



COLONIAL SUBJECTS AND THE EMPIRE IN J. M. COETZEE'S *WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS*

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Abstract

The South African-Australian novelist J. M. Coetzee's early novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), is notable for capturing the moral and physical implications of the colonial rule on both the oppressor and the oppressed. Set in an unnamed fictional frontier town governed by the "Empire," the novel sheds light on the disturbing reality of the colonial system through the perspective of the unnamed narrator, the Magistrate. The novel questions the colonisers' modes of representation of the colonial subjects and examines the inherent weaknesses within the colonial mindset. The aim of the present paper is to analyse, through the lens of postcolonial theories and concepts, the complex relation between the colonial Empire and its subjects in J. M. Coetzee's novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians*. While doing so, the paper will also try to problematise the idea of colonial discourse by examining its impacts on those apparently yielding the colonial power.

Keywords

Empire, Colonial Subjects, Colonial Discourse, the Other, Dehumanisation, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

The famous South-African-Australian novelist, J. M. Coetzee, garnered global recognition with the publication of his third novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians* in 1980 (Head 2009) which enabled the readers to re-examine the nature and legacy of colonialism in the post-colonial era. Colonialism, in the words of Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson, is an operation of discourse which "interpellates colonial subjects by incorporating them in a system of representation" (Coetzee, 3). In conjunction with this view, Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* raises important questions about the ways in which the colonisers represent their colonised subjects. Coetzee reveals in the novel that colonial discourses of the empire essentially form a negative image of the colonised people. In the words of John Mcleod, "colonial discourses are characterized *in part* by their attempts to construct and perpetuate a sense of difference between the Western colonisers and their colonised subjects" (Mcleod, 56). Coetzee's novel highlights that constructing a derogatory image of the colonised subjects serves to distance the coloniser from the natives. Against this premise, the present paper aims at depicting how the colonial Empire makes use of colonial discourses to justify its rule over the so-called "barbarians." While doing so, the paper will also explore the complications entailed in the colonisers' representations of the colonised others and the resultant tension arising within the very institution of the Empire itself.

Misrepresentation of the "Other":

In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, one of the central themes is the misrepresentation of the colonial subjects as the "other" in the colonial imagination. The Empire's misrepresentation and the subsequent torture of the native populations remains a focal issue highlighted by the author. The natives who are termed as "barbarians" live in the outskirts of the Empire and they become a subject of colonial fantasy in the novel. It is notable that the title of Coetzee's novel has been taken from



the Greek poet C. P. Cavafy's poem of the same name in which the Roman Empire is presented as awaiting the arrival of "the barbarians" who will take over the machinery of government (Head, 49). Regarding the imperial overtone of this poem, Dominic Head observes:

The imperialist project is based on the perception of the barbarian other, and the anticipation of the eventual succession of this other. In the poem, the barbarians fail to arrive – they cease to exist...Cavafy's poem identifies the contradictory dependence on the other that underpins imperialism (Head, 49).

Head suggests that the continuation of the colonialist campaign is based upon the existence of the uncivilised others. Hence, it becomes inevitable for the colonisers to keep these uncivilised others alive through imagination. This involves an imperialist self-prophecy in which he colonisers constantly wait for the colonised others, thinking that the latter might succeed the imperialist rule at any given moment. Suggesting a parallel idea, Jane Poyner says, "...echoing Cavafy's poem in which the barbarians provide the Senate with "a kind of solution" (Poyner, 5-6), Empire maintains control over the colony and can pursue its uncompromising campaign" (Poyner, 54). In Cavafy's poem, the Senate looks forward to the arrival of the barbarians upon whom the former depends for a better governance of the Roman Empire. Similarly, in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the Empire is dependent on the very presence of the uncivilised barbarians for the continuation of its rule over the colony. Thus, in both the texts, one can see that the act of "waiting" and imagining the Other becomes almost an act of compulsion to sustain the supremacist colonial identity.

Colonial Discourse and Stereotyping:

An important aspect of colonial discourses is to fit the colonised subjects into certain stereotyped representations. Such representations are based, among other things, on their physical characteristics. Often, they are compared to animals, thus revealing the colonisers' desire to dehumanise them. Coetzee clearly has this idea in mind while showing the Empire's inhumane tortures of the "barbarians" in the novel. According to Jane Poyner, "the barbarian prisoners, joined by a wire cord through their mouths and hands are ... pacified "meek as lambs"" (Poyner, 66). Poyner here suggests that in the eyes of the empire the barbarians are wild and difficult to control. Hence, they need to be "pacified" and "domesticated" in order for them to learn the lesson of civilisation. In order to "pacify" the barbarians, the Empire applies force upon them and tortures them. This is how the wild barbarians are made "meek" and domesticated. But still, in the Empire's eyes, they do not attain humanity as their animal features remain prominent as before.

The objective of colonial discourse, according to Homi K. Bhabha, "is to construe the colonised as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration" (Bhabha, 70). He suggests that the colonisers, in order to maintain their supreme identity, feel pressurised to represent the colonised as primitive and wild. They tend to doubt the humanity of the colonised subject whose behaviour often seem abnormal and unusual to them. Thus, it is seen in the novel that even the barbarian prisoners' manner of eating food evokes a sense of disgust in the colonisers' minds. The narrator remarks: "A woman spits masticated breads into her palm and feeds her baby. I motion for more bread. We stand watching them eat as though they are strange animals" (Coetzee, 26). The magistrate's description here focusses on the primitiveness and animality of the natives in the colonial imagination.

One of the most interesting episodes in the novel is the Magistrate's encounter with the barbarian girl who had been captured in a colonial mission. He not only rescues her and nurses her back to health but tries to read her mind and understand her as if she were an undeciphered text. However, despite his apparently tender feelings towards the girl, the Magistrate's representation of



her also reveals his inherent colonial gaze. He says: “I realize that if I took a pencil to sketch her face I would not know where to start. Is she truly so featureless?” (Coetzee, 64). In his mind, the barbarian girl is a blank space, an area which he is hardly able to cast light upon. Because of his inability to understand her properly, he invents a featureless representation or rather misrepresentation of her. She remains devoid of any qualities. However, after much effort he becomes able to visualise her image. But this time, her only feature that he finds worth mentioning is her ugliness: “I see a figure in a cap and heavy shapeless coat standing unsteadily... How ugly, I say to myself. My mouth forms the ugly word. I am surprised by it but I do not resist: she is ugly, ugly” (Coetzee, 64).

The Magistrate is unable to look at her beyond the preconceived image he has already formed inside his mind. The image of “a cap and heavy shapeless coat” adds to the ugliness of the girl’s deformed body. Though he is surprised by this highly unattractive figure he has himself generated, he lets his imagination follow its own course. This is because his imagination is always guided by his belief in what he thinks to be an undeniable fact – the ugliness of the barbarian girl.

Knowledge as Colonial Power:

In her influential book, *Colonialism Postcolonialism*, Ania Loomba suggests that knowledge about the colonial others can be perceived as an ideological accompaniment of the colonial power (2005). Highlighting the Foucaultian insight, she observes: “Knowledge is not innocent but profoundly connected with the operations of power” (Loomba, 42). Such a statement implies that knowledge about the colonised is central to the functioning of the colonial societies. The colonisers must apply force in their attempt to know the colonised subjects. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, this desire of the colonisers to forcibly understand the colonised becomes evident through the actions of both Colonel Joll and the Magistrate.

It can be seen in the novel that there are attempts to read the “other” made by Colonel Joll and the Magistrate in two different ways. First, in Joll’s case, this colonial attempt to read the colonised is implicated in his investigations and his tortures on the barbarian prisoners to get evidence of the supposed barbarian attack on the Empire. Dominic Head, in this regard, observes: “Joll presides over a regime of terror, involving interrogation and torture, and the directive to discover the “truth”” (Coetzee 49). For Joll, torture is the means to gain knowledge about the colonised other. Thus, narrator remarks: “Pain is truth; all else is subject to doubt. That is what I bear away from my conversation with Colonel Joll” (Coetzee, 10). In contrast to Colonel Joll, the Magistrate is rather peaceful in nature and refrains from engaging in any sort of violence. But although the Magistrate does not use violence to know the motive of the natives, he interrogates in his own way to gain more knowledge about them. This is indicated when he tries to uncover the truth about the barbarian girl simply by remaining close to her and closely observing the marks on her body.

In both the cases, there remains a desire to know the truth about the Other. The knowledge of this supposed “truth” seems essential for the stabilisation of the colonial rule over the subjects. Thus, the Magistrate remarks that “until the marks on this girl’s body are deciphered and understood [he] cannot let go of her” (Coetzee, 44). This desire to keep the girl in his custody irrespective of her will shows his colonial propensity. Besides, the very use of the term “decipher” serves to objectify and dehumanise the girl and negate her subjective, human identity. The difficulties that the Magistrate faces in trying to understand the truth about the Barbarian girl is caused by the fact that she seems to have “no interior” but “only a surface across which [he] hunt back and forth, seeking entry” (Coetzee, 59). This very idea of hunting for an access into the interior is symbolic in nature and predicated on a colonial desire to control the colonised subjects.

Colonial Discourse and the Coloniser:



It is true that colonial discourses serve as a powerful weapon for the colonisers to subjugate their subjects through a set of misrepresentations. However, this process of misrepresentation of the Other has not always had positive effects on the colonisers. This is because colonial discourse “constructs the colonizing subject as much as he colonized” (Ashcroft, 38). Very often, the colonisers are kept in darkness about the precarious nature of their position. So, when they are exposed to the hollowness of their discourses, a sense of guilt generates in them. But in spite of knowing the truth they cannot go outside the colonial discourses. They remain trapped within their colonial mindset as in the case of the Magistrate.

After coming to realise the injustices meted out by Colonel Joll on the barbarians, the Magistrate gradually tries to distance himself from the actions of the Empire. He even goes to the extent of saying, “I wish that these barbarians would rise up and teach us a lesson” (Coetzee, 70). Such a remark expresses his inner turmoil caused by his unwanted association with the colonial violence. But in criticising the actions of the Empire, the Magistrate commits the mistake of speaking on behalf of the barbarians, of constructing their views with his own imagination. By doing so, he inadvertently reveals that his own mind is still embedded in the colonialist mentality of representing the Other no matter how much he sympathises with the natives.

The ambivalent stance of the Magistrate is manifested when he returns the barbarian girl to her people. He hands her over to the first group of people he finds in the desert during his journey. He does not know who these people are and whether they know her or not. But what seems important to him is the fact that these people are a group of “the Others.” Since the barbarian girl is an “Other” to the Empire, she must belong to this group of “the Others.” The Magistrate here adopts the colonial mentality of categorising the colonised Others under one group. This shows his inability to come out of the impact of colonial discourses. Besides, it is also worth mentioning that nowhere in the novel, does the narrator mention the name of the barbarian girl. Neither does he show any interest in knowing her name. It seems as if the girl’s individual identity remains unimportant to him. He is happy to address her as a barbarian girl or simply “the girl” instead of seeking out her actual name.

Nevertheless, the Magistrate’s revolting act of risking the lives of the soldiers of the Empire for the sake of one barbarian girl is not at all perceived in a positive light by the Empire. The Empire comes to see him as an enemy, one who challenges the colonial discourse by apparently joining hands with the barbarians, by trying to close the gap between civilisation and barbarity. He is severely punished and is later made into an object of laughter. Such harsh experience reveals to him the true face of the Empire; he could see that there are no barbarians in reality as they are a fictional representation of the Empire’s own fear of the unknown, of the Other. The Magistrate’s victimisation by the same colonial centre of power whom he has served reveals that for a member of the colonial society to make any statement contradictory to the colonial discourse brings about punishment and humiliation (Ashcroft, 2000).

Conclusion:

J. M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the barbarians*, with its relatable characters, provides an allegorical picture of the condition of South Africa during the latter part of the apartheid regime. The centre of focus is, of course, the Magistrate and his response to the colonial drama of which he himself becomes a part, albeit reluctantly. In that sense, the novel is about the Magistrate’s conscience-driven response to the Empire’s tyranny and injustice. But at the same time, it is a novel about the dangers of misrepresentation and forceful labelling of people. The novel highlights the implications of the colonisers’ self-created fear and apprehension that lurks deep inside their psyche. It is revealed that colonial discourses are met with native resistance which threatens to destabilise the very foundation of the colonial empire. Thus, through a depiction of the impact of colonial



discourse and its wide ranging implications, *Waiting for the Barbarians* serves as a timeless allegory of the evils of the institution of colonialism.

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Article Received:15/06/2026

Article Accepted:24/06/2026

Published Online:30/06/2026

To Cite the Article: Singha, Smaranjit. "Colonial Subjects and the Empire in J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*." *Literary Cognizance: An International Refereed/Peer Reviewed e-Journal of English Language, Literature and Criticism*, Vol.-VII, Issue-1, June, 2026, 167-171. www.literarycognizance.com

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