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J. M. COETZEE'S FICTIONS OF FRAGMENTATION: A LITERARY OEUVRE BY ACCENTUATING *WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS*

J. M. COETZEE'NİN FRAGMENTASYON KURGULARI: *BARBARLARI BEKLERKEN ÜZERİNE EDEBİ ÇALIŞMA*

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ABSTRACT

The South African novelist John Maxwell Coetzee who grew up in Cape Town during the apartheid era attracts considerable critical attention around the world. He faces problems related to identification, and he witnesses the repressive political attitude at an early age, so his fictions reflect a challenge to the established regime which is developed by imperialism. To depict the oppressive South African environment, Coetzee focuses on the concept of power and powerlessness. *Waiting for the Barbarians* was published in 1980 when the oppressive apartheid government began to criticize international political environments. A critical analysis of his role as an author will be made in regard to the ideology of apartheid. By peeling each layer of his books, the sufferings of Black South Africans will be brought to light in regards to racism and how their mental states were affected. This study analyses the role J.M. Coetzee played as an author in the apartheid system by focusing on the way he challenges imperialism—without mentioning the setting, time and place.

Keywords: J.M.Coetzee, Barbarians, Empire, Otherness.

ÖZET

Apartheid döneminde Cape Town'da büyüyen Güney Afrikalı romancı John Maxwell Coetzee'nin eserleri, dünya çapında çok fazla rağbet görüyor. Kimlik sorunlarına vurgu yapan yazar, erken yaşlarda baskıcı politik tutuma tanık olmuştur. Bu yüzden, kurguları emperyalizm tarafından geliştirilmekte olan yerleşik rejime karşı bir meydan okumayı yansıtmaktadır. Coetzee, baskıcı Güney Afrika çevresini betimlemek için güç ve güçsüzlük kavramına odaklanır. *Barbarları Beklerken*, baskıcı apartheid hükümetinin uluslararası siyasi ortamları eleştirmeye başladığı 1980 yılında yayınlandı. Yazar olarak, Coetzee'nin rolü apartheid ideolojisine karşı eleştirel yaklaşımından ayıramayız. Kitaplarının her bölümünde, ırkçılıktan kaynaklı Siyah tenli Güney Afrikalıların çektikleri acı ve zihinsel durumlarının nereden etkilendiğini ortaya çıkarıyor. Bu çalışma, J.M. Coetzee'nin apartheid sistemde yazar olarak oynadığı rolü ve emperyalizme karşı-ortamdan, zamandan ve mekandan bağımsızın-meydan okumasından bahsediyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: J.M.Coetzee, Barbarlar, İmparatorluk, Ötekileştirmek.

1. INTRODUCTION

The winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2003, John Maxwell Coetzee (1940-) is a South African-born novelist who was born in Cape Town in 1940 and raised in the Apartheid era (1948 – April 27, 1994) of institutionalised racial segregation in South (West) Africa. J. M. Coetzee's novels reveal the messes caused in the postcolonial world—in an intriguing and captivating manner. One is taught by history through avoiding the repeated mistakes at present—although fragments of the mistakes made in the past manage to linger around. One could say that the inspiration he puts into paper came from the circumstances circuit around him. Although he was raised in an Afrikaans-speaking family in Cape Town, he graduated from an English-speaking school. He remained fluent in Afrikaans, a language which originates from Dutch settlers, regardless of English that gradually became his primary language.

Easton assume that Coetzee's fiction offers "a new kind of mapmaking which opens up the space of South African fiction." (Easton, 1995: 585) Coetzee translates "the raw hurt, fear and anxiety of his childhood into such remarkable" fiction. (Kakutani, 1997: 8) While most of his novels are "indirectly 'about' the political and social struggles of South Africa" (Martin, 1986: 4), Coetzee talks about one of these histories; "the history of his own discourse, rooted in the discourses of imperialism, and the suppressed history of the colonised, which has to be recuperated without being arrogated to colonial discourse." (Dovey, 1996: 139)

2. A THE IDEOLOGY OF APARTHEID THROUGH J.M. COETZEE'S LITERARY OEUVRE

Coetzee's books are treasured for those who wish to understand the culture of the white settlers of South Africa in historical, political and cultural contexts. For example, *White Writing* is Coetzee's attempt to give a background to the works of white South Africans that have shaped the white South African political culture and the downfall of the black people in his homeland. It is a valuable addition to the study of post-colonial and post-revolutionary South African culture (Cohen, 1992: 425-27). He is an admired South African novelist who has often used his country's apartheid system and its post-apartheid change to mirror humanity. The mixed reactions he received in South Africa called for debates over Coetzee's career. His admirers, find him confidential in the portrayal of a nation's racial and political conflicts before and after apartheid. Critics say he got fame by dramatizing South Africa's violence. Coetzee personifies the torn apart personality of whites in South Africa. In Coetzee's *Disgrace*, an intense portrayal of the after-effects is made in regards to what happens to white farmers on their lands after the disintegration of white supremacy.

Coetzee holds excellent information and knowledge in connection to the works that have shaped white thinking, and acquaintance with the nineteenth-century European traditions that educated the white writers of South Africa. He uses his familiarity with the latest theorists, especially the French, and manages a kind of postmodern critical-historical essays. Coetzee's *The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee*, which is presented as a lecture, suggests the early South African travel writing. Being a strongly meta-representational work, it focuses on those strategies through which, Europeans represent to themselves their 'others.' It means the European 'self', and the African 'Other' is distinguished by language and the narrative systems of Western culture. Coetzee's return to his country—South Africa—in 1976, and his second novel, *In the Heart of the Country*, marked the concepts of land, fragmentation and dislocation through Coetzeean words.

Coetzee's criticism and fiction have been deeply affected by an interest in such geographically or topographically defined genres such as the exploration narrative and the pastoral in politically significant spaces such as the imperial border, the labour camp, and the torture hall. Even the titles of his first two novels, *Dusklands* and *In the Heart of the Country* suggest this fascination in strangely mysterious and symbolically rich places. It is possible that the structuralism and viewpoint of Coetzee's academic training seem to have the firsthand and personal aspect of a South African landscape. Coetzee once remarked that people could be in love with only one landscape in their lifetime. Coetzee's novels and scholarly criticism like *The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee* in the second half of *Dusklands* or his collection of essays, *White Writing* face the issues of South Africa barely. His novels like *Life & Times of Michael K*, show departure and wander and they root themselves as nowhere. In the case of *Micheal K*, the protagonist Micheal represents the silence of the victims and how they endure torture, humiliation, captivity and enforcement against the regime of the oppressive apartheid era in South Africa. Coetzee's work might be seen as a series of travelling and dislocation—roots in South African veritas—but he offers a new kind of mapmaking which advertises South African fiction.

In order to appreciate Coetzee's novels, one needs to learn and understand the history behind them which allows one to understand the reason he would bring the apartheid system to light by using fiction to make his voice heard. There are always two sides of a story; the 'black' Africans might feel like their history was stolen and told by the same people (whites) that inflicted pain upon them. Thus, what makes Coetzee more special that he was heard and most recognized, unlike his 'black' counterparts? History can be written by anyone, but it takes someone special to convey the message—regardless of the criticism that follows. In *the Cambridge Introduction to J.M. Coetzee*, Head states that Coetzee's novel

occupies a special place in the South African literature and in the development of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries' novel more generally (Head, 2009: 1). Although "[the] difference of black people should not be understood through a binary opposition of white people" (Edman & Işık, 2018: 7); in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Coetzee demonstrates torture and its silent victims as well as reveals the language of authority.

3. A KNOWN STORY OF OPPRESSION

Coetzee's third novel, *waiting for the Barbarians* taken its title from the Greek-Poet, Constantine Cavafy:

-And why don't our worthy orators, as always, come out to deliver their speeches, to have their usual say?

Because the barbarians will arrive today; and they get bored with eloquence and orations.

-Why has there suddenly begun all this commotion, and this confusion? (How solemn people's faces have become). Why are the streets and the squares emptying so swiftly, and everyone is returning home in deep preoccupation?

Because night has fallen and the barbarians have not come. And some people have arrived from the frontiers, and said that there are no barbarians anymore.

And now, what will become of us without barbarians? Those people were some sort of a solution (Cavafy, 2008: 17)

The poem revolves around the anticipation of a barbarian invasion which never took place, and it results in a structured series of questions and answers between two participants. They live in fear of being attacked by the barbaric enemy and in a sense, they depend on the barbarians to strengthen their national feelings of a state. Poyner stresses that Coetzee makes a titular allusion to the Greek modernist Cavafy's poem and stages the state of waiting of a colonizing people who live in fear of being attacked by the elusive barbarians (2009: 52). As in Coetzee's novel, Empire needs someone to prove their existence against an 'other' or an 'opposite'. This Empire "has located its existence not in the smooth recurrent spinning time of the cycle of the seasons but in the jagged time of rise and fall, of beginning and end, of catastrophe" (Coetzee, 1999: 177) and "dooms itself to live in history and plot against history." (*ibid.*) Throughout the novel, non-defined Empire waits 'desired' barbarians in the 'desired' land, at the time the protagonist is nameless, who describes the barbarians in *Waiting for the Barbarians* as:

Of this unrest I myself saw nothing. In private, I observed that once in every generation, without fail, there is an episode of hysteria about the barbarians. There is no woman living along the frontier who has not dreamed of a dark barbarian hand coming from under the bed to grip her ankle, no man who has not frightened himself with visions of the barbarians carousing in his home, breaking the plates, setting the fire to the curtains, raping his daughters. These dreams are the consequence of too much ease. Show me a barbarian army and I will believe (*ibid.*, 14)

Coetzee carefully creates the barbarian girl as a representation of the 'other'. She is a prisoner of Colonel Joll and after being tortured, she is left on the streets with her injured body. This disfigured and semi-blinded figure demonstrates how the normal one turned to be abnormal by the Empire. Magistrate washes her body to wash away the traces of torture, but in the end, he becomes aware that washing her body cannot heal the traces. In other words, there is a crime against humanity in South Africa, so it is not easy to wipe the effects on people. Magistrate's last dream is about the children who are building a snowman—without completed mouth, nose, and eyes—in the middle of the square. For magistrate, it should also have arms, but he decides not to interfere a bad snowman (*ibid.*, 207). This snowman represents the victims of the oppressive apartheid system in South Africa and the victims without eyes; arms even legs try to configure themselves. In addition to this case, Magistrate questions that how people get rid of the traces of torment—whether 'torturer' or 'tortured'. It is cited in the novel as;

I would like to ask: How do you find it possible to eat afterwards, after you have been [...] working with people? Do you find it easy to take food afterwards? I have imagined that

one would want to wash one's hands. But no ordinary washing would be enough, one would require priestly, intervention, a ceremonial of cleansing, don't you think? (*ibid.*, 168)

Magistrate asks a question to Mandel to comprehend what he feels after the torture, how he calms himself down, how he returns to his daily life and how he eats with his hands without feeling nauseous and disgusted with himself? Meanderingly, Coetzee challenges imperialism without mentioning names via narrating the character's experiences. The torture room is a metaphor of relation between the Empire and its victims. At the beginning of the novel, the torture room is described as a simple storeroom that is attached to a granary without window and smells of urine; but later, when Magistrate is in the torture room, he describes the place: "I guzzle my food like a dog'. 'A bestial life is turning me into a beast.'" (*ibid.*, 79) He impersonates the walls of the torture room and tries to solve traces on the walls as he thinks of the barbarian girl and his father and how they endure these sorrows. Then he recreates the figure of a father whose child is beaten—when he cannot protect them. Then, Magistrate beats upon his self, but it is too late. This shame is due to the fact that he is one of the parts of Empire and he cannot control these sadistic torments. After the journey, across the border, while returning back the barbarian girl to her people, Magistrate is questioned by the young officials about the barbarians. They try to understand the barbarians' dissatisfaction and their reaction about them. However, Magistrate reacts with a condemnation of Empire's arrogant and oppressive mentality and answers in an ironic way, as below;

Shall I tell you what I sometimes wish? I wish that these barbarians would rise up and teach us a lesson, so that we may learn to respect them. We think of the country here as ours, part of our Empire—our outpost, our settlement, our market center. But these people, these barbarians don't think of it like that at all...they still think of us as visitors, transients [...]. That is what they are thinking. That they will outlast us (*ibid.*, 87)

Magistrate hints that barbarians are described variously; as herdsmen, fisher people, desert nomads or unsettled farmers, and they live near the Empire's border or unmapped lands. He implies that they are peaceful or pitiable, but non-apparently they are not like them. He calls barbarian as the Empire's conceive; implying that they are 'imagined' barbarians. What is interesting in the novel is that Magistrate discovers wooden slips near the settlement. They are proof of the pre-history of Africa, and he tries to interpret them many times, but it is too challenging to reveal its alphabet. When he is questioned by Colonial Joll about these slips, he is accused of being a spy for the enemy. Joll insists on translating the wooden slips' interpretations; Magistrate challenges the Empire to refer to the words of the war and justice. Joll defines that the sticks are likely gambling sticks which use other tribes on the border. However, the sticks with the interpretation reveal the existence of indigenous African pre-history. Magistrate depicts the stick mean 'war', or 'vengeance' or 'justice'; it depends on how you interpret it. As Head reminds Magistrate's challenge in his book, 'he proposes, the slips 'form an allegory', and can be read as a 'domestic journal,' or a 'plan of war,' or even a history of the last years Empire-the old Empire'. (2009: 52) Magistrate says;

See, there is only a single character. It is the barbarian character war, but it has other senses too. It can stand for vengeance, and, if you turn it upside down like this, it can be made to read justice. There is no knowing which sense is intended. That is part of barbarian cunning. (Coetzee, 1999: 150)

There is another history in the novel. As Head cites in his book, it is the story of Magistrate's personal growth, simmering in his subconscious and made manifest through a sequence of dreams (Head, 2009: 54). In his dreams, Magistrate sees children playing in the snow, and they are building a snow castle. When he comes near to them, children melt away; except the only one whose face is invisible, and maybe she is the barbarian girl. As the sequence of his dream progresses, the unidentified girl builds a town where she bakes bread. The last dream demonstrates the barbarian girl who recreates her town as an 'imagined' community. The children symbolize the dream of the South African people. After the torture, oppression and exploitation, they heal their sorrows and restore their country. Snowman represents broken Africans' pains. In economic and social terms, South Africa is exploited by imperialism, so it is possible to remove the traces of economic exploitation. Snowman's posture is an answer and in the final scene, Magistrate says;

In the middle of the square, there are children at play building a snowman. Anxious not to alarm them, but inexplicably joyful, I approach across the snow. They are not alarmed; they are busy to cast me a glance. They have completed the great round body, now they are rolling a ball for the head.' Someone fetch things for the mouth, nose and eyes'. Says the child who is their leader. It strikes me that the snowman will need arms too, but I do not want to inference. They settle the head on the shoulders and fill it out with pebbles for eyes, ears, nose and mouth. One of them crowns it with his cap. It is not a bad snowman. (Coetzee, 1999: 207)

4. THE NOTION OF BARBARIANS THROUGH COETZEEAN PERSPECTIVE

Edward W. Said deals with the notion of 'Barbarians' in *Culture and Imperialism*. Colonizers have been affected by the 'Mysterious East' since the discoveries started. They claim that they brought civilization to the primitive or barbaric people; but when they misbehave or become rebellious, imperialist powers think that barbaric people deserve to be ruled (Said, 1994: 1). Gardiner emphasizes how many liberal South African novels are willing to show "the culture of the ruling class is any more 'civilized' than that of the black majority," he says, "even these retain the ethnocentric intellectual baggage that comes with the term 'civilization'" (Gardiner, 1987: 184). In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Empire lives in fear of attacking 'barbarians', but it seems that there is irrationality when it comes to the barbarians who are created, acted and presented by these powers.

The military of the 'civilized' power, who are of course the real barbarians, then proceeds to inflict a terrible and hideous revenge. The barbarians, who are basically innocent, are really a mental fiction born of colonial paranoia and a political convenience: their invention has become indispensable for the maintenance of a blind, insane power which sucks everything into its vortex and for the antithetical definition of the Empire as a force for 'civilization,' which presupposes the existence of barbarism (Wright, 1989: 115)

Coetzee creates an imaginary and unnamed Empire, and at the end of the novel, he makes a universal allegory of imperialism; although, he displays the Empire's self-destruction. Colonel Joll and his men from Empire's Third Bureau arrive at the undefined border town to safeguard the borderlines of Empire and to destroy the barbarians. Magistrate meets them, while Colonel Joll is wearing sunglasses; while he explains to Magistrate the reason he used it. The first requested functions of new tool are its protective effects—although are know it keeps the eyes safe against the glory of the sun. The first function of this invention refers back to Empire that removes away the sense of humanity by committing crime. The second function of this new invention is that it prevents wrinkles, so Empire does not want to be old. As they do not want to struggle against the difficulties of life, maybe, the easiest way is to exploit the 'others';

I have never seen anything like it: two little discs of glass suspended in front of his eyes in loops of wire. Is he blind? I could not understand it if he wanted to hide blind eyes. But he is not blind. He tells me they are new invention. 'They protect one's eyes against the glare of the sun,' he says. 'Look. 'He touches the corners of his eyes lightly. 'No Wrinkles.' (Coetzee, 1999: 4)

The protagonist is simply the Magistrate and Joll's victim, the Barbarian girl who has been blinded and crippled by the imperialists and left by her own people. Sharma says, "J. M. Coetzee is controversial in depicting female characters in his war-themed novels [...] to define power as a factor influencing colour, race, and especially gender." (Sharma, 2016: 388) The first person narration as a phenomenon the narrator of the novel to think of a dream (Sharma, 2016: 384) Barnard is likening to show the similarity between the Magistrate who in a dream "urges the barbarian girl to put people in the empty city she builds out of snow," and Coetzee's texts that investigate "for a landscape full of people, a society of reciprocity and fraternity." (Bernard 1994: 58) Olsen reminds us, "Coetzee jams our notions of where and when. The geography of this entropic settlement is garbled because we are in the landscape of almost-dream, of the hypnagogic state—that state of semiconsciousness, of drowsiness and reverie experienced just as one is falling into dreams." (Olsen, 1985: 50-51)

Wright examines Coetzee's fiction as representative of a hostile colonial act and the novel "focuses on the moral dilemma of a liberal-minded Magistrate who takes the side of the nomadic people occupying

the wilderness on the other side of the ‘barbarous frontier.’” (1989: 115) The town’s people hear rumours about the barbarians, but only encounter with prisoners who “do not constitute a real threat to the Empire.” (Neimneh, 2013: 135) Barbarians or ‘fisherfolk’ in the novel desire “to be left alone in peaceful coexistence with the frontier people on land which they consider theirs to traverse.” (*ibid.*) Buboltz says, “The Magistrate, while he does not turn to violence, uses his relationship with the woman to promote his own healing rather than hers or theirs together. His rebellion against the Empire proves futile, and he continues working as an integral part of the oppressive group.” (Buboltz, 2009: 86)

As in the novel, the Empire in Cavafy’s poem pointlessly waits for the arrival of the barbarians who never come. Its anxious waiting for the barbarians and its excessive preparations lead to nothing. In Coetzee’s novel, the expedition of Joll into the desert meets nothing, and meaning for him, and for the magistrate, is continually delayed. The barbarians, on the other hand, continue to inhabit a shadowy existence. (Neimneh et al., 2012: 4)

Al-Saidi parallels Coetzee’s established archetypal indefiniteness in time as well as in space that “indirectly refers to the theme of Otherness.” (Al-Saidi, 2014: 98) Maybe “the contact between the European self and the African other” (Marais, 1993: 48) in Coetzee’s fiction is reflected in “the ruling abstraction, the hostile fiction preoccupying the paranoid mind of the oppressor” (Wright, 1989: 116) against the barbarian. Coetzee “not only see that ‘when all is called into doubt no assertion can be made,’ but by reading ‘a sequence of sentences that have been scored through,’ we experience the doubt of the doubter.” (Bishop, 1990: 57) It turns out “the voice of unnamed magistrate who serves as a binary model of self/the other. The issues of colonizer/the colonized, torturer/tortured, self/the other” give “the sense of disturbance and pain” (Diler&Emir, 2015: 2) Mushtaq says, “Othering makes the innocent people feel horrified, humiliated and depressed. They are unable to figure out what their offence is. The Self, in the shape of Colonel Joll’s oppression, asserts itself by marginalizing the barbarians through the process of Othering.” (2010:28) Sandler argued the links that create divisions such as barbarian/civilized with animalization;

The barbarians are animalized, stripped naked, inhumanely bound together, and then brought into the town and for everyone to see, tied to a post as a dog might be. This display, in conjunction with previous displays of animalization and the inevitable influence of spoken and written propaganda that likely permeated the town during the magistrate’s time in prison (and that accompanies every similar historical use of animalization, such as the depiction of Jews as rats by the Nazis), leads to a public recognition of the barbarians as the other. (Sandler, 2013: 176)

While “the Empire uses force to impose the enemy status on one of its representatives, the magistrate himself, by treating him as a traitor and by using force to inscribe this status on the native prisoners” (Neimneh, 2013: 135), Colonel Joll “personifies Empire at its most brutal, with his dark glasses symbolizing his mode of perception, his colonialist gaze. They are literally a ‘product’ of the Empire, a ‘new invention,’ just as the imperial enterprise is enabled and legitimized by the ‘production’ of a way of seeing.” (Dickinson, 2007: 10) Fisher describes although “the magistrate sympathizes with the barbarian girl and begins to see how miserable her life has been,” on the other hand, Colonel Joll “represents the Empire in its most evil form. He attempts to right the wrongs which have been done to her by the empire” (Fisher, 1988: 14) while “the Magistrate is an oppressor and an oppressed at the same time, and how imperialist attitudes are internalized. To a much less violent degree, but significant nonetheless, the Magistrate has participated in the colonization of the barbarian woman.” (Jansen, 2013: 55)

Mai, Joll and Mandel—the only people with a name—are characterised by the implications, whether ironical or not, contained in their names. Mai recalls ma, a linguistic near-universal for ‘mother’ found in many of the world’s languages and she is, in fact, the mother-figure in the novel. Colonel Joll is not a ‘jolly’ person, neither does he ‘jolly’ people to win their co-operation. Furthermore, in Afrikaans jol means ‘to play around’, ‘to have fun’, which singles out the worst kind of torturer: somebody whose job is also his recreation. His dark glasses and the black carriage he travels in identify him as an infernal creature who brings about death and destruction; with his lethal touch he changes healthy people into cripples

and dead bodies, and the tool-hut by the granary—a symbol of life—into a horror chamber.
(Pugliese, 2001: 61-62)

5. CONCLUSION

As an author, Coetzee faced the probability of being criticized for his work; but he challenged the norms as a white African and wrote about what he observed. He was condemned for using the apartheid system to obtain fame. He only did what others had failed to do. He dived into the minds of the ‘white’ Africans to try and explain why they behaved superior in comparison to the ‘black’ Africans to distinguish whatever makes one skin-colour more superior than the other. In order to understand Coetzee’s books and his ideology in regards to apartheid, one needs to be familiar with the apartheid system. The focus was placed on how Coetzee challenges imperialism without mentioning its setting, out of time and place notions. As a reader, one cannot find any word which directly to point imperialism, but every event in the novel reveals the mask of Empire. Coetzee problematizes the system and its victims through the novel. In the *Waiting of the Barbarians*, the barbarian girl’s silence is seen as a reaction to the enforced system by Empire. She is the victim of an imperialist power while the novel “challenges the relation between the individuals and the system” in order to “reveal cultural and sociopolitical anxieties” through “an allegory of imperialism” (Nadimi&Sadjadi, 2018: 2). This article investigates the identity of barbarians and the relationship between Power and Powerlessness.

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