



## CAVAFY'S WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS: DIALECTICS BETWEEN SELF AND THE OTHER

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### ABSTRACT:

*Waiting for the Barbarians* by Constantine P. Cavafy is a symbolical poem embedded with prominent ideas. The poem attempts to challenge the established notion or binary opposites where 'self' is considered as influential, civilised, cultured and 'the other' is the binary opposite and is deprived of all that the 'self' possesses. Cavafy is implicitly addressing the colonizers as "the other". He goes against the grain and considers the natives as 'self', recognises them as intellectual, knowledgeable, cultured, civilised but he also points out the flaw in the character of the natives, their mental preparedness and readiness to hand over power and rule to the colonisers, 'the other'. It points out their attitude of submission, surrendering and conceding. They are eagerly and curiously waiting for the other to implement new rules and ready to follow the rules that will be imposed on the natives by the barbarians. Cavafy does not consider the natives as barbaric however, implicitly he is considering colonisers as barbarians. This poem is an attempt to unveil the reality of the colonisers, it uncovers the reasons behind the colonial rule. It attempts to shake the ideas of the natives as well as the colonisers.

**Key Words :** Barbarians, 'the self', 'the other', binary oppositions, natives

### INTRODUCTION

*Waiting for the Barbarians* is significant poem by Constantine P. Cavafy the Greek poet, published in 1904 having a profound meanings underlying it. The vision of *Waiting for the Barbarians* was translated by renowned translator Richmond Lattimoe, originally appearing in the Kenyon Review in 1955. Cavafy's poem inspired a highly influential novel entitled *Waiting for Barbarians* (1980) by South African novelist J.M Coetzee, winner of the Nobel Prize for the literature in 2003. The poem was composed at the threshold of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century and also can be depicted as the revolt against colonialism. Both poem and the novel have become a centre of attraction in literary theory because of the metaphor of western colonialism and the war on terror embedded in it. The poem is symbolical with different meanings embedded in it. The poet attempts to change the whole connotations of the word 'barbarian'. Originally the word is intended for the savage, undeveloped and barbaric people. As the colonizers always colonised the people reminding them of their condition of being savage and barbaric. Here the poet implicitly points out that the natives or the original inhabitants are civilised but colonisers are barbaric. The poem uses the binary opposites in a different way.

### SELF AND OTHER DIALECTICS

Cavafy's *Waiting for the Barbarians* is a symbolic poem that carries a kaleidoscopic view and postcolonial appeal. The poem is open to different interpretations from different perspectives but here the poem is going to be analysed from the perspective of the 'self' and the 'other' which is not as simple and straight forward as usually depicted in the literature at the wider level. The poem uncovers the idea that 'self' is only possible because of the 'other', it tries to unveil the belief that considers 'self' as more powerful. Here the poem brings out the idea that idea of self or own identity is contingent upon the presence of the other. Barbarian is a word that has negative connotations it is used for the uncivilised savage and uncultured people. But here in the poem the word 'Barbarians' may be symbolic of the 'other' colonizers and the natives waiting for them to come. The word was also used for a stranger who speak different language. The poem has deep implications suggesting the arrival of the colonizers and the hopefulness of the natives and their high expectations from them. Here two binary oppositions can be seen 'self' and 'the other'. The natives are 'the self' and for them the barbarians who are going to arrive are 'the other'. The other is always what the self is not. In the words of Said 'other' is anyone who is separate from one's self. The existence of the other is crucial in defining what is 'normal' and locating one's own place in the world. The colonized subject is characterised as 'other' through discourses as a means of establishing the binary separation of the colonizer and the colonised and asserting the naturalness and primacy of the colonizing culture and world view. Cavafy's poem actually appears to be reverting the binary oppositions where the

colonizers are depicted as the negative other of the self. And the poem is actually written from the perspective of 'the self' that was never allowed to voice own point of view. Idea of self is contingent upon the idea of the other both are inextricably woven as night has no significance without day, night is defined as what a day is not. Similarly one defines oneself as separate, distinct identity, what other is not. Idea of identity is complex and ungraspable.

We are always attracted by something that is unusual and attracted by mysterious, mystique, and different. Cavafy's poem is full of questions, the question that reflects the inquisitiveness of the native regarding 'the other'. Here poet is presenting a picture of the natives who are proud of the richness of their own culture, traditions, customs who are aware of the Achilles heel of the Barbarians who can be impressed easily. The other perspective that may be revealed by the poem is that although the natives are aware of richness, uniqueness of their culture still they want the other to come to their land and rule over them. Those who are different from us are always perceived differently, having something that they lack.

Cavafy's poem reflects that whenever there is a lack of harmony, peace, order 'the other' is always looked forward to establish the order to restore peace or to provide some solution. Repeated questions in the poem are the structuring device of the poem, the poem has a classical setting, with an emperor on the throne and consuls and proctors in the embroidered togas. If we delve deep into the meaning, the "Barbarians" in Greek it suggests an unidentified enemy, anyone who does not speak your language or share your cultural ideas, those who lack culture who cannot be understood, also who cannot understand or gain higher reason.

Waiting symbolises eagerness, inquisitiveness as well as it symbolises the waiting for the authoritative, powerful and the respectable. All the natives have assembled to welcome the barbarians, they have also made a lot of preparations for them, to impress them. It is natural human instinct that compels an individual to impress those and try to leave impact on the mind of those who are considered better and those who can have some future benefits. For the natives the barbarians are some one mysterious, they have some idea about their likes and dislikes. The moment for the native is moment arousing ambivalent emotions, response. They expect the barbarians to be powerful and having the wisdom to provide them with the solutions of their problems. But the question that arises in the mind of the readers it when the natives are so rich culturally, are they wise in thinking that the 'the other' can provide them with the solution. The poem may be taken as giving a lesson that we make follies some times by relying on others for the solutions. The barbarians are important for the Greeks or the natives they projected themselves to be important. The Barbarians actually aroused their expectations and hope in them They are looking for the order and peace form the Barbarians.

In a way Cavafy wants to bring out the idea that colonizers only colonised and ruled not because they were powerful or they were intellectually strong in reality we the natives were the one who in a way gave power to them to rule over us by considering them more powerful. It is a general human notion and instinct that we feel powerful when others give power to us. Power lies not in the hands of the colonizers but actually powers are given to them invested in their hands. Cavafy's poem can be seen in the context of Indian colonialism also. The British were actually called by the rulers of the different states in India to resolve their conflicts and to provide them with some sort of solution. The condition of the natives in the poem is same as that of the Indian rulers who eagerly invited and waited for the British. Thus the Indian rulers in a same way waited for the barbarians welcomed them and gave them power to rule over them.

Thus the poem can be seen as having universal significance, universal appeal and an eternal lesson that we are ruled, subjugated, suppressed, not because the other is powerful because we make them powerful by giving powers to them. For the British natives are actually 'the other', who are mysterious, beyond understanding. Thus the orient is made to feel inferior, savage, and barbarian who lacks the sense of culture. The stereotypes generated for the barbarians or the occident as well as the orient. John Meclod argues that

the orient is 'penetrated' by the traveller whose  
'passions' it rouses, it is 'possessed', 'ravished',  
'embraced'... and ultimately 'domesticated' by the muscular coloniser

The poem depicts the state where there is 'inactivity in the senate' because the barbarians were expected that day, natives actually thought that there is no need of creating their own rules and laws and following them as the barbarians will arrive and new laws will be formed with their arrival. Barbarians will change the laws, they will formulate their laws and implement them. Here, the poet actually wants to show the mental preparedness of the natives regarding the new rules and laws that the barbarians will impose on them. It is indicative of mental preparedness of the natives to surrender and handing over power to implement their own laws and rule over them. Cavafy is pointing out the negative attitude of the natives, their mental preparedness to accept the domination. Even the senate, the officials are not working and following the laws and rules that they were following till date, they are waiting for the barbarians to introduce new laws and new rules for them according to their wish. Their condition is similar to the soldiers who have surrendered even before fighting. Soldiers who have put down their arms and ammunitions.

This poem can be interpreted at the different levels with different connotations. The natives waiting for the barbarians to come and change rules and laws for them, they are sitting ready to follow rules without questioning. It is evident that they do not have any rebellious instinct any revolt but they are peacefully surrendering. Even the emperor is ready and waiting at the gate to welcome the barbarians, sitting on the throne with crown on his head that is simply pretence to show that he is the ruler. But the situation is really ironical emperor waiting for the other ruler to come and rule over him. A ruler never sit at the gate and wait for the guest from dawn to dusk. His getting up early and waiting eagerly symbolises his own peaceful surrendering to the barbarians.

Because the barbarians will arrive today  
receive their reader

And the emperor expects to

He is accepting the ruler as his own head and surrendering himself to be ruled over by them. This act is symbolic of flattering the leader. The poem is in the question answer form he poses a question and expects a reply. It appears that either an innocent or an ignorant person is raising question and interrogating about the situation and the happenings around. He poses a question "What are we waiting for, assembled in a Forum?" and receives a reply "The barbarians are to arrive today." The line comes repeatedly "because the barbarians will arrive today." The line occurs four times that shows the significance and importance of their arrival. The line is has emphatic significance. It also symbolises the eagerness for the person who is waiting. The poem does not give any description of the barbarians it may indicate that they just have heard about the barbarians but have never seen them.

Common people are also waiting for the barbarians with may be symbolic of their expectation for the better ruler to rule over them a better order than the present order. It appears as if the ruler himself is fed up of ruling and now want someone else to rule. The wait by the emperor symbolises the waiting for handing over the control to whom he considers the more powerful.

Indeed , he has prepared to present him

with a parchment scroll. Thereon he  
has invested him with many names and titles

Preparing a parchment scroll to be presented is symbolic of handing over the control to the superior authority. Investing many names and titles is symbolic of giving an excessive respect, giving superiority, exaggerative flattering. Different names are given to the godly figure to whom we consider more powerful, central , we confer many titles to them. Even consuls and proctors are also ready with their formal dresses to impress the rulers. They are attired in their formal attires "in their purple, embroidered togas;" purple colour symbolises the royalty. They are dressed up with stone studded jewels "bracelets studded with amethysts and rings with resplendent, glittering emeralds;" they are wearing precious stones just to impress the others. The wearing of precious stones symbolic of attracting, impressing , leaving impression. They are dressed up keeping the expectations of the barbarians in the mind. Here we again find the hint of the superiority of the barbarians. The natives are showing of their rich culture through their dresses , embodied ones, jewellery, their acquisitively decorated stones in gold and silver. Everything is just done for them. They know that the barbarians are attracted , dazzled, impressed by such antique and decorative items.

Because the barbarians will arrive today;  
and such things dazzle the barbarians.

Greeks are known for making the eloquent speeches and they feel very proud of their skill of oratory for which they are known all over the world. Today when the barbarians are arriving they have not prepared any speech the reason behind it may be that they know that barbarians will not be able to understand their language or other implicit meaning behind it may be that the eloquent speech of the Greeks can only be understood and deciphered by the intellects, so the barbarians according to them may not be worthy of understanding such eloquent speeches. Another reason behind not preparing and not making any speech is that they are afraid of annoying the barbarians by making any mistake in their speech.

Because the barbarians will arrive today;  
and they get bored with eloquence and orations.

Idea behind not making any speech in front of them may symbolise that the natives think that the barbarians can be impressed with the materialistic things so there is no need of any speech because the speeches can only be appreciated and enjoyed by the intellectuals. Barbarians are just dazzled by the decorative items. Cavafy in a way is pointing out at the richness of the natives they are not only materially rich but they are intellectually also they are very rich, they are neither deprived of material goods nor bereft of intellectuals . When people learn that the barbarians are not actually coming they are not actually arriving the natives become sad, they start dispersing.

Why has there suddenly begun all this commotion,  
people's faces have become).  
squares emptying so swiftly ,  
deep preoccupation?

and this confusion?(How solemn  
Why are the streets and  
and everyone is returning home in

When the people get the news that the barbarians are not coming their all hopes are dashed to the ground they all return home putting long faces, their faces reflect the state of misery, hopelessness. As the day has ended and night has fallen, day stands for hope and the night stands for ending of hope. The voice that comes out of contempt is

And now what will become of us without the barbarians?  
Those people were some sort of solution.

All the preparations made by them have gone waste. They made all sort of efforts to impress them because they were a kind of ray of hope for them. In reality Cavafy's poem reverts the binary opposition of 'the self' and 'the other'. Generally self is the colonizer and the other is depicted as being colonized , suppressed, subjugated here Cavafy's poem actually goes opposite to it. The poem can be analysed from the Postcolonial point of view As Neimneh points out

Post colonialism is conserved with how the subject conceives itself with the relation to the other, with how groups of "us" and "them" stand with relation to each other. European or imperial discourses portray the other in a way that makes it different , they also help found the self as its counterpart. In this process , they build a self justifying myth in which the self and the other are opposite and exclusive.

In order to define oneself, to assert one's identity the construction and the description of the other is required. How a person can define oneself without differentiating oneself from the other. The 'self' can be defined in relation to 'the other'. The self always presents himself to be positive as compared to 'the other' which is negative. Self possesses all the qualities that 'the other' lack. 'Self' is presented as the superior to the counterpart 'other' who is inferior and lacking.

The poem can be seen as a counter discourse which is actually giving picture from the point of view of the natives who are generally depicted as the negative, superstitious, savage, barbarous, uncivilised and uncultured. Whereas this poem is actually satirising and commenting on the lack of skill of the barbarians who will not be able to understand oration of the natives and the colonizers the people in power are actually referred as "the Barbarians". Thus in a way the colonisers are actually the barbarians who are coming to their land, they are the ones who lack knowledge, culture. They are the ones who are coming to the land of the natives attracted and allured by their culture, their decorative items their practices, their customs as well as their material goods etc. Here when the poet depicts the non arrival of the barbarians, it may be indicative of the cowardice the lack of courage of the barbarians to land on the land of the natives who are so rich in their material as well as culturally. Thus 'the other' is the ambivalent identity which arouses who emotions simultaneously one, an identity that is an attractive and repulsive at the same time.

It can be concluded that the poem is not what it appears to be on the superficial level. It reflects the richness of the Greek culture, it gives a different point of view of the same situation. The idea of native being uncultured and uncivilised is being contradicted. He actually gives a dominant position to the subjugated and the repressed position to the dominant. He is actually speaking from the position of those who are pitied and never allowed to speak. Thus he is giving voice to those who were earlier regarded voiceless and speechless. The poem gives the psychological study of human nature and presents the idea how human beings are baffled with the idea of other, how human beings always look forward to the others for providing some kind of solution. The poem begins at an optimistic note reflects a lot of curiosity and anxiety where as it ends with a question that who will provide a solution to them. They were a kind of solution for the natives. Natives were looking for solution from them. It can be said that human beings are always preoccupied with some or other problems, they are never satisfied with their present state and look forward for a change new rules and laws. Similarly Cavafy presents the idea that the idea of one's own identity is dependent and contingent upon the other. Self is separate but still stands inseparable from the other, and it is impossible to define self as different from the other. Self is inseparable and inextricable part of the other as, as soon as we try to present self without other the whole idea of self shatters and collapses.

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