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ALLEGORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CHARACTERS AND LOCALE IN J. M. COETZEE'S *WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS*: A CRITICAL STUDY

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Abstract

Coetzee's warmth for South African people is unending. Their strangeness and struggle for identity on their own land, the reality of the apartheid-ridden Africa, have been the vast ideology upheld in his oeuvres, indeed a demonstration of their history. The present novel delves with narratives of identity and existentialism along with the central subject. Equally, it considers the locale and ethnic culture that signify their state of belongingness. The novel paradoxically, unveils the trauma and enigma of re-location that the characters struggle on their own land, denied and thwarted. Coetzee justifiably, uncoils the themes lamented with social, political and cultural situations fascinated with violence, discrimination and servitude of Africa, so that the events portrayed adhere to anonymously allegorical significance.

Keywords: Identity, Barbarian, Apartheid, Existentialism, Locale, Servitude.

INTRODUCTION

John (J) Maxwell (M) Coetzee is one the most critically acclaimed and bejeweled authors among the prominent White South African writers, in English language, and the recipient of the Nobel Prize, 2003, in Literature. Coetzee, Afrikaner literature and letters, hold him at "the forefront of the anti-apartheid movement ". Coetzee points at the limitations of art in South African society and its structures responsible for ensuing "South African literature is a literature in bondage. It is a less than fully human literature. It is exactly the kind of literature you would expect people to write from prison", and called on the South African government to abandon its apartheid policy. "Coetzee, getting prize, denounces apartheid". No fiction or non-fiction of Coetzee lacks the themes of fundamental totality. His oeuvres mirrors a complete participation of locale as a central element, in upbringing the protagonists' self. Coetzee's narratives critically instigate African chequered history in references to contemporary socio-political realities and the consequences within its people. All major characters suffer identity crisis, slavery, exploitation and extinction throughout his novels. Thus, the character and locale are a significant part Coetzee's ideology of conception and interpretations. A critical study of the present novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*, unfolds the significant and prolific subject of power and the colonial practices in the Africa.

In a way, *Waiting for the Barbarians* is Coetzee's reaction to the dictatorial state of violence in apartheid South Africa. He refers and relates these

torments towards the apartheids extended beyond African boundaries under the colonizer's control. He clearly revels about his protagonists that, "the protagonist of the novel could as well be Russian and Kirgiz, or Han and Mongol, or Turk and Arab (*qtd. Lenta* 72)". It indicates there exist allegorized forms of power, law and torture, commonly in all where. Thus, the present novel merges with a universally allegorical and significant premise –apparent through his protagonists and various locales.

THE CONCEPT OF LOCALE

Coetzee's sense of remorse remains a universal perceptive with an artistic restoration of truth, in the unnamed locales he uses for conveying his messages. Coetzee wisely justifies his art of novel by adopting an allegorical representation of its characters and locale and its occasion, giving it a universal imagery and reference. Appreciating Coetzee, Howe mentions, "Mr. Coetzee tells the story of an imaginary Empire set in an unspecified place and time, yet recognized as a universalized version of South Africa …The result is a realistic fable". His literary virtue heightens the artistic and emotional intensity of his writings.

Another critic Dick Penner, points Coetzee to have stated, "The setting is not specified for Barbarians, and very specifically is not specified… I just put together a variety of locales and left a lot of things vague with a very definite intention that it should not be pinned down to some specific place" as result Penner says, "the setting is no-time, no-place, a quality which underscores the allegorical nature of the novel" (35). The locale of the fiction that Coetzee describes does not match to any definite geographical boundary, based on some unfounded information, that the locale is situated near roundabout north-west coast of a lake at the mouth of a river. There, two miles south of the town, are covered with stable vegetation, occupied by a population living, contentedly except a few "banditry [which] do [es] not amount too much". The White protagonist -the Magistrate, (who collects taxes and controls the communal lands), lives merrily with the inhabitants.

Moreover, Coetzee's idea of an anonymous setting serves him a tool to decipher the evil consequences of man's authoritarianism. Human in lust of rule and dominion can turnout his animal instinct, anywhere and anytime. He, then, breathes savage way turning into a beast inclined towards lawlessness and dead respect for justice. He does not even hesitate to raze his own native brethren.

THE CONCEPT OF CHARACTERIZATION

Colonel Joll and the Magistrate

The artistic allegorical intensity of the novelist sets the readers into an unspecified imaginary world. Coetzee keeps several locales and characters, nameless, but has often named only the powerful and leading Whites, specifically Mandel and Colonel Joll. Even the natives and prominent characters- the girl, the fisher folk, the horsemen, the hunters, the nomads remain strange, bearing no identity of name. it is believed that to call a thing by name would be to make it so.(*Invisible Man*,12) It is surprising, the central protagonist of the novel, the Magistrate is not given any name, neither is he treated so seriously as a human. The paradox, as he supports the natives he owns no identity of a White, despite he is a Magistrate on that land. The character of the Magistrate relentlessly sheds Coetzee's irony. He writes his feeling, of racial injustice towards the blacks.

In spite of being in the force of the Magistrate and representative of the frontier village and the empire, he does not favour the barbarians, they considered enemy of the empire, and he feels helpless for it thinking himself,

> "A greybeard sitting in the dark waiting for spirits from the byways of history to speak to him before he goes home to his military stew and his comfortable bed. The space about us here is merely space, no meaner or grander than the space above the shacks and tenements and temples and offices of the capital. Space is space, life is life, everywhere the same. (16)". The Magistrate's interpretation of the land reveals his interested and attachment in the native

culture and life there. In another way, he desires to escape from the world he belongs.

On the arrival of Colonel Joll, at the frontier village, the Magistrate's role remains subordinate although both are in the service of the same service of the Empire. Finding that the Magistrate's duties are irrelevant to the situation in the frontier the colonel raises objection and the Colonel restrains the Magistrate quite awkwardly. Consequently, the Magistrate, no more feels free to discuss the Colonel's duty for fear of being intrusive. Now, the Magistrate observes a formal detachment with him, as it is noticed: "We do not discuss the reason for his being here...Instead we talk about hunting" (1). Colonel Joll boasts of his hunting that clearly denudes his insensitivity to the human lives, being alike to the animals and human beings. Thus, his presence proves no less than a threat to the natives and to the fauna too. To divert his thoughts from the Colonel's ideas about the barbarians, the Magistrate gives the description of nature and praises the native way of trapping the fishes:

> I tell him about the great flocks of geese and ducks that descend on the lake every year in their migrations and about native ways of trapping them. I suggest that I take him out fishing by night in a native boat. "That is an experience not to be missed," I say; "the fishermen carry flaming torches and beat drums over the water to drive the fish towards the nets they have laid." (1)

Evidently, the Magistrate is the most complex character in the novel that has been living a calm life anticipating a peaceful retirement in this tranquil frontier village. However, as Penner rightly comments, "Suddenly a great chasm appeared before "him, somewhat like the abyss that Conrad's Marlowe imagined Kurtz stepping into"(38). He feels sad to think of the mistreatment and tortures meted out to the natives after the coming of Joll. Unable to bear the sound of the torture going on, the Magistrate shuts himself in his room: "I sit in my rooms with the windows shut, in the stifling warmth of a windless evening" (22), in his houseroom, the Magistrate ponders on the condition of the barbarian girl. The girl feels as if misplaced there, as a victim of neglect. She comes to earn her living by begging or by prostitution. However, the Magistrate assists her but as an object of itemization to probe into the reality of Colonel Joll who has been ill doing to the natives, in the room of interrogation. The Magistrate is a father figure to her. He cares her like a father who feels guilty for a wrong that has been done to his daughter in his presence, thus resulting in his being regarded a traitor to the Empire. In addition, the Magistrate confesses of the barbarian girl as his daughter saying:

> I gave the girl my protection, offering in my equivocal way to be her father. But, I came too late, after she had ceased to believe in fathers. I wanted to do what was right, I wanted to make reparation: I will not deny this indecent impulse, however mixed with motives that are more questionable: there must always be a place for penance and reparation. (88)

The Magistrate's formal procedure of healing continues along with his curiosity to decipher what took place in the locale. In the course of this ritual, the Magistrate invariably falls asleep. He overcomes by drowsiness and sleep, just like the intellectuals who are overwhelmed by the awareness of the injustice that surrounds them and hence fall silent in helplessness. The Magistrate cleans her whole body and applies her almond oil. He realizes that, beyond healing and atonement, the rituals embody a desire for the truth, "It has been growing more and clearer to me that until the marks on this girl's body are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her" (31).

The Magistrate believes that in his care for to the Colonel's victim, the barbarian girl, he is attempting to read her wounds and scars in order to understand their meanings:

> "Is it then the case that it is the whole woman that I want, that my pleasure in her is spoiled until these marks on her are erased and she is restored to herself... is it she I want or the traces of a history her body bears?" (64).

The Magistrate is aware about using the barbarian girl as an experimental object to probe into what

Colonel Joll has been doing to her and the others of her tribe. It is only concern of the Magistrate to know what went on indoors at the great granary where the interrogations and investigations took place. It is the inquisitiveness of him to find how the torture took place and what reactions, to the torturers she had, that compelled the Magistrate to give shelter and examine the barbarian girl.

In other words, the Magistrate's bond with the barbarian girl highlights his deep interest in unearthing what the Empire has done to her. By the ritual of washing her feet, he tries to seek the tortured and subdued self in her. It is his attempt to heal the deep wounds, physical and mental, of the girl. Stephen Watson observes this relationship remarking:

> ". . . there remains that passionate hunger in all four of Coetzee's novels to escape the warped relationships that colonialism fosters. Nobody has given a more forceful expression to this hunger, and thereby delivered a more powerful protest against all that the historical phenomenon entails" (390).

This custom of washing the feet of the oppressed girl gains significant symbolic connotation as it can be considered the act of penance and a baffled attempt at penitence by the Whites for the age-long injustice meted out to the natives in their own land. The effect of this act of the Magistrate acquires heights as it takes place in a locale where the Blacks have always played a role of servitude. The room where this act of penance takes place is depicted as uncomfortable as sometimes "this room gets very hot" (28) and sometimes is "getting cold" (30), thus revealing the discomfort in the Magistrate's mind.

Nature Coetzee's novels very often fail to induce nature, as a influencer to human endeavours. We do notice that as the Magistrate faces inhospitable fellow human beings, he experiences the gnashing teeth of nature when it works against the well-being of humans. "The sun has risen but gives off no warmth. The wind beats at us across the lake bringing tears to our eyes" (58).

The Magistrate asks his own motive and dilemma for seeking the barbarian girl under his protection. Later, he realizes the situation: from her position, he is a White, exploiting her helplessness:

> Can I really be about to excuse myself? Her lips are clenched shut, her ears too no doubt, she wants nothing of old men and their bleating consciences. I prowl around her, talking about our vagrancy ordinances, sick at myself Her skin begins to glow in the warmth of the closed room. She tugs at her coat, opens her throat to fire. The distance between her torturers, and myself I realize is negligible; I shudder. (29)

Colonel Joll U associated with the Third Bureau of the Civil Guards, considered guardians of the State, devotees of truth, doctors of interrogation but never a genuine man.

Coetzee presents incidents to show how the evil sadism is the result of man's repression. Colonel Joll, pictured as an evil incarnate whose malevolence comes out when he uses persecution as a means to subdue his fellow humans. Coetzee's humanism is at the forefront when he shows that man lets loose the law of the jungle when the beastly inclination to overrule fellow humans takes possession of him, leaving him with scant respect for decency or justice, with na hesitation to pluck the natives off their land.

The Colonel captures the native fisher folk and nomads, treats ill with them and tortures them badly. The Magistrate keeps himself off from the Colonel's dealings owing to his professional decency, though he is terribly disturbed by a premonition that inhuman violence and pain have been imposed upon the captives in secrecy. Five days after their capture, the prisoners are "sick, famished, damaged, and terrified" (24). On looking at their situation, in agony the Magistrate says:

> It would be best if this obscure chapter in the history of the world were terminated at once, if these ugly people were, obliterate from the face of the earth and we swore to make a new state, to run an empire in which there would be no more injustice, no more pain. It would cost little to march them out into the

> desert... to have them dig, with their last strength, a pit large for all of them to lie in . .. and, leaving them buried there forever and forever, to come back to the walled town full of new inventions, new resolutions. (24)".

From our ramparts we stare out over the wastes" (38) ideates the Magistrate. Colonel Joll's power is devoid of humanism. He indulges in damaging the lives of people in order to attain absolute power: blinding the barbarian girl, hammering and breaking the ankles of the nomads and denying the basic needs of food and water to the native prisoners and to the Magistrate. He desires to have a control over the frontier village and its surrounding areas and does not fear to tread into the depths of the desert to gain control. The natural setting reveals the horridness in Colonel Joll as "the sun is suspended like an orange on an horizon streaked black and purple" (39).

The colonizers like Colonel Joll, consciously work to shatter the spirit of rebellion in the natives through tortures. A young White officer refers to some native deserters from the army who are missing without any feelings. The Magistrate says, "The country around here is inhospitable. They are dead men if they have not found shelter by now" (49). The Colonel's officer with no botheration refuses to give the deserters a funeral when they are found dead. He further mentions that it will create fear in the minds of the other soldiers making them fear escape.

The natives were leading a peaceful life in close communion with nature, though it was an unstated barbarism and an uncivilized social monarchy by the Whites.

The two characters, Colonel Joll and Mandel suppress the natives to attain power, and thus presented as wicked and villainous human beings with a lust to take possession of others' lands that favours the natives and not the aliens. At the end of the novel, one finds the Whites as the defeated because neither the locale nor the people accept them and eventually they experience an unceremonious exit and rejection. It is well mentioned in Richard G. Martin's article in the *Ariel,* "What is fore- grounded in this narrative, what stands out in sharp relief and the indeterminate setting, are the (existential) realities of birth and death, pleasure and pain, power and victimization - that is, the 'reality' of human experience" (5). The Magistrate speaks, "Show me a barbarian army and I will believe" (8). Colonel Joll right from the beginning persecutes the natives. The extent of their suffering remained enormous. The natives learn to give in rather than to revolt against the empire. The story about the barbarians can be a myth deliberately created by the Empire for its own end.

CONCLUSION

The many novels gain significance, when mingled with the novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*, exposes stature allegorical narratives of, character, place, signs and symbols and events used to decipher a broader message about real-world issues and occurrences.

The paper is an attempt to analyze at its best, the figurative connotation of both, the characters and their locale and their influence over each other, in an extremely traumatized milieu, often reflected helplessness, vulnerability, misery and agony. Thus, Coetzee adopts a justificatory choice of an unspecified locale, in an unspecified time, with an unnamed protagonist in *Waiting for the Barbarians,* so that the events portrayed adhere to anonymously allegorical significance.

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