

Analysis of Waiting for the Barbarians from the Perspective of Post-colonial Eco-criticism

Ying Chen^{1, a}

¹College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Heilongjiang Bayi Agricultural University, Daqing, Heilongjiang, China.

^a31594434@qq.com

Abstract

As a political allegorical work, *Waiting for the Barbarians* has been widely analyzed by scholars from the perspective of post-colonial theory, while the abundant ecological writing in the work is ignored. Coetzee's ecological writing and post-colonial writing are intertwined. Through exploring the contents of post-colonial ecology in the novel, we can find his post-colonial ecological ethics of opposing all colonial hegemony, respecting all forms of life, protecting the natural ecological environment and promoting harmony between man and nature.

Keywords

J.M. Coetzee; *Waiting for the Barbarians*; postcolonial Eco-criticism.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, with the economic development and globalization brought about by the increasingly fierce environmental problems, the global environmental crisis caused by the crisis of human survival has attracted the attention of some scholars with a strong sense of crisis. The ecological problems in post-colonial society have attracted more and more attention, and the study of post-colonial Eco-criticism has come into being. *Post-colonial Eco-criticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*, a monograph by Australian scholar Graham Huggan and Canadian scholar Helen Tiffin, is a pioneering work on Post-colonial Eco-criticism. They try to promote the transformation of social justice, environmental justice and ecological justice from the study of literary theory. J.M. Coetzee, a South African writer and Nobel Prize winner in literature, is famous for his post-colonial literary creation, which is dominated by abundant ecological writing. At the end of the 19th century, the dialogue and integration of post-colonial studies and Eco-criticism provided us with an opportunity to explore Coetzee's ingenious Eco-criticism.

Waiting for the Barbarians, an allegorical work by Coetzee and the first full-length novel for Coetzee to earn himself international fame, is called a political thriller and a classic colonial novel that follows the literary approach of Joseph Conrad. In the novel, Coetzee presents a frontier town of the empire. To prove the existence of the empire and expand its territory, the empire sent a rumor that barbarians are coming and then sent out an imperial army represented by Colonel Joel. Under the banner of spreading civilization and justice, they oppressed and abused the indigenous people in the border areas, but ultimately they failed. To interpret the novel with the theory of post-colonial Eco-criticism, we can see the classic works from a two-layer perspective. This paper analyzes the destruction of ecological environment by colonial war in *Waiting for barbarians*, the representation of ecological imperialism marked by constructive projects such as small towns, and the description of people and animals regarded as the Other to interpret the post-colonial ecological thought in Coetzee's novel.

2. ANALYSIS OF THE IMPACT OF COLONIALISM ON THE ENVIRONMENT

The impact of imperial conquest and colonialism on the regional environment and ecology of Africa is deeply painful for Coetzee, who grew up in South Africa, so for the destruction of South Africa's ecosystem by colonial expansion and corresponding economic and cultural activities, it is an important part of its ecological concern to reveal. Coetzee sets *Waiting for the Barbarians* in the vast alien frontier. There, before the colonists appeared, you could see oases everywhere, and the water and grass by the lake were rich. "It was a rich and beautiful land by the lake, and even in winter there were rich pastures"[1]76. Aborigines should live in the natural seasons during the cycles of spring planting and autumn harvesting and water bird migration. However, in order to colonize and occupy the colony, and promote the colonization process, more than 100 years ago, "we reclaimed this place from a wilderness to farmland, established irrigation and drainage systems, cultivated the land, built solid houses, and built walls around the town"[1]76. This practice greatly affected the natural environment and ecosystem of the area, so that the shallow surface water of the lake was too salty to drink. "Every year the lake would swallow up a little of the shore, sweeping salt and alum into the lake" [1]88, and the lake would become a little saltier. Building a defensive line against the so-called barbarians, the imperial army decided to burn all the bushes on the banks of the river. Flocks of birds flew away in terror; Everything else was burned. Imperial armies ravaged the land of the frontier natives for what they called military action. "They did not care that once the land was so repaired, the wind would strip the soil and the desert would advance"[1]122. The destruction of the natural ecological environment of the colonial empire showed that ecological plunder was the premise of its colonial expansion. These ruined natural scenes showed that the colonial war had completely affected the natural ecology of the colonies.

In the novel, the chief executive's description of the local wildlife also reveals the impact of colonial expansion on the local ecological environment. "More than twenty years ago, there were so many antelopes and hares that the keepers of the crops had to patrol at night with the hounds, with these animals to gnaw on green crops"[1]57, but "As a result of the development and expansion of the residential areas, especially in groups of dogs out hunting, antelopes went to the east and north, and rarely longed for the riverside or far to the river shore zone" [1]57.

The colonial empire was excessively exploiting and using the resources of the colony, which exhausted the resources and led to the deterioration of the local natural ecosystem. The empire's brutal treatment of land and nature showed that it had no respect for the natural ecology of its colonies, which were merely the objects of its resource plunder. In order to push in and consolidate the rule of the empire, they could exploit and plunder the resources of the colony at will, and seize and destroy everything in nature for their use, at the cost of destroying the local natural ecology in the process.

In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Coetzee used an allegorical method to describe the arbitrary trampling on the ecological environment of a frontier colony by the imperial army under the banner of civilization in order to consolidate the colonial rule of the empire, revealing his "criticism of human beings' worship of instrumental rationality and his concern for the future survival status of human beings"[3]. In the novel, Coetzee used metaphor to reveal the inevitability of the devastation of the frontier's natural ecology in the shadow of the colonial war. By describing the deteriorating frontier habitat under the imperial colonial war, Coetzee aimed to show that the political rules against ecological harmony constructed by colonial expansion would inevitably collapse and become a thing of the past. This could be confirmed by the words of the old chief executive in the novel: "The empire is destined to exist in history and act as an anti-history role. The whole idea of the empire is how to survive. In the open, it spread its minions here and there, and hunted down its enemies; In secret, it made up imaginary enemies: the cities were invaded and the people were dying." [1]19.

3. ANALYSIS OF THE IMPACT OF COLONIALISM ON THE HUMAN

As an expansionary and economic activity, trade is the direct driving force of colonial expansion. With the expansion of world trade since the 17th century, colonists started a large-scale and continuous colonial expansion in the interior of South Africa from the 18th century. Under the guise of civilization, they set up camp in the strange land of South Africa. When they arrived at the destination, they first established a frontier fortress to provide daily necessities, meat by bartering with indigenous people, vegetables, food mainly planted on their own, because South African natives did not grow food, such as lettuce, watermelon, zucchini, carrots and other food which colonists were fond of. To maximize their own interests, they ignore the local natural ecological environment, robbed of the indigenous inhabitants of the land to build the farm, "brought colonies the plants from Europe, animals, and disease, causing the native ecosystem composed of the local native plants, animals, and natives had been destroyed and replaced"[4]. Colonial expansion of the colonies ignored the rhythm of nature.

In order to speed up the pace of colonial expansion to South Africa, the empire under the disguise of civilization, thought that the frontier colony and the natives were the dark world, "dirty, ugly, barbaric, like animals" race which needed to use the so-called empire colonists western advanced culture to eliminate their ignorance, to promote the social development of civilian. The main feature of the constructive project is the domestication of nature.

In the novel, the chief executive stated that "this place was first an outpost, then a frontier fortress, and now has slowly become a settled town of three thousand agricultural persons"[1]6. They also built slaughterhouses and mills and indulged in excessive hunting. Hundreds of thousands of deer, pigs and bears were killed, and the mountains were covered with animal carcasses that could not be picked up, so they had to rot.

The establishment of the town and its supporting facilities showed that the imperial colonial expansion, based on the premise of snatching the world of the indigenous people, had brought destruction to the local natural ecological environment. Seemingly common setting up of the town actually masked the colonial expansion behind the real crisis, ecological destruction and even irreversible ecological destruction. Crosby called it "ecological imperialism, that is, the expansion of the empire in the settlers colonies, correlated with the environment, the common process of colonial empire, maintain the western colonial rule"[5].

The establishment of the town showed the dominance of the settled colonists over the life, land and nature of the original residents. "With the increase of the settler population and more and more forests being cut down to become pastures, the habitat area and number of local animals have decreased sharply"[6]. Constructive facilities such as small towns are physical manifestations of the destructive consequences of imperial colonial expansion on nature.

The imperial colonists drove the original residents from their land and established their settlements by bloody means such as war and slaughter. With the development and expansion of residential areas, they had developed into commercial distribution centers. In dealing with the local nomads, they often cheated. The plunder and oppression of the aborigines by the imperial colonialists and the corresponding economic and cultural activities had a profound impact on the ecosystem of South Africa, which resulted in the trampling of the traditional thoughts of the original inhabitants of South Africa and the destruction of social and environmental justice and ecological justice in South Africa.

4. ANALYSIS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ANIMALS AND HUMAN WITH COLONIALISM

"As a human being, I feel very uneasy," Coetzee says in *Double Vision*. "The suffering in this world is not only the suffering of human beings that makes me feel trapped and helpless." [7]. It

showed that while focusing on the crisis brought by colonial history to human living environment, Coetzee also expressed his concern about the animal lives wantonly ravaged by humans under colonial hegemony. As Coetzee expressed by Elizabeth Costello in *Animal Life*, animals, like humans, had rich emotions and intelligence, could experience pain and sense the smell of death. In *Waiting for the Barbarian*, Coetzee's barbarian girls seems to have a special bond with animals. After the girl was sent back to her tribe by the old administrator on a trek, a snowstorm terrified the horses. She soothed the horses through body language and telepathy. "The girl stood there with her arms outstretched like she was flying over the necks of two horses. She seemed to be saying to the horses, why are you staring? Just stay where you are." She soothed the horses in her own way. Thus, non-human animals are groups capable of communicating emotions with humans.

During the same long journey, a horse was about to die, and his companion was going to kill it for food. The old executive said, "I swear that animals definitely have spirit and sense. Its eyes rolled in terror at the sight of a knife "[1]92. Traditional ethical thinking holds that animals are creatures without emotions, and human rights and life are higher than those of animals. In his novel *Waiting for the Barbarian*, Coetzee breaks away from this prejudice, transcends anthropocentrism and specialism, and breaks the binary opposition between man and animal. In order to rebuild the relationship between humans and animals, Coetzee's representation of animal dignity is almost always completed at the same time as the protagonist's huge identity subversion, becoming a platform for the connection between animal issues and identity construction issues. In *Waiting for the Barbarian*, Coetzee described in details the animal-like suffering of the old executive as he escorted the barbarian girl home. After returning from a long journey, the old chief executive was convicted of "deserting his post without permission, collaboration with the enemy and treason". First it was the solitary confinement for a few days. The humiliating imprisonment made him gradually become a beast, gradually understanding the taste of freedom in the lower order, living "the daily life of an animal that eats when hungry and sleeps when sleepy"[1]129. Later, because he could not ignore the captured barbarians had suffered torture, he was beaten and the pain made him "howl like a dog", lost the last dignity as a person.

Coetzee's association of animal images with the experience of the old chief executive undoubtedly highlights the cruelty of colonial wars. In the process of colonial expansion, all persons and things that hinder colonial expansion will be crushed and destroyed. As animals in nature, they will surely suffer more sufferings in the process of colonial expansion because they can provide colonists with various supplies and ensure their fighting capacity, thus making necessary preparations for violent conquest and colonial expansion. The colonialists' animalization of the Other was demonstrated not only by the old administrator, but also by the treatment of the barbarians. Colonel Joel lead a large group of savages back to town, with a trooper holding a rope. "They all covered their faces with their hands... A circular wire runs through the palms of people's hands and through holes in their cheeks. Thus they obey like lambs "[2]151. Coetzee's writing suggests that colonial expansion is closely linked to animal disasters. Colonialism not only destroyed the native communities of the colonies, but also destroyed the natural ecological environment of the indigenous people and endangered the local animals. As Greta Gaard put it, "The connection between the indigenous people and animals, their common oppression under colonial rule, and the common loss of people and animals make people sigh and suffer"[8] .

5. CONCLUSION

As an allegorical novel, *Waiting for the Barbarian* gives no specific time and place for the story to take place, nor the appearance of typical historical figures. Everything seems to be divorced

from the reality, but Coetzee's good intentions as a typical post-colonial novelist come through. He not only complained about the pain brought by the colonial war to the people of South Africa, but also reminded people to think deeply about the relationship between the colonial war and the natural ecological environment. It can be seen that ethnic issues and ecological issues are interrelated, and ecological crisis and post-colonial political crisis are inseparable.

In Coetzee's works, *Waiting for the Barbarian* presents the colonial history of South Africa, racial hegemony, species issues, natural ecology and many other issues. Through exploring the colonial wars against the destruction of ecological environment in the novel, the ecological behavior of imperialism and the oppression of men and animals regarded as the Other, we can see Coetzee fought against the colonial hegemony, respect for all life, protect the natural ecological environment, to promote harmony between man and nature of post-colonial ecological ethic. To re-examine the colonial history, and the colonial experience to the people and the colonial countries brought about by the catastrophic effects and its characterization, and the relationship between economic development and environmental protection on the contemporary reflection on social justice ecological justice, and post-colonial context, it is necessary for South Africa and other countries to think about the problem of new colonialism and globalization.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The paper was supported by "The Philosophy and Social Science Research Project in Heilongjiang, China (Grant No. 19WWE296)".

REFERENCES

- [1] J.M. Coetzee: *Waiting for the Barbarian* (Zhejiang WenYi Publishing House, China 2010).
- [2] Shepard Krech III: *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (W. W. Norton & Company, America 1999).
- [3] Zaiqiang Zhong: *The post-colonial ecology of Life and Times by Coetze*, *Journal of Nantong University*, 2014 No.2, p.52-58.
- [4] John Miller: *Post-colonial Eco-criticism and Victorian Studies*, *Literature Compass*, 2012 No.7, p476-488.
- [5] Alfred W Crosby: *Ecological Imperialism: The Bio logical Expansion of Europe, 900—1900* (Cambridge University Press, English 1986).
- [6] Graham Huggan, Helen Tiffin: *Post-colonial Eco-criticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (Routledge, America 2009).
- [7] J. M. Coetzee: *Doubling the Point: Essays and Inter views*, ed (Harvard. UP, America 1992).
- [8] Greta Gaard: *Eco-feminism and Wilderness*, *Environ mental Ethics*, 1997 No.1, p5-24.