

THE IDEA OF OTHERING IN J.M. COETZEE'S *WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS*

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One of the principal elements in colonial and postcolonial literature is the encounter with “the other” -either the indigenous nations encountering European culture or the European settlers encountering the native culture of the colonized people. Postcolonial criticism brings to the fore front wide differences between the self and the other in terms of culture. It brings out the hierarchical relations between cultures, the culture of the colonist which is a dominant culture and the culture of the indigenous people who are involved in the task of rescuing their culture from obliteration by reasserting their own claim to authority and dignity.

In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Coetzee considers the nature of oppression and its effect on both the oppressor and the oppressed. His concern is for the marginalized groups who are often treated as “others”. “Othering is a way of defining and securing one’s own positive identity through the stigmatization of an other”. (Clearwater par. 1). The authors of *The Key Concepts in Postcolonial Studies* state that the term Othering “was coined by Gayathri Spivak for the process by which imperial discourse creates its ‘Others’ . . . Othering describes the various ways in which colonial discourse produces its subjects . . . the construction of the o/Other is fundamental to the construction of the Self.” (Ashcroft 171-172)

In general the “other” is anyone who is separate from one’s self. The existence of the others is crucial in defining what is “normal” and in locating one’s own place in the world. The other is perceived as lacking the essential characteristics possessed by a group and hence is considered to be a lesser or inferior being and therefore is treated accordingly.

J.M. Coetzee’s novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* abounds with ideas on colonialism, issues of identity and torture. Its title is taken from the 1904 poem “Waiting for the Barbarians” by Constantine Cavafy. The Empire, in both the poem and the novel is in a sense, dependent upon an other, a barbarian enemy to strengthen the national feeling of the State. The novel is set in an isolated outpost, unspecified in time and space, where two cultures – that of the Empire and that of the barbarians are set against one another. Though dealing with issues of State approved torture, the novel was scrutinized by the censors and was not banned because of the apparent remoteness of the setting from South Africa. The novel deals with the postcolonial discourse of power, of constructing a nation by means of Othering. Homi Bhaba says about the national construct in *Nation and Narration* that “the nation is a narrative strategy which fills the void left in the uprooting of communities and kin, and thus, turns that loss into the language of metaphor” (139).

Waiting for the Barbarians is the story of the Magistrate of the Empire narrated in the first person. He is identified only by his role as a Magistrate and is never given a significant name. He is a figure on the margins of both the Empire and the barbarians and has led a very comfortable life for years in the outpost. He is content and satisfied with the life that he lives in the outpost, with the record keeping and paper work that he looks into for the Empire. He says “When I pass away I hope to merit three lines

of small print in the Imperial gazette. I have not asked for more than a quiet life in quiet times” (8). But, the Magistrate no longer holds on to this sweet state of complacency when once Colonel Joll sets foot on the outpost. The Magistrate questions his own identity comparing it with the man from the Third Bureau, sent by the Empire to investigate and find the truth through torture, of the rumours of the Barbarian uprising. Barbarianism and civilization are opposed concepts. It is through the notions of the barbarians that the superiority of the civilized is established.

In Coetzee’s novel the Magistrate despairs and feels deeply for the prisoners that Colonel Joll has brought as captives. He asks the soldiers who go along with Colonel Joll in the barbarian hunt ride “Did no one tell him, the difference between fishermen with nets and wild nomad horsemen with bows? Dis no one tell them they don’t even speak the same language?” (17).

The Magistrate is reluctantly drawn into opposition to the activities that Colonel Joll does in the name of the Empire. The acts committed in his jurisdiction in the name of the Empire, are acts that rob him of authority and from which he wishes to distance himself from.

It is evident that the other is not one group of people but a diversity of people who do not belong to a specific group as Colonel Joll justifies his capture of people saying that all his captives are prisoners. Anybody who does not belong to us is an other in simple terms. As Gallagher says the nation “achieves strength, unity and identity” by creating notions of the other, the enemy at the gate. (*A Story of South Africa* 132) And as far as the people of the settlement are concerned, they belong, because they do not oppose the invaders and whom the Empire designates as the other to establish its own identity. And those who are others to the Empire are considered others to the townspeople as well.

The barbarians in the novel are variously described as desert nomads and settled farmers, herdsmen and fisher people. They live near the imperial settlement and they live far out in the unmapped lands beyond. They speak languages that are known, and languages that are unknown. They are peaceful and warlike, pitiable and fearsome. Who are they? If defined in simple terms they are whatever is not us. If they are not “us” then they must be “them”. No other alternative is allowed. Bhaba refers to the isolated state of the invaders, when he talks about a “gathering on the edge of ‘foreign’ culture.” (*Location* 199) He asks who can write or represent a nation, when the nation’s heterogeneity leads to a split in the “narrative authority . (*Location* 212) But the unifying factor seems to be to join in hatred towards the others. Bhaba further quotes Freud and says “it is always possible to bind together a considerable number of people in love, as long as there are other people left to receive the manifestation of their aggressiveness” (*Location* 214) This is one strong reason because of which the people of the settlement are open to strangers and support them and by which means they are themselves considered enemies of the ‘barbarians’. The myth of the other is constructed and found important in order to form a national construct.

In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Coetzee explores the moral, political and personal dilemma facing a colonized nation. The Magistrate, a colonizer is labeled as an other in due course of time. His identity with the Empire keeps changing even from the beginning of the novel. He shows his reluctance to listen to screams of torture which is meted out to the prisoners at the hands of Colonel Joll. And this becomes the Magistrate’s first sign of refusing to belong to the Empire and thus a beginning for his transformation.

In the second part of the novel, when the barbarian girl is tortured the Magistrate takes her to his apartment and tries to cleanse himself or rather purge himself from the sins committed on the other by washing her and cleansing himself. He tries hard to escape from his identity with the Empire by entertaining associations with the barbarian girl. He questions her in order to find out what the Empire has

done to its barbarian other. Yet, the Magistrate is helpless and is not able to derive any meaning from the wounded body of the girl. The girl like most of Coetzee's silent figures is silent to the core. She remains a cipher and is not given a voice to tell her own story. The tortured body of the girl is as incomprehensible, as is her identity. And to read the unspeaking other is difficult for the Magistrate.

Both the Magistrate and Colonel Joll try to enter into the other and have possession of the other. They trespass into the forbidden land. In postcolonial theory bodies "symbolize the conquered land" (Loomba 152) But the Magistrate attempting to differentiate himself from the man of the Empire, Colonel Joll crosses the line –the line of control, the line between the Empire and the barbarian enemy. And in order to assert his own transformation, the Magistrate crosses the boundaries of the Empire in order to return the barbarian girl to her own people. The journey across the land is punishing to their bodies and they almost lose all that they take with them on their way. The Magistrate hands over the girl to her people and comes back to the settlement satisfied with the whole enterprise. However, in order to learn what Otherness is all about, such acts of justification wouldn't suffice. If only the Magistrate experiences firsthand, would he be able to comprehend what it means to be an other, as defined by the Empire. Only when the Magistrate is imprisoned on charges of treason and tortured by the Empire, does he really understand what it means to be an other. Stripped of his dignity in the Empire, the Magistrate loses his standing, and is treated in the same way as the barbarians were treated. And it is at this point of time, that the readers witness a real transformation in him as he becomes more and more open to "otherness". He says, "my alliance with the guardians of Empire is over . . . I have set myself in opposition, the bond is broken, I am a free man" (76). When the Magistrate attempts escape from the prison cell and crosses the gates, the threshold of the town, he has second thoughts . Knowing for sure, that death would be his fate in the desert, even if he escapes, he decides to be a prisoner of the Empire than to have an ordinary death. And he reasons it out saying, "why should I do my enemy's work for them? If they want to spill my blood, let them atleast bear the guilt of it" (99). The Magistrate succumbs to the acts of torture that is meted out to him and by it he learns the meaning of humanity.

The Empire perceives an imaginary threat from the barbarian enemy and so sets out into the desert to conquer the enemy and destroy them. The more invisible and obscure they are, the more they tantalize the civilized imagination. Their invisibility fosters the myth around them and enhances its threatening force. And the same kind of fear is experienced by the expeditionary force which tries to obliterate the barbarians from the face of the earth. After three months of chasing in the desert, the soldier from the expeditionary force, tells the tale of the Empire, "we froze in the mountains! We starved in the desert! Why did no one tell us it would be like that? We were not beaten- they led us out into the desert, and then vanished. . .They lured us on and on, we would never catch them. They picked off the stragglers, they cut our horses loose in the night, they would not stand up to us!" (144).

As expected, the barbarians do not attack the Empire, but it is the Empire which has gone to attack the barbarians and in turn were led into the unknown land. There they are scattered and are finally back in the settlement without finding an enemy. The effect of the whole episode is that the Empire has lost its power in the absence of an enemy force. There is no way in which it can establish its identity. And thus on realization of the lost Empire, the imperial forces abandon the settlement. As the Magistrate puts it, "One thought alone preoccupies the submerged mind of the Empire : how not to end , how not to die, how to prolong its era" (131). The Magistrate is left to stay in the settlement and left alone he contemplates for a better world, "Is there any better way to pass these last days than in dreaming of a savior with a sword who will scatter the enemy hosts and forgive us the errors that have been committed

b and forgive us the errors that have been committed by others in our name and grant us a second chance to build our earthly paradise?" (143)

Thus, through the character of the Magistrate, Coetzee in his novels has clearly portrayed the distinctions of what it means to be "us" and "them", "self" and "other".

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