Chapter IV: Sage and Savage in the Works of Coetzee and Achebe
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Racial Violence in Coetzee’s African Novels

As a Liberal Funk novel, Public Enterprises Minister Jeff Radebe criticizes *Disgrace* for illustrating the ways in which white South Africans still believe in a certain stereotype of the African: “In this novel J. M. Coetzee represents as brutally as he can the white people's perception of the post-apartheid black man.”

The argument is built on the idea that Coetzee's novel reflects society, that the views of the white characters in *Disgrace* may be equated with those of white South Africans in general. Yet the corollary of this reading would mean that the black rapists in *Disgrace* are representative of most black people in South Africa, which is exactly what the ruling party would like to refute.

In their submission during the Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) hearings on racism in the media, the African National Congress (ANC) protested against the white media for propagating negative depictions of black Africans. This attitude is most noticeable in reports about crime and rape. But intriguingly, Coetzee himself, in a review published at the same time as the novel, takes Breyten Breytenbach to task for reporting, gruesome reports … of attacks on whites …. horror stories have become a staple… aimed at driving whites off the land and ultimately out of the country and thereby promoting white paranoia.

And in *Disgrace* Coetzee subverts the black peril narrative, by simultaneously scripting what Sol T. Plaatje referred to as white peril, the hidden sexual exploitation of black women by white men that have existed for centuries. While ‘black peril’ imagery was a common feature of racist political discourse throughout the twentieth
century, the subversive status of ‘white peril’ literature is confirmed by attitudes of apartheid censors.

In 1977, Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* was placed under scrutiny, partly for representing an apparent rape of a white woman by a black farm-worker as well as the white farmer's coercion of a black female servant. Coetzee reminds us that it is by no means only white who suffer from criminal violence in new South Africa.

In The narrative of Jacobus Coetzee, with its memorable description of colonial brutality, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, with its representation of a state apparatus relying on torture and cross-border raids, *Life & Times of Michael K*, with its state of war in a future South Africa, and *Age of Iron*, with its vivid depiction of the violence in the townships and the systematic viciousness of the police, Coetzee, quite as much as any South African author, has registered for his time and for future generations the brutality, the anger, and the suffering of the apartheid era. After the democratic elections of 1994 and the sweeping ANC victory that brought Nelson Mandela from prison to presidency, one might at least expected from his pen a novel with a tinge of celebration and optimism.  

But set in a turn-of-the-Millennium South Africa flirting with social collapse, *Disgrace* has a morally complex depiction of race, sex, and class. It begins with Professor David Lurie trying to find a rational solution to the problem of sex. When the arrangement with the part-time prostitute Soraya breaks down Lurie has a short–
lived affair with the new, young secretary, ironically named Dawn, whose views highlight the situation in post-apartheid South Africa.

Lurie then seduces a twenty-year-old student, Melanie Isaacs, whom he lures over to his place for a simple tagliatelle with mushroom sauce and few paragraphs of one-sided Wordsworth-based discussion, and before he knows it he has forced his way into her apartment and forced sex on her, all the while invoking Eros, to whom he feels he must be true. A mistake, a huge mistake, he realizes, but it is Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core.

The physical description of Melanie Issacs seems to point to the fact that she is, in the South African nomenclature, Colored. Once the reader grasps this, much of Lurie’s affair with his student becomes clearer and more sombre. Farodia Rassool, a member of the committee of enquiry and herself a woman of color, speaks out: Yes, he says, he is guilty; but…he is confessing to, just an impulse he could not resist, with no mention of the long history of exploitation of which this is part.

In her words there is perhaps an echo of the frustration of that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission faced with confessions of racist guilt but unrepentant acknowledgements. In any other context, behaviour such as his would have been seen as an unfortunate slip, a peccadillo, and accorded with a measure of indulgence. But this is contemporary South Africa where his encounter can only be contextualized within the several centuries of colonial history in which white men debauched black men with impunity.

Thus denounced David flees to his daughter, Lucy. It isn’t a safe place, as David and Lucy soon find out; several days after David arrives, three black men
invade their house, killing the dogs Lucy keeps, gang-raping Lucy, and driving away in David’s car.

Their relationship, formerly close, crumbles under the stress of this trauma, and it only gets worse when Lucy refuses to report the rape to the police, calling it purely a private matter.

Lucy represents another form of engagement with history. As a woman, she is victimized both by her domineering white father and by black men. A white lesbian, she is raped by three black men, a condition, and the novel indicates, worse than the violation of a virgin. Although the victim of a rape, Lucy is intrigued that her assailants treat her as an object of vengeance.3

With no love for the baby in her womb, at least not yet, Lucy looks forward to motherhood. The point, of course, is that Lucy contemplates her attempts at self-crucifixion as a form of restitution: what if that is the price one has to pay for staying on?

Perhaps that is how they look at it; perhaps that is how I should look at it too….They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors. For Lucy it is a good point to start all over again at ground level. With nothing….No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity. Lurie calls it humbling herself before history but if Lucy’s mode of engagement with history is Coetzee’s valid paradigm for whites’ negotiation for a precarious foothold in post-apartheid South Africa, then his conception of their fall from grace evokes near absolute depravity.
Locked as we are into Lurie’s view of things, we do not gain much sense of what the new South Africa means to those who are poor or black. For the most part the new South Africa to them would seem to be much the same as the old South Africa. To black as well as white, there are new fears, about personal safety.4

Petrus, the representative, remains almost entirely inscrutable; the racially or socially privileged character can gain virtually no understanding of inner world of the other who has excluded from such privilege. Thus Lucy’s will to sacrifice notwithstanding, in her supposedly objective evaluation of her place and that of other white farmers in her neighbourhood is inherent the dread of ethnic cleansing.

There will certainly be readers who protest against what they regard as the representation of black men as rapists in Disgrace, just as there will be those who read David Lurie as exemplifying the white experience in post-apartheid South Africa.

But it is important to acknowledge that the novel dissolves clear boundaries of identity between Lurie and the men who rape Lucy. Like these men, Lurie is also a rapist and (albeit in a different way) a dog-killer. Michael Marais notes that the scene in which Melanie is raped has resonance with Lurie's imagining of his daughter's rape.

Although Lucy's story is hidden from Lurie and from the reader, Lurie agonizes over possibilities, and eventually stages an appalling scenario in his mind where he 'becomes' the men who violate his daughter.
He can, if he concentrates, lose himself, be there, be the men, inhabit them, and fill them with the ghost of himself. In this imaginary ‘reading’, the scene of violence is represented, but Lurie’s narration is not from the viewpoint of perpetrator or voyeur, but from the position of weakness and suffering.

Coetzee’s is thus most disturbing and sombre about racial harmony. His white characters are invariably doomed. If Lucy proclaims white renunciation, Lurie invokes memories of the immediate past in order to rebuke the racially unpalatable present. Again, the black characters are perhaps too deprived, brutalized, and aggrieved to inspire any hope. In the end, Coetzee does not create any delusions of the immediate possibility of reconciliation so soon after apartheid.

Masculinity and Feminity of Igbo Culture

Some languages acquire a standardized literary language more easily than others. Chinua Achebe had a great part to play in the standardization of the peculiar style of Nigerian English and also the Igbo language.

The Igbo language has a multiplicity of dialects some of which are mutually unintelligible. The first dilemma of the European Christian Missionaries who introduced writing in Igbo land in mid-19th century was to decide on an orthography acceptable to all the competing dialects. There was the urgent need to have in native tongue essential instruments of proselytization, namely the Bible, hymn books, prayer books, etc. The ramifications of this dilemma have been widening over the centuries in complexity.

Since 1841 three proposed solutions have failed woefully. The first was an experiment to forge a synthesis of some selected representative dialects. This Igbo
Esperanto christened Isuama Igbo lasted from 1841 to 1872 and was riddled with uncompromising controversies all through its existence.

A second experiment, Union Igbo, 1905-1939, succeeded through the determined energies of the missionaries in having the English Bible, hymn books and prayer books translated into it for effective evangelism. But it too, fell to the unrelenting onslaughts of sectional conflicts.

The third experiment was the Central Igbo, a kind of standard arrived at by a combination of a core of dialects. It lasted from 1939 to 1972 and although it appeared to have reduced significantly the thorniest issues in the controversy, its opposition and resistance among some Igbo groups remained persistent and unrelenting.

After the Nigerian independence in 1960, and following the exit of European Christian missionaries, the endemic controversy was inherited by the Society for the Promotion of Igbo Language and Culture (SPILC) founded by F.C. Ogbalu, a concerned pan-Igbo nationalist educator who also established a press devoted to the production and publication of educational materials in Igbo language.5

Through his unflinching efforts a fourth experiment and seemingly the ultimate solution, Standard Igbo was evolved in 1973.Perhaps what was most revolutionary in Achebe's Odenigbo Lecture was not what he said but rather what he did. Two decades after his initial condemnation of Union as well as Standard Igbo, Achebe had not shifted from his position that Igbo writers should be free to write in their various community dialects unencumbered by any standardization theories or practices.
Then as now, he resented attempts to force writers into any strait jackets maintaining unequivocally that literature has the mission to give full and unfettered play to the creative genius of Igbo speech in all its splendid variety, not to damn it up into the sluggish pond of sterile pedantry. In keeping with this principle, therefore, Achebe wrote and delivered his Odenigbo lecture in a brand of dialect peculiar only to Onitsha speakers of the language and almost unintelligible to more than half the audience.

I fully support the right of every writer (or other user of a language) to use whatever dialect they choose, but there should surely be a standard language available for public purposes that is intelligible to all, and I hope the problems involved can be overcome.\textsuperscript{6}

Moses’s tone is unmistakably that of the Enlightenment: one can momentarily entertain dreams of freedom, but the mature, rational citizen will eventually realize that the true nature of freedom is responsibility.

However, the tone, the alternative ethos, of Michael K and his author is equally unmistakably that of a Romanticism that marks a radical break with, which refuses to acknowledge, the moralism of the Enlightenment: their ethical understanding stems not from maturity but from the radical innocence of the child.

As Coetzee puts it in \textit{Waiting for the Barbarians}, and Achebe also does in \textit{Girls at War}, children come into the world bringing with them the memory of justice, a memory that is perpetually at odds with the world of laws. The radical force of this memory is that, and this is what Moses, speaking from the perspective of civilization and from within its teleological timeframe, misses, it is not the solitary reverie but the
way of the world that is revealed as transitory. K tends to his garden because he recognizes that human nature is not wholly determined by the idea of civilization; he waits for the end of the time of history as the beginning of the time of the human.

**Teetotalism and Postmodernism: The Contradictions**

At a critical moment in J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the magistrate escapes from his cell to denounce the public beating of twelve barbarian captives. Colonel Joll summons the deposed leader to his office the following day. Joll, an officer of the Empire's Third Bureau, demands that the magistrate account for poplarwood slips he has been collecting from nearby ruins. Examining the slips, which are inscribed with a series of enigmatic characters, the magistrate doesn't even know whether to read from right to left and has no idea what the symbols stand for.

He wonders if a circular character is meant to represent the sun; if it describes the physical state of the tongue, the lips, the throat as they work together to produce a specific word; or if it merely stands for what it is, a circle, plain and simple. He has pored over the slips previously, and arranged them in differing grids, attempting to piece them together like a jigsaw puzzle or map. Despite the fact that he has isolated over four hundred different characters in the script, he fears these are actually scribal embellishments on a repertory of 20 or 30 primitive forms.

Although the magistrate cannot read the script with any more accuracy than Joll can, this fact does not stop him from forwarding a deliberately false translation of the scrawl set before him, weaving a narrative:

> We went to fetch your brother yesterday. They showed us into a room where he lay on a table sewn up in a sheet. Tore the sheet wide open
and saw bruises all over his body and saw that his feet were swollen and broken. What happened to him? I said. I do not know, said the man, it is not on the paper.  

His narrative critiques torture and imperialism, but it also foregrounds the role the interpreter plays in creating meaning from texts. At a pivotal point in the scene, the magistrate pauses to examine a single character: It is the barbarian character war he claims, but it has other senses too.

It can stand for vengeance, and, if you turn it upside down like this, it can be made to read justice. There is no knowing what sense is intended. In this passage, and throughout the text, the magistrate's experience parallels the difficulties faced by the postmodern reader. The magistrate can be understood as the translator who, despite his insufficient grasp of a text, forwards an authoritative interpretation.

The magistrate's reading of the slips provides a useful reference point for the reader and critic of *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Lance Olsen, in *The Presence of Absence*, one of the earliest scholarly studies of barbarians, argues that the wood slips form an absence which may be supplemented in an endless number of ways.

For Olsen, the slips mirror the novel, in which language remains at the mercy of the interpreter and holds no inherent significance independent of an interpretive agent. In his estimation, postmodern fiction like Coetzee's novel leaves the reader with a sense of despair before the arbitrariness of language and its essential defectiveness for depicting the world.

Olsen's argument resonates for many readers of Coetzee. The enigmatic quality of barbarians, emphasized by the magistrate's repeated references to
interpretation and his anxiety about making definitive assertions, undoubtedly makes it difficult to locate a center of authority in the book.

However, as Susan Van Zanten Gallagher argues, the fact that the slips do not hold a single meaning does not mean they are without meaning. By reading the absence of authority in Barbarians as a limiting factor, Olsen undervalues the various readings Coetzee's elusive work engenders.  

Barbara Eckstein reads Olsen's critique as an aesthetic defense of Coetzee, one directed at critics who claim the author fails to address pressing moral and ethical issues. These critics read the unspecified temporal and geographical setting of *Waiting for the Barbarians* through a straightforward allegorical lens, disapproving of its lack of worldly reference.

Nadine Gordimer, the most prominent of the critics named here, views all Coetzee's early fiction as refusing to engage with the historical situation in South Africa. Gordimer holds that in times of political crisis, it is the artist's duty to critique oppressive regimes, and numerous critics agree with her, criticizing what they see as Coetzee's preoccupation with the concerns of a white liberal elite and his failure to represent South African oppression under apartheid.

By reading *Waiting for the Barbarians* as an allegory, Lewis, Vaughan, and Gordimer overlook the magistrate's own implicit warning against allegorical reading. Translating the slips for Joll, he states, they form an allegory further, each single slip can be read in many ways.
The magistrate acknowledges that an allegorical interpretive approach will yield many meanings, but his own misinterpretation simultaneously undermines the accuracy or finality of these interpretations. Coetzee, through the magistrate, positions his particular allegory as a text that, when divided into its individual parts and examined carefully, resists oversimplified, universal readings. When the magistrate notes that

“…there is no agreement among scholars about how to interpret the barbarian script, he anticipates the widely disparate readings that critics apply to Barbarians itself.”

For several years following the initial release of Waiting for the Barbarians, criticism split into two camps. Critics in Gordimer's camp, by searching for explicit political engagement, found the novel lacking in the extreme; by contrast, those more in line with Olsen's critique found a rich store of commentary on the nature of language and interpretation.

The critical conversation was limited to these partisan approaches until the introduction of Teresa Dovey's Lacanian Allegories in 1988. Dovey argues that the deconstructive activity of Coetzee's novels is not an empty textual game, but an attempt to destabilize historical discourse itself.

She describes Coetzee's approach as a more nuanced form of political and historical engagement, and her argument significantly alters the critical conversation surrounding Coetzee.

David Attwell's The Problem of History in the Fiction of J.M. Coetzee is particularly indebted to Dovey's scholarship. Attwell argues that the resources of
postmodernism in fiction rather than an historical engagement. Along with Susan Van Zanten Gallagher.¹⁰

Reading Coetzee against the grain in this fashion may seem out of keeping with the author's own statements on history's antagonistic relationship to fiction, he disapproves of the colonization of the novel by the discourse of history.

An interview between Coetzee and Tony Morphet, however, makes Attwell's project appear quite relevant: I hope that a certain spirit of resistance is ingrained in all my books, Coetzee notes, ultimately I hope they have the strength to resist whatever readings I impose on them on occasions like the present one. Coetzee refuses to provide a master discourse to guide interpretation of his novels, choosing instead to employ an indeterminate language that resists any final, authoritative analysis.

Some interpret this elusiveness as political quietude, while others, like Jennifer Wenzel, read the novel as providing a nexus of the political and poststructural, the historical and linguistic. Examining the silence of the tortured body in the novel, Wenzel finds relevant contrasts between the magistrate's refusal to impose definitive interpretations on the barbarian girl and Empire's desire to impose a voice on its marginalized subjects.

*Waiting for the Barbarians* elicits widely differing readings, which span the gamut from Gordimer to Wenzel. This disparity among critics reflects the indeterminate language of the novel.
Bearing in mind the discourse of the novel itself, specifically, its focus on the role the interpreter plays in determining textual significance, it is difficult to forward a definitive interpretation of Barbarians.\textsuperscript{11}

Derek Attridge has recently made a vital contribution to the critical conversation on Coetzee, arguing that the novel should be approached as an event rather than a puzzle to be deciphered: I treat it as something that comes into being only in the process of understanding and responding that I, as an individual reader in a specific time and place go through.

In a novel where authoritative meaning is so difficult to locate, the reader plays an indispensable role in creating significance from the text; \textit{Waiting for the Barbarians} engages the reader in the same active process of interpretation that the magistrate undergoes when translating the barbarian script. Ultimately, the reader shares in his project, anxiously working to solidify textual meaning.\textsuperscript{12}

The magistrate employs a similarly inconclusive method of translation in his attempts to interpret the marks on the body of a barbarian girl who has been tortured by Joll. Though he is dealing with a human being, the magistrate approaches the girl much like he would a text, reading her, in essence, to elicit the story of her time in the torture chamber. Rosemary Jolly argues, the magistrate's fascination with the barbarian girl stems from her body as the site of torture, rather than any desire for the 'girl' herself.

He worships the surface of her body, the skin, the site of interaction between torture and tortured. The magistrate admits that until the marks on this girl's body are
deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her; in doing so he exposes the
disconnected and objective relationship he has toward her.

To the magistrate, her body is little more than an artifact to be decoded, an
encrypted record he hopes will reveal the secrets of Joll's chamber.

Drawn to a caterpillar shaped scar in the corner of one, the magistrate
mistakenly thinks that by uncovering the cause of this worm-like sear he will come to
know the origin of her blindness. While she initially refuses to answer his questions
about the scar, the girl later tells him, That is nothing. That is where the iron touched
me. It made a little burn.

Far from revealing the cause for her damaged vision, the mark is incidental, a
surface wound that does not penetrate her actual eye. This disclosure seems to
disappoint the magistrate: he experiences resentment and even stirrings of outrage
towards the girl immediately following.

Although the magistrate wishes to restore the girl to her original, intact state,
the one she inhabited prior to being tortured, he appears far more interested in
gleaning the traces of a history her body bear. To his disappointment, these marks do
not go deep enough. The magistrate is more interested in the writing left by her
torturers than in the story of the girl herself. In his attempts to read the external marks
of torture on her body, though, he often fails to recognize the mark his own
interrogations leave on her consciousness.

Rather than work to understand the totality of her being, the magistrate treats
the girl alternately as a charity case, a pet and, as noted above, a text. His inability to
communicate with her, to elicit her story, stems from a flawed approach.
He is incapable of remembering her face before she was taken to Joll's chamber, and this failing is inextricably linked to his lack of insight into her individuality. He cannot see her as anything more than a tortured body, a physical record of horrific processes to be carefully studied. To him it is as if the girl's body has no interior, only a surface across which he hunts back and forth seeking entry. But it is precisely because he approaches her body as a surface that he cannot gain access to her interior world.

His repeated attempts to wash away the effects of torture from the girl's body with soap and water allow him to clear his conscience long enough to fall into a sleep of oblivion. This washing mirrors his notion that the torturer must ritually wash his hands after leaving the chamber in order to return and break bread with other men. For the magistrate, the body's surface corresponds directly to the human interior, and this is the failure of his approach.

**Igbo-Centric Response of Achebe**

Achebe teaches us a lot about Igbo society. He gathers up Igbo myths and proverbs and knits them excellently in his work. The theme of woman figures a great deal in Achebe’s works. Achebe teaches us a lot about Igbo society. He gathers up Igbo myths and proverbs and knits them excellently in his work. Through them he explains the role of women in pre-colonial Africa and at the same time criticizes what he considers untenable forms of women exploitation.

Woman is used as symbol of weakness as well as strength and support. Both symbols, conflicting as they are, are woven neatly into his stories so that woman comes out vindicated and exalted at the end.13
In *Things Fall Apart* protagonist of the story has a tragic flaw that at the end brings his downfall. His whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and weakness. For Okonkwo, his father embodied the epitome of failure and weakness. He was taunted as a child by other children when they called Unoka agbala. Agbala could either mean a man who had taken no title or woman.

Okonkwo, protagonist of the story in *Things Fall Apart*, hated anything weak or frail, and his descriptions of his tribe and the members of his family show that in Ibo society anything strong was likened to man and anything weak to woman.

Because Nwoye, his son by his first wife, reminds Okonkwo of his father Unoka, he describes him as woman-like. After hearing of Nwoye's conversion to the Christianity, Okonkwo ponders how he, a flaming fire could have begotten a son like Nwoye, degenerate and effeminate.

On the other hand, he thinks that his daughter Ezinma should have been a boy. He favoured her most out of all of his children, yet if Ezinma had been a boy he would have been happier. After killing Ikemefuna, Okonkwo, who cannot understand why he is so distraught. When his tribe looks as if they are not going to fight against the intruding missionaries, Okonkwo remembers the days when men were men.

So we breakfasted well on new bread and milk, and then found a sunny seat in a churchyard. 'Do your best to follow, Friday,' I said - 'Nature did not intend me for a teacher, I lack patience.' On the slate I drew a house with a door and windows and a chimney, and beneath it wrote the letters h-o-u-s. 'This is the picture,' I said, pointing to the picture, 'and this the word.' I made the sounds of the word house one
by one, pointing to the letters as I made them, and then took Friday's finger and guided it over the letters as I spoke the word; and finally gave the pencil into his hand and guided him to write h-o-u-s beneath the h-o-u-s I had written. Then I wiped the slate clean, so that there was no picture left save the picture in Friday's mind, and guided his hand in forming the word a third and a fourth time, till the slate was covered in letters. I wiped it clean again. 'Now do it alone, Friday,' I said; and Friday wrote the four letters h-o-u-s, or four shapes passably like them: whether they were truly the four letters, and stood truly for the word house, and the picture I had drawn, and the thing itself, only he knew.¹⁴

In keeping with the Igbo view of female nature, the tribe allowed wife beating. According to Igbo belief women by nature required to be tamed and streamlined by regular beating so that atmosphere at home and outside should remain orderly. In *Things Fall Apart* Achebe describes two instances when Okonkwo beats his second wife, once when she did not come home to make his meal. He beat her severely and was punished but only because he beat her during the Week of Peace.

He beat her again when she referred to him as one of those guns that never shot. When a severe case of wife beating comes before the egwugwu, he usually favoured the wife, but at the end of the trial a man wondered why such a trifle should come before the egwugwu.

In *Anthills of the Savannah*, Achebe uses creation myths to criticize another form of women's oppression. In his love letter to Beatrice,
Ikem refers to creation myths from both the Bible and the oral traditions of his ancestors. Ikem remarks on the similarities of these creation myths and their analogous purpose of denouncing women.  

According to Ikem, women have been oppressed since the beginning of time; they have been accused of causing Man's great fall. Ikem, therefore, would argue that creation myths are not about the beginning of the earth; rather they are the beginnings of men's oppression of women.

Ikem states the origin of oppression of Woman was based on crude denigration. According to Ikem's rendition of the creation myths, woman causes all evil, as exemplified by her sinful bite of apple in the Garden of Eden. Christian and Yoruba creation myths evolve in order to dilute men's guilt and adapt to changing cultural actions.
References

12. Ibid. p. 33.