

# War, Trauma, and Otherness in Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*

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الحرب والصدمة والأخرية في رواية "انتظار البرابرة" لكوتزي

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تستكشف هذه الورقة البحثية العلاقة بين الحرب والصدمة النفسية ومفهوم الآخر في رواية في انتظار البرابرة" لكوتزي، وبين نظرية ما بعد الاستعمار ودراسات الصدمة النفسية. وبالاستناد إلى أفكار إدوارد سعيد حول مفهوم "الآخر"، وتحليل فرانز فانون للعنف الاستعماري، ونظرية الصدمة النفسية لكاثي كاروث، تُبين الدراسة أن القوة الإمبريالية تعتمد في واقع صناعة القوة و العدو كمخفيات وراء خطابات رنانة لتبرير سلطتها. ويُظهر تحليل النص أن تصوّر ما بعد الاستعمار الآخر كبربري خطير حتى في غياب أي تهديد خارجي حقيقي. وبتعزيز هذا التصور عمليًا بالعنف الممنهج، ولا سيما التعذيب الذي يُعد شكلاً من أشكال السيطرة وإنتاج المعرفة. وفي الوقت نفسه، تُظهر الرواية الآثار الصادمة لهذا العنف، ليس فقط على المستعمر، بل أيضًا على المُستعمر، مما يلحق ضررًا بالغًا بحالتهم النفسية وشخصيتهم الأخلاقية. تُبين أيضًا هذه الورقة، بالاستناد إلى نظريتي ما بعد الاستعمار والصدمة النفسية، أن الحرب في رواية "في انتظار البرابرة" ليست رد فعل حتميًا على الخطر، بل ظاهرة أيديولوجية تُؤدّد الشعور بالاختلاف والصدمة، وتكشف في الوقت نفسه عن عدم استقرار القوة الإمبريالية بطبيعتها. يمكن للنقاش والحوار أن يُسلط الضوء بشكل أوضح على الاختلافات داخل الرواية، وأن يربطها بشكل مباشر بالتحليل النصي. بالاعتماد على نظرية ما بعد الاستعمار لتحليل عملية خلق القوة الإمبريالية للهيمنة والحفاظ عليها.

## Abstract

This paper explores how war, trauma, and the creation of otherness in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) by J. M. Coetzee (1940) is connected to the postcolonial theory and the trauma studies. Using the ideas of Edward Said (1935–2003) on otherness, the analysis of colonial violence by Frantz Fanon (1925–1961) and the theory of trauma by Cathy Caruth (1955–), the paper argues that imperial power is actually reliant on the discursive creation of an imagined enemy in order to justify its authority. The analysis of the text shows that the Empire creates the Other as a dangerous barbarian when there is no actual external threat. This construction is practically reinforced with systematic violence, especially torture that is a form of control and knowledge production. Meanwhile, the novel has shown the traumatic effects of such violence, not only on the colonized, but also the colonizer, and has a debilitating effect on their psychological states and moral character. Incorporating the postcolonial and trauma theory, this paper demonstrates that war in *Waiting for the Barbarians* is not an unavoidable reaction to danger but an ideological phenomenon that creates otherness and trauma and at the same time reveals the natural instability of imperial power. The argument and discussion could emphasize differences within the novel more explicitly and could be more directly connected to the textual analysis. The paper relies on the postcolonial theory to analyze the process of imperial power creating and maintaining domination. **Keywords:** Postcolonialism, war, Trauma. Identity, and Otherness;

## 1. Introduction

The interrelation between war, trauma, and the construction of otherness constitutes a central concern in postcolonial literary studies, where imperial authority frequently depends on the fabrication of an external enemy to legitimize its dominance. The concept of war in *Waiting to Barbarians* is not introduced as a reaction to a real external danger but it is a discursive formation that allows the Empire to justify violence and maintain its power. The theory of *Orientalism* (1976) by Edward Said can be instrumental in the explanation of this

process because Said believes that the imperial power relies on the creation of the other as inferior and dangerous to legitimize the domination. As mentions in: "The Orient was almost a European invention" (1). Said argues that imperial discourse constructs the "Orient" as an inferior and threatening Other in order to affirm the superiority of the West (3). Postcolonial theory emphasizes that "othering is a way of defining and securing one's own identity through the stigmatization of others" (Nirmala 1). The Empire defines itself through opposition to the "barbarians," reinforcing hierarchical power relations between self and other. The magistrate embodies a fragmented identity, caught between loyalty to the Empire and sympathy for the colonized. His divided consciousness reflects the instability produced by colonial power structures (Al-Badarneh 121–22). The concept of "waiting" in the novel reflects a tension between action and passivity, revealing deeper philosophical implications of time and history (Matsuura 40). Furthermore, this is exactly the role of the so-called barbarians in the novel by Coetzee, as they were not a very definite or visible opponent but rather an imagined one to enable the Empire to justify its expansion and domination. The constant threat of a barbarian revolt, though there is no tangible evidence of this event, shows that the war is not a creation of material reality, but an ideological need to preserve the identity of the empire. The alleged enemy, as the Magistrate notices, is mainly made up of penniless tribesmen who do not raise any real threat (17), thus revealing the disconnect between the imperial discourse and the actual reality. Such a break between the representation and the reality is in line with what Said describes as the discourse of colonialism that not only describes the other but also constructs it to exist within the systems of knowledge and power. The story of the Empire turns the ambiguity into aggression and builds a strict dichotomy between the notions of civilization and barbarism which stabilize the power of the Empire. War is in this way a performative discourse, in that it performs the threat it purports to be in opposition to, and thus reinforces the ideological forms through which imperial dominance is maintained (32). Simultaneously, the understanding of colonial violence offered by Fanon makes this argument even more profound, as it shows that the very basis of colonialism is coercion and dehumanization. To Fanon, the colonial world is a compartmentalized world where power is upheld by physical and psychological oppression of the colonized (3). The tactics of interrogation practised by Colonel Joll can be considered the illustration of this reasoning because torture becomes one of the primary means according to which the Empire demonstrates the power over the bodies of the other. "The fact that he says that the truth is pain, everything is doubt" (Coetzee 5), shows how violence is turned into a weapon of epistemological power, with the truth itself being mined through pain. This, in Fanonian terminology, is the dehumanization of the native into a violable and disciplined body deprived of agency and humanity. Nevertheless, Coetzee develops his novel beyond the analysis of colonial violence by predicting its traumatic impact. According to Caruth, trauma is a very overwhelming experience that cannot be fully incorporated into consciousness and recurs as a form of symptoms (4). The bodies of the prisoners, especially those of the barbarian girl, in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, are marked by trauma, and her mutilated body is a silent witness of the imperial cruelty. The fact that she could not express her suffering is the inability to speak of her trauma as Caruth states the unspeakability of the trauma when the experience is beyond the language and the narrative level. Simultaneously, Stef Craps claims that the Western theory of trauma tends to devalue non-Western ones by not considering historical and communal aspects of colonial trauma (2). Coetzee dispels this delimitation by placing torture in a wider context of imperial violence, the cultural and political aspects of which are its focus. Furthermore, the fact that the colonial violence is a two-way process is supported by the traumatic experience of the colonizer, as Fanon revealed. The psychological fragmentation of the Magistrate is what can be interpreted as secondary or ethical trauma because the more he is troubled by the violence committed in the name of the Empire, the more disturbed he becomes. That he is unable to come to terms with the fact that he is part of the colonial order and his moral values as the victim of the colonial regime shows how trauma disrupts not only the oppressed but even those who are in comity with the systems of domination. The fact that the Empire is obsessed with an unseen threat also creates a climate of paranoia and fear, which serves as an example of what Fanon defines as the psychological pathology of colonialism, where violence leads to an external oppression and internal fragmentation. (52) As fear threat in these lines: "There is no woman living along the frontier who has not dreamed of a dark barbarian hand... Show me a barbarian army and I will believe" (Coetzee 8). Notably, Coetzee reveals the eventual collapse of this system because he shows that the imperial violence is self-destructive. The attack on the barbarians fails in a state of confusion and disorientation where the soldiers are led to the desert and overcome not by an actual enemy but by the uncertainty itself. (144) This is what Fanon means when he claims that colonial violence ultimately works against itself since the effort to kill the Other dislodges the very power structures that rely on its presence. In this respect, war is produced as deceptive and devastating, displaying the weakness of the imperial power. (249)

the truth that is: "Pain is truth; all else is subject to doubt... Prisoners are prisoners" (Coetzee 24). Therefore, combining the theory of otherness by Said, the theory analysis of colonial violence by Fanon, and the theory of trauma allows the film, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, to introduce war as a self-destructing and constructed project. The novel illustrates that the imperial power is based on the continuous manufacturing of the perceived opponent and the creation of traumatic effects which at the same time undermine the individual subjectivity and the stability of the institution. War, however, is not a response to necessity but an ideological and violent process that reveals the deep instability of the very core of colonial power as clarify in this: "Once in every generation... there is an episode of hysteria about the barbarians" (Coetzee 9). At the same time, Coetzee complicates the binary between colonizer and colonized through the figure of the Magistrate, whose psychological fragmentation reflects the moral contradictions of imperial power. Positioned between complicity and resistance (Said 3). This study argues that *Waiting for the Barbarians* represents war not as a response to actual threat but as a constructed narrative that legitimizes imperial violence, while simultaneously revealing how trauma functions as both a consequence and instrument of colonial power. By integrating postcolonial theory and trauma studies, this paper demonstrates that Coetzee's novel ultimately exposes the self-destructive logic of empire, in which the construction of the other leads to the erosion of ethical, political, and psychological stability.

## 2. The theoretical Framework of Concepts and the argument in the novel

The theoretical paradigm of the present research incorporates the postcolonial theory and trauma studies to analyze how war and violence are interrelated and influence the process of otherness construction in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. These frameworks allow one to critically examine the way in which the imperial power functions discursively and materially, creating regimes of domination, which are maintained by ideological structures and traumatic effects. The main focus of this analysis is the concept of otherness that Said proposed in *Orientalism*. who showed that the imperial discourse is not an objective and objective depiction of the other but rather forms it within systems of knowledge and power (3). In this context, the colonized subject is portrayed as irrational, inferior and possibly dangerous, thus justifying the legitimacy of the power and growth of the colonizer. Notably, Said points out that these representations are not passive representations, but active constructions, which are fuelled by political and ideological interests. That is why, in this respect, one may interpret the character of the barbarian in the novel by Coetzee as a discursive figure who helps the Empire to position itself as civilized and excuse its violence against those who it marginalizes. To add to the analysis offered by Said, the theory of colonial violence by Fanon gives the concept of imperial power a material and psychological perspective. Fanon points out in the book, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), that colonialism is violent in nature; it is organized based on physical domination and dehumanization of the colonized.(41) He explains the colonial world as a polarized place where power is held by using coercion, surveillance and force. More importantly though, Fanon also shows that this kind of violence has far-reaching psychological effects not only on the colonized but on the colonizer too, creating an atmosphere of inner fragmentation and moral decay.(249) This dual influence of violence is an indispensable part of comprehending how the colonial systems themselves perpetuate domination and destabilize the identity of individuals. Besides the postcolonial theory, there is the theory of trauma, which provides a critical approach in the study of the psychological consequences of violence in the long term. According to Caruth, trauma is an overwhelming experience that cannot be completely processed upon occurrence and reoccurs later and in recurrent forms (4). This notion is especially applicable to the setting of colonial violence where suffering does not always lend itself to easy representation but instead manifests itself as silence, fragmentation as well as inscribed in the body. "Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event... but in the way that it's very unassimilated nature returns to haunt the survivor later on" (4). In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, trauma is not a personal condition but a widespread phenomenon, which builds the identity of a person as well as the societal consciousness. Nevertheless, Craps states that conventional theory of trauma has been reduced to the Western experience, ignoring the historical and cultural particularity of trauma in the postcolonial realities. (2) Craps proposes a decolonization of trauma studies that acknowledges the collective, political, and transgenerational aspects of the suffering that has been brought about by imperialism and war. Introducing this point of view, this paper places the concept of trauma in a larger context of colonial authority, where the violence, as represented in the novel by Coetzee, is necessary to be perceived not merely as a psychological trauma but also as a historical and structural event as: "She cannot speak of what was done to her... I know somewhat too much... there seems to be no recovering" (153). A combination of these theoretical methods proves that the otherness, violence, and trauma are very interrelated processes that support imperial systems. This is the construction of the Other discursively as discussed by Said,

the imposition of this construction by violence as discussed by Fanon, and the psychological lingering effects of this imposition as discussed by the theory of trauma. Combining these points of view, the current research gives a universal tool of evaluating the role of the novel in criticizing the ideological and materialist basis of colonial rule and revealing its fragility.

### 3. The postcolonial Framework and the Construction of the Other

The notion of otherness as presented by Said in his book, *Orientalism*, offers the key frame of reference to this process. As discussed in: *Orientalism*, the concept of the other is constructed through discourse. It is not the Other as objective reality that imperial discourse represents but an active process in which it creates systems of knowledge and power (3). In this context, the colonized subject is portrayed as irrational, inferior, and could be dangerous at the same time, which makes the authority and expansion of the colonizer legitimate. Notably, the representations are not neutral but ideologically motivated, and they fulfill political and cultural interests. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the barbarian is a person who illustrates this process. The barbarians have not been defined as a real opponent but as a discursive tool with which the Empire can define itself as civilized. By means of this polar opposition between civilization and barbarism, the Empire excuses its violence and supports its power. The Empire's construction of the barbarian as an enemy reflects what Said describes as the discursive production of the other. As the Magistrate observes, "We have no enemies, but the Empire thinks otherwise" (Coetzee 85), highlighting the gap between reality and imperial representation. As in this point also the barbarians are not to be trusted and: "There is no woman living along the frontier who has not dreamed of a dark barbarian hand... Show me a barbarian army and I will believe" (Coetzee 8).

### 4. Colonial Violence and Psychological Fragmentation

The theory of colonial violence given by Frantz Fanon offers a significant addition to the work of Said since it focuses on the material and the psychological aspects of imperial domination. Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* maintains that colonialism is violent in nature by organizing around physical domination and dehumanization of the colonized (41). He talks of the colonial world as a polarized place where power is upheld by coercion, surveillance and force. Importantly, Fanon also emphasizes the fact that colonial violence has psychological effects on both the colonized and the colonizer. According to him, it is the colonial system that creates an internal fragmentation and moral disintegration, which is experienced by everybody concerned in its system (249). This is a two-fold influence of violence that is crucial to the way in which imperial systems perpetuate themselves, and at the same time, undermine individual identity. The conflict between the Magistrate and the colonial system in Coetzee is evident in the intricate psychological struggle of the former whose role in the colonial system causes a moral and emotional disturbance. Colonel Joll's assertion that "pain is truth; all else is subject to doubt" (Coetzee 5), exemplifies Fanon's claim that colonial violence is used to assert control and produce knowledge through domination. The destruction of the settlement reflects the systematic use of violence described by Fanon, where colonial power is maintained through coercion and force (Fanon 41). As mentioned by Coetzee "They came to the granary at dawn and set fire to it". (103) The Magistrate's realization that: "I am the lie that Empire tells itself" (120), reflects Fanon's idea that colonial violence produces psychological fragmentation within the colonizer (Fanon 249).

### 5. Trauma and the Aftermath of Violence

The theory of trauma offers a critically relevant framework that can be used to evaluate the psychological consequences of violence in colonial settings in the long term. According to Caruth, trauma is the experience that is so overwhelming that it is not possible to process it during the time it is happening and it re-emerges in delayed and repetitive forms. (4) This idea is especially applicable to the idea of waiting of the barbarians, in which pain is frequently manifested through silence, fragmentation and body writing. The barbarian girl's inability to articulate her suffering "She cannot speak of what was done to her" (Coetzee 30) reflects Caruth's concept of trauma as an experience that resists representation (4). Nevertheless, according to Stef Craps, the existing traditional theory of trauma has been significantly influenced by the western experience and fails in most cases to explain historical and cultural particularities of the trauma in the postcolonial environment. (2) Craps demands a decolonizing of the trauma studies which sees the collective and political aspects of the suffering that imperialism and war bring about. The physical scars on the girl's body illustrate how trauma is inscribed on the body, reinforcing Craps's argument that postcolonial trauma must be understood in its historical and political context. (2) With the inclusion of this point of view, it is possible to view trauma in Coetzee's novel not as a personal state of the mind but as a structural effects of colonial violence. The novel shows that trauma influences the individual identity, as well as the group experience, and shows the legacy of imperial domination. The Magistrate's statement, "I shiver, but I know it is not from the cold" (133), reflects the internalization of

trauma, aligning with Caruth's idea of trauma as a delayed and recurring psychological disturbance. (4) Taken together, these theoretical perspectives demonstrate that otherness, violence, and trauma are deeply interconnected processes that underpin imperial systems. Said's theory explains how the Other is constructed discursively, Fanon reveals how this construction is enforced through violence, and trauma theory accounts for the lasting psychological consequences of these processes. By integrating these approaches, this study establishes a comprehensive framework for analyzing how *Waiting for the Barbarians* critiques the ideological and material foundations of colonial power and exposes its inherent instability. The Magistrate's reflection "What has made it impossible for us to live in time like fish in water?" (Coetzee 146), captures the cumulative effects of otherness, violence, and trauma, demonstrating how imperial systems disrupt both personal and collective existence. A combination of the ideas of otherness, colonial violence, and trauma helps to understand that *Waiting for the Barbarians* offers imperial power as a self-destructive and fundamentally unstable system. Since as Said believes, the Empire needs the ongoing creation of an imagined enemy to maintain its power (3), this is replicated in the Magistrate understanding that "We have no enemies, but the Empire thinks otherwise" (Coetzee 85). This discursive creation is physically imposed by force, which, according to Fanon, is the key to the work of colonial domination (41). The method of torture, which the statement that "pain is truth..." (Coetzee 5), sums up, is an example of how authority is ensured by force and not by law. But this violence has traumatizing effects that devastate both the oppressed and the oppressor. Trauma interferes with the integrity of identity and recurs in disturbing forms as Caruth proposes, a state which is apparent in the silence of the barbarian girl and in the mental fragmentation of the Magistrate (4). In such a way, the novel by Coetzee reveals war as a process of creating otherness and trauma and, at the same time, destroys the principles of imperial power, as this war is not a necessary action but is an ideological and violent procedure. Nevertheless, the novel transcends the discursive critique by showing that these constructions are firmly imposed materially by violence. Based on the analysis of Fanon, it is revealed that colonial domination is essentially rooted in coercion whereby power is ensured by physical force, surveillance and the organized dehumanization of the colonized (41). The use of torture especially by Joll shows how violence is normalized as a control mechanism and a way of generating truth. In this regard, the colonized subject body becomes a place of domination where the suffering is the source of domination and the suffering is viewed as a sign of guilt or resistance. However, this system of violence is not two-way, as Fanon goes further to suggest; it creates psychological fragmentation in the colonizer also, undermining the moral and ethical principles of the imperial power (249). The inner struggle of the Magistrate is a perfect illustration of this process because his increasing recognition of the unfairness of the Empire causes a serious crisis of identity and complicity.

### Conclusion

To sum up, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, is a deep and multi-faceted criticism of the imperial authority because it reveals the interplay of otherness, colonial violence and trauma which perpetuate the regimes of domination. According to the theory of otherness by Said, the novel illustrates that the image of the barbarian is not a subjective or existing object but a discursive product created by the imperial ideology to facilitate expansion and domination. According to Said, the construction of the Other is a mechanism in which the colonizer identifies him or herself as superior and, at the same time, justifies the marginalization and dehumanization of those it excludes. It is clear that this process has taken place in the Empire where the existence of a threatening opponent is persistently insisted upon even in the absence of concrete evidence showing that imperial authority relies on the constant manufacture of an alleged enemy. Meanwhile, the novel by Coetzee foreshadows the traumatic impact of imperial violence by stressing that the consequences of imperial violence go way beyond the immediate physical damage. The idea advanced by Caruth on trauma as an experience that cannot be fully understood and reappears as delayed and disruptive makes Caruth's approach a useful to interpreting the psychological aspects of the novel. The barbarian girl with the mutilated body and silence that are the witnesses of the cruelty of the Empire is the representation of the unspeakable nature of trauma where suffering can not be fully revealed and included in the narrative form. Her situation indicates the extent of representation, on how trauma interferes with language and identity. Furthermore, even the personal psychological distress of the Magistrate proves that trauma does not belong to the oppressed only, but also to those who observe or take part in the violent actions, which supports the notion that trauma is a phenomenon that occurs at both personal and group levels. Notably, trauma in postcolonial society should be perceived as a historical and political process that is predetermined by power structures, but not as a single psychological state. The novel by Coetzee follows the same line of thought, placing the issue of trauma in a larger framework of imperial domination, showing how violence has long-term consequences that define individual subjectivity and the collective memory. The

atmosphere of fear, uncertainty, and moral instability that pervades the Empire is very suggestive of how trauma can be embedded into the core of colonial society. Finally, as it turns out in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the mechanisms that preservation of imperial power is based on, i.e. the construction of the other, the application of violence and the generation of trauma, are the same mechanisms that contribute to its destabilization and degradation. In this respect, war is not an inevitable or a defensive reaction but an ideological creation that creates the circumstances of its own defeat. In showing the hypocrisy and frailty of the imperial power, Coetzee questions the validity of the colonial orders and provokes the critical reconsideration of the order which establishes power, identity, and human relations. By uniting the postcolonial and trauma lenses, the novel, in the end, shows that in the quest of domination, external oppression is bound to be the result, as well as the internal disintegration, which is the ultimate disclosure of the high ethical and psychological price of the empire.

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