



# J.M. Coetzee: Waiting for the Barbarians

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**Abstract :** J.M. Coetzee novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* is a portrayal of the imperialist regime in South Africa. White colonialist and imperial powers imposed tyrannies on colonized people and exploited them on all levels of society, including the economic, social, racial and cultural ones by way of disregarding their culture and traditions and there by replacing them with their own values and views.

**Keywords – Imperialism, Barbarian, Humiliation, Injustice, Regime, Torture, Colonialism, Empire, Indigenous**

## I. INTRODUCTION

J.M. Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* is a powerful protest against imperialism. In this novel, he criticizes the imaginary unnamed empire, and, thus criticizes the regime system in general. Coetzee comments that the novel is about "the impact of the torture chamber on the life of a man of conscience". (Coetzee, 1992) 'The man of conscience who is none but an aging Magistrate, the main protagonist who lives lonely, aloof and secluded. When the government sent an army to protect and rescue the town from the so-called barbarians, his power was diminished but he still exercised authority in the service of the empire. While the magistrate believed the "barbarians" were being treated unfairly, the Empire saw them as a terrifying gang intending to assault the outpost and start a war with the Empire. He exhibited compassion and concern for the barbaric people when he returned their captured daughter to them. He was suspected and arrested for the charge of treason and imprisoned like the barbarians. Thus, he fell a pray to injustice, cruelty, callousness, humiliation and torture.

The magistrate's relationship with barbaric women started when he saw the beggar girl from the barbarian tribe at the outpost. After being questioned and tormented by Joll, she was made useless, ill, and lost some of her vision. The magistrate, a liberal humanist, expressed some affection for her. Instead of having her beg and sell her body a job at his home. Like the other members of the society, the magistrate never turned a deaf ear to the act of violence and torture the Empire was perpetually perpetrating on the barbarians. Though he knew it very well about his dark featured and problems, he never acted as a blind supporter of heinous and cruel crimes. But because of his moral outlook of life, he was punished in his society.

The novel depicts the dominance of colonial civilization via scenes of exploitation, racism, societal collapse and torture. Time and again, western nations used their imperial authority and dominant position to oppress the colonized on a variety of fronts, including but not limited to: race, society, the economy and culture. It's a political and social order in which those in authority exploit, degrade and torment those who are weak and powerless. According to Bill Ashcroft, "Colonialism is the system by which dominant groups in society constitute the field of truth by imposing specific knowledge, disciplines and values upon dominated groups". (Bill Ashcroft, 2000:42). "White colonialist and imperial powers imposed tyrannies on colonized people and exploited them on all levels of society, including the economic, social, racial and cultural ones by way of disregarding their culture and traditions and there by replacing them with their own values and views." (46)

The novel is about a magistrate who witnesses acts of racial discrimination and the unspeakable, unthought-of cruelty and callousness committed by Colonel Joll, a visiting man who has decided to ransack the enemies of the Empire in the lonely lands surrounding them. The magistrate looked the other way while the Colonel Joll interrogated the prisoners. He wanted justice for the innocent prisoners and welfare of the prison. Although the magistrate is part of the Empire, yet he has, to some extent, the humane and sympathetic attitude towards the barbarians. In the turmoiled, torture and terrible regime of the Empire he holds highly the judicious, human and sympathetic views for the native barbarians.

When a young barbarian girl fell prey to the Empire's brutal hands, the magistrate stepped in to help the little girl from the primitive culture by providing comfort and trying to allay her sense of isolation. The magistrate decided to send the girl back to the barbarians a move that maybe seen as a statement against the Empire's biased policies. The magistrate ultimately made the decision to return the girl to her own people, the barbarians. He had a tough time getting to the girl's home in the highlands. The girl was eventually turned over to a group of men on horseback marking the conclusion of the journey. Upon his return, however, he found that everything had been flipped upside down in his home town. He was no longer the respected town magistrate, but a prisoner suffering the same humiliating treatment reserved for barbarians. The story ends with the magistrate drawing the conclusion that the Empire's assault on the indigenous to display its authority over them symbolizes the potential of the colonial process of eradicating black people from existence. As a result, the people who called that area home were relegated to the status of non-existent and the importance of the location to another civilization was lost. Imperial action enforced racial discrimination, torture, brutality, oppression, and social

degradation on the indigenous people of the town who had been working hard to live in peace with one another, and these themes are presented throughout the whole narrative.

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