



Disability studies: Re-reading *Waiting for The Barbarians*

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Abstract

Disability Studies endeavors to formulate a social analysis of experience of disability. The inter-disciplinary approaches to the field of disability studies can offer new perspectives to existing disciplines such as the study of English literature. This approach can be applied to literary works and a new interpretation of these works be arrived at in the light of Disability Studies. J M Coetzee's *Waiting for The Barbarians* is generally studied from a Postcolonial perspective. The novel is also read as an allegorical depiction of depravity of man. The Magistrate is the central character and narrator of the novel. We see everything from his perspective. But if the novel is read from the perspective of Disability Studies, The Blind barbarian girl should be the focus of study. The disability of the girl is overlooked in interpreting the story of the novel from various perspectives. Reading the novel from the perspective of disability studies can help to reveal new insights in the novel.

Keywords: blindness, disability, disability studies, barbarian, J. M. Coetzee

Introduction

Disability Studies endeavors to formulate a social analysis of experience of disability. It begins with an assumption that disability is created by society and constitutes a form of social oppression which results in the exclusion of people who have impairments. In the words of Seamy Linton "Disability Studies...organizes and circumscribes a knowledge base that explains the social and political nature of the ascribed category, disability" (15). There is some similarity between the social construction of disability and that of race, class, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. The inter-disciplinary approaches to the field of disability studies can offer new perspectives to existing disciplines such as the study of English literature. This approach can be applied to literary works and a new interpretation of these works be arrived at in the light of Disability Studies. Literary works of the authors suffering from disability may be studied a fresh in the light of their disability. A Disability Studies perspective can also be applied to literary works depicting disabled characters, or dealing, directly or indirectly with disability. The application of Disability Studies perspective is illustrated in this paper in re-reading of *Waiting for The Barbarians* by J M Coetzee.

Re-reading *Waiting for The Barbarians*

J M Coetzee's *Waiting for The Barbarians* is generally studied from a Postcolonial perspective. The novel is also read as an allegorical depiction of depravity of man. The novel is set in an indeterminate time and place. The author describes the struggle of the Magistrate, the civil administrator of a frontier of the empire. The civilized empire is waging war against the native people of the region who are called barbarians. The Magistrate is the central character and narrator of the novel. We see everything from his perspective. But if the novel is read from the perspective of Disability Studies, The Blind barbarian girl should be the focus of study. The title of the novel also hints that barbarians, especially the barbarian girl is the central character. The following analysis of the novel is written

from the perspective of the blind barbarian girl.

When the magistrate first meets The Blind barbarian girl, she is begging at a street corner. The image of a blind girl begging invokes the old association between blindness and begging. Commenting on this old association of blindness and begging, Levy remarks, "Blindness and begging appear so intimately connected with each other that in the minds of many persons the existence of the former seems to indicate the presence of the latter" (63-64). The blind barbarian girl fits the old stereotype of a blind beggar. The image of a blind beggar is common in literature and the author exploits this old association. The magistrate tries to help her and offers her the job to clean his house, but the girl refuses and leaves.

The barbarian girl is not completely blind. She has some residual peripheral vision. She does not call herself as blind. But the magistrate insists on calling her blind. He fails to understand her vision of the world. Fictional characters are generally presented as totally blind to fit the binary of sight and blindness. But the barbarian girl is not totally blind. So she does not fit the stereotypical binary of blind and sighted. In this context Georgina Kleage comments, "he (Coetzee) could have made the girl completely blind. When he does not, she slips free of the allegorical categories of his narrative. Facile binary oppositions--sight/blindness, civilization/barbarism, center/periphery, us/them..." (83).

Though the barbarian girl has some residual vision, she is referred to as blind girl. She has no name. The magistrate does not even ask her name. Her name is not mentioned in the novel. The author projects her threefold identity. She is a barbarian, a girl and blind. But out of these three identities, her barbarian character and her blindness are emphasized. She has been denied individual identity. It has been a fashion in fiction to identify disabled characters by their disability. Charles Dickens in *Barnaby Rudge* and *The Cricket on the Hearth*, D. H. Lawrence in *The Blind man* and Rudyard Kipling in *The Light That Failed* repeatedly refer to blind characters in their stories as blind man and blind woman. Coetzee has also used the same technique to

emphasize the blindness of the girl. Identifying a character only by her disability projects her as other, an outsider. She remains a target of magistrate's pity and sympathy.

The blindness of the barbarian girl is the result of the torture inflicted by Colonel Joll. He is the interrogator from the third bureau. He forces her to stare at spikes of a hot metal fork. The intense light damages her retina and she loses the central vision and is left with faint peripheral vision. Her blindness is the punishment for being a barbarian and the enemy of the empire. Blinding as a punishment for enemies is an ancient motif in literature and mythology. The Greek mythology is replete with stories of blinding as a punishment by Gods or humans. Coetzee also uses this motif to symbolize the power of the empire and helplessness of the barbarians. Blinding as a punishment for some wrongdoing puts the onus on the victim. In fiction and films the villainous characters are disabled by the virtuous heroes. This association of disability as a fitting punishment for wicked characters reinforces the association of disability and villainy. But Coetzee does not depict the blind barbarian girl as wicked character. She is the victim of the whims of Colonel Joll and her blindness symbolizes the power of oppressors over the oppressed.

Her blindness also shapes her relation with the Magistrate. He assumes a patronizing attitude to her. The Magistrate is a compulsive lecher and regularly visits a prostitute. He takes the girl in to his room but does not make love to her even when she is lying naked in bed with him. He decides to stop sleeping with her and to return her to her people.

She is young and willing to satisfy Magistrate's lust, but he rejects her as a woman and thinks only of her blindness. Her blindness makes her undesirable in Magistrate's eyes. He links her blindness to loss of sexuality. English fiction is full of such examples. Loss of sight of a male character is also symbolically projected as the loss of manhood and sexuality. Blindness in fiction is seen as symbolic castration for men. Disabled women are also seen as unfit for marriage and procreation. The magistrate in rejecting the barbarian girl also reflects such attitude. He does not see her as sexually desirable. Georgina Kleage has explained the magistrate's fascination and repulsion of the girl: "She is alien to him in every way, being not only Barbarian and female but also blind. Her otherness at once attracts and repels him" (84).

When the magistrate travels with the barbarian girl to return her to her people, he sees her in a different light. Her blindness does not deter her. She rides the horse with ease. She knows all the difficult roads in the desert. He does not see her as a helpless victim of the empire. He overcomes the pity that he feels for her and when they are together in the tent, he makes love to her. This change in their relation reflects his attitude towards blindness. Since he does not see her as a helpless blind girl, he considers her sexually desirable. He restores the girl to her people and returns to his post. But he is also imprisoned on the charges of treason and the story of blind barbarian girl comes to an end.

The novel has been read as an allegory, a postcolonial and a postmodern text defying all interpretations. Barbara Eckstein remarks "*Waiting for the Barbarians* is about language and about the body in pain" (1). But even she does not take in to consideration the blindness of the barbarian girl and its impact on the story of the novel. The disability of the girl is overlooked in interpreting the story of the novel from various perspectives. Reading the novel from the

perspective of disability studies can help to reveal new insights in the novel.

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