



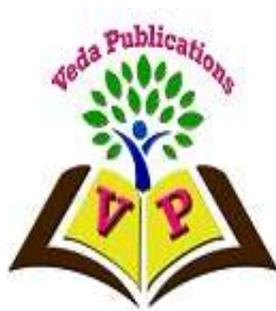
## THE HORROR OF INJUSTICES IN J. M. COETZEE'S WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS AND AGE OF IRON

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### ABSTRACT



J. M. Coetzee, through his writings has brought forth the African colonial conditions and revealed the damaged and deformed South African life under apartheid. The present paper aims to analyze Coetzee's novels in the lights of apartheid. In this respect, the study deals with the effects of racial segregation which affected the lives of people in South Africa. South Africa is one of the most brutally and violently exploited territories. The blacks are doomed to live in slums in terrible conditions while whites lived in the most modern areas and conditions. While Africans are struggling with poverty, hunger, unemployment, illnesses, the minority whites are busy with their idea of colonization. Witnessing the tortures and humiliation inflicted upon the blacks, there are instances in which whites are complicated by a strong feeling of compassion and pity because they look helpless and in need of the blacks' love and affection.

**Keywords:** *South African Life, Apartheid, Violence, Race, Injustice.*

### Citation:

**APA** Bexel,B.(2018) The Horror of Injustices in J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians and Age of Iron*. *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature-JOELL*, 5(1), 121-127.

**MLA** Bexel,B. "The Horror of Injustices in J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians and Age of Iron*." *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature JOELL*, Vol.5, no.1, 2018, pp.121-127.

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J. M. Coetzee is probably the most intellectual contemporary writer of high profile on the international literary arena. Writing in a country where banning and exile was a common reality for writers till recently, Coetzee's works unite the aesthetic and the political dimensions. His novels resonate with allusions from European literature and the writers he is fond of. His novels mirror the oppressive regime of South Africa and take it to the global notice. His novels are a strong testimony to the fact how a novelist could achieve his political aims without being a propagandist.

Coetzee's peripatetic and often reclusive life has served his fiction by giving him a certain distance from the troubles of his home country. The trauma of apartheid haunts his novels; even they appear to be set in a country other than South Africa. In Coetzee's novels emotions like shame, guilt and fear surge beyond rational discussion just as cruelty emerges out beyond bearable depiction. In the words of Abdulrazak, Coetzee's writing is, "firmly rooted in South African realities, in its history and its political complexities and ironies, in the failure of human sympathy which is the consequence of colonialism and apartheid" (qtd. in Sharma 69). The basic theme of all of the Coetzee's novels is apartheid. Apartheid system to the black man reminds that he is a helpless stranger in his own land.

As a white South African writer, Coetzee is actually aware that he speaks from a position of beneficiary of the apartheid regime. In contemporary South Africa it is no doubt a courageous and provocative act to give voice to slaves and particularly to their desire for freedom. Coetzee has avoided any direct reference to the skin colour of his characters but there are indirect references. That is why he has not named his empire or the magistrate nor does he reveal the race. In the words of Hamadeh, "Coetzee eschews the limitations imposed by specificities of temporal, geographical and historical context and succeeds in attaining a universalism to which all writers aspire but only the greatest realize" ("Waiting"). He extends it to a universal state where Coetzee deals with the universal problem of oppression that is beyond the barriers of race and nation.

Racism is the belief or ideology that human races have distinctive characteristics which determine their respective cultures. It involves the idea that one's own race is superior and has the right to rule or dominate others. The term racism usually denotes race based prejudice, violence, discrimination or oppression. Racism as a man made phenomenon may be defined according to Hernton as "...all of the learned behaviour and learned emotions on the part of a group of people towards another group whose physical characteristics are dissimilar to the former group behaviour and emotions that compel one group to...treat the other on the basis of its physical characteristics alone, as if it did not belong to the human race" (qtd. in Kumar 330).

Race is particularly pertinent to the rise of colonialism, because the division of human society in this way is inextricable from the need of colonialist powers to establish dominance over subjects' powers and to justify the imperial enterprise. Looma is of the view, "race has thus functioned as one of the most powerful and yet most fragile markers of human identity, hard to explain and identify and even harder to maintain" (121). Today skin colour has become the privileged marker of races which are, as Miles points out, "either 'black' or 'white' but never 'big-eared' and 'small-eared'. The fact that only certain physical characteristics... 'races' are socially imagined rather than biological realities" (qtd. in Looma 121). The basic myth of racism is white skin brings with it cultural superiority that the whites are more intelligent and more virtuous than the black by the mere fact of being white.

The term 'race' had been widely used to distinguish between the natives and the British. The 'black race' is considered inferior, while the 'white race' is believed to be a superior power which can reign supreme over the black race. The blacks are believed to be ignorant and weak. In the novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Colonel Joll, Mandel and the young officer reign supreme in the frontier. The blacks like the nomads and the fisher folk are made to feel inferior and useless. The study also pictures the brutalities and contradictions associated with the South African policy of apartheid. In *Age of Iron*, the police have a free hand under emergency regulations



to dispense casual injury or death at random, and they do so. On the other hand, in *Age of Iron*, Bheki and his friends in Guguletu boycott the schools. They protest against the education system which is fit for the apartheid system. The hospital gives treatment to the white people and denies treatment to the blacks. If blacks are admitted, the whites treat them brutally. When John is admitted, they humiliate him by placing him in a room surrounded by mad people. They keep no medical records for the black people.

Torture as a means of violence seems very dominant and powerful in *Waiting for the Barbarians* than any other novels of Coetzee. In fact, torture has been used by the imperialist and the colonizer as a tool to 'find truth' and to impose their identity and interest in the oppressed, colonized and hunted. The novel is an epitome of "apartheid, physical, psychological as well as apartheid violence" (Patil 112). At the time of Joll's arrival at the outpost, two prisoners, an old man and his cousin are captured and interrogated. The Magistrate tells Joll, criminality on the frontier does not usually extend beyond the occasional petty theft, to which the outpost retaliates with counter raids. Even though the old man informs, "we know nothing about thieving. The soldiers stopped us and tied us up. For nothing. We were on the road, coming here to see the doctor. This is my sister's boy. He has a sore that does not get better. We are not thieves" (Coetzee, *Waiting* 3-4), he is not released. This is the real condition of the native people who do not have the freedom to walk in the street. If they do so they will be trapped and labelled as barbarians.

In particular, Joll tortures the boy by leaving the boy to sleep with the corpse in one cell, in order to create fear in the boy's psyche. He tells the boy, "Sleep with your grandfather, keep him warm" (7). Coetzee in this novel gives a picture of the prisoners who live in constant fear. Leusmann clearly states that, "each of them is inextricably entangled in this Kafkaesque system of terror" (75). Joll seems to be denying what cannot plausibly be denied. The possibility is that the accused might comply fully with his tormentor's demand for information prior to the infliction of extreme pain. The confession obtained through torture contains whatever the torturer has projected into it. The boy with the sore confesses not

only that he and members of his clan have stolen horses but also that they are preparing for war against the Empire. The truth that is produced provides the justification that the Empire needs torture for its control against the barbarians.

Colonel Joll's another victim in the interrogation is a barbarian girl. The interrogation not only inflicts physical pain but also psychological pain. The barbarian girl is forced to witness the torture of her father. On the other hand, the girl is also tortured in front of her father. Magistrate extracts the incidents that happened when the girl was tortured by the guards. The guard replies, "Sometimes there was screaming, I think they beat her, but I was not there" (Coetzee, *Waiting* 36). In the Foucauldian conception, the body of the victim interrogated under torture is "the locus of extortion of the truth" (qtd. in Lenta75). Torture circumvents criminal procedures which demand for evidence. It marks the body with the signs of truth so that the body attests to the crime. The marks of torture, such as the scaring of the barbarian girl around the eyes are intended to justify the interrogation.

In order to capture the barbarians, Colonel Joll plans to raid the nomads. He takes the young boy as a guide to show the path. When Joll returns with a group of barbarian captives, the Magistrate notices that the prisoners are not barbarians. He retorts to the guards that they are fishing people. Another type of the torture inflicted in the novel is the spectacular torture. The guiding principle of Joll's handling of barbarians is prisoners are prisoners. Joll returns with the group of twelve barbarian captives linked to each other with wire that runs through the flesh of their hands and holes in their cheeks, the torture that ensues is spectacular.

The theatre of torture which Joll directs produces the truth of the category of evil barbarian which has hitherto been given only rhetorical expression. It gives each member of the crowd an opportunity to prove to his children that the barbarians are real. Four of the barbarians are forced to kneel on the ground and the other eight are still roped together. Joll rubs dust into their backs and with a stick of charcoal writes the word 'enemy'. The prisoners are then beaten till their backs are washed clean by sweat and blood. The soldiers are instructed



by Joll to offer their canes to the public so as to enable the crowd to participate in the beatings. A girl is pushed to the front of the crowd by her friends and encouraged to beat a prisoner, which she does to the applause of the crowd. Lenta points out that, in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, "the spectacular torture appears as a dramatization of Foucault's account of public torture in a colonial setting, except that in Foucault's account is what criminals are sentenced to following their trial and conviction" (75-76). The purpose for which this torture is inflicted in *Waiting for the Barbarians* is to destroy the resistance of the Empire because the empire itself feared the black population. After the Magistrate returns from taking the barbarian girl back to her people and is constructed as "treasonously consorting with the enemy" (85), he is imprisoned. He understands the purpose of his imprisonment. He will be "turned into a creature that believes in nothing" (89), forced to shift his attention away from political opposition and to fixate on the alleviation of his material discomfort.

The Magistrate is brought out of his cell periodically and humiliated and abused in the public yard. He is reduced to the state of powerlessness. Mandel, another officer of the Third Bureau, and his assistant force a pipe down the Magistrate's throat and pour pints of salt water into his stomach until it "coughs and retches and flails and voids itself" (126). His torture is to shut up, incommunicado, in a dark room, deprived of clean clothes and toilet facilities, to have his nose "rubbed in the quotidian" (96). The Magistrate tracks the progress of his internment, "I walked into that cell a sane man sure of the rightness of my cause ... but after two months ... I am much less sure of myself" (104-5). His commitment to resist the Empire's categorizations has become secondary to his craving for human contact, freedom and the creature comforts of life.

Apartheid in South Africa was a system of legalized racial segregation enforced by the National Party, South African government between 1948 and 1994. Apartheid legislation classified South Africa's inhabitants and visitors into racial groups like black, white, coloured and Indian. The system of apartheid sparked significant internal resistance. The government responded to a series of uprisings and protests with police brutality, which in turn increased

local support for the armed resistance struggle. In response to popular and political resistance the apartheid government resorted to detentions without trial, torture, censorship and the banning of political opposition from organizations.

Coetzee began to write *Age of Iron* in 1986 after the declaration of a State of Emergency in South Africa in 1985 and finished in 1989, before negotiations began gradually to dismantle apartheid in the 1990s. This is quite a surprisingly realistic work for a writer whose previous novels have portrayed South Africa in mostly allegorical terms. Coetzee tends to steer clear of realism as he sought to transcend the South African situation for a more universal plane of human existence, "...one shouldn't be condemned to being a minor writer," he said in a 1982 interview "because one is a provincial writer, but it is certainly easier to do major work if you have a wider view than a merely provincial view" (qtd. in Rich 473). These years are, in many ways, crucial in the black revolt against apartheid. These are the years of unprecedented violence and thousands of blacks are killed in the struggle for equality.

*Age of Iron* strikes a different note in its brilliant portrayal of the dilemma of the white minority in post-apartheid South Africa. Mrs. Curren is an example of the paralysed liberal. She is quite different from the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. She lives with the black people like Vercueil, Bheki and Florence. Mrs. Curren witnesses the warfare conducted by the security forces against the insurrectionary youth, who are inspired in turn by a notion of ungovernability, defined by the exiled political leadership. Coetzee uses two memorable slogans of the period, "liberation before education" and "Freedom or death!" (Coetzee, *Age* 68, 163). The killing and oppression continue, Mrs. Curren witnesses the death throes of the system. The action unfolds in Cape Town, "where a century ago the patricians of Cape Town gave orders that there be erected spacious homes for themselves and their descendants in perpetuity, foreseeing nothing of the day when, in their shadows, the chickens would come home to roost" (159).

During apartheid regime, South African government segregated education, medical care and other public services from the blacks. There is



violence in townships, the police brutality and a breakdown of normal life. Nistandra comments, "The political imbroglio of the 1980s has been seen as one of the most important revolts against the white rule" (24). The Western Cape Student Action Committee had boycotted the schools when emergency was declared in 1985. The boycott intensified as the parents, teachers and student organizations also got involved in the turmoil. The new policy of divide and rule, "devised by the government contributed to bitterness among the blacks because a new parliament was created with three chambers: one each for whites, coloured and Indians" (Head 131). The protests described in the novel reflect the struggle of black people against their marginalization.

Blacks were not allowed onto the streets of towns in the Cape Colony after dark and had to carry their passes at all times. Natives were discriminated against every facet of life. They stated where and how they could live, travel, work, be educated, get married and mingle. As a result of this separation, many blacks were separated from their life. Police officers could arrest anyone, most often blacks, for six months and detain them without a hearing. While in custody, many died as a result of the torture by police men. The police have a free hand under emergency regulations to dispense casual injury or death at random, and they do so; on the other side, the young militants of the townships have resorted to a hardened rhetoric of absolutes, sacrificing their youth to the all-encompassing demands of the struggle. Perhaps the most striking political feature of this period was the warfare conducted by the security forces against the insurrectionary youth who were inspired in turn by a notion of uncontrollable defined by the exiled political leadership, partly in response to the growing mood of the townships and the internal successes of the united democratic front.

One of the significant features of rebellions was the educational boycott. Black children, as young as nine or ten, left schools to wage a war against the discrimination being meted out of them. They stayed away from schools exams and raised slogans such as 'Liberation before education'. These ideas are echoed by Bheki and John in *Age of Iron*. These boys have chosen to opt out of school. Bheki describes education as an ideological control imposed by the

state to make us fit into the apartheid system. The novel, "evokes a tension between the educational ideas she stands for and the contemporary condition of South African education" (Yeoh, "Love" 108).

The black education system within 'white South Africa' by design prepared blacks for lives as a labouring class. The education system is designed to insist as the apartheid system. Coetzee, in *Age of Iron* has clearly written about the education system that treats black as criminals. When Mrs. Curren questions Bheki for not going to school he replies, "We do nothing, we just say we are not going to school. Now they are waging terror against us. They are terrorists". "Why won't you go to school?" "What is school for? It is to make us fit into the apartheid system" (67). Coetzee through his writings has given a clear picture of a system that inflicts brutalities on the black. Through this incident, he has portrayed the way blacks are treated and how whites take an upper hand because they fear the black population. Apartheid is a horrible form of government which not only takes the freedom of blacks but also it breaks down a community that is never given a chance to express itself.

In *Age of Iron* Coetzee has poignantly shown the flaw of apartheid reflected in the behaviour of the children. They have hardened up and feel no need of parents. In the novel Mrs. Curren feels irritated because of her servant Florence's son Bheki and his nameless friend. Bheki is there because the student has burned their schools in Guguletu. He spends his time by bouncing a ball against a wall or by listening to the radio. He is considered as hard to embrace. When Mrs. Curren argues that Bheki should be in school and the students shouldn't burn down the school since education is a privileged one, Florence says she cannot talk to them that, "there are no mothers and fathers". (39). Bheki is both the child of death and, in Florence's words, a child of the whites. He is in-between the old dying world and Florence's new one. Florence has lost her influence over Bheki because she has had no response to the injustice they suffer, and Bheki and his friend need to rebel. To resist injustice and bring the new world of loving embrace to birth he has to become like iron and hard to embrace. He is cut off from the chain of souls. Florence accuses the whites of having made



Bheki cruel and adds that she is glad that they are like iron.

Coetzee skilfully handles the effects of the apartheid system in his novels. It is only because of the racial segregation that Vercueil has been left out on the roads roaming here and there, hanging around the parking lots on Mill Street cadging money from shoppers, drinking under the overpass and eating out of refuse cans. One can easily recognize the blacks during that time. Likewise Mrs. Curren also recognizes the black man, Vercueil who has no way of living, "One of the homeless for whom August, month of rains, is the worst month" (4). On the other hand, Mrs. Curren lives a luxurious life in her big house alone. She has good clothes, food and medical care, but her servant Florence lives in an outer area. N.M. Aston comments, "Even the minimum rights as human beings denied to them, rendering them incapable of seeing the light of freedom and comfortable living" (9).

Coetzee's novels have been centrally concerned with colonialism and its effects on human consciousness. In Guguletu, Mrs. Curren faces the pitiless violence that is ranging in the townships. When Florence receives a phone call about Bheki, she takes Mrs. Curren to Guguletu to find him. Through Florence, Coetzee exposes to the readers about Guguletu, she says "They were shooting again yesterday. They were giving guns to the *witdoeke* and *witdoeke* were shooting" (89). They meet Florence's cousin Mr. Thabane and he guides them to Guguletu. In an incredible down pour, they witness a scene of arson and violence where men are burning the huts of poor people and beating them. The most oppressed among the victims of imperialism are peasants and women. Coetzee brings out the humiliation of black people through these lines, "A man in a black overcoat swung an axe. With a crash a window burst ... As if released from a cage, a woman with a baby in her arms flew out of the house, followed by three barefoot children" (95).

After Mrs. Curren and Mr. Thabane enter the site where the full horror becomes apparent. Bheki has been murdered by the police, "Blood flowed in a sheet into the boy's eyes and made his hair glisten, in dripped on to the pavement; it was everywhere. I did not know blood could be so dark,

so thick, so heavy" (57). His body is laid out with four others; eyes open to the terror of death. Coetzee portrays the body of five boys left out in rain as follows, "Against the far wall, shielded from the worst of the rain, were five bodies neatly laid out. The body in the middle was that of Florence's Bheki. He still wore the grey flannel trousers, white shirt, and maroon pullover of his school" (102).

Coetzee's writing seeks for itself the task of bearing witness to the abundance of real suffering engendered by apartheid. Mrs. Curren is overcome with emotion and after having seen enough says, "It is terrible" (98). She wants to go home. Mr. Thabane challenges her, and he further says it is not just terrible but, "it is a crime" (98). When Mrs. Curren is witnessing the fight between the people, she notices a woman screaming in a high and loud voice, as the black people have no way to go away from the affected places. They have to be there and the apartheid system has made them live in these places. When she addresses her inability to show such sight to Mr. Thabane, "I didn't come here to see sights" (97), and expresses her desire to go home, Mr. Thabane asks her some questions, "But what of the people who live here? When they want to go home, this is where they must go. What do you think of that" (97).

Coetzee insists on the autonomy of art in his novels in order to retain the possibility of bearing witness to a history of suffering without betraying it. Sometimes his characters remain speechless before history. Mrs. Curren, after witnessing the horror of the state sponsored violence in Guguletu replies, "These are terrible sights ... They are to be condemned. But I cannot denounce them in other people's words. I must find my own words, from myself. Otherwise it is not the truth ... "To speak of this" ... "you would need the tongue of a god" (98-99). Mrs. Curren's explanations do sound like evasion. She knows she should do something and that there is nothing for her to do. Crimes should be stopped. To go home after witnessing a crime is to deny what one has seen. There is a lie and a duality in the very failure to act. To then return to normal life is shameful. This failure guarantees the inevitable and irreparable break between the old world and the



new. At the end of the scene Bheki is dead, enfolded permanently in the arms of his other parent.

Mrs. Curren's journey to Guguletu allows her to see that no one is free, neither white nor black, she thinks, "When madness climbs the throne, who in the land escapes contagion?" (105). The madness follows her home when a friend of Bheki's goes to the boy's room for a gun. Later he is trapped in her house by the police. Despite her protests the police commandeer her house, and in one of the novel's most chilling scenes they force her outside, where she hears the explosion of a concussion grenade, then shots, then sees the boy's body being taken away. In going to site C, Mrs. Curren has abandoned the sanctuary of her middle-class life and afterward she can never forget those desolate flats.

Coetzee and his culture of racism matured together in South Africa. During the closing decades of the twentieth century, Coetzee becomes one of the country's most acute and articulate observers of the stunted and brutalized society to which these policies of segregation and alienation gave rise. Throughout his literary career, directly and obliquely, openly and allegorically, Coetzee has laid open the poverty of spirit with which South Africa has been diseased what he has called a failure of love. In a culture observed with skin colour, Coetzee's writing slices beneath the skin, to expose the very nervous and sinews defining those pathologies of power and perversion called 'South Africa'.

Thus, the novels of Coetzee point out that violence hurts both the victim and the victimizer. For him, by using violence the colonizers are able to rule over the colonized people. It is also seen that violence made fissure, division and conflict among the colonizers themselves. It indicates the institution of colonialism is brutal, destructive and exploitative not only for the colonized but for the colonizers as well. In a nutshell, it is seen that through his fiction Coetzee has presented violence with different purposes, to find truth, to impose and destroy identity, as a weapon of rebel, a way of survival and an act of colonialism.

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