

03. Interrogating Hegemony in J.M.Coetzee's *Waiting For The Barbarians* (1980) ¹

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Abstract

European imperialism, based on the colonisation of nations from other cultures and identities, is a discriminatory ideology that creates submissive and hegemonised people. These people are oppressed, and the superiority of the coloniser is injected into their minds through the use of force. The countries from Africa to the Caribbean and India were colonised, and they were exploited economically and culturally during colonisation. The indigenous people of those territories were enslaved, and they had to serve the white masters. J.M. Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* fictionalises imperial forces' barbaric attitudes towards the people claimed to be barbarians, and it depicts their inhumane tortures against the so-called barbarians who are speculated to attack. The unnamed Magistrate and his dramatic experiences in the frontier constitute the essence of the work, and the brutality imposed on the prisoners is explicitly given. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the magistrate witnesses the tragedy and continuously interrogates his position. Regarding the colonial acts of the imperial Powers, this study will handle the common thread ideology of hegemony running through postcolonial fiction. It will shed light on the process, dating back to the colonial period, when European powers dominated other nations through violence and tyrannical attitudes. In this context, this article will represent the hegemony created by using force on the people pushed to be the other. It will crystallise hegemony and its reflections in the light of postcolonial and colonial writing, so it will recenter our attention on the colonial gaze.

Keywords: Imperialism, Hegemony, J. M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*

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J.M.Coetzee'nin *Barbarları Beklerken* (1980) Adlı Eserindeki Hegemonyanın İrdelenmesi³

Öz

Farklı kültür ve kimliklere sahip diđer ulusların sömürülmesi temeline dayalı Avrupa Emperyalizmi, hegemonya altına alınmış ve boyun eğen insanların oluşmasına sebep olan ayrımcı bir ideolojidir. Bu insanlar, baskı altına alınmakta ve işgalcinin üstünlüğü güç kullanımı yoluyla zihinlerine kazanılmaktadır. Afrika'dan, Karayipler'e ve Hindistan'a kadar uzanan ülkeler sömürge döneminde kolonileştirilip, aynı dönemde ekonomik ve kültürel açıdan sömürüldüler. Bu bölgelerdeki yerel halk, köleleştirildi ve beyaz efendiye hizmet etmek zorunda bırakıldılar. J. M. Coetzee'nin *Barbarları Beklerken* adlı romanı emperyal güçlerin barbar oldukları iddia edilen insanlara karşı barbarca tutumlarını kurgu yoluyla anlatmaktadır. Roman, saldıracakları spekülasyonu yapılan sözde barbarlara karşı insanlık dışı işkenceleri anlatmaktadır. Romanın özünü isimsiz bir hakim ve bu hakim dramatik deneyimleri oluşturmakta ve mahkumlara uygulanan gaddarlık açık bir şekilde sunulmaktadır. *Barbarları Beklerken* adlı romanda, hakim, sınır bölgesindeki bu trajediye şahit olmakta ve konumunu sürekli olarak sorgulamaktadır. Bu çalışma, sömürge faaliyetleri göz önünde bulundurularak, sömürge sonrası kurgu aracılığıyla işlenen yaygın tema olan hegemonya temasını ele alacaktır. Makale Avrupalı güçlerin diđer ulusları şiddet ve zalimce tutumlar aracılığıyla boyunduruk altına aldığı sömürge dönemine giderek sürece ışık tutacaktır. Bu bağlamda, bu makale güç kullanılarak oluşturulan hegemonyayı ve öteki olmaya zorlanan insanları anlatacak, sömürge ve sonrası yazım ışığında hegemonya ve yansımalarını somutlaştıracak dolayısıyla dikkatimizi yeniden sömürge dönemine çekecektir

Anahtar kelimeler: Emperyalizm, Hegemonya, J. M. Coetzee, *Barbarları Beklerken*

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Introduction

Postcolonialism, which handles the topics related to both colonial and post-colonial periods, goes beyond easy definitions as it deeply presents a context and perspective on the Western and Eastern communities' first encounter in the colonial era and how it still shapes the lives of migrants in the European countries and Indigenous people in the colonised territories. Postcolonialism is the reevaluation of the effects of colonialism and its aftermath, and it is a new form of writing and thinking by the colonised nations. Postcolonialism, as stated by Ray, "can, then, be read as a commitment to a possibility of politics that attempts to readdress history from the perspectives of the marginalized" (2016, p.1). Those marginalised people interrogate the practices whose origins go back to the colonial period and injustices resulting in social and individual conflicts. Postcolonialism is an intellectual field of writing opposing colonial ideology. The term postcolonialism, according to Young,

names a politics and philosophy of activism that contests that disparity, and so continues in a new way the anti-colonial struggles of the past. It asserts not just the right of African, Asian, and Latin American peoples to access resources and material well-being, but also the dynamic power of their cultures, cultures that are now intervening in and transforming the societies of the West (4).

and it covers lots of themes ranging from hegemony, nationalism, ethnicity, subalternity, mimicry, in-betweenness, superiority, hybridity, inferiority, the other, and so on. According to the postcolonial intellectuals like Fanon, Said and Bhabha, Western countries such as France and Great Britain began to exploit the nations from Africa to India in the colonial era, and the unprecedented domination has created discrepancies between the colonised and the coloniser. Although the colonised nations gained their independence after World War II, imperial Powers continue to hold them under their sway, and once colonised people are still hegemonised by the Western ideology that produced subjugated Indigenous people during the colonial era and displaced, racialised migrants in the postcolonial period.

Colonialism, defined by Ocheni and Nwankwo as "the direct and overall domination of one country by another on the basis of state power being in the hands of a foreign power" (2012, p.46) almost dates back to the fifteenth century when European countries directed their interest into the remote territories which were rich in natural resources. The countries from Africa to India and New Zealand were subjugated and colonised by the Western Powers, namely France and Britain. Through colonialism, the occupied and the occupier met for the first time, and the first arrivals to the colonised territories were the new settlers, comprising missionaries, merchants, and soldiers. The first interaction between the two poles provides insights into the hegemonic ideology of the occupier since the use of force dominated the Indigenous people of the dominated territories.

The colonialists, according to Ocheni and Nwankwo, "had to take direct control of the African economy and political administration to produce the type of food required for their industrial workers back home" (2012, p.47). As a result of quick industrialisation, the population in the agricultural regions declined, leading to less production, so European countries considered African countries attractive places to provide the necessary food and even a market for manufactured goods. European Powers, attracted by the natural resources of Africa, created a close link with it and immediately oppressed the natives, who had their unique cultures and values, which later fell apart because of the violent and fragmentary practices of the Western forces.

John Maxwell Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* is one of the most successful depictions of the imperial and colonial mindset. The novel portrays the protagonist- the Magistrate- as the chief

administrator in a small town, which, according to the imperialists, is about to face an uprising by the natives of the territory. Colonel Joll, given as the representative of the distant Empire and the Third Bureau, questions the prisoners and investigates the rumours about the approaching uprising, and he tortures the prisoners and even kills them in order to show how the imperial forces can dominate the Other. As Lance Olsen suggests “The magistrate is not just a country magistrate serving out his days on this lazy frontier but he is also an archaeologist, anthropologist, a digger for “meaning,” a detective, an explorer, a scientist, searching those ruins that lie under the dunes around the settlement” (1985, p.52) so through the magistrate’s lenses, Coetzee takes the readers to witness how people suffer because of exploitation causing deaths and tragedy. Throughout the novel, Colonel Joll’s and his soldiers’ increasingly hostile attitudes toward the victims are given, and Joll is in constant search to confirm his hypothesis that the people surrounding the Empire’s front are planning a full-scale attack. In his attempts to justify his assumption, Joll becomes more brutal, but such brutality as the novel continues, turns into a process in which the Magistrate feels sympathetic towards the victims, and he questions the villainy of the imperial forces. Finally, Coetzee details the magistrate's growing awareness of the implications of colonisation and imperialism and his struggle to break away from it, especially after his encounter with the girl blinded by the soldiers. Upon seeing the girl whose ankles were broken, he decides to take the girl to his people, which will later lead to the magistrate’s torture, but a life with the colonial Other.

Hegemony in *Waiting for the Barbarians*

The word “hegemony” which was not common before the 19th century, “derives from the Greek term *hēgēmonia* (“dominance over”), which was used to describe relations between city-states (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/hegemony>). The use of hegemony in the political field was limited until Antonio Gramsci intensively handled it by stating that “ The supremacy of a class and thus the reproduction of its associated mode of production could only be obtained by brute domination or coercion”. (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/hegemony>). Hegemony is described as a kind of policy indicating a political, cultural, and social predominance. In recent times, hegemony implies the domination of other nations by superpowers. Such a political predominance includes the extension of the term since it affects the relations between states and people from different nations, territories, and ethnicities. Although it may be assumed to cover a direct political dominance of a stronger power over the weaker, hegemony is more than that. A more general dominance shapes people's worldviews and relations. Hegemony, leading to the passivisation of a dominated country or nation, not only stresses political or economic superiority but also experience and consciousness. That is to say, it predominates the cultural structure of a specific nation. As Williams writes, “A lived hegemony is always a process. It is not, except analytically, a system or a structure. It is a realised complex of experiences, relationships, and activities, with specific and changing pressures and limits” (1977, p.112), which may be associated with an ideology suppressing “the other” in different forms in different periods. Moving from the fact that hegemony is a living process repeating itself at different times in different forms, one can trace it to the colonial period when the opposing sides- the occupied and the occupier- first met and the postcolonial era when the so-called independence created dependent migrants in the European metropolises. Postcolonial fiction as a reaction to colonial writing, “differentiating between the colonizer’s ‘superior’ or ‘more civilised’ ways of life and the colonized people’s allegedly ‘inferior’ or ‘savage’ ways” (Okazaki, David and Abelmann, 2008, p.92) presents the impacts of colonialism and its devastating consequences in the minds of the colonized people aftermath of the independence.

J.M. Coetzee’s novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*, in this respect, is one of the prominent works depicting

the brutal hegemony created by the outsider referring to the imperial Powers. Although the novel fictionalises an unnamed Empire, the story strongly represents the serious hegemony introduced by imperialism. In the very beginning of the novel, the magistrate, leading a peaceful life remote from the Empire, is visited by Colonel Joll, who claims that barbarians are about to attack the Empire. The imperial power also hegemonises the magistrate since he is not sure whether the so-called barbarian tribes are going to attack the Empire or not. Although all the information about the tribes and their probable attack is based on a rumour, he serves the benefit of the Empire as suggested in the lines below.

I did not mean to get embroiled in this. I am a country magistrate, a responsible official in the service of the Empire, serving out my days on this lazy frontier, waiting to retire. I collect the tithes and taxes, administer the communal lands, see that the garrison is provided for, supervise the junior officers who are the only officers we have here, keep an eye on trade, preside over the law-court twice a week. (8)

Hegemony is an ideology operating through the dissemination of cultural ideas, political views, and religious thoughts. Among the dominant doctrines, the system created in *Waiting for the Barbarians* is sustained based on military hegemony. In the beginning, although the old man insists on refusing to be one of the barbarians, planning to attack the Empire, as follows;

Excellency," he says. His voice croaks; he clears his throat. "Excellency, 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. Show the Excellencies your sore."(3-4)

He (the old man) is unable to make Colonel Joll believe him, and the two men, one of whom is just a boy, are tortured brutally via Coetzee's expression: "The grey beard is caked with blood. The lips are crushed and drawn back, the teeth are broken. One eye is rolled back, the other eye-socket is a bloody hole". (7) As the lines suggest, the brutal hegemony and coercion suppress the natives who are victimised physically by the outsider legitimising his occupation through force.

The magistrate, represented as the passive beneficiary of the Empire, is depicted as the opposite figure to Colonel Joll, who is dressed in black and wears black sunglasses. From the black image, one can predict what might happen during the interrogation because Colonel Joll with his men get pleasure from their sadistic torture of people who are considered to be weaker. After they catch the old man, the magistrate's dialogue with him is quite ironic since it requires the possible brutal mistreatment and intimidation. It is such a serious warning that Joll will use his own bloody method to learn the truth created by those in power.

"Father, do you see this gentleman? This gentleman is visiting us from the capital. He visits all the forts along the frontier. His work is to find out the truth. That is all he does. He finds out the truth. If you do not speak to me you will have to speak to him. Do you understand?" (3).

Postcolonial novels one of the leading examples of which is *Waiting for the Barbarians* as suggested by Al-Saidi are written to present the unequal racial dichotomy such as "'Self" and "other", "Powerful" and "powerless", "Torturer" and "tortured", "Master" and "slave", "Civilized" and "savage", "Superior" and "inferior", "Human" and "subhuman" (2014, p.96). In the light of what he claims, Coetzee provides readers with an understanding of how the Imperial power constructs the self/other dichotomy through its power and considers the occupied as uncivilised, childish and barbaric. Coetzee's depiction of torture is not limited to the old man and the boy since new nomads are believed to be barbarians, and finally they die because of the bad treatment, especially caused by Joll.

Said theorises that Western colonial and imperial hegemony, representing the non-Western societies as the other, uncivilised and exotic, serves the European practice of power to control the colonised. (1979, p.26) This perpetual exercise of unequal power subjugates nations from different parts of the world. In the novel, the unnamed girl described as the “barbarian girl” (91) is also another figure regarded to be the victim of Joll’s torture. The way she is described by the magistrate demonstrates the devastating hegemonic effects on the colonised woman as well.

The next day she is not there. I speak to the gatekeeper: "There was a woman sitting over there all of yesterday, begging. Where does she come from?" The woman is blind, he replies. She is one of the barbarians the Colonel brought in. She was left behind. A few days later I see her crossing the square, walking slowly and awkwardly with two sticks, the sheepskin coat trailing behind her in the dust. (27)

Contrary to the figures like Colonel Joll and Mandel, who “have psychological conditions that make them ideal torturers” (Waham, Othoman, 2019, p.10), the magistrate who is portrayed as a loyal servant of the Empire changes in time as he helps the blind girl return to her family. Despite many challenges, including the adverse weather conditions, he manages to catch up with the nomads and pays them to take the girl to her family. Being replaced by the new officer, Mandel, the magistrate is blamed for cooperating with the barbarians in the desert. Despite his devotion to his job in the fort, the magistrate, contrary to his demand to be prosecuted, is beaten and tortured without a trial. At that point, one can understand how the hegemonic philosophy others an officer for its gain and judges other people through prejudices. The magistrate is not given a chance to defend himself but is pushed to desperation through imprisonment, stated as: “You are the one and only official we have had to work with on the frontier who has not given us his fullest cooperation”. (123)

Although the magistrate’s transformation is seen as treachery from the imperialist view, it proves him a new character identifying with society and the village people who are considered low. This new transformation enables him to understand the true nature of the invader. Still, the magistrate cannot escape from the violence the torturer uses to punish him, and though he regains his position later, he is also hegemonised, as given below.

Meanwhile, I, the old clown who lost his last vestige of authority the day he spent hanging from a tree in a woman's underclothes shouting for help, the filthy creature who for a week licked his food off the flagstones like a dog because he had lost the use of his hands, am no longer locked up. I sleep in a corner of the barracks yard; I creep around in my filthy smock; (136).

Frantz Fanon, in his *The Wretched of the Earth*, pinpoints that “Europe undertook the leadership of the world with ardour, cynicism, and violence” (1963, p.311), and the Europeans have employed violence as an instrument to dominate other nations for centuries. As a significant example of how violence aims to dehumanise, enslave people, wipe out and destroy all values, *Waiting for the Barbarians* provides insights into the hegemony of the so-called barbarians. Regardless of the lifestyles and morals of the Indigenous people, the physical and psychological torture continues, and Coetzee portrays the problematic situation, stating that the circumstances are so complicated for the village people that they have nothing to do but submit to the invader, and he brings the issues of equity, social justice and inclusion into question. Towards the end of the novel, the soldiers in the frontier continue their injustices by ransacking the shops and abusing their authority by dominating the territory and the people.

Among the small garrison that has been left behind there is more drunkenness than I have ever known before, more arrogance towards the townspeople. There have been incidents in which soldiers have gone into shops, taken what they wanted, and left without paying. Of what use is it for the shopkeeper to raise the alarm when the criminals and the civil guard are the same people? (135).

Colonel Joll, as the authoritarian figure representing the Empire, one day returns to the village, and he confronts hatred and anger because they are the feelings created by the colonial ideology. So the hegemonised people throw bricks at him, which is a clear sign of retaliation against the hegemonising occupier. The reversal of violence in the novel is similar to Fanon's ideology since he claims that violence is the only tool to avenge the invader and it is the only language he understands. On one side, the readers witness the reactions of town's people to the representative of the Empire on the other, they grasp how economic exploitation subjugates other nations in general and the townsfolk in particular in the novel. The imperial ideology clear from the novel creates its inferior, exposed to barbaric practices, resulting in hegemonised and suppressed figures and finally causing cultural hegemony described by Van Der Meer as;

The continuous process through which a dominant group—in this case, the colonizer—tries to attain and maintain the consent of the great majority of the people it rules—here, the colonized. is accomplished through the manipulation of cultural values, norms, beliefs, and traditions in an attempt to validate the ruling group's worldview and make it appear favourable to all. (2020, p.4)

Coetzee, in his novel, interrogates the psychological reflections of the hegemony created by brutal torment as well. Throughout his narration, one can understand that the use of torture proves to be ineffective since the possible attack by the so-called barbarians is nothing but mere speculation. The magistrate wonders if Mandel shows any sign of remorse after the torture sessions. He tries to find out how a human being feels after he tortures innocent people, and how he returns to normal human affairs without any conscience. For that reason, Coetzee voices Magistrate when he asks that question to Mandel, but the imperialist responsible for the hegemonic ideology does not have any reservoir of remorse and conscience since he prioritises his gain in the hegemonised territories. The Magistrate's attempt to comprehend the imperialist's feelings and the indifference of the Mandel, the representative of imperialism, is given as follows.

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? Some kind of purging of one's soul too.... He wrenches himself free and hits me so hard in the chest that I gasp and stumble backwards. "You bastard!" he shouts. "You fucking old lunatic! Get out! Go and die somewhere!" (138)

In Coetzee's novel, European hegemony is constructed in varying degrees, and the disparity created by the privileged Western power over the subaltern is articulated. It is noteworthy that European imperialism subjugated the nomads and fishing folk, thereby altering the course of history. In addition to the social and territorial hegemony, even history is poisoned by imperialism, and it situates itself in the centre of history to destroy cities, "rape of populations" (46) and interfere with the natural order of the earth. As stated below, the world has turned into a catastrophic place, and it is a turmoil, manipulation and intimidation for those who are exposed to torture in the novel.

What has made it impossible for us to live in time like fish in water, like birds in air, like children? It is the fault of Empire! Empire has created the time of history. Empire has located its existence not in the smooth recurrent spinning time of the cycle of the seasons but in the jagged time of rise and fall, of beginning and end, of catastrophe. (146).

Conclusion

European Imperialism, which began in the 15th century, has dominated a wide geographical area and affected the cultures and politics of different nations. Masking their true ideology, imperial powers colonised remote territories and exploited not only their natural resources but also all their values

regarding religions, lifestyles, and national unity. During colonisation, the coloniser used different tools to oppress other ethnic groups with different identities. One of these tools is violence created by the invader in order to hegemonise Indigenous people from other territories. J.M.Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* in this sense, is a leading example to highlight how the violent acts of the superior power hegemonise people. It details hegemony- the product of colonisation- and presents the readers with the brutal and merciless approach to people supposed to be barbarians. Throughout the novel, the villagers are tortured to be hegemonised, and they are exposed to inhumane treatment. Almost all people, no matter their gender or age, are dominated by the use of violence. Hegemony, one of the themes tackled in the colonial depiction, is successfully displayed by Coetzee, and the hegemonic philosophy of Western society is unfolded. To put it simply, exploitation through colonial acts is actualised through the hegemony of the local inhabitants of a specific place. Coetzee's narration reflects that people are more or less forced to suffer from such oppression. The Indigenous people, with their history, are dominated, and the imperialists are far from feeling any remorse or conscience. Not only are local people territorially suppressed, but they are also culturally dominated, leading to a loss of national consciousness. In the context of hegemony, violence is a tool to control less powerful nations, and the imperialist uses it as a way to oppress the imperialised. All in all, Coetzee, in his work, pinpoints the hegemonic ideology created by the imperialist power, and he depicts the experiences of a specific territory and its residents, explaining the colonial acts. *Waiting for the Barbarians* displays the utmost brutality used by the representatives of the imperialist and the devastating impacts of torture as a means to hegemonise a specific nation, which consequently results in the physical, cultural and economic destruction.

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