

The possibility of
decolonization in j. m.
coetzee's 'waiting for
the barbarians'...



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Decolonization is more difficult than simply removing the physical presence of the colonizer. Colonialism imprints on a multitude of levels on the lives of both the colonizer and colonized; the prospect of undoing years of institutionalized and officiated colonial control is a daunting challenge. J. M. Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* attempts to tackle the issue of decolonization through the mentality of the colonizing central character, the nameless Magistrate, exploring the difficulties that arise when poor leadership, uncertain morals, and ineffectual idealism intermingle within a changing colonial context. *Waiting for the Barbarians* presents complete decolonization as an impossible ideal due to ineffective leadership, focusing on the role of the Magistrate as a hopeless harbinger for the process whose motives are questionable and who succumbs to the pitfalls of sympathetic liberal thinking.

As the leader of the small border settlement where most of the novel takes place, the Magistrate appears to be, at best, a barely competent leader. At the start of the novel the Magistrate does not seem to be a likely catalyst for decolonization. He seems to have the most rudimentary level of power and, at the novel's very start, has his little authority overridden by the cruel and torturous Colonel Joll of the Third Bureau. Joll is throughout the novel seen by the Magistrate as symbolizing every cruel and unfair aspect of colonial rule, torture, deceit, and willful blindness being the primary tools Joll uses to further the interests of the Empire. A conversation between Joll and the Magistrate, the two central figures of power within the novel, concerning the process of torture to extract admissions of guilt reveals the absolute power of colonial rule that is epitomized through Joll:

“‘ There is a certain tone,” Joll says. “ A certain tone enters the voice of a man who is telling the truth. Training and experience teach us to recognize that tone. [...] 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.”[1]

For Joll, and colonialism itself, truth is not the intended result of torture, rather justification is. Joll hears what he wants to hear and is unconcerned with objective truths. As the Magistrate notes: ‘ Pain is truth; all else is subject to doubt.’ [Coetzee, pp. 5] The Empire does not need the objective truth to proceed with and extend its colonial rule, but rather it needs falsified admissions of guilt where ‘ pain is truth’ to provide the image of righteous motives. Colonial rule needs no honestly justified base to exist. Colonialism exists through cruelty as a fallacy of just governance. Suffering is integral to the existence of colonialism, and both Joll and the Magistrate as agents of the Empire acknowledge this and the Magistrate is guiltily aware that, much like Joll, he himself is a symbol for the cruel rule of the Empire. As Jane Poyner notes, the Magistrate ‘ realizes that the distance between himself and the vile Joll is [...] not so great.’[2]

The Magistrate, though appalled by the barbarity of Joll, is powerless to intervene. Instead he copes with the aftermath of Joll’s torturous exploits, caring for the bodies of the dead and nursing those Joll leaves maimed as best he can. The Magistrate has no authority to stop the atrocities of Joll; his job is not to act as a savior but to ‘ collect tithes and taxes, administer the communal lands, see that the garrison is provided for, supervise the junior officers’ and similar administrative positions. [Coetzee, pp. 8] Offended by <https://assignbuster.com/the-possibility-of-decolonization-in-j-m-coetzees-waiting-for-the-barbarians/>

Joll's cruelty towards two prisoners the Magistrate confronts Joll, stating the case for their release before noting that ' I grow conscious that I am pleading for them' to no avail. [Coetzee, pp. 4] The Magistrate is powerless to change the opinion Joll has towards his two prisoners, his helplessness emphasized by the meekness insinuated by ' pleading'. As well as being powerless to stop Joll and the atrocities of the Empire at large the Magistrate is often presented as disinterested in doing any more than he is expected to do: ' I am a country magistrate, a responsible official in the service of the Empire, serving out my days on this lazy frontier, waiting to retire.' [Coetzee, pp. 8] There is a listlessness in his tone, a vapidness that suggests both a lack of ambition and an apathetic attitude towards his work. Words like ' responsible', ' service', ' lazy', and ' waiting' create an image of a character who is without higher goals and uninspiring, or, at the very least, aspiring to little: ' When I pass away I hope to merit three lines of small print in the Imperial gazette. I have not asked for more than a quiet life in quiet times.' [Coetzee, pp. 8]

Within the Magistrate lays the opposite of greatness, an un-extraordinary man who wants nothing more than to be forgotten along with his times. He has no intentions to stand up to Joll or the Empire, nor does he formalize any solid convictions about colonial rule. He is both without power or motives to bring about decolonization. At the novel's start, Coetzee does not wrap the Magistrate in the traditions of heroism; he makes no rousing speeches, he pushes for no great reforms in Imperial rule, nor does he act selflessly on the behalf of those who he governs. Instead, Coetzee presents a colonial everyman, a Kafkaesque bureaucrat caught within the machine of colonial

rule, powerless to resist but simultaneously not wishing he could. For decolonization to happen there must be effective leaders willing to bring about change, and the benefits of a dialogue between the colonizer and the colonized are insurmountable. As Nicholas J. White writes, 'it has been argued that [often the removal of] colonial polities were essentially characterized by 'collaboration' with established local elites'[3] As part of such a polity the Magistrate is, theoretically, an ideal candidate to help bring about a process of decolonization. However, he is, at least from our introduction to him early on in the novel, no such ideal candidate. His lack of power and disinterest in making his life into anything greater than a quiet existence in a provincial town suggest that he accepts colonial rule, and even if he were to verbalize a disapproval or dislike of it, he does not have the conviction or aspiration to act.

Throughout the novel, the Magistrate's lack of aspiration becomes more and more evident, intermingling with an apathetic view of the world. Whether the Magistrate is even appalled by colonial rule is questionable, the more evident standpoint being that he disagrees with the methods with which the Empire enforces its colonial rule and less that it enforces colonial rule at all. The Magistrate is shown to be capable of compassion, as well as guilt concerning his involvement within the practices of colonial rule; he ensures an orphaned boy taken prisoner is taken care of, and he refers to one of Joll's early victims as 'father', a sign of respect within the provincial region he governs. [Coetzee, pp. 3] Furthermore, his 'pleading' to Joll about the fates of two prisoners shows both a level of compassion and guilt.

Perhaps the most important evidence of the Magistrate's compassion and guilt is his direct, personal, and intimate caring for an abandoned barbarian girl, a victim of Joll's torture. Left blind and crippled by Joll's torture, the girl is a moral weight upon the Magistrate, proof to him that 'The distance between myself and her torturers [...] is negligible', that he is truly part of the colonial ruling class. [Coetzee, pp. 29] Furthermore, she comes to symbolize to him the very worst of colonial rule. As Abdullah F. Al-Badarneh notes in his essay 'Waiting for the Barbarians: The Magistrate's Identity in a Colonial Context': 'To him [...] she is a historical document of the injustice of colonization. Such document has proof in the marks and traces of torture on her body, her eyes, and legs.' [4] The girl is both evidence that the only separation between the Magistrate and Joll is title and that colonial rule is dependent on the notion that 'Pain is truth'. Feeling guilty about her treatment under the Colonel, the Magistrate takes it upon himself to try and heal her badly damaged feet: 'I begin to wash her. She raises her feet for me in turn. I knead and massage the lax toes through the soft milky soap. Soon my eyes close, my head drops. It is a rapture, of a kind.' [Coetzee, pp. 31] This sense of rapture that the Magistrate succumbs to is the manifestation of being released from a sense of guilt he feels towards how the girl was treated by Joll.

The nature of his relationship with the girl becomes more muddled as it progresses: 'I have not entered her. From the beginning my desire has not taken on that direction, that directedness.' [Coetzee, pp. 36] His 'desire' for her is not sexual, but rather he desires her as an alleviation of his guilt, a form of catharsis. Her body, and his care for it, becomes a vehicle for

forgiveness, for a decolonized ideal: ' I watch her as she undresses, hoping to capture in her movements a hint of an old free state.' [Coetzee, pp. 36]

Though the Magistrate's acts of kindness and compassion, his respect, his ' pleading', and his care for the girl can be seen as indicators that he ethically opposes the cruelty of the Empire, it could also be argued that his acts are merely an opposition to torture, or, perhaps on a more personal level, a specific opposition to the methods of the despicable Joll.

The Magistrate's acceptance of colonialism can be seen in several instances. When the elder of the two prisoners he pleaded on behalf of dies, he attempts to extract the objective truth from the remaining prisoner, promising release from Joll's torture as reward. Here he notes that ' It has not escaped me that an interrogator can wear two masks, speak with two voices, one harsh, one seductive.' [Coetzee, pp. 8] The Magistrate is the ' seductive' to Joll's ' harsh', two sides of the same coin. His coercing of the young boy is further evidence, much like the crippled barbarian girl, that he is personally invested within colonialism. This duality he has with Joll comes to symbolize to the Magistrate the cruelty of colonial rule, but also further proves to himself how embroiled within it he is: ' I was the lie that Empire tells itself when times are easy, he the truth that Empire tells when harsh winds blow. Two sides of Imperial rule, no more, no less.' [Coetzee, pp. 148]

His presence as the sympathizer is as essential to colonial control as Joll's cruelty is and he finds little to criticize of his duties, showing an acceptance of his administrative position.

Moreover, the Magistrate often enacts the role of colonizer he sees in Joll, as well as the role that is expected from the colonized. His relationship with the <https://assignbuster.com/the-possibility-of-decolonization-in-j-m-coetzees-waiting-for-the-barbarians/>

young woman, his sense of 'rapture' and release, is on one level a caring one, but then there are simultaneously aggressive and fetishizing elements to it. She is subtly hostile towards him, aware of her position as racially inferior to him under the colonial discourse which their relationship exists:

'But even the motion with which she pulls the smock up over her head and throws it aside is crabbed, defensive, trammelled, as though she were afraid of striking unseen obstacles. Her face has the look of something that knows itself watched.' [Coetzee, pp. 36]

There is a claustrophobia to her posture, 'crabbed, defensive, trammelled', as though she is aware she is his prisoner of sorts, a prisoner both politically and as the manifestation of his guilt. The Magistrate Orientalizes her by making her both the symbol of his colonial guilt and an object of curiosity, referring to her with the pronoun 'itself'. The Magistrate is also not above succumbing to the demonizing of barbarian prisoners that he detests Joll for:

'Then, all together, we lose sympathy with them. The filth, the smell, the noise of their quarrelling and coughing become too much.' [Coetzee, pp. 21]

His tone shows a crack in the sympathy he is meant to symbolize, signifying that even within him an element of Joll's cruelty exists. Constantly dominant within the relationship, the Magistrate comes to epitomize Edward Said's idea concerning the constant superiority of Oxidant over Orient:

'Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand.' [5]

The Magistrate, up until his incarceration, is constantly relating to the Orient of the barbarian girl and prisoners as their superior, an indisputable cog within the colonial machine.

For decolonization to be a possibility, figures must exist that vehemently oppose colonial rule. The Magistrate, the de facto leader of the small province of the Empire he governs, shows a lack of power, a lack of aspiration towards decolonization, but also shows an acceptance of colonial rule. A colonizer himself, he repeatedly shows himself to be invested within colonial rule. When he shows sympathy or kindness towards the barbarians, it is mostly due to an opposition to Joll's cruelty, his means and not his motives. Without colonialism the Magistrate would be without social standing, financial support, or clout. His livelihood and his ideal future of a 'quiet life' is dependent on the continuation of colonial rule and so his sympathies become mere intellectual indulgences. His sympathy but lack of action is representative of the now often caricatured liberal: intellectually inquisitive but reluctant to act. After his incarceration, however, the Magistrate's sympathies begin to develop into a moderate opposition to the Empire, largely in part to his submission to torture and humiliation and a deeper understanding of the treatment the colonized suffer under colonial rule. With his altered sentiments towards the Empire, his being stripped of title and power, and the unofficial withdrawal of imperial forces from the border region previously under his governance, the Magistrate of the novel's conclusion is shown to be more aware of the nuances of colonialism and the difficulty of decolonization.

The Magistrate's narrative in the final chapter acknowledges the problems that arise when the idealized, and so far only theoretical, decolonization becomes a reality. With the withdrawal of imperial forces the town becomes overrun with fear:

' Along the north rampart we have propped a row of helmets with spears upright beside them. Every half-hour a child passes along the row moving each helmet slightly. Thus do we hope to deceive the keen eyes of the barbarians.' [Coetzee, pp. 158-59]

The absurdity of this scene shows how colonial rule provided guaranteed safety and order. The Empire was able to provide actual security, whereas the decolonized town is only able to provide the illusion of safety, and even that is so basic that it is not enough to provide the decolonized citizen the confidence to live properly: ' The fisherfolk will not venture out before sunrise. Their catch has dropped so low that they barely subsist.' [Coetzee, pp. 158] The Magistrate is shown to acknowledge one of the main problems of decolonization: self-rule. When a nation is decolonized the colonizers takes with them infrastructure and security, leaving the now independent nation to fend for themselves. The Magistrate divulges that post-decolonization his town has had to resort to desperate measures: ' The school has been closed and the children are employed in trawling the salty southern finger of the lake for the tiny red crustaceans that abound in the shallows.' [Coetzee, pp. 158] Decolonization has led to not only to the removal of security, but also things previously taken for granted (like education and child labor laws) are unable to exist without the authoritative power colonial rule provided.

Decolonization, therefore, needs to be negotiated and walked through by a <https://assignbuster.com/the-possibility-of-decolonization-in-j-m-coetzees-waiting-for-the-barbarians/>

capable leadership, and the desperate picture of his town that the Magistrate paints in the final chapter shows that he is incapable, unable to accommodate the needs of the people he leads and allow a smooth transition to independence.

Furthermore, as well as being unable to guarantee the smooth transition of his town into an independent future, the Magistrate remains to be both politically and ideologically dependent on the Empire and what it symbolizes. He takes control of the town under the probably false promise that:

‘ In the spring [the Empire] will send relief, there is no doubt of that’, showing that he still relies on the influence of the Empire to give himself authority, no matter how much of a hoax that authority is.’ [Coetzee, pp. 158]

His Orientalizing of the barbarians continues despite the abrupt decolonization that the frontier goes through:

‘ when the barbarians taste bread, new bread mulberry jam, bread and gooseberry jam, they will be won over to our ways. They will find that they are unable to live without the skills of men who know how to rear the pacific grains, without the arts of women who know how to use the benign fruits.’ [Coetzee, pp. 169]

Despite the cruelty and humiliation he has suffered under the Empire, the Magistrate still believes in the superiority of his ‘ civilized’ culture over that of the colonized barbarians. This superiority is so extreme that even the most basic of foods, ‘ bread and gooseberry jam’, shows how the barbarian

life outside of colonial rule is lacking. There is no ignoring how the Empire provided luxuries on both a basic level of food and infrastructure at large.

To the Magistrate, decolonization is nothing more than the illusion of independence and equality. With security and law removed and the still obvious superiority of the Empire, decolonization brings to light how utterly dependent a colonized nation is on the benefits of colonial rule. However, the failures of decolonization in *Waiting for the Barbarians* can be attributed to the failures of the Magistrate himself. Only partially won over by his sympathies for the barbarians and won over too late, he is powerless and unwilling to make the process of decolonization a success. Even post-decolonization he is still ideologically aligned with the self-superior Empire, dependent on the idea that safety and survival will be delivered with the return of the imperial forces. He is an ineffectual and uninspired leader for decolonization, thwarting a process that could happen if only led by the right person.

Citations

[1] J. M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, [London: Vintage, 2000], pp. 5

[2] Jane Pyner, *J. M. Coetzee and the Paradox of Postcolonial Authorship*, [Oxfordshire: Taylor and Francis, 2009], pp. 55

[3] Nicholas White, *Decolonisation; the British Experience since 1945*, [Oxfordshire; Taylor and Francis, 2014], pp. 134

[4] Abdullah F. Al-Badarneh, ' Waiting for the Barbarians: The Magistrate's Identity in a Colonial Context', International Journal of Humanities and Social Science, Vol. 3 No. 10, (2013),, [Accessed 1/11/16], pp. 125

[5] Edward Said, ' Orientalism', The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism, ed. by Vincent B. Leitch [New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010], pp. 1871