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Imperial Power and the Construction of Otherness in J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*

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Abstract

This research paper utilizes the concepts that underpin Edward Said's *Orientalism* to examine the imperial attributes of power and cultural otherness in J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*. The barbarian is not an external threat, constructed within the imperial imagination of Kalidasa; he is a rhetorical production of paranoia and surveillance born out of administrative violence that functions to legitimize Empire. Submitting to Said's normative vision of Orientalism as a form of representation subsumed in politics, the paper shows that difference is internalised by the Empire and silence animated by rumor, stereotype and interrogating gaze whereby not the barbarian from without but within comes. Drawing on selected textual readings, the research traces Coetzee's argument of how an ideological process produces and polices alterity as a specifically colonial orderings of knowledge; yet equally it is about how imperial discourse in its essence is also an ethically precarious one. The research also analyses the representation in a new light, namely as an anxious subject caught between complicity and resistance, showing how even acts of ethical recognition are reproduced within systems of dominance. This study argues that *Waiting for the Barbarians* gives a critique of imperial power in its subject matter– preoccupying itself as it does with violence and oppression – but to an even greater extent through discourse: a political technology used to define, manage and control marginalized identities

Keywords

Orientalism, Otherness, Colonial Discourse, Imperial Power, *Waiting for the Barbarians*

Introduction

With respect to power in the imperial sense, though, it has of course always relied on conquest and domination but even (perhaps far more so) descriptive systems that place marginal identities. The Other in colonial discourse is an imposition rather than a power-free subject, it is a manufactured construct seat made of representation, surveillance, categorization [and institutional power]. Such depictions function as the levers of empires, in which people groups are portrayed (by their conquerors) as barbaric, dangerous or crazed human beasts or animals. Colonial power does not only manifest through explicit acts of violence or intimidation; it relies primarily on strategies of knowledge which shape what societies perceive as difference and place subjects along a continuum in relation to structures and power. A necessity, our cursory engagement with the operation of empires in remedying otherness must therefore pivot on the characterisation of this relationship between discourse and domination.

The fiction of J. M. Coetzee has long been preoccupied with these questions, which constantly strain the ethical and political boundaries (and psychosexual dimensions) of colonial and postcolonial power practices. By using fractured narrative, a degree of moral ambivalence and unclear regimes of representation, Coetzee exposes how authority creates exclusion in the name of violence. *Waiting for the Barbarians* is one of his most powerful literary explorations into imperial anxiety and the construction of otherness. Set in an unnamed frontier town on the edges of an Empire, this novel critiques how colonial rule manufactures the image of the "barbarian," purportedly presenting a dire threat that can justify surveillance and interrogation and torture and land grabs. The Empire depends on the permanent manufacture of an enemy, which its existence certifies as a rational and therefore legitimate basis for its own violence: political rule. In particular, the novel illustrates how imperial systems craft and continue their forms of domination through discursive and institutional actions instead of physical force.

In this case, Edward Said's Orientalism—the idea that colonial discourse is a system of representation intricately linked to authority and power—is the theory that most closely relates to this process. Orientalism is "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said 3). Said said it in such a way that difference becomes a political weapon of stability and separation, through which the West secures its prerogative position against an inferior East. Orientalism thus shows how the represented is never innocent: representation produces those dimensions of identity that it tries to simply describe. If Said looks at representations of the East by the West, his idea remains useful and relevant across a broader scope of colonial and racial dynamics than those between east and west. The processes of othering in the colonial context also function through classification, surveillance, administrative discourse and fear production modes that this layer will address. The barbarian in Coetzee's fiction does not appear as an enemy found in nature which imperial rule has to identify and destroy; the barbarian is a discursive production, a figure conjured up by imperial authority as one mechanism by which colonial power might be secured.

More specifically, recent scholarship on the novel has focused on its engagement with surveillance and administrative violence, as well as some of the politics of representation. As Abdullah Dagamseh points out, Coetzee's novel does not merely depict South African apartheid analogy – it goes one step further: exposing modern systems of governance even as they transform fear into both administrative procedure and political management (Dagamseh 1). In the same manner of speaking, Susan Nirmala argues that the Empire produces the "barbarian"—not its very own discursive and coercive pillar—through taxonomy, cataloging, and institutionalized normalization rather than finding per se a present danger (Nirmala 1). As Shadi Neimneh also shows, the humanist discourse of the novel remains inseparably connected with formations of imperial complicity and maps out a fundamental disavowal in ethical recognition: these forms cannot overcome systems that operate through coercive knowledge production (Neimneh, "The Humanist Discourse" 79). Critics like Anne Chantot and Kharys Ateh Laue have analyzed the novel's invocation of inscription, allegory, and surveillance to argue that imperial power implements itself through acts of naming, visibility, and interpretive control that convert bodies into politically readable categories (Chantot 30; Laue 2). Collectively, these studies reveal how Coetzee identifies the critique of colonial violence with a critique of the representational and institutional mechanisms through which imperial authority creates manageable modalities of otherness.

Recently, scholarship has turned to frame *Waiting for the Barbarians* within its larger political and symbolic significance beyond apartheid South Africa's historical context. In her new study, Eve Lester suggests that the identity of the "barbarian" remains an instrument of modern political power via which states instill fear and exclusion across nations through their governments (Lester 20), as well as a source of border anxiety for those fleeing back across national borders or from one geographic location to another such as migrants seeking refuge in other countries. Lester argues that imperial discourse relies on making marginalized peoples at once visible and invisible through legal, political, and visual modes of control. A reading of this kind continues to support Coetzee's wider denunciation of particular ideological systems that rely on a mixture of surveillance, regulation and containment to render insecure or otherwise troubling difference into an outwardly threat.

Critics have further situated the novel within the political realities of apartheid South Africa and institutional fabrications that propped up state violence. *Waiting for the Barbarians*, they claim, accentuates the forms of censorship, torture and bureaucratic repression that were so integral to apartheid governance (Oliveira et al. 1). For them, Coetzee's allegory and narrative indeterminacy permitted the novel to reveal machinations of political violence while eluding state censorship directly. The argument draws attention to the hold imperial power has not only over the body but also through information and discourse regulation and public visibility.

Waiting for the Barbarians has been very popular among critics in regards to politics, allegory and ethical theories and postcolonial theory. Critics have made much of everything from its critique of imperial violence to frontier paranoia, from its interrogation of moral complicity in colonial systems. Other works have focused this narrative on arthropathy, ethical witnessing, and the psychological nature of power. Yet, significantly less investigation has focused on how imperial authority works in the process of constructing otherness as political threat depending on discursive production that renders difference equally dangerous to politics. Furthermore, although several studies approach postcolonial theories in general, few analyses of the novel utilize such a specifically Saidian lens to examine the relationship between imperial power and interpellation as the production of otherness. This article aims to fill this void by analysing how Coetzee articulates the means by which colonial discourse fashions the barbarian as an object of fear, surveillance and domination.

Based on Said's theory of Orientalism, this article asserts that *Waiting for the Barbarians* illustrates how imperial power constructs the barbarian as an "Other" through discursive practices, administrative procedures, and institutional violence to maintain colonial power and legitimize domination. Yet, the article also shows that Empire's power does not derive from an actual external enemy– instead points to how such fear and difference is endlessly reproduced through systems of representation. The close reading of the novel show how the interplay between discourse, violence and power question imperial ideology by so doing, the essay provides a more detailed reading of Coetzee's critique while specifying how othering becomes such an important instrument in imperial control.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Orientalism and the Construction of Otherness

This study draws on the theoretical notions of Orientalism used by Edward Said as a power-laden representational discourse. The first claim is made in Orientalism itself when Said disputes the idea that the Orient was a cultural or geographical reality whose fundamentals would endure outside of Western literature. Rather, he contends that the Orient has historically been defined as the cultural other to the West by political, intellectual, and institutional procedures. Said's statement that "The Orient was nearly always a European invention" (Said 1) refutes an essentialist East that is embodied in false intellectual accusations by arguing that it can only function as discursive rather than material utterance acting through auto-parasitic imperial desires for meat-bag power and representation. As a result, we can see that orientalism is more than just prejudice or stereotypes; it is a system of supremacy that produces knowledge and turns difference into hierarchy.

Orientalism, according to Said, is a "Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient" (Said 3). The difference between political power and representation is exposed by this definition. Orientalist rhetoric portrays the West as intelligent, peaceful, and morally strong, whereas the Orient is seen as repressive and backward. These fictional, negative dichotomies create what Said refers to as a "imaginative geography," in which coloniality is used by authority to order space, identity, and difference (54–55). This concept is crucial because it shows that representation is never impartial. In addition to being descriptive, colonial discourse's Other is a paradoxical watchdog of the alien territory, waiting to be discovered, subjugated, and subjugated.

Although Said’s classic is largely preoccupied with western depictions of the Middle East and Asia, the conceptual spaces opened by Orientalism are just as rich for examining relations of coloniality in South Africa or elsewhere within an imperial milieu. The workings of otherness in colonial systems function by means of a circular set of modalities to classify and inscribe difference into a political threat. Colonial power relies on a definable “Other” from which imperial identity can assert itself. And so, the Other becomes an empire political and epistemological necessity. Otherness in this context does not merely refer to difference as such, but rather a discursive condition produced by practices of exclusion, representation and administrative control.

Postcolonial critics have argued that the Orient, the East, has never been a fixed point in space or time but rather a set of discursive formations over an expansive geographic landscape extending far beyond any conventional idea of an East/West dichotomy. Orientalism is a "portable discourse technology," as Kamel Rais points out (Rais 61), and thus has the ability to function in different colonial contexts through stereotyping, classification, and archival inscription. In like manner, Zhihan Gao emphasizes the work of narrative framing, documentation and institutional classification to convert a cultural difference into categorically governable knowledge (Gao 1). Such perspectives resonate quite powerfully in Coetzee's South African space, which has to ground its imperial authority through representational regimes that translate the lack of certainty and division into political danger.

Recent criticism has also connected Coetzee’s fiction to Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism through the recurring opposition between the “self” and the “other.” *Waiting for the Barbarians*, according to Shalini Infanta and K. Shanthi Chitra, demonstrates how imperial regimes use dominance, surveillance, and ideological segregation based on Orientalist thought to create and marginalize the barbarian subject (Infanta and Shanthi Chitra 262). Their research also highlights how colonial authority relies on drawing parallels between civilization and barbarism to legitimize institutional violence and political control.

According to Shadi Neimneh, the colonized body is reduced to an object fashioned by imperial language and power as imperial discourse creates gendered identities through relations of domination and representation (Neimneh, “Imperialism and Gender” 1). His reading illustrates how colonial discourse creates identity by imposing ideological meanings on oppressed individuals through systems of inscription. Such mechanisms are demonstrated in *Waiting for the Barbarians* by the Empire's attempts to categorize, describe, and define the

barbarian body in accordance with imperial presumptions about gender, race, and culture. Therefore, Coetzee's book reveals the close connection between political power and representation in colonial institutions.

Such knowledge pertains especially to *Waiting for the Barbarians* in that the Empire keeps creating the other side of the barbarians as an identifiably hostile entity when there is no proof of a concerted barbarian incursion. This idea provides an advance of the ways in which imperial discourse creates alterity via rumour, interrogation, surveillance, and institutional violence. So the barbarian is not depicted as an enemy that exists on its own, rather a fictional product required for sustaining imperial power. Through this process Coetzee reveals the ideologies through which colonial systems rationalise control and governmentality using fear and difference as a means by which to justify domination.

One of Said's main theories also states that institutional authority is a vital part for keeping systems of representation in place. Orientalism is sustained not simply because of how some individuals think, but also through cultural, educational and political institutions that make imperial notions of the world normal. According to Said, as he explains: "The Orient is taught, researched, administered, and pronounced upon in certain discrete ways" (Said 203). Hence representation becomes administratively bound. Colonial knowledge is empowered at point of impact, through archives, reports, systems of classification and bureaucratic practice that convert discourse into governance. The link between representation and administration becomes paradigmatic in *Waiting for the Barbarians* where imperial sovereignty is narrated through investigation reports, oral testimonies, written accounts of interrogations that often stand alongside military logs. The force of the Empire is not always direct violence, but rather its capacity to define, classify and narrate reality.

Said especially invokes Michel Foucault in explaining how imperial discourse creates the Other. Said refers to the fact that he has employed "Michel Foucault's notion of discourse" in his analysis of Orientalism (Said 3). Recent scholarship has further explored the intellectual relationship between Edward Said and Michel Foucault in the formulation of Orientalism as a discourse. Moosavinia, Racevskis, and Talebi Sarokolaei argue that Said's project draws extensively upon Foucauldian concepts of discourse, power, and knowledge to explain how colonial authority constructs and regulates representations of the Orient (Moosavinia et al. 184). Their study demonstrates that Orientalism operates not merely as a collection of cultural assumptions but as a discursive framework through which political authority, knowledge production, and systems of domination are institutionalized.

Foucault offers a methodology for critical analysis of this process through his notion of discursive formations, how systems of knowledge create social realities and disciplines human subjects. Instead of seeing power as something that belongs to sovereign rulers or political institutions, Foucault understands power as a web or network formed by relational interactions that circulate through normalised habitus practices at work in institutions (like the prison) and discourses. As he explains, "Power is everywhere; not because it has the most; but also because it comes from everywhere" (Foucault 93).

It is Foucault's notion of power which, I believe, has the most relevance to understanding the adminstrative and disciplinary forces at work in Coetzee's novel. In Power in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, power works not only through militarized violence but also through surveillance, documentation, confession and examination. The Empire remains in power through removing the power from people, turning them into objects of knowledge which bureaucratic procedures and institutional observation can collect data on. Modern systems of power are, according to Foucault, characterized by "power-knowledge" relations in which knowledge both produces and regulates subjects (Foucault 98). As a result, the maintenance of imperial power is reliant on an incessant generation of intelligence about the barbarian subject. The political dominance of the Empire is substantiated by a whole archive of difference that produces its records, located between interrogator and interrogated, translated and translated.

Kharys Ateh Laue has also examined this relationship between surveillance and administrative authority, interpreting the novel's imperial gaze as a panopticon that organizes visibility and surveils subjects through classification (Laue 2). Anne Chantot likewise contends that the Empire marks and translates bodies as politically readable signs, shorthanding identity into administratively facilitative categories (Chantot 30). Such interpretations dovetail with the novel's denunciation of colonial systems that perpetuate domination through modes of documentation, visibility and interpretive management.

Foucault study of disciplinary mechanisms helps expanding the understanding of how normal practices in colonial systems regulate bodies and identities. Foucault explains how modern power shifts increasingly from the sovereign right "to take life or let live"to mechanisms meant "to foster life or disallow it to the point of death"

(Foucault 138). It shows how, now, rather than directly exercising sovereign violence alone, modern power works through surveillance, normalization and regulation. Again, and just as in Coetzee's novel, imperial administration relies on routine disciplinary mechanisms that divide populations, control borders and monitor movements. Torture, imprisonment and interrogation only become extensions of administrative logic instead of extraordinary acts of cruelty. Violence bureaucratically operates as a stratagem of the Empire to maintain political order and the legitimacy of its rule.

It is therefore the centrality of this relationship between discourse and administration that situates the novel in its understanding of the production of otherness. Said's work recognizes the representational aspect of colonial power, but it is through Foucault that we come to understand the institutionalized processes by which such representations become the material workings of governance. Together, their theories demonstrate how otherness is a political and discursive construct that can only be maintained by co-dependent systems of language, surveillance, and institution rather than existing naturally. Colonial rhetoric uses danger and diversity as justifications for dominance.

Recent criticism has also emphasized the relationship between imperial bureaucracy and moral corruption in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Swapnila argues that the Empire sustains oppression through administrative violence, interrogation, and institutional manipulation that normalize brutality in the name of political order (677). The study further demonstrates how the Magistrate’s moral transformation emerges through his growing awareness of the ethical contradictions underlying imperial authority and colonial violence.

Furthermore, Achille Mbembe´s neo-colonialism as necropolitics explains how this latter system helps to normalise violence through death management. According to Mbembe, sovereignty in modern society increasingly rests on identifying the specific individuals who may experience violence, abandonment, or social death (Mbembe 16). When viewed via Coetzee's lens, the Empire's management of barbarian flesh appears as a bureaucratic system in which physical punishment and incarceration, rather than being uncommon acts, serve to enhance imperial power in administrative rather than exceptional practice.

The Empire's nearly obsessive drive to recognize, categorize, and contain the barbarian classes is evident in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. In addition to being the location of that asymptotic imperial power, the frontier serves as a mirror in which fear is reterritorialized rather than replicated, and military operations, coerced interrogations, and administrative procedures are merely used to carry out the most prominent fantasies of "the barbarian."It does not exist unless there are active rhythms that structure and sustain its threat in perpetuity. That is to say, Coetzee's novel reveals how imperial power relies not only on brute force but also on the very discursive construction of Otherness. The novel is viewed through a Saidian as well as Foucauldian lens to reveal how colonial power works through an interlinked system of representation, surveillance and institutional control that produces the Other not only knowable but governable.

3. Constructing the Barbarian Other

3.1. Frontier Fear and the Colonial Imagination

In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, J. M. Coetzee shows that barbarian otherness is not a socially given fact but a discursively constructed form of difference produced over and again by imperial power in order to justify political dominance. The Empire does not simply react to threats, but generates the conditions for those threats to be interpreted, and signified and governed. In the process otherness is materialized as a form of political technology which focuses at identifying bodies in and outside both the civilization and moral legitimacy. Within this discourse, coercion is seen not as aggression but rather a form of defense, and imperial violence appears merely as a necessity in response to an alleged enemy.

Tom Bradstreet argues that the frontier landscape in *Waiting for the Barbarians* cannot be understood merely as a passive colonial setting but rather as a material space that exposes the instability underlying imperial authority itself (Bradstreet 2). According to Bradstreet, the Empire attempts to impose order upon an environment that continually resists administrative control and fixed representation. This ecological uncertainty mirrors the ideological instability of colonial discourse, particularly in the Empire’s obsessive construction of the barbarian threat. The frontier therefore becomes a symbolic space in which imperial anxieties concerning disorder, alterity, and territorial insecurity are continuously reproduced.

Perhaps the most crucial of this function occurring throughout the novel is in making fear a communal story, thus creating barbarian otherness. The frontier settlement, although it is governed by evidence of barbarian violence etc., is not as much governed by the factual reproduction of such evidence but repetition and fantasy that represent the barbarian as a transgressionist. According to Coetzee, colonial discourse perpetuates paths of

emotional imagery that turn uncertainty to political fear. The magistrate observes: “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” (Coetzee 14).

The reason this passage is significant is because of its generalized structure. Rather than a personal experience, fear here is used to symbolize a collective psychological malady among the frontier community. By repetition, fantasy slowly takes on the power of reality. Representation is, in Saidian terms, thus a tool of power here: the image itself begins to function as accepted knowledge, in virtue of its endless reproduction. To register the savage-subjectivity is to be deprived of it, safeness and orderliness giving precedence over the barbarian who must henceforth be symbolically reduced to a mouthpiece of en-and-dereliction. Because it limits otherness into a racialized residue of the body rather than a fully formed human being, the term "dark barbarian hand" is noteworthy. Therefore, the barbarian is a frightening representation of the imperial imagination rather than any recognizable historical figure.

As mentioned earlier, the already strong political function of fear in this passage is intensified by its domestic setting. When the home is envisioned as an objectively invaded space, private experience morphs into a national scene, in which barbaric incursion threatens to place female persons, property, and the order of family life permanently at risk. Such circumstances allow the Empire to rationalize its violence as a violent act of defense — mandatory violence in order to protect civilization itself. The frontier population freeps on the unrealistic measures of such a fantasy land to absorb clandestine acts like surveillance, militarized response and coercive interrogation simply because fear has made violence a normalized expectation. As such, Coetzee reveals that imperial authority is not merely dependent upon the gun and the various institutions of power but also on unremitting cultivation of collective imagination. Stories and fantasies govern the frontier almost as much as legal or military power.

3.2. Stereotyping and Administrative Power

Coetzee explicates that imperial power perpetuates itself through cyclical agencies of stereotyping which convert bias into bureaucratic, or administrative, “common sense.” Stereotypes serve as pre-packaged truths: there is no need here for research or moral consideration. Empire invents the barbarian repeatedly (above and all around) in a static lexicon of ethical and cultural inadequacy. The magistrate tells us that barbarians are often referred to as "lazy, immoral, filthy, stupid" (Coetzee 52). This sequence of accusations shows well the structure behind Orientalist discourse: threats are what your Other lacks while civilization is defined by not doing those things.

An important function of stereotyping is that it naturalizes hierarchy. The idea of a barbarian like the savage, often dirty and irrational but always morally corrupt while at the same time by way of contrast the Empire positions or sets itself on high being clean, rational and orderly. Yet this binary is destabilised by Coetzee who reveals the Empire as complicit in generating the very conditions of barbarian inadequacy that it later denigrates. The magistrate reflects:“that barbarians are lazy, immoral, filthy, stupid. Where civilization entailed the corruption of barbarian virtues and the creation of a dependent people, I decided, I was opposed to civilization” (Coetzee 53).

This segment shows one of the many critiques of colonial power that lie at the heart of the novel. The Empire establishes dependency via economic extraction, ridicule and dispossession, then uses the very poverty and vulnerability it creates as evidence of barbarism and lack of civilization. It follows that otherness is product of a cyclical process: imperial conquest generates the social circumstances, which in turn become “proof” of the violences perpetrated by the so-called barbarian. Empire, in this way, produces the disorder it claims only to manage and therefore colonial rule is self-justifying.

Simultaneously, Coetzee complicates the ethical stance of the magistrate by having him admit that he "keeps a barbarian girl" in his bed (Coetzee 53). The verb “keep” has a quality of possession that shows how far imperial structures are embedded into seemingly empathetic practices. The magistrate tries to justify himself to the barbarian girl whilst boosting his own self-esteem by detaching morally from the Empire's savagery but he still comes into contact with structures of domination and ownership. This, then, distinguishes Coetzee from those who would reduce all imperial subjects to good and evil. Orientalist power continues to thrive through not just state institutions but also moments of intimate relationships and everyday practices that continue the habit of defining the Other as an object in need of protection, or in need of examination, or control, or any other collecting desire.

3.3. Territorial Ownership and Imperial Geography

The novel depicts a construction of otherness through the Empire language of territory and space. Its central argument is that, without contrast or change in everything for once being the same, but differencing so quickly and completely; Koetize proves how colonial power relies on reconceiving local minutiae into a structure of ineluctable politic entrenchment. The magistrate realizes how arbitrary such distinctions are when he asks, "more substantial than differences in table manners, variations in the structure of the eyelid" (Coetzee 69). Within this reflection, the novel lays bare the questionable reasoning that is often loaded into colonial power relations. Commonplaces of difference are exaggerated to appear innate, unchangeable, and politically significant. The magistrate's reflections continue: "We think of the country here as ours, part of our Empire, our outpost, our settlement, our market centre" (Coetzee 70).This declaration exemplifies the assertion of imperial control through the use of both military force and rhetoric. The pervasive use of possessive phrases like "our Empire," "our settlement," and "our market center" constructs territorial supremacy as a natural and evident condition of affairs. So, in a sense colonial discourse erases the Occupation, turning it into legitimate property because the land has always belonged to the Empire. In turn, barbarian alterity is structurally imperative in this logic, for as a pre-requisite to imperial claims the indigenous presence must be delegitimated through acts of violence. For the colonial settlement to seem reasonable and lasting, the barbarian has to be depicted as primitive or nomadic or historically insignificant in some way.

Simultaneously, the magistrate's hope that the barbarians will "rise up and teach us a lesson" (Coetzee 70) exposes the inadequacy of imperial self-criticism. Even ethical moments of reflections remain caught up in the ongoing imaginative work of subsuming the barbarian under imperial needs and moral growth. The barbarian is bound by the structures of representation coded as a product of colonial discourse. Seen from the angle of Edward Said, this proves the ongoing strength of Orientalist representation: even protests against imperial power often operate entirely within those systems that locate and define the other as if it was a construct with very few dimensions. These narrative conflicts enable Coetzee to demonstrate that the escalation of otherness is not merely a question of ideological but also one of constitutive mechanisms for empire that can shape political power, legitimacy, and geography.

4. Violent Governance and Imperial Authority

4.1. Torture and the Production of Truth

It is not the replications of stereotype and representation that create imperial power in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, but systems of organized violence that work to make human bodies into instruments whose outcomes have political valences. According to Coetzee, torture is not just a kind of punishment but also an epistemic act used by the Empire to create "truth" and justify its existence. And because of this, violence is intrinsically linked to knowledge. The Empire does not differentiate between the real and the imaginary; instead, it uses terror, hardship, and bodily suffering to force the imaginary real into it. Through the fables fed by imperial politics, this reasoning, which is a form of barbaric othersing and training by suffering, causes a succession of repeats that effectively bring governability closer than one could have imagined.

Colonel Joll's interrogation theory best expresses this connection between violence and truth. The magistrate reflects on his conversation with Joll and observes: "Pain is truth; all else is subject to doubt" (Coetzee 10).

This statement is one of the most systematic formulations of imperial ideology found in the novel. The truth and the evidence become, on Coetzee's understanding, categories that we must turn outwards; pain itself will be relied upon as the source of certainty. With imperial dominion, knowledge is no longer rooted in empirical data or the logic of human reason; rather, truth emanates from the body's experience of pain. The Empire uses torture in order to build political legitimacy on the back of the cursed flesh. In this sense, barbarian otherness has a key role to play in that only bodies that have already been designated as barbaric are fit for such violence, without anyone needing to worry about the morality of the act. Thus, the barbarian is not relegated merely to an external group but is instead a category through which the state legitimizes unlimited violence.

Pelin Aytemiz interprets the barbarian girl as a visual embodiment of imperial violence whose wounded and disfigured body exposes the dehumanizing logic of colonial ideology (Aytemiz 1). According to her view, the Empire uses physical mutilation, torture, and humiliation to physically imprint political authority on the colonial subject's body. In this way, imperial discourse materializes its systems of dominance and exclusion on the body of the barbarian girl. Thus, Coetzee shows how colonial power uses physical pain as a political vocabulary to justify itself.

Coetzee extends and intensifies this criticism by drawing the reader's attention to the stark contrast between Joll's comparatively barbaric murder and his flawless façade as a law enforcement official. He wears "his tapering fingernails, his mauve handkerchiefs, his slender feet in soft shoes" (Coetzee 10). Because it addresses the topic of the relationship between civilization and violence in imperial discourse, this detail is pertinent. Joll's decorum is an example of obedient governmental authority that hides the brutality that underpins imperial order. Therefore, torture is shown as a prerequisite for its use rather than a break in civilizational history. Said would assert, that the Empire only maintains its position of moral superiority by brutally persecuting people it has labeled as primitive (Said 8) Violence against the barbarian is acceptable because, in the era of colonial discourse, he cannot even be considered a candidate for moral consideration.

The structural and psychological aspects of colonial violence in Coetzee's fiction have also been highlighted by recent research. Arul Devaram and Gunasekaran contend that colonial systems uphold dominance through methods of psychological repression, surveillance, and ideological control that normalize violence within imperial structures in addition to direct physical brutality (Arul Devaram and Gunasekaran 9914). Their interpretation illustrates how Coetzee reveals the connections between contemporary political dominance and historical colonial atrocities.Torture is employed in the book not only to gather information but also to fabricate a narrative that might support imperial fear. The Empire uses confession as a tool to turn lone individuals into proof of the threat posed by a group of barbarians. The magistrate speaks to a prisoner during an interrogation scene:"They say you have admitted that you and the old man and other men from your clan have stolen sheep and horses. You have said that the men of your clan are arming themselves, that in the spring you are all going to join in a great war on the Empire" (Coetzee 16).Most importantly, this form of confession transforms a private accusation into a public political narrative. The captive loses its lowness; it is not merely an individual accused of theft, but the entire horde that they represent—the whole barbarian population that is presumably on the verge of war. Instead, imperially-charged barbarism (conspiratorial and violent) results in a collective — as if always / never so. Not least, this also means that truth is not out there to be uncovered by confession; it is politically produced in a way that confirms the fears of the imperial narrative and provides reasons for intensifying violence.The questions they keep asking "Are you telling the truth?" and "Do you understand what this confession of yours will mean?" (Coetzee 16) also show. What the Empire cares about is not what is factually correct, but politically useful. Speech, when produced by suffering resorted to understanding and knowledge of the mass which can be used for surveillance dirty political moves against both rebels and civilian populations alike as well. It is in this way that Coetzee exposes the process whereby imperial discourse makes suffering into data. The Empire still creates the reality of which it later claims to have merely stumbled upon through waterboarding.

4.2. Spectacle, Inscription, and the Public Performance of Power

In fact, Coetzee demonstrates that imperial violence depends on public spectacle to normalize the Empire. Punishment in the novel is rarely private; rather, violence is displayed publicly in order to reinforce imperial ideology. The frontier town becomes a site where political authority is maintained through humiliation, exclusion, and visible displays of power. Punishment in the novel is rarely solitarily. Rather, violence is put on display so that it envelops audiences: they are themselves drawn into the performance of imperial ideology. The frontier town, as a site where the trick of political significance is cooperatively constructed and maintained through ritualistic degradation, reductionism and spectacular displays of force.

This process becomes particularly visible in the magistrate's confrontation with public judgment after his failed resistance to the Empire. He is reminded:"to people in this town you are not the One Just Man, you are simply a clown, a madman" (Coetzee 152).This is meant simply in connection to the magistrate; what matters more is what it indicates about how that perspective operates within the Empire. Data, news headlines, and social media posts all influence how the public perceives an individual. The town square has evolved into a place where imperial authority teaches the populace how to observe, classify, and weigh what is in front of them. Through mockery and groupthink, the Empire has for millenia reduced political complexity to moral simplicity. Because of the way this dynamic perpetuates the image of barbarians, these are public signs that announce menace, delinquency, and inferiority rather than agentic cutouts.

Coetzee further exposes the violence of representation through the literal inscription of political categories onto barbarian bodies. Before prisoners are beaten publicly, Colonel Joll paints the word "ENEMY" across their flesh: "ENEMY... ENEMY... ENEMY... ENEMY..." (Coetzee 141).

This is the moment when language most blatantly demonstrates its oppressive nature. Prisoners are not punished because they actually pose a threat to the Empire; rather, punishment is justified as soon as imperial discourse labels them as such. Naming therefore precedes violence. The inscription politicizes the body, constituting it as a surface onto which emergent imperial authority inscribes its condition for true legitimacy and precedent exclusion. And here the sense of barbarian otherness is performed in visible form as a matter for public consumption.The violence that follows demonstrates the procedural nature of imperial punishment:

"The soldiers use the stout green cane staves, bringing them down with the heavy slapping sounds of washing-paddles" (Coetzee 141).

It is a language of repetition, rhythm and measure: to repeat brutality as an act that becomes institutionalised rather than spontaneous cruelty. Empire gives the illusion of violence that is systematic, even bureaucratic: for example, it is ritualized processes monitored by the Empire. Arrayed as objects in a spectacle of disciplinary power, one that is quintessentially pedagogical, such that it offers education to the spectator as much as punishment for the victim. In this way, Coetzee teaches us that imperial sovereignty depends on public spectacle in the administration of bodies and visible manifestations of state power.

4.3. Institutional Silence and the Normalization of Injury

Violent governance in the novel extends beyond soldiers and interrogators to include broader institutional networks that normalize and conceal suffering. Coetzee reveals that imperial power survives partly because violence becomes bureaucratically invisible. Institutions continue functioning precisely by refusing to acknowledge the political origins of injury and pain.

This dynamic shows itself wonderfully in the sequence with the injured barbarian youth. The doctor, after treating the child "does not ask how the boy sustained his injuries" (Coetzee 17). The political importance of silence is that it sanitizes history from violence. But the injury then gets medicated, independent of the system that created it. By refusing to question causal claims, institutional power makes the brutality of power itself a banal administrative detail and not a moral scandal.

And so the silence of the doctor is a kind of cruelty. Violence persists not only in acts of direct aggression but through bureaucratic habits that erase responsibility and normalize the suffering. Empire is stable because institutions diffuse responsibility into administrative networks where no individual, human being can be held responsible for cruelty. Coetzee shows how barbarian otherness is controlled not only by visible acts of violence, but also and especially by procedural silences that prevent violence from being seen as violence.

4.4. Pain, Subjectivity, and the Limits of the Body

At last, the novel reasserts that imperial violence works not only in political and institutional terms, but at the level of bodily subjectivity itself. Torture turns the body into a site of both reorganization and sensations, identities, consciousness. Coetzee shows us not only that violence has ceased to be seen as a political phenomenon but that violent governance reaches into the heart of experience, transforming the subject's hold on dignity, endurance and self.

The magistrate describes his suffering:

"I cannot keep still, I have to walk back and forth or rock on my haunches to keep myself from screaming, tearing my clothes, clawing my flesh" (Coetzee 146).

Here pain is not shown as a momentary feeling but more like the total physical landscape that brings an entire body down and disrupts its balance and coherence. There are so many repetitions of the body verbs—the walk, the rock, the shouting, he clawing—that it conjures up images of mental collapse and physical disintegration. Torture thus operates as a means by which imperial power endeavours to erase the individual self and make the subject fully available only as raw flesh.

More importantly, the suffering of the magistrate exposes the essentially insecure distinctions that create otherness in imperial systems. His punishment, however, shows that the defining extension of the category "enemy" can grow whenever it is necessary for a political power to do so; although he has not entirely stretched apart from the colonized prisoners. The condition of otherness is a liquid state which power applies to bodies deemed suspect, expendable or oppositional. As Coetzee demonstrates, imperial violence thus turns back on all subjects in authoritarian contexts since the very mechanism of domination relies upon ceaselessly generating fresh objects of danger and exclusion.

Abdullah Al-Badarneh interprets the Magistrate as a fragmented colonial subject caught between loyalty to imperial authority and ethical identification with the colonized Other (Al-Badarneh 121). According to Al-Badarneh, the Magistrate's psychological instability reflects the contradictions inherent within colonial systems

that simultaneously demand obedience and suppress moral consciousness. His divided identity ultimately reveals the destructive effects of imperial ideology not only upon the colonized but also upon those who participate in maintaining structures of domination.

In its portrayal of interrogations, spectacles, institutional silence and bodily suffering, the novel reveals how violence is intimately related to imperial governance. It is not military might alone that sustains the Empire but rather, a network of interlaced discourses, practices of punishment, administration and public performance — all elements that reproduce barbarian otherness as an on-going political necessary.

Conclusion

This article has considered how J. M. Coetzee s *Waiting for the Barbarians* interrogates the interplay between empire and otherness via a Saidian lens of Orientalism. Through an analysis of the relationships between fear, representation, surveillance, interrogation and institutional violence the research has shown that the barbarian in this novel does not exist as a self- evident material enemy but rather is a discursive formation produced and sustained by imperial power. Thus, the Empire does not rely on any real danger but only in respect of bearing serialized tales of hazard fit to legitimate usurpation, colonialism and coercive governance.

The analysis also demonstrated that Coetzee presents otherness as a political and bureaucratic process, not constipated cultural condition. Stereotypes, frontier fantasies, torture and confession, and public spectacles of punishment all coalesce to render difference as a governable category based on suspicion and social inferiority — this is imperial discourse. Only within the ideological structure of the Empire itself does the barbarian begin to make sense. One of the main lessons in Edward Said's Orientalism is that representation does not just reflect the Other, but rather participates in its creation by intertwining systems of knowledge with political power—and this is one way to think about the novel. Thus Coetzee shows that colonial power does not merely operate through brute military force, but also discursive modes of producing perception, normalising violence and governing the bounds of humanity and otherness.The violence which persists in institutional forms, too, has been theorised as a necessary means of imperial power. The torture in the novel is not just bodily punishment, but an epistemological tool whereby Empire creates a truth in its own image to validate itself. And local/state surveillance, bureaucratic secrecy and public punishment work in such explicitly complementary ways in normalising violence as part of everyday bureaucratic practice. To see Coetzee — the consummate literary scholar of these practices — seek and find a subversive effect in confronting them suggests that violence and civilization are not heavy stones at either end of a scale in colonial structures. Instead, they form a system of self-reinforcing moral imperialism—a cycle as unyielding as it is vicious, and vice versa: The violence will not stop until there is no one left to be civilized. The Empire masks its appearance of reason and order as it commits scalpel violence on the barbaric-defined.

Whatever the benefits of this initial balance, too simple a division between resistance and complicity is further complicated by the figure of the magistrate. However, even as he slowly becomes aware of the brutal nature of imperial authority, his continuing involvement in colonial administration and this relationship with a barbarian girl all expose how thoroughly any ethical opposition to imperial discourses is mediated by them. It is then that Coetzee can think in terms of moral innocence brought to an end, but he rejects any possibilities for such innocence within systems of domination. Not only is otherness maintained through overt acts of oppression, but it also survives the more subtle routines of perceiving, possessing, categorizing and interpreting others that continue to locate them in asymmetrical power relations.

As Abdullah Dagamseh argues, *Waiting for the Barbarians* remains profoundly relevant because it exposes the continuity between colonial domination and contemporary systems of neoliberal governance and political control (1). Dagamseh suggests that Coetzee’s critique extends beyond the immediate context of apartheid South Africa to reveal the enduring structures through which modern states reproduce mechanisms of surveillance, exclusion, and economic domination (3). Such interpretations demonstrate the continuing significance of Coetzee’s novel in contemporary discussions of imperialism, state violence, and global power relations.

Finally, *Waiting for the Barbarians* depicts imperial power as being inherently predicated on a perpetual act of generating fear and ostracizing others. The novel shows that the empire survives its own institutions by creating enemies who serve to justify surveillance, punishment, and political power. The novel critiques representation, violence and forms of institutional authority that serve as ideological templates on which colonial systems rely in order to constitute and govern identities at the margins. This article has engaged Said's theory of Orientalism with Coetzee's fiction to argue that the construction of otherness operates as one of the mechanisms through which imperial power consolidates its authority. Doing so, the analysis participates in contemporary Postcolonial

Studies discussions by showing how Coetzee's novel makes visible the discursive and institutional mechanisms through which domination is rendered normatively justified, reproduced, and naturalized.

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