (1997)

On the other side, *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* is a memoir in which Coetzee tells his childhood memories and depicts South Africa in the 50s. The main character, John is a very successful high school student with an Afrikaner last name in a classroom of English boys. He feels himself different from his friends in many ways and even if he tries to resemble them to get rid of social pressure and to seem a normal boy, he fails. The book is the story of a boy growing up under the effects of apartheid. It is a discriminating society which humiliates people for being white, black or Afrikaner, for speaking English or Afrikaans, and for living in the province or Cape Town. "While Jews and Catholics are left to their own devices, the Christians go off to assembly to sing hymns and be preached to"(Coetzee 1997: 19). It is the first of Coetzee's fictionalised biographies and reflects Coetzee's childhood from birth to adolescence in 1940s and 50s South Africa as well as his feelings and mentality about his identity.

The main character, John feels isolated in his class as he has different preferences from his friends. For instance, he prefers Russians to Americans when it comes to choosing sides in the Cold War. He does not like his father and his relationship with his mother is based on a love and hate relationship. Coetzee expresses his conflicting idea of his mother as such:

He is always trying to make sense of his mother. Jews are exploiters, she says; yet she prefers Jewish doctors because they know what they are doing. Coloured people are the salt of the earth, she says, yet she and her sisters are always gossiping about pretend-whites with secret Coloured backgrounds. He cannot understand how she can hold so many contradictory beliefs at the same time (Coetzee 1997: 37).

John is keen on reading books and even he pretends to be ill to read books rather than go to school. Surprisingly he announces he is a Roman Catholic although he does not know anything about it or not practise it at all. He says so just not to feel alienated, but this time he is not accepted by any religion as he is seen suspicious and does not perform the requirements of Catholicism. Coetzee explains his in-between position like this: "the Catholic boys nag him and make sneering remarks, the Christians persecute him, but the Jews do not judge. The Jews pretend not to notice. The Jews wear shoes too. In a minor way he feels comfortable with the Jews. The Jews are not so bad"(Coetzee 1997: 21).

Another interesting point is that John feels like an outsider because he has never been caned unlike the other kids. Just to fit in he would like to be beaten. Moreover, he cannot go bare foot like the Afrikaans boys since his feet hurt. John exhibits different manners at home and outside. While he is a shy, reserved person outside, he turns into a difficult, demanding child at home. John's family is middle class Afrikaner who prefer to be English because of education and choice and this conflicting background comes with some social shortcomings which lead him to anxiety and self-derision. As Margaret Lenta refers in *Autobiography: J. M. Coetzee's Boyhood and Youth*, "taken to Worcester from Cape Town, the child is forced to define himself by difference: not as an Afrikaans child, not a genuine member of the 'English' group, not a 'Christian' (this meant a Protestant,

an identity which involved obligations at school so dismal that the child chose to call himself a Catholic) but as an outsider to all groups”(Lenta 2003: 165).

Result

Apartheid is a great social tension in South Africa. However, in this country the Afrikaners are also ostracised. This situation makes John feel uncomfortable. To avoid any direct criticism or political accusation Coetzee generally uses isolated characters without a reference to any specific place, person or country by extending to universal borders. He becomes the mouthpiece of oppressed South African people overwhelmed by apartheid by his writing. In *Constructions of Apartheid in the International Reception of the Novels of J. M. Coetzee*, it is indicated that “in reviews, Coetzee is positioned both as part of a tradition of committed anti-apartheid writing, but also as a writer whose work succeeds in escaping the conventions of politically committed fiction and thus elevating itself to the status of ‘art’”(Coetzee & Barnett 291). Howe also refers to the critical position of South African writers as intellectuals dealing with the significant issues of their society and period and facing the risk of being labelled if they put racism into the focus of their writing explicitly. In *A Stark Political Fable of South Africa* he argues A great commanding subject haunts the South African imagination, yet this subject can also turn into a kind of tyranny, close, oppressive, even destructive. Imagine what it must be like to live as a serious writer in South Africa: an endless clamour of news about racial injustice, the feeling that one’s life is mortgaged to a society gone rotten with hatred, an indignation that exhausts itself into depression, the fear that one’s anger may overwhelm and destroy one’s fiction. And except for silence or emigration, there can be no relief (Howe 1990: 8-10).

Dislocating and de-politicised features in Coetzee’s writing add universalism into his novels and rescue him from the traditions of politically committed fiction. Coetzee both serves committed anti-apartheid writing and addresses the general, universal issues of humanity such as suffering, tyranny, racism or oppression. Binary oppositions like civilized versus barbarians, black versus white or isolation, alienation and identity crisis are the major problems of almost every hybrid, multicultural society as witnessed in the history of South Africa.

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