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Oppression during prehistoric/post nuclear time in j. M. Coetzee's waiting for the barbarians

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Abstract

“Oppression” is major theme in most of Coetzee’s novel. The novel waiting for the Barbarians deals with the similar theme during Prehistoric / Post Nuclear Time. “Oppression” can be defined as an act or instance of oppressing, the state of being oppressed and the feeling of being heavily burdened, mentally or physically by troubles, adverse conditions. The paper titled “Oppression during Prehistoric / Post Nuclear Time” analyses the nature of oppression during the prehistoric times in Waiting for the Barbarians. It portrays the oppression of native of the land called “barbarians” by a political entity known as “the Empire” through Colonel Joll who humiliates the native and makes a public spectacle of their torture.

Key words: Oppression, Prehistoric, Post Nuclear Time, The Empire.

In *Waiting for the Barbarians* Coetzee allegorizes the ambivalence of white resistance in South Africa and also the dilemma of any dissenter in an oppressor regime. The story can take place anywhere or anytime; the relationships dealt within the novel are equally allegorical, between colonizer and colonized, man and woman, the Empire and its subjects. In the novel the Magistrate who tells the story is situated at the edge of the “empire” living peacefully with the people beyond the boundary. One day Colonel Jolly, a representative of the secret police, arrives to extract, by torture, any information about the “barbarian” that can be gathered from a collection of old men, women and children. For certainly, the Colonel is in the business of “creating” the enemy, in order that the Empire might define itself by its geographical and racial “others”. This according to Teresa Davey is a kind of Laconia allegory in which the imperial “self” can only exist with the creation of the colonial “other” (Starker 46). There are images of a pollution proliferate in the novel, within a narrative in which frontiers, marginality, the mutilated and violated body expresses political and cultural realities. The action falls into representative phases: an initial movement, dominated by the presence of a crippled ‘barbarian’ girl, in which a liberal magistrate attempts to maintain the status quo, via ritual cleansings, but is drawn towards a deeper truth by the unconscious life of his dreams; and a second, after his excursion in to the uncharted areas across the frontier, in which the state unleashes its powers to dramatize its symbolic structures on his physical body. There are few direct references to South Africa, though we may wish to consider that ‘apartheid’ (separateness) with its system of classification of racial purity stands implicitly condemned. In a broader sense, all margins may come to be perceived as dangerous. People in a marginal state, placeless, left out of the social patterning, become sources of danger because their status is indefinable, whether they are social outsiders, offenders against the bounded wholeness of the human body, or in some way positioned between the living and the dead. At the same time, power goes hand in hand with danger. Danger lies in marginal states because transition is neither one state nor the next, but indefinable: To have been in the margins is to have been in contact with danger, to have been at the source of power. The magistrate observes a “barbarian” girl begging on the streets. As one of the Jull’s captives, she has been questioned, tortured and left behind to survive or die. The magistrate sees that her ankles have mended crookedly after having been broken and that she has a strange way of regarding him. He makes inquires and is told that her torturers have blinded her. Under his insistent questioning, the girl reluctantly explains that the soldier’s destroyed her frontal vision by holding hot metal prongs close to her lenses. However, she can still see peripherally; thus, she turns her gaze away from the magistrate in order to see him more clearly. The essence of the girl is more obscure. Partially blinded, she makes the best use of the sight that remains to her. Crippled and impoverished in a strange frontier village, she has no means of support but begging and prostitution. She practices both until the magistrate forbids her to beg and offers her (she has no alternative) a position as a domestic in his home. His first perception of her is as a combination of domestic and concubine. She is productive as a domestic — “she washes dishes, peels vegetables, and helps to take bread . . .” (32), and later encourages the reluctant magistrate to make love with her. The parallelism between the woman’s body and the colonized land is also a parallel between body and story. While the girl remains mute, the narrator hunts for the truth of her story, examining the signs of torture on her body and repeatedly questioning her. For a brief period the girls’ lack of verbal or sexual responsiveness drives him to a young prostitute in whose arms he finds it a pleasure ‘to be lied to so flatteringly’ (42). But sex with the placating prostitute is only an attempt ‘to obliterate the girl’ (47), to wipe clean the slate.

The novel dramatizes the experience of Magistrate, a liberal “man of conscience” (“Dark Chamber” 363) presiding over the outpost, who is confronted with his complicity in the violence of the Empire. The novel charts the alteration in the Magistrate’s status from servant of the Empire and administrator of its laws to its adversary. This shift is triggered by the torture of barbarians by Colonel Jolly of the Third Bureau (the Empire’s internal security service), who has been authorized by “emergency powers” (1), and by the Empire’s declaration of war on the barbarians on the strength of allegations that the Magistrate knows to be groundless concerning the barbarians’ preparations of war. The torture that occurs in *Waiting for the Barbarians* is of three kinds: interrogational torture, which takes place, in “twilight of legal illegality” (Coetzee, “Dark Chamber”, 363) for the purpose of extracting “confessions spectacular torture, which invites the public to witness and participate in the torture of captives, and terroristic torture, whose purpose is the paralysis of resistance. These categories overlap and blend. In the novel, for example, both interrogational and spectacular torture produce “truth” and both contains terroristic elements. At the time of Jull’s arrival at the outpost, two prisoners, a father and son, or being held — an unusual event, the Magistrate tells Jolly, since criminality on the frontier does not usually extend beyond the occasional petty theft, to which the Outpost retaliates with counter — raids. The father informs the Magistrate that he was bringing his son to the outpost for medical treatment when they were captured by soldiers: “For nothing” (3). Jolly decides to interrogate and torture the prisoners. Jolly explains that there is a particular tone which prisoners use when they are telling the truth and that training enables the torture to recognize it: “I am speaking of ‘a situation in which I am probing for the truth, in which I have to exert pressure to find it. First I get lies, you see this is what happens — first lies, then pressure, then more lies, then more pressure, then the break, then more pressure, then the truth. That is how you get the truth’”. (5)

The confession obtained through torture contains whatever the torture has projected in to it: the boy with the sore “confesses” not only that he and members of his clan have stolen horses, but also that they are preparing for war against the Empire (11). Yet what is produced by torture — psychological as well as physical torture: the barbarian girl’s torture includes being forced to witness the tortures of her father — may be considered “truth” if truth is understood not as the correct perception of reality achievable only in the absence of the distortions of power but as produced through the operations of powers. Torture produces the victim’s status as “evil barbarian” and, what amounts to the same thing, the “truth” of the victim’s guilt, on which the Empire’s continued self — realization is contingent. The truth that is produced provides the justification that the Empire needs for its violence against the barbarians. The marks of torture, such as the scarring of the barbarian girl around the eyes, are “intended (. . .) to brand the victim with infamy”; they are signs of a truth “that must be effaced” (Foucault 34). If the torturer of the barbarian boy, his father and the barbarian girls is interrogational torture, when Joll returns with a group of 12 barbarian captives linked to each other with a wire that runs through the flesh of their hands and holes in their cheeks, the torture that ensues is spectacular. It gives each member of the crowd “an opportunity to prove to his children that the barbarians are real” (113). Four of the barbarians are forced to kneel (115). Joll rubs dust in to their backs and with a stick of charcoal writes the word “ENEMY”. The prisoners are then beaten “till their backs are washed clean” by sweat and blood. The soldiers are instructed by Joll to offer their canes to the public so as to enable the crowd to participate in the beatings. A girl is pushed to the front of the crowd by her friends and encouraged to beat a prisoner, which she does to the applause of the crowd. Indeed, in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the spectacular torture appears as a dramatization of Foucault’s account of public torture in a colonial setting, except that in Foucault’s account public torture is what criminals are sentenced to following their trial and conviction. Public torture is in this sense terroristic: its purpose is to make the crowd aware, through the body of the tortured, of the supreme power of the sovereign. The spectacle forces the crowd to experience the potency of the Empire’s power so that its members will experience themselves as subject to the Empire. It makes real for them the barbarian threat, and the Empire’s power to vanquish it. The Empire reconstitutes itself by marking those who live beyond its boundaries, but whom it has the power to subjugate. A third purpose for which torture is inflicted in *Waiting for the Barbarians* is to destroy resistance to the Empire. After the Magistrate returns from taking the barbarian girl back to her people and is construed as “treasonously consorting with the enemy” (85), he is imprisoned. He understands the purpose of his imprisonment: he will be “turned in to a creature that believes in nothing” (89), forced to shift his attention away from political opposition and to fixate on the alleviation of his material discomfort. He is made to endure petty sufferings that are “all the more degrading for their pettiness” (93). His torture is to be shut up, incommunicado, in a dark room, deprived of clean clothes and toilet facilities, to have his nose “rubbed in the quotidian” (96). After the Magistrate has voiced his opposition to the spectacle of torture by accusing Jolly of wanton cruelty and corrupting “the hearts of the innocent” spectators (118), he is again imprisoned, not to be interrogated about what he may have said to the barbarians but to be reduced to powerlessness. Mandel, another officer of the Third Bureau, and his assistant force a pipe down the Magistrate’s throat and pour pints of salt water into his stomach until it “coughs and retches and flails and voids itself” (126). The purpose of the torture is to demonstrate to the Magistrate that his corporeal well — being circumscribes the possibilities of political opposition. The Magistrate is forced to attempt “tricks” (127) that his weakened body is unable to perform and to wear women’s clothing. He is also prevented from washing. All of these impositions cause him, at least initially, “agencies of shame” (128). Torture works here by rendering the Magistrate’s enforced cross dressing, his ineptitude at performing tricks and his bodily stench, his failures for which he feels, despite his powerlessness, accountable. The sham execution of the magistrate combines elements of the terroristic and the spectacular. A salt bag is placed over the magistrate’s head and he is forced to balance on the top rung of a ladder “trying not to waiver” (131). The motivation behind the torture is to terrify the Magistrate, but also to “entertain” the crowd with a spectacle designed to demonstrate his reduction from an individual that speaks to an animal, “roaring, shouting” (133).

The nameless Empire in *Waiting for the Barbarians* has striking parallels with the South African regime. The 1970s in apartheid South Africa was the time when state sanctioned torture was the order of the day. South Africa police acted with untold brutality and a person of color could be detained for an indefinite period of time and tortured under the iron laws. The incidents of torture and police violence remarkably escalated after the National Party assumed power in South Africa in 1948. As repressive mechanism grew intense, torture became the theme of literature and political writings. The genesis of torture lies in the concept of Otherness. Otherness is often produced as a consequence of callousness towards one who is perceived as different from self. The tendency of self to create the other lies behind the rationalization on given to torture and a deliberate ignorance of the prisoner's pain. Amnesty's report on torture concludes: "If our education systems, newspapers, and politics teach us from earliest days that members of one race, or religion or political belief are not be regarded as humans like ourselves, then it will be normal if we treat them inhumanly". (Gallagher 64) In this paper, we have seen that how the natives of land called "barbarians" got tortured and humiliated by the Empire. Throughout this novel, the Empire shows its oppressive nature on natives through Colonel Jolly, particularly on the barbarian girl. Even the loyal man like Magistrate got oppressed by the Empire. This novel which takes place in prehistoric / post nuclear time (invention of eyeglasses and gunpowder) has a real meaning of oppression. In this novel, both colonized and colonizer got oppressed by the same political entity called the "Empire".

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