

Civilization and disillusionment in J. M. Coetzee's *waiting for the barbarians*

Herlyn Juverly BALONGANA* and Basile Marius NGASSAKI**

Abstract

Civilization and disillusionment have clearly shown their intrinsic link in this work. This is an evocation that all external powers that intend to civilize some territories but ignore internal social realities will likely be disillusioned. Thus, J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) can be considered as a good illustration of White people's tragic end in their attempts to educate native localities.

Keywords

Civilization, Disillusionment, Imperialism, Colonialism, Apartheid, Barbarians.

Résumé

La civilisation et la désillusion ont clairement montré leur lien intrinsèque dans ce travail. Cela est une évocation que toutes forces extérieures qui ont l'intention de civiliser des territoires, mais ignorent les réalités sociales internes seront vraisemblablement désillusionnées. Ainsi, le roman *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) par J. M. Coetzee peut être considéré comme une bonne illustration de la fin tragique des Blancs dans leurs entreprises d'éduquer les localités autochtones.

Mots clés

Civilisation, Désillusion, Impérialisme, Colonialisme, Apartheid, Barbares.

Introduction

In African literature, the themes of civilization and disillusionment jointly emerged during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In these periods, White people who have been almost on the African land

*Doctorant, Faculté des Lettres, Arts et Sciences Humaines, Université Marien Ngouabi (Brazzaville, Congo).

**Professeur titulaire CAMES, Faculté des Lettres, Arts et Sciences Humaines, Université Marien Ngouabi (Brazzaville, Congo).

since the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries decided to teach their civilization to local people. Very often, this trend did not easily reach its purpose; it is not rare to map out some clashes that resulted from the encounter between the old dispensation represented by Natives and the new order represented by the Whites.

The present study therefore evokes this interrelation to demonstrate that the disillusioned state is the product of the imposition of intended stranger values on those which are found in among aborigines. It is a focus on J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980). In fact, the novel explicitly shows up this dual process through a successful depiction of one of its major characters, Colonel Joll, facing another one, the magistrate, the novel's protagonist.

In brief, the novel recalls the entire apartheid action that White people have perpetrated in South Africa for almost three centuries. It also grounds some post-apartheid materials considered as Coetzee's predilection of the forthcoming re-unification era that his country would experience.

To consider civilization, I refer to *Oxford English Dictionary* (2018) which defines it as "the process by which a [human] society reaches an advanced stage of social and cultural development and organization." As for disillusionment, the most convenient meaning is that quoted by Shekhar Vispute (2016, p. 2):

Disillusionment is nothing but the hard truth of reality that one possesses with certain dreams and ideals. These dreams and ideals are lost by the realization of hard truth of reality and let one towards frustrations or disappointment.

Some critics have already dealt with these terms as part of their work on African literature. Basile Marius NGASSAKI's article "Post-Independence Disillusion in Ngugi's *Wizard of the Crow*" (2008) is concerned with both the Kenyans' disillusionment for having been betrayed by their new leaders after Whites' departure and the novelist's disillusionment for being aware of the point that his experience of writing in Kikuyu, his native language, is only a complete desolation.

To mention Jane Poyner, she conducts a study entitled "Madness and Civilization in *Waiting for the Barbarians*" (2009, p. 53-68) which shows that by attempting to civilize local people, Whites

become mad. At this point, it is fair to stress that Poyner emphasizes on the magistrate, the protagonist, who experiences madness that she takes up as the Western system downfall during apartheid. Indeed, she (2009, p. 54) writes: "... the Magistrate's position of both oppressor and oppressed is experienced as a kind of double consciousness that can only lead to madness". In this paper, however, I prove that the true image of apartheid is better stereotyped by the antagonist, Colonel Joll, who illustrates colonizers' disillusionment in South Africa. Thus, how does the novelist paint colonizers' disillusionment in *Waiting for the Barbarians*?

Two principal approaches are employed so as to complete this study. I firstly resort to the socio-critical approach coined by Claude Duchet and Alain Badiou in order to scrutinize characters in their relation with their milieu as Daniel Bergez (1990, p. 123-5) mentions it. Knowing that this relation is highly influenced by personages' innerness, therefore the psycho-critical approach pioneered by Charles Mauron, as Bergez (1990, p. 70) notes it, needs to be used to deal with fictitious people's interior thoughts.

1. Political and Economic Unrest in the outpost frontier

The component purpose is to examine some social events which have led to the Western project to civilize the outpost frontier inhabitants. In fact, in this unnamed locality, White people have launched imperialist movements. The narrator tells about the Empire realizations in this place. From the nameless capital, Empire has extended its power over some periphery territories where its representatives rule unfortunately the local people's land. These aborigines are therefore controlled by the new power as if they were in captivity. Most of them who regularly oppose this political jurisdiction are forced to leave their village and then retreat sometimes into forests. The following extract gives the new changes that Whites have brought in this place as well as their pride:

We think of the country here as ours, part of our Empire – our outpost, our settlement, our market center ... We have been here more than a hundred years, we have reclaimed land from the desert and built irrigation works and planted fields and built solid homes and put a wall around our town ... (p. 51).

The above quotation notes the imperialists' aims to remain longer in this side of the African continent and monopolize it so as to exploit continuously the Black people's raw materials among others; these exploitations fuel their originate homes' industries and sustain job opportunities there. Actually, this exactly typifies the imperialistic policies as shown by Edward W. Said (1994, p. 9) : "[...] 'imperialism' means the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory [...]"

This regrettable situation caused by the Empire's harsh actions over this aboriginal community is painted by its administrative servant, the magistrate:

They [Black people] live in settlements of two or three families along the banks of the river, fishing and trapping building flimsy reed shelters, groaning with cold through the winter dressing in skins (p. 18).

The Natives are dehumanized under the Empire's domination. As the magistrate mentions it they live in permanent fear. Coincidentally, some rumours travel to the capital which accuses them for being responsible for banditry attacks over traders' goods:

[...] last year stories began to reach us from the capital of unrest among the barbarians. Traders travelling safe routes had been attacked and plundered. Stock thefts had increased in scale and audacity. A party of census officials had disappeared and been found buried in shallow graves. Shots had been fired at a provincial governor during a tour of inspection. There had been clashes with border patrols. The barbarians tribes were arming, the rumor went; the Empire should take precautionary measures for there would certainly be war (p. 8).

This place is plunged into an atmosphere of fear. All people experience an interior and external trauma. Even at the bed time, their psychological state is far from offering them rest. However, the strangest thing is that the magistrate, the Empire administrator, the most experienced imperial servant has never suspected this threat: "Of this unrest I myself saw nothing." (p. 8).

This component offers an opportunity to show how both literary approaches fit this analysis. Imperialism and colonialism are first and

above all the question of fuelling Western economy. With their industrial era, Western people are compelled to find out more outlets to trade their products. Besides, localities which may enable the exploration of necessary raw materials in order to perpetuate their economic activity are also needed. Indeed, colonizers' homeland are pinpointed to meet Whites' trade aims. For this reason, Western trek towards South Africa is purely ideological.

As mentioned by Kooijman (2008), Edward W. Said asserts that the particularity of imperialism and colonialism or apartheid is this ability to devise typical stories which can spread great fear in the colonized locality. Unfortunately, this fear does not spare their representatives. By thinking of energizing their economy, Whites create a new portrait for aboriginal community. For Kooijman (2008, p. 5), Said terms this process *Orientalism* : "L'Occident utilisait l'Orientalisme ... pour dominer l'Orient. L'Orientalisme a produit une image de l'Orient, un discours ..." For instance, Black people are called barbarians and sometimes beasts-like stereotypes are created: "The Bushman is a different creature, a wild animal with an animal's soul" (Dusklans, p. 58).

It is clear that imperialists and colonizers are creators of Natives' stereotypes with the intention to prove that they are responsible for all bandits' exactions. For this reason, I agree with Said, as Kooijman (2008, 6) reports it, that colonizers have created these negative images in order to show local people's inability to rule their own land, therefore reinforce their existence in their locality. The real intention of economic exploitation being dissimulated, the civilization mission becomes compulsory.

2. New Dispensation Project of Civilization

The question of civilizing local people often tears up colonizers or apartheid servants. The best illustration is found in J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* between a civil servant and a Lieutenant:

We are not going, therefore they make a mistake. Even if it became necessary to supply the settlement by convoy, we would not go. Because these border settlements are the first line of defence of the Empire. The sooner the barbarians understand that the better.

Despite his engaging air there is a rigidity to his thought that must derive from his military education ... do I really after all believe what I have been saying? Do I really look forward to the triumph of the barbarian way: intellectual torpor, slovenliness, tolerance of disease and death? If we wear to disappear would the barbarians spend their afternoons excavating our ruins? Would they preserve our census rolls and our grain-merchants' ledgers in glass cases, or devote themselves to deciphering the script of our love-letters? (p. 52).

This passage is one of the most revolutionizing extracts in this novel. It reveals the magistrate's dilemma oscillating between the idea of defending local people and that one of executing imperial project. Also, it evokes the military determination to protect imperialist interests at any case. The use of anaphora, to some extent, tells that Whites may not leave their colonies very soon and if this may be, they may keep on ruling these territories using other means as violence as it is shown in the author's *Age of Iron* (1990). Indeed in this novel, most African students are shot for having boycotting the institution of Afrikaans, Afrikaners' language, in schools. And, Afrikaners are White people who travelled from Holland to South Africa in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and where they devised apartheid system as their ideology officially since 1948.

Above all, the native people's portrait is enough to understand that these people are not ripe enough so as to govern their own territory. Thus, the civilization project has to be executed. It seems that Whites are well-prepared to achieve this commission. Yet, their approach does not only contain ideologies because this may be associated with a military intervention in the case of subsequent attacks. This means that repressive measures are always part of colonizers' philosophy in the process of civilizing the so-called barbarians.

The magistrate tells about colonizers' means to improve aboriginal communities' barbaric vision :

Officers of the general staff were sent on tours of the frontier. Some of the garrisons were strengthened. Traders who requested them were given military escorts. And officials of the Third Bureau of the Civil Guard were seen for the first time on the frontier, guardians of the State, specialists in the obscurer

motions of sedition, devotees of truth, doctors of interrogation.
So now it seems my easy years are coming to an end ... (p. 9).

All the skilled people quoted in this extract do not give the impression of a civilizing era, but they are sent for torturing those inhabitants. These men are all military servants and their expertise is not to demonstrate. Quoted by Kooijman (2008, p. 10), Albert Memmi ponders that this Western legal architecture is devised because of colonized people. Instead of educating them through so-called better values of civilization, colonial representatives only bring weapons as severity and torture which culminate into possible death.

Coetzee's military character who better plays this role is inevitably Colonel Joll ; he reaches the frontier for the first time and even the magistrate has not seen him before though they supposedly work for the same power. From the onset of the novel, Colonel Joll is physically portrayed as an influential officer:

I have never seen anything like it: two little discs of glass suspended in front of his eyes in loops of wire. Is he blind? I could understand it if he wanted to hide blind eyes. But he is not blind. The discs are dark, they look opaque from the outside, but he can see through them. He tells me they are a new invention. "They protect one's eyes against the glare of the sun," ... "You would find them useful out of here in the desert. They save one from squinting all the time. One has fewer headaches. Look." He touches the corners of his eyes lightly. "No wrinkles." ... He has the skin of a younger man (p. 1).

Colonial rulers have tailored new agents with new technological means which enable these executives to carry out their commissions without any hindrances. As Ania Loomba (2005, p. 26) sustains the reversible relation between social concerns and humans' innerness, external realities can modify internal thoughts and vice versa. The socio-critical approach therefore highlights the point that apartheid has developed protectionism discourse.

For this matter, Colonel Joll and his troop are particularly authorized this: "... whatever might be necessary to safeguard the Empire would be done regardless of cost ..." (p. 38) As soon as he reaches this frontier with his soldiers, Joll clarifies his duty and sets

his civil colleague's limits. He tells the magistrate that his help is vain. Colonel Joll does not care that this is his first time to trek to this place therefore does not know every place in this frontier as the protagonist reminds him:

Those maps are based on little but hearsay, Colonel. I have patched them together from travellers' accounts over a period of ten or twenty years. I have never set foot myself where you plan to go. I am simply warning you (p. 12).

Actually, Colonel Joll does not meet the so-called barbarians inside the frontier some days after his arrival. Then, he plans to trek into the interior of this outpost and possibly track them from their reserves. Ignoring the direction where he has to move, he decides to use the interior geographical map that the chief character has made from the traders' reports. At the first sight, the thing that makes Colonel Joll a strange officer is that he prefers to trust the map to the cartographer. The object may base on wrong or old information; unfortunately, the Third Bureau officer is blinded by his former realizations in the capital. His excessive pride blinds him at a so higher stage that he forgets to understand that the 'centre nation' is not the 'periphery country' that is to say the 'capital' where he is used to doing tremendous actions is far from bearing this 'outpost frontier' realities.

He seems to understand the magistrate's warning and everyone thinks that Joll will take him for his interior investigations. He maintains his idea to travel to these places by taking there a small boy he finds in the prison. This young boy is not in the state of playing the guide role because he is already terrorized by Joll who has just killed his uncle during the interrogation. One of the soldiers reports the facts:

During the course of the interrogation contradictions became apparent in the prisoner's testimony. Confronted with these contradictions, the prisoner became enraged and attacked the investigated officer. A scuffle ensued during which the prisoner fell heavily against the wall. Efforts to revive him were unsuccessful (p. 6).

This old man prisoner who collapses under Joll's pressure is the boy's uncle that he wants to go with into the periphery localities. As the magistrate pinpoints it such a shocked young man may not be psychologically prepared for this great military mission towards other native people. The magistrate, based on his impressive administrative experience, insists persuading him to stop this investigation:

With no disrespect, Colonel ... you are not a professional soldier, you have never had to campaign in these inhospitable parts. You will have no guide except a child who is terrified of you, who is anyhow unfit to travel. You cannot rely on the soldiers to help you, they are only peasant conscripts, most of them have not been more than five miles from the settlement (p. 11).

Colonel Joll is both a man of action and impulsive too. He trusts his military training which has made of him a reliable officer inside the Third Bureau officer. The same training that enables him to get experience about how to know that a thief, for instance, tells the truth or lie:

[...] I have to exert pressure to it [the truth]. 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 (p. 5).

Colonel Joll demonstrates that the finding-process of the truth operates through involving the Empire's enemy into heavy beating, using painful tactics until he recognizes his mischief. That is true since this officer has already damaged the barbarian girl's ankles and eye (p. 41) and pitilessly kills the native old man he has found in prison (p. 6). Finally, he leaves the outpost frontier and travels into the South African interior localities searching the so-called bandits to track down to prison or trial.

This component has shown up that Colonel Joll is the true colonial representative. His wicked motivations and inhuman actions typify apartheid ideology. The last component examines the new political and military system weaknesses which consequently cause its downfall through disillusionment process.

3. Western Civilization Disillusionment

The purpose of this component is to raise apartheid or colonialism failure to civilize native communities. It is not too much to state that civilizing people have, to some extent, been civilized. Thus, it is an evocation that Western civilization bears its specific flaws therefore cannot pretend to be the best. It is true that some themes and especially characters' analysis will be examined to complete this study.

The Third Bureau officer's physical appearance tells that he is too much self-confident. That is the reason why he rejects all various services that the magistrate offers him. Indeed, Colonel Joll trusts the Empire's new technology that seemingly leads him to success. For example, he wears so new and special glasses for which the protagonist, despite his old age, visibly wonders:

I have never seen anything like it: two little discs of glass suspended in front of his eyes in loops of wire. Is he blind? I could understand it if he wanted to hide eyes. But he is not blind. The discs are dark, they look opaque from the outside, but he can see through them. He tells me they are a new invention. "They protect one's eyes against the glare of the sun," he says. "You would find them useful out here in the desert. They save one from squinting all the time. One has fewer headaches. Look." He touches the corners of his eyes lightly. "No wrinkles." He replaces the glasses. It is true. He has the skin of a younger man. "At home everyone wears them" (p. 1).

Considered as a literary technique, Colonel Joll's glasses symbolize the Empire's fourfold response to the new social changes brought among the barbarians. To some extent, this invention characterizes the colonizers' identity that policies are always to be devised whenever the colonized people try to fight back. In the first place, these glasses denote the Empire's new tactics of attack. This means their military servants, being well-equipped, are able to reach farther places where others as civilians cannot travel. Colonel Joll, for instance, has trekked to the areas where the magistrate has not gone

for thirty years thanks to this technological tool as he asserts “[...] You would find them useful out here in the desert.” (p. 1).

The second point to evoke is the glasses’ opacity. It is reported that the two discs are opaque from the outside, but enable to see from the interior. If the glasses represent a political system codification or set of policies that is the devisers create so as to be in disfavour of the Empire’s enemies. In clear terms, the imperial servants alone may control the periphery nation while, in return, it is not allowed to understand the adverse party’s projects against it. To achieve this project, Empire has to rely on new people because there are new tactics. Characters like the magistrate are not selected to realize this vision; indeed, they are too much humanistic and tend to back up the victimized people’s fight. The protagonist is a thoughtful man, a man of concessions, but Colonel Joll ponders less and acts more.

This analysis is supported by the magistrate who argues that Empire’s “[...] Officials of the Third Bureau of the Civil Guard were seen for the first time on the frontier [...]” (p. 9). Another thing that the chief character wonders is Colonel Joll’s strange personality:

I find myself wondering too whether he has a private ritual or purification, carried out behind closed doors, to enable him to return and break bread with other men. Does he wash his hands very carefully, perhaps, or change all his clothes [sic]; or has the Bureau created new men who can pass without disquiet between the unclean and the clean? (p. 12).

Colonel Joll’s both moral and physical portraits are implicitly evoked through this extract. His loyalty to Empire means that he embodies its ideologies therefore he is really the Empire’s prototype. For this matter, this Western system strives to take care of its servants’ longevity. This idea leads to the third aspect that the system creates means to get its servants rid of any serious illnesses. As Colonel Joll claims “[...] One has fewer headaches ...’ He touches the corners of his eyes lightly, ‘No wrinkles.’ [...]” (p. 1) If headaches means illness and wrinkles symbolize old age, Empire has thus built up its new representatives for living longer.

In literature, every detail is meaningful. In this prospect, Joll’s glasses’ colour needs to be scrutinized; and, this is the fourth understanding resulted from this invention. It is said that “The discs

are dark” (p. 1). Actually, the ‘dark’ colour reveals the gloomy or lugubrious situation that the frontier’s inhabitants are about to experience. The most appropriate meaning of this colour is conducted by Veronica L. Zammito (2005). She thinks that colours are a means of communication interiorly and exteriorly. They transmit our feelings and moods.

In her work, she develops two main categories of colours. She deals with saturated colours which are associated to enjoyment and fun; and, brighter colours mostly unique ones are concerned here. The second category, named desaturated colours, goes with sadness and languidness. Then, dark is such a colour. To a high extent, ‘sadness’ and ‘languidness’ are brought in by unfortunate situations as Colonel Joll successfully interprets them in this novel.

Being blinded by the feeling of certitude, four days after his arrival in this periphery nation are enough for Joll to experience the first disillusionment episode. The following passage tells evidence:

How do you explain this? ... These are fishing people! How can you bring them back here? ... Did no one tell him these are fishing people? It is a waste of time bringing them here! You are supposed to help him track down thieves, bandits, invaders of the Empire! Do these people look like a danger to the Empire? (p. 17).

Colonel Joll is blamed for having tracked wrong people down the outpost. As the magistrate pinpoints it he is expected to catch gang groups which are planning to attack the Empire from its frontier. Instead, he rides back innocent peasants whose villages have been taken by force by the imperial authorities.

The second disillusionment phase that shows up apartheid system inexperience comes up when its typical servant writes a script on every prisoner’s back:

The Colonel steps forward. Stooping over each prisoner in turn he rubs a handful of dust into his naked back and writes a word with a stick of charcoal. I read the words upside down: ENEMY ... ENEMY ... ENEMY ... ENEMY (p. 105).

The word 'ENEMY' is written four times on prisoners' back by the Third Bureau officer certainly he wants to be sure that every person can read these scripts since they are written in bold letters. Another reason may be that he wants to insist, unlike the magistrate, that the locality is really attacked by local bandits' exactions. Unfortunately, his feeling of certitude blinds him to the extent that he uses effaceable materials as charcoal. After torturing these prisoners, sweat and blood wash their back clean. The scripts that condemn them disappear, but actions as torture and killing largely reveal who the real bandit is. In this connection, the protagonist rightly tones "You are the enemy, Colonel!" (p. 114).

At last, all local existing social realities that is to say Natives' civilization to have governed their own territory before the Whites' advent, have been ignored or smashed down. This Eurocentric standpoint has unfortunately confronted with several uprisings and clashes that have ushered colonial rulers into disillusionment. Indeed, Colonel Joll's carriage is stoned by the frontier's inhabitants; he runs away by leaving his troops behind:

The carriage is nearing the gates ... Stones clatter against the carriage out of the darkness, shouts and curses rain down (p. 147).

From the above extract, it is true that civilization projects have enabled to know Western hidden intentions to have trekked to South Africa. Apartheid servants prove that they have been commissioned for the government's interests, but aboriginal growth has not been their major preoccupation. The disillusioned and tragic end of this military officer typifies apartheid's failure in attempting to resolve local people's social concerns. To a high extent, this Western misadventure corroborates Natives' abilities to rule their own locality.

Conclusion

Civilization and disillusionment have clearly shown their intrinsic link in this study. This is an evocation that all external rulers who intend to civilize some territories but ignore internal realities are likely to be disillusioned. In South Africa, for example, imperialism and apartheid have been ushered into the disillusionment process and Coetzee's

Waiting for the Barbarians (1980) can be considered as a good illustration of White people's shameful attempts to educate native localities.

Besides, the two approaches resorted to, in this work, has proved that colonizers' projects of civilizing Black communities have been devised for egocentric interests only. Unfortunately, Whites' ignorance of internal realities has led to their tragic end. This failure means that Eurocentric ideologies have not been fitting social paradigms for ever civilized localities.

Thus, colonial characters as Colonel Joll have confirmed that Western civilization and its high technological inventions still embody certain weaknesses. Consequently, their pretending projects of educating worldwide nations can be devastating for themselves and targeted people as well unless they consider internal sociality.

References

- BERGEZ Daniel et al., 1990, *Introduction aux Méthodes Critiques pour l'analyse littéraire*, Paris, Bordas.
- COETZEE J. M., 1974, *Dusklands*, Johannesburg, Raven Press.
- COETZEE J. M., 1980, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, London, Martin Secker.
- COETZEE J. M., 1990, *Age of Iron*, London, Secker.
- KOOIJMAN, Kelly, 2008, *Portrait du colonisé, Portrait du colonisateur* dans *Le Coup de lune et Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* (<http://etudescoloniales.canalblog.com>).
- LOOMBA Ania, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism Second edition* (London: Routledge, 2005).
- NGASSAKI Basile Marius, 2008, « Post-Independence Disillusion in Ngugi's *Wizard of the Crow* » (*PURN*, 037,). *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2018.
- POYNER Jane, 2009, *J. M. Coetzee and the Paradox of Postcolonial Authorship*, U.K.: University of Exeter.
- VISPUTE Shekhar, 2016, "Disillusionment and Feeling of Certitude as Tragic Elements in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*," Vol. 4, Issue 1.
- ZAMMITO Veronica, 2005, "The Expressions of Colours", DIGRA.