

Existential and Identity Crisis in the Novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* by JM Coetzee

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INTRODUCTION

The novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* is an attempt to fictionalise Coetzee's political concern with regard to the institution of apartheid in South Africa. Apartheid is a system of racial segregation. The novel may rightly call a commentary of colonialism. Besides this one can find use of violence and torture from the perspective of Post colonialism. In this regard Kailash C. Baral remarks in his book *Introduction to JM Coetzee- Critical Perspective*: "perhaps the only one who is rigorously engaged in exploring the ontological and other issues crucial to the fictional discourse...choosing his own voice of articulation and in particular, locating himself in the complex historical past and in the fractured social present of post-apartheid South Africa." (Baral 11).

While Coetzee was in the USA, he started to write this novel in 1977. In the prior years the world witnessed the Soweto up rise followed by Steve Biko's death in police custody. There police were given full freedom to shoot down any so-called insurgent. At that time many of black people died in detention camps. The South African White government restricted media to report any kind of incidents regarding violence. Media was not allowed to report related to violence, torture, killing and detention. Government ordered the foreign journalists to leave South Africa and if any journalists and writers writing on the issue, they were put behind the bars to death. A magazine, any book or every newspaper article to be published were brought under censorship. Censorship first cuts them and then only allowed for printing and publishing. Coetzee himself has expressed his view on this media censorship so, it can be said that Coetzee's choice for unspecified local and unidentified magistrate directly points out to the contemporary social and political condition of South Africa.

EXISTENTIAL CRISIS AND QUEST FOR IDENTITY

The quest for identity and existential crisis are highly explored theme among authors and critical theorists. When thoroughly examined the South African literature, search for identity and existential crisis is one of the main themes and Coetzee is not exemption. The present research paper deals with the theme of quest for identity and existential crisis in the novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

The novel explains the real suffering created by apartheid and by the history of colonialism. Coetzee derived the title of the novel from Cavafy's poem name "Waiting for the Barbarians." Cavafy's poem "Waiting for the Barbarians" concludes the formal entangles and richness of the Empire. Besides this, the poem is about the barbarian drive out as they are remarked to place in relation to the matters of Empire. If Barbarian exist then Empire gain power to rule over them so it can be said that Empire's existence is depended on the existence of Barbarian.

The novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* was published in 1980 when the oppressive apartheid government started to draw attention on international level. Novel shows the depiction of oppression and the root of oppression is an existential crisis. An unnamed Magistrate is a narrator of novel. He is an isolated figure but lives a life of peace and happiness. There is not any direct or indirect reference regarding his family. Novels title *Waiting for the Barbarians* explores the existence of existentialism in the novel and shows the notion of meaninglessness. When we talk about existentialism then the great work of Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* first comes in our mind. The title of the novel is as similar as the existential play *Waiting for Godot*. Play's title advocates the meaningless waiting and absurdity of life. The play begins with 'waiting' and ends with 'waiting' for a man named Godot but he didn't appear in front of Vladimir and Estragon, other two characters of the play. Around them the action of the play turns. They are pointlessly waiting for Mr. Godot. So in relation to this it can be said that 'waiting' is the focal point of the play and it raises the question about life and search to find meaning of the life remain hopeless.

The word 'waiting' is an existential expression of meaninglessness. Vladimir and Estragon can move away but did not. So it can be said that their existence is dependent upon Godot therefore they must continue with the act of 'waiting' without doing anything meaningful. P. Cavafy's poem also entitled "Waiting for the Barbarians" which is Coetzee adopted for his novel. Few lines from the poem "Waiting for the Barbarians", "Everyone going home lost in thought?/ Because night has fallen and the barbarians haven't come./There are no barbarians any longer."(*WFB* 76)

In Beckett's play Mr. Godot never arrived, same as the barbarians in Cavafy's poem. In the poem, the Romans are fallen into to an unspecified but a serious problem without the existence of barbarians and the problem are related to their existence. The Romans identified themselves with respect to those barbarians but since 'barbarians' are no longer there, the Romans have fallen into their own existential crisis. This is the same for the novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, when the novel opens there is rumour about barbarian. The empire and its citizens remain in a regular state of 'waiting for the barbarians'. But there 'waiting' is meaningless because no barbarians come last they are 'waiting and waiting'. In the novel, the word 'waiting' indicates empires continuous fear of barbarians attack means purposelessness.

The idea of existential crisis is a theoretical offshoot of the philosophy known as Existentialism. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche are considered the unequivocal fathers of existentialism. Existentialism is the philosophy of 'Being', coupled with its inherent fear of encountering the danger of Nothingness and shows the attitude of life with new point of view. The experience of existential crisis of the coloniser and the colonised are different. According to B.B. Homayra and A. Eshita, "Colonialism is a state of mind fuelled by the superciliousness of superiority originated from supremacy in complexion, economic solvency and crude political ideology. It imperialistically creates existential crisis by absorbing inner spirits of any free man. This tyrannical philosophy endows the colonizers with immense despotic empowerment to rule people who are considered as unruly blended with animalistic attitude." (Homayra and Eshita 173-180). In fact the coloniser's mind set as superior to the colonised in all respect such as culturally, politically, economically and socially. It is the basis reason behind the fixity with existential crisis for the coloniser. In addition to this both writers B.B. Homayra and A. Eshita points out that how George Orwell was 'de-existentialised' under the obsessive strains of the conditional pressure and shot the elephant in Shooting an Elephant, as well, the colonisers also go down under same pressure once their superiority is anyhow challenged.

The term 'barbarians' is imaginary and a mentally created in the novel and the logic behind creation and application of this word is an attempt to self defining the position of superiority and existential force in the capacity of a coloniser. So, in order to maintain that position of superiority and existential validity, the coloniser must use violence and torture. One must confess to answering the above sequence of questions, that literally there is no act of 'waiting for the barbarians' by the empire in the novel, since truly there was no 'barbarians' in the frontier theoretically, and not practically, the colonisers were waiting for the 'barbarians', in order to highlight their identity.

CONCLUSION

The idea of existential crisis is also known as existentialism. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche are considered the fathers of existentialism. It is the philosophy of 'being' coupled with its inherent fear of encountering the danger of nonexistence. In the novel, the empire endorsed the fame and created the identity of the 'barbarians' in order to identify their own identity. At the end of the novel the whole place turns into a chaos. The Magistrate refuses to leave the place and decides to tell the truth and expresses the sense of his lack of cultural belonging. Thus, still he is not sure for both his future and identity in a colonial context that keeps changing.

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