

Persona and Shadow: The Magistrate's Path to Redemption in Waiting for the Barbarians from Jungian Perspective

Tian Feng

Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics, Nanjing, Jiangsu, 210016, China

ABSTRACT

South African author J. M. Coetzee, in his profoundly philosophical novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*, portrays the old Magistrate as a contradictory subject suspended within the imperial colonial apparatus through a lucid and introspective narrative. Employing Carl Gustav Jung's analytical psychology as the theoretical framework, this paper focuses on the core archetypes of the "Persona" and the "Shadow" to deconstruct the Magistrate's psychological entrapment within the imperial structure of colonial violence and his ensuing moral transformation. As the executor of imperial authority in a remote border town, the Magistrate long relies on his "dutiful official" persona to sustain both his identity and systemic function. This persona not only constitutes his public role within the imperial order but also acts as a psychological defense mechanism that obscures the suffering inflicted by colonial violence upon Others and the moral ambiguity of his own actions. According to Jungian theory, however, all psychic content rejected, repressed, or denied by the conscious ego—such as unacceptable desires, emotions, or moral intuitions—coalesces into the "Shadow." In the case of the Magistrate, his Shadow manifests as a latent moral conscience, an emergent empathy for the so-called "barbarian" Other, and a growing skepticism toward the legitimacy of imperial ideology. Via the Magistrate's moral struggles and limited redemption, Coetzee compellingly interrogates the possibility and limits of personal ethical accountability within structural evil. Therefore, this study also aims to reveal how Coetzee constructs, through literary imagination, an ethical laboratory wherein the awakening and struggles of the moral subject transcend the narrative framework of the novel itself, offering contemporary readers a persistent and urgent ethical reference for reflecting on historical violence, complicity, and individual responsibility.

KEYWORDS

Persona and shadow; *Waiting for the barbarians*; Redemption

1 Prelude to redemption: the mask and shadow of authority

As an executor within the imperial colonial machine, the Magistrate is compelled to wear an elaborately constructed "colonizer persona." This persona is the embodiment of the "Persona" archetype in Jungian psychology, manifesting as a rationalized authority figure that meets imperial expectations, symbolizing his structural role and duties within the colonial system. Disciplined by this mask, he mechanically carries out imperial orders, becoming a complicit bystander to the systemic atrocities of the empire, deliberately maintaining an instrumental rationality characterized by indifference and an "objective" stance to suppress inner moral discomfort. However, this external authoritative facade cannot completely conceal the stirring "moral Shadow" deep within him. In Jungian theory, the "Shadow" represents aspects of the individual's consciousness that are repressed, denied, or unintegrated. The Magistrate's moral Shadow gradually emerges, signaling his profound ethical dilemma and emotional turmoil. His complex feelings toward her—encompassing pity, desire, and guilt—symbolize his latent critique and emotional resistance to the entire logic of imperial colonialism. This represents an ethical practice through which his abstract moral dilemma is projected onto a specific "Other."

1.1 The persona of authority: the rationalized self under imperial discipline

As the empire's direct agent in the frontier, the Magistrate is entrusted with the core duty of maintaining the order of colonial rule. The construction of his "rational persona" is manifested primarily in his submission to and practice of the imperial discourse of "Order." At the beginning of the novel, he strives to play the role of what Michel Foucault terms an executor of disciplinary power, dedicating himself to maintaining the superficial stability of the town and avoiding open conflict and violence. However, the foundation of this ostensibly "rational" authority is deeply rooted in imperial will and colonial logic, inevitably making him a complicit agent within the structure of colonial oppression. The complexity of the Magistrate's role lies not only in his function as an executor of power but also in his forced position as a proximate witness and compelled bystander to the systemic atrocities of the empire. However, the ethics of duty imposed by his position and his habituated obedience to imperial authority compel him to suppress his conscience, sustaining a state of moral blindness—as described by Zygmunt Bauman—making him an agonized accomplice to the empire's crimes. His act of rescuing the barbarian girl can be seen as an attempt to break free from the bystander position and offer limited moral restitution. As an embodied symbol of imperial violence and a living repository of traumatic memory, the girl's presence continually pierces the rational facade the Magistrate strives to maintain, forcing him to confront the empire's

brutality and his own sense of moral debt.

In the public sphere, he must maintain the dignity and superficial impartiality required by this mask. Yet in private or deep within, he is acutely aware that he is merely a cog in the imperial machine—his individual will rendered insignificant before the vast colonial power structure. This profound disjunction between his public role and private self-awareness constitutes the core of the inner schism and psychic agony concealed beneath his mask of rational persona. Through the interplay of persona and shadow, Coetzee crafts the image of a complex and conflicted colonial subject entangled in the web of imperial ideology, torn between obedience and conscience.

1.2 The moral shadow: ethical predicament and traumatic awakening of the colonial subject

Through the portrayal of the frontier Magistrate as a contradictory colonial subject, Coetzee exposes the inherent fissures within imperial ideology. The Magistrate's moral Shadow—representing the repressed ethical consciousness in Jungian theory—enters into structural conflict with his identity as an imperial agent, manifesting as a profound break between instinctive resistance to colonial violence and systemic complicity. Coetzee deliberately casts an anxious and conflicted frontier Magistrate as the empire's representative. The persona symbolizes external authority and control, while the shadow hints at the immoral acts and personal moral contradictions concealed beneath this authority. In the novel, the Magistrate witnesses numerous atrocities committed by the so-called civilized people against the indigenous inhabitants, including arson, robbery, and rape. His Shadow reflects the kindness and moral conscience of humanity, yet appears powerless and tragic under the empire's machinery of violence. He had originally intended to enjoy his border life, awaiting retirement, while the townspeople lived contentedly in an atmosphere of peace and tranquility.

Ultimately, he recognizes that I am an intermediary, a wolf in sheep's clothing, a lackey of the empire yet his awakened self-awareness remains powerless against the mighty empire. As he admits: I am the lie of the empire, while Joll is the truth. His civilization can only be seen as a lie, for under colonialism, as the empire's representative, he cannot escape his fate—lies can never conquer truth!

Through a detailed examination of the Magistrate's dual persona, we can observe how Coetzee uses this character to unveil the complexity of colonialism and the multifaceted nature of humanity. The Magistrate is both an executor of imperial power and a civilized individual attempting to save the oppressed. This duality reflects the inner contradictions and struggles within him. In the interplay between persona and shadow, the Magistrate's path to redemption is fraught with challenges. Yet it is precisely through these conflicts and struggles that he embarks on a profound reflection of both himself and imperial violence. Through such intricate characterization, Coetzee not only critiques the violence and injustice of colonialism but also explores the moral responsibility and potential for redemption of the individual within power structures.

2 The embarkation of redemption: the struggle between persona and shadow

In J. M. Coetzee's seminal work *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the character of the Magistrate is imbued with ethical complexities far beyond his superficial duties. He is not merely an executor of imperial power in the frontier region but also, symbolically, a bearer of moral consciousness and ethical possibility within the colonial system. From the perspective of identity construction, the Magistrate initially internalizes the ideological apparatus of the empire perfectly, fulfilling his responsibilities in a state of near unconscious complicity. He exercises judicial and administrative authority on behalf of the empire, upholding the so-called civilized order, and his actions align with all the politically correct demands of the colonial system regarding rationality, civilization, and legitimacy. He embodies the role of a calm, efficient, and emotionally detached colonial official—a figure deeply resonant with what Louis Althusser describes as the hailing and construction of the subject by ideological state apparatuses.

2.1 The conflict between political correctness and hypocrisy: moral chaos under colonial rule

As the narrative progresses, particularly through his contact with the so-called barbarian woman and his direct witness to imperial violence, the Magistrate gradually plunges into a profound moral and epistemic crisis. He begins to experience intense ethical stress, painfully grappling with the disparity between the empire's proclaimed civilizing mission and its systemic brutality. This struggle is far from a mere psychological conflict; rather, it points to the process of alienation and awakening of an ethical subject within power structures. As the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas suggests, the ethical consciousness of the subject arises from responding to and taking responsibility for the face of the Other. Initially, he perfectly internalizes and performs the role demanded by the imperial political correctness—that of a calm, rational official dedicated to maintaining colonial order and imperial authority. This political correctness, within the imperial context, is essentially a practice of discursive power in the Foucauldian sense. It constructs a narrative of legitimacy and

disciplines behavior by defining the binary opposition between civilization and barbarism—a classic colonial cognitive framework analyzed by Edward Said in *Orientalism*.

As Giorgio Agamben argues, by creating a state of exception, the empire excludes certain groups from legal protection and moral community, thereby rendering violence against them unproblematic. Thus, Coetzer's critique extends far beyond questioning individual morality—it targets the erosion of the very foundation of humanity by this systemic hypocrisy: it does not require people to believe in the righteousness of violence, only that they carry out their duties and remain silent as a matter of routine. This dissolves the sense of abnormality surrounding violence through everydayness, ultimately undermining the moral responsibility of the community. The Magistrate's path to awakening, therefore, is not merely an individual redemption but a symbolic rupture from an entire oppressive discursive system. This transformation from a passive executor to an active moral agent signifies the Magistrate finally shedding the *Persona* imposed by the empire and confronting the repressed Shadow—those characteristics deemed barbaric and unclean by the empire, which nonetheless carry more authentic human values. Through this, Coetzer suggests that true moral awakening begins with the recognition of and response to the suffering of the Other. Only by refusing to be fully co-opted by the system and courageously assuming ethical responsibility for the Other can an individual embark on a possible path toward atonement and the reconstruction of subjectivity.

2.2 The hegemonic empire vs. the ideal empire: from blind enforcement to alienated doubt

In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Colonel Joll, the central official, and the old Magistrate represent two distinct imperial ideologies. The empire embodied by Colonel Joll is one of narrow nationalism, whose proponents irresponsibly fabricate imaginary enemies for the empire. Capitalizing on people's ignorance of the barbarians, they propagate theories of a barbarian threat, inciting citizens and soldiers to launch external campaigns and leading them into war and disaster. The answer is found in the old Magistrate: the empire he advocates is people-centered and embraces differences. The novel's further development proves the validity of the old Magistrate's perspective: the empire represented by Colonel Joll indeed suffers severely from its own imagined enemies, with imperial soldiers dead or fled. As an act of redemption, he seeks to return the barbarian girl persecuted by the empire to her homeland. Yet, precisely because of this act, the old Magistrate is charged with treason by Colonel Joll and becomes an object of public scorn in the empire.

The hegemonic empire is doomed to fail, but the people must continue to survive. As the novel's final sentence states: "Like a man who has lost his way long ago, but presses on along a road that may lead nowhere." The phrase "a road that may lead nowhere" suggests that Coetzer is aware that the empire advocated by the protagonist could be termed a synonym for "utopia." Indeed, nowhere in the novel do we see a complete, systematically established empire. Though the ending is bleak and desolate, it is not pessimistic but rather a confrontation with reality—for in the long river of human history, we are precisely this insignificant and helpless. This historical river is not one imposed by any particular empire but the naturally unfolding history of humanity. Considering the overall trajectory of the novel, Coetzer presents a remarkably optimistic theme: though politics and imperial hegemony may disrupt people's lives, the eventual acceptance of the old Magistrate by the community reflects the indomitable resilience of the individual and the ultimate triumph of perseverance and tolerance.

3 The completion of redemption: integration of the shadow and the formation of the ethical subject

This section focuses on the final stage of the Magistrate's redemptive journey, centering on how he achieves profound moral awakening and attains redemption by confronting and integrating his own shadow and dismantling the subject-object binary opposition upon which colonialism depends. This process is not only an individual spiritual transformation but also a thorough deconstruction of the ideological foundations of empire. First, the crucial step in the Magistrate's redemption lies in recognizing and deconstructing the absolute binary opposition between the Self and the Other, meticulously constructed by imperial power. He gradually realizes that his relationship with the barbarian victims, as an agent of the empire, is not simply one of perpetrator but a false opposition alienated and segregated by colonial discourse. Prison thus becomes a paradoxical space for achieving authenticity and ethical resistance. Finally, the Magistrate's path of redemption ultimately leads to the complete subversion and re-evaluation of the core colonial discourse—the binary opposition of civilization and barbarism. This process is essentially the repair of a fractured subjectivity and the formation of a true ethical subject. No longer attached to the illusions of imperial ideology, he reclaims inner wholeness by confronting his own and history's shadows, accomplishing the difficult transformation from accomplice of power to independent moral agent. The completion of his redemption is not only a purification of the individual soul but also a powerful theoretical and practical critique of the logic of colonialism.

3.1 Assuming ethical responsibility for the other: from bystander to defender

The Western philosophical tradition has long been characterized by a binary opposition between the self and the other, a structure that profoundly shapes the cognitive and power dynamics between subject and object. From Descartes' "I think" to Hegel's master-slave dialectic, the other has often been relegated to a position of being defined, objectified, or even conquered. However, in J. M. Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*, this logocentrism is thoroughly questioned and subverted with a narrative precision akin to anatomical dissection. He gradually comes to the sober realization that behind the empire's discourse of "civilization" lies a self-centered, exclusionary logic of power that ultimately leads to destruction. This awakening is not merely a shift in cognition but an ontological ethical turn—breaking free from the objectification and silencing of the other toward listening, acknowledgment, and response. As Jacques Derrida articulates in *Of Hospitality*, "To respond to the other is to seek justice," and true hospitality is not charity but the full acceptance of the other's difference. The old magistrate's path to spiritual redemption begins precisely with his transformation from a "bystander" within the system to a "defender" willing to stand up for the other, even at the cost of self-sacrifice.

His transformation, therefore, carries significance not only for personal, inner redemption but also points toward an ethical possibility that transcends traditional binary modes of thinking—only when we are willing to take responsibility for the other and respond to their call can we truly become an ethical "self." This is precisely the kind of ethical utopia that Coetzee attempts to construct through his literary narrative: individual redemption does not reside in a distant beyond or in abstract doctrines, but in every genuine encounter with the other, in our courage to break free from the shackles of history and the chains of identity, and to sincerely declare, "Here I am; I am responsible for you."

3.2 From magistrate to prisoner: the transformation from mask to authenticity

If witnessing the suffering of the barbarians plunged the old magistrate into a profound moral dilemma, subjecting him to the interrogation of his conscience and intense inner turmoil, leading to an initial transformation of his consciousness through relentless self-examination, then his own experience of humiliation and pain—as he became a victim of violence, transitioning from an enforcer of power to a prisoner of the empire—allowed him to viscerally understand how violence systematically destroys humanity. In the extreme conflict between spirit and flesh, he gradually underwent a metamorphosis of his individual spirit, ultimately ascending to a form of self-martyrdom akin to the sacred, achieved through suffering. This reversal from magistrate to prisoner is not merely a dramatic plot development but can also be interpreted through Foucault's theory of discipline and punishment. The imperial violence apparatus, through public humiliation, bodily marking, and behavioral normalization, attempts to subjugate the individual into an object that serves the needs of power. From the perspective of Jungian psychology, the persona represents a compromise between the individual and societal expectations, often concealing the true self. The physical and psychological torment inflicted upon the magistrate forcibly stripped away this colonial bureaucratic persona, compelling him to confront the repressed shadow—the internalized residue of imperial violence within himself. It was through this almost ritualized suffering that he achieved an existential return from bureaucrat within the system to authentic self.

Through these narrative movements, Coetzee not only critiques colonial violence but fundamentally destabilizes the deep-seated binary oppositions of Western metaphysics—civilization and barbarism, self and other, reason and madness. Through the magistrate's transformation from an agent of power to an ethical subject, Coetzee not only delivers a sharp critique of colonial modernity but also hints at the possibility of an ethics of the other and redemption beyond binary oppositions. His awakening is not only a personal moral redemption but also offers an existential paradigm for preserving humanity and practicing responsibility in the face of systemic violence. This is the profound insight literature as an ethical medium can provide: when confronted with the darkness of power and history, individuals can still reclaim the radiance of humanity from the ruins by refusing complicity and choosing to bear witness.

4 Conclusion

The spiritual transformation and moral struggles of the Magistrate constitute the core tension of the narrative, profoundly revealing the inner fragmentation faced by individuals under colonial systems and the possible paths to ethical awakening. Drawing on the Jungian analytical psychological concepts of the "Persona" and the "Shadow" as archetypal constructs, this essay examines how the Magistrate evolves from a bureaucrat loyal to imperial authority into a critic and resister of imperial tyranny. Through repeated encounters with the torture, oppression, and systematic othering inflicted by the empire upon the "barbarians," his innate moral sensibility is gradually awakened, plunging his emotions and rationality into intense conflict. This ultimately leads him to fundamentally question the legitimacy of the empire's so-called "civilizing mission" and painfully reflect on his own ethical responsibility as an accomplice. Initially, the Magistrate fully adopts the "political correctness" defined by imperial ideology, wearing the persona of a loyal official.

This persona functions not only as a survival strategy within the power structure but also as a psychological defense mechanism that suppresses authentic moral feelings. However, when a "barbarian" girl traumatized by imperial violence enters his life, becoming an undeniable "face of the Other", his long-repressed shadow—including compassion, guilt, doubt, and a conscience untainted by the system—begins to emerge intensely. Through this complex and profound character arc, Coetzee not only offers a sharp critique of the violent logic and discursive hypocrisy underpinning colonialism but also presents readers with a severe yet hopeful ethical proposition: even within highly oppressive power structures, individuals retain the capacity for self-redemption through introspection, empathy, and resistance. The Magistrate's path to redemption thus serves as both an indictment of the colonial system and a call for a new ethical subject—one courageous enough to confront the suffering of the Other and willing to assume personal responsibility for a justice that transcends power. His awakening and struggles thereby transcend individual fate, becoming a powerful metaphor and judgment on the relationship between violence, complicity, and conscience within human civilization as a whole.

References

- [1] Adams, K. 2015. Acts without agents: The language of torture in J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*. *ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 46(3): 165-177.
- [2] Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Disgrace*. *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, 30(1): 13-23. Boletsj, M. 2007.
- [3] Barbarian encounters: Rethinking barbarism in C. P. Cavafy's and J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*. *Comparative Literature Studies*, 44(1): 67-96.
- [4] Dibavar, S. S., P. Abbasi & H. Pirnajmuddin. 2019. The metaphorical stage of J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*. *Research in African Literatures*, 50(4): 87-107.
- [5] Hegel, Georg W.F. *The Philosophy of History*. Translated by J. Sibree, London: Colonial Press, 1900.
- [6] Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981. Jani, Deepa. "J. M. Coetzee: Ethics, Subalternity, and the Critique of Humanism." Diss. U of Pittsburgh, 2013.
- [7] Lochner, Liani. "Power and the Subject in J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*." *Ariel A Review of International English Literature*, vol. 47, no. 4, 2016, pp. 103-134.
- [8] Penner, Dick. *Countries of the Mind: The Fiction of J. M. Coetzee*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1989.
- [9] Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- [10] Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Penguin, 1977.
- [11] Zamora, Lois Parking-son(1986). *Allegories of Power in the Fiction of J. Coetzee*. *Journal of Literary Studies*. No(2):1-14.