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AFRICAN CULTURE IN WAITING FOR BARBARIANS**MANWAR D. R.**

Assistant Professor &
Head, Dept. of English
Lal Bahadur Shastri Sr. College,
Partur Dist. Jalna- 431501 (M. S.)

ABSTRACT

John Maxwell Coetzee is a multi-dimensional artist- a novelist, essayist, linguist, critic and translator. Though he is an Australian national today, he has not severed his ties with African milieu. Being born in Cape Town he is emotionally much attached to the country of South Africa. The novel Waiting for Barbarians centres on African culture and racial discrimination. Thus the novel presents the war between the barbarians and the Empire. It also exposes regimes that ignore rights, justice and decency.

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There are various connotations and denotations of word 'culture'. Edward Tylor defines culture as:

Culture is an umbrella term which encompasses the social behavior and norms found in human society, as well as the knowledge, belief, arts, laws, customs, capabilities and habits of the individuals in these groups. (Tylor)

While introducing 'culture' in *Introducing Cultural Studies*, Elaine Baldwin and others state:

The term 'culture' has a complex history and diverse range of meaning in contemporary discourse. Culture can refer to Shakespeare or Superman comics, opera or football, who does the washing-up at home or the organization of the office of the President of the United States of America. Culture is found in your local street, in your own city and country, as well as on the other side of the world. Small children, teenagers, adults and older people all have their own cultures; but they may also share a culture (Baldwin, et al. 4).

Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick argue:

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Culture is the complex everyday word we all encounter and through which we all move. [...] the two most important or general elements of culture may be the ability of human beings to construct and to build, and the ability to use language. (Edgar, et al. 82)

According to Raymond Williams, **Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language.**(Williams, 76) Yet it is one of the most common terms used in public debates on nationalism, regionalism etc. It is also used in political, social, religious and literary discourses and in newspaper editorials and television panel debates.

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines culture as: 1. (n.) **the customs, beliefs, art, way of life and organization of a particular country or group.**

2.(n.) a country , group etc. with its own belief, etc. (OALD 370).

Culture is regarded as a revolution of our psyche or the core content of our individuality. It signifies an independent identity of a human being irrespective of his exterior possessions. In short, it means all sort of artistic activities and a way of life.

Common literature idealizes the apparent reality while ideal literature is an attempt of realizing the ideal. Keeping this in view, Coetzee's writing is the criticism of life under the conditions fixed for the literary truth and literary beauty. As a socio-literary-visionary, he visualizes the picture of classless society. His thoughts and meditation on cultural disintegration of African society are especially commendable.

Waiting for Barbarians is a novel by Coetzee Published in 1980 which has found a proud and privileged place in the Penguin's Great Books of the 20th century. It won James Tait Black Memorial Prize and Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize for fiction. It is a story of the natives called barbarians that are captured by Colonel Joll, the leader of Special Forces, who wants to torture them and kill some of them. However, the Magistrate questions the legitimacy of imperialism and nurses a crippled and partly blinded girl who is a victim of torture. The Magistrate wants to prevent the further torture of the captives but he himself becomes a prey to torture. Torturing the natives presents culture of the whites whereas the Magistrate's approach to prevent torture presents his humanitarian culture.

Traditional culture survives strongly among the barbarians. They perform rituals, use their own language and live in the lap of nature. But the arrival of the Empire on the scene creates cultural clashes and disintegration. Irving Howe remarks:

And at the outset we also realize that this is to be a novel not about nuances of character but about a clash of moral styles, a drama of representative ways of governing. (nytimes, 01)

Colonel Joll is a symbol of brutality while the Magistrate is the symbol of humanity. Both are the servants of the Empire, but the Colonel defends imperialism while the Magistrates supports the natives called barbarians. The object of imperialism is to establish political rule



and to plunder natural resources of the colony. The colonizers impose their culture upon the native people. Coetzee presents these cultural differences and cultural disintegration in African society in the novel. Colonel Joll is representative of the culture of the Empire while the Magistrate is representative of the culture of barbarians, the native people. The novel exposes brutality and torture of the Empire. Colonel Joll thinks that the barbarians are preparing for a mutiny, so he leads an expedition in search of barbarians and finally arrests a group of barbarians in chains. The Magistrate opposes the arrest and subsequent torture of the barbarians because he feels sympathy with the victims. He thinks that they are harmless.

Coetzee exposes this torture in the following words:

First I get lies, you see- this is what happens—first lies, then pressure, then more lies, then more pressure, then the break, then more pressure, then the truth. That is how you get the truth. Pain is truth; all else is subject to doubt. (Coetzee, 05).

Thus the novel exposes brutality, torture, racism and violence perpetrated against barbarians by the Empire.

Coetzee highlights barbarian culture in the novel. The barbarians are the native inhabitants of South Africa. They live in groups of two or three families along the banks of the river. Fishing and trapping are their main business. They build flimsy reed shelters in deep forest. There is deep affinity between the natives and nature. They love and worship nature. For them, nature is a source of happiness and livelihood. Thus they live away from the so-called cultured and civilized people. But still they are insulated by the farmers and the soldiers of the Empire. Coetzee as a creative writer wants to eradicate contempt. He becomes the voice of the barbarians. The Magistrate comments:

How do you eradicate contempt, especially when that contempt is founded on nothing more substantial than differences in table manners, variations in the structure of the eyelid? Shall I tell you what I sometimes wish? I wish that these barbarians would rise up and teach us a lesson, so that we would learn to respect them. We think of the country here as ours, part of our Empire - our outpost, our settlement, our market centre. But these people, these barbarians don't think of it like that at all. (Coetzee, 55).

The Empire imposes not only its culture but also its history on its subjects and the subjects are transformed into slaves. The magistrate states:

I think: I wanted to live outside history. I wanted to live outside the history that Empire imposes on its subjects, even its lost subjects. I never wished it for the barbarians that they should have the history of Empire laid upon them. How can I believe that that is case for shame? (Coetzee, 179).

Thus the novel presents the war between the barbarians and the Empire. It also exposes regimes that ignore rights, justice and decency.



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