

# The others collective identity english literature essay

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



While the barbarians are stereotyped as animal-like, they are treated as such. More specifically, they are treated as a herd of cattle with no individual and personal discrimination. Colonel Joll, who comes fresh from the capital carrying with him all the ornaments and opulence of Empire, has no real and authentic knowledge of the native people. Rather, influenced by the stereotypical image of the barbarians as savage people, he cannot draw the difference between a warrior, a rebel, a bandit, and an ordinary fisherman. He asserts that there is a general "unrest among the barbarians. Traders travelling so far routes had been attacked and plundered" (8). All 'barbarians,' accordingly to his version of the story, are guilty and, thus, deserve to be tortured. The Magistrate expresses his revulsion when the Colonel brings captives who turn out to be not the barbarians he set out to find: "Did no one tell him the difference between fishermen with nets and wild nomad horsemen with bows? Did no one tell him they don't speak the same language?" (Emphasis added, 19). The Magistrate is aware of the fact that the Other is not merely a homogeneous community; but rather a heterogeneous Other with varied as well as distinct communities. This is suggested by the linguistic aspect which is an important marker that separates different ethnic or cultural groups as well as different social subdivisions that are reflected in the different life styles\_\_\_ fisherfolk live along the river, nomads are scattered on the mountains. Colonel Joll, who seems to be totally engulfed by his monolithic view of the Other and his ignorance of the geographical reality of the frontier region, views the barbarians only as enemies that have to be captured: "prisoners are prisoners" (23). The Magistrate, who is so much aware of the fact that Empire overreacts in its "

precautionary measures" (9), deems the Colonel's behavior as " an episode of hysteria about barbarians" (9). The Magistrate, trying to undermine the Empire's claims against barbarians, confesses that: " of this unrest I saw nothing [...]. Show me a barbarian army and I will believe" (9). In fact, the Magistrate has taken a skeptical position against the Empire's schemes; he is aware that all the mobilization and demonstration of power against the barbarians is based on sheer rumors and some few isolated incidents that do not grow up to an act of war. The Empire's violent campaign against barbarians is not built upon solid information or real threat; rather, it feeds on the fixed image of the barbarians as ruthless, barbaric people who would not miss any opportunity to attack and finish the Empire. This is reflected in the collective imagination of the imperial population, especially the soldiers. When the Magistrate asks the newly arrived young officers whether the people who were trailing them at a distance were barbarians, one of them replies with certitude: " Who else could they have been?" And "[h]is colleagues concur" (53). This general consensus among people from the capital that the barbarians are the only source of danger reveals a growing tendency to demonize the invisible Other. Of this the Magistrate tells the reader: 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 fire to the curtains, raping his daughters. These dreams are the consequence of too much ease. (WB, 9)The fear of barbarians seems to have contaminated most of the settlement dwellers, who are supposed to have better knowledge of the barbarians as they live

within the precincts of their territory. They are so afraid of the barbarians that they imagine them as specters, bogeymen and looters. The Magistrate is aware that the fear of barbarians has taken the form of public phobia that hides a primeval fear of the unknown and the inconceivable Other.

### **1. 2. 4. Feminized Other**

The Other in Coetzee's novel is not only demonized, but also feminized. In his book *Orientalism*, Said contends that geography is part of the Western imagination. The Oriental lands are hardly seen as separate territories that belong to Orientals; rather, they constitute an important part of Western fantasy. One of the fantasies related to the Orient, Said maintains, is that it is often referred to as being 'feminine,' and the encounters between West and East are thus described in sexual terms. Namely, the Orient is "penetrated" by Western travelers; it is "possessed", "ravished," "embraced," and "domesticated" by the masculine colonizer (Said 207-08). In Coetzee's *WB*, the frontier trespassing and transgression, which are reflected in the consecutive military expeditions inside the barbarian territories, can be regarded as an act of imperialism that takes the form of usurping the right of the natives to exist upon and control their own lands. The Empire's transgression of borders, therefore, can be interpreted as a chauvinistic masculine intrusion into the Other's lands. The barbarians have never shown signs of aggressiveness, except some suspected incidents the account of which is based on hearsay. Along the narrative, they are systematically depicted as docile, harmless, and submissive people that have hardly sought trouble with Empire. In the light of Empire's ideology that highly values the notions of power and domination, the docility and the

passivity of the barbarians are regarded as signs of feminine weakness and submissiveness that incite both literal and metaphorical invasion and penetration. Right from the first encounter with Colonel Joll, the Magistrate is aware of chauvinistic intrusion made by Colonel Joll: " We sit in the best room of the inn with a flask between us and a bowl of nuts" (emphasis added, 1). The metaphorical references to male and female organs can be read as a sexual connotation of Empire's phallogentric tendency to exhibit its power and maintain its dominion. Moreover, the same scene can be regarded as a prelude to the forthcoming penetration and intrusion first into the settlement which has resulted in stripping the Magistrate of authority, and then into the barbarian lands that takes the form of consecutive military expeditions. Another scene, where the connotation of violent sexual penetration is evoked, is when officer Mandel, provoked by the Magistrate, " flexes the fingers [...] ' I used to poke this finger'\_\_ he holds up his index finger—' through a pumpkin-shell'" (129). The culmination of the feminization of the Other, takes place right before the scene of the mock hanging of the Magistrate when Mandel forces him to wear a " woman's calico smock" and then he whispers in his ears: "[d]o your best to behave like a man" (128). According to the emissaries of Empire the Magistrate's condemnation of their atrocious ways of treating the barbarian prisoners is an effeminate behavior. For them the Magistrate, who is charged with treason for consorting with the barbarians, has become one of them and, thus, he deserves to be treated as such. Aside from the above stereotypical representation of the indigenous population, it is interesting to wonder why these people are considered as ' barbarians' when the Magistrate explains: "

The people we call barbarians are nomads, they migrate between the lowlands and the uplands every year, that is their way of life" (54). While a nomad might not be the most civilized person, he is far from being classified as a barbarian. More importantly, nomadic life reflects a way of existence, a state of being; however, barbarism is a quality that can be attributed to civilized as well as uncivilized people. According to the Magistrate's observations of the so called barbarians, they do not seem barbaric at all. He describes how a loaf of bread is offered to the oldest prisoner and that "the old man accepts the bread reverentially in both hands, sniffs it, breaks it, and passes the lump around" (19). Now, some might consider the man sniffing the bread savage, but what is more important as well is how he shares the bread with the other prisoners. An animal would have kept the entire loaf of bread for itself, which would have started a fight amongst the pack. Instead, their act of sharing which reflects a high level of social solidarity shows a very developed sense of civilization that the representatives of Empire fail to recognize. Therefore, the so-called "barbarians" are not so barbaric after all. A label has been assigned to this group of people so that Empire can endure its domination and "prolong its era" (WB, 146). Interestingly, the Magistrate, who has shown a deep interest in history, predicts that the barbarians will "outlast" the men of Empire (55). The subversion of the stereotypes discussed above manifests in the Magistrate's hobby of archeology. He has managed to excavate old poplar wood strips that refer to an ancient civilization that had belonged to the ancestry of the indigenous population referred to as barbarians now. In other words, the Magistrate's interest in the ancient civilizations unveils his deep

apprehension of history not as a teleological process that evolves naturally and progressively towards a finality, which is reflected in the Empire's hegemonic and expansionist project of self-realization. Instead, he perceives history as a disruptive process that entails interruption, discontinuity, and even conflicts between civilizations. His reference to the "rise and fall" of civilizations (146), reflects his awareness of the possibility that the Empire would really jeopardize its existence, provided that it blindly went on oppressing and probably annihilating other races.