

The Representation of Violence and Suffering in J M Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*

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Abstract. The research article looks at the many ways in which violence and suffering are portrayed in the novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*, one of the early novels of J M Coetzee. The study explores the ways that Coetzee's novel examines colonialism's repercussions, power relationships, and human nature through its portrayal of violence and suffering and tries to shed light on the underlying social and psychological implications of violence and suffering in the context of imperialism by examining the characters, themes, and narrative devices used in the novel. The novel depicts the socio-political issues in the 1970s in South Africa due to the Black Consciousness Movement, the Soweto revolt, the death of Steve Biko, an important leader of the Black Consciousness Movement in police custody and the attention of international media on his death and condition of women and children in the patriarchal society.

Key Terms: Violence, suffering, empathy, imperialism, power dynamics, ideology, imagery, allegory, trauma, identity.

I. Introduction

Violence can be defined as the unlawful use of physical force or the use of such force to intimidate others as well as the illegal use of physical force with the intention to harm, kill or destroy someone or something. WHO defines violence as, "the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, which either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development or deprivation". Every year 4.4 million people die of injuries and violence across the world which constitutes nearly 8% of all deaths. However, the number of deaths represents a small portion of the health and societal costs associated with violence. The most vulnerable groups to non-fatal physical, sexual, and psychological abuse are women, children, and the elderly. Suffering is the physical or mental pain a human being or an animal feels or experiences. The suffering can be physical, mental, emotional and/or psychological as used to distinguish different kinds of it.

The common causes of violence and suffering are war; severe emotional, physical or sexual abuse in childhood; betrayal, neglect and abandonment in childhood; witnessing or/and experiencing violence; rape; catastrophic illness and injuries. As South Africa is in a state of change, violence, psychological and physical injuries, HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, sexual violence, and rape of children and women in the name of religion, culture and superstitious beliefs have increased the suffering and trauma in the life of people. South Africa is notorious for its sexual violence against women and children. Hence, it has been called the rape capital of the world as it has reported the highest number of rape incidents.

Albeit the novel depicts the events that took place in an unnamed Empire, time not specified and of an unnamed magistrate in the outpost at the frontier, there are parallel incidents that had taken place in South Africa in the 1970s which influenced Coetzee to select the themes for *Waiting for the Barbarians*. The rumoured uprising of the nomads/barbarians is derived from the Soweto revolt of 1976 inspired by the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa. The suppression of the uprising of the barbarians was taken from the state's deployment of security forces to ruthlessly suppress the Soweto revolt. The death of a barbarian in police custody is derived from the death of Steve Biko, a prominent leader of the Black Consciousness Movement under unnatural circumstances. The imprisonment and detention of the Magistrate without trial are based on the incarceration and detention of political prisoners during the suppression of the Soweto revolt in 1977 in South Africa. South African BOSS, the Bureau of State Security was renamed the Third Bureau as Tsarist Russia. The Magistrate represents the torture chamber and the officer with a liberal conscience on people. Coetzee did this to avoid the book being banned by the stringent South African censorship on publication.

II. A Synopsis of *Waiting for the Barbarians*

The novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), is set in the backdrop of an unnamed colonial outpost in an unspecified time controlled by an unspecified Empire. The story is narrated by an unnamed Magistrate who wants to live peacefully before getting retired. The peace of the outpost was interrupted by the coming of Colonel Joll, sent by the Empire to investigate the rumoured uprising of the barbarians. Colonel Joll randomly selects a few barbarians and tortures them to get information about plans for barbarian attacks on the outpost. The Magistrate who is loyal to the Empire begins to question the plan of action of Joll towards barbarians. After a series of tortures and deaths, Joll leaves for the capital to return with a fresh attack on the nomads. The Magistrate makes a journey to the barbarian frontier in order to return one of the captives (a young girl) to the nomads. During this journey, they sleep together and she chooses to remain with her people when they find them.

The Magistrate was incarcerated after his return from the expedition as he was convinced of his visit to the nomads. He was tortured by Joll and humiliated again by Mandel by hanging him from the tree naked except a smock. He was released from confinement and lived a life of a beggar and people started to leave the outpost as the barbarians flooded the fields in retaliation to the tortures. The soldiers sent to subdue the barbarians are defeated when nomads lure them into the desert and leave them bereft of horses and other supplies. Joll comes back to the outpost and finds Mandel already left the outpost. The Magistrate assumes his position again and instructs the people to prepare for the winter.

III. Representation of Violence

Coetzee uses clear and unsettling imagery to portray the acts of physical, psychological and sexual violence and exploitation against the native/aboriginal people in the name of law and order and protection. Colonel Joll, the colonial representative of oppression, employs the tactics of violence, cruelty and torture to subdue and exploit the native people. These delineations expose the inherent brutality of colonial power and power dynamics under colonialism.

The first instance of violence in the novel can be seen at the time of interrogation of nomads called barbarians by the colonisers. One of the barbarians, who comes to the outpost with his nephew for medical advice for his soar, was tortured to death in the name of interrogation by the Third Bureau officials. This incident derived from the custodial death of Steve Biko, one of the leaders of the Black Consciousness Movement and Soweto revolt, due to torture causing political uproar against colonial rule in South Africa, “During the course of the interrogation, contradictions became apparent in the prisoner’s testimony. Confronted with these contradictions, the prisoner became enraged and attacked the investigating officer. A scuffle ensued during which the prisoner fell heavily against the wall. Efforts to revive him were unsuccessful” (Waiting for the Barbarians 6). The young boy who suffers from soar was also captured and tortured. His hands are tied before him. He looks dead as he lying on the ground but he is alive terrified by the torture and violence given to him and severely injured in the process. When the shroud opened the dead body of the tortured old man can be seen, “The grey beard is caked with blood. The lips are crushed and drawn back, the teeth are broken. One eye is rolled back, the other eye-socket is a bloody whole” (Waiting for 7).

The boy was tortured and traumatized so much that he did not speak or move. He silently suffers from the torture meted out to him in the name of extracting information about the rumoured uprising of barbarians against the Empire. He was also attacked with a knife to torture him, “The boy lies on his back, naked and asleep, breathing fast and shallow. His skin glistens with sweat... I bring the lantern closer. His belly and both groins are pocked with little scabs and bruises and cuts, some marked by trickles of blood” (Waiting for 10). A group of nomads are incarcerated in the yard and treated like animals without basic facilities. They eat, sleep and defecate in the same place making it filthy and unhygienic. They were also called diseased and would bring an epidemic to the town and ill-treated all at the outpost. The food was thrown at them like animals. Some people even threw a dead cat into the yard causing uproar and suffering, “The baby cries and coughs, cries and coughs till I flee for refuge to the farthest corner of my apartment” (Waiting for 21).

The second group of prisoners were brought in the middle of the night. The Indigenous people are never considered equals but inferior to their Western counterparts. They are never treated like human beings but animals without any care for human rights. This reflects how the native people in South Africa were treated during the colonial/apartheid period denying them self-respect and delegating them to the subordinate position. The barbarians roped together from neck to neck like animals and made to walk like that for miles together. This shows the brutality of the colonial power towards the native people, “Then the shuffling group of prisoners roped together from neck to neck, shapeless figures in their sheepskin coats under the silver moonlight, then behind them the last of the soldiers leading the carts and pack-horse” (Waiting for 22).

Even women are victims of the brutality of the officials of the Third Bureau. A young barbarian woman was tortured and beaten like a criminal, both her ankles were broken making her unable to walk without sticks. She was also almost blinded in the process of violence and torture to extract information about the plans of barbarians' attack on the outpost and colonial administration:

There was a fork, a kind of fork with only two teeth. There were little knobs on the teeth to make them blunt. They put it in the coals till it was hot, then they touched you with it, to burn you...they brought it very close to my face and made me look at it. They held my eyelids open. But I had nothing to tell them. That was all. That was when the damage came. After that, I could not see properly anymore. (Waiting for 44)

The barbarian young woman was also sexually abused by the Magistrate taking advantage of his position, "I behave in some ways like a lover—I undress her, I bathe her, I stroke her, I sleep beside her—but I might equally well tie her to a chair and beat her, it would be no less intimate" (Waiting for 46).

The Magistrate feels like he possesses ownership of the barbarian woman and does not care whether it hurts or discomforts the woman. The young barbarian woman is an embodiment of the suffering of women and children in the patriarchal society of South Africa. South Africa is a country where the highest number of sexual abuse cases of women, children and lesbians takes place and it is rightly called the rape capital of the world, "For a while it rests against her sex; then I shake more of the warm oil on to my fingers and begin to caress her. Quickly the tension gathers in her body; she arches and shudders and pushes my hands away" (Waiting for 47). Like most patriarchal societies, South African society also believes that women are things to be controlled and enjoyed by men, "How can I believe that a bed is anything but a bed, and a woman, 's body anything but the site of joy? (Waiting for 48). This attitude also resonates in Coetzee's other novel, *Disgrace*, which deals with crime violence and crime against women in South African society, "Because a woman's beauty does not belong to her alone. It is part of the bounty she brings into the world. She has a duty to share it" (*Disgrace* 16). In many cultures in the world including South African culture women are portrayed derogatorily in literary and non-literary texts, "I even catch myself in a flush of pride: she is not just the old man's slut, she is a witty attractive young woman!" (Waiting for 68).

The barbarians are inhumanly treated by the Third Bureau when the third batch of barbarians is brought to the outpost. It can be seen to what extent the officials go to ill-treat the native people. They were tied together with rope-like animals while taken to the fair. They are naked holding their hand up to their faces as if they suffer from toothache. But the fact was a loop of wire ran through their hands and cheeks to keep them still. This shows the colonizers' fear and hatred for the native and indigenous people, "A simple rope of wire runs through the flesh of each man's hand and through holes pierced in his cheeks. It makes them meek like lambs"(Waiting for 113). By adding injury to insult the colonel rubs a handful of dust on their back and writes the word 'ENEMY' with charcoal. Then the beating begins on their back and buttocks until dust and charcoal run with sweat and blood on their back. Not only the soldiers but even the kids and people take turns to beat them or mutely watch the violence and torture meted out to the native people,

Then the beating begins. The soldiers use the stout green staves, bringing them down with the heavy slapping sounds of mashing-paddles, raising red welts on the

prisoners' backs and buttocks. With slow care the prisoners extend their legs & they lie flat on their bellies, all except the one who had been moaning and who now gasps with each blow. (Waiting for 115)

The Magistrate becomes the victim of violence, brutality and torture when he opposes the torture of barbarians by the colonial power in the name of investigation and security of the Empire:

Something crashes into me from behind. I sprawl in the dust, gasp feel the sear of old pain in my back. A stick thuds down on me... I hide my arm, lower my head, and try to grope towards him and grapple. Blows fall on my head and shoulders... My nose is broken, I know and perhaps also the cheekbone where the flesh was laid open by the blow of the stick. My left eye is swelling shut. (Waiting for 116, 117, 118)

The torture and brutality against the Magistrate continues. As a worn-out old bear tamed by too much baiting, he stands in front of them caressing my sore hand while concealing his nakedness. Mandel says, "Run." He runs in the hot sun around the yard. He canes him in the buttocks when he starts to slack off, which makes him trot more quickly. The scullery maids hang over the kitchen door, the soldiers interrupt their nap to observe from the shade, and children peer between the gate's bars. Unable to run he halted, hunched his chest, and hung his head. Everyone politely waits while he takes a break. The cane then pokes him, and he stumbles along at a man's walking pace. They invite the young grandson of the cook over and give him one end of the rope to hold. While waiting for him to leap, the kid holds onto the rope with both hands, focused on this crucial task. He quakes and the cane's point pokes him in the buttocks with its point to continue to jump, "I balk. The point of the cane finds its way between my buttocks and prods. 'Jump' Mandel murmurs. I run, make a little skip, blunder into the rope, and stand there. I smell of shit. I am not permitted to wash. The flies follow me everywhere, circling around the appetising sore on my cheek..." (Waiting for 126). Even though time, place and empire/state are not mentioned in the novel, it is clear from the study of historical documents and notes made by Coetzee while writing the novel that he speaks of South Africa in the 1970s during the colonial rule. The novel also deals with the precarious condition of women and children in the country which is notorious for the maltreatment of women. The physical, sexual and psychological violence against women is a very common thing in the country; hence it is called the rape capital of the world.

IV. Suffering and its Impacts

Suffering is the consequence of violence- physical, sexual and psychological- that people experience in their lives. The novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* portrays different forms of suffering in the characters like the Magistrate, the barbarians, the prisoners and also people living in the outpost due to the fear of rumoured attack of barbarian attack on the outpost. The readers are invited to face the physical, moral, emotional and psychological toll of violence and brutality. The internal struggle of the Magistrate with his complicity with the colonial administration and his empathy for the suffering of the prisoners and barbarians shows the complexity of morality within the violent context of the novel.

The barbarian young boy was so traumatised that he did not speak or move. He silently suffers from the torture meted out to him in the name of extracting the information about the uprising of the barbarians against the outpost. Further, the boy was

tortured and suffered as he was cut with a small knife and left to bleed. His grandfather was also beaten to death in front of him by the Third Bureau, “ I hold the lantern near the boy. He has not stirred; but when I bend to touch his cheek he flinches and begins to tremble in long ripples that run up and down his body” (Waiting for 7).

The barbarian people kept in the yard like animals without any basic facilities. They are made to eat, sleep, play and defecate in the same place arousing disgusting feelings in the Magistrate. As a result of this one of the kids dies due to illness. The body of the baby was taken away from them forcefully to bury. The colonisers do not worry about the customs of the nomads and how they bury their dead and make provisions to bury the dead baby as per their customs. As a result of this act, the mother of the baby silently suffers and does not eat anything for days together, “ I send the guard to search and he finds the little corpse under its mother’s clothes. She will not yield it up, we have to tear it away from her. After this, she squats all day with her face covered, refusing to eat” (Waiting for 21). The Magistrate cannot hear the sound of the suffering of the people in the yard which has become a permanent prison. He wants to sleep to escape from the suffering of the people but when he wakes up he does so reluctantly as he has to see the suffering of the innocent people, “ I sit in my rooms with the windows shut, in the stifling warmth of a windless evening, trying to read, straining my ears to hear or not to hear sounds of violence” (Waiting for 23-24)

The young barbarian woman is another victim of violence and suffers to a great extent. He was captured along with her family and beaten by the soldiers. Her ankles were broken, and she could not walk properly, she had to take support of sticks to walk. She was almost blinded at the time of interrogation, she could not see anything clearly but blurred. Her family left her to suffer in the outpost as she was severely injured. Now she is at the mercy of the people in the outpost. The Magistrate gives her refuge but she has to undergo sexual exploitation at the hand of the Magistrate. She does not say anything but suffers silently till she is taken to her people by the magistrate. She was sexually abused on the way to the desert to her people.

The magistrate was arrested after he came back from the desert leaving the young barbarian woman to her people in the desert. He was accused of a political tryst with the enemy(barbarians) and incarcerated in the yard without any trial whatsoever. He suffers from the psychological trauma of suffering at the hands of the soldiers. He abused, insulted and beaten in the public. He was hanged to a tree, made to jump, run skip and when stopped to take a breath he was prodded to move by inserting a stick into his private parts.

The ones who suffered most were the barbarian prisoners. They were treated less than animals by the Third Bureau. It was their practice to come out of the desert to catch dry worms and return before the winter. The first batch of prisoners were brought to the outpost and kept in the yard with children. They were made to sit, eat, sleep and defecate in the same place. Due to this one of the kids dies in the yard. The prisoners are treated like animals by the people in the outpost. They looked at them as if they were animals in the zoo. They were also terrorized by throwing the dead animals into the yard. The second group of prisoners were tied together with a rope. They were beaten like animals and treated inhumanely by the Third Bureau. The third group of prisoners were the most suffered by the torture of the officials. Each man has a loop of wire running through the flesh of his hands and through holes bored into his cheeks. It was to keep still and make them meek like lambs. Even the Magistrate thinks he should have remained in the cell. Then the prisoners were beaten on their backs and buttocks

till they were bleeding profusely and consequently experiencing unspeakable suffering due to pain and humiliation caused to them.

V. Conclusion

J.M. Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* effectively demonstrates the complexity of violence and suffering in the context of imperialism. The novel emphasizes the importance of realizing the pervasive effects of oppression as well as the necessity of empathy and moral reflection through its brilliant depiction of people, themes, and narrative techniques in their suffering. Like other works of Coetzee, this novel also brings out the violence and suffering people underwent during the colonial period and also the suffering of the people in contemporary South Africa. Even though name of Empire, name of the Magistrate and the time of action is not mentioned it is clear that Coetzee was deriving heavily from what happened in the 1970s in colonial South Africa, the Black Consciousness Movement and the Soweto revolt and its consequence on the life native people of the country.

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