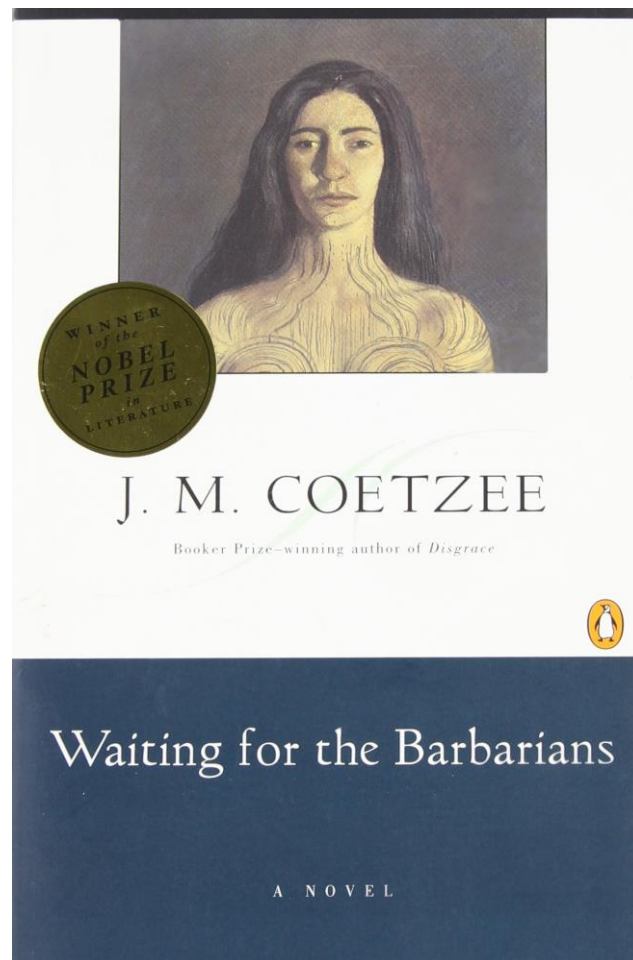


Waiting for the Barbarians:
A Mysterious White-Black Attachment

Mai Malkawi

Full Time Lecturer

The Hashemite University, Jordan



Abstract

This paper examines Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* from a post-colonial perspective. "The post-colonial theory is an area of literary criticism and cultural studies that has come into being in response to the post-war upsurge in literary creativity in countries

formerly under colonial rule and the persistence of colonial, neo-colonial or imperialist influence in the modern world. By analogy, the use of terms such as "post-structuralist" and "post-modern" seem to generate a challenge to universalists' claims." (Simon Eliot and W.R Owens).

In this paper, post-colonial aspects will be examined and analyzed in light of a chosen literary work. This paper aims at displaying and analyzing the strange relationship between the white man and the black barbarian girl in J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarian*. Moreover, the relationship will be analyzed in reference to two chapters of Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*. These chapters are entitled as "The Women of Color And The White Man", "The Man of Color and The White Women".

Key words: post-colonial, white man, black woman, skin, mysterious relationship, colonized, colonizer, race, culture, magistrate.

The Study

Clearly speaking, one of the most questionable issues in Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*, is the white magistrate's relationship with the black barbarian girl. Throughout the novel, there is always one question nagging the reader, as to what attracts a powerful white man to a weak, helpless black woman. In fact, the same question can be applied to the girl, as to why was she willing to stay with the white man although he made her unhappy. As observed, both the white magistrate and the black girl are unnamed, as if to represent two different races (the whites and the blacks), and two identities (the colonizers and the colonized). The relationship between the white male and the black female in *Waiting for the Barbarians* will be discussed through an exploration of the incentives that drive the magistrate and the barbarian girl into establishing and maintaining such a relationship.

Mysterious, Ambiguous Human Relationship

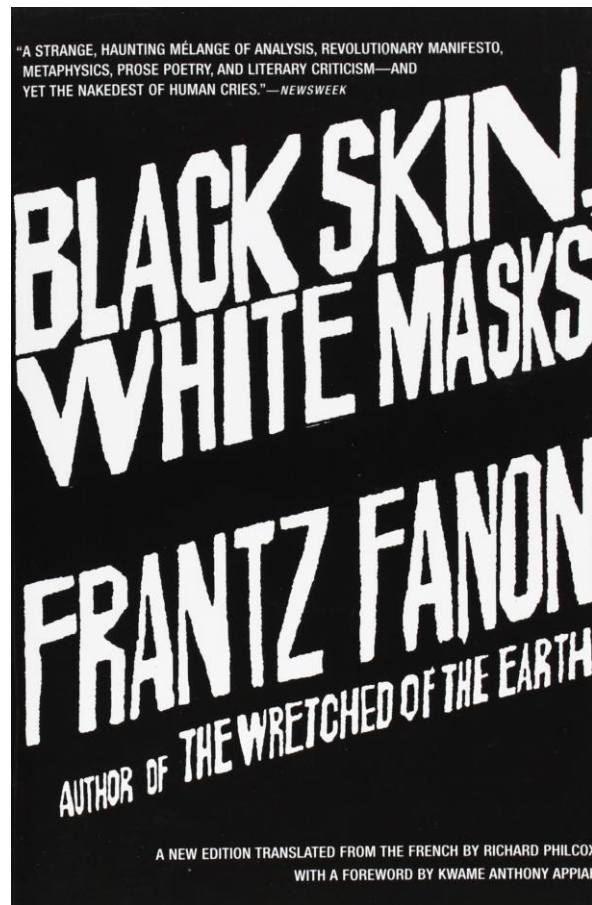
The novel provides a mysterious, ambiguous human relationship that can't be easily called sexual or even intimate. *Waiting for the Barbarians* tells the story of a civil servant ruling a South African colony, who was warned of an imminent barbarian attack, which he made no efforts to face. However, an officer working for an intelligence agency arrived and

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 15:7 July 2015

Mai Malkawi

Waiting for the Barbarians: A Mysterious White-Black Attachment

performed a series of false arrests and tortures against the natives of the land. When the interrogations came to an end, we had seen the black girl coming out of her home, crippled as a result of torture, begging in the streets to earn a living. The magistrate invited her to live with him and gradually he began to examine her body part by part, following the signs that her skin revealed. The girl got used to the ritual of washing and rubbing her body with almond oil and yielded to that foreign way of someone dealing with her.



Black Women in the White World

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon indicates that black women are always willing to indulge themselves in the white world and since they can't be assimilated to that world by whitening themselves or nitrifying the others, they become subjected to a sense of alienation. According to him, whenever those women gain entrance to the white world, they will find it increasingly difficult to return back to their own people and to their previous lives although “they will become aware, one day, that ‘ white men do not marry black women” (P 49). So, all

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 15:7 July 2015

Mai Malkawi

Waiting for the Barbarians: A Mysterious White-Black Attachment

women of color seek to find a white male partner, regardless his other characteristics, he should be white. For them, being loved by a white male means that they deserve white life, white culture, and white world. In short, they can prove to other races that they are their equal human partners.

Barbarian Girl and the Magistrate

In fact, what Fanon mentioned in his book was exactly what happened in the novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*. The barbarian girl seems to be happy that she was left behind by her people, because it was, for her, an opportunity to indulge in the white world. When the magistrate saw her begging in the street, he told her:

“we don’t permit vagrants in the town. Winter is almost here. You must have somewhere to live. Otherwise you must go back to your own people”. She sits obdurately. I know I am beating about the bush.” (P 26)

Although the barbarian girl was frequently humiliated by the magistrate who refused to sleep with her and, instead went to other hotels seeking young white women, she preferred, through pain and torture at the hands of the magistrate, to join that new world. In fact, the magistrate was not the girl’s aim and goal, rather, she was seeking white flesh, especially since we know that the magistrate was sure “that among these men standing to attention with their equipment in bundles at their feet, are some who have slept with the girl” (P 54). When the magistrate refused to sleep with her and insisted that, from that moment on, they would sleep separately in different beds, she accepted that, but kept sleeping in the same room; she shared with him his dinner, hoping to amend the situation and reenter the white world again. Not surprising, the barbarian girl did not succeed in going with the magistrate to bed as an equal partner, except when they were in the wilderness, subordinate to the rules of nature and away from the influence of the empire and white women, who stood as competitors to her.

Magistrate’s Motives

As for the magistrate, his relationship with the black women is motivated by a set of different incentives. Right from the very beginning of the novel, the reader gets to know that the magistrate’s favorite hobby is to decipher a hieroglyphic script, carved in wooden slips

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 15:7 July 2015

Mai Malkawi

Waiting for the Barbarians: A Mysterious White-Black Attachment

scattered amongst the deserted barbarian ruins. Similarly, the black women's body was for him the voice of history, the place where the political injustice of the Apartheid system is revealed. So, the magistrate was hoping to read the history of the colonized nation on her body, or even to find clues that might help him to decipher the script on the pieces of wood:

Is it then the case that it is the whole woman I want, that my pleasure in her is spoiled until these marks on her are erased and she is restored to herself or is it the case (I am not stupid, let me say these things) that it is the marks on her Which drew me to her, but which, to my disappointment, I find, do not go deep enough? Too much or too little: is it she I want or the traces of a history her body bears? (P 64)

Exploitation

For the magistrate, the history of the colonized nation is incomplete and there are gaps in it, so his attempts to decipher the incompleteness of the black woman's body represent his attempts to have full knowledge and vision of the colonized nation's history. Moreover, the scars on her body become identifying marks of her race's obstinate survival and the colonizer's injustice and oppression; therefore, the magistrate's interest in her body does not have any sexual connotation, rather, he was interested in her body as an embodiment of a human narrative. The regret he shows after her departure because he didn't ask her to teach him her mother tongue indicates that their relationship was another form of colonization, body colonization, since it is well known that language is an issue of central importance in colonial projects.

Definition Using Opposites – Existence of the Other

Linguistically speaking, one of the most popular ways of defining things is by mentioning their opposites. For example, the gender "female" exists because it has an "other"- "male"; the color "black" exists because it has an "other"- "white", and that was exactly the concept that the magistrate wanted to mention. He believed, consciously or unconsciously, that the empire exists because the barbarians do exist. When the magistrate met Colonel Joll, who was wearing dark glasses, for the first time he asked: "is he blind?" (P 1), as if to foreshadow his blindness to see the complexity of his existence that requires the existence of his "other".

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 15:7 July 2015

Mai Malkawi

Waiting for the Barbarians: A Mysterious White-Black Attachment

Since the barbarian girl represents his other in terms of race and gender, the magistrate managed to let her live with him. Regarding her as his other, he always contrasted his own old white body with her healthy young one, while he never did so with the differences between people in terms of race, gender, and color, and that interprets the interests that the magistrate showed toward the black woman's body which has the ability to reveal the white man's superiority, power, and civilization. Because of the prevailing notion that depicts the barbarians as savages, uneducated and uncivilized people, the magistrate did not trust the black girl's mind, rather, he trusted her body that bore the scars to which her life would be always referenced.

Sympathy as the Guiding Factor

Actually, sympathy can be regarded as one of the incentives that had driven the white magistrate into establishing that relationship with the black girl. He was used to spend some time washing the woman's body, as if to wash his hands from any wrongdoing done by Colonel Joll against her:

How can I believe that a bed is anything but a bed, a woman's body anything But a site of joy? I must assert my distance from Colonel Joll! I will not suffer for his crimes! (P 44)

Moreover, he asked her to live with him because he wanted to hear silenced voices of the victims of history and colonization. He wanted to know what it meant for the body to be humiliated and tortured, physically and emotionally, so that he would be able to make amends. Consequently, the magistrate provided the girl with what she needed, including work, food, shelter and protection. Although he viewed her as being very ugly and exclaimed: "how ugly, I say to myself. My mouth forms the ugly word. I am surprised by it, but I do not resist: she is ugly, ugly" (P 47), he allowed her to come to his bed every night and sleep next to him, but without allowing any sexual intercourse to take place, because neither of them loved the other.

This situation is exactly identical with that which Fanon mentions in his book, *Black Skin, White Masks*:

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 15:7 July 2015

Mai Malkawi

Waiting for the Barbarians: A Mysterious White-Black Attachment

And there one lies body to body with one's blackness or. one's whiteness, in full narcissistic cry, each sealed into his own peculiarity - with, it is true, now and then a flash or so, but these are threatened at their source. (P 45)

Strange and Mysterious Relationship

In conclusion, *Waiting for the Barbarians* comprises a strange and somehow mysterious relationship between a white man and a black woman during the Apartheid period. After reading the novel, the reader will be astonished and surprised to realize that what brought the two main characters together is not sexual stimuli, but their desire to study each other and to reveal what colonization tries to cover and conceal. The barbarian girl wanted to seek acceptance in the eyes of the whites, which is her ultimate goal, and consequently join them. On the other hand, the magistrate saw in the girl's body an embodiment of the incomplete history of the colonized nation. J.M Coetzee was actually successful in creating and displaying this mysterious human relationship that was created and influenced by colonization.

Works Cited

1. Dobie, B. Ann, *Theory into practice :An Introduction to Literary Criticism*. Third Edition , International Edition. Wadsworth , Cengage Learning , 2012
1. Eliot ,Simon and Owens .W.R ,*A Handbook to Literary Research*. London :Routledge,1989.
2. Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press, 1967.
3. Girgus, Sam. *Desire and the Political Unconscious in American Literature*. London: The Macmillan Press LTD, 1990.
4. Huggan, Graham, Stephen Waston, eds. *Critical Perspectives on J.M Coetzee*. London: The Macmillan Press LTD, 1990.
5. Ledbetter, Mark. *Victims and the Postmodern Narrative or Doing Violence to the Body*. USA; ST. Martin's Press, INC., 1996
6. Tate, Claudia. *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.
7. Weinstein, Philip. *The Semantics of Desire*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984.

Mai Malkawi
The English Language and Literature Department
Language Center Building, The Hashemite University
Zarqa, Jordan malkawi.mai@gmail.com

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 15:7 July 2015

Mai Malkawi

Waiting for the Barbarians: A Mysterious White-Black Attachment