

A Space for Translation: *Waiting for the Barbarians* and the Language of J. M. Coetzee

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Abstract

This essay argues for the significance and centrality of translation in J. M. Coetzee's early novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), outlining Coetzee's multilingual aesthetic and its ethical implications. In the novel, translation manifests in real and metaphorical spaces in three key respects. Firstly, the allegorical quality of the work, which both invites and resists interpretation (Derek Attridge 2006), denotes an indeterminate, unstable quality that is also characteristic of translation. Secondly, translation manifests stylistically in terms of the language of the novel and the manner in which Coetzee employs an already translated narrative to mark an effaced and absent (native) language. Lastly, translation functions thematically, governing the gendered colonial encounter and its economy of power. The thematic reading reflects the complicit (racist and sexist) position that translation occupies in the colonial endeavor. Translation is key in regulating and exerting power, and includes the view of the sexualized female body as a text to be deciphered. However, when the role of the translator changes hands this economy is upset, and also further problematized by notions of untranslatability, allowing room for resistance.

The multifaceted engagement with translation in *Waiting for the Barbarians* thus creates a space that encompasses the novel's complex ethical vision, prefiguring the investment in translation evident in Coetzee's later works.

Keywords

translation, barbarians, torture, gender, colonial encounter