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The Fragile Boundaries of Power:

Imperial Violence and the Ethics of Suffering in *Waiting for the Barbarians*

The frontier in J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* is not merely a boundary between empire and wilderness; it is a fluid, unstable space where power and morality are tested, and identity unravels. As the Magistrate distances himself from the imperial order, he confronts the fragility of civilization and the ethical void at its core. The empire's escalating paranoia transforms the town into a breeding ground for fear and suspicion, where violence is rationalized, and suffering becomes both inflicted and ignored. Coetzee's sparse, detached prose mirrors the emotional and psychological detachment that enables the empire's machinery to function. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Coetzee rejects the spectacle of suffering, compelling readers to grapple with the ethical ramifications of imperial violence, the limitations of empathy, and the dehumanization of both the oppressed and their oppressors.

The novel unfolds in an unnamed frontier settlement, where the empire manifests less as a tangible entity and more as a faceless ideology sustained by fear. Colonel Joll's arrival, marked by his distinctive dark glasses and methodical interrogation techniques, initiates an unprovoked campaign against the so-called barbarians. These alleged enemies remain largely unseen, appearing only as prisoners, victims, or distant silhouettes on the horizon. Their threat is

presumed rather than substantiated, accelerating the town's descent into paranoia. This fear of the Other which is a cornerstone of the imperial project, serves as a pretext for cruelty.

At the centre of this hysteria stands the Magistrate, a man who has long operated within the empire's structures without fully endorsing its violence. His initial detachment allows him to coexist with the system, but confronting the tangible evidence of torture such as; bodies broken under interrogation and eyes hollowed by suffering, forces him to question his complicity. His moral awakening, however, is fraught with contradictions. He offers care to a maimed barbarian woman, attempting to cleanse the scars inflicted by imperial violence, yet his actions are imbued with ambiguity. His gestures of compassion are also acts of possession; he seeks understanding, yet remains an outsider to her suffering. He reflects, "The distance between myself and her torturers... is negligible," (Coetzee 46) highlighting his realization that passive compliance renders him complicit in the empire's atrocities. Even as he begins to resist, he recognizes that his position both as an agent of empire and as a man seeking atonement, affords him no moral purity. His attempts at kindness are tainted by his privilege, reinforcing the novel's larger critique of power and complicity.

Unlike many narratives that depict colonial brutality, *Waiting for the Barbarians* refrains from graphic portrayals of torture to underscore the horrors of imperialism. Instead, Coetzee's prose is stark and restrained, presenting acts of violence in fragmented glimpses rather than explicit detail. When prisoners are beaten, the narrative focuses on the aftermath and the quiet endurance of victims, as well as the indifference of soldiers and the void that follows acts of cruelty. This deliberate refusal to sensationalize violence prompts readers to confront it in its most unsettling form: as an ordinary, bureaucratic process normalized within the empire's

framework. This stylistic choice raises fundamental questions about the representation of suffering in literature. Should the atrocities of torture be depicted in detail to elicit outrage, or does such portrayal risk stripping it of its moral gravity? Coetzee's approach suggests that true horror resides not in the act of violence itself but in the system that perpetuates it. The empire's cold efficiency and its officials' use of euphemisms to justify brutality as a means of security, is more disquieting than any graphic depiction of pain could be. "Pain is truth; all else is subject to doubt," (Coetzee 13) declares Colonel Joll, encapsulating the empire's terrifying logic that violence is not simply a means of control but the very foundation of power itself.

A central tension in the novel is the feasibility of genuine empathy within imperial power structures. The Magistrate, despite his growing dissent against the regime, remains distanced from those he seeks to understand. His attempts to care for the barbarian woman are intertwined with his desires for redemption, understanding, and absolution. He observes her injuries and traces the scars on her body, yet cannot penetrate her experience. The narrative emphasizes this failure: pain exists beyond language, beyond comprehension, beyond the reach of the Magistrate's guilt-laden conscience. "To the last we will have learned nothing. In all likelihood, we will go on as before, in a world in which men do what they please to other men," (Coetzee 220) he muses, recognizing the cyclical nature of history, in which empires rise and fall, but oppression and suffering remain constant. Coetzee's minimalist prose reflects this inaccessibility. The inner lives of the tortured remain opaque; their suffering is not translated for the reader's benefit. In this manner, *Waiting for the Barbarians* subverts literature's traditional role as a vessel for empathy. Rather than inviting readers to "feel" the oppressed's suffering, the novel underscores the limitations of such understanding. This refusal is not a textual deficiency but a

commentary on power's nature: those within the empire's structures, regardless of intent, cannot fully grasp the bridge between themselves and those subjected to its violence.

While the novel exposes the suffering of the empire's targets, it also illuminates how imperialism erodes the humanity of its enforcers. The soldiers who execute torture are not depicted as monstrous villains; they are unremarkable individuals adhering to orders without question. Their cruelty is mechanical, impersonal, and devoid of passion. Even Colonel Joll, the most visible embodiment of imperial brutality, is not portrayed as overtly sadistic. He performs his duties with detached efficiency, reducing human suffering to a methodical pursuit of "truth." This detachment renders him truly terrifying. He is driven not by hatred or malice but by a conviction in the necessity of his actions, a belief instilled by an empire that equates power with the prerogative to inflict pain.

The Magistrate, too, is implicated in this dehumanization. Though he repudiates the empire's methods, he is a product of its ideology, and his failure to act decisively against it renders him complicit in its violence. When he endures humiliation and punishment, his suffering does not grant him the insight he once sought. Instead, he experiences firsthand the mechanisms of imperial oppression, recognizing that those in power dehumanize not only their enemies but themselves. "One thought alone preoccupies the submerged mind of empire: how not to end, how not to die, how to prolong its era," (Coetzee 205) he reflects, highlighting the empire's ultimate obsession with self-preservation at any cost. The novel ultimately leaves the reader with an unsettling truth: empire does not merely oppress those it subjugates, it destroys the humanity of all who are entangled in its machinery, blurring the lines between victim and perpetrator until no one emerges unscathed.

Work Cited

Coetzee, J. M. *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Vintage Digital, 2004. Ebook.