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كلفة الآءاب و العلوم الآلسائفة
Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines

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The Secrets of the Empire in J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*

Mounir Guirat*

ملخص :

في هذه الورقة دراسة لقصة *Waiting for the Barbarians*، لكتبتها ج.م. كوتزي، بوصفها سردا يتناول أسرار الامبراطورية والآخر المهمش من أجل تقويض الخطاب الاستعماري وكشف المسكوت عنه لدى الامبراطوريات. هذه الدراسة تهدف إلى فضح العنف الاستعماري الذي يناقض ادعاء الامبراطورية للعقل والحكمة، ويقدم أسرار الآخر باعتبارها شكلا من أشكال المقاومة للمفاهيم الجاهزة والأحكام المسبقة. المقالة تسعى للبرهنة على أنّ الآخر الخاضع للاستعمار يظل موضوعا مبهما أو لغزا يتحدّى أيّ محاولة لضبطه بمفاهيم نهائية من طرف المستعمر.

Résumé

Dans cet article, nous proposons l'étude du roman de J. M. Coetzee *Waiting for the Barbarians*, un récit qui évoque les secrets de l'Empire et ceux de l'autre marginalisé pour déstabiliser le discours colonial et révéler son non-dit. Cette étude a pour but de dénoncer la violence qui contredit tout lien entre la sagesse et l'Empire colonial. Il expose d'autre part, les secrets de l'autre comme une forme de résistance aux concepts prêts. L'article vise à démontrer que l'autre colonisé reste ambigu et échappe à toute tentative de définition des concepts finaux par le colonisateur.

Abstract

This article takes J. M. Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* as a narrative that addresses the secrets of the Empire and those of the marginalized "other" with a view to subverting the colonial discourse and revealing the unspeakable and the unsaid of empires. It addresses the Empire's capacity for violence as opposed to its much celebrated rationality and foregrounds the other's secrets as a form of resistance to being defined. It argues that the colonized "other" remains an ambiguous site that defies any final and fixed representation by the colonizer.

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Introduction

The aim of colonial texts such as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901), and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) is to give a definite and definitive representation of the "other" who is subject to mastery, domination, and discipline. They are motivated by an "othering" process that consolidates and disseminates the imperial divide between "us" and "them." Defining the colonised "other" in terms of inferiority and savagery, they encode him/her as the antithesis of the white man's rationality and order. They construct a biased discourse that excludes the possibility of giving voice to the "other" or approaching him/her as a subject. Defoe's Friday, for instance, occupies a feminised position of passivity and malleability while Conrad's Africans are reduced to grunts, yells, clapping hands and stamping feet. He represents them in terms of savagery and "incomprehensible frenzy" (Conrad 62). This narrative exclusion and repression, however, has motivated many postcolonial texts such as J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) to define the other's silence as a form of resistance to the imperialist discourse and a means to challenge its economy of categorisation and classification. The "other" becomes a site of secrets that are never told. This makes him/her an object of mystery never fully fathomed, a being that resists being represented according to the established criteria and codes.

I propose to read Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* as a narrative that addresses the secrets of the Empire¹ and those of the marginalized "other" in an attempt to challenge the colonial discourse and expose the unspeakable and the unsaid of empires; this novel tries to reveal the Empire's capacity for violence as opposed to its much celebrated rationality and to represent the other's secrets as a form of resistance to being defined. The novel's narrator, the Magistrate, takes the side of the barbarians and reveals the secrets of the Empire and the amount of violence on which it is based. His transgression informs the reader about the immoral and unethical story of the Empire. The Magistrate, however, becomes frustrated when he fails to understand the barbarian girl, a captive who remains outside Western time and signification. Like the cryptic scripts he finds, the tortured girl remains

1- In the novel, the term "Empire" is capitalised to symbolise all the empires throughout history.

opaque to any form of representation. *Waiting for the Barbarians* is, therefore, a novel of secrets waiting to be disclosed and secrets resisting disclosure. It explores the frustration of the colonial man as he realizes that revealing the Empire's secrets does not necessarily empower him to unveil those of the "barbarian" other.

1. Disclosed Secrets

Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*, like his most acclaimed novel *Foe*, addresses interesting questions related to imperialist attitudes and proceedings, colonization, and forms of resistance, issues that inform the politics and poetics of his own texts. In his book *J. M. Coetzee*, Dominic Head points to the relevance of Coetzee's works to South Africa's apartheid as a system of segregation and discrimination :

The novels of Coetzee occupy a special place in South African literature, and in the development of the twentieth-century novel more generally. His works present a sophisticated intellectual challenge to the particular form of colonial violence embodied in apartheid, though, in some quarters, this has been seen as an oblique rather than a direct challenge. (1)

Politicising his work, the novelist's contribution to the novel form in the twentieth century resides in his preoccupation with sites of marginality, silencing, and repression. In fact, in his book *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* Coetzee defines the writing act and its motivation in terms of voicing the subaltern: "Our craft is all in reading *the other*: gaps, inverses, undersides; the veiled, the dark, the buried, the feminine; alterities" (81). His novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* considers the encounter between the imperial centre and the marginalised "other," an encounter informed by the transgression of established codes and incited by a desire to unveil the unsaid of the Empire. The Magistrate, a white European man, allows the reader, like Conrad's Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, to get into the secret and hidden workings of the Empire. As its representative, the Magistrate enjoys his "peaceful" imperial duties of protecting the Empire's borders and displays curiosity about the barbarians' history until the arrival of Colonel Joll, who, under the emergency powers, has full control that leads him to commit excesses and atrocities against the natives in the name of law.

The character-bound narrator turns out to be a man of conscience who helplessly observes the destructiveness of the imperial regime. The official representative of its armed might is Colonel Joll, from the Empire's Third Bureau, a man who in his first encounter with the Magistrate prides himself on his skill in hunting. As he boasts about the "mountain of carcasses [that] had to be left to rot," he sets himself in opposition to the native fishermen who hunt for survival (1). Colonel's Joll's hunting for pleasure relates to his identity as an investigator and a torturer who has come to deal with the barbarian threat. Sensing Colonel Joll's complacency and aggressiveness, the Magistrate tries from the start to ease any possible tension that might arise following the interrogation of prisoners and to cast doubt on the effectiveness of his extreme procedures for knowing the truth:

'What if your prisoner is telling the truth,' I ask, 'yet finds he is not believed? Is that not a terrible position? Imagine: to be prepared to yield, to yield, to have nothing more to yield, to be broken, yet to be pressed to yield more! And what a responsibility for the interrogator! How do you ever know when a man has told you the truth?' (5)

Here, the narrator points to the interrogator's capacity to be sensitive to fluctuations in tone that would help him distinguish truth from lies. As the Magistrate problematizes the notion of truth and foregrounds the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of reaching or knowing it through torture, he unveils the psyche of the imperialist agent. In fact, Colonel Joll has a firm faith in imperialist judicial procedures: "We have set procedures we go through" (4). He is determined in his refusal to doubt the barbarians' guilt. For him the only truth is the one predetermined by the Empire's definition of the "other" as guilty. Colonel Joll's method or strategy to get the truth reveals an extreme manifestation of power exercised against the subjected "other" who is supposed to reveal the secrets he/she has about a possible attack by the barbarians:

'No, you misunderstand me. I am speaking only of a special situation now, 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' (5)

During the interrogation the subjugated individual experiences a time of dehumanization and suffering as he/she is obliged to give the truth and only the truth. Here, Colonel Joll relates truth and pain in extreme imperialist procedures that reduce the colonised to one single tone of pain that this torturer calls the “tone of truth” (5). Such an experience the narrator undergoes later in the narrative when he is tortured and strangled hanging naked in a tree. His cries of pain are interpreted as calls for help in the barbarians’ language. In the first part of his book *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault writes about torture as a means to get the truth. The “body of the condemned” experiences all kinds of pain and suffering. “Torture,” Foucault states, “rests on a whole quantitative art of pain. But there is more to it: this production of pain is regulated. Torture correlates the type of corporal effect, the quality, intensity, duration of pain, with the gravity of the crime, the person of the criminal, the rank of his victims” (34). Torture is most of the time associated with the need or desire to get the truth. This makes the torturer ready to go to extreme measures to force the tortured subject to utter truth in order to survive. Foucault writes:

Beneath an apparently determined, impatient search for truth, one finds in classical torture the regulated mechanism of an ordeal: a physical challenge that must define the truth; if the patient is guilty, the pains that it imposes are not unjust; but it is also a mark of exculpation if he is innocent. In the practice of torture, pain, confrontation and truth were bound together: they worked together on the patient’s body. The search for truth through judicial torture was certainly a way of obtaining evidence, the most serious of all—the confession of the guilty person; but it was also the battle, and this victory of one adversary over the other, that ‘produced’ truth according to a ritual. In torture employed to extract a confession, there was an element of the investigation; there was an element of the duel. (41)

Colonel Joll’s victory lies in his good exercise of torture and in winning all the duels with the barbarians. He exerts power in his command of the techniques of torture as he knows in advance that he must be the winning party.

The Magistrate is not allowed to attend the interrogation of the prisoners. He is not allowed to know and record the imperial aberrations.

Secrets about the way prisoners are maltreated and even killed are not disclosed to the Magistrate. He simply gets falsified stories. For instance, when a prisoner is killed during the interrogation, he receives a brief report saying: "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" (6). This is an official report that hides the exact reasons behind the murder of the prisoner. It is a biased report as it is concocted by people who wield power and who do not scruple to violate rights, maltreat people, and eventually kill them. Doubting the truth of the report, the Magistrate decides to examine things by himself:

I enter the hut holding the lantern high, trespassing, I realize, on what has become holy or unholy ground, if there is any difference, preserve of the mysteries of the state. [. . .] In the yard, with the guard holding the lantern, I find the stitching with the point of my knife, tear the shroud open, and fold it back from the head of the old man.

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 hole. 'Close it up,' I say. The guard bunches the opening together. It falls open. 'They say that he hit his head on the wall. What do you think?' He looks at me warily. 'Fetch some twine and tie it shut.' (6-7)

What the Magistrate discovers contradicts the report he receives. Colonel Joll's report hides the truth about the atrocities and violence of the Empire. What badly tarnishes its image is kept secret and is disguised to maintain its presumed moral uprightness, credibility, and solidity. The Magistrate discloses disgraceful and shocking acts that reveal the Empire's capacity for destructiveness and foreshadows its precariousness. The monstrous practices of the imperial agents operate on two levels: they dehumanise both the subjected barbarians and their torturers.

To study the relationship between the Magistrate and colonel Joll is to detect a conflict between their opposite views and attitudes. If Colonel Joll is the imperious and violent man of war, the Magistrate is rather the

peaceful and sympathetic man of law and justice. That is why he decides to deviate from the teachings of the Empire and chooses to challenge its norms and defend the barbarians. He is incredulous of the colonial and ideological teachings of the Empire as he believes that they have lost credibility and adequacy. The way the Empire disciplines, subjugates, and maltreats the colonised makes the Magistrate challenge its overarching frameworks and rigid structures. Unlike Colonel Joll's rule in which pain and truth, secrets and lies become exchangeable categories, the Magistrate's responsibility lies in managing the daily proceedings of the "lazy frontier." The colonial outpost of which the Magistrate is in charge is stable and its inhabitants do not violate or infringe its regulations. On the frontier between the Empire and the barbarians' land, it does not present any challenge to the Magistrate who easily maintains order. He says:

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. I collect the tithes and taxes, administer the communal lands, see that the garrison is provided for, supervise the junior officers who are the only officers we have here, keep an eye on trade, preside over the law-court twice a week. For the rest I watch the sun rise and set, eat and sleep and am content. (8)

The Magistrate's life on the frontier is peaceful, not involved in violence and war. The fact that the Empire "should take precautionary measures, for there would certainly be war" is not a solid judgment, he believes (9). He does not believe rumors that say that the barbarians are arming. He clearly expresses his viewpoint: "Of this unrest I myself saw nothing. [. . .] Show me a barbarian army and I will believe" (9). The Magistrate also tries to dissuade Colonel Joll from launching a raid on the barbarians. More reasonable, he knows the limitations of this imperial raid. For him, the barbarians are the natives whose knowledge of the land gives them an advantageous position over colonialists. Colonel Joll, the representative of the Empire's armed might, stands for the imperialistic discourse of self-imposition and self-assertion through military superiority. The barbarian other, in this sense, is forced to know that he/she is meant to be colonized and silenced in order to guarantee the Empire's security and continuity. This accounts for the Empire's reliance on the systematic use of violence and the misrepresentation of the native.

Opting for an alternative rule to Colonel Joll's, one that relies on a more sympathetic relationship with the natives, the Magistrate decides to offer help to these subjugated and ill-treated people, trying to strip himself of his colonial cloth. In the absence of Colonel Joll, he resumes his command of the frontier. He is again in charge of the settlement. He states:

The new men of Empire are the ones who believe in fresh starts, new chapters, clean pages; I struggle on with the old story, hoping that before it is finished it will reveal to me why it was that I thought it worth the trouble. Thus it is that, administration of law and order in these parts having today passed back to me, I order that the prisoners be fed, that the doctor be called in to do what he can, that the barracks return to being a barracks, that arrangements be made to restore the prisoners to their former lives as soon as possible, as far as possible. (26)

The Magistrate has a different, rather deviant, conception of imperial rule. He wants to embellish the image of the colonial man and the Empire by rejecting violence against the colonized trying to alleviate their pain. He believes in a new beginning where the colonized natives will be happy to know that the colonial man is no longer their enemy and that the Empire is at their own service. The "new men" of Empire, the Magistrate explains, are the ones who should oppose Colonel Joll's imperial violation of the rights of the barbarians. Therefore, the Empire's "fresh starts" signal the acknowledgement of the deficiencies of an imperial system based on domination and oppression. The colonial ideological forces that have participated in the construction of negative images about the natives and in the effacement of their cultural values and traditions are not the right answer, the Magistrate argues, in the building of a solid Empire. In writing "new chapters" with "clean pages," the Empire has to address the natives not as savage, backward, and undeveloped, but as worthy of respect and entitled to maintain and defend their indigenous culture and to rule their lands. Living in the hinterland, the natives, who are caught up in a process of contact with the colonial men, have to be given the right to live according to their cultural difference. Cross-cultural interaction, in this sense, necessitates a mode of thinking that aims at the introduction and maintenance of a new order that does not prevent the "other" from participating in the construction of new political,

cultural, and social paradigms. The Magistrate finds himself obliged to resume the established order disturbed by Colonel Joll and his men because he is fully aware that the Empire is faulty in its colonial and belligerent attitudes towards the natives. Pugnacious, the Empire and its representatives fail to meet the Magistrate's conception of law and order.

The Magistrate's scrutiny of imperial rule is meant to allow the reader into the evil machinations on which the Empire is based. Since the arrival of Colonel Joll, Coetzee's protagonist has managed to spotlight the real aims of the imperial ideology which wants to guarantee the superiority of the white race. The Magistrate's scandalous revelations of the Empire's use and abuse of the native account for his open defiance of its deceptive principles and ideals. He realises that the Empire/native relationship is encoded in terms of relations of control and dependency that ensure both the power of the Empire and the weakness of the native and the way he/she is forced to accept the new political and cultural structures. The Magistrate stresses the fact that the Empire is a dominant system and a discourse that imposes specific values and rules and constructs an unjust reality for the "other" based on colonial relationships. He defiantly discloses the secrets of the imperial ideology which revolve around matters concerned with colonisation and exploitation. This goes with the way Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin unveil the hidden aims of the colonial discourse :

Colonial discourse tends to exclude, of course, statements about the exploitation of the resources of the colonized, the political status accruing to colonizing powers, the importance to domestic politics of the development of an empire, all of which may be compelling reasons for maintaining colonial ties. Rather it conceals these benefits in statements about the inferiority of the colonized, the primitive nature of other races, the barbaric depravity of colonized societies, and therefore the duty of the imperial power to reproduce itself in the colonial society, and to advance the civilization of the colony through trade, administration, cultural and moral improvement. Such is the power of colonial discourse that individual colonizing subjects are not often consciously aware of the duplicity of their

position, for colonial discourse constructs the colonizing subject as much as the colonized. Statements that contradict the discourse cannot be made either without incurring punishment, or without making the individuals who make those statements appear eccentric and abnormal. (43)

In revealing the secrets of the imperial ideology, the Magistrate proves “his eccentric notions of how the Empire should conduct itself” (Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* 126). He is both “eccentric and abnormal” as he fails to keep his allegiance to the Empire. He rather foregrounds the need of deconstructing the principles and ideals on which this Empire is based. Whether the Magistrate’s behaviour is read as heroic or not, there is no doubt that his revelations represent an important manoeuvre towards discovering the camouflaged aims of the Empire and its representatives.

Acknowledging himself as an agent working at the service of the Empire and motivated by his sense of guilt, Coetzee’s protagonist develops a counter discourse that subverts the imperial discourse and discloses its major defects and aberrations. In revealing the colonial scandals of the Empire, the Magistrate shakes it to its very foundations. He even decides to help the barbarians and therefore gets punished through imprisonment and maltreatment as he is accused of “treasonously consorting with the enemy” (Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* 85). In defiance to the teachings of the Empire, he declares: “we have no enemies. [. . .] Unless I make a mistake. [. . .] Unless we are the enemy” (85). His imprisonment allows him to feel and experience the pain and suffering undergone by the imprisoned natives. He states:

I stare all day at the empty walls, unable to believe that the imprint of all the pain and degradation they have enclosed will not materialize under an intent enough gaze; or shut my eyes, trying to attune my hearing to that infinitely faint level at which the cries of all who suffered here must still beat from wall to wall. I pray for the day when these walls will be levelled and the unquiet echoes can finally take wing; though it is hard to ignore the sound of brick being laid on brick so nearby. (87)

The Magistrate’s incarceration allows him to discover the history of colonialism and oppression from within. He manages to establish a clear relationship between imperial power and experiences of pain and

suffering that he himself is invited to taste. Obsessed with Colonel Joll's procedures of torture and the pain they cause, the narrator redefines prison in terms of echoes and sounds smothered and muffled. Commonly seen as a spatial confinement, prison for the Magistrate becomes an acoustic one built for muffling voices and hushing secrets. As a prisoner, he shows signs of resistance to the colonial status quo when he expresses his desire to see the colonial confining walls destroyed as a symbolic destruction to forms of domination, maltreatment, and silencing. The Magistrate's connection with the Empire changes dramatically as he no longer believes in its deceptive rhetoric. What he foregrounds is its ruthlessness, the violent practices by means of which the natives and their lands are brought under colonial control and domination. Colonial violence, then, is the main mechanism for sustaining the central authority of the Empire which is no longer authoritarian as it is being threatened from within by its own agents.

2. Secrets Resisting Disclosure

The Magistrate's relationship with the Empire changes drastically when he meets a barbarian girl who is obliged to stay in the settlement as she is physically disabled after the violent and cruel interrogation by Colonel Joll and his men. She has broken ankles and is partially blinded. The Magistrate becomes obsessed with her, with her crippled body as a site of the perversions of the Empire's power. Therefore, he takes her in his custody because "It has been growing more and more clear to me that until the marks on the girl's body are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her" (33). His encounter with the girl is an encounter with the colonised natives and their violated land. Here, the female body stands for the colonised land. In *The Ballistic Bard: Postcolonial Fictions*, Judie Newman argues that

The parallelism between the woman's body and the colonized land is also a parallel between body and story. While the girl remains mute, the narrator hunts for the truth of her story, examining the signs of torture on her body and repeatedly questioning her. [. . .] Now he senses an obscure correspondence between his own quest for the truth and the interrogations of Colonel Joll. (91)

The barbarian girl's body symbolises the colonised land in the way it is abused and violated. It also symbolises a story that both Colonel Joll, the torturer, and the sympathetic narrator demand of her. In fact, the

magistrate takes the role of a protector who in return for it manipulates her body. Every night, he engages in a ritual of washing and oiling her body. However, it remains impenetrable; he traces her scars but it “is like caressing an urn or a ball, something which is all surface” (Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* 52). In her silence and refusal to tell her story of torture and pain, the barbarian girl remains a body that resists the white man’s conception of truth, an “alien body,” one which is “closed, ponderous [. . .] beyond comprehension” (Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* 45).

In “Transfiguring: Colonial Body into Postcolonial Narrative,” Elleke Boehmer shows how in “colonial representation, exclusion or suppression can often literally be seen as “embodied”” (269). This means that the colonial enterprise is as very much involved in the subjugation and inscription of bodies as it is based on the appropriation of lands. Boehmer points out:

From the point of view of the colonizer specifically, fears and curiosities, sublimated fascination with the strange or the “primitive,” are expressed in concrete physical and anatomical images. The seductive and/or repulsive qualities of the wild or Other, and the punishment of the same, are figured on the body, and as body. To rehearse some of the well-known binary tropes of postcolonial discourse, opposed to the colonizer (white man, West, centre of intellection, of control), the Other is cast as corporeal, carnal, untamed, instinctual, raw, and therefore also open to mastery, available for use, for husbandry, for numbering, branding, cataloguing, description or possession. Images of the body of the Other are conflated with those of the land, unexplored land too being seen as amorphous, wild, seductive, dark, open to possession. (269-70)

Central to the colonialist ideology, the colonised body is taken as an object of domination and subjection. That is why Colonel Joll guarantees the security of the Empire by subjugating bodies and turning them into sites of otherness and guilt. Constructed as dangerous to the well-being of the Empire, the punished bodies of the natives could be read as discursive levels of representation that inscribe their inferiority and thus their vulnerability to control, use, abuse, and possession. The barbarian girl’s body, in this sense, is, for the Magistrate, a symbolic evocation of the

history of colonisation and its cruelties. However, it refuses to help him in his attempts to disambiguate the ambiguities that feature the history of the Empire and its violent aberrations and deviations. Things remain opaque for him as they have been for Colonel Joll. Their different quests for truth are not fully achieved. Rosemary Jane Jolly points out that Colonel Joll sees the marks of torture “as evidence of “barbarian” guilt, whereas the magistrate sees them as proof that the “girl” must express some truth that he and Joll both wish to possess but which, the magistrate recognises, Joll has failed to reach” (131). Colonel Joll’s reliance on violence to impose the truth that the barbarians are guilty and therefore have to be punished contradicts the Magistrate’s belief that what should be investigated is not the imposed truth but the one possessed by the barbarian girl who refuses to mean according to the colonial and patriarchal system of signification.

In tracing the scars on the barbarian girl’s tortured body, the Magistrate becomes an interrogator. Colonel Joll’s interrogation techniques impose guilt on the natives who are pushed to speak the torturer’s truth through pain. The Magistrate’s questioning of the girl, however, differs from that of Colonel Joll because he is motivated by the desire to atone for his guilt as an imperial agent and to alleviate her pain. Bearing the burden of Colonel Joll’s maltreatment of the girl, he feels that he is indirectly involved in torturing the girl; that is why he tries to act in a way that compensates for the wrong and immoral behaviour of the colonial man and is completely unaware of his humiliating handling of her body. He softly and serenely questions her to get a full story about her situation, but she remains mysterious and unfathomable. She is a knotted thread of secrets that needs to be unravelled. She resists any form of representation by the colonial man. She is like the desert, beyond the Empire’s frontier, resisting exploration and remaining opaque to any form of penetration. In his conversation with the girl, the representative of the enslaved other, the magistrate experiences frustration as she does not respond to his attempts to give her meaning. She would not give him the kind of meaning that would help him write and construct his history and hers, the story of the colonisers and that of the colonised. As a tortured body resisting his monolithic truth, the barbarian girl is not an object of sexual desire for the narrator. Unlike the prostitute he visits because she acts a part and pretends to respond to him, the barbarian girl refuses to comply with his desire to possess her and her story. “Pleasant

fictions of erotic desire,” however, “cannot rival the girl’s untold story. By holding back its details, she refuses to initiate him fully, leaving him in an interstitial position, aware of his complicity with the torturers, and yet unable to move on, to turn the page.” (Newman 91). The barbarian girl shows him that she cannot be fully penetrated and controlled. If her body is tortured, her mind, soul, and heart cannot be easily mastered and categorized. Note the narrator’s frustration at his failure to disclose the secret of the colonised:

But of this one there is nothing I can say with certainty. There is no link I can define between her womanhood and my desire. I cannot even say for sure that I desire her. All this erotic behaviour of mine is indirect: I prowl about her, touching her face, caressing her body, without entering her or finding the urge to do so. I have just come from the bed of a woman for whom, in the year I have known her, I have not for a moment had to interrogate my desire: to desire her has meant to enfold her and enter her, to pierce her surface and stir the quiet of her interior into an ecstatic storm; then to retreat, to subside, to wait for desire to reconstitute itself. But with this woman it is as if there is no interior, only a surface across which I hunt back and forth seeking entry. Is this how her torturers felt hunting their secret, whatever they thought it was? For the first time I feel a dry pity for them: how natural a mistake to believe that you can burn or tear or hack your way into the secret body of the other! (46)

Every night the narrator traces the definite contours of her body, but he is not allowed access to her story, the inner recesses of her subjectivity.

On the body of the barbarian female is a text inscribed by the colonisers, but like the historical documents discovered by the Magistrate it resists being read and rewritten by the colonial man. In fact, before Colonel Joll’s coming to the settlement, the narrator passes most of his time excavating the antique ruins in the vicinity and attempts to decipher the “illegible” script painted on a number of wooden slips. He states:

One of my hobbies has been to excavate these ruins. If there are no repairs to be done to the irrigation works, I sentence petty offenders to a few days of digging in the dunes; soldiers are sent here on

punishment details; and at the height of my enthusiasm I even used to pay for casual labour out of my own pocket. [. . .] I have recovered the heavy poplar lintel, carved with a design of interlaced leaping fish, that now hangs over my fireplace. Buried below floor level in a bag that crumbled to nothing as soon as it was touched I also found a cache of wooden slips on which are painted characters in a script I have not seen the like of. [. . .] The characters on the new slips are as clear as the day when they were written. Now, in the hope of deciphering the script, I have set about collecting all the slips I can, and have let the children who play here know that if they find one it is always worth a penny. (15-16)

The Magistrate's desire to explore and discover what surrounds him is part of a colonial culture that is based on the appropriation and annexation of what is new and strange. His hobby to uncover and extract the hidden and the mysterious demonstrates the white man's desire to investigate what is beneath an apparently tamed and subjugated land. The need to know what is secret is certainly a way of obtaining exclusive privileges and rights to dominate the land and its people. Leading a peaceful life in his distant settlement, the Magistrate enjoys his hobby as he knows that there are no conflicts on the frontier between the white settlers and the "barbarians." His appropriation of these historical texts is symbolic of his hegemonic position. Aware that the barbarians pose no threat to his settlement, he passes time attempting to construct history by trying to decode the cryptic message that the wooden slips hide:

Perhaps in my digging I have only scratched the surface. Perhaps ten feet below the floor lie the ruins of another fort, razed by the barbarians, peopled with the bones of folk who thought they would find safety behind high walls. Perhaps when I stand on the floor of the courthouse, if that is what it is, I stand over the head of a magistrate like myself, another grey-haired servant of Empire who fell in the arena of his authority, face to face at last with the barbarian. How will I ever know? By burrowing like a rabbit? Will the characters on the slips one day tell me? (16)

The wooden slips are an unfathomable mystery to the Magistrate whose curiosity is a sign of his anxiety about the precariousness of the Empire.

Like the undecipherable wooden slips, those texts which are only a surface that resists any access into their depths, the barbarian girl is not easily appropriated and read by the Magistrate as she resists his colonialist and masculinist economy of possessing, classifying, and categorising. For him, she is such a nondescript person, without a distinctive character and so not easily penetrated and classified. Known from the outside but unknown from the inside, the barbarian girl disturbs the established and conventional forms of representation and stands as a challenge to the Western man to know and define her. She demonstrates her ability to remain an intriguing character who could unsettle the white man's self-aggrandizement and self-aprobation. What the barbarian girl reveals is that the colonial man, even if he succeeds in violating and torturing the surface part of the body, cannot force his way into the "secret body of the other" because his prejudicial knowledge could not enable him to understand and feel the pain and suffering caused by colonial domination. The Empire cannot go beyond the surface level of representation, while the native "other" opts for forms of resistance that demonstrate his/her capacity for subverting the colonial discourse and frustrating its aim to impose absolute forms of signification. The Magistrate's lack of insight into the girl's subjectivity makes him unable to come to terms with her own social and cultural values. She rejects his attempts to assign her a biased identity that does not take into consideration the very specificities of her individuality. Her body remains impenetrable and unfathomable and her "untold story of marginalisation, torture and resistance remains unarticulated, and it is the Magistrate's fate to live it through" (Newman 92). The barbarian girl, then, "remains stubbornly physical, refusing to reduce herself to his language, his categorisations, symbolically enacting in her own body her own structures of meaning" (Newman 92). It is the materiality of her own body that reveals the Magistrate's futile language and its imposed system of signification. When he returns her to her own people, the Magistrate crosses "the limits of the Empire" to discover that the margin is enlightening as it allows him to acknowledge the fact that much could be learned from them. He states: "'What a waste,' I think: 'she could have spent those long empty evenings teaching me her tongue! Too late now'"(78). Learning the language of the barbarians could possibly alert the Magistrate to the truth behind their resistance and to the significance

of their culture and the sacredness of their land. Waiting for the barbarians, then, should not be seen as an indication of something undesirable and monstrous coming, but should be welcomed as informative and corrective for the rules of the Empire and its deviations.

Conclusion

Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* gives the reader the opportunity to revisit the Empire and to question its imperialistic representation of the native "other" as well as the imperialistic story it tells itself. What is interesting about this revisiting is that it takes us to the centre of empires while allowing us some access to the colonial margin; we cross the frontier with the Magistrate who is no longer satisfied with the imperial rhetoric and the colonialist logic on which the Empire is based. The interaction between the reader and the Magistrate results in revealing the power perversions of the imperial repressive structures and violent practices meant to secure the Empire's hegemonic power and construct the otherness and guilt of the colonised. The Magistrate's critical perspective and counter actions uncover the Empire's secrets and ambiguities and disrupt the certainties of its imperial ideology, bringing the scandalous facts about its aberrations out into sharp relief. Snipping at the centre of the Empire, however, does not allow him to understand and appreciate the ambiguous and obscure nature of the barbarian girl who remains for him an impenetrable and unfathomable "other". The Magistrate's command of the means of representation, by virtue of his imperial belonging, confronts resistance from the barbarian girl. He rather learns that her being partially blinded does not blindfold her perception of the way the Empire monopolises and controls representation and to the need of frustrating that representation by questioning its certainty and unity.

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