

Exploring Truth and Integrity Amidst Ethical Dilemma: An Analysis of Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*

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Abstract- The novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* is written by J. M. Coetzee and it was published in the year 1986. *Waiting for the Barbarians* is a cognitive novel that explores the issues of imperialism, power dynamics, morality, and the consequences of colonialism. The novel examines the destructive nature of imperialism as the protagonist, a magistrate in a remote colonial outpost, begins to question the ethics of the empire's treatment of the indigenous people. The novel delves into the moral and ethical complexities of imperialism and colonialism. It raises questions about the oppressive nature of these systems and the dehumanizing effects on both the colonizers and the colonized. The story delves into the abuse of power and the oppression of the powerless, particularly the brutal treatment of the barbarians and the moral dilemma faced by the magistrate, who witnesses the unjust acts. The magistrate struggles inside with his moral values and conscience as he witnesses the cruelty of the empire and questions his complicity. In the novel, the interactions between the imperial settlers and the indigenous people (the barbarians) are indeed characterized by their abnormal, often violent nature. The tension arising from the clash of cultures and the oppressive nature of the empire is pivotal to the story. The present paper highlights the brutal role of bureaucracy in perpetuating oppressive systems and the idea that individuals can become complicit in atrocities through their passive acceptance or participation in the bureaucratic machinery. The paper also seeks Coetzee's exploration of the malleability of truth, integrity, and the use of propaganda and misinformation to maintain control and manipulate public perception. It also explores the human condition, the consequences of unchecked power, and the moral dilemmas faced by individuals in a repressive society. It also analyses the two lead protagonists, the Magistrate and Mr. Colonel Joll of the novel on the ethical grounds and the colonialist brutalities.

Keywords: Imperialism, colonizer-colonized, moral dilemma, Integrity, Oppression.

INTRODUCTION

The novel focuses on the life of a civil servant who holds the position of magistrate within an unnamed empire. This empire is in a state of conflict with a group of enigmatic nomads known as the Barbarians, who inhabit regions within the empire's borders. The magistrate, nearing retirement, anticipates spending his final years of service in tranquillity, hoping to avoid any significant confrontations with the Barbarians. His retirement plans involve dedicating his free time to the exploration of desert ruins and the interpretation of the art of remnants he encounters. However, the magistrate's peaceful existence takes an unexpected turn with the arrival of Colonel Joll from the Third Bureau. The rumours circulating about potential offensive actions being planned by the Barbarians prompted the appointment of Colonel Joll to investigate these claims. The general staff officers were dispatched on tours of the frontier, marking the first appearance of the Third Bureau officials on the border. Coetzee as an author refers to them as "*devotees of truth and doctors of interrogation*" (WFB 23).

This arrival marks a significant turning point in the magistrate's life, as he becomes entangled in the unfolding events and the consequences of the empire's actions against the Barbarians. Colonel Joll's methods employed against the Barbarians are nothing short of brutal, and they deeply affect the Magistrate. The issues of morality in the novel can be a subject of controversy. In the novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, morality is entwined with the way the characters treat the barbarians, the Magistrate, and the moral implications of Colonel Joll's actions. While analysing the development of 'civilized' and 'barbarian' societies and their interplay, Coetzee delves into the issue of moral decay within society. This portrayal of moral decline is conveyed through the depictions of the positions held by the Magistrate and Colonel Joll. Colonel Joll's approach often involves coercive techniques aimed at compelling his victims to confess or conform to his preconceived notions. There is a case when the soldiers apprehended two prisoners, both of whom are now bound on the floor. One is an elderly man, and the other is a young boy. Their capture follows a military raid. When the Magistrate presents these prisoners to Colonel Joll, during their conversation, the prisoners assert their innocence, explaining that they are not thieves. Despite their claims, the soldiers have restrained them without cause. Their actual reason for being in the area is to seek treatment for the boy's persistent sore, which the old man brought to the settlement for medical attention. This is the truth, as simple as it is. However, Colonel Joll, a representative of the Empire, has arrived with a hidden agenda that serves his ruthless purposes. Consequently, he remains unsatisfied with the prisoners' explanation. Subsequently, both prisoners are confined in the granary, where the elderly man endures brutal beatings and tragically loses his life. The sole survivor is the young boy, who bears serious injuries inflicted by Colonel Joll. Joll's intentions involve launching a raid on the nomadic population and capturing more prisoners to demonstrate his cruelty. He believes that the young boy can be coerced into serving as a guide for the operation. In an attempt to dissuade Joll from his course of action, the Magistrate informs him that the boy is a stranger,

suggesting that the nomads will disperse upon sensing his presence. However, Colonel Joll remains resolute in his decisions, proceeding with his planned raid.

The Magistrate, a product of the imperial past, consciously compares his memories of the capital with his current desert surroundings when speaking to a young Imperial officer. Notably, Colonel Joll submits to barbarian prisoners to seemingly harmless torture. The Magistrate, torn between his inability or unwillingness to hear their screams from the granary, feels compelled to seek understanding, investigate, and excavate the truth of what transpired. He thought *"I did not ride away: for a while I stopped my ears to the noises coming from the hut by the granary where the tools are kept, then in night I took a lantern and went to do so for myself"* (WFB 09-10). This situation marks the inception of the Magistrate's awakening and transformation. He begins to question the Empire by challenging Colonel Joll and his awareness. Throughout the novel, he makes a deliberate effort to do so. In his sleep, the Magistrate unconsciously pushes his regular prostitute out of bed, symbolizing his rejection of his old, comfortable life.

One particularly harrowing case is that of a young Barbarian girl. Her father falls victim to Colonel Joll's cruelty, and after her release from Joll's subordinates, she's left to lead a destitute life on the streets. The measures imposed by Joll are so severe that the girl not only loses her eyesight but also her ability to walk. Filled with compassion, the Magistrate takes the girl into his care, initially as a servant. However, their relationship gradually transforms from a professional one into a sexual entanglement. The girl's enigmatic personality begins to perplex the Magistrate, even leading him to question his sexuality under her influence. Eventually, the Magistrate makes the difficult decision to return the girl to her people. To accomplish this, he assembles a small team comprising two soldiers and a few horses. Their journey commences amid a perilous wintry desert storm.

The Magistrate accompanies Colonel Joll as a gesture of courtesy but returns alone when the road turns north. He's passionate about exploring ruins but faces repeated failed attempts. He senses something elusive in the ruins but can't grasp it. Later, the Magistrate identifies arriving prisoners as fishermen, not barbarians. Colonel Joll's message instructs their detention, which angers the Magistrate, leading him to discard the letter. A man transports a barbarian woman, who survives by begging, back to her people. However, their journey takes a turn as they engage in a sexual relationship. Despite his attempts to decipher marks on her body, he struggles to understand their meaning. The woman serves the Magistrate in Colonel Joll's absence, lacking any genuine bond between them.

These bodies of hers and mine are diffuse, gaseous, centreless, at one moment spinning about a vortex here, at another curdling, thickening elsewhere; but often also flat, blank. I know what to do with her no more than one cloud in the sky knows what to do with another. (WFB 36)

The Magistrate, seeking to repair damage caused by the third bureau, writes a letter to the Provincial Governor. He embarks on a journey with three men and the barbarian woman to restore goodwill in the area. After ten days of travel, they cross the Empire's limit and he sends off the woman to her people as promised.

After returning the girl to her people, the magistrate's life takes a tumultuous turn. A new officer named Mandel replaces the magistrate, who is unjustly taken into custody on suspicion of consorting with the Barbarians. Mandel reveals plans for a campaign against the Barbarians. Even the two soldiers who had previously accompanied the major in his troop falsely accuse him of treason, leading to his imprisonment in the fort. During his trial, the magistrate endures brutal beatings and torture at the hands of Mandel. Eventually, Mandel releases him, deeming him no longer useful. The magistrate is then forced to live a life similar to that of the barbarian girl, begging for survival. Over time, he gains the trust of the Barbarians. Meanwhile, the soldiers who once followed the magistrate begin to curse and abuse their authority, causing chaos by ransacking the fort's shops and more. In the end, a semblance of stability returns. The magistrate regains his position, and the settlement finds its footing once more. The novel concludes with the magistrate's attempt to write the settlement's history, though he struggles to recall the events that transpired throughout the story. The contrast between these aspects is depicted through the characters of the novel, the Magistrate and Colonel Joll, and their differing perspectives on justice, morality, humanity, and civilization. Power can expose hidden personal traits. Furthermore, each object and phenomenon possess dual facets. Consequently, the authority wielded by the Magistrate and Colonel Joll serves as a means to manifest their contrasting views on the roles of integrity and morality in society, representing two sides of a single coin or divergent approaches to the situation. The conflict between the Magistrate and Colonel Joll unfolds through multiple stages, revealing a clash not just between characters but also between differing moral principles and ideologies. This dramatic narrative is vivid and emotionally charged, rich with allegories and imagery, and it unfolds through a first-person perspective. The narrator is the Magistrate, once wielding power, but now forced to navigate the shifts in his community and confront the new authority imposed by Colonel Joll.

The novel is not set in South Africa but rather unfolds during the declining years of an unnamed 'Empire'. According to David Atwell, it broadly encompasses events in an unspecified imperial context,

The Empire is a parody of the apartheid order, presenting its paranoid nature and its attempt to control history. Empire constructs otherness by announcing the separation between civilization and barbarians. The latter are linked with several myths supporting the idea of savagery of the surpassed by torture and humiliation. As much as "torture is in fact a way of producing the soul" (Atwell 80)

The initial encounter between the Magistrate and Colonel Joll can be characterized as a subtle clash between two men. This opposition is concealed, rooted in their contrasting social status and the authority held by the Magistrate and Colonel Joll, rather than in their differing perspectives. Readers may sense the underlying tension between them, though it remains unspoken. One can discern this tension by paying close attention to the phrases that capture the Magistrate's thoughts regarding Colonel Joll. The tensions in this situation are nearly impossible to ignore, as they revolve around issues of power and influence within society. However, the interactions between the Magistrate and Colonel Joll gradually take on clear and unmistakable signs of conflict. To illustrate the disparity in the characters' understanding of truth, Coetzee emphasizes their social positions. These descriptions provide insight into the motivations behind the actions of the Magistrate and Colonel Joll. Colonel Joll maintains a stringent stance on his perception of truth, leading the Magistrate to conclude that for Colonel, agony is the fact. This statement carries a symbolic

weight, which the author unveils through his portrayal of the barbarians' torture as the prevailing method by which Colonel Joll and his associates seek to uncover and assert the truth. Hence, despite the Magistrate's attempt to veil his thoughts and contemplations regarding Colonel Joll, the reader can discern a growing tension between these characters. Their views on pivotal matters such as morality and responsibility are profoundly at odds. Regarding this aspect one can conclude these lines from the novel, "*It has been growing more and more clear to me that until the marks on this girl's body are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her*" (WFB 33).

Consequently, they cannot harbour affection for one another, nor can they truly comprehend each other, given the stark disparities in their perspectives. However, in his discourse, the Magistrate underscores the common assumption that individuals tend to believe they comprehend the essence and origins of integrity.

The people's notions of integrity and disintegrity are shaped by the ideas they acquire when first navigating the world's rules and norms. According to the Magistrate, Colonel Joll possesses his distinct conceptions of truth and justice, and in his pursuit of the truth, he is unrelenting. However, Colonel Joll's unwavering determination also extends to his violent actions against the barbarian population, which means he tries to unearth the truth. Colonel Joll's boundaries of truth differ from his boundaries of rightfulness. In contrast, the Magistrate's approach to integrity and reality is grounded in principles of morality and humanity. The Magistrate deciding to return to prison, expresses a principle: "*Why should I do my enemy's work for them? If they want to spill my blood, let them at least bear the guilt of it*" (WFB 110). This signifies his refusal to halt his transformation, leaving the agents of the Empire to execute the process, as they conceptualize the notion of the "other".

The author employs the protagonist's initial monologue to convey the depth of the character's emotions. This monologue is marked by an abundance of short, straightforward sentences that mirror the character's inner thoughts, like the Magistrate says, "*The joy has gone from my life*" or "*I sleep like a dead man*" (WFB 12). The text of the novel also features numerous metaphors, similes, and allegories that serve to convey the character's emotional state and his stance on various situations. In the novel, Coetzee also traces the evolution of the Magistrate's perspective on the matter of integrity. While at the outset of the novel, the Magistrate explores justice through truth, focusing on moral aspects, by the end of the story, the character places greater emphasis on the principles of law as the foundation of integrity. It's plausible to consider that the sequence of events depicted in the novel has influenced the Magistrate's evolving understanding of the concept of integrity. Now, he grapples with the need to strike a balance between integrity and the law, recognizing that the complexities of real life demonstrate that integrity doesn't always lead to truth. The confrontation between the Magistrate and Colonel Joll hinges on the shifting positions of the characters. Consequently, the circumstances change, and the Magistrate is no longer seen as a representative of the authorities. Colonel Joll and the community now view him as an adversary. His interaction with the barbarians aligns with the perception, at least by the third Bureau, that he snares a kinship with the barbarian way of life. Albert Memmi claims in his book, *The Coloniser and the Colonised* that the colonizer who rejects the role of colonizer essentially embraces the identity of the colonized. "*The colony is not made up only of European! Refusing the colonizers, damned by them: let him [colonizer] adopt the colonized people and be adopted by them; let him become a turncoat.*" (Memmi 66) While it may appear that the Magistrate is merely stating facts, the level of tension is also conveyed through the nuances of the written text. The author highlights the troubling aspect of injustice inflicted upon the Magistrate through the use of emphatic sentences and the repetition of words that convey the Magistrate's thoughts. To underscore the disparity between Colonel Joll and the Magistrate's perspectives on integrity and morality, the author employs the description of the Magistrate's torment. This was achieved through the Magistrate's experience of pain, but it's underscored that the torturers also aimed to demonstrate the Magistrate's inherent human qualities.

The recurrence of the word 'body' serves to draw focus to the torturers' objective, which is to subject an individual to physical agony in the hope of compelling them to abandon their beliefs and principles. Nevertheless, physical pain pales in comparison to the moral anguish that can stem from betraying one's deeply held convictions. The Magistrate, through the torment he endures, must come to comprehend the cost of humanity in society, all while grappling with the suffering inflicted by these tortures. In response to the consequences of civilization on the Empire, the Magistrate declares, "*where civilization entailed the corruption of barbarian virtues and the creation of dependent people, I decided, I was opposed to civilization*" (WFB 20). Moral degradation can be linked to an individual's physical well-being and result from physical and mental ailments. Furthermore, moral decline can be regarded as a societal phenomenon rooted in the social ailments afflicting both the entire society and its members.

J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* paints a complex picture of the colonial world where established rules and laws are rooted in a particular interpretation of the concepts of integrity and morality. These principles, common to the organization of the Empire, reflect the broader standards prevailing throughout the colonial world. Thus, the nameless Empire transcends time and is intertwined with the geographical expanse of South Africa. Consequently, *Waiting for the Barbarians* is a narrative that delves into "*the story of one man's efforts to break from the terrorizing ranks of his superiors, to make up in some way, shape, or form for the crimes committed with his passive consent*" (Blyn). The novel's structure effectively elucidates the nuances of the clash between the 'civilized' and 'barbarian' worlds, primarily through the evolution of the conflict between two individuals whose conceptions of justice and morality stand in stark contrast. Moreover, the incorporation of vivid dialogues and the narrator's monologues enhances the readers' ability to engage with the narrative as authentic, and the narrator's voice comes across as distinctive and persuasive.

The conflict in the relationship between the Magistrate and Colonel Joll starkly illustrates their opposing perspectives on fundamental concepts such as truth, integrity, humanity, morality, and law. In his novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, J. M. Coetzee portrays the characters' contrasting views on these central aspects of life by closely examining their attitudes toward these issues. The Magistrate prioritizes key values like truth, morality, and humanity, with his conception of integrity rooted in these principles. On the other hand, Colonel Joll predominantly frames integrity in terms of the principles of law. In this context, laws serve the needs of the state, rather than individual ones. Concluding the paper, one might highlight the message conveyed by the Magistrate to Colonel Joll at the novel's end, serving as a poignant tagline for the entire narrative. He expresses,

I have a lesson for him that I have long meditated. I mouth the words and watch him read them on my lips: "The crimes that is latent in us we must inflict on ourselves," I say. I nod and nod, driving the message at home. "Not on others," I say: I repeat the words, pointing my chest, pointing at his. (WFB 146)

Hence, the notions of integrity and morality are subject to diverse interpretations in society. The contentious issue upon which the two men's conceptions of justice hinge is the question of truth, its absolute nature, and the moral dimensions it encompasses. It's crucial to note that, after enduring tortures, the Magistrate comes to realize that justice isn't always aligned with truth, and morality doesn't serve as the foundation for the laws that dictate the implementation of justice in society. In this society, where the primary emphasis lies on laws rather than morality, power serves as the source of virtue.

CONCLUSION

In the novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the Magistrate is portrayed as a moral being through his actions, thoughts, and behaviour. The Magistrate displays compassion and empathy toward the barbarians. He questions the brutal treatment of the indigenous people and seeks to understand their perspective, which demonstrates his moral sensitivity. He refuses to condone the cruelty and inhumane acts committed by the Empire, indicating his commitment to moral principles. He struggles with his complicity in the system and seeks redemption. The Magistrate makes personal sacrifices, including putting his safety at risk, to help those who are suffering, which reflects a strong moral character. He challenges the authority and actions of Colonel Joll and the Empire, driven by a sense of moral responsibility and a desire for justice. The Magistrate engages in deep self-reflection and introspection throughout the novel, examining his moral values and the moral dilemma he faces.

J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* is open-ended and thought-inciting. It leaves several key themes and questions unresolved. The novel concludes with the Magistrate, who has undergone significant personal transformation and moral growth, venturing out into the desert, searching for the barbarian girl who was brutally tortured. His journey symbolizes his commitment to seeking validity, morality, and redemption. The novel does not offer a clear resolution to the larger conflicts between the Empire and the barbarians or between the Magistrate and Colonel Joll. Instead, it leaves readers to contemplate the complex and often contradictory nature of dominance, authority, equity, and morality.

The novel underscores the idea that the search for truth and justness can be an ongoing and elusive quest, and the novel invites readers to reflect on the moral dilemmas and ambiguities that persist in a world marked by power struggles and colonialism. The narrative revolves around the conflict between the moral values represented by the Magistrate and the brutal, oppressive actions carried out by the Empire, as exemplified by Colonel Joll and his forces. The story delves deeply into the tension between these two opposing forces, exploring the complexities of morality and brutality in a colonial context. Therefore, Coetzee highlights the moral dilemmas and the stark brutality that are at the core of colonialism in the novel.

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