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Fetishism in J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*

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Abstract

Most of the criticism on J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* centres on the allegorical possibilities of the novel, and while this approach is indeed useful and perhaps even the ultimate point on Coetzee's part, very little attention has been paid to the overt sexuality and eroticism of the novel outside of the metaphorical roles these issues play within the allegorical whole or wholes. What Coetzee does, though, is destabilize any attempts to read the novel fixedly as only those things, as a text that expounds virtue through allegory. Any mention of the controlling nature of the "gaps, absences, and uncertainties" is not a new idea. What has not had much attention is the notion of fetishism; that is, reading the novel as an allegory of body fetish. Consider what many critics have called the central image of the novel, the repeated scenes of ritual foot washing, rubbing, and massaging. On a very literal level these scenes are textbook examples of a

foot fetish or a deformity/disfigurement fetish. Coetzee uses the body to destabilize any absolute certainty of the public/political or universal.

Keywords

Fetishism; J.M. Coetzee; *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

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The Oxford English Dictionary offers a twofold definition of torture, distinguishing between “the infliction of excruciating pain . . . from a delight in watching the agony of a victim, in hatred or revenge, or as a means of extortion” and judicial torture, which is “inflicted by a judicial or quasi-judicial authority for the purpose of forcing an accused or suspected person to confess, or an unwilling witness to give evidence or information.” In J.M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Colonel Joll could certainly be seen to be operating under the pretense of the latter definition, but Coetzee clearly intends for there to be an overt element of the former. Certainly, by his position within the Empire, the magistrate stands within the scope of the latter definition, but his own dark

fascination with torture complicates his position. It is this grey area that needs to be examined. Jolly provides a useful starting point.

The magistrate is ultimately unable to eradicate his fascination for the Colonel and the acts of torture he performs. It is true that he is fascinated by the 'barbarian girl' too, but only because of her connection with Joll - the marks of torture she bears. He himself asks if it is not "the marks on her which drew me to her" (*Waiting for the Barbarians* 3). His treatment of her - the washing, the massaging, the tracing of her torture wounds - indicates that he fetishizes her, rather than loving her for herself. It is no wonder he is mesmerized in the course of his attentions to her body: he is not seducing her, but rather is himself seduced by the marks on her skin. This fetishism links him once again with Colonel Joll.

His fetishization of her is no less an expression of a desire to violate her, to gain access to her through her body by obliterating it, than Joll's torture of her is. Jolly's reading, as useful as it is, is guilty of elevating fetishism directly to metaphor, playing into the extra-textual realm of theory. She clearly buys into Frantz Fanon's stereotype (non-imperial as 'other'/inferior) as fetish, characterizing the barbarian girl as "sealed into crushing object hood", and, like Hayden White in "The Noble Savage: Theme as Fetish", sees the fetish as a figurative tool that has grown out of a thematic tradition. White writes, "From the Renaissance to the end of the eighteenth century, Europeans tended to fetishize the native peoples with whom they came into contact by viewing them simultaneously as monstrous forms of humanity and as quintessential objects of desire" (8).

In "The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism", Homi K. Bhabha explains that colonialist discourse is predicated upon the creation and maintenance of stereotypes of the "other." Since the native is naturally subservient, inferior, and menacing, these stereotypes, like the fetish object, provide feelings of power and pleasure to the person in position of power, while simultaneously questioning this power by focusing on the danger inherent

in the native. Bhabha argues that the stereotype should be read in terms of fetishism because the physical manifestation of the stereotype, its body, its very physical presence, is the site upon which the colonizer projects the desire for superiority. The stereotypes constructed by the colonizer are fetishized in the sense that they are seized as examples of superiority, the triumph of a superior race over an inferior one that is nonetheless always a danger to the former, despite the appearance of assimilation or cultural sameness. Simply put, the girl is a stereotype because she is undeniably portrayed as “other.” But it is Coetzee who ironically “fetishizes” this stereotype - not the magistrate; he fetishizes the girl's body.

A Fetish is an item possessing some sacred, magical - usually dark - power. It is like an icon but different. Like an icon a fetish is also an object, person, concept, theory or philosophy believed to possess extraordinary magical or supernatural power. But they are different. To a degree beyond the icon, the fetish carries the taint of the off-colour, an abnormal attachment, a 'closet' devotion, something that the person attached to the fetish should be unusually sensitive to or ashamed of. White nicely elaborates upon this definition, saying:

A fetish is any natural object believed to possess magical or spiritual power. It is the traditional ethnological meaning of the term, and from it derives the conventional figurative use of it to designate any material object regarded with superstitious or extravagant trust or reverence. From this figurative usage, in turn, derives the psychological sense, as indicating any object or part of the body obsessively seized upon (cathected) as an exclusive source of libidinal gratification. (21)

The seed of fetishism is planted very early in the narrative. The magistrate has, after all, offered to “help with the language”. It is the rituals or “set procedures” of the torture that firmly establish the idea of a torture fetish for Joll and a growing dark and erotic fascination for the magistrate. A further conflation develops; the magistrate is fascinated with Joll and is, therefore, fascinated with

torture. It is at this point that the magistrate's obsessions begin to develop. He says he is “aware of what might be happening, and [his] ear is even tuned to the pitch of human pain”, but it is ambiguous whether or not he is truly disgusted or whether this is the “dark fascination”. The ambiguity continues and the growth of a dark obsession is realized when the magistrate contradicts himself a short time later, saying of the same event, “I did not ride away: for a while I stopped my ears to the noises coming from the hut by the granary where the tools are kept, then in the night I took a lantern and went to see for myself”. The obsession with the effects of torture on the body begins to take shape when the magistrate says, “Pain is truth; all else is subject to doubt” (*Waiting for the Barbarians* 38).

For a novel that allows an erotic reading, the first example of sex is quickly glossed over when the magistrate goes to see the young girl, later identified as The Star, in her room. All that is told is he slept “like a dead man”. The sex is assumed and is otherwise left out of the actual narrative. It further blurs the attempts to fix the magistrate's and Coetzee's intentions. Some light is shed when the girl asks him of the dreams he was obviously having during the night. He does not say anything to her, but the reader is privileged to yet another reminder of the conflation of sex and violence: “The jackal rips out the hare's bowels, but the world rolls on” (*Waiting for the Barbarians* 57). The magistrate seems to be implying that a sex/violence conflation is natural. With the unsatisfactory sexual encounter, the narrative moves into its second section and the introduction of the barbarian girl, and the fetish truly begins to take shape, though it is still largely undefined for the magistrate. He even tells the girl, perhaps more for his or the reader's benefit that “This is not what you think it is” (*Waiting for the Barbarians* 71). And, upon a first reading, it is not what the reader expects. He “prowl[s] around her” and admits that the distance between himself and her torturers is negligible. Finally, he says “Show me your feet”. A physical manifestation of his growing fetish is realized. What follows is a sensual, erotic, but rather unnerving description of his washing and massaging ritual, starting

with her feet and moving upward to the rest of her body. He says, “I lose myself in the rhythm of what I am doing. I lose awareness of the girl herself” (*Waiting for the Barbarians* 94). Ultimately, the ritual ends in “rapture, of a kind”. The first stage of a body fetish is realized. However, it is not long before this stage is not enough. His fascination begins to move outward, from the foot, to disfigurement, to cleansing, to the act of torture itself: “It has been growing more and more clear to me that until the marks on this girl's body are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her” (*Waiting for the Barbarians* 111).

The barbarian girl forces a separation of sex and the growing body fetish. She says, “You should not go hunting if you do not enjoy it”, referring literally to his attempts to tell a story about hunting. He dismisses her statement as proof that she does not understand but her following actions do not necessarily support that fact. Immediately following her statement, she gives him the answer to a question he claims not to have asked. More importantly, the girl is the one who propels the object of the fetish from her body to the act of torture itself, giving him the gruesome details of her blinding, details that he has as yet been unable to possess either through his conversations with Joll or his explorations of her body. It is after this exchange that the magistrate throws himself back into a more traditional sexual relationship. He revisits the young girl, The Star, as an act of defiance against his “bondage to the ritual of the oiling and rubbing, the drowsiness, the slump into oblivion” (*Waiting for the Barbarians* 152). He acknowledges the failings of his present obsession:

All this erotic behaviour of mine is indirect: I prowl about her, touching her face, caressing her body, without entering her or finding the urge to do so . . . Is this how her torturers felt hunting their secret, whatever they thought it was? For the first time I feel a dry pity for them: how natural a mistake to believe that you can burn or tear or hack your way into the secret body of the other! (*Waiting for the Barbarians* 163)

The magistrate is clearly conflicted at this point. When he asks her “What do I have to do to move you?” He resists what he has seen, saying, “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” (*Waiting for the Barbarians* 171)! But that is not what he truly wants. The magistrate attempts to compensate for these conflicting feelings by visiting his mistress more regularly but he suffers from bouts of impotence: “there were unsettling occasions when in the middle of the sexual act I felt myself losing my way like a storyteller losing the thread of his story” (*Waiting for the Barbarians* 178). This is a complicated metaphor that can be read many ways, but here, it is our first tangible hint that our narrator's obsessions may be compromising his story. As well, this metaphor is an example of what Coetzee is doing to the reader; he is using sex, obsession, and fetishism as red herrings to allegory, keeping us bound to the experiential level of the narrative by focusing on the magistrate's growing need to experience pain. The girl has played out her role in the growing fetish and is no longer physically necessary. The magistrate says, “While I have not ceased to see her as a body maimed, scarred, harmed, she has perhaps by now grown into and become that new deficient body” (*Waiting for the Barbarians* 185). What follows is the magistrate's fateful decision to return the girl to her people, thereby sealing his fate and taking the fetish to the next step.

When at last they encounter the barbarian riders they have been seeking and the girl is offered to them, the magistrate tells her to “Tell them the truth. What else is there to tell?” Again there is a subtle conflation of Joll and the magistrate. Both implored her to tell the truth. And in both cases, as Rosemary Jolly states, the proof of the truth is in the physical marks on her body. As torturer, Joll needed to inflict the marks to prove he'd succeeded, and the magistrate, as storyteller complicit in the appropriation of her torture, needs only to offer those same marks as proof of her story's truth. It is at this point that a real transition occurs within the novel. As the magistrate hands over the girl, she ceases to be objectified. There is a short break in the text that resumes with

images of spring, symbolic of a new beginning, which is, in some ways, the case because the magistrate's fate is sealed upon his return to the outpost. As such, this new beginning is hardly one in the sense of renewal and hope - another metaphor and narrative red herring on the author's part.

The return opens the fourth section of the novel and sets the full realization of the magistrate's body fetish into motion. It is notable, too, that at this point the novel seems to shift to a more overtly political tone. The emphasis on sex abates and the magistrate attempts to rationalize his earlier actions within political context(s). He says, "I am aware of the source of my elation: my alliance with the guardians of Empire is over, I have set myself in opposition, the bond is broken, I am a free man" (*Waiting for the Barbarians* 188).

In fact, Coetzee resists a full realization of the earlier manifestation of the fetish as torture fetish. The first two sections of the novel seemed to be building towards a need for the magistrate to experience torture at the hands of Joll; that is, upon failing to read from the girl's body the answers to his dark and erotic questions, the magistrate would need to experience the marks himself, firsthand. And he does to a certain degree. However, it is the ambivalence with which Joll and Mandel treat him that allows for a full realization of the body fetish. This ambivalence is evident in the two Bureau officers' failure to treat him seriously. After first reading the magistrate his charges, Mandel has him unceremoniously jailed. Later, standing across from Mandel over his own desk, the "saucer of little glass balls" without an accompanying phallic symbol recalls the earlier flask and bowl of nuts that opened the narrative, and is a symbolic emasculation. He is now powerless and is locked away and seemingly forgotten. There, the magistrate truly comes to know his own body. His painful incontinence is reminiscent of the emphasis placed on the excrement of the fisherfolk. As a prisoner he is reduced to a smelly, dirty caricature for whom it has "become an agony" to move his bowels, enduring the stabs of pain, the tearing of tissues that accompany his "evacuations." Soon, the magistrate comes to understand that, as Michel Foucault says, "it is always the body that is at issue - the body and its forces,

their utility and their docility, their distribution and their submission” (*Waiting for the Barbarians* 207).

And again after being beaten for intervening in the torture and mutilation of the barbarian prisoners:

What I am made to undergo is subjection to the most rudimentary needs of my body: to drink, to relieve itself, to find the posture in which it is least sore . . . I wondered how much pain a plump comfortable old man would be able to endure in the name of his eccentric notions of how the Empire should conduct itself. But my torturers were not interested in degrees of pain. They were interested only in demonstrating to me what it meant to live in a body, as a body, a body which can entertain notions of justice only as long as it is whole and well. (*Waiting for the Barbarians* 256)

His torturers, then, if that is what we are to call them, have taught him a lesson worthy of Foucault himself. The magistrate has gained a ‘knowledge’ of the body that is not exactly the science of its functioning, and a mastery of its forces that is more than the ability to conquer them” (Foucault 173). He has learned the “political technology of the body.” He has learned that his body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs. The body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body.

The magistrate is not, as many critics have said, attempting to simply “read” from the experiences of others. It is true that his obsession with torture did begin that way, but Coetzee has resisted this reading by providing a twist to the magistrate's fetish quest. The magistrate never actually experiences the “torture” faced by the barbarian girl and others Joll interrogated, because he is never placed in a position of racial inferiority, never made an “other.” It is true that he faces serious charges and is ultimately brutalized in the course of his imprisonment, but he always has an out. Each step of the way his fate is in his

own hands. So, despite the fact that he bears, for the outside world, the marks of torture that brand him a “victim,” this is a fiction. His scars result from cause and effect. He dares to intervene in the beating of the barbarian prisoners and has his face and arm broken. The final act of brutality he faces, his mock hanging and the breaking of his shoulders, has nothing to do with “judicial torture”; it is an act of depravity, one he sought on a subconscious level, at least, as part of his body fetish.

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