

The Barbarian Women in White Fiction

Dr.Devika Rani

Associate Professor of English,
DOS in English,
Manasa Gangotri, Mysore 570006.

Abstract : Toni Morrison in her book *playing in the dark: whiteness and the literary imagination* avers that “Africanism” is arbitrarily “deployed as rawness and savagery”. Both Joseph Conrad and J.M.Coetzee, provide Africa as a setting in their novels to deploy wilderness and , in this backdrop are delineated native women who embody the primitive ,barbaric and the exotic. Also, as the ‘racial other’ they are debased and devalued in their genderised and sexualised roles. In a comparative study, this paper posits that Kurtz’s black mistress and the barbarian girl are consistently negated sexually, biologically and racially and are defined as the racial ‘OTHER’. Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* and the nameless narrator of *Waiting for the Barbarians* who are themselves white and are the displaced narrative voices for their Imperial white authors, render the native black women as signs or symbols.

Keywords: Primitive, barbaric, wilderness, sexual objectification, racial other.

1. INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison in her book *playing in the dark: whiteness and the literary imagination* states that ...” in the matters of race, silence and evasion ruled literary discourses...to enforce invisibility through silence is to allow the black body a shadow less participation in the dominant cultural body”(9-10).The late Chinua Achebe also endorsed her view point for whites ,“Africa is a place of negations”(206) .Thus in the white’s literary imagination, the blacks embody a composite definition of the primitive , barbaric, erasure ,invisible , negative and finally the “racial other”. One can cite a number of examples of such racist discourses. In this paper I shall attempt a comparative study of two ‘white’ fiction and focus entirely on their depiction of the blacks, particularly women who are perceived as exotic and barbaric in their absent presence.

The blacks in the predominant white narratives, *Heart of Darkness* and *Waiting for the Barbarians* do not exhibit themselves as thinking and civilized human beings .Besides these blacks are neither protagonists nor significant characters who grow and evolve but projected through the binary, dehumanised, debased, negated and made invisible by the white consciousness. This “Africanism” according to Morrison is consciously “deployed as rawness and savagery” (44).This paper argues that Joseph Conrad and J.M.Coetzee represent the white race and are male writers hence have invariably written racist narratives. This comparative reading analysis the parallels within their fictional works with a focus on their conscious delineation of blacks. To begin with both novels are set in Africa, one is the actual Congo, the other the imaginary South Africa. The narratives unfold through distinctive white and male voices, one is Marlow, the displaced narrator for Conrad and the magistrate , nameless narrator for Coetzee .Both narrators adopt the consciously authenticated voices drawn from their own personal experiences and for whom the journey is real as well as symbolic .Both narrators appear to be on the surface anti imperial and anti racist but both reveal themselves as thorough racists , blatantly imperialists and sexists in their act of storytelling.

In *Heart of Darkness* Marlow the protagonist recalls the whole lived experience through memory and in retrospect tries to understand the meaning of his journey down the Congo. In *Waiting for the Barbarians* the nameless narrator records the events through memory and recall and the narrative appears as a memoir. Both narrators at the outset admit that they are taking the readers through their inexorable lived memories and that their acts of recall leave them emotionally and psychologically shattered and are unable to come to terms with whatever happened in their journeys. While Marlow in his confession glorifies the colonising abilities of Europe and his idol Kurtz, the magistrate obliquely and ironically criticises the Empire’s colonising acts. What can be

posited here is that both narrators while they vehemently criticise the colonisation, reveal their affinity to the white race as they themselves are white and completely fail to present the black community from liberal and humanistic perspective. The Africa for them unerringly embodies the 'dark' which connotes the mystery, invisibility, absence and negation. And the blacks whom they actually see and get to know and about whom they write about are barbaric, and primitive which is seen through the binary against the whites who are civilised, noble, urbane and refined.

This paper shifts from the general to the particular in the delineation of blacks from whites' imagination. When Marlow first encounters them in the Congo, he is shocked beyond imagination to see "...six black men...walked erect and slow...each had an iron collar on his neck, and were connected together with a chain... called enemies. They were called criminals, and the outraged law...All their meagre breasts panted together, the violently dilated nostrils quivered, the eyes stared stonily...without a glance with that complete, deathlike indifference of unhappy savages"(19).There is conscious dehumanisation as "racist mythology has functioned...to rationalize oppression ...by the images of stereotypes"(Morton xv).When Marlow first steps into the 'darkness' of the Congo, he happens to witness a movement on the boat which brings him in contact with reality. He can see the actual stirrings of life on a far off boat: Was paddled by black fellows. You could see from afar the white of their eyeballs glistening. They shouted, sang; their bodies. Steamed with perspiration...they had bone, muscles, a wild Vitality, an intense energy of movement that was natural and true.... They were a great comfort to look at...For a time I would feel I belonged to a world of straightforward facts; but the feeling would not last long. Something would turn up to scare it away.(15).

The entire passage needs an explicated reading. Without carrying the white racial and cultural baggage, he is free to perceive the blacks as they present themselves as human beings vibrant with life. But the feeling is only fleeting as the dominant racial consciousness pulls him away when he foists onto them characteristic savagery. His next later meeting with his white counterpart "whitemen being so much alike...(17) although a Swede, provides him the much needed affinity and comfort with whom he can easily identify against the possibility of being isolated among the blacks. This not only reiterates his whiteness but also his habitual dehumanisation of blacks..."naked, move about like ants(16) that reinforces his later perception of them as savages who lack the essential culture. This Morrison believes is the whites' 'collective unconscious', meaning what the whites feared or were drawn to or the latent, hidden, subdued, is what they imposed on the 'racial Other': the fascination of an African persona is reflexive, an extraordinary meditation of the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly consciousness. It is an astonishing revelation of longing of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity(17).

First, Marlow provides the origin of the colonisation of England thus "...this also ...has been one of the dark places of the earth"(5) and ends there without elaborating on the coloniser's colonising of the land. Dark for him might or might not connote wilderness or lack of civilisation. As a white narrator he cautiously avoids the gory details of the colonisation itself since the colonised people are the whites. But when he comes to describe darkness of the Congo and its attendant colonisation by the whites he neither conceals nor becomes reticent. On the contrary the colonising enterprise of the already colonised Africa fascinates him to no end. All he is eager to know is the methods and abilities of the whites in colonising the land and its natives. When one observes the title itself, it is undoubtedly a racist ideological term. The 'darkness' connotes evil, barbarity, primitive, wild and chaos," i have never seen anything so unreal in my life...the silent wilderness surrounding this cleared speck on the earth struck me as great and invincible, like evil...(26).The deeper he penetrates into the darkness the more fascinated he becomes to know, decipher, study and finally record what he sees and understands as a white. As has been mentioned before this paper looks at the perception of blacks from the whites briefly and shall focus exclusively on the representation of black women in both narratives. How and why there is a conscious and arbitrary denial of human dignity and racial identity to the black women through the strategical and systematic dehumanisation and debasement of them. What the white doctor tells Marlow is relevant for the delineation of blacks in both narratives taken for study..."it would be interesting to watch the mental changes of individuals on the spot" (23).

The absolute denial of human dignity and a thorough debasement is when “the black figures strolled about listlessly...(28) and the undernourished slaves are reduced to animals “while I stood horror-struck, one of these rose ... and went off on all-fours towards the river to drink”(19). The constant reference to them as four legged creatures with bestial ferocity is an attempt to deny them their human status in their native land. Even their language is debased to “a violent babble of uncouth sounds...(21). Marlow’s later narrative when he “penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness”(39) gives him white’s sanctioned authority to further debase them when he attributes cannibalism to them when one native admits to eating the flesh of humans “catch ‘em. Give ‘em to us.(45). All he abhors is sheer ...”wilderness stink in my nostrils“(39). Similarly Conrad denies Kurtz’s black attendant, the cultural language of the civilised nations when he announces “Mistah Kurtz- he dead”(79). Achebe deplores the failure “to adequately represent the blacks”. Conrad’s arbitrary erasure of humanity and intellect in the blacks is what Morrison avers as “the dialogue of black characters is alien, estranged dialect made deliberately unintelligible by spellings contrived to defamiliarize it” (52).

The most disturbing racist imperialist and sexist aspect of Conrad’s discourse is how he delineates black women especially Kurtz’s so called ‘black mistress’. That Marlow as a white narrator fully endorses white imperialism and sexist ideology is made apparent in his encounter with Kurtz’s mistress. As a black and female, she obviously has no name like her male counterparts. That Marlow also endorses patriarchal ideology is first discerned at the beginning of his narrative when he says that women should be allowed to “stay in that beautiful world of their own, least ours gets worse”.

The racial marginality and othering by gender gets fullest expression in the depiction of Kurtz’s mistress. The only identity albeit devalued as a woman in the sexual role is that of a mistress to satisfy the libido of her white coloniser. As a helpless woman she has neither a choice nor a voice in the scheme of things as she seems to resign to being his mistress as he also represents the colonial power. For Marlow as also for Conrad she embodies all that is negative and what the darkness of the Congo itself stands for which is the exotic “she walked with measured steps... (68). Later she is conveniently reduced to “she was savage and superb, wild eyed and magnificent... (68-69). She is the symbol of African primitivity “she stood looking at us without a stir.... wilderness itself.... Suddenly she opened her bare arms...” (69). One of Marlow’s assistant’s fails to allow a cultured language to her just like Marlow “she talked like a fury...I don’t understand the dialect of this tribe.”(69). And she merges with the darkness of the forest and becomes one with the wilderness which is chaos as “she turned away...and passed into the bushes...” (69). Strauss argues “the savage woman condensed into wilderness, presides over the ‘infernal’ horror and mystery. (250). In other words she mirrors the “abominable darkness” (252).

Marlow’s white predecessor likewise ascribes animal ferocity to the black women who in the absence of civilisation are no better than the darkness they personify. These black women mesh to remain in the prehistoric barbarity itself” i ‘ve been teaching one of the native women about the station. It was difficult .She had a distaste for work” (20). Kurtz’s mistress is not only bestowed animal barbarity but denied the mental attribute for she neither questions nor has a say with regard to being a mere sexual woman. She seems to express her sorrow and loss over the dying Kurtz in a way befitting only the animals displaying wild gestures and cries. Denied the voice of a civilised language which is one form of affirming herself as a woman, she can make her presence felt in the only way allowed to her, which is a peripheral sexual one .Marlow describes her in all derogatory terms possible “the woman with helmeted head and tawny cheeks rushed out to the brink of the stream. She put out her hands ,shouted something...”(76). And her black men follow suit ,”shout in a roaring chorus of articulated ,rapid ,breathless utterance...”(76). In the entire passage devoted to the black mistress’s image she is not only pushed to the margins of her existence , she is categorically rendered more as an aberration as wild chaotic yet exotic to ignite the male sexual desire .She is abhorred and feared and therefore outside the civilised white and the human world” it was **beyond** the human realm that her power was affirmed and therefore she was **outside** of that realm”(de bouvoir 561). The title *Heart of Darkness* is subtle encoding ambiguity of meanings .Conrad begins the narrative attributing darkness to the blacks whom he regards as savages ,evil ,mysterious etc,. Whereas the title *Waiting for the Barbarians* does not

provide any subtlety or ambiguity. In the course of the narrative it becomes apparent to the readers that the anonymous narrator is talking exclusively about a black race which invariably represents the 'racial other'. They are what his white race is fortunately not which is uncivilised hence barbaric and debased to the level of animals. Like the former novel, the other features imposed on them are primitivity and exoticism.

The narrative unfolds with the magistrate's discussion with colonel Joll from the III bureau .Since both are white and belong to the civilised world they discuss in a language that inscribes a culture. In a short while ,the narrator guides the colonel to a dark room where they have held two barbarian natives prisoners ,suspecting them of an attack on the Empire a few days earlier. Since the narrative is written from the white racist consciousness of Coetzee for whom the voice is provided by the white narrator , it is justifiable that the arrest is done based on a mere suspicion and a probable hearsay , as the victims happen to be the blacks who are defined as barbarians hence capable of attacking the Empire. The old man and his nephew are brought and subject to interrogation by the colonel and the narrator as a mediating spokesman. The narrator appears to be a liberal on the surface trying to be civil speaking on their behalf "We have brought you here because we caught you after a stock raid. You know that is a serious matter. You know you can be punished for it" (3). The 'we' in the questioning suggests his allegiance to the white Empire as he is a part of that race. These lines glaringly hold the black natives guilty of committing a theft and a raid which is a violation of law in their own land that has been usurped by the Empire. The narrator's ambivalent stance is clear when he attempts to force them to admit a crime they have not committed. And colonel Joll conducts a private interrogation which includes violent torture whose helpless "pitch of human pain"(5) reverberates the walls of the garrison disturbing the narrator as he awaits its results .Colonel Joll justifies his (white) perpetration of pain which was done for" first lies ,then pressure ,then more lies... Then the break then more pressure ,then the truth"(5) to make them confess to the crime .What the colonel refuses to reveal about the punishment meted ,the narrator learns from the guard after he witnesses the site of the savage ,inhuman cruelty on the barbarian victims' bodies. The brutal assault kills the old man while the young boy lies unconscious following the beating. The passage testifies to the Empire's prerogative to concoct a story which places the blame entirely on the barbarians for resisting the Imperial power incurring the white man's wrath , "This black population was available for meditations on terror...their dread of failure ,powerlessness"(Morrison 37).The racist Coetzee is careful to ensure a fair enquiry and the ensuing torture inflicted on the guilty natives by the Empire through the absence of any testimony to the actual scene as well as by employing a displaced narrator who has no name .Absence of a proper name is evasion of responsibility as well as ownership of a person. But the memoirs themselves reaffirm the narrator's or the white writer's racist leanings "Among the Europeans and the Europeanised, this shared process of exclusion – assigning designation and value – has led to the popular and academic notion that racism is "natural"...phenomenon" (Morrison 7).

Colonel Joll and the guard are in connivance when it is established that the Empire's representative was left with no choice but respond to the wild attack by the native prisoner by a counter attack which culminated in the death of the old man that has been authenticated by signed statements "the prisoner became uncontrollable and attacked the visiting officer .I was called in to help subdue him. By the time I came in the struggle had ended, the prisoner was bleeding from the nose" (6). The narrator gets the truth from the guard which justifies the white's 'barbarian' act to categorically label and brand the natives as liars. Achebe asserts that the white racist writers consciously created "the image of Africa as 'the other world', the antithesis of Europe" (210).These lines also reveal the narrator's conscious 'othering' of the natives despite the factual evidence to the Empire's violent attack resulting in the old man's death and the near paralysis of the boy who is mercilessly coerced to confess the truth to avoid further punishment "Listen: you must tell the officer the truth. That is all what he wants to hear from you – the truth" (7).

The continued emphasis on the barbarian truthful confession by the narrator makes him a racist as this passage reiterates his inherent white attitude where barbarians by the virtue of their black skin lack the refinement which is the hallmark of the white that make them believe and practice honesty always. And the anticipated results are forthcoming "they tell me you have made a

confession. They say that you have admitted.... that in spring you are all going to join in the great war on the Empire”(11).

The Empire’s wanton desire to punish the attackers enables Joll to make expedition into the heart of nomad territory following his return with barbarian captives. Though the narrator expresses anger against their arrest and tries to free them which is futile he later perceives them in the dehumanised form as is characteristic of the Empire “their strange gabbling ,their vast appetites ,their animal shamelessness ,their volatile temper “(20) creates an aversion as it reinforces their primitive barbarity. The barbarian girl who is left behind first appears blind to the narrator despite assertion that she can see “they tell you are blind “(27).When he looks at the permanent marks of punishment that leave the girl not only blind but also crippled his interest in her is not bordered on humane sympathy as anti- Empire or liberal but carries the white’s latent desire to label her after thorough observation .The narrative explicates his constant attempt to analyse her from the parameters of the racist ideology. The very fact that he keeps calling her ‘barbarian ‘ girl without trying to know her name which is her identity reinforces his habitual dehumanisation and debasement of her .

The very first act of othering her by gender and race by the magistrate is clear when he suspects her of violation within the Empire’s territory “you know you are not supposed to be in town. We could expel at any time ...” (28).Later winning her confidence he takes her to his quarters and cleans her wounds. But it becomes obvious that his interest is in decoding the scars of her torture rather than altruistic impulse that would enable the subverting of her being the ‘racial other’. His probing her marks of pain “what did they do?” when it fails to elicit any favourable reply from her he further tries by initiating her in material comforts . She is both vulnerable as a woman and powerless because of her deformity and is left with no other alternative but yield to his machinations .Besides she does not see him as anyway different from other men of Empire and that he is a magistrate or has noble motives have no impact on her .

That is why she provides only cryptic answers to his strategic probing of her physical wounds and preserves her spiritual fortitude despite being devalued sexually. His calculated concern borders on his selfish racist interest in her as she is reduced to an experimental object like the pieces of artefacts he has treasured in order to study their signs . In other words, she is reduced to a sign, a symbol. His insistence that she unravel her pain of torture “why don’t you want to tell me?”(34) fails to elicit any plausible answer from her, “they did not burn me....They held my eyelids open. But I had nothing to tell them.”(44).Wanting to know her perception of the Empire he is appalled by her refusal to provide him the facts.

The novel uncovers several incidents where the magistrate constantly labels her as the racial other as also a sexual object. Beyond that he attempts to categorise her to a sign/symbol denying a dignified human identity/status. Since she initially does not submit her body to him like his women he blames her for “she is incomplete”(45) and since he has hitherto objectified her as a sexual stereotype he cannot “sketch her face...(50).His denial of a racially identity makes him unable to form her actual image” where the girl should be ,there is a space , a blankness”(51).She admits with integrity that she was sexually exploited by men of Empire “yes ,there were other men, I did not have a choice”(58).These lines not only point the poignancy of her vulnerability but also her helplessness to fight her oppressors. No wonder she has her“ body maimed ,scarred”(61).His refusal to gratify his sexual desire at first is owing to feeling of disgust following her confession that several men had abused her body and that she carries those scars alongside her other scars. The narrative nowhere suggests any of his benevolent attitudes towards her or is free from racial prejudices.

Arguably his decision to return her to her family does not speak of any noble impulse but as a woman who does not belong to his Empire or fit into any of the images of his women she remains outside that category .His further objectification of her is reinforced when he prepares her for a return journey encasing her in “heavy fur...with a rabbit cap ...new boots, gloves” (63). A close reading suggests his failed attempts to mould her to material object as they misfit her .Later when he realises that she has to be returned to her community he satisfies his sexual desire without any sense of moral violation or guilt .Besides he is sure that it was also his one last attempt to decode

her sexuality as a white .As he himself admits “it would not have been done if I were not in a few days to part from her... I am with her not for whatever raptures she may promise...” (70). The magistrate’s interest and purpose in providing succor to the barbarian girl is exclusively from the white’s racial act of decoding her scars that have been inflicted on her sexual body before him “My pleasure in her is spoiled until these marks are erased and she is restored to herself..that it is the marks on her which drew me to her...or the traces of a history her body bears?”(70). These lines reveal the blatant devaluing herself worth as woman in the first reading .Besides the very emphasis on the body is tantamount to relegating the barbarian girl to a mere sign and that of body as a site of eroticism as is wont in all male writings. Rosemary Jane argues that “his treatment of the girl-the tracing of her torture-wounds, indicates that he fetishizes her” (129).Marks on her can connote both the literal marks of torture as well as marks of violation of her body. He is mainly drawn to her body alone and that is why he is completely baffled by her display of intelligence “her fluency, her quickness, herself possession” (68).

Since he fails to endow her the prerequisite dignified racial identity by constantly inscribing barbarism, exoticism and primitivism, he also fails to know her completely nor is he able to unravel her scars. Her menstrual cycle “a woman’s flux is bad luck”(75) from the barbarian perspective is resistance to his persistent attempts to other her by gender and race. Which is why he seems to regret not having made any effort to either know or learn her language. “She could have spent those long empty evenings teaching me her tongue” (78) since language is one form of affirmation of the self. Likewise he “cannot remember certainly what she looks like” (94).That is also why he is unable to touch her face in the fleeting vision he has of her “her hair braided in a heavy plait ...”(120). His persistent attempts to see her image beside her captive father fail him and continue to haunt him all through which would suggest that as he has othered her from racial and sexual perspective he is unable to recall her image as a human being.

His sense of loss in her return to her family is only fleeting and replaced by a wish to recover his old secure life “all I want now is to live out my life in ease in a familiar world” (82). But his arrest for treason on his return that divests him of his old authority and luxury as a magistrate forces other realities as well. His belated realisation that he was just a “victim of infatuation “(142) as her ‘other’ness had befuddled his intellect and “therefore she was no longer human ...certain sympathies died ,certain movements of the heart became no longer possible “(88-89).Since his ritual cleansing of her body is done after he has reduced her to a sexual object , his later sexual encounter with her does not provide him the required satisfaction .In this , his act corroborates colonel Joll ‘s which belatedly but shockingly allows him to identify himself with Colonel Joll “with a shift of horror I behold the answer that has been waiting all the time offer itself to me in the image of a face masked by two black glassy insect eyes... my doubled image cast back at me.”(47).

When the barbarians are later arrested and brought as captives bound in shackles which is the Empire’s display of power over them the magistrate’s initial feeling of humanity towards them is transformed by contempt for their uncivilised ways “there was sympathy for these savages first” (136). This invariably testifies to his superiority as a white also his unerring perception of them as barbaric and primitive which likewise provides a rationale for othering the barbarian girl. The last few lines endorse a pure racist and Empire certainty where he has a vision of the inevitable imperial take over “the barbarians. ... will be won over to our ways “(169). The magistrate finally accepts his racial superiority against the barbarians as he views their world as a “battlefield devoid of all recognisable humanity ...trapped in primordial barbarity.”(210).

2. CONCLUSION

In the final analysis , though there is not much delineation of the black mistress by Conrad in his novella *Heart of Darkness* it has been found relevant to attempt a comparative study with the barbarian girl from Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* as both writers are white and whose names begin with C who perceive women consciously from the racist and imperial ideology ”The act of enforcing racelessness in literary discourses is itself a racial act”(Morrison 46).Both white writers primarily colonise the land which is glaringly(Conrad) and by implication(Coetzee) Africa and succeed in colonising its people. And the women discussed are colonised racially as

well as sexually. By defining them as the racial other Conrad and Coetzee ensure their marginal existence denying them the cultured language and acceptable identities of the civilised world of the whites as both women only fulfil “the structural requirement of the story; a savage counterpart to the refined...”(210) white women. Kurtz’s woman who is identified as his black mistress is not only culturally effaced by skin colour but also deprived of power of articulation and a name which are forms of affirming a woman’s identity. But Coetzee goes one step further by making the barbarian girl speak the cultured language which is done to ensure that he is able to effectively communicate with her who like her black counterpart in Conrad’s narrative is negated by othering her. While the black mistress becomes the sole concubine to gratify her white master Kurtz, she is not free from the writer’s racial biases as she is assigned all negative qualities as the savage accentuated by wilderness that the Congo itself embodies, the barbarian girl also personifies the composite negatives as primitive as well as barbaric. Carrying the scars of white Empire’s torture she is further debased to carry the scars of sexual abuse on her body “Unto the female unto that which is ideologically defined and accepted as an unproblematic sexual object” (Guerrero 760). The black mistress and the barbarian girl resign to their roles as both are powerless as women and racially inferior to fight their white and male oppressors. And in the death of Kurtz the black mistress returns to blend with the darkness of the Congo’s wilderness but the barbarian girl returns to her barbarian race, both gestures suggest the white racist writers’ persistent refusal to accord them their legitimate human identities.

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