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Review Paper

# Wandering in the Wilderness of Words: Coetzee's Magistrate Adrift in Deconstruction

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper examines how J. M. Coetzee addresses the challenges of depicting torture in his novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Coetzee was grappling with how to represent state violence and oppression without trivializing or validating such acts. The novel tells the story of the Magistrate in a frontier town as the Colonel arrives to interrogate and torture prisoners. Through witnessing the torture, the Magistrate begins to question his complicity in the Empire's crimes. Coetzee uses ambiguity and symbolism to criticize oppressive systems without glorifying torturers. The paper analyzes how the novel engages with postmodern literary theories, particularly deconstruction. Scenes where the Magistrate struggles to articulate his experiences represent the limits of language according to deconstructionist thinkers like Derrida. Coetzee also depicts the torturers in an intentionally unclear way to avoid justifying their actions while still acknowledging state violence. Ultimately, through undergoing his own imprisonment and torture, the Magistrate comes to realize his own moral failings in quietly accepting oppression. This reveals universal human tendencies towards complicity. By removing clear moral distinctions and emphasizing shared culpability, Coetzee addresses the ethical issues of portraying torture without trivializing harm or sympathizing with perpetrators. The novel underscores the paradox that oppression imparts a duty to speak out yet language can never fully convey lived experiences of violence.

***Keywords***: *Deconstruction, Discourse, Storytelling, Torture*

## INTRODUCTION

Writing about torture creates challenges for authors, especially those from South America and Africa. Should they include torture in their works, and if so, how should they depict this difficult act? These issues have been explored by writer J. M. Coetzee, a South African novelist, linguist and critic. His novels grapple with possible ways for writers to handle including torture when they face the decision of whether to portray it or not. Coetzee's fiction experiments with different strategies for how novelists can approach the topic of torture in their works.

In a 1986 *New York Times Book review*, Coetzee acknowledges that "torture has exerted a dark fascination" for him and many other writers from South Africa (Coetzee, 1986, p.13). When depicting "the dark chamber" of torture, the writer faces two moral issues. First, they must find a balance between ignoring state atrocities and realistically portraying them. Coetzee objects to realistic torture depictions because the novelist vicariously participates and validates the acts, helping the state terrorize people. However, Coetzee notes that these acts of torture and oppression cannot simply be ignored. He proposes "The true challenge is how not to play the game by the rules of the state, how to establish one's own authority, how to imagine torture and death on one's own terms" (p.13).

Coetzee says a second issue concerning the torturer's depiction is both moral and aesthetic. Many authors use clichés like portraying torturers as pure evil, tragically conflicted men, or nameless bureaucrats. Some writers, including South African writers Alex La Guma and Mongane Serote, depict torture "with a false portentousness, a questionable dark lyricism" (p.35). Coetzee suggests that when writing about torture, authors must balance between trivializing and glorifying the person inflicting harm. Coetzee believes writers need to find a moderate approach for representing torturers that avoids these issues.

Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* addressed these two important issues through its story and themes. The book was critically acclaimed when it was published in 1980, winning a major South African literary award. Early reviews noted how the novel symbolized brutality and injustice (Burgess, 1982, p.88). Some saw it as dramatizing different ways of governing (Howe, 1982, p.36). However, the novel is intentionally ambiguous and unclear. It represents ambiguity in all relationships and does not make clear ethical judgments (Ableman, 1980, p.21). One early academic study of the book focused on these ambiguities, arguing that the novel questions ideas like civilization, authority, and truth by showing their weaknesses (Olsen, 1985, p.47). Coetzee uses both symbolism and ambiguity, which seems contradictory but represents his solution for addressing torture in fiction. It also points to the lack of moral principles in the modern world that allows torture to exist.

The novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* explores how witnessing torture and mistreatment impacts the moral conscience of an essentially kind man (Coetzee, 1986, p.13). This man, called the Magistrate, runs a small village on the border between the Empire and lands of nomadic tribes called Barbarians. When a Colonel comes to investigate a reported Barbarian attack, he tortures Barbarian prisoners. Watching this causes the Magistrate to start feeling bad for the victims. After the Colonel leaves, the Magistrate takes in a Barbarian woman who was hurt during torture. He even risks danger to return her to her people. But when he does this, the army comes to fight the Barbarians. The Magistrate gets in trouble for helping the enemy and gets tortured too when he returns. In the end, the army leaves the village on its own, and the Magistrate is still in charge as more Barbarians could attack at any time.

Told from the Magistrate's perspective, the novel has many images of writing's ineffectiveness, acknowledging the difficulties of portraying torture. The old bureaucrat compares his fading sexual desire to his struggle to verbalize and describe his experiences clearly in a story: "It seems appropriate that a man who does not know what to do with the woman in his bed should not know what to write" (Coetzee, 2019, p.58). This comparison is used in both directions: "there were unsettling occasions when in the middle of the sexual act I felt myself losing my way like a storyteller losing the thread of his story" (p.45). Even after being intimate with the Barbarian woman, he cannot derive meaning from it, showing writing's limits in situations lacking comprehension or answers:

No thought that I think, no articulation, however antonymic, of the origin of my desire seems to upset me. "I must be tired," I think. "Or perhaps whatever can be articulated is falsely put." My lips move, silently composing and recomposing the words. "Or perhaps it is the case that only that which has not been articulated has to be lived through." I stare at this last proposition without detecting any answering movement in myself toward assent or dissent. The words grow more and more opaque before me; soon they have lost all meaning. (p.64-65)

The Magistrate's connection of sexual experiences and writing imagery, contradictory statements, and inability to find meaning depicts someone wandering amid deconstructionist ideas. His statement that "whatever can be articulated is falsely put" is itself a contradiction that thus "endlessly constructs its own destruction" as Derrida put it (1974, p.71). The Magistrate's thinking follows Derrida's idea that "metaphor, then, always has its own death within it" (p.74). For the Magistrate, the act of articulating and creating a text necessarily produces falsehoods and limitations. His experience captures the core deconstructionist concept that language cannot capture true meaning.

The way the Magistrate fails sexually and can't understand language shows he lacks power. He cannot make sense of the world around him or express his experiences clearly. Throughout the story, when the Magistrate looks for understanding, he only sees emptiness. When trying to remember the Barbarian woman as a captive, he pictures "a space, a blackness" (Coetzee, 2019, p.47). After she departs, he cannot visualize her appearance. His recurring reverie of walking forever in snow ends when he sees a child's face that is "blank, featureless" (p.37). This vision shows that he lacks self-awareness, he only sees emptiness inside: "I try to look into myself but see only a vortex and at the heart of the vortex oblivion" (p.47). His efforts to find clear meanings always end in failure.

There is another part in the book that clearly refers to modern ideas about language and meaning. While exploring the desert, the Magistrate discovered many wooden blocks with writing on them. The Colonel demand he translate what it says. However, the Magistrate does not comprehend the text. He admits to the reader that he is unable to undersand the meaning. This links to theories that meanings and languages may not have fixed translations and can be ambiguous:

In the long evenings I spent poring over my collection I isolated over four hundred different characters in the script, perhaps as many as four hundred and fifty. I have no idea what they stand for. Does each stand for a single thing, a circle for the sun, a triangle for a woman, a wave for a lake; or does a circle merely stand for "circle," a triangle for "triangle," a wave for "wave"? Does each sign represent a different state of the tongue, the lips, the throat, the lungs, as they combine in the uttering of some multifarious unimaginable extinct barbarian language? (p.110)

The Magistrate struggles to understand the relationship between the written words and their meaning. Lance Olsen notes that, "As Derrida would have it, those wood slips form an absence which may be supplemented in an endless number of ways, cut off from responsibility, from authority, an emblem of orphaned language" (Olsen, 1985, p.53). However, when Joll pressures him, the Magistrate fabricates stories based on the writing to reveal how the Empire hurt the Barbarians. In doing so, he acts like a temporary explainer for the language.

This part of the story again shows that the meaning of written works can be unclear, and that readers are free to interpret them differently. But in the Magistrate making up stories about the wooden blocks, there is hope. Even though storytelling may not be perfect and meaning uncertain, creating narratives can reveal oppression and torture.

The Magistrate's telling of stories demonstrates how Coetzee deals with the moral issue of writing about torture. The narrator also discusses how stories can have multiple meanings. When talking to Joll, the Magistrate says the wooden blocks could be interpreted in many ways: " 'They [the tiles] form an allegory. They can be read in many orders. Further, each single slip can be read in many ways. Together they can be read as a domestic journal, or they can be read as a plan of war, or they can be turned on their sides and read as a history of the last years of the Empire-the old Empire, I mean' " (Coetzee, 2019, p.112). Using 'Empire' suggests Coetzee's own work could have different meanings. By not naming the country or time period, and calling the groups the Empire and Barbarians, Coetzee creates an allegory that is like the Roman Empire falling but also refers to South Africa. As Anthony Burgess says, "[*Waiting for the Barbarians*] is not about South Africa: It is not about anywhere, and hence it is about everywhere" (Burgess, 1982, p.88). Setting it in an unnamed time makes the book disclose realities about any society that is oppressive and uses torture.

By setting the story in an unnamed place and time, Coetzee solves his ethical problem. He does not ignore the bad things his government did by using torture for security, but he also does not describe those actual acts directly. Instead, he insists on his own control over the story, even if it is limited. He creates his own version of death and torture, rather than identifying the specific atrocities done by South Africa's security police. Though he does not name South Africa directly, how Barbarian woman and Magistrate are treated clearly point to how political prisoners were treated there. By talking about true things about torture and oppression in general, Coetzee also criticizes his own country in an indirect way.

Coetzee's solution to his second problem - how to show the torturer - is more complex. The Magistrate cannot understand the torturers. He thinks about Colonel Joll but doesn't really know why he acts that way. No reason seems to really explain his cruelty. By not fully explaining the torturers, Coetzee avoids justifying or excusing their actions. He leaves their motivations unclear. This allows readers to focus on the harm done through torture instead of sympathizing with the torturers:

I wonder how he felt the very first time: did he, invited as an apprentice to twist the pincers or turn the screw or whatever it is they do, shudder even a little to know that at that instant he was trespassing into the forbidden? I find myself wondering too whether he has a private ritual of purification, carried out behind closed doors, to enable him to return and break bread with other men. Does he wash his hands very carefully, perhaps, or change all his clothes; or has the Bureau created new men who can pass without disquiet between the unclean and the clean? (Coetzee, 2019, p.12)

When being tortured, the Magistrate asks Mandel if it's easy to eat after torturing someone: " 'Do you find it easy to take food afterwards? 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?' " (p.126). He thinks a person would feel they need to wash their hands but normal washing wouldn't be enough - they'd need a religious ceremony to feel clean again. The Magistrate thinks of both Joll and Mandel in the same way as Pilate from the Bible. Pilate sentenced Jesus to death but wanted to absolve himself of responsibility. In the same way, the Magistrate thinks the torturers need to free themselves from guilt for their terrible acts.

Both men seem to lack morality, shown by their eyes. Joll wears sunglasses, which were new and strange to the frontier people: "two little discs of glass suspended in front of his eyes in loops of wire" (p.1). "Is he blind?" wonders the Magistrate. Mandel's eyes are uncovered but still hidden, like clear crystals over his eyeballs. The Magistrate looks in but has no idea what Mandel sees: "I look into his clear blue eyes, as clear as if there were crystal lenses slipped over his eyeballs. He looks back at me. I have no idea what he sees. Thinking of him, I have said the words *torture*. . . *torturer* to myself, but they are strange words, and the more I repeat them the more strange they grow, till they lie like stones on my tongue" (p.118). Thinking of him as a torturer, those words feel strange to the Magistrate, the more he repeats them the stranger they feel. Words cannot properly describe the reality to the Magistrate.

When asking Mandel questions, the Magistrate says he's not blaming or accusing him. He just wants to understand Mandel's world, how he breathes, eats and lives each day: " 'I am only trying to understand. I am trying to understand the zone in which you live. I am trying to imagine how you breathe and eat and live from day to day. But I cannot!' "(p.126). Maybe this reflects Coetzee's own inability, since by focusing on the Magistrate narrating, Coetzee doesn't have to directly show the torturer's mindset. So in a way, Coetzee addresses this dilemma by posing the question, is it even possible to understand a torturer's mind? This allows him to avoid depicting the torturer's perspective.

The Magistrate in the story acts in ways that are similar to a torturer, even though he does not consider himself one. The Magistrate becomes fixated on the Barbarian woman after she is mistreated by the authorities. He constantly questions her about the torture, trying to imagine the details. He also ritualistically washes her, starting with her injured feet, seemingly trying to make up for allowing the Barbarian woman to be tortured. However, the Magistrate also seems to be trying to deeply understand the woman and penetrate her inner thoughts and feelings. But he becomes frustrated when he cannot fully access her psychologically or physically: "with a shift of horror I behold the answer that has been waiting all the time to offer itself to me in the image of a face masked by two black glassy insect eyes from which there comes no reciprocal gaze but only my doubled image cast back at me" (p.44). This impulse to control and understand the woman is compared to the mentality of a torturer. The Magistrate immediately rejects this comparison, insisting that he has nothing in common with the actual torturers. But the text suggests there are unsettling parallels between the Magistrate's behavior and that of a torturer, even if he does not want to acknowledge it: "*No! No! No!* I cry to myself. . . . There is nothing to link me with torturers, people who sit waiting like beetles in dark cellars. . . . I must assert my distance from Colonel Joll! I will not suffer for his crimes!" (p.44).

The Magistrate only realizes his similarities to Colonel Joll after fulfilling his dream and struggling across the desert to bring the woman back to her people. Then the Magistrate is imprisoned and tortured. By going through this experience, The Magistrate realizes he treated the Barbarian woman similarly to how Colonel Joll mistreated her, even though the Magistrate was trying to help her: "From the moment my steps paused and I stood before her at the barracks gate she must have felt a miasma of deceit closing about her: envy, pity, cruelty all masquerading as desire" (p.135). When he first met her at the military camp gate, she probably felt deceit from him as he felt envy, pity and cruelty disguised as desire. He sees his own actions as meaningless ways to make up for guilty of quietly allowing the state's wrongdoings. Now he can admit that before, he accepted the state's actions without objection:

I was not, as I liked to think, the indulgent pleasure-loving opposite of the cold rigid Colonel. I was the lie that Empire tells itself when times are easy, he the truth that Empire tells when harsh winds blow. Two sides of imperial rule, no more, no less. But I temporized, I looked around this obscure frontier . . . and I said to myself, "Be patient, one of these days he will go away, one of these days quiet will return[.]" . . . Thus I seduced myself, taking one of the many wrong turnings I have taken on a road that looks true but has delivered me into the heart of a labyrinth. (p.135-36)

Even though the Magistrate feels lost and aimless at the end of his story, "feeling stupid, like a man who lost his way long ago but presses on along a road that may lead nowhere" (p.156), the Magistrate's self-realization and actions at the end suggest he may have found the right path after all. When more Barbarian prisoners were brought in, he escaped prison to publicly condemn their cruel beatings. In his dreams, the Barbarian woman's face appears as a child, and she even offers him bread, making peace. Though the torture and imprisonment physically diminished him, these experiences also increased his moral understanding - not just of the Empire's cruelty, but of his own as well.

Coetzee addresses the issue of portraying the torturer by removing the distinction between 'them' and 'us', between the evil and the innocent. This doesn't create moral ambiguity, but rather suggests that everyone is guilty and in need of purification, like Pilate's cleansing ritual. Through the Magistrate, Coetzee identifies a universal human tendency to go along with things, be complicit, and wait for others to act. Those who silently allow torture and oppression are just as barbaric as the actual torturers.

In his *New York Times* article, Coetzee expresses a desire for a world where "humanity will be restored across the face of society," a world where all human acts "will be returned to the ambit of moral judgment" (Coetzee, 1986, p.35). He finishes by "In such a society it will once again be meaningful for the gaze of the author, the gaze of authority and authoritative judgment, to be turned upon scenes of torture" (p.35). Coetzee connects the lack of moral authority that allows torture to the lack at the core of modern literature since deconstructionism became popular. In a world without a moral center, where cruelty is hidden throughout society, authors can only struggle to provide authority and meaning. Coetzee's works have gaps and absences, but he suggests temporary presences, like storytellers, can somewhat fill the role of a moral and linguistic center. In Waiting for the Barbarians, Coetzee shows that the impact of oppression on people of conscience is paradoxical: they realize the need to speak the truth about it, but also their inability to do so fully or effectively.

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**Biodata**

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