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ELUCIDATING THE CONFLUENCE OF FRONTIERS: VIEWING GENDER IN COETZEE'S *WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS*

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Abstract:

The socially constructed notion of gender has made a substantial difference in the Postcolonial understanding of the novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* by J.M. Coetzee. There have been various ways of defining the context of space, gender and place in the backdrop of Colonialism. These negotiations give rise to postcolonial subjects. The paper makes an attempt to analyze the politics of gender by reimagining the line demarcating Empire and frontier. The location ingeniously narrates the struggle and power dynamics in recognizing the coloniality through the socio-cultural ramification. Gender has been at the centre of the political subjects divulging the edges from the central part of our understanding of Post colonial Geography. The binary of self and other at this context is once again dissected both from within and outside the two large groups. Confluence or the act of convergence dilutes the stark division that prematurely resides in the minds of the Colonizers pulsating between both sides of the borders. The response, reaction and resistance against the colonizers and the product of colonisation are subtle yet pervasive in Coetzee's treatment of the characters foreshadowed by the impending mistreatments. Exploitation at the level of physical, emotional and psychological swirls around the colonized characters weaving silence as a wall between the two parties. The vagueness and artificiality of the existence of boundaries vehemently negates any space for developmental in the area under the context of coloniality. There develops a partition within the shared identities and worldviews concentrated with historical animosity under the view finding lenses of the Colonizers.

Keywords: border, gender, frontier, Postcolonialism, space

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South African literature is a result of a long awaited history of struggle and freedom that has played a pivotal role in shaping its emergence.. The literature from this part of the African continent thus presents a vibrant picture of the complex interaction and intermixing of colonial and post-colonial ramifications. J.M Coetzee, a daunting figure in this context, critically negates the presence of literature free of impediments thrust upon his community. There is a growing sense of urgency and the need of representation in his works. Postcolonial understanding runs deep in his works and *Waiting for the Barbarians* is not an exception. Coetzee is engaged in a dense exercise of uplifting the status of marginalized others by voicing their concerns in a way acceptable in the historical, political and cultural contexts.

Gender, in relation to the broader field of Postcolonial studies, can be defined as a space prone to a daunting sidelining under the pretext of embodiment, intersection of binaries and subject position of the entities in discussion. In the context of colonialism, gender can be seen as a destabilizing agent to question desired spaces at the level of ideation projected on it. The relationship of gender to society is constructed on the defining ideologies of rights, responsibilities and identity at the intersecting points of race, age, ethnicity and religion. Gender, at the same time, is a product of individual identity as well as a result of social interaction pertaining to the geography of space, place and context. The space, in the geography of empire and frontier, intimately connects the threads of ambiguous subject positions. The gendered division of spaces into public and private spheres both within the same gender and other genders continuously sustained its grip through the novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

Space and place function as a forerunner of social change rather than providing a stable ground for sustaining the outcomes of Postcolonialism. The concrete positioning of Empire as the absolute entity and negating any space beyond the boundaries of the Empire as a threat to the community makes us reflect upon the idea of relocation and artificiality of created boundaries for separating one place from another. The binary created in terms of self and the other, East and the West, subject and object critically holds a ground open for discussion in the context of the novel. In the Introduction to *Seeking Spatial Justice*, Edward W. Soja contests that,



In this more cautious spatial perspective, space tends to be seen as little more than a receptacle. Things happen to it and in it, helping us to explain the formation of more- or less-just human geographies but blocking from view how space is actively involved in generating and sustaining inequality, injustice, economic exploitation, racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression and discrimination. (4)

Coetzee sets the novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* at the frontiers of an unknown land with people from both sides of the colonial division struggling to prove their position and reacquire their space invaded by the people of the Empire. The concept of space in Postcolonial studies is vaguely and metaphorically portrayed for the divisions and dualities existing in its understanding. Edward Said, in his foundational text, *Culture and Imperialism* foregrounds that nobody is “outside or beyond geography” which can be later laid alongside the contestation of the geographies concerned. At the same breadth, the interpretation of subjectivity, according to Bhabha “should shift from the ready recognition of images as positive or negative, to an understanding of the processes of subjectification made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse” (95).

Coetzee critically and consciously investigates the constant strife in power relations exercised upon the colonial equivalents, the people of the Empire on the one hand and the indigenous people of the place on the other hand. The boundaries separating the binaries of self/other, active/passive and subject/object is a perceptible position where the former category is mostly aggrandized as the strong, influential, productive and the latter functions in shadow of the former. The discussion furthers the depiction of a range of boundary-less spaces significant to the theory without any distinct coherent position. This can be backed by Doreen Massey’s critical argument on the indefinite and indistinct bifurcation of place and community,

An (idealized) notion of an era when places were (supposedly) inhabited by coherent and homogeneous communities is set against the current fragmentation and disruption. The counter position is anyway dubious, of course; ‘place’ and ‘community’ have only rarely been coterminous. But the occasional longing for such coherence is none the less a sign of the geographical fragmentation, the spatial disruption, of our times” (146-147).

The relationship between realities and representations is a blurred line in the text and is open for interpretation in all its arbitrariness. The geography of place and space is such that



there lays an intermediation between both. The location of the novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* is precisely mentioned without furthering any overt reference to view it from a safe vantage point devoid of historical and geographical influences. The control over confinement of space and context has been articulated by Richard Martin in his article “Narrative, History, Ideology: A Study of *Waiting for the Barbarians* and Burger’s *Daughter*” as, “However they are read, Coetzee’s ‘history’ and ‘geography’ are abstractions from ‘real’ history and geography, abstractions which are re-textualized in new configurations, but which yet retain their relations to our world” (9).

Over this bordered position lies the questions of historical reality and actual reality built on control, confiscation and subdued voices. The possibilities of revivifying the terrains on both side of the borders fit in the interplay of both the characters and the setting of this text. The frontier and the Empire are connected by an invisible link where the Empire is regarded as Empire solely on the basis of the presence of the colonized other. Coetzee, in this novel, makes a strong lamentation on the practices of his country. The unique blend of an uncertain historical setting and symbolic narrative is quite appealing to the larger picture that follows. The novel introduces us to two classes of people, the barbarians and the people from the Empire. The barbarians never appear in the novel and the impending conquest from their end is nothing but the fear of the Empire in the verge of decadence. The imminent arrival of the barbarians and them attacking the Empire is a narration of the identity politics, where one group identifies itself superior to the other.

The novel opens with a detailed description of the glasses, a new discovery which creates a sense of inquisition in the mind of the unnamed Magistrate. This inquisitiveness in turn challenges the position of the Magistrate in the dilemma of his ambiguous position. The frontier acts as a boundary, beyond which reside the indigenous people like nomads and the fishing folks. Colonel Joll and his men use torture as a technique to subdue the indigenous people and construct a narrative of othering the colonized subjects. The young barbarian girl who has been captivated by the Empire was vigorously tortured both mentally and physically nearly blinding her in the torturous process. The Magistrate takes in the barbarian girl and engages himself in the rituals of purification over the exploited body. The position of the Magistrate instantly ascribes him with the task of purification where the self negates the other by projecting him as white sympathizer attempting to save the other that needs to be rescued.



“I have relieved her of the shame of begging and installed her in the barracks kitchen as a scullery-maid”(Coetzee 34).

Characterizing the girl as impure, unclean, damaged and reducing her to animals becomes a complex mental and physical exercise on the part of the Magistrate who takes up the task of purification. The struggle between both the genders while one exploiting the other is the latter’s unassigned wilful task of uplifting the former from the position of violent exploitation to mild exploitation. The Magistrate’s treatment towards the barbarian girl is in stark contrast to the people from the other gender of her community. His attraction towards the barbarian girl’s deformed feet and her creeping movements offers a heightened sense of fantasy to subdue the past and reformulating the present. Defining her as marginal he tries to draw a parallel between land and body in, where land is the colonized land and body is the gendered body. The girl did not let out any details even after being repeatedly questioned by the Magistrate. This leaves the Magistrate in an intervening position, conscious of the conspiracy he has been a part of and yet afraid of rewriting his role. Women in the novel is treated kept in the marginal role being the target of male atrocities and exploitation both physically and emotionally reduced to easily replaceable characters. Body occupies a significant position in the study of gender. The female body is studied as a category influenced by nature, society and social constructions.

The description of the physical deformity of the barbarian girl is stereotypically described in the face of the torchbearers of superior culture. The Magistrate feels an urgent need to uplift the status of the barbarian girl in order to master the role of the mediator between the colonizer and the colonized. In order to uplift the status of the barbarian girl, the Magistrate is seen to have been in a constant internal struggle that psychologically affected to him to reinvigorate his standing at the confluence of the frontiers. He constantly contests his own views of the barbarian girl from the day of her physical presence in his chamber. Initially, he described her as “It is the same girl, the same black hair cut in a fringe across the forehead, the same broad mouth, the black eyes that look through and past me” (Coetzee 27). The description after multiple trends of purification is a turnaround from the initial physical description

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. Between thumb and forefinger, I part her eyelids. The caterpillar comes to an end, decapitated, at the pink inner rim of the eyelid. There is no other mark. The eye is whole. (33)



The blinded eye of the barbarian girl which has been a deformation resulting from the inflicted violence is now transformed to a physical feature attractive to the Magistrate. The definition of women suffers a tremendous blow in the hands of the gendered worldviews, which Toril Moi mentions in her article, “Feminist Literary Criticism” as

patriarchy’s definition of woman as oppressed within the symbolic order, as on the frontier between men and chaos, pinpoints that it is appropriate for her to be perceived as the link to the “outside” that men seen as the limit of the symbolic order will in other words share in the disconcerting properties of all frontiers: they will be neither inside not outside neither known nor unknown. (213)

Forced prostitution and unpaid women laborers are seen in the kitchen of the barracks. Despite performing their duties they had to move a step forward to satisfy the angst of the colonizers. Raping the women at the frontiers and depriving them of their needs is an everyday scene at the frontiers. The masculine figures in the text are perpetrators of violence and fosterers of fear. Gender inequality is explored in great details in the novel, initially between the characters of Colonel Joll and Magistrate who has been assigned with higher responsibilities while the women are seen engaged in menial works. Objectification of the female body has been elaborately dealt with in the relationship of the barbarian girl and the Magistrate. The frontier comes into play even in the sexual intercourse of the Magistrate with the woman he has known for a year and the barbarian girl. There is a resentment of a sort when he could not articulate the untold fictions of the barbarian girl and the prostitute’s easily articulated stories. The barbarian girl is not subservient to the spirit of her benevolent master, she had agreed to satisfy his urge as he did not have any choice but there is an invisible line blocking the knowledge from reaching the Magistrate. The Magistrate compares his desire for both the women as

...to desire her has meant to enfold her and enter her, to pierce her surface and stir the quiet of her interior into an ecstatic storm; then to retreat, to subside, to wait for desire to reconstitute itself. But with this woman it is as if there is no interior, only a surface across which I hunt back and forth seeking entry. (Coetzee 46)

The restricting of subject positions unsettles the Magistrate. The Magistrate is an integral part of the colonizing force, which meant easy access to brutality and violence on the colonized bodies. But this subtle resistance from the barbarian girl is questioning his stand and feasibility of the Empire. She is an enigmatic presence in the colonial discourse disallowing



penetration both physical and mental. Silence is regarded as an authority in this relationship where the Magistrate is supposed to be in a privileged position but here the outcast or the marginalized is holding the authority against the colonizer. Silence is again used as a trope to fight against unjust treatment and an undeclared fight for freedom. Gender inequality and phallic dominance are two consistent themes in the novel. The barbarian girl is the victim of double marginalization, firstly as a colonized in the colonial setting and secondly as a woman in a male dominated setting. Perpetuating violence and experiencing pain are two different phenomena that cannot be reduced to words.

In general terms what is clear is that spatial control, whether enforced through the power of convention or symbolism, or through the straight forward threat of violence, can be a fundamental element in the constitution of gender in its (highly varied) forms. (Massey 280)

This has been the motto of the barbarian girl who refused to describe her experience in front of the Magistrate who had been repeatedly engaged in extracting the truth behind her tortured body. Exploring the characters of the novel both male and female we can clearly conclude that gender inequality is being strategically presented both thematically and structurally by Coetzee. Doreen Massey understanding of the relationship of geography and gender forms the basis of the critical relationship shared by the members of the opposite gender at the confluence of the frontier and the Empire:

The intersections and mutual influences of 'geography' and 'gender' are deep and multifarious. Each is, in profound ways, implicated in the construction of the other.-geography in its various guises influences the cultural formation of particular genders and gender relations; gender has been deeply influential in the production of 'the geographical. (Massey 177)

The barbarian girl united with her people only when the Magistrate decided to go on an expedition to understand them and return her to her people. The reunion had not made any authentic information available to the Magistrate but he was wilfully challenged by the northerners by bringing him to a position equal to theirs in their own ground. He was in the hope of discerning an identity for him but failed to extract any. This journey can be understood as possibility to release oneself from the confines of space and boundary. The dynamics of the relationship between the colonizer and colonized shifted with the change of geography. In the frontier, the Magistrate has been assigned a position capable of enforcing commands on the people beyond the frontier. But with the change of spatial location and shift of geography, he



was pulled down to a position suitable for negotiation in terms with the indigenous population who has always been reduced to barbarians. Beyond the frontier, the barbarian girl is in a privileged position to limitedly respond to the Magistrate.

Her short utterance and near blank reaction to the Magistrate's departure created an unrest in the Magistrate. This very unrest created an imbalance in the life of the Magistrate which frequently contested with his idea of Empire, frontier and barbarians. It can be concluded that gender functions as a critical debate which can change its course based on the location in which it thrives. There is an intricate connection between space, gender, geography and borders in the Postcolonial studies. Border although is a contested term especially for the arbitrariness of its presence which is only possible in relation to different geographical location in political terms. Arbitrariness is present from the very beginning of the novel be it the setting, the people in question or the engagements. The novel is fretted by elaborate descriptions of torturous images and oppressed souls but there is also a vivid presence of resistance which pushed the Empire to the verge of disintegration.

Coetzee disseminates the arbitrariness of the war that the people of the Empire and the people beyond the frontiers are engaged it while at the same time hints at the illegal possession of their land by the Empire. The entire novel is an implication towards the superficiality of the colonial occupation, confiscation of land, tortures inflicted on people inferior to the colonizers, the existence of boundaries and the irrationality of concrete geography and space. Coetzee attempts a universal outlook by placing his characters in an imaginary setting to deduce the idea that any place can function as a hotspot of colonial exploitation depending on the existence of factors supporting the colonial construct. He deprived himself from providing the readers with an actual truth and left us with a cyclical nature of truth which changes with changing perception.

There is a greater need of eradicating the gender divide while elucidating the colonial discourses. The text can also be seen as a battle ground of challenging the loopholes of colonialism and gender injustices by perpetuating characters with questionable mindsets thriving in a Postcolonial setting. Coetzee thus through the novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*, leaves a ground open for us to initiate discussion, dialogue and argument by dealing with problematic areas of Post colonialism.



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