



The Construction of the Other in Postcolonial Discourse: C. P. Cavafy's "Waiting for the Barbarians" as an Example

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European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self. E. Said, *Orientalism*

Abstract

This paper argues the construction of the other in literary discourses by analyzing C. P. Cavafy's poem "Waiting for the Barbarians." Using textual analysis and postcolonial rhetoric, it shows that the other is a convenient myth created and maintained to justify the privileged existence of the self. Since one of the essential functions of postcolonial literature is to offer a counter discourse that undermines colonial and imperial master narratives, Cavafy's poem, I argue, is itself a discursive means of resistance that exposes the falsity of the exclusive, binary foundations of western imperialism and, in the process, the mechanism through which colonialist ideologies function. Hence, the response to the negative construction/representation of the other in literature, which is itself a discourse, is another deconstructive discourse.

Keywords: Postcolonialism; Literature; Cavafy; Construction; Discourse; Otherness; Poetry; "Waiting for the Barbarians"

1. Introduction

Postcolonialism is concerned with the construction of the colonial and postcolonial subject within literary and theoretical discourses. Just as the idea of representation is important in postcolonial studies, that related idea of construction is also important. As D. Hall (2001) puts it, "an analysis of race, ethnicity, and/or post-coloniality begins with the recognition that the social meanings ascribed to categories of race and ethnicity have led to profound injustices" (p. 267). Postcolonialism is also concerned with how the subject conceives itself with relation to the other, with how groups of "us" and "them" stand with relation to each other. European discourses commonly and negatively construct the other as inferior. And discourse becomes a major site for resistance against such construction just as it is the site of this construction itself. Therefore, just as European or imperial discourses portray the other in a way that makes it different, they also help found the self as its counterpart. In the process, they build a self-justifying myth in which the self and the other are opposites and exclusive. Postcolonialism, in its ability to react to imperial thinking and myths, is an apt theoretical approach when the subject matter of otherness is at issue. Constantine P. Cavafy, a Greek Alexandrian poet, uses a literary discourse in the form of a poem to expose the falsity and dangers inherent in imperial logic. He exposes the self-justifying myth making that colonialism and imperialism found themselves on. Drawing on his 1904 poem "Waiting for the Barbarians," I use postcolonial theory and employ textual analysis to prove this thesis that the poem exposes colonialist ideologies and shows the role of language and metaphor in reinforcing binary logic. While some literary pieces reinforce different forms of oppression by constructing and maintaining meaning, "Waiting for the Barbarians" just does the opposite. And since Cavafy died in 1933 and lived and worked in Alexandria during the reign of the Ottoman Empire, well before the flowering of postcolonial studies within western academic circles, it is also my assertion that this poem problematizes the relationship between the colonial center and its periphery as well as the positionality of resisting voices.

The imperial subjects in Cavafy's poem define themselves in contrast to the barbarian other. But since this other is most probably their creation with no objective reality, it fails to show up and thus disproves their privileged status and even very existence. Identity, it turns out, is something made and questioned in discourse. And if identity is not a given, this leaves it as a matter of representation. It might be an exaggeration to claim that the other is simply an idea or a creation because power relations govern racial ones and thus other people, but my point is that there is a process of myth-making, fabrication, misrepresentation, and distortion that goes in our thinking about and theorizing of the other. In the words of M. Ryan (2012), "In recent years, scholars of culture have argued that race is a cultural fabrication that often serves crude power interests (justifying slavery and colonization, for example). Racist thinking does have that function, but race is only in part culturally or socially constructed. Most of our negative beliefs about other ethnic groups are cultural fabrications that express feelings like fear, envy, resentment, and hatred, but the five major groups of humanity are nevertheless real things" (p. 110). The other can function as a metaphor to allow for stereotypical thinking, but humanity is real. Simply put, Cavafy's poem engages and contributes to postcolonial discourses and cultural theories about the other.

Despite the scarcity of substantial readings or interpretations of "Waiting for the Barbarians," there are numerous secondary texts that deal in one way or another with the cultural construction of the other as a counter to the positive depiction of the self. And postcolonial theory becomes readily and immediately available in this regard. For example, according to the critic L. Tyson (2006), postcolonialism as a theory "seeks to understand the operations—politically, socially, culturally, and psychologically—of colonialist and anticolonialist ideologies" (p. 418). Tyson, hence, emphasizes the cultural construction underpinning colonialist thinking. According to J. Culler (1997), colonial and postcolonial subjects are "hybrid subjects, emerging from the superimposition of conflicting languages and cultures" (p. 127). The result of this hybridization of cultures and languages is a new global, multicultural subject that evades attempts at a strict definition or exclusion from discursive practices. Although Culler hints at the idea that the postcolonial subject is constructed via language and culture and their interaction, his comment undermines the mono-dimensional attitudes of colonialist ideologies.

In *Orientalism*, E. Said (1978) argues that the Orient, among other things, has served the West as "one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" (Leitch, p. 1991). Apparently, Said's ideas are a very good starting point for my discussion of the barbarians in Cavafy's poem because they are put in the same position of the East for the West. One element in Said's definition of Orientalism is "the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Leitch, p. 1992). Discursive practices are, therefore, hegemonic because they produce and consolidate our conception of the other. In this sense, Cavafy's poem seems a forerunner for orientalist discourses of the kind Said promulgated and canonized.

In "Can the Subaltern Speak?" G. Spivak (1988), like Said, contends that the intellectual is possibly "complicit in the persistent constitution of the Other as the Self's shadow" (Leitch, p. 2197). Spivak's formulation hints at the role of intellectuals and academics in the discursive constitution/creation of the colonial subject as Other. Basically, Cavafy treats the same idea but via the literary genre of the poem rather than the theoretical essay as Spivak does in her article. In fact, the very effort to speak for the other and on their behalf runs the risk of silencing them and thus further oppressing them. Cavafy's speaker offers a mono-vocal account, but the end of the poem, we will see, undermines mono-vocality in favor of a suppressed multi-vocality.

2. Discussion

Colonial ideologies and discourses are manichean in logic, i.e. involving radical dualisms. They posit a set of binary oppositions between the self and other. One important distinction is that between the supposed superiority of the colonizer as opposed to the supposed inferiority of the native. Natives get to be represented as "savage, backward, and undeveloped" (Tyson, 2006, p. 419). And while the colonizer sees himself as the center of the universe, the native is pushed to the margins (Tyson, 2006, p. 419). The colonizer holds himself to be morally superior and sees the other as evil and mysterious. Differences in skin color and physical features are also thought to make difference a basis for othering. Due to such differences, the other is seen as less human and more primitive/savage. To create a positive self-definition, it always helps to find a counter position on which one can project all negative things. The constitution of the colonial self is thus ambivalent: the other is totally different but also essential for defining our sameness, i.e. the coherence and stability of the subject. The critics Bennett and Royle (2009) call this process that applies to many canonical literary works in the western tradition the "essentializing of race" (p. 238). They argue that "Western notions of human identity itself as universal or unchanging may be recognized as a historical construct constituted by the exclusion, marginalization and oppression of racial others" (p. 238). Thus, Bennett and Royle articulate the processes through which colonialist ideologies function to create, cope with, and fix the other.

In his book *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said revises Michel Foucault's notion of discourse to show how the east is a cultural construction. Discourse, Said argues, disseminates and normalizes the oriental as exotic and inferior. Hence, discursive representation is a key factor in setting the orient as the opposite of the occident. Said shows how the orient was necessary for the positive self-definition of the occident. The other (as the savage or the barbarian) is a convenient political label for the self-definition of the imperial center. The oriental is an invention by the West to account for economic and social exploitation or even direct colonization. It is a solution that justifies colonialism and racism. In his introduction to the book, Said argues that the other is basically an imaginary construct: "The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (Leitch, p. 1991). We have the right to colonize "them" and to treat "them" differently because they are different. They are barbaric, and they deserve to be treated as savages because we are civilized, educated, and cultured. They are not like us. Their culture is not lettered, the imperial logic goes, and they are less human than us.

While Said was working within the field of cultural studies to put forth the theory that the other is a construct created by language and culture, others presented a variation on the same idea but via literary discourses. One example can be found in Joseph Conrad's works. Mr. Kurtz in Conrad's (1900) *Heart of Darkness* needs the black natives to be their master, their semi-god. Their existence justifies the imperial mission he has as one who spreads light and civilization. He needs them to project his own horror on them. Therefore, his final words "The horror! The horror!" (p. 105) again put to question the good/evil or light/dark dichotomy used in colonialist thinking. Kurtz's final whisper to the narrator designates his final vision that his idealism is hollow and that he is not different from the savages he sought to conquer and civilize. And in Samuel Beckett's (1954) *Waiting for Godot*, Godot does not arrive may be because there is no Godot or because we have deformed our ideas about God and other beings. Vladimir and Estragon aimlessly wait within a minimal atmosphere of stasis. The play begins with Estragon's assertion: "Nothing to be done" (p. 5).

The barbarians in the poem do not arrive because, apparently, they do not exist. They are a conception and a construct. The question, therefore, is: What happens if this “hanger” disappears? Obviously, the colonizer’s own self-image and identity will come to a real problem. The barbarian other is a myth. Hence, the barbarian is an invention and a construct in that. The true barbarian, as a result, is within rather than without. In J. M. Coetzee’s 1980 novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the barbarian enemy similarly does not invade the small imperial settlement. The Empire has justified its imperial mission and tactics through the supposed existence of the barbarian enemy it seeks to keep away from its territories. Therefore, the Empire’s representatives like Colonel Joll and Warrant Officer Mandel do not hesitate to use torture or wage war on this supposed enemy. How can an Empire justify its ruthless ways without constructing a savage enemy and priding itself on its civilized life? It is no wonder, then, that the Empire in the novel, while appropriating the lands of the natives and depriving them of essential resources for a decent life, foregrounds the filth and hunger of the barbarians and circulates rumors about their sensuality. The paradox comes when the barbarians keep an evasive shadowy existence and do not appear to justify the Empire’s existence. The town’s people hear rumors about the barbarians but do not actually encounter them. What they encounter, instead, are a few nomads and prisoners who do not constitute a real threat to the Empire. As the narrating magistrate says:

In private I observed that once in every generation, without fail, there is an episode of hysteria about the barbarians. 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 has not frightened himself with visions of the barbarians carousing in his home, breaking the plates, setting fire to the curtains, raping his daughter. These dreams are the consequence of too much ease. Show me a barbarian army and I will believe. (p. 9)

There is much hearsay about border troubles with the barbarians, but their existence in the flesh is never confirmed. And upon the magistrate’s return from a long, difficult journey to send a tortured native girl to her people, he finds imperial officers sitting in his office who interrogate him and accuse him of treason. His first response is: “‘We are at peace here,’ I say, ‘we have no enemies.’ There is silence. ‘Unless I make a mistake,’ I say. ‘Unless we are the enemy.’” (p. 85) The magistrate’s purposeful confusing of “we” and the enemy exposes the fragile nature of the Empire’s attempted distinction between its imperial subjects and a supposed barbarian enemy. It is no wonder, as a consequence, that the Empire uses force to impose the enemy status on one of its representatives, the magistrate himself, by treating him as a traitor and by using force to inscribe this status on the native prisoners. The word “ENEMY” is inscribed on their backs (p. 115) and washed with their blood.

Just as in Cavafy’s poem, waiting in Coetzee’s novel serves as effacement and deferral. If the barbarians show up, they will justify the fears, anxieties, and obsessions of the Empire. But when the barbarians do not show up, such neuroses remain baseless projections. In fact, the barbarian becomes an internal reality, something that exists within us but we project on others. This way, the poem—I argue next—simultaneously and successfully juxtaposes colonialist and anticolonialist ideologies. And although the construction of the other in postcolonial discourse is in itself a common theme, the originality of the poem, it should be pointed out, resides in the way it yokes this theme with its reaction to it. In C. P. Cavafy’s poem, we are given a postcolonial, and to some extent a poststructuralist, notion about the imagined/imaginative existence of the other as barbarian. The poem begins this way and highlights the notion of indeterminate waiting as the absence of what is waited for. In addition, the poem poses the notion of group identity by speaking of “the barbarians”, by lumping them together and ignoring any unique aspects about individual group members or any differences among them. Identity seems to function through a process of identification or essentialism: What are we waiting for, assembled in the forum?

The barbarians are due here today.

The poem begins with the notion of waiting as deferral or putting off. It is ironic, however, that the allegorically unknown empire in this poem simply leaves its position of agency and action and succumbs to a state of stasis while it waits for the unknown. In a reversal of roles that shifts power relations, the barbarians are expected to make new laws or simply demolish the legal system of this empire:

Why isn't anything happening in the senate?
 Why do the senators sit there without legislating?
 Because the barbarians are coming today.
 What laws can the senators make now?
 Once the barbarians are here, they'll do the legislating.

Implicitly, the state of stasis the speaker refers to the stereotypical view of the barbarians as idle. But the shift in this logic undermines the very idea of the native’s slothful life. Because binary distinctions between self and other are often a mere construct, the poem shows the fluidity of the action/stasis dichotomy. As the poem progresses, the theme of imperialism becomes more manifest. We are talking about an emperor who is anxiously ready to surrender his powers to the expected enemy:

Why did our emperor get up so early,
 and why is he sitting at the city’s main gate
 on his throne, in state, wearing the crown?
 Because the barbarians are coming today
 and the emperor is waiting to receive their leader.

In its attempts at self-definition, the empire has distinguished itself as a lettered nation that writes, i.e. that uses language, and guards the law. Hence, and because the barbarians are conceived as the opposite of the civilized empire, the emperor decides to give them a list of names of honor and others among his subjects wear the best signs of their civilization to meet this "savage" newcomer:

He has even prepared a scroll to give him,
replete with titles, with imposing names.
Why have our two consuls and praetors come out today
wearing their embroidered, their scarlet togas?
Why have they put on bracelets with so many amethysts,
and rings sparkling with magnificent emeralds?
Why are they carrying elegant canes
beautifully worked in silver and gold?
Because the barbarians are coming today
and things like that dazzle the barbarians.

The empire, just as it possesses writing, also possesses speech and rhetoric as well as the tools of civilization that the barbarians can see as an oddity.

If the barbarians are bored by listening as the poem suggests, they may be just silent and thus oppressed. So, speech versus silence is another manichean distinction the empire uses to define itself and exclude the other. Or else, discourse is a means of oppression and language barriers play a role in communication gaps. This becomes a problem when the other is expected to use our language, or when the other's failure to use the same language becomes grounds for discriminating them. The ordered state of the empire gives way to a state of confusion upon the expected arrival of the barbarians. Order and chaos are another binary within this logic. The barbarians seem to threaten the orderly, stable state of the Empire:

Why don't our distinguished orators come forward as usual
to make their speeches, say what they have to say?
Because the barbarians are coming today
and they're bored by rhetoric and public speaking.
Why this sudden restlessness, this confusion?
(How serious people's faces have become.)
Why are the streets and squares emptying so rapidly,
everyone going home so lost in thought?

So far, the poem has maintained a distinction between the empire and its barbarian enemy. Its logic has been this far imperial and exclusive. For example, the empire associates the barbarian coming with change and abnormality and deems its life with the barbarians at a distance as one of stability and productivity. In other words, the poem has not challenged the autonomous constitution of the colonial self as the opposite of the other. In a sense, it has not destabilized the imperial status quo. However, the poem suddenly calls for what E. Said (1993) calls in *Culture and Imperialism* a "contrapuntal reading" (p. 78), a reading that deconstructs the binary imperial logic the poem has been establishing or conforming to so far or forces us to see things otherwise. The epitome of the poem comes at the end. In a memorable fashion, Cavafy captures the reservoir of projections and stereotypes working within postcolonial logic. As a construct, the other is a solution for the west. The identity crisis comes when the supposed other is exposed as a myth. The essence of humanity is the same. Differences in skin color or habits do not justify discriminating people or mistreating them. The absence of the other exposes the falsity of the construction of the self as better or superior. As in Coetzee's novel, the poem ends on an uncertain note and an intimation that waiting will continue:

Because night has fallen and the barbarians have not come.
And some who have just returned from the border say
there are no barbarians any longer.
And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians?
They were, those people, a kind of solution.

It is significant that the barbarians are pushed to the borders and margins while the imperial subjects occupy the center of the town, its public square. In Eurocentric discourses, the west becomes the center of the world and the east is pushed to the periphery. The barbarians coming to the town and transgressing its borders means that the center/margin binary is becoming a fluid one. On the other hand, the barbarians not arriving to the town might mean that they do not inhabit the margin in the first place. Instead, they already exist at the very center, which undermines colonialist ideologies and exposes their inherent constructedness.

The barbarians, by not arriving, put to crisis the empire's identity. The absence of the solution causes a dilemma for the empire. Without barbarians, the empire itself becomes the barbarian. The poem represents one aspect of colonial oppression which occurs at the level of myth making, i.e. discourse and construction. The poem also touches the core of colonial identity and its problematization in postcolonial discourse. Identity is a cultural construct. This is how the text undermines colonialist ideologies and thus serves as one of "countertexts to the hegemonic texts that present a Eurocentric version of colonial history" (Abrams, 2012, p. 307). In fact, the poem conveys an effective message against the colonial construction of the other as a negative image of the colonizing west by juxtaposing two things: the myth itself that a barbarian other exists and can arrive anytime and a deconstructive version of this myth by making the

assumed other fail to appear. The empire, in the absence of the barbarians—whether this absence is real or imagined—is free to make of them what it wants. However, the empire's failure to ascertain or perpetuate its myths regarding the barbarians puts it in an ontological crisis.

3. Conclusion

The previous argument tried to show that colonial thinking is manichean in nature in that it thrives on essentialized differences between the self and the other. More importantly, postcolonial theory as a body of ideas written to counter this colonial logic exposes its inherent weaknesses, contradictions, and fallacies. We create the other to justify our privileged status. Waiting for who does not arrive indicates that a transcendent existence is not certain and that Estragon and Vladimir, as two tramps in Beckett's literary world, are on the same level and complement, rather than exclude, each other. Postcolonial logic, thus, serves to make us question commonly held views and thus also serves as a mode of resistance. The counter narrative it posits for the master narrative of the west is that binary logic can be unsettled and is sometimes totally baseless.

And since postcolonial theory draws on ideas from poststructuralism, the very notion of the subject is questioned. The "subaltern" Spivak speaks of (Leitch, pp. 2197-2208) and the subject, i.e. the self and the other, are never fixed categories. Their negotiation and fluidity is what constitutes a global, transmigrant and hybrid identity. As H. Bhabha (1994) argues in *The Location of Culture*, the recognition of a new space can open the way to a conception of a new global culture, one based the articulation of cultural hybridity, on the overlap and exchange of values. What Bhabha calls the "in-between spaces" (p. 1) carries the meaning of culture and allows us to avoid polar politics and even become the others of our selves. The very idea of hybridity challenges the dichotomous logic of colonialist ideologies and forces us to rethink our relationships with each other and with ourselves as human beings.

The Marxist critic F. Jameson (1986) makes the sweeping comment that "[a]ll third-world texts are necessarily ... allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as ... *national allegories*..." (p. 69). Jameson particularly means such forms of representation as the novel and discusses the interrelationship between the private and the public in such literature, the subjective and the political. Jameson's idea, however, can be extended to postcolonial literature in general, not only third-world literature. I am also aware of the sweeping generalization I make when I state this. However, I hope that I am qualifying Jameson's argument rather than adding to its fallacies. Jameson's article is relevant because he constructs a (problematic) binary opposition between a capitalist First World and a pre- or non-capitalist Third World. He defines Third-World literature in terms of an experience of imperialism and colonialism. According to Jameson's argument, hence, difference and otherness characterize the relationship between the First World and its counterpart the Third-World. This idea is best captured in A. Ahmad's (1992) response to Jameson's argument when he wrote as a concluding remark to his refutation of Jameson's article that "Jameson's is not a First World text; mine is not a Third World text. We are not each other's civilizational Others" (p. 122). Cavafy's poem is not necessarily a Third World text, nor is it simply a First World one. Regardless of the poet's nationality and where he lived, Cavafy succeeded in writing a poem that is still relevant nowadays in this era of globalization. Certainly, the poem vents a postcolonial spirit and maintains universal applications, which also makes it an allegory of a sort. It is an established fact in literary studies nowadays that postcolonial literature employs and complicates this notion of allegory. For Jameson (1986), allegory stands for "the multiple polysemia of the dream rather than the homogeneous representation of the symbol" (p. 73). Allegory allows for a multiplicity of meanings. Cavafy's poem can be read as a universal allegory of imperialism and colonization, for it has applications within the field of politics.

Nowadays, the poem's logic can be applied to global politics, especially the US foreign policy during the war on Iraq in 2003 and America's so-called war on terrorism and Al Qaeda in the wake of 9/11. It became manifest that the Iraqis did not possess weapons of mass destruction and posed no threat to the US. And just as the US created the myth of Saddam Hussein, the US also got rid of it in due time. A brutal, savage other was a convenient myth that aided America in its war on terror and secured the consent of the American people. Bin Laden was also a convenient ploy in the hands of US politicians to scare the American people from a spiteful other threatening their lives and thus to allow mobilizing their war machine to remote corners in this globe. What would happen to the US without the likes of Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden? And how would the US establish itself as a global power that guards the ideals of freedom and democracy without creating political tyrants, exaggerating their threat, and ultimately disposing of them?

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