

Empire's Echoes: Postcolonial Power, Identity, and Language in J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*

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Abstract:

This paper explores J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* through the lens of postcolonial theory, analyzing its interrogation of colonial power, identity formation, and the role of language as both an oppressive and emancipatory force. Set in an unnamed imperial frontier, the novel critiques the construction of the "Other," the psychological transformations within colonial agents, and the imperial state's manipulation of truth and discourse. By drawing on Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Homi Bhabha's hybridity, and Ashcroft et al.'s linguistic theory, the paper demonstrates how Coetzee dismantles colonial binaries and reveals the complexity of domination and resistance. The novel illustrates how power is maintained not only through physical coercion but also through linguistic control and narrative manipulation. Language becomes a tool of empire, shaping perceptions of truth and morality, while simultaneously revealing its limitations in capturing the complexities of human experience. Coetzee problematizes the stability of identity under colonial rule, depicting the Magistrate's crisis of conscience as a metaphor for the disintegration of imperial ideology. The novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians* serves as a profound meditation on the entangled relationship between language, identity, and power in the postcolonial context, emphasizing the need to dismantle dominant narratives to envision a more just and humane order.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Empire, Othering, Identity, Hybridity, Language, Coetzee, Power, Orientalism

Introduction:

J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) emerges as one of the most powerful allegories of colonial violence in postcolonial literature. In the desolate outpost of an unnamed Empire, Coetzee crafts a psychological and political drama in which domination is maintained through myth, language, and fear. The narrative follows an imperial Magistrate who begins to question the moral foundations of the system he serves, particularly after witnessing the torture of so-called "barbarian" nomads.

This paper examines three central postcolonial dimensions of the novel: (1) the construction and maintenance of colonial power through fear and othering, (2) the psychological and cultural impacts of empire on identity—especially in the figure of the Magistrate, and (3) the ambivalent role of language as a medium of control and as a potential site of resistance. Drawing on postcolonial theory and close readings of the text, the paper situates *Waiting for the Barbarians* as a critique of imperial logic and an exploration of the ethical dilemma of complicity.

Colonial Power and the Manufactured Enemy:

Coetzee's Empire exists not in direct confrontation with an external threat, but in a perpetual state of preparation against an imagined one. Colonel Joll, a cold representative of the Bureau of State Security, epitomizes this logic of paranoia. He claims his methods are infallible:

"Pain is truth; all else is subject to doubt." (Coetzee 5)

His blunt philosophy reflects Michel Foucault's concept of power as disciplinary and truth-making—violence not just as enforcement but as a means to construct legitimacy.

The Empire's narrative of danger allows it to "intervene" in the frontier—torturing nomads and razing settlements in the name of peace.

"The crime that is latent in us we must inflict on ourselves,"

the Magistrate reflects. "Not on others." (Coetzee 140).

This internalization of violence is key to how colonial systems rationalize their aggression. Edward Said's *Orientalism* is echoed in the novel's depiction of the "barbarians" as unknowable, savage, and needing to be controlled. The "barbarian" is not a real figure, but a mirror through which the Empire defines itself.

Dagamseh, in his reading of the novel, argues that “the Empire constructs its legitimacy not by its material superiority but by its rhetorical production of the Other as irrational, backward, and violent” (Dagamseh 3). This “Othering” process dehumanizes the colonized while consolidating the colonizer’s power.

Identity, Hybridity, and Moral Awakening:

The Magistrate’s narrative arch dramatizes the moral and existential crisis of a colonial agent caught between complicity and resistance. Initially indifferent, he begins to question imperial policy after witnessing the torture of prisoners. His encounter with the barbarian girl—a victim of the Empire’s cruelty—becomes a turning point, initiating a slow unraveling of his ideological certainty.

Coetzee complicates this awakening by refusing to present the Magistrate as a hero. His attempts to “heal” the barbarian girl—through bathing, ritual, and intimate contact—are fraught with contradiction. He confesses: “I cannot even tell whether it was affection or restlessness that drove me to undress her...” (Coetzee 31). His guilt and desire blur, raising questions about whether his actions are liberating or re-colonizing her body in softer forms.

Homi Bhabha’s theory of hybridity offers a useful lens. The Magistrate inhabits a liminal space—neither fully aligned with the Empire nor entirely assimilated into the world of the “barbarians.” He becomes, as Bojana Gledić writes,

“a hybrid subject whose position allows him to critique the colonial center while never fully escaping its logic” (Gledić 129).

His ultimate rejection of Empire comes not through revolution but through moral witness: a refusal to participate, even as he is punished and humiliated.

Language and the Empire’s Control of Meaning:

One of the novel’s most powerful postcolonial gestures is its interrogation of language. Coetzee emphasizes how imperial language constructs reality, represses dissent, and enforces order. Colonel Joll’s language is cold and bureaucratic; he calls torture “the new methods.” The very euphemisms used by the Empire sterilize violence and erase the suffering of its victims.

In contrast, the Magistrate’s language becomes increasingly uncertain, questioning its ability to represent truth. In a striking moment, he reflects on his inability to read a barbarian script:

“It is the barbarian character war, but it has other senses too... vengeance... justice... There is no knowing which sense is intended” (Coetzee 102).

This linguistic ambiguity challenges the colonial claim to authoritative meaning. As Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin argue in *The Empire Writes Back*, the appropriation and subversion of imperial language is central to postcolonial resistance.

The Magistrate’s eventual silence—his refusal to confess or explain himself to the authorities—is itself a subversive act. He no longer plays the game of imperial discourse. As Mary Nashef argues, “Language, which once facilitated the Empire’s control, now becomes incoherent, paralyzed under the weight of its own contradictions” (Nashef 16).

The Barbarian Girl- Silence and the Body as Testimony:

The barbarian girl is one of the novel’s most haunting figures, yet she speaks little. Her silence is not a sign of passivity but a critique of the limits of language in representing trauma. Her broken body becomes a living text, one that the Magistrate obsessively tries to “read,” but cannot fully understand. Her presence forces him into a confrontation with his own guilt and desire.

Redemptive empathy is never fully achieved. The girl eventually returns to her people, leaving the Magistrate to face the consequences of his defiance alone. As a Reddit reader aptly notes,

“His empathy doesn’t absolve him—he remains part of the Empire. Even kindness can be colonial.” ([Reddit.com] (https://www.reddit.com/r/TrueFilm/comments/iluqdy?utm_source=chatgpt.com))

This ambivalence is part of Coetzee’s broader strategy: he resists offering moral clarity, instead emphasizing the complexity of postcolonial subjectivities.

Conclusion:

Waiting for the Barbarians is a searing indictment of imperial violence and the psychological machinery that sustains it. Through the lens of postcolonial theory, Coetzee exposes how empires construct enemies, manipulate language, and distort identity. The novel’s brilliance lies in its refusal to simplify. The Magistrate is both complicit and redemptive; the barbarian girl both victim and agent; language both prison and liberation.

In today’s world, where echoes of colonial logic persist—in surveillance, military intervention, and the rhetoric of “us vs. them”—Coetzee’s novel remains urgently relevant. It calls not for easy condemnation, but for ethical introspection. As the Magistrate learns, the path away from empire begins with doubt, silence, and the painful work of seeing clearly.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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