
Research Papers



SEXUALITY IN J. M. COETZEE'S *WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS*

Mr. Devendra Jalindar Ranaware

Asst. Professor, Dept. of English,
S.B.R. College, Mhaswad.

ABSTRACT :

Human history of any culture is packed with sequence of war and violence. The conflict carries on even during post-war period from the primitive age to the contemporary. With the span of time the means and mediums of violence have been changed but the victim remained the same. J. M. Coetzee in his novel presents sexuality and violence under the shadow of war and state approved violence. The present paper concerns with sexuality and its aspects presented in the novel.

KEYWORDS : sexuality, sexual-violence, violence, State-approved-violence, War-violence, Colonialism.

INTRODUCTION :

The war history of any country contains the events of sexual violence in between the opponents. Women are honoured with the prestige of a family in almost all the human cultures. However, during war women remained the best preferred prey in the matter of demoralizing and avenging the opponents. Therefore, every war has registered the raping and killing of women. Referring to the testimonies from anthropology at the collective level systematic and formal class cultural studies point in the same direction.

Regarding the study Mc Conahay found that overall level of violence was positively related to having a rigid differentiation of sex roles, which in effect means male dominance. The rumours at the frontier add more possibilities of the sexual harassments. In J. M. Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* the barbarians are considered as enemy of the Empire. The women of soldiers fantasize and horrify about the sexual harassments by the brutal barbarians. The rumours affect drastically the psychology of the man of family as they always fears about the possible attack on his family. About the rumour and the fear of the sexual violence the Magistrate the central figure of the novel states:

"There is no woman living along the frontier who has not dreamed of a dark barbarian hand coming from under the bed to grip her ankle, no man who had not frightened himself with visions of the barbarians carousing in his home, breaking the plates, setting fire to the curtains, raping his daughters." (WB-9)

Through the Magistrate's statement, J. M. Coetzee explores how the sexual violence and war violence are reciprocal. The history of war reveals the records about the sexual

harassment of the women and families of the enemies. Many of them are compelled to become the sex-slaves by the opponent soldiers.

While sympathizing with, the Magistrate brings a wounded barbarian girl to his residence. He offers refuge, medical treatment and food to her. At the outset it seems that the Magistrate is very humanistic person, but later he derives sexual pleasure from the same helpless girl. Their sexual relationship is neither out of force nor passion. The sex in this context is nothing but a commodity. There is an adjustment and an agreement between the Magistrate and the girl. The Magistrate takes benefit of the barbarian girl for protecting her and she also willingly offers her body for the same. Later the Magistrate criticizes his own sexual acts by considering it as the means of enjoyment during the world outside is suffering through the violence. Another psychological aspect of the justification for the sexual act is that he prefers involving in sexual act as a means of escape from the painful sight of the violence outside. He wishes to forget the violence going on outside by enclosing himself with the barbarian girl. His sensitive nature leads him to evaluate his sexual act in the context of violence outside. J. M. Coetzee attempts to explore the psychological complexities involved in the emotions like sex and violence.

It is obvious to develop a sexual relationship between the sexually suppressed man and woman. The young barbarian girl is stout enough to attract the aged Magistrate. In dire need of a sexual partner, the Magistrate sexually exploits the girl. Their physical relation lacks the sexual passion and enforcement. The Magistrate considers his attraction for the girl as 'a quiet affection'. He is also aware of the age difference between them. He is an aging man in his sixties and the barbarian girl is in her twenties. He rejects the possibility of any 'possessive' passion for the girl. The unconscious act of pushing the sleeping girl away from his bed justifies the lack of possession for her. Through the statement of the girl that 'we cannot help our dreams or what we do in our sleep' (WB-24), J. M. Coetzee focuses on the relation between reality and dreams.

The sexual relationship between the Magistrate and the barbarian girl becomes routine. The feelings of the Magistrate and the girl exemplifies of the submissive sex. On the one hand the Magistrate feels no desire to have physical relationship with the girl and on the other he fulfils his sexual needs through the girl. The lack of conversation between them highlights the apathy for intimacy. The silence here is produced out of the depriving and non passionate feelings of the Magistrate. Whenever the Magistrate speaks with the girl, the topic is about the sex or violence and later it results in love making. Her movements of the 'stiffened body' turn into the yielding one. The word 'yield' here is an indirect indication of the sex-slavery of the barbarian girl. The other response of the girl is that she 'slips off into sleep' before the Magistrate finish his sexual act. The sleep is dominant than the sexual pleasure for the barbarian girl. It indicates the failure of the girl's response to go with the movement of the Magistrate in sex. Beyond that, her sleep is mentioned as 'intensely as a child'. J. M. Coetzee's use of the image of sleeping child makes the effective impressions about their sexual relationship. The involvement in sexual acts with the innocently sleeping girl like a child signifies the satanic sin.

Gradually the physical intimacy between the Magistrate and barbarian girl fades. The Magistrate sometime tries to create desire for the girl, while the other times she falls asleep while caressing. There are indefinites in the sexual relationship between them. Thus, monotony enters in their sexual relationship. Her sudden sleep stands simultaneous to his waiting to arouse in him the sexual passion. Sometimes the Magistrate wants to make sex and she sleeps and sometimes vice versa. The paradoxical acts of sleeping show the mismatch of the couple for the act of sex. Through the sexual relationship of the Magistrate and the barbarian girl, J.M. Coetzee also focuses the issue of sexual exploitation of the servants by the owners. Generally it is taken to be granted that the maid servants always develop a

curious intimate relationship with the owners. In the same way, the Magistrate also sexually exploits the barbarian girl and puts her as his maid servant. He feels shameful for committing the similar sexual act. The Magistrate is aware of the gossips spreading in the town about their relationship. Though his is not a forced sex, the Magistrate expects the blames upon him for seducing and exploiting the barbarian girl.

After year-long-sex, the Magistrate's interest in the barbarian girl starts declining. He feels disgusted for his intimacy and physical relationship with the girl. As a responsible person, the Magistrate starts questioning himself about his sexual relations with the girl. His sympathy for the girl is polluted by the sex desire. "Hence although his relationship with the girl remains quiet inexplicable to him, he soon realises that he is simply 'using' her body and that, in spite of his liberal attitude, she is even more imprisoned...." Gradually, he realizes the age factor and intimacy in their relationship, which compels him to think about avoiding sex with the barbarian girl. The Magistrate expresses his feelings as:

"This is where the break always falls. This is where my hand, caressing her belly, seems as awkward as a lobster. The erotic impulse, if that is what it has been, withers; with surprise I see myself clutched to the stolid girl, unable to remember what I ever desired in her, angry with myself for wanting and not wanting her." (WB – 35)

J.M. Coetzee without failing portrays the Magistrate's morality which abides him to think about the ugly aspects of his sexual exploitation. After an extended pleasure of sex now his 'erotic impulse' withers. There is no obstacle for the Magistrate to continue his physical relationship with the barbarian girl. But because of moral botheration, he finds it difficult to maintain. Through the Magistrate's feelings J. M. Coetzee heightens the dilemma in abandoning the sex. It is climax for the Magistrate to take an ultimate decision about the barbarian girl. After a day's labour she turns to the Magistrate's bed to please him. Though not mandatory, the barbarian girl keeps on playing a sex-slave. She doesn't care for the Magistrate's interested and keeps sleeping with him. J. M. Coetzee presents the routine sexual life as if they are married compelled to sleep together.

After satisfying his sexual desire, the Magistrate starts contemplating over his sinuous act. Due to the age difference there are many disparities in their behaviour also. While comparing their bodies he finds his reaching towards the disorders and disabilities and the girl's full of lusty potential. The magistrate presents his thought on their physical features using the symbols "acid in milk, ashes in honey, chalk in bread.... flower radiating out from a kernel in the loins". As well as finds their physic "diffuse, gaseous, centreless"(WB-36.) J. M. Coetzee here presents the self-criticism of the Magistrate. He frequently presents such weathered male characters in his novels that sexually exploit and later feel guilty and try to compensate for the loss.

Confused between the desire and guilty feeling, the Magistrate starts going to the Inn where he used to visit women to satisfy his sexual desire. He is welcomed with greeting by the Inn-lady for his visit after a long time. While sexual intercourse with the Inn-lady, he cannot help himself in preventing the appearance of the face and body of the barbarian girl in front of his eyes. The Magistrate unconsciously compares the untainted barbarian girl's body with the experienced Inn-lady's and concludes that the Inn-lady is 'incomplete' woman. When he returns to his residence, he finds the barbarian girl waiting for him. He becomes habitual of her intimacy. While observing her naked body, he contemplates in a trance position. He is enslaved by the acute pleasure in her 'tiny body, its manner and its movements'. (WB-46) On the opposite, his confusion and uncertainty about the desire for her continues. All thoughts regarding comparison and evaluation of the sexual life occur in his mind unexpectedly. His desire for her is inexplicit and indirect. Through the Magistrate's psychological grievances, J. M. Coetzee explores general conflict of a person helplessly surrenders to the socially and morally unacceptable physical relationship. The Magistrate's

responsible nature and emotional attachment with the barbarian girl dries up the satisfaction in sexual relations with the Inn-lady. The man in *Magistrate* is shackled due to his status, honour, duty and accountability and his natural emotions and desires for women get suppressed. However, his various feelings about his sex-partners are formulated under the influence of his role and responsibility as a Magistrate of the Empire. He frequently rethinks about his behaviour and relationship with the barbarian girl. Through the Magistrate's feelings, J. M. Coetzee presents the conflict in sexual violence. The barbarian girl is one of the enemies of the Empire, so she must be punished. But she is a useful enemy who proves her need in the life of a lonely person. He takes pleasure and makes fun with her. In addition, J. M. Coetzee focuses on a man's behaviour spoiled by the failure to regain his sexual desires. J. M. Coetzee calls such violent thoughts 'vengeful actions of impotent yearning'. (WB-46)

The Magistrate's sexual relationship with the barbarian girl reveals the never-ending lust and sexual appetite in an aging man. The fatherly Magistrate and the young stout barbarian girl are the mismatch in sex relationship. The Magistrate confesses his failure in sex due to age factor. He remembers a reputed old man who died in attempt to force himself in sex for which his body fails to respond. This is an example of the inevitable sexual desires and the futile efforts to fulfil it in the old age. The Magistrate admits:

"...there were unsettling occasions when in the middle of the sexual act I felt myself losing my way like a story-teller losing a thread of his story. I thought with a shiver of those figures of fun, fat old men whose overburdened hearts stop beating, who pass way in the arms of their loves with an apology on their lips and have to be carried out and dumped in a dark alley to save the reputation of the house. The climax to the act itself became remote, puny, and oddity." (WB -48-49)

With the above example, J. M. Coetzee shakes the social belief that an elderly person is aloof from the sexual desires. Ironically the aged man dies due to the unbearable stress in sex. The dead old man's reputation is saved by unloading his dead body in the tapered passage to make farce about his death. J. M. Coetzee indirectly questions about the sexual desires of the retired person. He also reveals the emotionless moves and lack of passionate feelings during the love making between an aged man and a young girl.

While contemplating upon his irresistible sexual desires, the Magistrate realizes the animal sexual passion residing in him. He admits his helpless submission to the never ending appetite for sex. He explains the dominance of sex as "...swelling and dwindling according to autonomous appetites..." J. M. Coetzee presents the conflict in human nature between the conscience and instinctive physical needs. On one hand the Magistrate criticizes his own desires of sex and on the other he is unable to control the sex. During visits to the Inn-lady entitled as 'a bird' the Magistrate realizes that his old body is not responding to the girl in the same fashion as it was in his youth. The Magistrate admits the reality about the limits as well as the process of physical declining. J. M. Coetzee provides scope for the readers to foresee his retirement period.

The sexual needs and suppression of the soldiers are presented through the Magistrate's thoughts about them. The Magistrate reveals that the soldiers also visit the Inn-lady. He sees the gifts in the Inn given by the soldiers to the inn lady. While observing the inspection parade of the soldiers he thinks about the secret sexual relations of the soldiers. Generally soldiers are considered strict in nature, heartless and brutal, but being human they also need to visit the women prostitutes to satisfy their physical need. J. M. Coetzee indirectly highlights the parallel need of women around the camps of the soldiers during the wars. Whoever the man, higher or lower in position, anyhow he wants to fulfil the sexual desire.

When the Magistrate avoids sex with the barbarian girl, he experiences the sexual jealousy and possessiveness in her. While keeping the barbarian girl away, he starts visiting the Inn-lady to satisfy his sex appetite. Being aware of the substitution for her, the barbarian

girl complains about his negligence towards her. The Magistrate does not respond to her sexual passions while postponing the intercourse for 'another time'. The girl complains about sexual negligence. He somehow succeeds in keeping the barbarian girl away from him and later the girl also adapts to 'the new pattern' of life. In this way, the Magistrate ends his sexual relationship with the barbarian girl. He expresses his feelings about the end of the sexual relation: "...but to see sexual passion, whether in horse or goat or man or woman, as a simple fact of life with the clearest of means and the clearest of ends; ..." (WB -60) At the end of the sexual relationship with the barbarian girl, the Magistrate recalls the deep memories about her caressing, love, intimacy and the physical pleasure. Apart from the psychological and moral burden, other reasons for breakdown of their sex relation can be the age factor and decreasing interest in sex.

There is an incident of rape of a girl child. After the physically and mentally torture, the girl is left in solitude without asking her about the deeds done to her. The event narrates the extreme social, moral and psychological impacts of the sexual violence upon children and their family are shown in this incident. J. M. Coetzee shows how a child rape results in the confinement and obligations on all the children in the society. It also shows the impact of the sexual violence on social life. As frequent, again the guilty mob is considered to be the barbarians on the basis of their appearance. The Empire assumes and is prejudiced that all the worst things are done only by the barbarians.

J. M. Coetzee in *Waiting for the Barbarians* points out the role of prejudices about sex as under current in spreading rumours in society. He projects how men and women cannot live without thinking about sex. The novel also projects sexual violence under war circumstance, relationship between the sexually suppressed man and woman, various aspects of sexual exploitation and the never-ending lust and sexual appetite.

NOTES AND REFERENCES:

- 1) Winter David.G, '*Power, Sex and Violence : A Psychological Reconstruction of the 20th Century and Intellectual Agenda for Political Psychology*', Political Psychology, Vol. 21, No. 2, Blackwell Publishers, 2000.
- 2) Coetzee, J.M., '*Waiting for the Barbaians*', Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1982.
- 3) Canpari – Labib, Michela, '*Old myths – Modern Empires, Power, Language and Identity in J. M. Coetzee's work*,' Peter Lang, 2005.