

Post-colonialism in  
waiting for the  
barbarians by jm  
coetzee



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## POST-COLONIALISM

Waiting for the Barbarians is a novel written by JM Coetzee which has strong themes of Post-Colonialism. To begin, an understanding over what post-colonialism is specifically in literature needs to be elaborated. A simple definition most would define post-colonialism as an issue happening after colonialism in a country and its ramifications (Young, 13). Interestingly, the definition has also expanded; 'some writers have tried to redefine the postcolonial anachronistically to mean resistance to the colonial at any time- literally in the case of decolonized societies, and ideologically for still colonized societies' (Young, 13). However, whilst this definition may have some merit, the more traditional meaning being the 'aftermath of the colonial' (Young, 13) will be utilized for the purpose of this essay and Coetzee's novel. 'Post-Colonialism's concerns are centered on geographic zones of intensity that have remained largely invisible, but which prompt or involve questions of history, ethnicity, complex cultural identities and questions of representation, of refugees, emigration and immigration, of poverty and wealth- but also importantly, the energy, vibrancy and creative cultural dynamics that emerge in very positive ways from such demanding circumstances' (Young, 14). In literary criticism it has been used since the late 1970s to discuss the various cultural, political, and linguistic effects of colonialism. As a term, post colonialism 'has subsequently been widely used to signify the political, linguistic, and cultural experience of societies that were former European colonies' (Emir, 1). Novels that encapsulate Post-colonial theory present the 'unequal relations of power based on binary opposition; "us and them", "first world and second world", "white and

black", " colonizer and colonized", " self and other", " powerful and powerless", " torturer and tortured", " master and slave", " civilized and savage", " superior and inferior", " human and subhuman""(Al-saidi, 95). Continuing on, basic plot around the novel also will be briefly discussed since *Waiting for the Barbarians* needs to be elaborated as to provide some context around the novel and its relevance to post-colonial literature. It is a novel about political symbolism which involves imperial natives and power hungry colonial ferocity. Printed during the apartheid era in South Africa, the novel reflects the racism and fear of an Empire with an imagined enemy within. The setting of the novel is an ' unspecified geographical place where the readers are told the story from the voice of unnamed magistrate who serves as a binary model of self/the other' (Emir, 2). The idea of ' self and the other are represented as the colonizer and the colonized' (Al-saidi, 95), Self is generally the dominant and other is the outsider, inferior. The concept of Otherness sees the world ' as divided into mutually excluding opposites: if the Self is ordered, rational, masculine, good, then the Other is chaotic, irrational, feminine, and evil'(Al-Saidi, 96). The novel begins with the arrival of Colonel Joll and his soldiers from the Third Bureau to assert their dominance over the barbarians. In this respect, in the ' beginning of the novel, there is an encounter between the colonizer/colonized, and the oppressor /oppressed' (Emir, 2). This sets the juxtaposition of the themes of the novel. The Magistrate in the novel manages a tiny settlement and is isolated from the war between the barbarians and the empire, however encounters a woman he begins to sleep with which confronts his conscience and the value system of the empire. Throughout this essay, there will be discussion around the concept of otherness which is a direct connection to <https://assignbuster.com/post-colonialism-in-waiting-for-the-barbarians-by-jm-coetzee/>

Post-Colonialism and therefore relevant to the text and also around the binary opposition of torturer/tortured and violence. In all this, JM Coetzee writes a novel that revolves around the theory of Post-Colonialism and how it evolves through the idea of *otherness*.

The binary opposition of torturer and tortured to gain truth shows the widely accepted idea that post-colonialism requires the use of violence to gain power. The colonizer believes that the other is the enemy and so truth must be forced. The truth is a guilt confession that the Empire uses to invade. The idea of truth so 'confidently asserted by the Magistrate at the beginning is undercut when Joll elaborates on 'all he does': "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" (Coetzee, 5). The possibility that the barbarians may not be part of any radical plans is "brushed aside by Colonel Joll in the previous remarkable description of how he conducts his interrogations" (Al-saidi, 98). Joll is looking for truth that is needed for the Empire and once this is achieved he tortures a boy and then the magistrate proceeds to blame the boy for his confession, 'Do you understand what this confession of yours will mean?...' It means that the soldiers are going to ride out against your people. There is going to be killing. Kinsmen of yours are going to die, perhaps even your parents, your brothers and sisters. Do you really want that?' (Coetzee, 10). Colonel Joll's process of getting the truth is a historical process of colonization which is easily acquired as he said a certain tone enters the voice of a man who is telling the truth .., training and

experience teach us to recognize that tone". This shows evidently the relationship between the torturer and the tortured that requires the use of multifaceted violence, which is achieved only through the Empire's training and experience over the natives. When Colonel Joll uses violence to get out the truth, it is of importance in post-colonial novels in general and in this novel in particular. Truth encapsulates the empire's need for power; ' the act of forced speech is mirrored in the act of torture, where the torturer attempts to make the tortured speak the ' truth'' (Al-saidi, 98).

The significance of the Other and the Self in the text emphasizes the colonialism in the novel. The concept of otherness was developed by ' Frantz Fanon...[and says that] the idea of the other in his writing to be a key concern in postcolonial studies. To him the other is " not me" he is the other' (Al-Saidi, 95). Continuing on, ' the other, colonizer (self) believes, has to be owned, altered and ravished- he is deceptive and fertile. This post-colonial model is based on the tension between colonizer and colonized, and dominating and dominated' (Al-Saidi, 96). Importantly he says that, ' the other by definition lacks identity, propriety, purity, literality. In this sense he can be described as foreign: the one who does not belong to a group; does not speak a given language, does not have the same customs, he is the unfamiliar, uncanny, unauthorized, inappropriate, and the improper' (Al-saidi, 95). When the novel opens, Colonel Joll, a representative of the Third Bureau, arrives to investigate rumors of a barbarian uprising which have begun to circulate in the distant imperial capital. As Joll Interrogates and tortures barbarian prisoners, the Magistrate becomes increasingly sympathetic towards the victims. When the Colonel leaves the outpost, the

Magistrate takes a young barbarian woman whose body shows evident signs of her otherness. Colonel Joll and his men choose to torture her in front of her father and it results in making her blind. ' Both her ankles have been broken and the tortures have left her with ugly scars where her body becomes a tale of the vital other' (Al-Saidi, 97). Analyzing the first paragraph of the novel, it is clear that Coetzee does well at launching immediately, a short model of vagueness in time which indirectly refers to the theme of Otherness and so post-colonialism. The concept in *Waiting for the Barbarians* is especially seen through the dominating Magistrate and the dominated; the barbarian girl. If colonialism, at its core, involves the ' conquest and subjugation of territory by an alien people, then the human relationship that is basic to it is likewise one of power and powerlessness: the relationship between master and servant, overlord and slave' (Al-saidi, 98). The magistrate takes the woman in and enacts a ritual of taking her clothes off. This is used cleverly by Coetzee as a metaphor for the rape and plundering that happened to her empire and herself. " First comes the ritual of washing, for which she is now naked. I wash her feet, as before, her legs, her buttocks. My soapy hand travels between her thighs, incuriously, I find. She raises her arms while I find. She raises her arms while I wash her armpits. I wash her belly, her breasts. I push her hair aside and wash her neck, her throat. She is patient. I rinse and dry her. She lies on the bed and I rub her body with almond oil. I close my eyes and lose myself in the rhythm of the rubbing while the fire, piled high, roars in the gate" (Coetzee, 32). This ritual is like a process that makes her vulnerable in front of him and emphasizes the fact he has taken everything from her much like the Empire has taken everything from the barbarians. The magistrate's choice to bathe instead of torturing

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her is a symbolic washing of the magistrates guilty conscience and association. However, by choosing to strip her, he still displays power over her; and in a wider context the nomad is still under the power of the Empire. With this example there is a clear connection between the idea of 'otherness' as it relates to post-colonial literature. The novel is a 'disturbing love story about wanting to possess another person and to turn that person inside out as though she were a puzzle to be solved'(Al-Saidi, 97). The nomad girl emphasizes the notion of being dominated; she is also a motif. She is seen as 'representative of other by the Magistrate and Colonel Joll, however, it has a wide meaning where her injured body represents conquered land, in this sense: South Africa. The motif of the girl's body becomes inaccessible to the magistrate in his inability to remember what it looks like, and because he has no way to penetrate the surface, and ultimately invade her. In this way his attempt to identify with the colonized *other* initially fails' (Al-Saidi, 5). "Now that the two feet are together in the water I can see that the left is turned further inward than the right, that when she stands she must stand on the outer edges of her feet. Her ankles are large, puffy, shapeless, the skin scarred purple" (Coetzee, 31). Later on, the magistrate also takes notice, 'between thumb and forefinger I part her eyelids. The caterpillar comes to an end, decapitated, at the inner rim of the eyelid' (Coetzee, 33). The magistrate initially finds when he takes her into his home that the scars and marks of torture are unbearable; this is clear when he says "it has been growing more and more clear to me that until the marks on this girl's body are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her" (Coetzee, 30). In his relation to the barbarian girl, 'the magistrate tries to eliminate the sense of otherness and understand the signs of torture on

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her body' (Emir, 3). Michael Halliwell in an article writes that ' both the magistrate and Joll are complicit in the damage that the girl has suffered; in a sense they have both left the ' writing' of the colonizers on her body'(65). Of course, there are ' internal marks' as well. Her whole body has ' become a history—and a map—of empire, despite Joll's claims that there is no history on of the empire' (Halliwell, 65); ' in a sense, the journey of the magistrate and the girl is mirrored in microcosm by the magistrate's exploration of her body as if it was part of a typical ' colonial quest''(Halliwell, 65). This gives strong imagery to the brutal force that Post-Colonialism is in the novel and also in history. An important plot in the story when it comes the theory of post colonialism specifically in otherness is when the magistrate is tortured and understands what it is like to be the victim; the other. ' The violence offered to the magistrate includes a public beating, the force-feeding of gallons of salt water and a mock hanging' (Al-saidi, 99). The magistrate once captured explains that, ' they came to my cell to show me the meaning of humanity, and in the space of an hour they showed me a great deal...it cost me agonies of shame the first time I had to come out of my den and stand naked before these idlers or jerk my body about for their amusement. Now I am past shame. My mind is turned wholly to the menace of the moment when my knees turned wholly to the menace of the moment when my knees turned to water or my heart grips me like a crab and I have to stand still; and each time I discover with surprise that after a little rest, after the application of a little pain, I and be made to move, to jump or skip or crawl or run a little further. Is there a point at which I will lie down and say, " kill me- I would rather die than go on'? Sometimes I think I am approaching that point, but I am always mistaken. There is no consoling grandeur in any of this. When I

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wake up groaning in the night it is because I am reliving in dreams the pettiest degradations. There is no way of dying allowed me, it seems, except like a dog in the corner' (Coetzee, 126-128). By using the barbarian, Colonel Joll and the magistrate, Coetzee displays through the concept of otherness, the theory of post-colonialism which will be further explained through the similar but more complex idea of the 'triangulation of otherness'.

Similarly, the triangulation of otherness is also an aspect in the novel which helps to emphasize the complexity of post-colonialism in the text. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the best way to analyze the novel is through a 'set of binary oppositions which explains the complex relation between the characters as it helps, also, in visualizing the different positions of the characters' (Al-saidi, 98). When discussing binary opposition it is usually, between two essentials, however the complexity in the novel is that it involves three characters, the magistrate, the barbarian girl, and colonel Joll; and all 'inhabit at different moments the positions of the *Self* and of the *Other*' (Al-saidi, 100). In a sense all the characters mentioned are others; they are all victims. However, it is the barbarian girl that because of where she comes from is the only character that is strictly seen as other throughout the novel. The Magistrate and Colonel Joll are 'victims of power' (Al-saidi, 100). The positions of the characters change with the plot when considering the theme of self and other. In the novel there is always a clear connection between two of the characters. However since there is a third person involved, which is defined as the 'mediator', which is the magistrate (Al-saidi, 100); who can be referred as the 'observer in this analysis and with whom also the relation between the Self and the Other would, probably, not

exist or might be different' (Al-saidi, 100). Understanding the complexity the characters represent in regards to the notion of other, increases the understanding of Post-colonialism as a theory that Coetzee uses. The Self - Other relation is focused on the connection between Colonel Joll and the girl. Joll is in the position of the ' Subject where he clearly shows the power that he possesses' (Coetzee, 100); ' do as the Colonel instructs: I hold his useless prisoners ' incommunicado' for him (Coetzee, 20)...the next day the colonel begins his interrogations. Once I thought him lazy, little more than a bureaucrat with vicious tastes. Now I see how mistaken I was. In his quest for the truth he is tireless. The questioning starts in the early morning and is still going on when I return after dark' (Coetzee, 23) to find out a certain truth about their intentions. The girl is also within the captured prisoner and is immediately placed in regards to the triangle, as the ' object'. Her otherness is particularly noticed through her physical description; '[she] has straight black eye-brows, the glossy black hair of the barbarians' (Coetzee, 25). From this, it is clear that the Empire establish themselves in a position of power that allows them to demean prisoners and see the girl as inferior simply for her physical appearance. In all this, the Magistrate is present however is only observing and does not take part in what is happening; hence he is the observer in the triangle. The magistrate being the observer is particularly seen when he says, ' I wave a hand in front of her eyes. She blinks. I bring my face closer and stare into her eyes. She wheels her gaze from the wall on to me. The black irises are set off by milky whites as clear as a child's. I touch her cheek: she starts' (Coetzee, 28). He knows she she's blind however cannot look past it. The plot progresses and position of characters change. The Magistrate, takes the girl in and begins to look after her; the <https://assignbuster.com/post-colonialism-in-waiting-for-the-barbarians-by-jm-coetzee/>

*self* is nurturing the *other*. With the frontier being taken by Joll, the Magistrate seeks his self, his superiority through the girl. Perhaps the most interesting shift in regards to the concept found in Girard's triangle, is Colonel Joll being the self over the Magistrate. By returning the girl home, he is arrested and tortured by Joll signaling his severance from the Empire when he says, " my alliance with the guardians of the Empire is over, I have set myself in opposition, the bond is broken" (Coetzee, 77). When the Magistrate does this, he was at a ' moment of self-realization of the real fact of the Empire that it is not as he says earlier " the Empire of light" rather it becomes " the Empire of pain". This self-awareness causes him to be in the position of the Other' (Al-saidi, 102). The result of this awareness leads him to be prisoned, tortured; where he realizes the brutal circumstances the barbarians were in. It is of little surprise that Colonel Joll arrested the magistrate as releasing the girl means that Joll's position or power, as *self* is in danger of ceasing. The barbarian girl is also in a ' position of the Self when the plot of the novel presents her in a dual relation with the Magistrate in her " own", " barbarian" territory"' (Al-Saidi, 100). Hence, the triangulation theory presents the idea of self and otherness that reveals the complexity over binary oppositions in the text and also post-colonialism.

In all this, *Waiting for the Barbarians* by JM Coetzee is a novel that illustrates the complexity of post colonialism through three main characters; the Magistrate, the barbarian girl, and Colonel Joll. To further emphasize the binary opposition such as dominate/dominated, the theory which represents post colonialism well the idea of *self* and *other*. As previously stated, Post-colonialism are written to represent the unequal power relations and in

waiting for the barbarians this is multifaceted as positions of *self* and other change as the plot thickens. The first paragraph discusses the use of violence to display the binary opposition of torturer and tortured to get the twisted truth from the other, the barbarians. It is a clear display of the *self* dominating over the *other*. The second paragraph mainly focuses on the relationship between the girl and the magistrate. The metaphors and the motifs further emphasizes the idea of post-colonialism since it revolves around the powerful dominating over the vulnerable. The last paragraph although similar in the use of *self* and *other* as a primary topic details the novels complexity over how the characters positions (self, other, or observer) changes according to the scene which is being described by Coetzee. Ultimately, the theory of post-colonialism is highlighted through the idea of otherness and the multifaceted binary opposition and complex characters it presents in *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

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