VICTIMS OF THE EMPIRE: AN ANALYSIS ON COETZEE'S WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS

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Abstract- The aim of this article is to unravel further what the book Waiting for the Barbarians written by J. M. Coetzee (1982) is saying about the human psyche and how the novel criticizes imperialism. By locating its concern on the issues of morality and violence and exploring the limits of human cruelty this paper argues that Waiting for the Barbarians challenges humanity and imperialism in several ways. Presenting a psychoanalytic discussion of Waiting for the Barbarians this study focuses on the impact of fear on the human psyche and imperialism's self-destructive power. How far fear and anxiety can go? How far members of society can follow a blind power? These are the main concerns of this essay that tries to interpret the allegories created in relation to the tensions raised by Coetzee.

Keywords- Coetzee, Imperialism, Other, Torture

I. INTRODUCTION

J.M. Coetzee is a South African novelist born in Cape Town in 1940 and his novel can be read as his protest against imperialism. Coetzee criticizes the imaginary unnamed Empire of his Novel and by doing so actually, criticizes imperialist system as a whole. Although he never mentions imperialism directly, it can be regarded as a critique of it while "several of Coetzee's novels are noted for their eloquent protest against political and social conditions in South Africa, particularly the suffering caused by imperialism, apartheid, and post-apartheid violence, as well as for their technical virtuosity" (Columbia Encyclopedia, 2001).

In Coetzee's words, Waiting for the Barbarians is a novel about "the impact of the torture chamber on the life of a man of conscience" (Coetzee, 1992: 363). The man of conscience is the main protagonist of the novel who is an aging Magistrate living in a border town which is isolated from other words, of an unspecified Empire. He has responsibility and authority for maintaining the outpost for the service of the Empire but he loses his power when the Empire sent an army to protect the town from the barbarians. The protagonist protests the unjust treatment of the so-called "barbarians" although the Empire perceives them as a dangerous tribe preparing to attack the outpost and battle against the Empire. When he returns a captured barbarian woman he sympathizes and cares for her people, he is accused of treason and imprisoned like the barbarians. He becomes the subject of cruelty, humiliation, and torture. The examination of the critiques raised in the book will be discussed through interpreting the characters as victims of the Empire. The first victim is the barbarian girl in which will be examined in relation to her “otherness” as an outsider and as an enemy of the Empire. The Magistrate as the second victim and his self-journey will be examined in relation to his evaluation to become the other. Woman as the third victim of the Empire is the part, which discuss women’s silenced, and powerless positioning in the society. Then in the following section, Empire as the victim of itself and its self-destructive power will be pointed.

II. DISCUSSION

2.1. Victim 1: The Barbarian Girl

Coetzee seems to create the barbarian girl as the representation of the “other” to problematize the attitude, which perceives difference as having no subjectivity. The existence of the barbarian girl criticizes the perspective, which pushes minorities to the margins and never allows any chance to the “other” to survive in itself. Because of his barbarian identity, the barbarian girl will always be regarded as the other by the imperialist system. Coetzee, to challenge this, carries her otherness also to her body. Her identity as other, is represented also visually through her semi-blind eyes and deformed body. Such an otherness is marked as a result of the torture, which displays clearly who is the reason of her awkwardness. Such an exaggerated representation expressed through the deformed tortured body might be read as the visualization of the deformed ideology of imperialism that perceives her as the other because of her “barbarian” identity.

Magistrate's relationship with the barbarian girl is interesting. Barbarian girl is a prisoner of Colonel Joll's but after their release, she is also left behind by her own folk in the outpost, begging, semi-blinded and disfigured from the torture. When Magistrate sees her begging, he decides to take care of her and invites her to sleep in his room. He is attracted to her deformed tortured body, but their relationship is not based on a sexual attraction. In the novel, it is understood that the girl's otherness is the spell, which
attracts the Magistrate's attention while he does not remember her face before the torture. He always tries to remember her previous look but he can never visualize her face. In his words:

I cast my mind back, trying to recover an image of her as she was before. I must believe that I saw her on the day she was brought in by soldiers roped neck to neck with the other barbarian prisoners. I know that my gaze has passed over her when together with others (...). My eye passed over her, but I have no memory of that passage. On that day, she was still unmarked, but I must believe she was unmarked as I must believe she was once a child (...). Strain as I will, my first image remains of the kneeling beggar-girl. (Coetzee, 1982: 33).

In this context, the magistrate’s dream is worth focusing. In his dreams, he always sees children playing in the snow. When he approaches them, the children melt away, except one. The only child who doesn’t disappear is faceless. One can read these children that are melting away, as the barbarian prisoners who died or united with their folk and left the life of Magistrate. The only child who does not disappear is the barbarian girl who is left behind. She is, in his dreams, pure as a child. This pureness expressed by the white snow metaphor can symbolize the barbarian culture while actually they are the ones in danger because of the Empire. The child is faceless in his dreams because Magistrate does not remember the barbarian girl's unwounded body and does not know her origin, identity, and culture. In this sense, I suppose Magistrate’s desire to smooth out the marks of the torture, scars and disfigurations are represented by the faceless child in the snow in his dreams.

In the novel when the Magistrate is still a member of the Empire, he feels guilt towards the girl. As if he is trying to clear the violence marked in her body and heal her soul, he is obsessed with washing her feet and legs and massaging her with oils. Wenzel reads the relationship between the Magistrate and the girl by saying that "the Magistrate seeks to eliminate his sense of the girl's otherness and to understand the pain of her torture as he verbally and physically probes the girl in an effort to read the signs of torture written on her body" (qt. in Dewar: 2000). She is the victim of the Empire and doomed to be the other throughout her life. Magistrate reads the girls tortured body and understands that her body and soul will never heal and she will always stay as the other, both as a barbarian in the eye of the Empire and as carrying the marks of the Empire in her uncanny body, in the eyes of her folk. Magistrate narrates this in these words:

However kindly she may be treated by her own people, she will never be courted and married in the normal way: she is marked for life as the property of a stranger, and no one will approach her save in the spirit of lugubrious sensual pity that she detected and rejected in me. (Coetzee, 1982: 135).

According to Coetzee, torture room is a metaphor "for relations between authoritarianism and its victims” (Coetzee, 1992: 363). In this context, when the Magistrate understands his washing ritual does not help to discover the secrets of the girl and heal her soul, he also understands that torture leaves marks: which can not be effaced also in the torturer’s soul. After he finds the weakness of the torture, he questions the torturer Mandel. He says:

How do you find it possible to eat afterward, after you have been working with people? (...) I have imagined that one would want to wash one's hands. But no ordinary washing would be enough, one would require priestly intervention, a ceremonial of cleansing, don’t you think? Some kind of purging of one's soul too – that is how I imagined it. Otherwise, how would it be possible to return to everyday life- to sit down a table, for instance, and break bread with one's family or one's comrades? (Coetzee, 1982: 126)

Washing the traces away from the girl's body, which the torturer has left, is impossible, but it is also impossible to wash away the responsibility from the torturer's hands. The victim is apparent but also the guilty.

2.2. Victim 2: The Magistrate

What is interesting in the novel is that the main protagonist at the end of his story also turns out to be the other likewise the barbarian girl he adored and helped in the beginning of his story. The Magistrate questions the authority of the Empire by locating himself against Colonel Joll and separates his view from the Empire's in which by this act, his process of otherness starts. To reunite the girl with her folk, he decides to make a journey and pass through the isolated desert, to where the barbarian folk resides. By the journey in the desert his bounds to the Empire loosens and when he enters the realm of the other, he and his mind starts to change. Parallel to this psychically hard journey, he also completes a complicated mental journey of separating himself from the Empire and from its moral understanding. After his return, his transformation process is completed. He is now regarded as a traitor and perceived as guilty as the barbarians without any doubts since the other is always the guilty one. Magistrate is actually comfortable with his arrest while his otherness separates his bound and responsibility to the Empire and as the other and as the subject of torture and humiliation, the purification of his soul starts which he longed for.

The Magistrate never closes his eyes to the violence the Empire is embodying on the barbarians like the other members of the society. Although he knows that he will get in trouble, he never acts as if he is supporting the act of torture. Therefore because of his morality, he is punished by being labeled as an outcast in his society. Nobody except Magistrate is
uncomfortable with the violence embodied by the man of the Empire; Colonel Joll but Magistrate makes his moral stand. As a result, it can be said that the system pushes every identity, individual and idea different than its subjectivity, to its margins and punishes every resistance to its self. Even if the resistance is against violence.

By narrating how a group of people, with the power to put fear into people's soul, can order what is right and wrong, Coetzee criticizes the passive and blind members of the society. In the novel, how people can just follow the crowd without even thinking once is exemplified very explicitly. Even though people of the town knew for years that the barbarians were gentle and harmless people and even though just like the Magistrate they know that actually they would not attack the town while it is not their style, they all witnessed the violence of the Empire's army embodying on them. More strikingly although the crowd respected and liked the Magistrate when he was together with the authority and although he is one of them, they ignored the torture he experienced. Moreover, they watch his torture; the hanging, like watching an entertainment. Besides, they laugh. This clearly depicts that fear from the other, results in blindness.

The novel actually depicts the mental self-journey of a man. His mind is like the history of the town. Magistrate's hobby is to excavate the timber skeletons of ancient houses and ruins. He tries to understand the characters on wooden slips he found. Throughout the novel, his pre-symbolic writings are always a mystery for him likewise his unconscious is a mystery. One can read this act of digging and finding ancient unknown elements as a representation of his self-discovery through his own history and mind. The old ancient civilization can signify his unconscious and the surface; yet the realm he is living can symbolize his consciousness. Likewise in the old scripts, in his dreams, he finds some hints about his self. Freud explains the term unconscious as a system, which "comprises the repressed contents which have been denied access to the preconscious - conscious system by the operation of repression" (Laplanche, Pontalis, 1973). The ancient writings are not accessible to his conscious likewise his unconscious.

All through the novel, the reader traces the unconscious of Magistrate via his dreams and his relation with the barbarian girl. Magistrate tries to trace the altered and tortured body of the barbarian girl both in his dreams and in his washing ritual. According to the Magistrate “her body is a script to be decoded in the same way as the characters on the wooden slips he has excavated” (Dovey, 1996: 48). Through her body and through the ancient scripts he found, he actually traces himself and his own desires, fears and repressed feelings. For instance; Magistrates attraction to the girls body can be the articulation of his repressed castration anxiety while for Freud "the body that is the source of fetishism is the mother's body, uncanny and archaic” (Mulvey, 1996: 14). Likewise, the uncanny body of the mother which is the former home of the subject but at the same time somewhere alien, the girl’s disfigured body is also uncanny but attractive. The foot washing ritual of the Magistrates can be considered as a fetishistic act, which is the outcome of his castration anxiety. To cope with the realization that his mother's body is different and castrated, and also to cope with the fact that the girls body and identity is very much alien to him, he has over evaluated her feet. In Magistrate's case, the fetish object; the feet, besides the castration anxiety, also functions as a mask and disavowing the traumatic process of the girl's torture. "The fetish object (...) is also a mark of mourning for the lost object” (Mulvey, 1996: 5) that's why, the washing process is like a ritual which symbolizes the mourning for the girls lost beauty, normality, and subjectivity.

2.3. Victim 3: The Women

One of Colonel Joll's torture techniques has an important representation about the victimization of a woman in the society. As a torture to humiliate the Magistrate and to break the power he has, Colonel Joll equates him with a woman by hanging him in a tree with woman clothes and showing him struggling in front of his town. This clearly criticizes the passive and silenced position of a woman, which does not have any access to gain authority in the society.

Once being the part of the law of father as a Magistrate, which has an authority in terms of Lacan rationalization of subjectivity, Colonel Joll by equating him with women, throw him away from the symbolic order. As the other, he has no authority moreover no subjectivity at all. Likewise women in the society which are left behind with no subjectivity and threatened as the object of pleasure and desire in a world addressing to men, Magistrate is humiliated and equated with women, in front of his town being hanged in a tree, in woman's dressing.

"Here," says Mandel, and hands me a woman's calico smock. "Put it on." "Why?"
"Very well, if you want to go naked, go naked." I slip the smock over my head. It reached halfway down my thighs. (...) "The time has come, Magistrate," Mandel whispered in my ear. "Do your best to behave like a man" (Coetzee 1982: 117).

He is represented as the object of the voyeuristic gaze of the members of the town likewise the women are always positioned. The scene, when the Magistrate hangs in the tree with a bag in his head, can be regarded as his symbolically blind position since he is...
not able to return the voyeuristic gaze of the ones who are watching his torture. Likewise the barbarian girl’s semi-blindness, Magistrate also cannot return the gaze of the watchers, which puts him in an object position. Feminist critics say that in society “woman is deprived of a gaze, deprived of subjectivity and repeatedly transformed into the object of a masculine scopophilic desire” (Doane, 1987: 2). By equating the Magistrate with the women and by hanging him half naked in front of the crowd, Magistrate is represented as the object of Colonel Joll’s scopophilic pleasure which symbolically empowers Colonel’s masculinity and therefore both his subjectivity and authority.

The hanging of Magistrate can also be regarded as a symbolic castration. Considering castration, Lacan specifies, “what is at issue as potentially lacking in castration is not so much the penis – a real organ-as the phallus, or the signifier of desire (Psychoanalytic theory, Another look: 61). The phallus is not the penis it is the symbol of power. In this sense, Magistrate does not lose his real organ as in a torture scene, but he loses all his power and authority by the humiliation of his hanging therefore this can be considered as a symbolic castration.

According to Lacan, the symbolic order is the realm of language, the unconscious and an otherness that remains other” (Bowie, 1991: 92). While this is the domain of the language, the women do not have a total access to it. When the Magistrate is represented to the crowd as a passive and silenced position while hanging on the tree, he is eliminated from the law of father and order, to complete silence. Since he is belonging to the domain of the other like the female, he has no subjectivity and authority anymore. How Magistrate is silenced by Colonel Joll aka the Empire, the authority and the realm of man, is narrated in the following way in the novel; I try to call out something, a word of blind fear, a shriek, but the rope is now so tight that I am strangled, speechless. (…) I am swinging loose. The breeze lifts my smock and plays with my naked body. I am relaxed, floating. In a woman’s clothes. (Coetzee, 1982: 120)

According to Feminist critique Irigaray; female imaginary, desire, and language are not recognized in Lacan’s symbolic order. Symbolically castrating the Magistrate and putting him in the realm of a woman also pushes him to a state that he is not recognized in the symbolic order. Similarly, the barbarian girl’s language is also not recognized in symbolic order because she is both the other and a woman. Once being a part of the realm of symbolic, the Magistrate in the novel indicates several times that he does not understand the gestures and nuances of the barbarian girl, in the same way, he never able to discovers her body. This time, he is the one who is not understood like the girl he never manages to understand.

To sum, such a representation of humiliation which reduces the Magistrate to stillness and silence depicts the subjectivity assigned to female. The rope around the Magistrate signifies the pressure on the woman in the society. Through the hanging scene of the Magistrate Coetzee actually criticizes the inevitable suffering and death of woman in the man’s world

2.4. Victim 4: Self
Throughout the novel, Coetzee leaves an uncanny feeling in his readers, because who and what the real danger is never specified and the reader are always left in uncertainty. According to Freud all those feelings that arises trouble, anxiety, fear horror like as it is felt while reading Waiting for the Barbarians, belongs to the realm of uncanny. He defines the concept as follows: "on the one hand, it means that which is familiar and congenial, and on the other, that which is concealed and kept out of sight” (Freud, 1958: 129). In relation to the novel, the existence of barbarians fits the second definition of the concept while Coetzee does not define who the barbarians are. Between the two sides, no war or fight occurs and therefore, Barbarians are always kept out of sight. They are the aliens, they are the other, and they are the imaginary dangers, which are preparing to attack the town. Although the folks are living together without any problem, fear of attack unites the outpost against the barbarians and they are always perceived as the hidden enemies. The image of the barbarians as represented by the barbarian girl, which is also totally unfamiliar. Moreover, her deformed body displays another level of uncanniness. In this sense, the existence of the barbarians is the concealed aspect of the concept uncanny.

On the other hand, it is seen that Empire’s relation with the outpost fits the first definition of the concept which is the familiar one. While reading the tortures of Colonel Joll and step by step witnessing the self-destruction of the town, the reader realizes that actually, the real barbarians are the Empire. Danger came not from the other yet the barbarians, but from the familiar from the family. Empire, turns the outpost to a desert and leaves it marked with fear and violence. As a result, it is seen that not only the others are victims of the Empire but also the outpost is the victim of Empire’s cruelties. Such a self-destruction leaves the reader face to face with an uncanny feeling.

Similar to this ambiguous uncertainty of the danger, "waiting" for the danger also has different connotations. In this sense, Head analyzes the connotations of waiting and says; "Joll needs the barbarians to arrive for his mission, and Empire's function, to be validated. For the Magistrate, however, the barbarians have already arrived in the form of Empire's militia: he has been waiting for Empire's barbarity to manifest itself so that he can
begin the process of disentangling himself from its ideology of power and justice" (1997: 74). As the narrator of the novel is the Magistrate, the reader identifies him/herself with the Magistrate and considers the Empire as the barbarians since under the name of self-defense they are making a self-destruction. In contrast, for the Empire, barbarians are the treat. Through out the novel, by creating violence and then turning it to its origin, Coetzee shows the self-destructive power of imperialism

CONCLUSION

The issues examined and the tensions raised in Waiting for the Barbarians, can not be closed off so easily. This paper, tried to focus on how Coetzee challenges imperialism without even mentioning its name, but by narrating the self-journey and the transformation of the psyche of a man of conscience. Coetzee's usage of the torture chamber and his detailed explanation of violence, pain and fear are the subversive side of the novel. The impact of fear and violence, both depict psychically and mentally by the tortured body of the barbarian girl and the description of the Magistrates mental state. Embodying torture to the narrator of the novel is the way, which makes the reader witness the cruelty of the system. Coetzee actually makes an ironical comment about imperialism at the end of the novel by displaying the Empire's self-destruction.

In this sense, one can conclude the paper by noting the message Magistrate gives to Colonel Joll at the end of the novel, which can be read as a tagline of the novel. He says:

I have a lesson for him that I have long meditated. I mouth the words and watch him read them on my lips: "The crime 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. (Coetzee, 1982: 146).

In the novel the location, the time or culture of the Empire and the outpost is not specified. Similarly except Colonel Joll, the characters in the novel do not have a name. Even the main protagonist is nameless. He is the Magistrate. Not defining and naming the characters and the Empire gives the reader to identify with that culture and characters of the story more easily. This uncertainty makes the novel open to all kind of imaginations and makes it accessible to all societies. And also, as Coetzee makes the story of fear, he calls every individual one by one and therefore every society.

REFERENCES


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