



Università  
Ca' Foscari  
Venezia

Corso di Laurea Magistrale  
in Lingue e Letterature Europee, Americane e  
Postcoloniali

Ordinamento ex D.M. 270/2004

Tesi di Laurea

**The Question of Violence in J. M. Coetzee's  
*Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Disgrace***

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2017/2018

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## INTRODUCTION

Despite his recent emigration to Australia, John Maxwell Coetzee was born in South Africa and is considered one of the major South African writers. My dissertation has represented the possibility to explore a great novelist and his relation to the South African land. Through him, I have gained an understanding of how South Africa is portrayed through the author's works and, in particular, I have been interested in the way in which history emerges from his novels. As a result, I have started with a deep study of South Africa's history and then I have focused my attention on Coetzee's novels *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Disgrace*, which share what has become my main issue: the theme of violence.

As far as the bond between literature and history is concerned, Coetzee's writings have radically differed from the works of other contemporary writers, especially white South African authors. In fact, due to the colonial and Afrikaner domination over the centuries, the white South African writer's role has been considered of crucial importance to stand against the horrors that have characterised this land. However, whereas white South African authors such as Nadine Gordimer or André Brink have overtly denounced the country's atrocities (especially during the apartheid phase) through the adoption of realism, Coetzee's allusive and provocative narrative has rendered his works only indirectly linked to the country's concrete historical events. Despite his clever critique of the South African political system, he has never proposed an open denunciation of South Africa's crimes. For this reason, Coetzee has been widely criticised for his lack of specificity and for not having taken an overt position against the injustices of South African history.

The aim of this dissertation is to analyse the question of violence in *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Disgrace* in order to understand the relationship between history and literature in Coetzee's novels; violence is the means through which the bond between the historical and the literary discourse will be clarified. Above all, I have attempted to show how Coetzee

invokes the power of imagination over an imposed historical discourse: he challenges history in favour of the writer's free, imaginative powers.

Through the depiction of violence Coetzee has a twofold goal. First, the representation of violence allows him a scrutiny of the human condition, which reveals human beings' contrasting nature. This is possible thanks to the novels' protagonists, the Magistrate and David Lurie, which occupy the middle ground between two opposite perspectives: the Empire against the barbarians, the white world in contrast to the black community, and the conflict between the female and the masculine identity. In both *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Disgrace*, the opposition between the perpetrator and the victim of violence is pivotal to show the dualism that is inherent in every human being. Whereas the perpetrator of violence is someone who reveals his loss of humanity – the worst level that a human being can reach – the victims of violence manifest human beings' vulnerability when they are subjected to violent acts such as torture or rape. Thus, this dissertation deals with the issue of identity and, in particular, with the protagonists' process of self-transformation which is encouraged through the relationship with the other. The driving questions behind the text could be: is a form of evil present in all of us? Is it possible to redeem oneself through the bond with the other?

Secondly, the portrayal of violence enables a reflection on the history of South Africa. I would like to explore how the novels present an indirect criticism of South African history, especially focusing on the colonial domination, on apartheid and post-apartheid eras. I explain how the use of violence by the South African political systems have had a profound impact on South Africans' lives over the centuries. I also observe the author's difficulty to deal with this theme and his narrative strategies to cope with such a thorny topic. The attempt has been to propose a possible answer to the following queries: how is violence represented in *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Disgrace*? What is the correspondence between the violent acts represented in the novels and South African history's real events? In addition, my aim is to demonstrate Coetzee's ability to transcend any specific South

African setting in order to think globally and to show how the reader is requested to attach his/her own meaning to a literary text.

In order to address all these questions, this dissertation will be divided into three main chapters. The first chapter will explore the meaning of violence in relation to South African history. A definition of violence will be provided through the contributions of the Italian sociologist Paola Rebughini and the German sociologist Wolfgang Sofsky. Hanna Arendt's work *On Violence* will contribute to clarify the distinction between the notions of violence and power, two issues that are often misused in everyday language, in particular when they are linked with the realm of politics. Then, the role of violence will be examined in the colonial time and during the process of decolonization; this will be possible through Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, where violence's revengeful function will emerge. To conclude, violence will be analysed in the four major phases of South African history: colonialism, the transitional period before apartheid's establishment, the apartheid regime (in which the baaskap apartheid, the separate development apartheid, and the multiracial co-option apartheid will be distinguished), and the post-apartheid era.

The second chapter is meant to shed light on the representation of torture in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. First, I will begin with an analysis of the white South African writer's role and his challenge to the discourse of history. Then, I will observe the notion of the other, represented here by the "barbarian"; specifically, a comparison between C. P. Cavafy's poem *Waiting for the Barbarians* and Coetzee's novel will be offered. Furthermore, the novel's depiction of torture and the writer's struggle to write about it will be presented. Colonial history and the process of reading will be shown to have significant functions in the novel; moreover, the bond between the protagonist and the other, the barbarian girl, will be scrutinized. To conclude, the novel's narrative strategies will be summarised to understand the text's complexity and the author's allegorical style.

The third chapter will concentrate on the representation of sexual violence in the novel *Disgrace*. I will show how the context of post-apartheid

South Africa emerges from the novel, examining South African rape culture. Here women occupy a secondary position in relation to men; they appear to be subordinate to a rooted masculine culture that renders them vulnerable and fragile. Melanie Isaacs and Lucy Lurie's characters and the subsequent effects that sexual violence has on the novel's protagonists will be analysed. The chapter will end with a focus on the novel's narrative strategies employed by Coetzee.

My hope is that my dissertation could contribute to clarify the meaning and significance of violence in Coetzee's novels, also underlying the impact that the colonial way of thinking has had for South Africa throughout the centuries. My purpose is to stress Coetzee's peculiarity as a writer: he has presented to his readers an engaging and unconventional portrayal of South Africa, drawing our attention on a violent past that should never be forgotten.

## CHAPTER ONE

### 1. The meaning of violence

In our contemporary society, we have been accustomed to hear or read the word “violence” almost every day. When mass media provide us with information of what is happening in our own country or around the world, it is probable that a relation to a violent act exists. Unexpectedness can be viewed as a feature of violence since we can never know when something violent will happen. This is the reason why violence represents a constant challenge for governments whose powers strive for keeping this phenomenon under control. If we search for “violence” on online newspapers, this term covers a diverse range of realities or actions: violence in Gaza or Libya, gun violence in the American society, domestic violence, sexual violence on women or children, murder, bullying, homophobic violence; as can be evinced, violence is a general reference for numerous circumstances.

The aim of this chapter is to explore the role of violence in relation to the history of South Africa; the following analysis will be divided into two main sections. In the first part, a definition of violence will be provided, offering instances of violent acts in relation to our modern society. Of great significance will be the contribution of the Italian sociologist Paola Rebughini and the German sociologist Wolfgang Sofsky, whose works on violence have been crucial to understand this phenomenon. Secondly, the focus will be on political violence; the misleading similarity between violence and power will be clarified: the philosopher and political theorist Hanna Arendt provides a crystal clear distinction between these two notions. Thirdly, the function of violence in the colonial world will be illustrated through the analysis of Frantz Fanon’s work *The Wretched of the Earth*. The second section will be based on the history of South Africa, through which the comprehension of the South African experience, from the beginning of colonial power until the country’s post-apartheid era, will be examined.

Whether physical, psychological or symbolic, violence is highly complex to define: this is exactly what this chapter will attempt to do.

### 1.1. Defining violence

As Rebughini illustrates, the word “violence”, which includes Indo-European roots, is deeply connected with the idea of life (Rebughini 2004: 12). She points out that the word *violentia*, which originates from the Greek *bia* (vital strength), is translated in the Latin version with the word *vis*. *Vis* functions as linguistic root both for the words “violence” and “life”; as a result, violence is strictly bound with the concepts of strength and life (Rebughini 2014: 12). This is the reason why it is difficult to designate a difference among the words violence, strength and power, which appear often as equivalent. According to Rebughini, violence implies the use of physical force, coercion or threatening behaviour.<sup>1</sup> She recognizes two main forms of violence: violence as physical strength and violence as psychological pressure.

The word “violence” is frequently used in our common language to allude to different denotations. The *English Oxford Dictionary* offers two main interpretations. On the one hand, the first definition states: “Behaviour involving physical force intended to hurt, damage, or kill someone or something”; the second one refers to violence as “strength of emotion or of a destructive natural force” (*English Oxford Dictionary*). Whereas in the first instance, violence entails the use of physical strength against someone or something, in the second explanation the term refers to an emotional level or a natural uncontrollable event. *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* suggests that the first use of the term violence originated in the fourteenth century (*The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*).

History supplies unlimited historical circumstances in which violence plays a major role. If one considers both meanings, it could be interested to

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<sup>1</sup>“La violenza può . . . essere definita come una forma di costrizione e come un’imposizione della forza che si afferma attraverso atti concreti e fisici, ma anche di natura psicologica, per esempio attraverso la minaccia, il plagio e la paura” (Rebughini 2004: 12).



mention the example of the twentieth century. It can be pointed out that not only did this century go through the two World Wars, a historical moment in which physical violence has been horrific, causing suffering and death as had never happened before. In addition, these worldwide phenomena led the attention on the psychological and emotional side of violence, whose consequences have been deeply inscribed in human being's minds at an unprecedented level. Overall, as a first step to define violence, it can be observed that violence can affect either on a physical but also on an emotional and psychological level. These two aspects are not always blended together since every historical epoch attaches a different meaning to this term. Therefore, violence does not have a fixed definition; it changes and evolves in relation to what is happening in a particular situation. For instance, during the Cold War, especially in the sixties and seventies, violence was evaluated on political terms since the world was divided into two main ideologies, capitalism and communism, which led to significant political conflicts. After the Berlin Wall was dismantled on November 1989 and the Cold War's stagnation ended, the century had seen violence under so many different perspectives that the term became to be interpreted especially as a societal disorder rather than a physical or ideological struggle against something. This happened mainly in Western countries, where living conditions were remarkably improved. On the other hand, some worldwide realities were still experiencing critical violent situations, where the word retained the common meaning of violence as a powerful threatening force.

It is significant to propose Rebughini's distinction between "interpersonal violence" and "collective violence".<sup>2</sup> According to her, interpersonal violence refers to violence between individuals, what she calls "micro-sociological dimension" (Rebughini 2004: 8). In this circumstance, violence may present itself under various forms. Interpersonal violence involves "the rejection of the other" (Rebughini 2004: 8), whereby an

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<sup>2</sup> "In particolar modo si distinguerà tra la violenza interpersonale (che corrisponde a una dimensione microsociologica legata all'interazione) e la violenza come parte di un processo sociale e collettivo (che corrisponde a una dimensione macrosociologica del rapporto sociale)" (Rebughini 2004: 8).

individual is totally ignored, despised and not recognised as possessing human qualities. This first instance entails the relationship between a prominent authoritarian figure able to inflict violent acts (a despot, a tyrant, a politician, an oppressor, an autocrat) and a victim, the person who copes with the suffering derived from violence. Collective violence, “the macro-sociological level” (Rebughini 2004: 9), on the other hand, refers to a combined action by a larger group of individuals.

Moreover, Rebughini classifies four main categories of theories concerning violence (Rebughini 2004: 9). The first category, of a psychological derivation, focuses its attention on the action of a single individual; these theories tend to bind violence with human beings’ aggressive behaviour and do not provide a distinction between the two attitudes. The second group is based on theories that analyse the function of interpersonal violence; in this case, an individual is downgraded and harassed and the status of victim is recognizable. The third classification considers the macro-sociological level of violence, where violence impedes peaceful coexistence among human beings. The last section of theories regards violence as linked to power. The correlation between violence and power creates a discrepancy among diverse social groups. On the one hand, a minority of people hold power; on the other hand, the other social classes occupy a subordinate position and find themselves controlled by major violent forces.

## **1.2. The victim of violence**

The notion of victim is connected with Rebughini’s second category of theories that corresponds to interpersonal violence. As has been noted, interpersonal violence involves the relationship with another individual or group of human beings. When a violent act is performed, a victim can be identified. The role of victim implies a negative undertone; the victim represents someone who may have been attacked, hurt, injured or even murdered. The only way to comprehend the victim’s status is to listen to his or her own words directly, to understand the individual’s perspective,

something that is possible only when the victim's status has been recognized. However, the victim's word does not always have the right to be expressed since victims' testimonies may damage the official social order. In fact, it might also occur that a victim is not believed or acknowledged to be someone who has suffered from violent acts; in this case he/she is urged to silence and the victim's rights are completely forgotten.

Rebughini observes that the original idea of victim had positive connotations (Rebughini 2004: 27): the victim functioned as a scapegoat, whose sacrifice strengthened the communal identity. In Western society, the most evident example was that of the foreigner, a person culturally different, who was rejected by the community in which he tried to conform to: Nazis identity against the Jewish community may be considered as an extreme instance of the victim's status. With the help of Mawby and Walklate's work *Critical Victimology*, Rebughini provides a definition of victim; according to her, the concept of victim has entered common usage to express the status of human beings who have sustained a wide range of injuries or sufferings, on which they have not had any control or responsibility (Rebughini 2004: 28).

<sup>3</sup> Victims are human beings who have been damaged or have suffered from diverse causes. Victims do not have any control or responsibility for violent forces acting on them. Whether one refers to oppression, destruction, denigration or exploitation, victims can only cope with these severe conditions.

When examining the relationship between the person who commits a violent act and the victim's role, Rebughini states that three main elements might be delineated: the victim of violence, the perpetrator and the witness (Rebughini 2004: 29). The person who has suffered from violence insists on

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<sup>3</sup> Il concetto di vittima nel linguaggio di senso comune è utilizzato oggi in maniera piuttosto ampia, per indicare persone che hanno subito danni e sofferenze di diverso genere — incidenti, aggressioni, malattie, perdite di persone o di cose care ecc. — rispetto ai quali non hanno potuto avere alcuna forma di controllo e nessuna responsabilità (Rebughini 2004: 28).

being labelled as victim; the only means to achieve this goal is that of being listened to and supported by other individuals. The persecutor's status should also be officially recognized; in some cases, it might also occur that his/her violent behaviour has legal recognition. The witness' function is significant because it is often the only medium through which the victim and the oppressor's status are formally designated. Unfortunately, even when officially acknowledged, it is demanding to overcome an experience of violence. The victim may be unable to discuss about the violent act he/she has encountered or may be possessed by a feeling of alienation difficult to extirpate. The Holocaust survivor Primo Levi might be regarded as an example of violence's victim; he experienced serious traumatic events, which have represented an indelible mark for his entire life. In the epilogue of Primo Levi's *I sommersi e i salvati*, Walter Barberis emphasises the witness' role and the significant bond with history.<sup>4</sup> Barberis points out that a victim of violence wants the oppressor to be brought to justice so that what the victim has experienced might not happen anymore. However, even when justice is achieved, to go on with a normal life, at the same time seeking inward peace, might be a burdensome task: Primo Levi lived his entire life in anguish, unable to forget or overcome his oppressive violent past.

### 1.3. Classification of violence

Since violence is a difficult concept to be defined, many scholars have attempted to create a classification of the different forms of violence, which

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<sup>4</sup>La sua voglia di verità, di testimonianza, di giustizia, la sua insaziabile ricerca di una spiegazione che permettesse di rendere evidenti gli errori che ogni individuo e ogni popolo avrebbero dovuto in futuro evitare; la sua voglia di una storia esemplare per tutti; convivevano con la mai sopita attesa del ritorno di un'angoscia di cui il sopravvissuto non poteva salvarsi. Neppure Primo Levi, così forte e spesso agli occhi degli altri persino sereno, ne era al riparo. Bruciante, un giorno quell'angoscia prese anche lui, ad ora incerta. (Barberis, Walter. "Afterword" in Primo Levi's *I sommersi e i salvati*. Einaudi, Torino, 2007: 188)

have been part or are still present in our contemporary society. This paper will analyse the major forms of violence that include: war and genocide, terrorism, crime, gender violence and torture.

Rebughini's definition of war derives from the Prussian general von Clausewitz's popular statement: "War is a continuation of policy by other means" (qtd. in Rebughini 2004: 34). War may be illustrated as a conflict between two or more contrasting political groups, which occurs among different countries or in the national territory. War is strictly bound to political and power relationships. War's aim is the use of force in order to subjugate the enemy. Nevertheless, war differs from genocide. Whereas war implies the perpetration of violence by both sides, genocide is the deliberate killing of a large group of human beings, especially when they belong to a different cultural or ethnic group. History provides numerous examples of genocides, especially when one considers the process of colonization in the Asian, African and American continents. Moreover, war distinguishes itself from genocide because it acts through a system of rules and laws whose aim is the defeat of the enemy. However, in the last century, with the improvement of military technology, war's nature has changed. War affects civil populations and destroys urban areas rather than attacking military groups. A recent example is the Syrian war, where the use of chemical weapons continues to kill civilians, including children.

When considering terrorism, the American sociologist Gibbs offers a general definition of the phenomenon: "Terrorism is illegal violence or threatened violence directed against human or nonhuman object" (Gibbs 1989: 330). Terrorism is an instrumental form of violence, which in the majority of cases has a target. Nonetheless, it may also happen that terrorist attacks do not have a precise goal. According to Rebughini, terrorism's origins derive from the building of national states, ethnic and cultural communities but also of political and religious beliefs (Rebughini 2004: 37). She also draws a distinction between national and international terrorism (Rebughini 2004: 37). In the first instance, terrorism refers to a movement or social mobilization's degeneration. An example may be provided by the well-

known Italian “years of lead”, a period in which Italy has been characterised by left-wing and right-wing political terrorist movements from the 1960s to the 1980s. International terrorism, conversely, aims to bring the attention on specific topics and, additionally, to spread an important message, whereby the role of the media is fundamental. Modern terrorism has become increasingly bound to religious and cultural justifications.

Crime is an illegal action or activity, which is strictly connected to ordinary citizens. Some examples might comprehend theft, vandalism, murder, fight or criminal organizations. Crime is the most common form of violence since it usually manifests itself within society.

Gender-based violence (GBV) <sup>5</sup> is a brutal form of violence, a violation of human rights, which creates an unbalanced relationship between men and women. Whether physical, sexual, psychological, cultural or symbolic violence, the fight against GBV is usually directed against men; however, violence against manhood is relevant too and its role should not be underestimated. There are different types of gender-based violence, which is based on power relations: domestic violence, physical violence, sexual violence, and psychological violence.

According to the sociologist Sofsky, torture’s major aim is not death but the fear for agony that leads to death (Sofsky 1998: 71).<sup>6</sup> Sofsky suggests that not only does torture generate obedience through the threat of death, but also its purpose is to prolong the agony of death. The practice of torture has existed from ancient times. In the twentieth century, torture’s use increased, especially thanks to the improvement of new military techniques: torture became the means employed by the state to prevent dissent and subversion. Torture’s victims include inferior social classes, slaves, foreigners,

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<sup>5</sup> “Gender-based violence (GBV) is the general term used to capture violence that occurs as a result of the normative role expectations associated with each gender, along with the unequal power relationships between the two genders, within the context of a specific society.” (“Gender-based violence” in <http://www.health-genderviolence.org/training-programme-for-health-care-providers/facts-on-gbv/defining-gender-based-violence/21>. Accessed 4 June 2018.)

<sup>6</sup> “[La tortura] non mantiene solo la paura della morte, che costringe l’obbedienza, ma crea una paura, molto più tremenda: la paura di un’interminabile agonia” (Sofsky 1998: 71).

indigenous people, criminals, and devotees of forbidden religious and ideological creeds (Sofsky 1998: 72).<sup>7</sup> Torture creates social division and exclusion, whereby a line of demarcation is established between human and non-human people. Torture is not a duel between two different forces; torture is a cruel form of violence in which the oppressed individual is not allowed to defend himself from the torturer. Sofsky affirms that torture is not exclusively a physical act (Sofsky 1998: 79): physical torture is bound to psychic torture since the body, the soul and the spirit are strictly connected. Physical violence may be accompanied by the torturer's mechanism of humiliation whose goal is to denigrate the oppressed individual. A key factor of inflicting torture is the victim's language: torture destroys human being's ability to speak and to create new words, whereby the victim is not even able to lament or to express some forms of rebellion. Moreover, torture involves the interrogatory's practice whose sole scope is to injure the victim. Whether the oppressed answers to the asked questions or not torture becomes unavoidable. The interrogatory is a legal medium thanks to which the victim is harmed. The role of the torturer is significant, his wish is to damage other human beings, feeling and seeing all the inflicted violent acts; when the victim dies, he longs for another human being on whom he aims to inflict greater pain.

#### **1.4. Order and violence**

The German sociologist Sofsky begins his work *Traktat über die Gewalt* presenting the myth on the origins of violence.<sup>8</sup> This myth attempts to explain

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<sup>7</sup> La tortura colpisce tutte le categorie sociali che non appartengono al nucleo della società omogenea. E' una tecnologia per la lotta al diverso, uno strumento della divisione sociale, dell'esclusione. La tortura traccia una linea di demarcazione tra amico, nemico e stranieri, tra cittadino e barbari, tra genti civilizzate e selvaggi, credenti e pagani; divide gli esseri umani dagli esseri non umani. (Sofsky 1998: 72)

<sup>8</sup> "Quando tutti gli uomini erano liberi e uguali, nessuno era al sicuro dall'altro . . . gli uomini strinsero così un'alleanza per la sicurezza comune . . . un contratto che prescriveva a tutti ciò che potevano e ciò che non potevano fare" (Sofsky 1998: 3).

the desires and fears of contemporary people; it serves to justify violent acts perpetrated by power and order. According to his story, once upon a time men and women were free and equals, living in a world where they felt vulnerable, unprotected, and whose major feelings were fear and suspicion. In order to find a solution to this problem, human beings decided to create a system in which a group of representatives, who were periodically substituted, had the task to safeguard and control the social order, a new society where individuals could feel safe and protected. To maintain order the representatives prescribed rules and regulations, which, after a while, were perceived as too binding for them. In fact, human beings began to feel oppressed and enraged since power and law were in the hands of a restricted minority. Consequently, men and women became nostalgic of the initial world's order, where they were "free and equals" (Sofsky 1998: 3). Thus, the moment arrived when they decided to take hold of all the arms to eradicate the representatives from power and law. Through violence, they obtained their goal.

The myth's aim is to explain the transforming process of violence. The story explains society's birth, civilisation's cycle and human beings' ultimate wish to return to the early stages of civilisation; the myth attempts to give voice to the social victims of violence and their need of protection.<sup>9</sup> Sofsky wants to point out that the fear of violence catalyzes society's birth. Society is created because individuals feel vulnerable and need protection; as a result, freedom is a threat for men and women: if men were free and undisciplined, aggressive behavior would be unlimited. The sociologist sustains that men and women have invented the social contract for their personal security.<sup>10</sup> Through the social contract, men and women are obliged to comply with any

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<sup>9</sup> "La violenza rimane onnipresente: attraversa la storia del genere umano, dall'inizio alla fine. La violenza crea caos e l'ordine crea violenza . . . fondato sulla paura della violenza, l'ordine stesso genera nuova paura e violenza" (Sofsky 1998: 5).

<sup>10</sup> "Il contratto sociale . . . regola le modalità delle relazioni sociali . . . solo la rinuncia alla violenza, solo il patto di reciproca intoccabilità, crea i presupposti entro i quali la socialità diventa possibile" (Sofsky 1998: 7).



rules that attempt to regulate the relationship among them. What is clear is that human beings do not want to suffer and to experience violence.

After the social contract is established, some representatives are elected: their function is to promote security, to prevent violence from originating. However, to have a representational minority means that the concentration of power is in its hands and the relationship between individuals and representational power may differ from the original scope.<sup>11</sup> The sociologist observes that when violence is in the hands of power, the power relationship between the representational minority and the people completely change. Since violence belongs to and is regulated by a group of delegates, one can never know whether power will be used to protect the people or to subjugate them. This social order creates a pyramidal system in which men and women are subjected to the representatives' power.

To rely on some spokespersons to protect society might involve a risk. If the representatives oppress the people, it will be seriously difficult to rebel against them. This is because the main means through which power is exercised is the employment of military force.<sup>12</sup> Representational power should be able to exert pressure when needed. In order to be officially legitimised, power needs to threaten people with the use of force to preserve social order. How can power stem the flow of violence? The answer is by teaching individuals to fear violent acts that could spring exactly from the

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<sup>11</sup> Nel momento in cui la violenza risiede solo nelle mani del potere, il rapporto di forza è del tutto differente. L'opposizione non ha quasi più possibilità di successo: la lotta contro l'autorità è persa ancora prima di essere iniziata, a meno che tutti non facciano causa comune e devastino palazzi e depositi . . . il regime dell'ordine crea il suddito, il conformista, il diverso — e la vittima umana, che viene immolata alla divinità statale. (Sofsky 1998: 8)

<sup>12</sup> “Non vi è potere che non sia assicurato dalle armi . . . per mantenersi, deve essere capace di violenza, anzi, è potere solo fino a quando dispone di questi mezzi. Ottiene riconoscimento e legittimazione solo nella misura in cui garantisce effettivamente l'ordine” (Sofsky 1998: 9).

same representatives that they have originally chosen. Therefore, power becomes centralised by the state.

It is significant to consider the bond between centralised power and history. History provides meaningful examples in which countries have been in charge of safeguarding social order. Nevertheless, many national states have not limited themselves to the preservation of social order. They have used the maintenance of order as an excuse for abusing of their power. The repercussions have been of huge impact. Violence has become the means through which states have conquered new territories, have subjugated entire populations and have caused suffering at an unprecedented level through wars, persecution and unlimited destruction. When power does not limit itself to safeguard society, the ambitious plan of preserving social order only increases the spread of violence.

It should also be considered that order implies the compliance with regulations. Men and women have to adhere to certain rules in order to preserve their social security. This enables a condition in which human beings conform to the precepts imposed on them by the representational institutions. Everyone must be treated equally before the law. As a consequence, society becomes uniform, law-abiding and every form of diversity is prohibited and excluded. Order is established through homogeneity, discipline and education (Sofsky 1998: 12).<sup>13</sup> As the sociologist points out, order's function is that of educating human beings so that they conform to the rules. Order and power work together to build a stable and uniform world. One of the main weapons used by power is culture. Power's generation of order depends not only on the use of the military forces, but also on books and instruction. This is the only means through

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<sup>13</sup> L'ordine ammaestra gli esseri umani fino a che seguono gli ordini e le istruzioni senza ribattere. Il potere è anche un severo precettore della cultura. Produce una rappresentazione del mondo omogenea in cui i pensieri predominanti sono i pensieri del potere. Non solo la spada, ma anche il libro, l'abecedario e il pastorale sono strumenti del potere. (Sofsky 1998: 12)

which any revolutionary action or subversive behaviour is prevented from happening. Order, control, repression, conformity, imposed education; all these factors catalyse the total elimination of freedom.

Nonetheless, power may be very treacherous. It leads the representatives to become alienated from ordinary men and women. They appear to be always more detached from their original goal: social order's security. For them the most essential task is to maintain power and, if this is possible, to increase it. They transform themselves into greedy and violent delegates inclined to do everything to reach their aims. As a result, the moment arrives in which men and women become fed up with the alliance between order and power. Thus, revolutionary actions begin to spread. However, it is significant to remark that revolution brings into existence a chaotic situation in which some conditions may improve but power still retains its position.

The myth presented by Sofsky ends with a last revolt, which is directed towards the principle of order.<sup>14</sup> Men and women destroy what has been initially established for ensuring their safety; they are united to have their liberty again. In order to achieve this goal, they use violence, demolishing all what has been previously built, hunting and killing people. From this moment onwards, they will live in a free world without the imposition neither of power nor of order.

To conclude, Sofsky points out that the beginning and the end of the story are imaginary constructions that human beings have created to explain the origin of civilisation. What deserves to be understood after reading this story is that societies have been erected using violence. Even though human

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<sup>14</sup> Così il tempo del potere procedette, fino al momento in cui gli uomini furono stufi. La storia si conclude con un'ultima rivolta, con il rogo del contratto, con la distruzione del mondo civile. L'ultima rivolta non è diretta contro il vecchio regime, ma contro il principio dell'ordine in assoluto . . . un odio indomabile esplode, l'odio verso il potere, verso gli altri che lo servivano . . . la violenza dell'ordine si capovolge nella violenza selvaggia delle orde: tutti sono di nuovo uguali. (Sofsky 1998: 18)

beings have always tried to justify the states' birth with the idea of the social contract, this does not correspond to reality. The origin of every state has always been accompanied by acts of violence. Human beings have been victims of violence, which has been perpetrated by other men in charge of power, law and institutions; conquerors, tyrants, persecutors, murderers, whose greed for power has subjected men and women to unlimited violent acts and destruction.

## **2. Political violence: the difference between violence and power**

One of the most important reflections on violence and, in particular on the difference between two major concepts such as violence and power, is Hannah Arendt's essay *On Violence* published in 1970. The American philosopher Richard J. Bernstein observes:

Arendt had lived through the turbulent 1960's with mixed emotions. She was an enthusiastic supporter of the early civil right movement, the anti-Vietnam War movement, and the nonviolent student sit-ins in universities . . . but she was alarmed by the growth of the Black Power movement and the increasingly shrill rhetoric of violence in the student movement throughout the world. (Bernstein 2011: 3)

Arendt's essay echoes a strident voice whose acute remarks have been subjected to criticism. However, even if in a strong way, the philosopher offers a powerful perspective on the topic of violence in relation to the political realm.

At the beginning of the essay, she explains the reasons why she has decided to write on such a topic:

The reflections were provoked by the events and debates of the last few years as seen against the background of the twentieth century, which has become indeed, as Lenin predicted, a century of wars and revolutions, hence a century of that violence which is currently believed to be their common denominator. There is, however, another factor in the present situation

which, though predicted by nobody, is of at least equal importance. The technical development of the implements of violence has now reached the point where no political goal could conceivably correspond to their destructive potential or justify their actual use in armed conflict. (Arendt 2014: 3)

Arendt's source for her essay is explained by two main factors. On the one hand, the first element is bound to the events and discussions that she was living in the 1960s. In fact, the twentieth century fueled many debates on the topic of violence. After the two World Wars, the ongoing Cold War and the civil rights actions, violence was a theme that deeply concerned academics, theorists and philosophers at the time. The fear of another devastating war did not extirpate. On the other hand, the recent birth of new technologies connected with warfare did not help to calm the hearts down. Nonetheless, violence, according to Arendt, was still treated "as a marginal phenomenon" (Arendt 2014: 8), studied on a superficial level. The main issue was that violence was becoming the means through which political leaders accomplished their goals and warfare's development of new techniques put in danger the entire world system. As Arendt states: "The seemingly irresistible proliferation of techniques and machines, far from only threatening certain classes with unemployment, menaces the existence of whole nations and conceivably of all mankind" (Arendt 2014: 17).

Under these circumstances, the philosopher introduces the topic of the students' rebellions in relation to violence. She offers the example of the new generation's organization, the New Left movement, which was deeply concerned with what was happening around the world; she observes: "This generation seems everywhere characterized by sheer courage, an astounding will to action, and by a no less astounding confidence in the possibility of change" (Arendt 2014: 16). Students' movements were active especially in the universities' realm, where "violence [had] remained mostly a matter of theory and rhetoric" (Arendt 2014: 18). Nevertheless, when considering the American Black Power movement, Arendt proposes a critique of its violent

behaviour, which was harshly condemned by some critics. Arendt warns that in certain cases, students' movements are inclined to praise violence. This is due to some writers such as Fanon and Sartre who tend to glorify violent behaviour. Bernstein affirms:

She discusses Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, which many radical students were hailing as the credo and justification for violence. But her main target for criticism is Jean-Paul Sartre for his "irresponsible glorification of violence". She accuses Sartre of misunderstanding Marx in his "amalgamation of existentialism and Marxism". (Bernstein 2011: 5)

After analysing these points, Arendt focuses on the definition of violence: "It is against the background of these experiences that I propose to raise the question of violence in the political realm" (Arendt 2014: 35). The first problem one may encounter when analysing violence is the inclination to blend the concept of violence with that of power: "It is, I think, a rather sad reflection on the present state of political science that our terminology does not distinguish among such key words as "power", "strength", "force", "authority", and, finally, "violence"" (Arendt 2014: 43). Arendt draws a crystal clear distinction between power and violence.

As far as the theme of power is concerned, when talking about politics power is linked to the act of persuasion; she notes:

Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the groups keeps together. When we say of somebody that he is "in power" we actually refer to his being empowered by a certain number of people to act in their name. The moment the group, from which the power originated to begin with (*potestas in populo*, without a people or group there is no power), disappears, "his power" also vanishes. (Arendt 2014: 44)

Power presupposes two main conditions. On the one hand, power can exist only if there is a group of individuals, on whose hands power relies, who act together. Thus, power continues to last only if the group lingers on too. On the other hand, the second prerequisite involves the authorization of the people that confer to the group the possibility of being “in power” (Arendt 2014: 44).

According to Bernstein, Arendt’s explanation of the concept of power is strictly linked to some notions, which she had elaborated in her previous works. An example is her vision of action and plurality in *The Human Condition* (1958); Arendt states that action “corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on earth and inhabit the world . . . this plurality is specifically the condition . . . of all political life” (qtd. in Bernstein 2011: 8). Bernstein observes that Arendt’s concept of plurality is related to the notion of political equality: “Political equality, the equality that characterizes plurality, is what the Greeks called *isonomy*” (Bernstein 2011: 8). The Greek polis attributed great importance to the political gathering of people as citizens, individuals who were considered to be equals because of their citizenship. Following the Greek perspective, Arendt completely rejects the concept of political power, power of one person or group over the other. She emphasises the role that politics has to act together in the public space.

Contiguous with Arendt’s notions of plurality and political equality is her vision of public freedom: “Public freedom is a positive political achievement that arises when individuals act together and treat each other as political equals” (qtd. in Bernstein 2011: 9). She draws a difference between the idea of public freedom and that of liberty, which may be conceived as “liberation *from* someone or something whether it is liberation from poverty, or oppressive rulers and tyrants” (Bernstein 2011: 9). These views are relevant if one considers the role of political leaders throughout the world in the present time. In fact, they often try to persuade ordinary citizens that they want to act on a particular situation to free populations from oppressive rulers. If one follows Arendt’s point of view, public freedom can be achieved

only when men are treated as equal citizens: in the real world, this rarely happens.

Conversely, Arendt judges violence in opposition to power. Violence is something that cannot exist in the political realm since violence is the antithesis of politics. According to Rebughini, who bases her reflections on Arendt's essay, violence is instrumental when it is used to accomplish a superior purpose. She distinguishes between two kinds of instrumental violence. On the one hand, violence can be the means through which social order is achieved. On the other hand, violence can also be the instrument of rebellion and revolution against some forms of domination or superior order, which are not approved by the people (Rebughini 2004: 58). Arendt points out:

*Violence*, finally, as I have said, is distinguished by its instrumental character. Phenomenologically, it is closely to strength, since the implements of violence, like all other tools, are designed and used for the purpose of multiplying natural strength until, in the last stage of their development, they can substitute for it. (Arendt 2014: 46)

The main feature of violence is its instrumental nature. This means that individuals aim to strengthen themselves through warfare's devices in order to achieve their goal. As a matter of fact, violence in its pure state depends on the implements of war, tools used to increase strength.

Arendt wants her readers to think about the notions of violence and power in relation to real politics. She explains the reason why it appears to be tempting to merge the two concepts together. As she states, it has never existed a political government based entirely on violence: "Even the most despotic domination we know of, the rule of master over slaves, who always outnumbered him, did not rest on superior means of coercion as such, but on superior organization of power — that is, on the organized solidarity of the masters" (Arendt 2014: 50). However, whereas power "is actually the very condition enabling a group of people to think and act in terms of the means-



end category” (Arendt 2014: 51), violence preserves its instrumentality. Violence has an end, a goal for which it is necessary to act. Conversely, it is the action of gathering that allows power to come into existence.

In addition, it may be suggested that power and violence usually emerge together. Arendt observes: “Wherever they are combined, power . . . is the primary and predominant factor. The situation, however, is entirely different when we deal with them in their pure states” (Arendt 2014: 52). Violence in its pure state depends on the implements of war: “Violence can always destroy power; out of the barrel of a gun grows the most effective command, resulting in the most instant and perfect obedience. What never grow out of it is power” (Arendt 2014: 53). In politics, when power is lost, there is the tendency to substitute it with violence. Arendt, to conclude, suggests that, as far as the analysis of the themes of power and violence are concerned, it should be remembered that the two concepts are never the same: “Power and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent. Violence appears where power is in jeopardy, but left to its own course it ends in power’s disappearance” (Arendt 2014: 55).

The philosopher also explains the causes of violence. She first comments that there are certain conditions in which the rapidity of a violent act seems the only possible solution for manhood. This happens both in public and private life: “The point is that under certain circumstances violence — acting without argument or speech and without counting the consequences — is the only way to set the scales of justice right again” (Arendt 2014: 64). Human beings sometimes feel compelled to use violence in order to obtain something, which they are not able to achieve through other means. The search for justice provides the best example for this case. It is true that violence is not a legitimate solution, but it is also true that there are specific situations in which rage emerges and the temptation to “take the law into [one’s] own hands for justice’s sake” (Arendt 2014: 64) may be viewed as the unique possible way.

One of the main exponents who agrees on the concept of violence for violence’s sake is Frantz Fanon. According to him, violence enables men to

create a bond that cannot be destroyed even when death strikes them. If one takes into consideration Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, where the writer talks about anti-colonial struggle, it seems plausible his high praise for violence. As it will be visible in the following section, Fanon considers violence a legitimate self-defence choice. When human beings undergo such dehumanization as it happens in the colonial world, violence is the only tool they have to react against suppression, inhuman conditions and racism. Violence appears to be the only way to obtain dignity and freedom.

As far as the theme of racism is concerned, Arendt states: "Racism, as distinguished from race, is not a fact of life, but an ideology, and the deeds it leads to are not reflex actions, but deliberate acts based on pseudo-scientific theories" (Arendt 2014: 76). In her view, when violence is connected with racist ideologies, racism lead men to kill other men, who are culturally different. These murderous actions are based on rational thinking, which render violence even more ruthless. This occurs in the colonial realm, where colonizers kill or subjugate men and women to achieve their greedy goals, completely ignoring all the suffering they generate to people, whose only guilt is their cultural difference.

To conclude, Arendt proposes a final warning to the readers: "The practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is to a more violent world" (Arendt 2014: 80). She believes that this kind of violence, which makes sense only for short-term goals, might evolve into something even more violent. Especially in our modern societies, where "bureaucracy is the form of government in which everybody is deprived of political freedom, of the power to act" (Arendt 2014: 81), there is the tendency to resort to violence. People have become "equally powerless" (Arendt 2014: 81), they do not have the possibility to choose and not even the faculty of action. As a result, the philosopher alerts: "Every decrease in power is an open invitation to violence" (Arendt 2014: 87).

### **3. Violence and the colonial world**

As has already been anticipated in the previous section, Frantz Fanon defends human beings' right to use violence for specific aims. In particular, his work *The Wretched of the Earth*<sup>15</sup>, published before his death in 1961, argues for the practice of violence in the colonial world, especially emphasizing the right of colonized people to use violence in order to obtain their liberty. Fanon observes:

The violence which has ruled over the ordering of the colonial world, which has ceaselessly drummed the rhythm for the destruction of native social forms and broken up without reserve the systems of reference of the economy, the customs of dress and external life, that same violence will be claimed and taken over by the native at the moment when, deciding to embody history in his own person, he surges into the forbidden quarters. (Fanon 2001: 31)

In the passage, Fanon explains that one day the subjugated people will exercise the same violence that colonizers have used to enslave them. They will win their country back, rebuilding their native social customs and recovering their own economic rules. They will be protagonists of a new history, a new phase in which their rights will be asserted again. The aim of this section is to understand the meaning of violence in relation to the colonial situation. This goal will be achieved considering two main aspects: the role of violence in the colonial world and the process of decolonization, a period in which violence has been adopted in the name of freedom in order to raise against colonialism.

First, it might be suggested that perpetrating violence in a colonial country involves a physical and a psychological change. Violence is executed at a physical level when it implicates the transformation of the territory. In fact, when the colonizers arrive in the country they want to control, they instantly set a dividing line, which establishes the territory's frontiers.

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<sup>15</sup> The quotes in this section are taken from Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* prefaced by Jean-Paul Sartre and translated by Constance Farrington. This version has been published in 2001 by Penguin Books.

Soldiers and policemen are the people designed for the colony's protection; as Fanon states: "The agents of government speak the language of pure force" (Fanon 2001: 29). Confines symbolize the first form of oppression for the subjugated people.

Another significant division is established in the colonial realm because of race. Fanon observes: "In the colonies, the foreigner coming from another country [imposes] his rules by means of guns and machines . . . the governing race is first and foremost those who come from elsewhere, those who are unlike the original inhabitants, 'the others'" (Fanon 2001: 31). The colony is created when the incoming settlers establish their rule and deprive the natives of their natal territory, stealing the people's pride and joy. Fanon notes: "For a colonized people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity" (Fanon 2001: 34). The territory is divided in contrasting zones according to the racial belongings. It can be easily predicted how different will be the two factions' living conditions. This, of course, involves a psychological aggression for the colonized populations, which suffer both from losing freedom in the native country and from being dehumanized by their oppressors.

Thus, a meaningful difference is established between the settlers and the natives. After being physically delimited, the natives are treated like animals. Even the colonial vocabulary contribute to render the colonized person an inferior individual. It should be taken into account that the colonized people totally lose their living customs and cultural values. This is due to the imposition of the colonizers' lifestyle, which is significantly demanding for the native populations to accept. The colonial world appears to be well established when the native admits the colonizer's superiority in terms of values. According to Fanon, for the white power, "the customs of the colonized people, their traditions, their myths-above all, their myths, are the very sign of that poverty of spirit and of their constitutional depravity" (Fanon 2001: 32). This state of affairs can be said to be psychologically burdensome for the natives to endure since "the settler paints the native as a

sort of quintessence of evil” (Fanon 2001: 32). It is interesting to point out that the settlers employ this lack of cultural values as a justification for colonization. The settler affirms that his main function is to create history in the land he is occupying, which, without his intervention, would probably face regression.

In addition, the settler-native relationship is based on the process of envy that the colonizer catalyses in the colonized person. In the colonial world, the native learns to obey the settlers’ rules. Of course, this happens because of the white man’s superior condition; the native wishes he could occupy the settler’s dominant position. As Fanon points out: “The native is an oppressed person whose permanent dream is to become the persecutor” (Fanon 2001: 41). Inward rage is an emotion that becomes part of the native’s characterization. It may also happen that the colonized people develop a feeling of denial towards colonialism, as if the colonial situation has never begun, a process through which the native aims to forget all the experiencing suffering. This is visible when violence is perpetrated among the same natives. In doing so, they behave as if they were living the conflicts that already existed before colonialism, what Fanon calls “the well-known patterns of avoidance” (Fanon 2001: 42). Furthermore, it is meaningful the native’s belief in fatality. The native, in fact, believes that all the misfortunes he has to endure in the colonial world depend on God’s will. With this in mind, it is easier for him to obey to the settler’s commands. Overall, it might be highlighted that whereas the settler satisfactorily affirms his superiority in the colonial setting, the native attempts to survive in a world whose original essence has been extirpated by the white man’s intrusion.

Fanon is able to provide a perfect portrait of the colonial world, a description from which one can understand the reality’s brutalities:

A world divided into compartments, a motionless, Manichaeistic world, a world of statues: the statue of the general who carried out the conquest, the statue of the engineer who built the bridge; a world which is sure of itself, which crushes with its stones the backs flayed by whips: this is the colonial

world. The native is a being hemmed in; apartheid is simply one form of the division into compartments of the colonial world. (Fanon 2001: 40)

The colonial world is split up in numerous areas, where the settlers transform the natives' birth land. The colonized people become slaves in the hands of their tyrants, being entrapped in the colony's borders. Their cultural legacy is destroyed in the name of a conquering civilization. As a result, the natives find themselves dependent on the colonial system, whose subservience triggers a feeling of alienation that is difficult to extirpate. Thus, it might be suggested that colonialism's worst consequence is on a psychological level, since violence deeply affects the minds of the subjugated human beings.

However, after the colonial reality becomes well defined, the moment arrives in which colonized people begin to develop negative feelings that bring about a new outcome in the relationship between the colonizers and the native populations. Emotions such as anger and hate come to surface since colonized people are not able to endure colonialism anymore. As a consequence, violence becomes the main protagonist of this new phase. Fanon talks of "atmosphere of violence, that violence which is just under the skin" (Fanon 2001: 55), which functions as instigator for a new step towards the process of decolonization. Recourse to violence becomes legitimate to rebel against colonial subjugation; according to Kebede: "The mere departure of the colonizer is not enough; liberation and dignity cannot be recovered unless the colonized get involved in violent performances" (Kebede 2001: 539). All the colonial world's dehumanizing conditions give the native strength to rise against the colonizers; he must use violence to change his situation, to gain his freedom and to restore his dignity.

Before understanding the meaning of violence during the process of decolonization, it should be stressed Fanon's definition of the phenomenon:

Decolonization is the meeting of two forces, opposed to each other by their very nature, which in fact owe their originality to that sort of substantification which results from and is nourished by the situation in the

colonies. Their first encounter was marked by violence and their existence together — that is to say the exploitation of the native by the settler — was carried on by dint of a great array of bayonets and cannon. (Fanon 2001: 27)

Decolonization is a violent phenomenon, which aims to subvert the colonial world, whereby “the last shall be first and the first last” (Fanon 2001: 28). This phenomenon distinguishes itself by the meeting of two divergent groups, the settlers and the natives, whose relationship is radically transformed. Fanon sustains that violence is part of this bond from the beginning, continuing during their coexistence together, up until their final division.

The main aspect of decolonization is that unity is forged among colonized people. These human beings, who have lived colonialism together, who have endured denigration and oppression, who have been manipulated by the white man’s superiority, find out to have a common cause: to free themselves from the burden of slavery. Individual interest disappears and space is left for cohesion, fraternity and union on a national and racial basis: “The interest of one will be the interest of all, for in concrete fact *everyone* will be discovered by the troops, *everyone* will be massacred — or *everyone* will be saved” (Fanon 2001: 37). The fight against colonialism becomes a struggle of the group who learns to mould a new form of national conscience. The settler, the main representative of colonization, is the opponent force, the enemy that must be destroyed.

Under these circumstances, how does the decolonizing process spring into action? Fanon observes:

The uprising of the new nation and the breaking down of colonial structures are the result of two causes: either of the violent struggle of the people in their own right, or of action on the part of surrounding colonized peoples which act as a brake on the colonial regime in question. (Fanon 2001: 55)

Thus, decolonization may emerge from two factors. On the one hand, decolonization may be a revolutionary action, which spreads among the natives like a wildfire. They launch a mass appeal on a national level to rebel against colonialism in order to obtain their rights again. On the other hand, it may happen that colonized peoples share the same intents with other neighbouring realities. The decolonizing course in one country may unfold in other countries too; Fanon affirms: “It discovers that violence is in the atmosphere, that it here and there bursts out, and here and there sweeps away the colonial regime” (Fanon 2001: 55). In the course of revolutionary fervour, the history of resistance plays a major role for the masses. The great figures of the past are pivotal in providing the example for colonized people to take action.

According to Fanon, real revolutions are brought in the colonial world by the figure of the peasant, whose freedom requires the use of legitimate violence. He notes: “The starving peasant, outside the class system, is the first among the exploited to discover that only violence pays . . . the exploited man sees that his liberation implies the use of all means, and that of force first and foremost” (Fanon 2001: 47). Fanon provides the instance of the Algerian movement *Front de Libération Nationale*, which stated that “colonialism only loosens its hold when the knife is at its throat” (Fanon 2001: 48). As Perinbam points out, the peasants’ revolutionary action may depend on “stress-producing circumstances” (Perinbam 1973: 430): “Fanon also knew that, when under stress or provocation, peasants had ‘propensities toward waves of uncontrollable rage’ . . . possessing ‘bloodthirsty instincts’, they were capable of brutality” (Perinbam 1973: 430). A bond is established between violence and inhuman conditions, which prompt the peasantry to react against such a situation. Through their speeches, political parties may contribute to enflame the masses. However, some of them may also ask for calm behaviour rather than for aggressive insurgency.

Consequently, the decolonizing process requires first of all the building of a national awareness. In this situation, the settler becomes alarmed since his power is put into question. Even when he tries to take some



measures against what is happening, the colonized people do not draw back; conversely, they are so enraged that they become more ferocious. They want to break the colonial chains. In fact, they arrive to the conclusion that only violence can help them. Fanon notes: “It is because violence (and this is the disgraceful thing) may constitute, in so far as it forms part of its system, the slogan of a political party. The leaders may call on the people to enter upon an armed struggle” (Fanon 2001: 58). The group is often guided by some figureheads whose function is to unify the masses. Their goal is directed against the military forces of the colonial power and this struggle involves the use of weapons. Force, the means used by the settler against the native, is now used by the former colonized individual. According to Fanon: “The violence of the colonial regime and the counter-violence of the native balance each other and respond to each other in an extraordinary reciprocal homogeneity” (Fanon 2001: 69). Even if insurgent masses know that they do not possess all the advanced military devices that the white power has, they do not fear to go on with their struggle.

It might be argued that the decolonization’s process is characterised by two main phases. The first phase corresponds to the natives’ subversive action, during which the practice of violence consolidate people’s fraternal bond. If they will succeed in achieving freedom, there will be the birth of a new free nation. Once that liberty is obtained, independence is realized and the second phase might begin. This second stage corresponds to the building-up of the new nation. Fanon suggests: “During the colonial period the people are called upon to fight against oppression; after national liberation, they are called upon to fight against poverty, illiteracy and underdevelopment. The struggle . . . goes on. The people realize that life is an unending contest” (Fanon 2001: 74). It may be suggested that independence appears to be the most significant fulfilment that the native population is able to earn. However, this shift of power implies that the same people, who have been subordinate to the white supremacy, have the duty to rule over the country. This implies the dealing with major issues such as penury, illiteracy and economic upheaval.

As far as the economy is concerned, the African independent states had to cope with the competition between capitalism and socialism and, especially, with the fear of their economic distance from other developed countries. When talking about the European advanced condition, Fanon shows his disdain: “This European opulence is literally scandalous, for it has been founded on slavery, it has been nourished with the blood of slaves and it comes directly from the soil and from the subsoil of that underdeveloped world” (Fanon 2001: 76). According to him, European countries have deprived African regions of all their riches and resources. Even though decolonization brought the beginning of a new era, the new independent countries had to proceed with their struggle to change their underdeveloped conditions. After having adopted violence to obtain liberty and dignity again, the free nations had also to think about a new strategy to cope with all the issues originated by the oppressive supremacist white power.

#### **4. Violence in South African history**

Why is it that in this day and age, human beings still butcher one another simply because they dared to belong to different religions, to speak different tongues, or belong to different races?

Are human beings inherently evil?

What infuses individuals with the ego and ambition to so clamour for power that genocide assumes the mantle of means that justify coveted ends? (Mandela 1994 Peace Lecture of the WCRP)<sup>16</sup>

From the beginning of colonialism until the end of apartheid, violence has been a crucial component of South Africa. Whether one considers colonial role, racial discrimination or liberation-struggle movements, I believe that it is extremely important to describe the function that violence has always had in South African history. What I aim to point out is that violent actions have

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<sup>16</sup> “Response by President Nelson Mandela to the 1994 Peace Lecture of the WCRP (South African Chapter) 7 August 1994” from South African History Online, <http://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/response-president-nelson-mandela-1994-peace-lecture-wcrp-south-african-chapter-7-august-1994>. Accessed 3 September 2018.

been perpetrated not only by what we may call the “antagonists”, the colonizers, the tyrants or the political leaders who have led the country to oppression and subjugation. South Africans, who may be described as the “good people”, have fought to have their country back too. In his speech, Mandela attempts to analyse human beings’ nature, which is influenced by good and bad propensities. He asks himself what lead human beings to slaughter one another simply because of their race, religion or language. He observes that men and women are composed by bad and good leanings, which they must control. A fair and harmonious society will be built only if the choice will be on manhood’s good side. As a result, it could be argued that throughout the history of South Africa, many human beings decided to choose the wrong path, their evil side, from which indescribable violence originated and spread for centuries. Usually, when one thinks about South Africa, there is the tendency to focus the attention on the apartheid period. However, even if this process has been extremely crucial for the country, one should first asks himself: “When did violence brew in South Africa?”

The aim of this section is to analyse South Africa and its relation to violence through four main historical stages. In the first place, the arrival of the first colonizers will be explored in order to understand colonialism’s influence in what will be the future events of the nation. Secondly, the first steps towards what will be called “apartheid” will be taken into consideration; my purpose is to observe what South African people have endured due to the promulgation of the first racial laws. Equally significant it will be the focus on apartheid and the anti-apartheid struggle in the third section, from which it will be recognized the bond between this phenomenon and the colonial epoch. The fourth section will furnish a final reflection on the post-apartheid period. To conclude, the understanding of South African history will be pivotal for fully comprehending the subsequent chapters based on J. M. Coetzee’s novels *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Disgrace*.

#### **4.1. The origins of violence in South Africa: the roots of colonialism**

Before going into the depths of South Africa, it should be observed that this section will not adopt a white-supremacist historical point of view. The aim will be that of providing an objective analysis of South African history, which is mainly based on Lorenzo Ruggiero's work *Lager Sudafrica* and Omer-Cooper's *History of Southern Africa*. It will be attempted to bring the attention on South African reality, restoring the truth about all the fundamental events that this country has experienced from the seventeenth century onwards.

The different point of views about the first settlers of South Africa should be taken into account. On the one hand, the Western historiography has always asserted that both white and African people arrived in South Africa in the middle of the seventeenth century. Nevertheless, as Ruggiero points out, at the end of the 1950s, a group of anthropologists found out fragments of bones, which belonged to Bantu-speaking peoples, in the northern part of the former Transvaal province (Ruggiero 1989: 14). The discovery underlines that the first inhabitants of South Africa were South African human beings, who made their appearance 1300 years before the arrival of Western dominators. As a result, from that moment onwards, Western societies have appropriated the country's territories, which should have always belonged to South African populations from the very beginning.

In the first place, the first experience of violence in the South African territory can be attributable to the Portuguese colonizers. In fact, around the 1550s, they launched the slave trade, the activity of buying and selling African slaves, which lasted from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. The slave trade corresponds to the physical removal of African populations from their natal lands. Moreover, its function is that of destroying the ethnical identity of African peoples through violence, terror and, in the worst case, genocide. The slave trade developed through a cunning strategy: not only were conflicts fuelled among the various ethnic groups with the result that war prisoners were sold to the governor; also, native populations were totally subjugated by force.

In 1652, the Dutch, guided by Jan van Riebeeck, arrived in the Cape of Good Hope. Soon, a group of Dutch farmers asked the Dutch East India Company the authorisation to move towards the Eastern part of the country, the valley in the Berg, completely ignoring that the territory had already been occupied by the Khoi and San peoples; this white Dutch ethnic group represented the Boers. The term “boer”, whose meaning is farmer, derives from the Dutch; the Boers present-day descendants are the Afrikaners. The Boer became a mythological figure, usually represented with the rifle and the Bible in his hands. According to the Boer religious creed, this group was predestined to conquer South African territories and had the right to subjugate entire populations in the name of its faith. Farming became the Boers’ main activity and the Cape one of the major points from which Western ships (mainly Dutch, German and French) were refilled with local products. When the Edict of Fontainebleau, also known as the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, was issued by Louis XIV of France in 1685, many Huguenots arrived to the Cape: their arrival became fundamental in building the roots of the Afrikaner religion. At the end of the century, Western colonizers appeared as well established in the Cape.

The beginning of the eighteenth century was characterised by a new historical phase, whose main protagonists were the Trekboers, the Boers’ direct descendants. However, whereas the Boers had a stable position in the Cape as farmers, the Trekboers’ main activity was represented by nomadic pastoralism. They were encouraged in living a nomadic lifestyle by an economic reason: according to them, the meat’s trade was more remunerative than the wheat’s trade. In this period, not only did hostilities begin to arise between the Trekboers and the Dutch East India Company, but also the contrast between the Trekboers and the native South African populations sharpened. Moreover, the idea of an independent national entity originated among the Boers. It should be noted that throughout the years the original group of Dutch settlers had been including also French and German colonizers, whose main wish was the preservation of their position in the South African state. At the end of the eighteenth century, the Trekboers

exercised a prominent role in the Cape's government. At the same time, in 1795, after having attempted a first mission against the Dutch Cape Colony, the British victoriously docked at Simon's Bay. In contrast with all expectations, the Boers were content with the British presence: for them it was more convenient to deal with the British colonizers, rather than with the Dutch East India Company's strict rules. In addition, Governor McCartney, symbol of the British colonial power, was averse to the black South African populations, something that was in common with the Boers' hostile attitude towards the natives.

In the nineteenth century, from 1835 to 1837, one of the most important emblem for Afrikaner nationalism took place, the Great Trek. According to the *South African History Online* website (SAHO),<sup>17</sup> the Great Trek embodied a ferocious event to the detriment of South African natives:

The Great Trek was a landmark in an era of expansionism and bloodshed, of land seizure and labour coercion. Taking the form of a mass migration into the interior of southern Africa, this was a search by dissatisfied Dutch-speaking colonists for a promised land where they would be 'free and independent people' in a 'free and independent state'. ("Great Trek 1835-1846" in SAHO)<sup>18</sup>

At this point, the protagonists of South African history were mainly three: the Boers, the British and the South African people. The Boers were beginning to harbour a grudge against the British since they wanted to control the South African lands independently from British power. As a result, they decided to travel by wagon, migrating from the Cape Colony into the interior territories of South Africa, areas which were still untouched by the colonial process. Between 1830 and 1832, the first colonizers directed towards the

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<sup>17</sup> The website *South African History Online* (SAHO) will be referred to as SAHO throughout the text.

<sup>18</sup> "Great Trek 1835-1846" from *South African History Online*, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/great-trek-1835-1846>. Accessed 5 June 2018.

Orange River. During this phase, three main migratory waves occurred: the first, guided by Kruger, directed towards the Orange River; the second migratory wave, led by Trichardt, headed towards the Transvaal region. The last migratory wave, whose commander was Retief, went towards the Natal province. Although their official target was the Promised Land, this mass exodus highlighted the Boers' colonial avidity, whose main aim was to succeed in controlling all South African natural resources. As a matter of fact, the Great Trek, far from being a pacific phenomenon, involved dire consequences for the South African populations; the Boers caused havoc and death, violating the lives of numerous ethnic groups in the name of their Afrikaner identity.

It is meaningful to understand the significant difference between the Boers and the South African natives' conception of the territory. As far as South African peoples are concerned, their main belief was that the land and its natural products were the tribe's collective possession; the land was not conceived as a private property. South African people did not want to perpetrate an intensely exploitation of the land; rather, they were administrators of a natural heritage that they did not want to damage. From the land, they wanted to extract the necessary products for the tribe's benefit. Their leader's function was to safeguard the tribe's collective resources. Conversely, the Boers, in furnishing the example of a superior advanced civilisation, whose function was to save the underdeveloped ethnic tribes, pointed at the exploitation of South African resources in order to gain economic advantages.

The year 1838 designated an important step in Afrikaner memory. In fact, this date symbolises the Battle of Blood River, a battle fought between the Zulus, whose leader was the King Dingane, and the Boers, headed first by Piet Retief, then substituted by Andries Pretorius. The battle was fought near the Ncome River (KwaZulu Natal). One of the most widespread myth on this battle recounts that on 9 December 1838, Andries Pretorius gathered together the Boers' army and asked God to help them to defeat the loathed Zulus. On 16 December 1838, the Boers obtained their victory on the Ncome

River: “More than 3000 Zulu casualties were counted around the laager. Only, three Voortrekkers (including Voortrekker leader Pretorius) were wounded, none were killed. The Ncome River became red with the blood of the slain. Hence the river became known as “Blood River”” (“The Battle of Blood River” in *SAHO*)<sup>19</sup>. Again, the South African natives were victims of the white colonial force, whose power was strengthened by their well-equipped military coercion. It is interesting to observe that the future Boer Republics’ cornerstones were mainly four: political ambition, militarism, fideistic religion and extreme anti-African racism. The combination of these factors will be fatal for the future of South Africa.

In 1856, the Cape Colony, governed by the British administration, promulgated the Master and Servant Act, a law stemmed from the white superior logic of power. The act controlled the working relationship between the white and the black people from 1856 until 1972. Whereas the whites became the Colony’s absolute masters, the South African people were destined to slavery. Independently from their racial belonging, the law established that South African people were subordinate human beings, who should suffer subhuman conditions both in their working and daily life. The path towards racial segregation had just begun.

#### **4.2. The dawn of racial segregation**

The aim of this section is to focus on the historical phase, which lasted from the nineteenth century’s final period to the Second World War, in order to fully comprehend the mechanisms of inferiority that the white colonists instilled in the minds of South African populations. Thus, the purpose will be that of stressing the psychological violent events that characterise this phase of South African history. Apartheid could never be understood without a good knowledge of what happened in these decades.

At the end of the 1860s, a crucial event occurred in South Africa, something which will deeply affect the lives of South African people: the

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<sup>19</sup> “The Battle of Blood River” from *South African History Online*, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/dated-event/battle-blood-river>. Accessed 5 June 2018.



discovery of diamonds. The first diamond deposit was found in 1867 in the Griqualand West zone. Two years later, a second diamond deposit was discovered in the volcanic areas of Colesberg Kopie, which were also called New Rush. Up until this moment, the principal activities conducted in the territory were mainly related to agriculture, trade, and copper and coal mining. Nevertheless, after the news concerning diamonds spread, a multitude of explorers soon reached the area. Cecil Rhodes was one of the epoch's main protagonists. His role was fundamental for the development of the mining revolution that would catalyse the economic, social and political progress of the South African regions. Despite his significant influence in the country's economy, this man had a strong imperialist vision, permeated by racist ideologies and contempt for the African people.

In the 1880s, gold deposits were discovered in South Africa. Consequently, cheap wage labour became decisive for the mining sector and the secondary industry. After diamonds and gold were found, the compound system emerged, a phenomenon that can be viewed as the apartheid system's precursor. The compounds were "institutionalised forms of labour control . . . [in which] exploitative relations now assumed the same racial form as that which already existed in the rural areas" ("Grade 8 – Term 2: The Mineral Revolution in South Africa" in *SAHO*)<sup>20</sup>. Up until now, the history of South Africa had always been characterised by strong racist ideologies. It should be remembered that black people were not allowed to search for diamonds or gold since they were discriminated because of their skin colour. The only chance they had to approach the mining system was to become slaves, working for the white explorers. Due to the black low-cost labour force, the white labourers that worked in the mining system considered the black presence a threat for their working position. Black and white people were assigned to different tasks and their wages and working spaces were established according to their skin colour. The compound system, founded

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<sup>20</sup> "Grade 8 – Term 2: The Mineral Revolution in South Africa" from *South African History Online*, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/grade-8-term-2-mineral-revolution-south-africa>. Accessed 6 June 2018.

on the most ferocious anti-African racist ideologies, distinguished itself for inhuman working conditions, low salaries, a rigid tribal division and a working paramilitary structure, which rendered the South African natives' lives a nightmare. In 1893, a further proof of the exacerbating discriminatory attitudes in South Africa was established by the first racial law in the Transvaal Republic, which imposed racial discrimination based on skin colour.

Furthermore, this historical period saw the escalation of the hostilities between the British and the Boers, what would lead to the First Anglo-Boer War. On the one hand, the Boers openly refused the British control over the South African territories, especially the Transvaal region. On the other hand, the British power did not want to lose both its political hegemony but also the benefits deriving from the mining activity. In 1875, Stephanus Jacob du Toit founded the alliance of true Afrikaner, whose aim was that of organizing against the British colonizers. In 1877, the British minister Lord Carnarvon decided to annex the Transvaal into the British Colony. This choice affected the Zulu populations, altering their precarious equilibrium in the region. As a result, they attempted to react against the British presence but they were soon defeated. The Boers' first answer to the British conquer was the creation of the Afrikaner Bond in 1880:

The Bond was launched as a reaction to the alienation of Afrikaners by the English rulers, and first emerged as a force to promote Afrikaner economic, political and cultural interests, especially the interests of Afrikaner farmers in the Cape. The Bond also wanted to forge country-wide Afrikaner unity, and although it emerged in the Cape Colony, it sought to unite Afrikaners in the four 'states': the English colonies of the Cape and Natal, and the two republics, the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. ("The Afrikaner Bond" in *SAHO*)<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> "The Afrikaner Bond" from *South African History Online*, <http://www.sahistory.org.za/article/afrikaner-bond>. Accessed 7 June 2018.

On 16 December 1880, in the Battle of Blood River's anniversary, the Boers' army, guided by Kruger, Pretorius and Joubert, won against the British force, an event which resulted in the Transvaal's independence from the British Colony.

Notwithstanding the British loss in this first conflict, the British government still dreamed to unify South Africa under its rule. In fact, the aversion between the two main opponents did not stop and, after the 1890, the tension between them worsened. As far as the Boers are concerned, they were mostly worried for the *uitlanders*' presence in the Transvaal region: *uitlander* was the name given to foreign migrant workers, who came to the Transvaal region during the Witwatersrand Gold Rush to work for the mining activity; in this area, gold was discovered in 1886. The Boers were suspicious of the uitlanders' dubious intentions and they were right; the foreign workers attempted a rebellion in accordance with the British government, which subsequently failed, in the Transvaal. Under these circumstances, the tension between the two opposing factions exacerbated. Kruger, the Boers' leader, incited a rebellious action against the British government, which had severe consequences for the British opponents. On the one hand, Cecil Rhodes resigned from the Prime Minister's position; on the other hand, the Cape Colony, which was under the British rule until that moment, fell to the Afrikaner's control. It is interesting to remember that the Afrikaner's first legislative measure was the proposal of the colour bar, the exclusion of black workers from skilled jobs and their seclusion to slavery. In this same period, the Afrikaner's force was also able to conquer the Orange Free State. However, a supplementary obstacle was put in the Afrikaner's pathway. After Cecil Rhodes' withdrawal, the new British colonial administrator Milner, who decided to strongly intensify the British military force, substituted him: his aim was to take control of the Transvaal region. The Boers, consequently, worried about such reinforcement, proposed to cede the South African mines to the British power. Despite Sir Milner's acceptance of the offer, the British government laid claim to the Transvaal. As a result, the

Boers declared war to the British army and the Second Anglo-Boer War began.

According to Gilliomee and Mbenga (2007), this “South African War . . . remains the most terrible and destructive modern armed conflict in South Africa’s history. It was an event that in many ways shaped the history of 20th Century South Africa. The end of the war marked the end of the long process of British conquest of South African societies, both Black and White” (“Grade 10 – The South African War and Union” in *SAHO*)<sup>22</sup>. The Second Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) represents a pivotal event in the country’s history, which enables the understanding of the current South African economic and political structure. It symbolised the conflict of interest between the mines’ owners, who belonged to the British imperialist economy, and the Boers’ classes, which controlled the Transvaal province. The clash was between the British modern industrial structure and the underdeveloped economic scheme of the Boers’ republics. In the Second Anglo-Boer War, the British power prevailed over the Boers thanks to its military force. This war appears to be one of the most known conflict in the African territory because of its virulence but also because it was fought between two white antagonist opponents in what should have been a black territory. The war’s outcome was significant. First, the union between the Transvaal and the Orange Free State was defined by the British administration. Secondly, the British government decentralised the provinces’ administration and this enabled the Boers to have a form of self-government. The war was considered by the international audience as an unfair conflict. Overall, even though the British people had won, the chance of both the Boers and the South African people’s revolt could not be excluded: the future of South Africa was still precarious.

While the country was still coping with the war’s effects, in 1910 the Union of South Africa was constituted, the unification of the four principal

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<sup>22</sup> “Grade 10 – The South African War and Union” from *South African History Online*, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/grade-10-south-african-war-and-union>. Accessed 7 June 2018.

British colonies: the Cape, Natal, Transvaal and the Orange River colonies. South African society was changing: the political administration belonged now to the white minority and the economic structure became mainly industrial and urbanised rather than agricultural; however, both the white farmers and mine owners' interests had to be preserved. Even though the four colonies were for the first time under a common flag, the South African Union could not be conceived as a national entity. Significant divisions were present among the white dominant classes. In particular, the split was visible between the English-speakers, whose majority owned the mines' industry, and the Afrikaans-speakers, the white Afrikaner farming population. Omer-Cooper states: "As the economy changed a complex pattern resulted from the interweaving of rivalries between the two white language groups and the conflicts of interests between the different classes in white society" (Omer-Cooper 1994: 158).

The African National Party became the first Union government. It was led by Louis Botha and Jan Smuts as his deputy. The party aimed to represent the interests of the white people, English-speakers and Afrikaners, totally excluding all the South African, coloured and Indian people that numerically prevailed over the white supremacist minority. One of its main cornerstones was the extension of the colour bar, thanks to which racial segregation was severely sharpened. South African people began to realize that the only way to assert their rights was the creation of a unifying confederation, which could overcome all the ethnic divisions. According to them, the tribal differences had enabled the white power to subjugate them. As a result, the South African Native National Congress (SANNC), later re-named African National Congress (ANC), was founded in 1912 thanks to the action of some South African leaders like Pixley Ka Izaka Seme. Influenced by black American activists such as Booker T. Washington or by the ideas of W.E.B. Du Bois, the SANNC was the first nationwide African nationalist movement, which conceived for the first time the concept of a new African nation free from the white presence.

The years between 1911 and 1913 saw the beginning of the most ferocious segregationist laws, which would deeply affect the future of South Africa. It is necessary to present the most important laws in order to grasp the grave alterations that non-white people went through. In the first place, the Native Labour Regulation Act of 1911, an extension of the Master and Servants Act of 1856, made it a criminal offense for South Africans to break a labour contract; of course, this condition was not applied to white people. The Mines and Works Act of 1911 established white people's privilege to monopolize skilled jobs; in contrast with this, black workers were restricted to semi-skilled and unskilled labour in the mines. According to Omer-Cooper, the Natives Land Act of 1913 symbolised the most extreme political measure: "The legislation marked the permanent division of South Africa into areas of exclusive white or black land ownership and the total rejection of the ideal of a common society as the final goal of social development in South Africa" (Omer-Cooper 1994: 163). In addition, "the 1913 Land Act made it illegal for Africans to purchase or lease land from Europeans anywhere in South Africa outside the reserves. It also specifically prohibited the practice of farming 'on the halves' in the Orange Free State" (Omer-Cooper 1994: 163). The Immigration Act was the logic consequence of the 1913 Land Act since it prevented African, coloured and Indian people from living in the white cities, relegating the non-whites to the towns' outskirts. With this in mind, one may only deduce the difficulty of living in such degrading conditions, the psychological violence that South Africans had to endure. The white government's purpose was the exclusion of non-white people from progress, the creation of a capitalistic society in which only the British and Afrikaner élites were allowed to benefit from the new developing system. In answer to the white power, in 1918 the Industrial and Commercial Worker's Union (ICU) was founded. It was the first black trade union, which regarded the black workers as the starting point for the origination of a black liberation movement to emancipate Africans from the white oppressors.

After the First World War, the legal foundations for racial segregation were created. In 1923 the Natives Urban Areas Act was promulgated; as

Omer-Cooper notes: “[It] laid down the principle of residential segregation in urban areas and reinforced the doctrine that Africans had no permanent rights in the towns and no justification in being there unless needed by the whites as units of labour” (Omer-Cooper 1994: 169). The 1926 Natives Land Bill, which slightly modified the 1913 Natives Land Act, “aimed at destroying the African franchise in the Cape” (Omer-Cooper 1994: 172). These two pieces of legislation were the inter-war period’s most important pillars, which sharpened the segregationist approach in the South African territory.

As far as Afrikaner nationalism is concerned, the Broederbond, a movement of Afrikaner theologians and academics preoccupied with the questions of Afrikaner language and culture, became more popular in these years, providing the premise for the future apartheid. The movement founded the FAK (Federation of Afrikaans Cultural Associations) in 1929, which “[gave] direction to Afrikaner cultural organisations and [acted] as a public front for the Broederbond” (Omer-Cooper 1994: 174).

In 1934, a significant event for the country’s political future occurred, the fusion between Hertzog’s National Party and Smuts’ South African Party. This new coalition government was known as the United Party. However, a group of Afrikaner extremists, which belonged to the former National Party, rejected the United Party’s alliance since they bitterly opposed the blend between Afrikaner people and English-speakers. As a result, they founded the Purified National Party under the leadership of D. F. Malan, gaining the support of the Broederbond too; in particular, the Cape Purified Party leaders and the Broederbond soon came together. Omer-Cooper observes:

Their membership of the organisation led to the formulation of a new strategy. This involved using Afrikaner language and culture and the emotional appeal of history to strengthen the hands of the Afrikaner community and to channel the savings of Afrikaner farmers, professionals and workers into the creation of Afrikaner banks, finance companies and other businesses. (Omer-Cooper 1994: 177)

Not only were Afrikaner leaders interested in Afrikaner culture and education. In addition, since they wanted to be linguistically, culturally and economically detached from foreign power, South Africa's economy played a major role too. It was during the Second World War that the country faced a self-sustaining growth, transforming itself from a mining economy into a manufacturing one, becoming always more independent.

In 1943, the word "apartheid" appeared for the first time. Consequently, how did South African people react against Afrikaner supremacy? In 1944 the African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL) was founded, composed by figures such as Anton Lambede, Nelson Mandela, Ashby Mda, Walter Sisulu and Oliver Tambo. Its aim was to encourage young people to rise against the oppressive Afrikaner regime. The ANCYL represented a first step towards a fundamental anti-segregationist struggle that would be pivotal during the apartheid era. Furthermore, after the war's end, the African continent saw the decolonization's process, which symbolised for many countries the independence from colonial hegemony. In this same period, South Africa experienced the most dramatic process of its time: apartheid.

#### **4.3.       Apartheid, blend of psychological and physical violence**

Before the 1948 election, the National Party focused its attention on the theme of race, transforming the apartheid notion (from the Afrikaans "apartness") into a political plan. As Omer-Cooper explains:

Apartheid theory owed much to the theological tradition of the Dutch Reformed churches which had contributed to the ideals of Afrikaner nationalism developed by the Broederbond and its affiliated bodies. It was also influenced by the pseudo-scientific racism which was widespread in the inter-war period and had formed much of the basis of German Nazism. According to apartheid doctrine each race and nation has its own distinct



cultural identity and has been created to fulfil a unique destiny laid down by God. (Omer-Cooper 1994: 190)

In 1948, the choice for the introduction of apartheid was made. The National Party and the Broederbond's leaders won the election and Malan assumed the role of Prime Minister from 1948 to 1954. As a result, South African society was reorganised in line with Afrikaner ideals. The National Party led to the emergence of the apartheid's doctrine. It aimed at a different development for each racial group. Racial purity's preservation, fear of racial mixture and a separate territory for each race were the basic principles of this concept. As the *SAHO* website suggests: "On paper it appeared to call for equal development and freedom of cultural expression, but the way it was implemented made this impossible. Apartheid made laws forced the different racial groups to live separately and develop separately, and grossly unequally too" ("A History of Apartheid" in *SAHO*)<sup>23</sup>. Apartheid penalized the majority of the population because of its skin colour, which was different from that of the white Afrikaner rulers. It should be observed that the main difference between apartheid and the former segregationist policy was that apartheid rendered segregation legal. Moreover, whereas the African continent was undergoing the process of decolonization, freeing the different countries from racist ideologies, South Africa was turning towards racial discrimination. Numerous were the laws built to fortify the apartheid system. Omer-Cooper points out: "Segregation was to be systematized as never before and applied rigidly and dogmatically in accordance with the theory of apartheid" (Omer-Cooper 1994: 193).

In order to offer a clear analysis, Omer-Cooper divides the apartheid era into three main historical phases: the first, called "*baaskap* or classical apartheid", lasted from 1948 to 1961 and put the National Party's ideals into laws. The second phase, called "separate development", lasted more or less until the 1974: in this phase, South Africa was affected by significant

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<sup>23</sup> "A History of Apartheid" from *South African History Online*, <http://www.sahistory.org.za/article/history-apartheid-south-africa>. Accessed 7 June 2018.

economic changes, particularly because of the influence of decolonization. The last phase, called “multiracial co-option”, was characterized by important political changes; in 1984 a new multiracial constitution was introduced.

### ***The baaskap apartheid***

During this first period, the South African government was led by three men: D.F. Malan, J.G. Strydom and Dr Hendrik Verwoerd, “the main architect of the system of *baaskap* apartheid” (Omer-Cooper 1994: 195). As far as the legal framework of apartheid is concerned, between 1948 and 1951, the first piece of legislation was promulgated. The apartheid laws affected every aspect of South African life, from the private to the working condition. The 1949 Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act prohibited the marriage between human beings that belonged to different races. The 1950 Immorality Act forbade adultery or immoral acts between white and black people. The 1950 Population Registration Act classified every South African person into a specific racial group: the white race, the black race, and the coloured race. The 1950 Group Areas Act led to the physical separation of South African people that belonged to distinct racial groups. People who lived in the wrong areas were physically removed and banished to their right district. The 1950 Suppression of Communism Act consisted in communism’s outlaw. It should be pointed out that many South African people were considered communists even if they did not belong to any political branch. In fact, communism was the pretext used by Afrikaner rulers to attack the apartheid’s dissidents. The 1951 Bantu Authorities Act was founded on the idea of separate development, whereby black Africans left their urban spaces in order to settle in new ethnic areas called “homelands”, which were provided by the Afrikaner regime. Even though the homelands had an independent status, their chiefs were subordinated to the central government. The homelands’ inhabitants did not possess neither the South African citizenship nor political rights. Therefore, they should show passports to enter in the South African

territory. The 1951 Prevention of Illegal Squatting Act prohibited squatting communities; it harshly controlled black people's movement.

The following years other segregationist laws were officially announced. The 1952 Natives (Abolition of Passes and Coordination of Documents) Act "prescribed the introduction of the reference book bearing photographs, details of place of origin, employment record, tax payments, fingerprints and encounters with the police. Africans were expected to carry passes with them wherever they went" ("Segregationist Legislation Timeline 1950-1959" in *SAHO*)<sup>24</sup>. This law affected both women and men. The 1953 Bantu Education Act aimed to establish a separate educational system; Omer-Cooper states: "The purpose of the legislation . . . was to prevent Africans being given an education which would lead them to aspire to positions which they would not be allowed to hold in white society" (Omer-Cooper 1994: 201). Africans, who were taught in their tribal language, had the chance to be educated only to develop the necessary skills to perform their duties and to serve white people's requirements. Both Afrikaans and English became compulsory languages in the higher primary schools. The Afrikaner government worked towards the foundation of an unequal system, where all Africans were treated like inferior groups, originating an intense inferiority complex from their childhood onwards. The 1953 Reservation of Separate Amenities Act declared that separate amenities (parks, toilets, beaches, ambulances . . .) for different racial groups must exist. The 1953 Natives Labour Settlement of Dispute Act wanted to control African labour since it delimited the chances for non-white people to access skilled jobs and it did not give legal recognition to the African trade unions: strikes were prohibited. The 1953 Public Safety Act "granted the British governor general authority to set aside all laws and declare a state of emergency"

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<sup>24</sup> "Segregationist Legislation Timeline 1950-1959" from *South African History Online*, [https://www.sahistory.org.za/jquery\\_ajax\\_load/get/topic/segregationist-legislation-timeline-1950-1959](https://www.sahistory.org.za/jquery_ajax_load/get/topic/segregationist-legislation-timeline-1950-1959). Accessed 8 June 2018.

(“Segregationist Legislation Timeline 1950-1959” in *SAHO*)<sup>25</sup>. Thus, any person could be detained for reasons of public safety, even without a legal trial. This act distributed totalitarian powers to the Afrikaner government, which was entitled to perpetrate the most brutal and bloodiest anti-apartheid repression. All things considered, the above laws provide a restricted number of the apartheid’s legislation. What is clear, however, is that the country’s economic progress could benefit only the white population; South African, Indian and coloured people, conversely, continued to live in a state of denigration and penury.

In order to oppose the suffering and violence of the apartheid’s system, a growing political consciousness began to mould among the non-white peoples. In 1949, the ANC, with the support of the ANC Youth League, saw the formation of a new leadership: Walter Sisulu became General Secretary and Dr J.S. Moroka was elected in place of Dr A.B. Xuma. During the period 1950-52, a programme of mass action, which involved boycotts, strikes, civil disobedience was organised by the African people. These years culminated in the Defiance Campaign in 1952, “the largest scale non-violent resistance ever seen in South Africa and the first campaign pursued jointly by all racial groups under the leadership of the ANC and the South African Indian Congress (SAIC)” (“Defiance Campaign 1952” in *SAHO*)<sup>26</sup>. This campaign aroused African consciousness at an unprecedented level. Nevertheless, the Afrikaner government was determined to subdue the peaceful revolt with extreme violent acts: rioting people were fined, imprisoned or, even worst, killed. After the event, the black movement suffered from the Afrikaner repression and Dr Moroka was replaced by Albert Luthuli. Then, a new initiative to define the future of South Africa took place: the Congress of the People, a conglomeration of all non-white

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<sup>25</sup> “Segregationist Legislation Timeline 1950-1959” from *South African History Online*, [https://www.sahistory.org.za/jquery\\_ajax\\_load/get/topic/segregationist-legislation-timeline-1950-1959](https://www.sahistory.org.za/jquery_ajax_load/get/topic/segregationist-legislation-timeline-1950-1959). Accessed 8 June 2018.

<sup>26</sup> “Defiance Campaign 1952” from *South African History Online*, <http://www.sahistory.org.za/topic/defiance-campaign-1952>. Accessed 8 June 2018.

racess, met at Kliptown in 1955 and the Freedom Charter was planned. Omer-Cooper notes:

[The document] pronounced that South Africa belonged to all its inhabitants and called for a non-racial democracy, the removal of all discriminatory legislation, and equal opportunities in education and work for persons of all races. It also called for the nationalisation of the banks, mines and heavy industry and the redistribution of the land. (Omer-Cooper 1994: 207)

Again, the Afrikaner leadership answered with heavy penalties since all the race groups' leaders (156 people) were arrested and charged with treason. The year 1958 saw the birth of the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC), which "rejected co-operation with other race groups and was particularly opposed to radical socialist ideas held by some members of the ANC, its ultimate ideal, like that of the ANC, was a non-racial South Africa" (Omer-Cooper 1994: 208). The PAC, led by Robert Sobukwe, originated when some exponents left the ANC; its main intention was to free Africans from the white colonial supremacy, affirming the glory of the black population.

The African continent decolonisation's process contributed to bolster black consciousness and further encouraged the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. On March 1960, both the ANC and the PAC organized an anti-pass campaign:

At Sharpeville a large crowd gathered outside the police station . . . As the crowd milled around the station some of the police seemed to have fears that the fence was about to collapse. Suddenly they opened fire and as the unarmed crowd fled in panic the police continued to fire into it. Of the sixty-nine people killed most were shot in the back. In addition 180 people were wounded. (Omer-Cooper 1994: 209)

Despite the government's brutal reaction, Luthuli, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1960 for his fight against apartheid, "publicly burned his passbook and called for a national stay at home . . . in mourning for those

killed” (Omer-Cooper 1994: 209): 18.000 people were arrested; guns, tear gas, batons were used to calm the protest down. As a result, the government declared a state of emergency and both the ANC and the PAC were declared illegal through the Unlawful Organizations Act. In 1961, after a last attempt to persuade the government to change its attitude towards the black population, the Umkhonto we Sizwe (Spear of the Nation) was formed under the leadership of Nelson Mandela: it represented the ANC’s armed wing. Since peaceful and passive resistance were not working, the members decided to initiate an armed struggle against the Afrikaner power: violence would help them to achieve their goals on the condition that only things, not human beings, would be harmed. In the same year, South Africa became a republic (with an exclusively white government) and officially left the Commonwealth.

### *The separate development apartheid*

This second phase is characterized by significant changes, which were first initiated by Verwoerd. After his murder in 1966, he was succeeded by the former Minister of Justice J.B. Vorster, thanks to whom apartheid reached its absolute development.

In the first place, attention should be given to the new policy regarding the Bantustans, the 1959 Promotion of Bantu Self-Government Act, according to which “a new way of justifying the white monopoly of power in the economic heartland of South Africa was being prepared” (Omer-Cooper 1994: 212).

This Act announced the existence of eight African ethnic groups based on their linguistic and cultural diversity. Each group had a Commissioner-General as an official representative of the South African government. The Commissioner-General was assigned to develop a homeland for each group. Provision was made for the transfer of powers of self-government whereby

each ethnic group would govern itself independent of White intervention.  
 (“Segregationist Legislation Timeline 1950-1959” in *SAHO*)<sup>27</sup>

As a result, in becoming the Bantustans independent states, racial discrimination was justified on the concept that blacks were now citizens of separate states (South Africa had mainly eight ethnic groups) and Afrikaners had the right to exercise their power over their own country. Omer-Cooper suggests: “Instead of a system of increased segregation and discrimination, apartheid was to be presented as a system of internal decolonization” (Omer-Cooper 1994: 212). Racism was based on the idea of separate nationhood. The word “apartheid” was replaced with the notion of “separate development”, the non-white people’s territories became “African homelands” and the natives were called “Bantus” (Omer-Cooper 1994: 213). Even though in this same period some aspects of apartheid were relaxed, other restrictions were strengthened. According to Omer-Cooper, “the most cruel of these was the forced removal of huge numbers of Africans from the towns and white-owned rural areas to the ‘homelands’ which involved a disruption of African life on a scale far greater than anything which took place before 1960” (Omer-Cooper 1994: 216). The number of Africans that moved in this period was between one and three million people. Moreover, repressive measures were severely heightened: the accusations of sabotage and terrorism were introduced. The security police system was reinforced around the Bureau of State Security (BOSS), which introduced the practice of torture against political detainees. One of the consequences of the government’s increased power was the Rivonia Trial (1963-64), which acted against the whole South African resistance movement. At the trial’s conclusion, Mandela and seven other black leaders were charged of sabotage and sentenced to life imprisonment: as far as Mandela is concerned, he was

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<sup>27</sup> “Segregationist Legislation Timeline 1950-1959” from *South African History Online*, [https://www.sahistory.org.za/jquery\\_ajax\\_load/get/topic/segregationist-legislation-timeline-1950-1959](https://www.sahistory.org.za/jquery_ajax_load/get/topic/segregationist-legislation-timeline-1950-1959). Accessed 8 June 2018.

first held on Robben Island, then in the Polsmoor prison, outside Cape Town. At the Rivonia Trial Mandela declared:

During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die. (Mandela Rivonia Trial 20 April 1964)<sup>28</sup>

At the end of the 1960s, the National Party split into two main factions: “The hardliners, known as *verkrampes* (the cramped ones) and the more pragmatic and reformist *verligtes* (the enlightened ones) (Omer-Cooper 1994: 219). The *verkrampes*’ leader, Albert Hertzog, decided to break from the National Party in order to create the Herstigte Nasionale Party (the Restored National Party) to struggle against any alteration concerning the apartheid legislation. In these same years, a new generation of black political leaders, which sprang from the student world, forged a new African cultural conscience whose principal aim was to rescue the African history, culture and peculiarities that white domination had cancelled for over two centuries. Thus, the Black Consciousness movement, which was founded by the black leader Steve Biko, originated. In an interview recorded before his detention, Biko himself talked about the development of the Black Consciousness movement: “Black consciousness is a political cultural philosophy employed by Blacks in South Africa in an effort to shake off shackles of mental oppression and to reinstate the essential humanity and pride of Blacks” (Steve

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<sup>28</sup> “Mandela – In His Own Words” in *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/feb/11/nelsonmandela.southafrica>. Accessed 10 June 2018.



Biko)<sup>29</sup>. Together with Barney Pityana and Harry Nengwenkhulu, he launched the South African Students Organization (SASO), whose main purpose was to rewrite and tell the truth about black history, which from the dawn of South African colonialism had always been distorted by the white establishment. The Black Consciousness movement contrived also the formation of the Black People's Convention (BPC), a political organization generated in university campuses, which promoted actions against the apartheid system. This historical moment witnessed an escalation of violence at an unprecedented level.

### ***The multiracial co-option apartheid***

The years 1973-74 marked a transition from the separate-development apartheid to a new phase of multiracial co-option. The major issue was that the South African economy was changing. For the first time, the Afrikaner government realised that the industrial sector required skilled operations rather than unskilled labour but the number of white workers was not sufficient to pursue this goal. As a result, the white supremacy recognized the need to rely on African workers to perform skilled labour, a new form of dependency that had never existed before, in Omer-Cooper's words, "a need to build a new relationship with the black, Indian and Coloured work force which would involve a whole series of further policy changes" (Omer-Cooper 1994: 224).

Notwithstanding these decisive changes, South Africa had been harbouring anger and frustration for a long time. The consequences were particularly disastrous in the south west of Johannesburg, an area which was known as Soweto: on 16 June 1976, the Soweto uprising began. The revolt's origins could be traced back to the 1953 Bantu Education Act, whose key principle was based on the idea that Africans could only be inferior human beings, workers or slaves of the apartheid organization. However, in the

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<sup>29</sup> "Steve Biko speaks on The Black Consciousness Movement". You Tube, uploaded by terry McKean, 6 June 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AQR5-WjECGg>. Accessed 11 June 2018.

1970s students became increasingly aware of the unequal educational programme reserved to non-white people and, in June 1976, they began to massively demonstrate against the use of Afrikaans alongside English as a medium of instruction, a piece of legislation intended to establish a white cultural hegemony. On the 16<sup>th</sup> of June, a 10.000 student's peaceful massive demonstration took place and the Afrikaner security forces made use of extreme practices of violence to subdue the rebels. During the Soweto uprising large numbers of young black men were killed, hundreds were arrested or injured. Omer-Cooper points out: "The riots were far and away the largest outbreaks of racial violence that South Africa had ever seen . . . unlike earlier disturbances . . . the insurgents did not quickly yield even to the most drastic use of force . . . violence was always on the verge of bursting forth again" (Omer-Cooper 1994: 226). The Afrikaner authority's answer to the developing black guerrilla was ferocious repression linked with military action: the various black consciousness' movements were banned, the African newspapers were closed down and, worst of all, Steve Biko was killed. The inquest revealed that, after his imprisonment, "he had died of brain injuries received while in police custody and that before his death he had been kept naked and in chains for a prolonged period" (Omer-Cooper, 1994: 227). His murder represents how the blend of white power and violence worked in South Africa; in his song "Biko" dedicated to the black leader, Peter Gabriel sings:

The man is dead  
 When I try to sleep at night  
 I can only dream in red  
 The outside world is black and white  
 With only one colour dead. (Gabriel 1980 )<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Gabriel, Peter. (2013, September 12). *Biko*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=luVpsM3YAgw>. Accessed 11 June 2018.

Since the situation was dramatically declining, the Afrikaner government wanted to find a successful solution to prevent the spread of African rebellious actions. As a result, the army commander Magnus Malan proposed to combine military preparation and social reform to lead the country to a tolerable level of social coexistence between the white and black people. First, black hostility in urban areas had to be reduced: blacks were a permanent portion of the South African townships and they should have been entitled to perform higher skilled jobs. The new phase of multiracial co-option, however, entailed a negative outcome. Even though independence was granted to the Bantustans, these regions were completely abandoned by the Afrikaner government. According to Omer-Cooper, “while for those in steady employment in the urban areas conditions improved somewhat, for those based in or forced into the Bantustans the situation became even worse” (Omer-Cooper 1994: 230). Poverty-stricken conditions and malnutrition began to afflict these areas. In 1978, after Vorster’s unexpectedly resigned, Pieter Willem Botha became Prime Minister and Malan became Defence Minister. “Botha’s aims were the creation of a clean administration, law and order, constitutional reforms to include Coloureds and Indians (if only on paper), a gathering of South African states, and industrial decentralisation to improve the economic lot of the homelands” (“Pieter Willem Botha” in *SAHO*)<sup>31</sup>. Moreover, Botha aimed to cope with the increasing international criticism in relation to apartheid. It is interesting to underline that even though Botha could not tell this idea officially, he considered apartheid fruitless.

Even if some apartheid’s measures were slightly modified through Botha’s multiracial constitution, especially with regard to Indian and Coloured people, these efforts were not enough; humiliating conditions, discrimination and poverty were still part of the South African reality. Thus, the constitution’s introduction triggered an escalation of rebellious actions led by the anti-apartheid movement United Democratic Front (UDF) and the

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<sup>31</sup> “Pieter Willem Botha” from *South African History Online*, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/pieter-willem-botha>. Accessed 9 June 2018.

ANC to ask for radical changes. Omer-Cooper underlines that “demonstrations in the black townships, fuelled by economic hardship, growing unemployment and political desperation, soon exceeded the level of the 1976 Soweto uprising” (Omer-Cooper 1994: 237). It should be pointed out that the UDF, whose members were Blacks, Indians or Coloureds (some of them were Desmond Tutu and D. F. Hurley), was an anti-apartheid organization which was not linked to any ideological or political party. They demanded South Africa’s democratization and the end of apartheid. The ANC never tried to bond the UDF with politics; the UDF symbolised South African march towards freedom. On the one hand, the Afrikaner leadership began to comprehend that some changes had to be granted to the African population. On the other hand, Omer-Cooper states that “Botha’s military and intelligence advisors retained their faith in the ‘total strategy’ as originally propounded by Magnus Malan . . . the attempt to destroy the ANC’s power bases at home and in the ‘frontline states’ (Omer-Cooper 1994: 238). As a result, the South African regime answered to the increasing unrest launching an ideological campaign against terrorism, against all those people attempting to threaten the country’s stability. More power was conferred to the police forces to repress mass protests, to ban propagandist activities and to imprison South Africans (many individuals defined as “terrorists” were bound to communism). Many were the dissident voices who died in detention due to practices of violence and torture; Neil Agget, a trade union organiser, furnishes just one of the many examples of the persons who died because of torture. Another instance is Ruth First, a South African anti-apartheid activist who was exiled and then killed in Mozambique. Resistance to the Afrikaner regime could lead to death or exile. The 1988 Amnesty International report states:

Torture and ill-treatment of prisoners, particularly political detainees held without charge, remained common and widespread. There were persistent reports of detainees, including children, being beaten with *sjamboks* (rhinoceros-hide whips), hooded and subjected during interrogation to

electric shock torture or partial suffocation with plastic bags or rubber tubing pulled over the face, a method of torture which leaves no marks. Many detainees were held in prolonged solitary confinement and allegedly threatened with death or injury to themselves or their relatives and abused by security police interrogators. (Amnesty International 1988)<sup>32</sup>

During these years, one of the most important request to the Afrikaner power was Nelson Mandela's liberty: his detention corresponded to the imprisonment of all South African human beings. In consequence of the strenuous situation that South Africa was suffering, Botha showed himself inclined to free Mandela on the condition that the black leader would renounce to adopt any violent means. Mandela's response to Botha was read by his daughter Zindzi in Jabulani (Soweto):

I am surprised at the conditions that the government wants to impose on me. I am not a violent man. My colleagues and I wrote in 1952 to Malan asking for a round table conference to find a solution to the problems of our country, but that was ignored. When Strijdom was in power, we made the same offer. Again it was ignored. When Verwoerd was in power we asked for a national convention for all the people in South Africa to decide on their future. This, too, was in vain . . . It was only then, when all other forms of resistance were no longer open to us, that we turned to armed struggle. (Mandela 1985)<sup>33</sup>

After Mandela's reply, numerous were the revolts and the subsequent repressive measures that took place. South Africa's situation was out of control and a state of emergency began to be proposed on annual basis. Regardless of the country's turmoil, Botha made a last attempt to acquire

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<sup>32</sup> Amnesty International. 1988. *Amnesty International Report 1988*, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol10/0001/1988/en/>. Accessed 30 May 2018.

<sup>33</sup> "Statement by Nelson Mandela read on his behalf by his daughter Zinzi at a UDF rally to celebrate Archbishop Tutu receiving the Nobel Prize, Jabulani Stadium-Soweto", [http://www.mandela.gov.za/mandela\\_speeches/before/850210\\_udf.htm](http://www.mandela.gov.za/mandela_speeches/before/850210_udf.htm). Accessed 13 June 2018.

absolute power to strengthen the Afrikaner hierarchical structure: this decision confirmed Africans' suspicions that Botha would never end the apartheid system. Nevertheless, neither the state of emergency nor the Afrikaner bloody repression could stop the African population's fight for freedom.

1989 marked the beginning of a new era. Frederik Willem de Klerk became State President; despite his intention to maintain the apartheid's pillars, the international pressure to put an end to the Afrikaner regime was significant. Omer-Cooper notes:

On 2 February 1990, in a presidential address on the opening of Parliament, de Klerk astonished the nation and the world by announcing that Nelson Mandela was to be released, the ANC, the PAC, the SACP and the UDF unbanned, and that the government intended to enter into negotiations with a view to the development and introduction of a new constitution based on universal suffrage. (Omer-Cooper 1994: 242)

Even though this was just a theoretical statement, a step towards a better future for the South African people had been taken.

#### **4.4. A reflection on post-apartheid South Africa**

In 1990-1991, the traditional segregationist pillars of apartheid were demolished. The main issue became the establishment of a reliable political system in which all the different groups could cooperate for the country's stability. Thus, diverse political views depended on each other for the building of a new democratic and free nation. In particular, Mandela and the ANC had the responsibility to channel their supporters into disciplined loyal political enthusiasts. After the creation of the South African new constitution, in 1994 Mandela became the first President of South Africa, whereas the ANC's new Secretary General was Cyril Ramaphosa. One of the great merits of Mandela lies in the fact that he was able to preside over the post-apartheid transitional period, laying the grounds for a major future national stability.

South Africa was experiencing a new process of transformation. For the first time, not only should the different ethnic groups find their place in a new democratic society but the country should also understand its role at an international level. They should face a new reality, where human relations would not be conditioned by rigid rules anymore. These human beings, who have been forced for centuries to segregation, racism, harsh labour's conditions, and violence, were now free of the burden of white domination. In 1994, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), a court-like body, was assembled. Its aim was to give voice to all the apartheid's victims (and to the perpetrators of violence too). On 1998, the TRC's final report was presented to the President Nelson Mandela. The first volume offers a significant depiction of violence during apartheid: "Violence has been the single most determining factor in South African political history. The reference, however, is not simply to physical or overt violence - the violence of the gun - but also to the violence of the law or what is often referred to as institutional or structural violence" (TRC Final report 1998)<sup>34</sup>.

Despite its burdensome history, not only has South Africa been able to achieve an important international relevance, but the country appears also as a hegemonic power within the African continent; in 2010, South Africa became part of the BRICS, the five major emerging national economies' association along with Brazil, Russia, India and China (Flores d'Arcais 2012: 17). Moreover, the nation appears as economically stable and able to attract investors; the population has faith both in the political and juridical system, and the country entails a worldwide cultural recognition (De Michelis et al. 2012: 11).

However, in the post-apartheid phase, South Africa has been also characterised by a tough reality in which Tutu's "rainbow people of God" have had to cope with major issues such as unemployment, poverty, mismanagement of public services (education, healthcare), the AIDS plague,

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<sup>34</sup> "Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report", <http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/report/finalreport/Volume%201.pdf>. Accessed 12 June 2018.

and the challenges of a globalised world. In the contemporary world, although some people view the violent colonial past and the oppressive regime of apartheid as something related to the past, a multitude of South Africans are still affected by the country's burdensome history: some of them are still experiencing social inequalities, economic and social difficulties which are difficult to extirpate (Flores d'Arcais 2012: 19).

Since the following sections will be focused on the theme of violence in the novels of the South African writer J. M. Coetzee, to conclude, it is necessary to highlight the relationship between history and literature. I believe that literary works cannot be detached from a country's historical context; a bond between the historical reality and the fictional framework will always be present. As far as South Africa is concerned, this connection is extremely significant. South African authors feel compelled to link their works with history. Thus, literature will always reverberate with the colonial atrocities of the past, segregation's racial discrimination, apartheid's violence and the trauma of the post-apartheid epoch. Writing appears as the only way through which a collective memory will continue to be vivid and to forge the future generations. Will this be enough not to forget all the violent acts that have been perpetrated during South African history?



## CHAPTER TWO

### 1. The role of the white South African writer: John Maxwell

#### Coetzee and his challenge to the discourse of history

The novelist John Maxwell Coetzee is widely acclaimed in the South African contemporary literary panorama and in the international context. The author has won prestigious literary awards that includes the Booker Prize (for *Life and Times of Michael K* in 1983 and *Disgrace* in 1999), the Prix Femina étranger (1985), the Jerusalem Prize (1987) and the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2003. The Swedish Academy proclaimed Coetzee to be a writer “who in innumerable guises portrays the surprising involvement of the outsider” and his novels as “characterised by their well-crafted composition, pregnant dialogue and analytical brilliance” (Swedish Academy 2003). He has been described as an elusive and difficult author, a private person whose novels are challenging and impressive.

J. M. Coetzee’s complexity stems from the particular background in which the writer has been shaped. He was born in Cape Town on 9 February 1940 to Afrikaner parents: his father was a lawyer and his mother a schoolteacher. His family’s direct descendants were Dutch settlers, who arrived in South Africa in the seventeenth century. He grew up in the Karoo desert, an area in the Cape province. One crucial aspect of Coetzee’s identity is that not only did his family decide to reject its Afrikaner affiliation but also his parents did not practice any religion. Since his mother was English, he acquired a bilingual status, speaking English at home and Afrikaans with his relatives and friends. He felt unable to respond appropriately to the Afrikaner society’s religious demands. As Head observes: “There are several elements in the portrayal of the young Coetzee that contribute to his sense of independence, or, the refusal to conform; and this prefigures the sense of resistance that becomes the key characteristic of the writer” (Head 2009:5). After he attended a Roman Catholic boys’ college, he studied literature and mathematics at the University of Cape Town. He worked as a programmer in

England for four years (in this period he wrote a Master's thesis on Ford Madox Ford) and then moved to the USA (University of Texas at Austin) where he earned a Ph.D. in linguistics, writing a doctoral dissertation on Samuel Beckett's style. In 1972, he returned to South Africa, where he began his teaching career in literature and linguistics at the University of Cape Town. Afterwards, Coetzee held numerous visiting professorships in the USA and his worldwide recognition has been definitely established after the publication of *Disgrace* in 1999, a novel which was negatively received by the South African society. According to Head: "The treatment of the gang rape of a white woman by black men, as a figure for an aspect of postcolonial historical process, caused a furore, and this seems to have had a bearing on Coetzee's decision to turn his back on South Africa: in 2002 he emigrated to Australia to take up an honorary research fellowship at the University of Adelaide" (Head 2009: 2).

Before his emigration to Australia, the South African context has always permeated Coetzee's writings. He had lived as a white South African under the Afrikaner regime and had experienced the transition to the post-apartheid phase. Nevertheless, the writer had never talked too much about the position that the white South African author should adopt in relation to the country's historical situation. Therefore, what is Coetzee's relationship with South African history? How should the writer deal with such reality? Is there any particular role that he must perform?

In order to provide an answer to these questions, many writers resolved to employ a realistic mode in their narratives. This enabled them not to ignore what was happening in their country, giving a direct response to the South African political state of affairs, a reflection of the current events. Conversely, Coetzee's position appears to be more ambiguous. He has been severely criticised for his lack of realism, of an overt political and historical commitment. According to Gallagher, this depends on the author's ambivalent position: "His own historical situation is significant: he is an Afrikaner who speaks Afrikaans, has forebears involved in instituting apartheid, and is now critical of his own tradition and heritage. He sees the

South African situation as a manifestation of “colonialism, late colonialism, neo-colonialism”” (Gallagher 1991: 15). In his novels, he has presented his own answers to the South African society without choosing realism as his writing strategy. As far as the writer’s function is concerned, Professor Gallagher notes that “Coetzee refuses an authoritarian determination of the role of the writer” (Gallagher 1991: 16). Although the novelist acknowledges the writer’s dominant role in society, he rejects the genre of social realism that the South African writer is supposed to adopt. In his view, the writer should not be limited by the discourse of history and his imaginative powers should go beyond the South African situation’s portrayal. In his Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech, Coetzee states:

South African literature is a literature in bondage, as it reveals in even its highest moments, shot through as they are with feelings of homelessness and yearnings for a nameless liberation. It is a less than fully human literature, unnaturally preoccupied with power and the torsions of power, unable to move from elementary relations of contestation, domination, and subjugation to the vast and complex human world that lies beyond them. It is exactly the kind of literature you would expect to write from a prison. (Coetzee 1992: 98)

Coetzee here points out that the writer’s imagination has been severely damaged by “the *crudity* of life in South Africa” (Coetzee 1992: 99), by the burden of colonialism and the apartheid segregative structures. It is exactly this “crudity”, the brutality of South African history, which Coetzee wants to explore in a different way. He detaches himself from the conventions of realism that the majority of South African writers present in their novels. His aim is to combine his imaginative powers with the historical reality, offering a unique equilibrium between them. Gallagher states: “Both storytelling and history are modes of discourse, and Coetzee refuses to privilege history . . . refusing to tell the same story that history does, imaginative storytelling provides a rival vision of reality” (Gallagher 1991: 22). As a result, the writer,

in trying to resist historical discourse, is in search of a new vitality for his novels, a creative literary project in which his narrative is no longer subjugated to history. The writer's role, consequently, becomes the writing of new stories in which, although the South African reality may be present, the main challenge appears to be the creation of a storytelling based on his own imaginative terms, different from the conventional realistic novels that have always prevailed in the traditional South African literature.

As far as the relationship between the South African writer and history is concerned, it should be noted that the function of the white writer in South Africa involves a difficult task, especially for an author, who belongs to the white supremacist group and whose ascendancy is bound to the Afrikaner colonizers. Therefore, as Gallagher questions, "how can a white, privileged author such as Coetzee refer to South African history with any credibility, or depict blacks without contributing to their marginalization? Is it possible to draw echoes from the silent world of the oppressed when blacks have consistently become Other by the very fact and tradition of representation?" (Gallagher 1991: 43). What is significant about this novelist is that in his works he creates an innovative writing in which a free, non-authoritative storytelling makes possible to hear all those unheard voices (the Other, the oppressed, the subjugated individuals) that have been silenced throughout South African history and that now receive life.

Coetzee's writing, where the discourses of language, authority and history are strictly connected, is illuminating. In his *Editor's Introduction*, David Attwell points out that "in representing a form of postcoloniality felt on the bone, it brings its metropolitan heritage into a charged and complex relationship with the historical crisis in which it finds itself" (Coetzee 1992: 3). His novels have been ascribed to postmodernism and postcolonialism. As Gallagher observes:

Flatly rejecting both liberal and socialist realism, Coetzee opts for a non-realistic, self-referential fiction that constantly highlights its own unreliability. Usually employing a first-person narrator and narrated in the

present tense, Coetzee's works depict situations of oppression along with the discourse that simultaneously accompanies, enables, and exposes that oppression. In his novels, Coetzee demonstrates a growing concern both with the question of how, as a white South African writer, he can depict the Other and with the imminent apocalyptic destruction of his country. (Gallagher 1991: 44)

His unconventional narrative, in which postcolonialism and postmodernism are conflated, has been forged through a variety of cultural influences, thanks to authors such as Beckett, T.S. Eliot, Pound, Nabokov, Neruda, Rilke, Herbert. In addition, even though Coetzee has distanced himself from realism, the dominant genre of contemporary South African literature, some hints of this tradition can be found in his works. Coetzee has contributed to telling a different story of the South African world through the examination of the subordinate figures. In his dialogical narratives, many voices have been allowed to speak, rejecting an oppressive discourse that has been so vivid in the Afrikaner reality. Moreover, Coetzee's writing has been characterised by the use of impersonality. Attwell explains that this technique allows "an instantiation of self, followed by an erasure that leaves traces of the self behind", a useful strategy "to understand how the self is written into the work and then written out, leaving its imprint as a shadowy presence" (Attwell 2015: 3) This modernist method enables the writer's elusiveness, his disappearance behind his characters. As narrative, the self is present in the fictional storytelling; however, he is difficult to catch since he is there and not there at the same time. Reflexive self-consciousness may be suggested as another feature of Coetzee's complex writing. This device is extremely useful to understand the relationship that his narrative has with the country's historical and political backdrop. Language plays a meaningful role in its attempt not to be controlled by external authoritative forces. This is the reason why Coetzee's storytelling is shown as ambiguous, non-linear; his aim is to emphasize the value of storytelling through the use of an indeterminate language. Finally, it should be observed Coetzee's adoption of the English

language. Even though he has grown up speaking both English and Afrikaans, he considers the second tongue as too limited for his writings. Gallagher underlines Coetzee's need of "a language that he can play with, that facilitates multiple meanings and evokes a diversity of meaning" (Gallagher 1991: 48). Thus, on the one hand Coetzee's novels have been accessible for an international audience and have had a worldwide recognition. On the other hand, within South Africa, his works have been read predominantly by the intellectual readership rather than by the common people.

To conclude, before entering the realm of Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*, it is worth proposing the author's commentary on the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert, who wrote the poem "Five Men", a poem about five condemned prisoners. In this passage, Coetzee's words on the act of writing in relation to South African history are revealing:

Herbert feels himself so deeply to be a European and believes, with whatever hedgings and reservations, in the vitality, the *social* vitality, of the literature of shepherds, roses, and so forth, in the power of poetry to bring those symbols to life, that he can oppose poetry to the great shambling beast of history. In Poland one can still hold such beliefs . . . But in Africa . . . ? . . . In Africa the only address one can imagine is a brutally direct one, a sort of pure, unmediated representation; what short-circuits the imagination, what forces one's face into the thing itself, is what I am here calling history. "The only address one can imagine" – an admission of defeat. Therefore, the task becomes imagining the unimaginable, imagining a form of address that permits the play of writing to start taking place. (Coetzee 1992: 67)

Again, Coetzee underlines the importance of imagination that is set against historical discourse. His ability to transcend the late colonial South African situation (apartheid and post-apartheid) is a distinctive feature of his literary works as will be visible in the novel that will be subsequently examined: *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

## 2. *Waiting for the Barbarians*

Coetzee's third novel was published in 1980. He described it as "a novel about the impact of the torture chamber on the life of a man of conscience" (Coetzee 1992: 363). In the narrative, the unnamed protagonist, the Magistrate, undergoes a process of personal awakening, in which a profound self-confrontation subverts his tranquil lifestyle. The conflation of an allegorical method and the vagueness of setting and time enables the novelist to deal with the question of violence, more specifically the theme of torture, in a society that is on the verge of dissolution. Although Coetzee's writing strategies aim to withhold meaning and to create a state of suspension, it might be suggested that the novel investigates the horrors of the contemporary South African events in a detached mode, providing an analysis of the effects of violence on both a physical and psychological level. After reading Coetzee's work, one question may arise: can South Africa imagine a future after apartheid?

*Waiting for the Barbarians* tells the story of a man approaching old age, the Magistrate, who lives in a colonial outpost, on the frontier of a non-specific place, at an unknown time. This small walled town is located on the border that divides a civilized unnamed Empire and the nomadic barbarian people. Head observes that "the omission of the definite article helps to widen the connotations of 'Empire', which becomes available as an emblem of imperialism through history" (Head 1997: 72). A crystal clear opposition between Empire and the barbarians is drawn. The book opens with the arrival of Colonel Joll, a Stormtrooper-like man, and his soldiers, who are part of Empire's Third Bureau. After the spreading rumours about a potential barbarian attack, their aggressive imperialism invades the settlement's peaceful existence. Colonel Joll and his henchmen collect the barbarian people in order to interrogate and torture them. Their scope is to discover the truth about the barbarians' intentions through the means of violence:

When I see Colonel Joll . . . I bring the conversation around to torture. 'What if your prisoner is telling the truth', I ask, 'yet finds he is not believed? Is

that not a terrible position? . . . How do you ever know when a man has told you the truth?' 'There is a certain tone', Joll says. 'A certain tone enters the voice of a man who is telling the truth. Training and experience teach us to recognize that tone' . . . I am speaking of a situation in which I am probing for the truth, in which I have to exert pressure to find it. (Coetzee 2004: 5)

Among the tortured prisoners there is a young barbarian girl that the Magistrate decides to take in. She has deformed ankles and she is nearly blind. Nevertheless, he develops a fetishist interest upon her. Through her, the Magistrate begins his process of self-discovery that characterises the entire narrative. He reaches the decision of returning her to her people and undertakes a dangerous journey across the desert. During his absence, the Third Bureau occupies the outpost and when the Magistrate returns he is accused of collaboration with the barbaric enemy. For this reason he is imprisoned and tortured. The novel ends with the small town's abandonment by the Third Bureau and the Magistrate's release: Empire has been defeated by the barbarians' cunning behaviour who have been able to keep away from a direct confrontation. The final image is that of an abandoned outpost, in which only few people have remained to endure the winter's season and to wait for the barbarians' invasion. According to Gallagher: "Published at the height of controversy over the treatment of detainees, *Waiting for the Barbarians* contains several echoes of the recent events in South Africa" (Gallagher 1991: 119).

After having proposed an introductory section on J.M. Coetzee as a writer and, subsequently, a brief commentary and plot of the novel, it seems useful to provide a clear structure of the chapter's second section, which will be focused on the depiction of violence in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. The following analysis will be divided into six main subsections. First of all, it will be explored the notion of the Other, which in the novel is represented by the barbarian; this might recall colonization's binary oppositional structure, in which the figure of the civilized colonizer is set against the barbaric colonized. Secondly, a comparison between the Greek C. P. Cavafy's and J.



M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* will be drawn. In addition, an examination of torture in relation to the novel will be presented. Particularly, the writer's struggle to depict torture and the violent acts applied both on the barbarian prisoners and the Magistrate will be investigated. Fourthly, the relationship between colonial history and the process of reading in the novel will be analysed. Furthermore, the attention will be focused on the relationship between the Magistrate and the barbarian girl. To conclude, a final observation of Coetzee's narrative strategies, with a specific attention on his allegorical style, will be examined in order to better understand the novel's complexity and meaning.

## **2.1. The notion of the Other: the Barbarian**

In the second chapter of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the Magistrate laments the innate human tendency to develop preconceived opinions upon other human beings, which, in the majority of cases, are converted into hatred, contempt and fear:

It is this contempt for the barbarians, contempt which is shown by the meanest ostler or peasant farmer, that I as magistrate have had to contend with for twenty years. How do you eradicate contempt, especially when that contempt is founded on nothing more substantial than differences in table manners, variations in the structure of the eyelid? (Coetzee 2004: 55)

Human beings have always been inclined to formulate prejudicial attitudes towards the figure of the Other. In the novel, the Other is represented by the barbarian, an unknown enemy that is thought to be different because of his physical appearance and mores. The Magistrate asks himself why are barbarians held in contempt, how can biased concepts arise among the Empire's forces and its civilians: how can these people develop such ideas after they have occupied a foreign territory that does not even belong to them? The Magistrate's final wish is that one day the barbarians would rise against the oppressive regime in order to take the law into their hands.

It might be argued that the conception of Otherness originates from human beings' difference in the cultural, social, and geographical context. They feel the natural need to distance themselves from what is diverse and remote. In fact, in the moment in which the individual identifies the different, a clear opposition is established between the I and the Other. As a result, I agree with Roberto Mulinacci's statement that the legitimate distinction of the Other, his right to be different, is eradicated and a logic of exclusion soon emerges (Mulinacci 2004: 41): social marginalization occurs on the basis of identity.

Since the discovery of the New World, the relationship with the Other has been first characterised by a feeling of wonder. From the beginning, the white man's approach to foreign human beings, the indigenous people, the Africans, the Indians, or the Asians, has been marked by the attraction towards the exotic dimension of the Other, his external and far position, the distant countries in which he lived, the wide range of different products that flourished in his territories. Nevertheless, this fascination was supplanted by the white man's urge to conquer what he had just discovered: the material objects, the lands, the foreign individuals included. In fact, it should be pointed out that, as soon as the white man encountered with the Other, he conceived him as a thing rather than a human being, labelling him with terms such as "savage" or "barbarian". Consequently, racism became the basic feature of the relationship between the white European man and the Other. There was the intrinsic idea that not only was the white man a superior human being, but also that he had the civilizing mission to subjugate and educate all those primitive people. As professor Silvia Albertazzi explains, the world became structured according to strict categories based on ethnicity, a classification conceived by a European mind-set. It established a clear evolutionary dividing line that involved a division among ethnic groups, which extended from the animal status until the white man prototype, considered to be the dominant evolutionary model (Albertazzi 2000: 49). Thus, the white-skin man defines his authoritative position and conceives as Other everyone that is different from him. He becomes the conqueror, the

master, the colonizer, whose task is to “elevate” all the inferior races, the barbaric people. This is exactly how colonialism is set in motion.

Watson recognizes that “if colonialism, at its very simplest, involves the conquest and subjugation of a territory by an alien people, then the human relationship that is basic to it is likewise one of power and powerlessness: the relationship between master and servant, overlord and slave” (Watson 1996:14). It might be observed that colonialism founds itself on the binary opposition between colonizer, usually the white European, and colonized, the subdued barbarian. In order to create a deeper fracture between the two factions, the notion of frontier is instituted. The frontier helps to redraw the border that divides the European space and the barbaric world: from this point onwards, whoever circulates outside the dividing line is in the enemy’s territory. After having expropriated the colonized people of their territories, the colonizers attempt to exercise their power upon their victims on a psychological level. This is realized through the imposition of the colonizer’s language upon the subjugated person. Under these circumstances, the colonized individual finds himself as dislocated between two hemispheres: on the one hand, he still possesses his mother tongue; on the other hand, he learns the colonizer’s tongue, what becomes for him/her the language of power opposed to his/her native one. One of the main white prejudicial opinion imposed by the civilized societies is that the colonized people’s languages “are not real languages but only jargons, and that the tones of unfamiliar languages are not much better than brutish gruntings” (Powell 1888: 102). This linguistic collision triggers the creation of a hybridised identity that is painful to accept for the colonized, who sometimes feels the need to reject this Otherness imposed by the white man.

As far as the conception of the barbarian is concerned, it is significant to propose the process of transformation that the word “barbarian” has undergone throughout the centuries and the myth that civilization has developed around this figure. In the first place, as has been already seen, barbarism opposes to civilization. The myth that has always circulated about the barbarians is that these nomadic people are a threat for the stability of

civilization; this is clearly visible in J.M. Coetzee's novel too: Empire and the colonial outpost's inhabitants fear an invasion in their domestic territory. Living outside civilization, they are conceived as primitive people. But how did the term "barbarian" originate and what is its precise meaning? Professor Maria Boletsi speculates that:

In terms of its etymology, the ancient Greek word barbarian [*βάρβαρος*] is supposed to imitate the incomprehensible mumblings of the language of foreign peoples, sounding like "bar-bar" (or, as we would say today, "bla bla"). As such, it has a double implication: on a first level, it signifies a lack of understanding on the part of the other, since the language of the other is perceived as meaningless sounds. At the same time, it suggests an unwillingness to understand the other's language and thus to make the encounter with the other a communicative occasion. (Boletsi 2007: 68)

As can be evinced, the prospect of approaching the barbarian is totally excluded. The barbarian is objectified, treated as a subordinate and degraded figure, whose language is incomprehensible and not worthy of being understood. This image of the Other helps to forge an idealised picture of the civilized individual who, in contrast, is perceived as a superior and educated human being.

Although the negative barbaric figure is set against the positive civilized man, it might be observed that barbarism contributes to reinforce the discourse of civilization. This is realized through the building of binary oppositions that erect a crystal clear line between barbarism and civilization, master and servant, colonizer and colonized, savage and civilized, educated and illiterate. These divisions have always been inscribed in the discourse of history. Boletsi considers some historical phases in which the notion of barbarism has affected society's perception of the Other; what is important is that the meaning of the term "barbarism" has undergone numerous changes throughout the centuries. In the first place, there is the opposition between the Greeks and the Persians: "Greek democracy, freedom and logos as

principles and ways of life [are] opposed to the decadent luxury, lax morality, servile manners, and despotism of the Persians” (Boletsi 2007: 68). Here a perfect Greek culture and lifestyle is set against the immorality of the Persians. Moreover, as Boletsi points out, it is pivotal to highlight that the barbarians’ label of savage people, as one may think of barbarians today, was ascribed to them only after the barbaric invasions of Rome (Boletsi 2007:68). However, the conception of barbarism was elevated during the Enlightenment, a period in which the figure of the “noble savage” was invented. Thanks to important philosophers such as Rousseau and Montesquieu, civilization was put into question and the well-established opposition between civilization and barbarism was completely reversed: whereas barbaric society was considered more virtuous, the civilized society was viewed as corrupt. The nineteenth century, on the other hand, saw a radical change in the judgement of barbarism. The barbarian was depicted as violent and inferior and this way of thinking was part of the imperialist scheme, as Boletsi points out:

The civilization/barbarian dichotomy is employed at the service of the imperialist project and its “civilizing mission”. The barbarian (the colonized subject) is not only represented as ignorant of civilization but as threatening and destructive toward it. Therefore, the barbarian has to be held under the domination of Western colonial powers, which offer to civilize him/her. (Boletsi 2007: 69)

Even though the term was applied to colonized people, during the Industrial Revolution the notion of barbarism defined also “members of the underclass of the newly urbanized European peasants” (Boletsi 2007:69) and society’s marginal figures too. Again, the meaning of the term “barbarian” was redefined between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century with the contribution of philosophers such as Nietzsche and Freud. Boletsi states that whereas “Nietzsche envisioned a new kind of barbarism, which would be self-conscious, liberating, and empowering . . . Freud’s contribution to the questioning of the discourse on barbarism and

civilization lies in his view that barbarism is not external to Europe, but internal to civilization and to every individual” (Boletsi 2007: 70). After the First and Second World War and the beginning of the decolonizing process, the contrast between civilization and barbarism was reversed: civilization had been capable of unconceivable atrocities, showing its “barbaric” side towards the subordinate people. In the final analysis, the dichotomy between civilization and barbarism seem to have reappeared in Western culture, especially after the collapse of the Cold War and the twentieth-first century terrorist attacks.

All things considered, it might be argued that the role of literature appears as crucial in relation to what has been said. The dangerous binary oppositions created by historical discourse, particularly the dichotomy between barbarism and civilization, have been presented to underline the key function that writers have to deconstruct and re-write these preconceived Western universal truths in a fictional way. Literature, through its imaginary storytelling, has the chance to develop a new hybrid discourse in which the “I” and the “Other” can meet without being necessarily opposite, where prejudicial labels or segregative ideas are brought to surface and re-worked. Literature has the chance to rise up and to present a different reading of the discourse of history. In my opinion, this is exactly what the novelist Coetzee is capable of doing in his narrative. He analyses the dichotomy between Empire and barbarism through the figure of the Magistrate, showing that the savage, barbaric people are those who erect themselves as civilization’s saviours.

## 2.2. C. P. Cavafy’s and J. M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*

What are we waiting for, assembled in the forum?

The barbarians are due here today.

Why isn’t anything going on in the senate?

Why are the senators sitting there without legislating?

Because the barbarians are coming today.

What's the point of senators making laws now?

Once the barbarians are here, they'll do the legislating.

Why did our emperor get up so early,  
and why is he sitting enthroned at the city's main gate,  
in state, wearing the crown?

Because the barbarians are coming today  
and the emperor's waiting to receive their leader.

He's even got a scroll to give him,  
loaded with titles, with imposing names.

Why have our two consuls and praetors come out today  
wearing their embroidered, their scarlet togas?

Why have they put on bracelets with so many amethysts,  
rings sparkling with magnificent emeralds?

Why are they carrying elegant canes  
beautifully worked in silver and gold?

Because the barbarians are coming today  
and things like that dazzle the barbarians.

Why don't our distinguished orators turn up as usual  
to make their speeches, say what they have to say?

Because the barbarians are coming today  
and they're bored by rhetoric and public speaking.

Why this sudden bewilderment, this confusion?

(How serious people's faces have become.)

Why are the streets and squares emptying so rapidly,  
everyone going home lost in thought?

Because night has fallen and the barbarians haven't come.

And some of our men just in from the border say  
there are no barbarians any longer.

Now what's going to happen to us without barbarians?

Those people were a kind of solution. (C. P. Cavafy, *Waiting for the Barbarians*)<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> C. P. Cavafy, "Waiting for the Barbarians" from *C.P. Cavafy: Collected Poems*.  
Translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard:  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/51294/waiting-for-the-barbarians>. Accessed 13  
July 2018.

Cavafy's poem and Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1904, 1980) deal with the question of identity, the contrast between the I and the Other where the Other, the barbarian, performs the double function of defining the waiting group, the citizens, and of being perceived as a constant threat. The poem's structure is a dialogue in which two interlocutors discuss the barbarians' imminent arrival to conquer the city. As in the novel, the setting in which the first and second speaker are having their conversation is undefined. Everyone is waiting for the barbarians and has abandoned his/her normal role in the city: the senators are not legislating anymore, the emperor is awaiting for the barbarians' leader at the city's main gate, the two consuls and praetors are overdressed in order to "dazzle the barbarians" (Cavafy 22), the orators are not making their usual public oration. Albeit the general excitement, the city's atmosphere is soon replaced with confusion and seriousness when the night falls; the citizens come back to their home since "the barbarians haven't come" (Cavafy 31). In the poem's final verses, the future is presented as uncertain. Now that the barbarians are not coming no one knows what will happen.

In his narrative, the author Coetzee decides to adopt the literary device of intertextuality for his novel. In fact, he chooses the Greek poem's title, adapting the story of Cavafy's verses to a postcolonial perspective. As Boletsi notes: "Both works can be placed within a broader intertextual network of works that address the theme of waiting for the arrival of the other. This topos has been staged in a series of literary works, from Dino Buzzati's *Il Deserto dei Tartari* [*The Tartar Steppe*, 1938] to Samuel Beckett's *En attendant Godot* [*Waiting for Godot*, 1952], and Julien Gracq's *Le Rivage des Syrtes* [*The Opposing Shore*, 1951]" (2010: 162).

In both the poem and the novel, the emphasis on the process of waiting is significant. The alleged Roman city's citizens and the colonial outpost's people are waiting for the barbaric enemy to authenticate their identity. However, it can be suggested that the novel presents a double waiting. On the one hand, Colonel Joll needs the barbarians to assert its function, a reason



for beginning his process of interrogations associated with the practice of torture. On the other hand, the novel's protagonist, the Magistrate, is waiting for Empire's manifestation of its barbarity. Only after Empire has shown its logic of power and violence can the Magistrate undertake his process of self-evaluation and detachment from the Third Bureau's atrocities. Conversely, in Cavafy's poem, there is the manifestation of a supposed Roman Empire in decadence, where the citizens are waiting for the barbarians to take control of Empire's governmental function. As Head notes, in the poem, "the 'waiting' is a waiting for the imperialist self-prophecy to be fulfilled. This prophecy is partly a teleology of imperial history, justified by the presence of the preconceived Other: it is as if everything has built up to this moment. Yet the fulfilment of this prophecy would also be a negation of the imperial enterprise, its death-knell" (Head 1997: 74).

As far as the question of identity is concerned, Cavafy's poem and Coetzee's novel show a precarious position that the speaking voice occupies in both works. In the first place, it is relevant the use of the first-person plural by the first speaker in the poem. In his questioning about the city, he establishes himself as part of the community. At the same time, he appears as unable to explain what is happening: this is the reason why he keeps asking questions. Does the first speaker identify himself inside or outside this citizenship? The poem does not provide any clear answers. Moreover, in the last verses, when the first speaker wonders what is going to happen in the next future, its function seems to call the attention to the perilous state of civilization, which cannot exist without the barbarians: "Those people were a kind of solution" (Cavafy 35). While the first speaker is in search of explanations, the second speaker's role is to furnish a clarification to all the queries that the first speaker demands. There are no doubts that this second voice is a member of the community. He mechanically answers to all the questions, as if he were representing civilization's voice. According to him (and thus to Empire), the barbarians' arrival is taken for granted: the line "because the barbarians are coming today" appears five times in the poem. Boletsi observes: "The almost hypnotic effect of this repetition leaves no

room for doubting the logic of the answer: the barbarians are coming, and they are the remedy to the predicament of a decaying civilization” (Boletsi 2010: 166).

In addition, it can be suggested that the Magistrate occupies a perilous position too. During the narrative, he is shown as both inside and outside the Empire’s confines. Is he the colonizer or the barbarians’ ally? The protagonist’s identity is unclear. Since he has lived his quiet life within Empire’s borders, he starts his process of self-awareness only after having discovered the Third Bureau’s ferocity. In particular, thanks to the barbarian girl, not only is he able to comprehend his complicity with the acts of Empire but also he sets himself against Empire’s colonialist discourse. Boletsi suggests: “The authoritative discourse of the Empire, within which the Magistrate has been shaped as a subject, is not something he can discard since it is not external to his being. Caught up in a position where he can belong neither to the oppressors nor the oppressed, his identity becomes a site of conflicting claims” (Boletsi 2007:77). His identity is full of contradictory sides. In the first part of the novel, even though he shows sympathy towards the Empire’s prisoners, it can be evinced that the Magistrate has interiorized the same prejudicial attitudes that belong to the torturers, that the barbarians are “lazy, immoral, filthy, stupid” (Coetzee 2004: 41). However, during a morning’s hunting, the Magistrate experiences a moment of epiphany: he realizes that the world can be viewed in a multiple perspective, that the binary dichotomy between the I and the Other is something that has been imposed on him by the colonial logic. He is living his life according to the Empire’s rules rather than following his own conditions:

In the clear silence of the morning I find an obscure sentiment lurking at the edge of my consciousness. With the buck before me suspended in immobility, there seems to be time for all things, time even to turn my gaze inward and see what it is that has robbed the hunt of its savour: the sense that this has become no longer a morning’s hunting but an occasion on which either the proud ram bleeds to death on the ice or the old hunter misses

his aim; that for the duration of this frozen moment the stars are locked in a configuration in which events are not themselves but stand for other things. Behind my paltry cover I stand trying to shrug off this irritating and uncanny feeling, till the buck wheels and with a whisk of his tail and a brief splash of hooves disappears into the tall reeds . . . ‘Never before have I had the feeling of not living my own life on my own terms’. (Coetzee 2004: 42)

Despite this revelation, the Magistrate has just begun his process of self-recognition. It will be only after the girl’s return to the barbarians’ group and his subsequent imprisonment that he will become the victim and he will fully understand the meaning of being treated as the Other.

What should also be considered is the relevance of both writers’ background. On the one hand, Coetzee’s position of white South African writer entangles him in the discourse of colonialism. Having always lived in the context of apartheid, the contact with the oppressive regime may appear as visible in his writings, where the majority of his protagonists are inscribed into the logic of colonialism while at the same time they struggle to oppose to it. On the other hand, Cavafy’s ambivalence can be said to depend on his multiracial origins. His parents were Greek and, even though he worked for the British Empire, he lived in Egypt throughout his life: “Due to his complex position, he remained a marginal figure all his life – a marginality enhanced by his homosexuality” (Boletsis 2007: 77). As a result, the authors’ peculiar conditions might sometimes be reflected on their works.

To conclude, both the poem and the novel end without providing any definite conclusion. In both texts, there is a sense of uncertainty and lack of stability. Neither in the poem nor in the novel have the barbarians made their appearance. It can be observed that both works aim to set themselves against the fixity of history, to go beyond the strict categories of the historical discourse. However, the novel and the poem contain some references to real historical events. As far as Cavafy is concerned, what is described in the poem has a bond with the actual circumstances that Egypt underwent during

the poet's lifetime, when the Egyptians wanted to be saved from the British Empire's model of civilization:

These people wanted to be saved from "civilization", the British Empire, which had been ruling Egypt since 1878. The disappearance of the barbarians in the poem alludes to the brutal crushing of the Mahdist rising – an Islamic revolt that was threatening the power of the British – by the British Army. In the final battle that took place in September 2, 1898, at Omdurman, the Mahdists, despite their brave fighting, were annihilated by Commander Kitchener's army. (Boletsi 2007: 83)

Conversely, as has already been noted, in Coetzee's novel the allusion to colonialism is crystal clear. Nevertheless, Coetzee's purpose is to defy the discourse of history that, according to him, destroys literature's imaginative powers. Thanks to literature the novelist deconstructs the specificity of a particular historical context. What can be evinced is that both authors shape their texts in a way that excludes every indications of real places or time. Moreover, the use of the present tense helps not to allude to any past events and to provide the sense of a progressive action. The text is thus able to be adapted to different contexts. As Boletsi states: "Due to the absence of such indications, the "scenario" of the works and the issues that they raise can evoke different historical moments in the past, the present, and, possibly, in the future without being swallowed by, or restricted to, any of them. In this way, the iterability of the literary act is foregrounded" (Boletsi 2007: 83). I believe that the power of Cavafy's poem and Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* is that these works can be reshaped in a completely altered circumstance, just like Coetzee has done with the Greek poet's work, which has been enriched with indirect references to the South African past. Maybe in the future it will be the turn of another writer to reformulate Coetzee's novel on a new, different light.

### **2.3. Torture in *Waiting for the Barbarians***

“Of the screaming which people afterwards claim to have heard from the granary, I hear nothing. At every moment that evening as I go about my business I am aware of what might be happening, and my ear is even tuned to the pitch of human pain” (Coetzee 2004: 5). From the beginning of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the Magistrate is tormented by a moral enigma. While he attempts to assert his distance from what is happening in the granary, the place in which the barbarian prisoners are being tortured by Colonel Joll and his henchmen, he knows that he cannot really escape from the atrocities that are taking place. It might be proposed that the scene seems to recall the mistreatment of detainees during the apartheid regime, when political prisoners were interrogated and tortured by the South African Bureau for State Security (also known as BOSS). In particular, during the 1970s, torture became an international issue, especially after the death of the anti-apartheid activist Stephen Biko on September 12, 1977. The inquest about his death revealed how political prisoners were treated and he became the symbolic figure, the representative of all South African detainees. It is certain that vicious methods were adopted by the BOSS. For example, Gallagher affirms that “Biko had been kept naked in isolation and was shackled in leg irons and handcuffs” (Gallagher 1991: 114) but other devices such as electric shock or beating were customary practices during the interrogations.<sup>36</sup> Since the novel was published in 1980, my argument is that Coetzee certainly contributed to the contemporary discourse on torture. Just like the Magistrate, South Africans witnessed the real meaning of violence. Despite the fact that many were those who took the decision to acquiesce in front of the gravity of what was happening, it may be suggested that many were those confronted with the question of how torture can even exist. As Gallagher points out: “How could anyone perform such deeds on another human being?” (1991: 114).

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<sup>36</sup> At the inquest into Steve Biko's death, held in Pretoria in December 1977, Major Harold Snyman and other security police officers testified that he must have suffered the head injuries from which he died when he apparently had to be restrained by his interrogators. It was also revealed during the inquest that Steve Biko, who had been detained without charge on 18 August, had been kept naked for much of his time in detention and was chained hand and foot when taken to security police headquarters for interrogation (Amnesty International 1978).

### ***Torture and the South African writer***

*Waiting for the Barbarians* deals with the question of violence, specifically “the impact of the torture chamber on the life of a man of conscience” (Coetzee 1992: 363). According to the writer, the theme of torture has captivated the interest of many South African writers because of two principal reasons. Coetzee observes:

The first is that relations in the torture room provide a metaphor, bare and extreme, for relations between authoritarianism and its victims. In the torture room unlimited force is exerted upon the physical being of an individual in a twilight of legal illegality, with the purpose, if not of destroying him, then at least of destroying the kernel of resistance within him. (Coetzee 1992: 363)

Coetzee states that the torture room functions as the stage for two main protagonists: the oppressor and the oppressed. In this place, the exertion of violence appears as legitimate and its scope is the victim’s total annihilation on both a physical and psychological level. The ability for the subjugated individual to endure such conditions is taken to the extreme. In this room, the torturer has the liberty to exercise his perverse imagination upon the victim’s body. Moreover, “the fact that the torture room is a site of extreme human experience, accessible to no one save the participants, is a second reason why the novelist in particular should be fascinated by it” (Coetzee 1992: 363). Thus, an ulterior motive for the writer’s attraction to the torture room is that this chamber, in its being shadowy, mysterious and forbidden, triggers the novelist’s imaginative power.

According to Coetzee, any South African writer faces two main dilemmas in the moment in which he decides to explore the theme of torture. In the first place, how can the writer represent torture? The novelist firmly believes that the writer should avoid a too realistic depiction of torture while at the same time trying to explain what happens in the torture chamber. In

Coetzee's words, "the true challenge is: how not to play the game by the rules of the state, how to establish one's own authority, how to imagine torture and death on one's own terms" (Coetzee 1992: 364). In addition, how should the writer offer the torturer's representation in a narrative form? Coetzee's solution is that the writer must discover "how to find an appropriately minor place for the petty secrets of the security system; how to treat something that, in truth, because it is offered like the Gorgon's head to terrorize the populace and paralyze resistance, deserves to be ignored" (1992: 366). He thinks that the author should find a balanced image for the torturer: neither should the writer present commonplaces in relation to this figure nor should the torturer's role be magnified.

Coetzee attains this goal through *Waiting for the Barbarians*' narrative mode, where his allegorical style is combined with images of impotence, uncertainties, blankness, and fears that are evoked through the protagonist. I personally believe that it is when the Magistrate is confronted with the deep meaning of torture, when he is unable to find the right words to express his feelings of anger or hopelessness for what is taking place, that the reader grasps the import of such violence. As a result, allegory might be presented as the first solution for Coetzee's first moral dilemma, the representation of torture: death and torture are expressed on his own terms. Through the storyteller's voice the reader understands the role of the torturer. Gallagher suggests: "The solution he posits to his second moral dilemma – how to depict the person of the torturer – rests on the deconstruction of dichotomous thinking and the recognition of the common elements of humanity that extend across cultural differences" (Gallagher 1991: 126).

### ***Violence in Waiting for the Barbarians***

"The barbarian tribes were arming, the rumour went; the Empire should take precautionary measures, for there would certainly be war" (Coetzee 2004: 8): from the novel's beginning, a justification is provided for an opposition between the barbarians and the Empire. Since the barbarians are planning to attack, the Empire should be equipped to retaliate against them for their

offensive. As a result, “officials of the Third Bureau of the Civil Guard were seen for the first time on the frontier, guardians of the State, specialists in the obscurer motions of sedition, devotees of truth, doctors of interrogation” (Coetzee 2004: 9). The Third Bureau is described as an organization composed by officers whose main role is to defend the Empire’s state. These men are interrogators who aim to discover the truth, a truth established by the Empire’s preconceived beliefs, principles that they use to assert their position against the barbarians.

Between the dichotomy Empire-barbarians the Magistrate emerges. I would argue that Coetzee adopts this figure to obscure the binary opposition between the barbarians and the torturers. This seems to me Coetzee’s solution to the writer’s second dilemma mentioned in the previous section: how to represent the torturer. In trying to understand the torturer’s craving for violence, the deconstruction of the differences between the barbarians and the oppressors is achieved and the notion of Otherness is undermined: “In dismantling the myth of the torturer, Coetzee exposes one way oppression is sustained in South Africa. However, just as the division between those who torture and those who do not quickly becomes blurred, so too does the division between barbarian and Empire that legitimates the existence of torture” (Gallagher 1991: 128).

It can be suggested that the tranquil life that the Magistrate has always led before the Third Bureau’s arrival is completely disrupted. In his urge to understand Empire’s abuse of power and the practice of torture, he enters the torturer’s zone. Apart from the relationship with the barbarian girl that will be deeply analysed in the following section, two characters play a significant role in order to achieve this purpose: Colonel Joll and Mandel. Both men are represented as stormtrooper-figures who never show their human side. They are inquisitors determined to seek the proof of the barbarians’ guilt to fulfil a direct confrontation with them. Gallagher states: “An absence [is] reflected in their eyes” (1991: 126), as if they were robots behaving in a mechanical manner in the name of the Empire.



As far as Colonel Joll is concerned, in the novel's first chapter, he is presented as the emblem of Empire. His figure may recall that of the coloniser whose main target is to subjugate the native populations and their lands. The first instance of violence against the barbarian prisoners is a consequence of Joll's commands. The victims of torture are an old man and a sick boy, who have been accused of false allegations. The pattern of interrogation is combined with torture and the results are severe: the old man dies and the boy is physically and mentally injured.<sup>37</sup> The logic of torture is based on threatening and instilling fear in the victims.

It seems to me that a difference can be drawn between Joll and the Magistrate's attitudes: whereas the Magistrate is certain of the prisoners' innocence, Joll is only interested in discovering an alleged truth that cannot be actually extrapolated from them. According to Joll, torture is the only means through which truth can be achieved. Even if the Magistrate is not present at Joll's interrogations, he begins to feel uneasy about what is happening. In his inward rejection of the violent practices, he shows his sensitivity, his ability to see beyond the dichotomy Empire-barbarians. In fact, the effects of torture, instead of affecting Joll's moral blindness, underlined by his sunglasses, reach the Magistrate's soul like an infection that cannot be removed. As a result, Colonel Joll's blindness stands in contrast with the Magistrate's ability to see. As Dovey points out:

This initiates the theme of the Magistrate's superior capacity for sight in contrast to the willful blindness of the new military dictators, and refers to the stance of the liberal writer, who takes upon him/herself the task of acting as the 'eyes' or the conscience of the society, hoping to affect a change in

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<sup>37</sup> Coetzee's portrayal of Empire's prisoners recalls the real events that took place in South Africa in the 1970s. In addition to Biko's death, in 1977 other ten people died in prison due to the security police's ill-treatment. An example is provided by the death of Dr. Hoosen Haffeejee, a young dentist that died in August 1977. Amnesty International observes that "the pathologist who carried out the postmortem examination stated that he had found between 40 and 50 "abraded bruises" and other marks on the head, body, elbows, knees, ankles and feet, which had been inflicted some 4 to 12 hours before death. Dr Haffeejee, who was slightly built, had been in custody for about 16 hours before he died" (Amnesty International 1979).

individual attitudes by unveiling the horrors to which others are blind.  
(Dovey 1988: 220)

The Magistrate furnishes an image of society's conscience, which is unable to react against the ferocity of its imperial system. According to Dovey, his task can be paralleled to the function of the liberal writer, who, in denouncing through his writing society's horrors, attempts to trigger a reaction in the individuals' moral sense. Therefore, the violation on the old man and the boy's bodies sets in motion what will be the Magistrate's obsession with the practice of torture: this will be particularly clear in his relationship with the barbarian girl.

The novel's fourth chapter begins with the portrayal of Warrant Officer Mandel, who looks at the Magistrate "behind that handsome immobile face and through those clear eyes as an actor looks from behind a mask" (Coetzee 2004: 84). Although Mandel shows his authority and self-confidence, the Magistrate believes that beyond this attitude there is an attempt to conceal his immature behaviour and sensibility. After his journey to take the barbarian girl back to her people, the Magistrate is accused of "treasonously consorting with the enemy" (Coetzee 2004: 85) and is imprisoned. Mandel's task is to preside over the man's imprisonment. Gratuitous violence is perpetrated against the Magistrate. The impact on the psychological level is significant, as can be evinced from the following words: "No one beats me, no one starves me, no one spits on me. How can I regard myself as a victim of persecution when my sufferings are so petty? Yet they are all the more degrading for their pettiness" (Coetzee 2004: 93). Even if the Magistrate still has the liberty to eat or scream, to show his sufferance or to remain silent, the truth is that Mandel's inhumanity is trying to lead his victim to moral debasement from which the Magistrate cannot recover anymore.

In my opinion, the novel's escalation of violence takes place when Colonel Joll returns from his expedition. Twelve barbarian captives, who are led in the middle of the settlement's square, are tied neck to neck with their

hands leant against their faces: “A simple loop of wire runs through the flesh of each man’s hands and through holes pierced in his cheeks” (Coetzee 2004: 113). The Magistrate, who becomes one of the numerous witnesses to the cruelties that are going to happen, soon regrets to have temporarily escaped from prison. Since he does not want to be involved into the torturers’ corrupted minds, he feels the urge to affirm his distance from Colonel Joll’s conduct:

For me, at this moment, striding away from the crowd, what has become important above all is that I should neither be contaminated by the atrocity that is about to be committed nor poison myself with impotent hatred of its perpetrators. I cannot save the prisoners, therefore let me save myself. Let it at the very least be said, if it ever comes to be said, if there is ever anyone in some remote future interested to know the way we lived, that in this farthest outpost of the Empire of light there existed one man who in his heart was not a barbarian. (Coetzee 2004: 114)

In the following scene, the word “ENEMY” is inscribed with charcoal on the prisoners’ backs and ferocious flogging begins; the barbarian victims are beaten until their backs turn clean again. According to Dominic Head, the passage is a reminder of Kafka’s *In the Penal Colony*, a short story published in 1919: “The story concerns a device for execution which kills by scoring on the condemned body a phrase deemed appropriate to the determined sentence” (Head 1997: 77). In Kafka’s narrative, a soldier is condemned for insubordination and the writing “HONOUR THY SUPERIORS” is inscribed on the body. The attitudes of Coetzee and Kafka’s torturers are similar. Not only are they fascinated by torture and by the infliction of violence on the victims’ bodies, but also their belief in the equivalence between pain and truth is evident in both works:

In Kafka’s story, the process of inscription is an expression of power, as well as an exposure of the self-destructiveness this involves. In Coetzee’s novels . . . as in Cavafy’s poem, the operations of Empire require the

existence of the barbarians as enemy, and here the beating away of the charcoal inscriptions is an ironic purgation of the Manichean difference upon which Empire depends. (Head 1997: 77)

During the barbarians' persecution, the Magistrate is astonished at people's reaction to the flogging. Instead of showing disapproval, they are presented as extremely curious to see the captives' mistreatment. Nevertheless, the Magistrate cannot endure this situation anymore and, eventually, he retorts to Colonel Joll's violent acts:

Those pitiable prisoners you brought in – are they the enemy I must fear? . . . 'You are the enemy, you have made the war, and you have given them all the martyrs they need – starting not now but a year ago when you committed your first filthy barbarities here! History will bear me out!' . . . 'You are an obscene torturer! You deserve to hang!' (Coetzee 2004: 125)

I would surmise that the in-betweenness that has characterised the Magistrate up to this moment, his position between Empire and barbarians, arrives to the conclusion: the protagonist experiences a process of moral elevation. Whereas in the first part of the novel the Magistrate tends to perpetuate the colonial preconceived principles of Otherness, the barbarian's opposition to civilization, in the second part, his moral awareness is elevated: he is now able to denounce the violent acts against the prisoners. He resists the notion of Otherness and learns the final lesson that "the crime that is latent in us we must inflict on ourselves" (Coetzee 2004: 160): these words will be repeated to Colonel Joll when the Magistrate will see him for the last time.

After the Magistrate's public resistance, the repercussions on him are severe. Colonel Joll's public beating with the hammer is just the first device that the torturers use against the man. The torturers' scope is to amuse themselves in order to reduce his psyche and body to an inhuman level. In playing the role of the clown, he is subjected to the most shameful punishments, for instance when he has to stand naked before his henchmen

or when he is forced to feed himself with gallons of salt water. The worst abuse occurs when a mock-hanging takes place and the Magistrate almost dies. However, the man is able to understand his limits; he discovers that when a new menace is posed to him, he is able to endure the situation despite his weakness. During his detention, the Magistrate muses over the reasons that lay behind torture, he asks himself why torturers devote themselves to such work. It is of crucial importance the moment in which he has a confrontation with Mandel:

‘Forgive me if the question seems impudent, but I would like to ask: How do you find it possible to eat afterwards, after you have been . . . working with people? That is a question I have always asked myself about executioners and other such people . . . I have imagined that one would want to wash one’s hands. But no ordinary washing would be enough, one would require priestly intervention, a ceremonial of cleansing, don’t you think? Some kind of purging of one’s soul too – that is how I have imagined it. Otherwise how would it be possible to return to everyday life – to sit down at table, for instance, and break bread with one’s family or one’s comrades? (Coetzee 2004: 138)

The extent of the Magistrate’s reflection is impressive. It shows the humanity of a man who has lost everything: his quiet life, his job, his pastimes, his sexuality, his feelings. He is now attempting to imagine how the figure of a torturer can exist, his capability of going on with his life, eating, breathing, living, without questioning his role, without expressing any remorse even for a moment.

As a kind of conclusion, I think that the purpose of *Waiting for the Barbarians* is to reveal the worst level that a human being can reach. This is visible through the figure of the torturer who, even though Coetzee has never provided a crystal clear answer, represents the condition of a human being who has lost his humane side. The novel enables the reader to comprehend that a form of barbarism may be present in all of us. As Gallagher points out:

“All human beings have a latent capacity for crime, an inner corruption that prompts the creation of Others” (1991: 131). When human beings cast themselves as superior beings in the name of a false cause, the danger of erecting oneself against an imagined Other, who unfairly becomes the scapegoat, emerges. And when the Other is conceived as an enemy, a “barbarian”, there is the risk that the perpetration of violence against him may become legitimate. This discourse is particularly relevant in relation to our contemporary society, where the fear of outside “barbarians” has led to the creation of boundaries, in which the opposition between “us” and “them” appears as irreversible. The novel allows the reader to wonder about what would happen if, instead of waiting for the barbarians’ arrival, one “would be more open to an encounter with others” (Boletsi 2007: 94). Only through the abolition of a dichotomous view of the world can human beings create a fairer society in which resistance to the different would be replaced by the acceptance of the Other.

#### **2.4. The Magistrate and the Barbarian girl**

At the beginning of the second chapter, the Magistrate comes across the barbarian woman, one of the prisoners that Colonel Joll has brought into the colonial outpost: “She kneels in the shade of the barracks wall a few yards from the gate, muffled in a coat too large for her, a fur cap open before her on the ground. She has the straight black eyebrows, the glossy black hair of the barbarians. What is a barbarian woman doing in town begging?” (Coetzee 2004: 27). The girl has been left behind, she wears a large coat with a fur cap that will be a recurrent element in the Magistrate’s dreams. The signs of torture are evident on her: she is a victim of Empire’s interrogations and she has been rendered lame and almost blind. The girl arouses the Magistrate’s interest from their first encounter, especially in his desire to discover what lays behind her marks. For this reason, the Magistrate shelters the girl in his home and finds her a job as helper for the cleaning and kitchen staff. An intimate relationship is established when the man takes the girl into his room. From this moment onwards, a ritual between the Magistrate and the barbarian

woman begins. First, the Magistrate washes the girl's naked body. He dries her and rubs her with almond oil. She consents to all his gestures. Then, the man is overcome by drowsiness and he falls into sleep. Every time he wakes up, he feels confused and dazed. Despite the sensual atmosphere, the Magistrate is not attracted by the girl's "stocky little body" (Coetzee 2004: 32).

It might be suggested that an affinity exists between the Magistrate and the torturer. This is shown by the Magistrate's obsession with the girl. Notwithstanding his efforts, he is not able to imagine her as a perfectly normal woman. Even though he should have seen her on the day she has been brought in by the Third Bureau's officers, tied with the other barbarian prisoners, the Magistrate cannot recall that precise moment: a blank space is left when he thinks about all the lined up captives. As a result, she functions as the object of desire that the man wants to understand. He feels the urge to decipher the signs that the torturers have left on her body. At the same time, he questions his attitude towards her, in particular when an analogy with the oppressor's figure emerges:

What depravity is it that is creeping upon me? I search for secrets and answers, no matter how bizarre, like an old woman reading tea-leaves. There is nothing to link me with torturers, people who sit waiting like beetles in dark cellars. How can I believe that a bed is anything but a bed, a woman's body anything but a site of joy? I must assert my distance from Colonel Joll! I will not suffer for his crimes! (Coetzee 2004: 48)

Dovey observes that "the Magistrate wishes to know the girl as she was, whole and perfect; for only in knowing her thus can he free himself from bondage to her form as victim, and free himself to establish a different kind of relationship with her, unmediated by the oppressor" (Dovey 1988: 239). Likewise the torturers project the woman as Other, so does the Magistrate yearn for the knowledge of her as Other: she is both the victim of the persecutors' imperialistic mind-set and of the Magistrate's obsessive

curiosity. The similarity between the Magistrate and the torturer is also discernible as far as the theme of sexuality is concerned. As Head suggests, “phallic desire [is] an imposition on the Other” (1997: 84): the Magistrate wants to subjugate a foreign body that he is unable to comprehend. However, during his process of self-evaluation, “he realizes the desire to possess the ‘interior’ of the girl is a ‘mistake’, which, effectively, would involve a projection of his own schema – the marking of her surface that her torturers had attempted” (Head 1997: 85). For this reason, the Magistrate does not feel attracted by the woman. Sexual intercourse between them occurs only during her return to the barbarian people, when she is outside the Empire’s territories, the moment in which she is finally out of the torturers’ grasp. Moreover, the resemblance between the torturer and the Magistrate is evident with regard to language. In the first place, the torturer/colonizer drastically reduces the victim’s ability to speak. As Jolly points out, the Empire’s logic leads the torturer to inflict pain in order to achieve a language of truth: through oppression, the torturer imposes his own language on the victim and the barbarian language is completely destroyed (Jolly 1996: 126). The Magistrate, on the other hand, shows a complete disinterest in learning the barbarian language. Despite the numerous occasions in which he could have acquired some knowledge about the barbarian tongue, his lack of curiosity designates the girl as Other. Even though he does not impose his language on her, through his behaviour, he sets a distance between them. It is only when the Magistrate and the girl are in the desert, while she talks animatedly with the other men, the Magistrate regrets not to have learned her native tongue before. If he had shown an interest for her language, he would have surely attained a closer relationship with her.

In connection with the practice of violence, torture has been inflicted upon the barbarian girl on two levels. On the one hand, she is alleged to have been beaten; the consequence is that she cannot walk because the torturers have broken their feet. On the other hand, she cannot see properly. After the Magistrate keeps asking questions about what the torturers have done to the girl’s eyes, she replies:



‘You are always asking me that question, so I will now tell you. It was a fork, a kind of fork with only two teeth. There were little knobs on the teeth to make them blunt. They put it in the coals till it was hot, then they touched you with it, to burn you . . . they said they would burn my eyes out, but they did not. The man brought it very close to my face and made me look at it. They held my eyelids open . . . after that I could not see properly any more. There was a blur in the middle of everything I looked at; I could see only around the edges. (Coetzee 2004: 44)

The girl describes with resignation the Empire’s devices to reveal the truth about a supposed barbarian expedition. From her words, it can be deduced that the torturers have spared her life: while other barbarians have been burned, she has been rendered almost blind and deformed.<sup>38</sup>

Many critics have explained the bond between the Magistrate and the barbarian girl as an allegory of the act of writing. In particular, Dovey has compared the act of writing to a process of expiation, especially when the novel reproduces images of obliviousness, as for example in the ritual’s scenes. She states: “This blank space, outside time, is a release from the ‘life’ of the discourse, and describes the effect achieved by the act of writing itself, an act which, like the Magistrate’s ministrations to the girl, must be seen as a ritual expiation of guilt. This, then, is the covert function of the liberal ‘literature of witness’” (Dovey 1988: 221). Along this line, the Magistrate’s feeling of guilt in his relationship with the barbarian woman is similar to the liberal writer’s sense of guilt in his/her relation to his narrative’s victim. The barbarian girl’s role is dual-purpose: firstly, she is the novel’s suffering

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<sup>38</sup> As far as the theme of violence in connection with the barbarian girl is concerned, it seems appropriate to emphasize the suffering that many South African women experienced during apartheid, especially those who were imprisoned. A great number of non-white women were killed, raped, or tortured. Justin Lawler notes: “Women in prisons during apartheid experienced many of the same discriminations and emotional concerns as men. But they also survived gender-based violence and suffered indignities unique to their sex. Their role as mothers and women, who continuously fought for freedom, make them some of the toughest survivors of apartheid and the prison systems. This alone gives women the respect and honor that they deserve in their key role of fighting apartheid”. (Lawler, “History of Women in Prisons during Apartheid by Justin Lawler” in *South African History Online*, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/history-women-prisons-during-apartheid-justin-lawler>)

victim; secondly, she is the source of the liberal writer's discourse. Conversely, the liberal writer and the Magistrate's role is to be a witness to suffering: "The suffering victim becomes a means of establishing an identity for the liberal writer . . . the writer casts him/herself in the role of the seer, truth-teller, of blameless one" (Dovey 1988: 223).

As a result, it may be argued that the main function of the barbarian girl in the novel is to allow the Magistrate's search for his identity. The journey through the desert constitutes the means through which the Magistrate reaches his aim.<sup>39</sup> When the barbarian woman returns to her people, the Magistrate establishes himself as the victim: "The act of returning the girl to her people allows the Magistrate to cast himself in the role of the one who suffers, and the hardships of the journey . . . are the self-imposed suffering, or penance, which, it seems, frees him to consummate his relationship with the girl" (Dovey 1988: 227). When the Magister sleeps with the girl, he is unsure about the reasons that lie behind his being with her: does he desire the girl's wholeness or her tortured body? "Is it she I want or the traces of a history her body bears?" (Coetzee 2004: 70). In the moment in which the Magistrate becomes the one who suffers, his attraction for the barbarian woman completely disappears. Thus, during his time in prison, when he attempts to recall her image, she appears as blurred: "Desire is displaced onto the victim's signs of suffering at the hands of the oppressor, rather than in a demand for a relationship different from that defined by the oppressor" (Dovey 1988: 247).

In the novel, the relationship between the Magistrate and the barbarian woman is characterised also by the protagonist's recurrent dreams. Since the narrative is in the present tense, the dreams may symbolise the chance for the Magistrate to escape from a tough real world. Numerous dreams are present

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<sup>39</sup> The Magistrate's journey through the desert may be a reminiscent of the Israelites' exodus from Egypt to Sinai. In my opinion, the desert might symbolise the place through which the fleeing from oppression becomes possible. The Magistrate helps the barbarian woman to traverse the desert in order to achieve freedom from Empire's tyranny. In the same way, the Israelites escape from the Egyptian pharaoh's despotism to achieve their liberty from enslavement.

in the novel. The first of the dreams' sequence has the function to set the scene that the Magistrate will rebuild throughout the narrative:

As I glide across the square, dark figures separate out from the whiteness, children at playing a snowcastle on top of which they have planted a little red flag . . . I am aware of my bulk, my shadowiness, therefore I am not surprised that the children melt away on either side as I approach. All but one. Older than the others, perhaps not even a child, she sits in the snow with her hooded back to me working at the door of the castle, her legs splayed, burrowing, patting, moulding. I stand behind her and watch. She does not turn. I try to imagine the face between the petals of her peaked hood but cannot. (Coetzee 2004: 10)

The protagonists of the dream are a group of children who are building a snowcastle. Among them, an older girl, who wears a hooded coat, is working at the castle's door. She does not turn towards the Magistrate so that he cannot see her. Therefore, he attempts to imagine her face: the reference to the barbarian girl is crystal clear. The second dream occurs after the Magistrate has sheltered the girl into his home and is trying to understand what the police officers have done to her. Again, the Magistrate sees the children building a snow castle; a hooded child is sat among them and he or she, maybe it, does not turn towards him: "The face I see is blank, featureless; it is the face of an embryo or a tiny whale; it is not a face at all but another part of the human body that bulges under the skin; it is white; it is the snow itself. Between numb fingers I hold out a coin" (Coetzee 2004: 40). According to Head, "the logic of this dream is to expiate (as the coin suggests) the ambivalence of the magistrate's earlier 'reading' of the scene: the figure is a child, the earlier hint of sexual availability expunged; the face is still resistant to the expectations and projections of the onlooker's gaze" (1997: 90). As far as the third dream is concerned, this time the figure is the barbarian girl in the form of a smiling child. The girl is building a snow fort, a reference to the Empire's walled town. The outpost's square is empty: the

Magistrate would tell the girl to put some people in it but he cannot be heard. This emptiness may allude to the town's final collapse that takes place at the end of the novel, when both Empire's officers and inhabitants flee from the colonial settlement. In one of the subsequent dreams, the girl, who is dressed in her best, is building a clay oven in the desert and offers a freshly baked loaf of bread to the Magistrate. He feels so grateful that he cannot control the impulse to enfold her; nonetheless, just before the embrace, he wakes up. According to Dovey, "the gift of broken bread is a symbol of forgiveness: if in bringing bread (*pain*), the girl takes the pain away, it is because the dream offers the solace of guilt expiated through suffering, and the girl, again whole and perfect, is a symbol of self-transcendence achieved through expiation" (1988: 232). Although I agree with Dovey's statement, I also believe that the dream may function as a symbol of human's struggle, the ability of human beings to cope with difficult conditions. The final dream takes place after the discovery of a buried graveyard within the walled town: the Magistrate, who stands in the unearthed grave, rips from a hole in the ground a bent, tarnished fork and a dead parrot whose eye sockets are empty. Dovey points out that "the dream invokes the repetition of individual and shared history as a return of the repressed . . . in the sense of a past which, while it is seemingly obliterated, nevertheless persists in and impinges upon the present" (1988: 257). To conclude, the novel ends with an echo of the dream-scene: the Magistrate watches some children building a snowman. Even though he sees that the snowman lacks its arms, he refrains from disturbing the little ones. He feels content but his last thoughts convey a tone of resignation: "This is not the scene I dreamed of. Like much else nowadays I leave it feeling stupid, like a man who lost his way long ago but presses on along a road that may lead nowhere" (Coetzee 2004: 170). I believe that the Magistrate is attempting to realize the new condition in which he finds himself: Empire has been annihilated and his past life has been destroyed. Now the time has come for a new beginning which, as in a dream, is represented by the playing children. In fact, the children's concluding image provides a metaphor of

hope for the future: instead of a snowcastle or a fort, they finally build a snowman. As Dovey states:

The Magistrate is disposed of an Empire, of a woman, of his own story, of the 'truth'. He is dispossessed of his desire . . . this dispossession is, however, not finally devoid of hope, for the presence of children in the closing scenes of the narrative implies a projection into a future in which the text will be 're-possessioned', a future in which different forms of possession will be possible. (Dovey 1988: 258)

## **2.5. History and the process of reading: the Magistrate's wooden slips and the barbarian woman**

In the novel, it is relevant to observe the importance of the function that history and the process of reading perform in relation to the wooden slips and the barbarian woman. It might be suggested that the slips and the girl's signs are the symbols of a buried history that the Magistrate seeks to disclose. As far as the poplar slips are concerned, in the first chapter, the Magistrate explains that one of his main hobbies consists in the excavation of ruins that are located south of the walled town. Buried in these ruins, the protagonist has discovered two hundred and fifty-six slips, which bear an archaic script that the Magistrate is not able to decipher. Although the protagonist attempts to uncover the scripts' message, he fails to reach his aim. Whether the wooden slips remind of a former barbarian population's language or not, he is not able to find a crystal clear solution. What is sure, however, is that, even though their significance cannot be unveiled, the scripts are reminiscent of the circularity of history, a history that is related to the barbarians, in which Empire has played a crucial role. As Gallagher underlines, "the novel invokes a new pattern: one of oppressor and oppressed continually struggling throughout history, building fort upon fort, one false civilization after another" (1991: 134). Due to Empire's disruption, a former barbarian life has been completely erased and the remnants of such violence are symbolised by the poplar slips. Appearing as a warning message, they are the memory of

Empire's guilt; despite the attempt to obscure barbarians' roots, the past has come to surface. As a consequence, I would suggest that the wooden slips stand for barbarians' suffering, the memory of Empire's sin, a past that cannot be enshrouded under the town's historical ruins, and the final hope that Empire's violence has been revealed.

Similarly, the barbarian woman's undecipherable marks are the manifestation of Empire's violence; the Magistrate becomes obsessed about decoding her signs. Likewise the wooden slips, the woman's marks are the symbols of the girl's suffering, a colonial history that has been inscribed on her body and that the protagonist is not able to interpret. Consequently, the girl's tortured body can be compared to a text that the Magistrate attempts to read in the same way as he attempts to comprehend the slips' meaning. As Adams points out:

The link between the poplar slips and the barbarian girl is reinforced in a dream that the Magistrate has after he questions a guard about what happened to the girl in the torture chamber. In this dream, the Magistrate sees a "blank, featureless" face reminiscent of the girl's blind stare. He holds out a coin to this face, reproducing in this gesture the payment he would make for a poplar strip. (Adams 2015: 171)

Given these points, the attention should be focused on the role of the Magistrate in relation to history and the process of reading. Through the protagonist's attempt to decipher the wooden slips and the girl's marks, the novel furnishes the reader with an act of interpretation in which the Magistrate acts as a truth teller, "an agent of sight, or witness" (Dovey 1988: 252), who finally exposes the lies that "the history of Empire" (Coetzee 2004: 169) has foisted on his subjects. In the final chapter, the Magistrate states: "I wanted to live outside history. I wanted to live outside the history that Empire imposes on its subjects, even its lost subjects. I never wished it for the barbarians that they should have the history of Empire laid upon them. How can I believe that that is cause for shame?" (Coetzee 2004: 169). The

Magistrate completely rejects the history that Empire has forced on its people; he would live outside a historical perspective rather than accepting the lies that have forged Empire's history. As a result, he wishes for a re-imagination of history, a history that would enable a multiplicity of interpretations and would stand in opposition to Empire's imposed view. This is exactly what the Magistrate aims to do in the scene in which he interprets the wooden slips' characters. In attaching his own meaning to one of the poplar slip, not only does the Magistrate defy Colonel Joll, but also he discloses Empire's historical guilt:

‘Now let us see what the next one says. See, there is only a single character. It is the barbarian character *war*, but it has other senses too. It can stand for vengeance, and, if turn it upside down like this, it can be made to read *justice*. There is no knowing which sense is intended. That is part of barbarian cunning. ‘It is the same with the rest of these slips.’ I plunge my good hand into the chest and stir. ‘They form an allegory. They can be read in many orders. Further, each single slip can be read in many ways’.  
(Coetzee 2004: 122)

The fixity of Empire's historical view stands in opposition to the fluidity of a new interpretation of history that, in the above passage, is provided by the Magistrate's explanation of unknown signs. However, it requires some efforts for the Magistrate to offer such interpretations outside Empire's control. This is shown by his failed attempt to write “a record of settlement to be left of posterity” (Coetzee 2004: 168). Head suggests an outstanding explanation for the Magistrate's inability to write down a historical account:

The magistrate's problem is in the conception and function of history. He wants to escape the history that Empire has imposed, and feels that such freedom must involve living outside history. Yet this desire to escape can also be read as a need to recast history – or to reimagine it – in a form which liberates it from hierarchical control. (Head 1997: 89)

Since he has lived his entire life inside Empire's domains, the Magistrate cannot write his own story; his mind is not free to go beyond Empire's influence. Having been shaped along this line, the only language he knows is Empire's authoritative language. Only after having seen the real face of Empire and after his experience as Other, the nameless protagonist realizes that Empire's language is not appropriate for him. Therefore, he begins to deconstruct this imperialistic discourse in order to think outside its logic. This is the reason why he is unable to write his own history: he does not possess the proper language to construct a new vision of history. Maybe it will be the turn of another magistrate, who will live outside Empire's authority, to offer a different view of a past that, up until now, has been subjugated to Empire's authority.

To conclude, I would like to point out that Empire's imposition of its own history may be a reminiscent of South African history. In a similar way to the novel's imperial power, Afrikaner authority imposed its own historical perspective on South Africans, totally obscuring and hiding the role of non-white people throughout the country's history. Since the novel was published during the apartheid regime, the highest level of Afrikaner power, one may consider: does Coetzee wish for a re-imagination of South African history? A new historical portrait free from any imperialistic or colonial imposition?

## **2.6. The novel's narrative techniques: Coetzee's allegorical strategy**

"The ant boring its way through rock is a good metaphor for all of Coetzee's writing" (Attwell 2015: 2). As Attwell suggests, when the reader engages with Coetzee's narrative, the process of reading requires some effort since his writing is full of unconventional strategies that renders the reading engaging but also complex. As far as *Waiting for the Barbarians* is concerned, the novel's exceptionality stands in its ability to transcend the South African reality; in fact, the narrative can be analysed from different and various perspectives and every reader can attach his/her own meaning to



it. In this last section, the attention will be focused on the main narrative strategies that Coetzee adopts in *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

First of all, on a thematic level, the relationship between language and identity is significant, especially the opposition between the “I” and the “Other”. According to Dovey, Coetzee’s novel presents a critique of the liberal humanist novel through which the writer offers “a thematics of the Lacanian subject, which provides the means for a deconstructive re-writing of these themes and genres”: this strategy is called by Dovey “(Lacanian) psychoanalytic criticism-as-fiction” (1988: 11). Coetzee’s narrative recalls the French psychoanalyst Lacan in his “genesis of the individual as a human being” (Canepari 2000: 105) that he originated by applying structuralist linguistic models to psychoanalysis, in particular to Freud’s concept of the unconscious:

For Lacan it is in fact only when the individual enters into the Symbolic Order of language that s/he can perceive him/herself as a distinct individuality and, by being provided with the grammatical categories of the personal pronouns which offer a reference for his/her identity, can become a social human being as opposed to the biological being s/he was born as. (Canepari 2000: 105)

In Coetzee’s novel, the affirmation of identity takes place when an opposition to the Other exists. This is shown both by the Magistrate’s relationship with the barbarian girl and by Empire’s contrast with the barbarians. On the one hand, the author underlines the power of language in the creation of oppressive systems. In the novel, language is used to oppress human beings: “Under Empire, language is itself debased” (Neumann 1990: 70). An example is provided by the scene in which Colonel Joll’s prisoners have the word “ENEMY” inscribed on their bodies. On the other hand, the affirmation of identity is achieved only through the confrontation with the Other: the colonizer’s “superior” identity is recognizable exclusively when it confronts

the “inferior” identity of the Other. As a result, Empire’s existence is strictly bound to the barbarians’ existence.

Moreover, Coetzee’s allegorical strategy plays a key role in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Notwithstanding the author’s lack of specificity in relation to time and place, the novel suggests a reference to the contemporary South African situation, in particular its allusion to the repressive regime of apartheid. Dovey proposes that Coetzee’s use of allegory is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin’s definition of allegory: “Allegories are, in the realm of thought, what ruins are in the realm of things”:

Through their repetition of prior modes of discourse, Coetzee’s allegories recognise that they cannot remove themselves from those historically located discourses of which they offer a critique . . . Coetzee’s novels self-reflexively register these failures and imply an analysis of their sources. (Dovey 1996: 146)

Through the Magistrate’s narration, Coetzee speaks beyond the late-colonialist situation of apartheid. Even though the novel may be regarded as a universal allegory of colonialism, particularly in its confrontation between colonizer and colonized, the allegorical strategy allows the writer to be detached from a specific historical reference. The novelist is able to deal with two main historical discourses: first, the fictional historical discourse present in his own story, Empire’s imperialism; secondly, colonial discourse, a discourse that may refer to any oppressive society without directly mentioning it. Thus, the ambivalence of his writing is bound to this allegorical technique: his criticism of a historically located discourse without explicitly drawing to it.

In addition, it can be argued that, through the strategy of allegory, not only does the novel show a failure of interpretation in the Magistrate’s attempt to read the barbarian girl’s marks and the wooden slips; also, the novel involves an active role on the part of the reader. According to Dovey, “the Magistrate’s narrative provides evidence of two broad areas of failure in

liberal humanist discourse: first of all its failure to interpret and offer resistance to the militarised totalitarian phase of colonisation and, secondly, its failure to interpret and articulate the history of the colonised” (1996: 141). The first, “illustrated via the metaphor of blindness and sight” (Dovey 1996: 141), sees the protagonist’s process from a superior sight to a position of blindness and uncertainty throughout the novel. The second is shown by the Magistrate’s relationship with the barbarian woman and his struggle to give meaning to her suffering. The Magistrate’s failure in his process of reading underlines the difficulty of the act of interpretation on the part of the reader.

It seems to me that Dovey’s interpretation of Coetzee’s allegorical style contributes to explain the writer’s reference to broader ideas through the use of hidden images, symbols or metaphors. However, I agree with Attridge’s viewpoint when he states that Coetzee’s works should not be confined only to an allegorical reading. According to him, it is thanks to “a literary reading” (Attridge 2004: 39) that the magnificence of Coetzee’s writing can be fully grasped and the text becomes an experience for the reader. As Attridge notes:

In every event of reading a fictional text, the meanings of the words solidify into the customary ingredients of such writing – characters, places, relationships, plot complications and resolutions – which are derived from my familiarity with the genre, my participation in the shared meanings of my culture, and from my own personal history. At the same time, I respond emotionally to these meanings as they engage with my own stores of knowledge and memory. (Attridge 2004: 40)

From Attridge’s point of view, every time the reader is absorbed into his reading, he sees the text in a new light, attaching his or her own meanings. This shows that when something is unclear or ambivalent, the reader does not necessarily have to look for some explanation: the power of reading stands in the reader’s ability to “live the text” (Attridge 2004: 40) as it is.

To conclude, an observation on the main postmodern narrative devices should be furnished in order to have a complete portrait of the novel. In the first place, the narrative is given in the present tense with an autodiegetic narrator as if the action were taking place in front of the reader; narrative time and narrated time are conflated so that the protagonist's speech and the action coincide. Dovey points out: "It is a mode of narration which insists upon the discourse *as discourse*, flouting the conventions of *vraisemblance* not only by having the Magistrate narrate actions in the present tense, but also by having him narrate situations of speechlessness" (Dovey 1988: 215). Moreover, external commentaries are not present in the narrative and the reader has access only to the Magistrate's thoughts and perspective. Deictics represent another technique used by the writer. Dovey states that "the appropriate deictics for autodiegetic narration and present verb forms are, for example, now, today, this morning, yesterday, tomorrow . . . but there are numerous instances which do not locate events accurately in time with respect to the *I* in the present" (1988: 216). Deictics are used in the novel to highlight the speaker's distance from the events that are described.

Coetzee, who has been defined in Head's words "the first South African writer to produce overtly self-conscious fictions drawing explicitly on international postmodernism" (Head 1997: 1), introduces postmodernist devices in his narrative. Postmodernism is characterised by an ontological uncertainty and epistemological scepticism, a spirit of heterogeneity and tolerance, a focus on language and textuality, where certainty and truth are not possible anymore; what is said is more important than reality. Language becomes plural, fluid, a site of conflict, negotiation and debate. Furthermore, a fragmentation with historical truth creates a dialogue between man and history, thanks to which an impulse of negation and unmasking takes place: a celebration of silence and otherness always repressed in Western culture, an impulse to decentre and to create doubts, a spirit of indeterminacy establish the basis for this new narrative. This is what Coetzee attempts to do in his novel, where Empire's authoritarianism tries to foist its own truths upon a world that cannot be fixed. The novel presents a non-linear plot in

which the future is completely unknown. Blank spaces, gaps and moments of silence imposed by a threatening authority help to construct an insecure, fearsome and vulnerable world. As Watson observes: “Coetzee wants to create what Barthes would have called a ‘writable’ text, one which makes the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text’, one which does not attempt to reduce the potentially multiple meanings, the ‘plurality’ of the text, by fixing one single meaning for it” (Watson 1996: 18). In order to stress the process of mutability in opposition to a fixed real world, the Magistrate’s narrative is also enriched by the presence of the seasons’ cycle. However, the future cannot alter its unpredictable nature.

### CHAPTER THREE

*Disgrace*'s protagonist David Lurie describes 1990s South Africa as follows:

A risk to own anything: a car, a pair of shoes, a packet of cigarettes. Not enough to go around, not enough cars, shoes, cigarettes. Too many people, too few things. What there is must go into circulation, so that everyone can have a chance to be happy for a day . . . that is how one must see life in this country: in its schematic aspect. Otherwise one could go mad. Cars, shoes; women too. There must be some niche in the system for women and what happens to them. (Coetzee 2000: 98)

The country is depicted as dangerous and overpopulated, theft appears to be a severe social plague and happiness something difficult to achieve. This reality is shown to be particularly threatening for women, the most vulnerable group in South African society. I believe that Chapter 11, from which the quoted paragraph has been taken, is the most significant in *Disgrace* and it presents what the central theme of my analysis will be: violence against women. However, before going in depth into this question, I will provide a brief plot of the novel and an outline of the third chapter.

Thanks to *Disgrace*, which was published in 1999, J. M. Coetzee was awarded the Booker Prize for the second time (he won his first Booker Prize for *Life & Times of Michael K* in 1983). Despite the novel's international success, this work did not receive the same positive acclaim in South Africa. The way in which race relations are represented and the decision to choose, as his topic, the rape of a white South African woman by three black men have led many South African writers to acutely criticise Coetzee's novel. *Disgrace* has been defined as offensive, racist, ambiguous, troubling. During an interview in Johannesburg in 2006, Nadine Gordimer said: "In the novel 'Disgrace' there is not one black person who is a real human being".<sup>40</sup> It

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<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Donadio, Rachel. "Out of South Africa" in *The New York Times Sunday Book Review*, 16 Dec. 2007:

should be taken into account that during the 1990s, South Africa was undergoing a profound process of transformation and rehabilitation from the apartheid era. The need to build a cohesive unity rather than focusing the attention on the difference among the various South African ethnic groups was of crucial importance. Therefore, after the democratic victory and Nelson Mandela's election as President in 1994, one may wonder: why does Coetzee decide to give such disharmonious portrait of South African society and, in particular, to present the divergence between different racial communities?

*Disgrace* tells the story of David Lurie, a fifty-two-year-old Professor of Communication Studies, once Professor of Literature, at the Cape Technical University of Cape Town. From the beginning, it is evident that, differently from what he claims, the twice-divorced protagonist has not “solved the problem of sex rather well” (Coetzee 2000: 1). David acts as a Don Juan, sleeping with prostitutes and having liaisons with different women. He does not love what he teaches and his students do not show enthusiasm for his lectures. After having written three books, in the last years he has attempted to write a work on Byron, “a meditation on love between the sexes in the form of a chamber opera” (Coetzee 2000: 4). One day his life completely changes when he decides to seduce one of his students, Melanie Isaacs. Due to the interference of Melanie's parents, their sexual intercourse leads to a disciplinary hearing where David is requested by the disciplinary committee to apologise and to do some “*counselling*” (Coetzee 2000: 66).

After his refusal, David resigns and goes to Salem, in the Eastern Cape, where his grown-up daughter Lucy lives. Lucy leads a country lifestyle in her smallholding, living only with her dogs and being helped by her neighbour Petrus. In Salem, David focuses on two main tasks: he becomes assistant of Bev Shaw, one of Lucy's friends who runs an animal clinic, and he attempts to go on with his composition. The job at the animal clinic is

emotionally demanding for David: not only does he assist Bev Shaw in euthanizing animals that are in desperate conditions, but also he takes on the responsibility to dispose of the dead dogs' carcasses. Notwithstanding his initial reluctance to adapt to his daughter's way of living, he is able to find his place in this new environment. Unfortunately, all his efforts are soon disrupted when three black men attack Lucy's home: they kill all her dogs (except for the bulldog Katy), they try to burn David's alive and they rape Lucy one after the other. The last part of the novel deals with David and Lucy's reaction to the rape: while David asks for his daughter's justice, Lucy takes the decision not to report her incident to the police. David, deeply affected by the violation of his daughter's body, tries to devote himself entirely to his job at the clinic and to his work on Byron. At the end of the novel, Lucy discovers that she is pregnant and, determined not to leave the South African land, she is willing to become Petrus' third wife in order to obtain his protection (while Petrus can profit from Lucy's land). Since the text suggests that Petrus might have known about the farm's attack, her choice to marry him is astonishing. In the end, both father and daughter try to cope with the repercussions of the disgrace that has completely upset their precarious equilibrium.

The aim of this chapter is to focus on the theme of sexual violence in relation to *Disgrace*; in particular, the following analysis will be divided into four main subsections. First, the link between *Disgrace* and the context of post-apartheid South Africa will be investigated. This is a new phase of transformation that clearly emerges from the novel. Secondly, an attempt to understand rape's cultural role will be presented, specifically concentrating on the question of violence against women in the post-apartheid era. In addition, a close examination of the two main rape scenes and the protagonist's process of redemption will be scrutinised. To conclude, this chapter will attempt to furnish a final observation on *Disgrace*'s main narrative strategies.

## **1. *Disgrace* and the new South Africa**



After the eradication of the apartheid's oppressive regime and the liberation of Nelson Mandela in 1990, South Africa was ready to embark on a process of national reconstruction. A climate of happiness and euphoria pervaded South African society, especially because South Africans had optimistic expectations for the country's future. Their hopes concerned economic and political security, peace and stability, all what they had been deprived of in the previous decades. The promulgation of the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa* in 1996 was one of the first steps towards the creation of an equal society. In the Constitution's Preamble, South Africa's major aspirations were defined in order to shape the new democratic and egalitarian nation:

Heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights;

Lay the foundations for a democratic and open society in which government is based on the will of the people and every citizen is equally protected by law;

Improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person; and

Build a united and democratic South Africa able to take its rightful place as a sovereign state in the family of nations.<sup>41</sup> (*Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*, 1996)

However, this positive attitude was soon replaced by the realization that South Africa had to cope with the legacy of apartheid: an economy in decline, the gap between the rich and the poor people (poverty afflicted the black population in particular), low unemployment levels, the shortcomings in public service, violence, crime, and the contrast among the diverse ethnic communities.

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<sup>41</sup> *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act*, No. 108 of 1996, Preamble: <https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/images/a108-96.pdf>. Accessed 21 August 2018.

In an article entitled “End of Apartheid in South Africa? Not in Economic Terms”<sup>42</sup>, the journalist Goodman claims that “apartheid has essentially persisted in economic forms” (Goodman 2017). South African society does not guarantee equal opportunities; the disparities between black and white people have persisted and, in certain cases, “the geographic strictures of apartheid” have been reinforced (Goodman 2017). Despite its attempts to realize the constitutional ideals, the journalist notes that South Africa still remains “a land of astonishing contrasts” (Goodman 2017).

In the novel *Disgrace*, it can be suggested that Coetzee offers a realistic portrait of the process of change, which post-apartheid South Africa has experienced. What I attempt to argue is that throughout the narrative a subtle and ironic critique of South African transitional society can be evinced. This is shown by the author’s reference to themes such as ethnicity, sexuality, education, crime and the law. One of the first examples occurs at the beginning of *Disgrace*, when the reader discovers that the protagonist has a weekly arrangement (every Thursdays) with a coloured prostitute named Soraya. David finds himself wondering how the woman is capable of blending her daily and respectable lifestyle with her existence as a prostitute: “That would be unusual for a Muslim, but all things are possible these days” (Coetzee 2000: 3). Not only does the phrase “all things are possible these days” underlines that something has differed from the past, but also the protagonist is receiving a benefit from this change. In fact, sexual relations between different races have become a novelty; one should remember the Immorality Act that, during apartheid, caused sex between different ethnic groups to be illegal. If David’s sexual intercourse with the Muslim prostitute Soraya had occurred in the apartheid era, he would have been imprisoned. David’s relation with Soraya would have been something inconceivable in the past. As Attridge observes, in the new contemporary South Africa there are “changed surroundings, a new mentality, different ways of doing things”

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<sup>42</sup> Goodman, S. Peter. “End of Apartheid in South Africa? Not in Economic Terms” in The New York Times, Oct. 24, 2017: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/24/business/south-africa-economy-apartheid.html>. Accessed 21 August 2018.

(Attridge 2004: 165). When his rendezvous with Soraya ends, David has a liaison with the new secretary of his department, Dawn. An interesting detail emerges when the woman speaks with David since she complains about the country's general disorder: "Now people just pick and choose which laws they want to obey. It's anarchy. How can you bring up children when there's anarchy all around?" (Coetzee 2000: 9). As far as the educational system is concerned, David also mentions "the great rationalization" (Coetzee 2000: 3), one of the major changes of post-apartheid South Africa. Due to the new educational policy, "once a professor of modern languages, [David] has been, since Classics and Modern Languages were closed down . . . adjunct professor of communications" (Coetzee 2000: 3).

Moreover, the meeting that David has with his ex-wife Rosalind is all-important since an allusion to the loss of privileges of white South Africans is presented. Rosalind affirms that "no sympathy" (Coetzee 2000: 44) will be reserved for David; the times are changed and any caring attitude can be manifested towards a white man who has had a sexual relation with one of his students. In addition, a bond between Melanie Isaacs's play, "*Sunset at the Globe Salon* . . . a comedy of the new South Africa set in a hairdressing salon in Hillbrow, Johannesburg" (Coetzee 2000: 23) and the reality of the contemporary South Africa can be traced. I agree with Attridge when he claims: "Lurie's somewhat jaundiced description of the play's premise no doubt reflects his view that the process of coming to terms with the legacy of apartheid will be much more painful and long drawn out than is suggested by this cheerful divertissement with its racial and sexual liberties" (Attridge 2004: 167). A further comment on the new South Africa is offered when David refuses to apologise for his affair with the student Melanie: he does not give a public confession nor does he want to do some counselling in order to make amends. He declares: "These are puritanical times. Private life is public business. Prurience is respectable, prurience and sentiment. They wanted a spectacle: breast-beating, remorse, tears if possible. A TV show" (Coetzee 2000: 66). In this new era, sexual intimacy has become a public business; Attridge suggests: "Rather than heralding a greater acceptance of

sexual diversity and sexual needs, this shift marks an increase in puritanical surveillance and moralistic denunciation” (Attridge 2004: 168). The novel highlights a final aspect when South Africa is described as unsafe. In the second part of the novel, when David makes the acquaintance of Petrus, he expresses his private fears about Lucy’s living all alone in her farm. Instead of offering some comfort, Petrus’s reply sounds as impressively realistic: “Everything is dangerous today” (Coetzee 2000: 64). This means that in the new South Africa everyone occupies a precarious position, even those white people that for centuries have been under their skin colour’s wing.

Race, the fundamental cornerstone on which South African politics has been based from the beginning of colonisation to the end of apartheid, occupies an important role in *Disgrace*. In fact, the novel’s most condemnatory criticism has been directed to the way in which the racial other is represented. David has been accused of being racist, especially because the novel is narrated only through his perspective. Roy observes: “The narrative focus on the racist protagonist, the absence of an authoritative moral voice, and the other as an absent presence has contributed to the novel being labeled as racist” (Roy 2012: 700). What is significant in *Disgrace* is that instead of a direct allusion to race, references to the protagonists’ skin colour, language or ethnic group are presented. At the novel’s beginning, while David caresses Soraya, he defines “her honey-brown body, unmarked by the sun” (Coetzee 2000: 1): in this way, the reader understands that Soraya is non-white. On the other hand, Melanie is designated as “Meláni: the dark one” (Coetzee 2000: 18). She has “close-cropped black hair, wide, almost Chinese cheekbones, large, dark eyes” (Coetzee 2000: 11). As far as the character Petrus is concerned, Petrus speaks the Xhosa language when he is at home, a reference to his Xhosa black identity. In addition, when David talks about Lucy’s neighbour, he is portrayed, in Coetzee’s words, as “the one who does the work, while he sits and warms his hands. Just like the old days: *baas en Klaas*” (Coetzee 2000: 116). He talks about Petrus drawing a connection with the old colonial times’ master and servant relationship. Instead, Lucy is defined as “a frontier farmer of the new breed” (Coetzee 2000: 62), a link to

the Boers, when they moved to the country's interior lands and then established their new farms.

Despite the end of racial segregation, it might be suggested that race distinction seems to still have a predominant role in the novel's representation of post-apartheid South Africa. Even if Coetzee avoids making direct allusions to race, Roy points out: "Racial subjects continue to be created despite the end of racist regimes" (Roy 2012: 703). The long history of South Africa has forced South Africans to internalize racial divergence; however, the persistence of racist policies after the regime's collapse (as has been shown above by the reference to Goodman's article) has contributed to the survival of racial stereotypes. Although *Disgrace* presents racial divisive perspectives, especially in the contrast between David and Petrus (with the inclusion of the gang rape too), I would like to argue that I disagree with those critics who have defined the novel as racist. What I believe, instead, is that in *Disgrace* Coetzee offers a realistic portrait of South Africa's process of reconciliation, where some people such as David continue to have restrictive views on the racial Other, whereas other people such as Lucy are prone to collaborate in a new multi-racial milieu. Although racist ideas are still inscribed in the South African social policies, this cannot be an excuse for further fuelling schismatic ways of thinking.

To conclude this first section, it will be attempted to answer the following question: why does Coetzee choose Salem as the setting for the second part of the novel? It might be proposed that the author's intentions could be to draw the attention to the historical significance of this place. In the novel, Salem is extremely important, since it is here that Lucy's rape occurs. In reality, Salem is a real village about 25 kilometres south of Grahamstown, in the Eastern Cape. Cornwell observes: "Salem was the name given to the small valley where the majority of the Sephton party of the British settlers halted their trek from Port Elizabeth in mid-1820" (Cornwell 2003: 44). The history of Salem becomes significant, especially in the relationship between the white and the black people, because it is in this region that the Xhosa people and the British fought during the nineteenth

century. Cornwell highlights two major historical events that should be mentioned in relation to Salem: the role of Richard Gush of Salem and the last Frontier War.

As far as Richard Gush of Salem is concerned, during the Sixth Frontier War, the Xhosas stole the British settlers' cattle, planning to prepare a further attack on them. However, Richard Gush, "a man of Quaker leanings and an avowed pacifist" (Cornwell 2003: 45), instead of responding to Xhosas' offence with violence, decided to discuss with them the reason behind their depredation: hunger. Gush could have revenged on them or denounced them, but he opted instead for a pacifist meeting, without the use of coercive force. As a result, Gush provides, in Cornwell's words, an "exemplary demonstration of the principle of non-violence" (Cornwell 2003: 46). Conversely, the last Frontier War (1850-53) saw the hatred between the Xhosas and the British settlers at its peak; the war lasted two years and ended with the total subjugation of the Xhosa people.

It might be suggested that these two historical events can bring to mind two attitudes that are clearly visible in *Disgrace*. On the one hand, Gush may evoke Lucy's wish for peace and tranquillity after her farm's attack; on the other hand, the clash between the Xhosa and the British, so visible in the last Frontier War, may echo David's revengeful approach towards those who have caused harm to his daughter. Cornwell, additionally, draws attention towards Lucy's rapists: "The attack in *Disgrace* on the Luries, the "personal hatred" (Coetzee 2000: 156) that Lucy senses to be animating her rapists, is neither more nor less than a resumption of the last Frontier War" (Cornwell 2003: 53). In fact, according to Lucy, the three black men's perpetration of violence on her is not just a matter of sexual harassment. There is something that goes beyond sex, something deeper that leads these men to profoundly hate her: she is a white South African woman, a reminder of the last Frontier War and the black man's most hated enemy.

## **2. Understanding rape culture: violence against women in post-apartheid South Africa**

Whereas *Waiting for the Barbarians* deals with the question of state violence against an alleged threatening enemy, the Empire in contrast to the barbarians, *Disgrace* investigates the issue of sexual violence in relation to women, focusing the attention on the role of rape in post-apartheid South Africa. Before analysing the novel's representation of violence and, in particular, the author's decision to insert two rape scenes, the rape of Melanie Isaacs and the rape of Lucy Lurie, this section has twofold goals. On the one hand, it aims to understand what it means to live in a rape culture. On the other hand, it will attempt to explore the degree of violence that women have to endure in post-apartheid South Africa.

First of all, in presenting rape from different perspectives, *Disgrace* invites the reader to think about this theme: what does he/she know about rape? How is rape related to the specific reality of post-apartheid South Africa? Middleton and Townsend suggest:

In its representation of rape, *Disgrace* reminds us of some of our most deeply ingrained ideas about what constitutes the act: who is at fault, to what extent, and why; how does it affect victims and perpetrators; and, what are the possibilities and/or applications of justice in the aftermath? In ways that have confounded many readers, the novel refuses to give a definite account of its own stance on the issues above. (Middleton and Townsend 2009: 118)

The novel enables the reader to reflect on the meaning of rape: why does the rapist decide to abuse his/her victim? What is the victim's reaction? Does he/she decide to bring the perpetrator of violence to justice or to remain silent? Can the victim recover from such a violent act? How does his/her life change? These are all legitimate questions that emerge when one is confronted with such a major concern as sexual violence.

In *Transforming a Rape Culture*, it is argued that a culture of rape is deeply inscribed in Western society, especially the American one. Many factors are supposed to nurture the social permanence of rape: crime and violence, the institutions' lack of attention to this phenomenon, religious

beliefs that promote a masculine way of thinking, the media, or the family. Buchwald et al. define rape culture as follows:

A complex of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women. It is a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent. In a rape culture, women perceive a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape itself. A rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women and presents it as the norm. In a rape culture, both men and women assume that sexual violence is a fact of life, as inevitable as death or taxes. (Buchwald, et al. 2005: XI)

This definition expresses a particular concern about physical and psychological violence against women. It considers women's private sphere, where, on a daily basis, they have to cope with the menace of abuse. In a rape culture, there is a real danger that rape could become permanent, and women go on being vulnerable and in constant danger. This portrait seems to exactly illustrate a significant aspect that comes to surface from Coetzee's novel: the ordinariness of sexual violence in post-apartheid South African society.

In order to understand the precarious condition of women in South Africa during the 1990s, it should be remembered what happened in the aftermath of apartheid. In 1994, the ANC published the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), a policy document that was directed to solve the country's immense social and economic problems. The programme was supposed to address to the social role of women too and, particularly, to the issue of gender equality. As the document states: "The RDP must focus on the reconstruction of family and community life by prioritising and responding to the needs of families with no income, women and children who have been victims of domestic and other forms of violence, young offenders and all those affected by substance abuse"<sup>43</sup>. Despite this declaration of

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<sup>43</sup> *The Reconstruction and Development Programme*, (Johannesburg: African National Congress, 1994), section 2.13.15:



intent, South African women were still perceived of secondary importance, at the mercy of violent men that prevented them from living a normal life. The Human Rights Watch<sup>44</sup> declares: “Perhaps as many as one in every three South African women [would] be raped and one in six South African women [was] in an abusive domestic relationship” (Human Rights Watch 1995: 2). As a result, the issue of violence against women could not be underestimated.

As far as South African women are concerned, were women of all races victims of violence? It can be argued that violence threatened all women in the country (Indian, Coloured, white and black women), both in the private and the public sphere. Poverty was an additional factor that rendered women vulnerable and likely to be damaged. Not only have women had a subordinate status in society, but also they have lived in a patriarchal legal system that has not allowed them to experience the new democratic process that was undergoing in South Africa. The result was that women’s rights were completely violated. As Andrews observes:

For African women, [the] laws operated to deprive them of rights to rent or buy their own homes, to custody of their children, to an education, or a living wage. In addition, these laws were administered by White bureaucrats or their African surrogates; thus, their locus was to be found in the apartheid system which codified and sustained patriarchy”. (Andrews 1999: 430)

Coloured and Indian women, who were conceived as racially inferior in relation to white women, had more opportunities than black women. However, even though their superiority was still persistent, white women too were discriminated with “paternalistic and sexist attitudes” (Andrews 1999: 431). Poor and black women had to face the worst reality, especially because

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[https://www.sahistory.org.za/sites/default/files/the\\_reconstruction\\_and\\_development\\_programm\\_1994.pdf](https://www.sahistory.org.za/sites/default/files/the_reconstruction_and_development_programm_1994.pdf).

<sup>44</sup> Established in 1978, the Human Rights Watch (HRW) is a non-profit, non-governmental organization that investigates human rights abuses around the world.

they lived in poverty-stricken areas.<sup>45</sup> Women had neither the chance to be independent nor to live a decent life in full security.

What were the reasons behind the diffusion of violence against women in post-apartheid South Africa? It can be alleged that the combination of male dominance and the escalation of political violence can be reckoned to be some of the main factors that have contributed to exacerbate the issue of female violence. The epidemic proportions of violence against women after the end of the regime can be traced back to the spread of political violence during the 1980s, which caused the emergence of an acute masculine culture, especially among young black men. As the Human Rights Watch observes: “The rise in violent crime coincided with the development of endemic political violence in many black communities. Political violence first became a significant phenomenon in South Africa in the mid-1980s” (Human Rights Watch 1995: 19). In particular, violence became spread among representatives of the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and of the ANC, but also other political parties’ exponents, both left and right wing groups, were involved. Although the majority of the participants in violent political actions was characterised by men, “a number of political massacres have included indiscriminate killings of the elderly, women and children” (Human Rights Watch 1995: 20).<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, it could happen that during the conflicts women were abused too. Violence became the primary means through which manhood was asserted, above all among young people. According to the Human Rights Watch, “violence in support of a political cause offered these young militants known as “comrades” an opportunity to define themselves in an overtly macho manner, when other routes – as breadwinner and head of a household – were denied” (Human Rights Watch 1995: 22). However, it

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<sup>45</sup> After apartheid, poverty was one of the major problem in South Africa. As the World Bank indicates: “Poverty is concentrated amongst the African population: 95 percent of those in the poorest 40 percent of the population are African, and 65 percent of Africans are poor, by the same measure” (Human Rights Watch 1995: 15).

<sup>46</sup> The Human Rights Watch provides the example of the Uganda squatter camp at Umlazi (Durban) where twenty-two women and children were killed (Human Rights Watch 1995: 20).

should be noted that the bond between political violence and violence against women has never been officially validated, although the Human Rights Watch sustains that “those areas worst affected by the uprising against the state and by intra-community political conflict are also those areas where reported rapes are highest” (Human Rights Watch 1995: 22).

In order to understand the relevance of violence in *Disgrace*, it seems appropriate to investigate the phenomenon of rape in relation to post-apartheid South Africa. What should be taken into account is that, although in this work some rape statistics will be provided, they will show just a limited number of the actual amount of sexual violence that women have suffered in the post-apartheid phase. Many rape cases result as unreported because women did not have sufficient trust both in the law and in the police system. “Social stigma and fear of reprisal” (Human Rights Watch 1995: 44) have also contributed to stop women from denouncing those men who have committed the crime. Moreover, it should be emphasised that the issue of rape deals with the private sphere of women; thus, it cannot be interpreted as a case of state violence (as has been seen in the previous chapter on *Waiting for the Barbarians*). Every woman responds to rape in a different way and the decision to discuss or not about it underlines the difficulty of investigating such a thorny subject.

In the first place, as far as the definition of rape is concerned, the Human Rights Watch’s report declares that during the 1990s there was the necessity to clarify the meaning of the word “rape” on legal grounds:

It should be recognized in law that this crime can be committed by men or women against men or women. The definition of rape should be broadened to include anal and oral penetration as well as penetration by foreign objects such as sticks, bottles, or knives. The definition should focus on coercion by the perpetrator rather than lack of consent by the victim. (Human Rights Watch 1995: 7)<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> According to the Human Rights Watch, “less than one third of reported rapes reach the courts. Of those cases prosecuted, only half – that is, less than 15 percent of the reported

It can be argued that the necessity of offering an accurate definition of rape was extremely significant in a context in which the judiciary system ensured insufficient protection to women. This definition explains that rape can have different forms and that it is the duty of the South African government to legally recognize all rape types in order to safeguard women.

From 1983 to 1994, cases of reported rapes registered an exponential growth in South Africa: whereas in 1983 the reported rapes amounted to 15,342, they rose to 32,107 in 1994 (Human Rights Watch 1995: 50). Nevertheless, the real number of rape cases remained unknown and “rape continue[d] to be one of the most under-reported – and therefore unpunished – crimes, according to the South African Police” (Human Rights Watch 1995: 51). The statistics show that poor black women were those who suffered most from rape. In fact, in order to earn their living, they worked for long hours during the day: they usually left home early in the morning and they came back when outside was already dark; they went to work walking or taking public transports and they usually lived in high crime rate areas. The result was that all these conditions contributed to render these women vulnerable and rapists could easily profit from them. Some examples are provided by the Hillbrow medico-legal clinic of Johannesburg: “In a 1992 study of 584 rape cases reported to the South African police . . . 71 percent of the victims, and 78 percent of the perpetrators, were black, although the 1991 census recorded three times as many white women as black women in the area” (Human Rights Watch 1995: 53). Most importantly, the survey reported that:

Rapes of girls under the age of sixteen years were usually perpetrated by men known to them – family or friends – or by strangers who enticed or abducted them. Sixty-five percent of the women were raped by one male,

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cases – result in convictions. By contrast, more than two thirds of prosecutions for aggravated assault are successful” (Human Rights Watch 1995: 90).

and 34 percent were gang-raped . . . the majority of rape victims fell between the ages of seventeen to twenty-five years. (Human Rights Watch 1995: 53).

According to this study, Natal appeared to be the region where the number of rape cases was most relevant.

It should be noted that one of the most serious phenomenon that developed during the 1980s-90s was gang rape and, in particular, the practice of “jackrolling”. Mokwena observes:

The word was coined to refer to the forceful abduction of women in the township by a specific gang called the Jackrollers which operated in the years 1987-1988 in the Diepkloof area [Soweto] under the leadership of Jeffrey Brown . . . the most notable practices of the Jackrollers were rape and abduction, car theft and bank robbery. But as the abduction of women became fashionable, anyone who did it could be called a jackroller, and jackroll became a commonly used verb in the township vocabulary. (Mokwena 1991)<sup>48</sup>

The consequence of living in a male dominated and gendered country was that young men were taught to assert their supremacy over women; as a result, violence against young women was reputed to be the means through which they could assert their male identity as it is shown by the conversation that follows. When the interviewer asks what it happens when a girl refuses to have sex, the interviewed replies:

A: (X) You see, I have told myself that "cherries" (girls) can't tell me anything, when I want it she must give, you see girls think they are clever sometimes. She will make excuses claiming she is sick and all that. I make

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<sup>48</sup> Mokwena, Steve. “*The Era of the Jackrollers: Contextualising the Rise of the Youth Gangs in Soweto*” in *Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation* (Johannesburg, 1991): <http://www.csvr.org.za/publications/1805-the-era-of-the-jackrollers-contextualising-the-rise-of-the-youth-gangs-in-soweto>). Accessed 25 August 2018.

it clear that when I say I want it now. If you are soft and you let her get away with it, you will not get her. (Mokwena 1991)

Girls feared the Jackrollers everywhere; they were not safe neither at home nor outside. Some of them even took the decision to leave school in order not to be sexually harassed. The situation was alarming in university dormitories and in women hostels too.

In general, it should be argued that women in danger of sexual assault could be injured<sup>49</sup> or killed. Furthermore, rape could lead to sexually transmitted diseases or even to pregnancy; in fact, pregnancy resulted “in approximately 10 percent of rape cases” (Human Rights Watch 58). Even though abortion was illegal in South Africa, in the case of rape it was considered legal. Together with this, many were the women who suffered from the Rape Trauma Syndrome (RTS), which can be described as the “physical, emotional and behavioral problems” (Human Rights Watch 1995: 59) that women could experience after rape. According to the Rape Crisis Cape Town Trust:

Rape by its very nature is intentionally designed to produce psychological trauma. It is form of organised social violence comparable only to the combat of war. We get nowhere in our understanding of Rape Trauma Syndrome if we think of rape as simply being unwanted sex. Where combat veterans suffer Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, rape survivors experience similar symptoms on a physical, behavioural and psychological level. (Rape Crisis Cape Town Trust)<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> The Human Rights Watch makes a reference to the article “Rape in Johannesburg” by Lorna J. Martin (Johannesburg: Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 1993, p. 4): “The 1992 study of rape survivors conducted by the Hillbrow medico-legal center found that almost 40 percent sustained genital injuries. Another 40 percent sustained other injuries included bruising, abrasions, lacerations and fractures” (Human Rights Watch 57).

<sup>50</sup> “Rape Trauma Syndrome” in *Rape Crisis Cape Town Trust*: <https://rapecrisis.org.za/rape-trauma-syndrome/>. Accessed 25 August 2018.

To sum up, despite the government's insufficient attention, some significant state efforts contributed to tackle the phenomenon of rape, such as the Wynberg Sexual Offences Court and the Hillbrow and Newcastle Rape Reporting Centers. These organizations were created in order to offer support and guidance to women, to increase the number of reported cases and to help rape survivors to obtain justice. Since the Human Rights Watch report deals with the 1990s South Africa, one may wonder whether the country's situation has improved over the last twenty years as far as the problem of rape is concerned. Unfortunately, the Statistics South Africa report offers a negative response:

Using the 2016/17 South African Police Service statistics, in which 80% of the reported sexual offences were rape, together with Statistics South Africa's estimate that 68,5% of the sexual offences victims were women, we obtain a crude estimate of the number of women raped per 100 000 as 138. This figure is among the highest in the world. For this reason, some have labelled South Africa as the "rape capital of the world". (Statistics South Africa 2018)<sup>51</sup>

This section has attempted to illustrate the magnitude of the problem of female sexual violence in post-apartheid South Africa during the 1990s, the same period in which Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* was published. Whilst the country was recovering from the dire consequences of apartheid, South Africa was experiencing for the first time the meaning of living in a free, unified democracy. Although South Africans lived in a territory full of discrepancies, they harboured hopes and dreams for their beloved country. This is the background of *Disgrace*, whose theme of violence will be analysed in the following section together with the author's choice to deal with the question of rape.

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<sup>51</sup> Statistics South Africa. 2018. *Crime Against Women in South Africa, 2018*. Report No. 03-40-05, Pretoria, 2018: <http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/Report-03-40-05/Report-03-40-05June2018.pdf>.

### 3. Sexual violence in *Disgrace*

Attridge states that the protagonist of *Disgrace*, David Lurie, experiences “a deeper sense of being unfit for the times in which he lives” (Attridge 2004: 179). David’s feeling of inadequacy in the post-apartheid South Africa perfectly introduces the novel’s protagonist. I want to stress here that Coetzee, through the representation of sexual violence, has twofold goals. On the one hand, not only does the violent act of rape enable a reflection on this subject, but it also triggers a process of personal transformation from a state of disgrace to a state of grace in the protagonists: this is evident especially in David’s character. On the other hand, in connection with Attridge’s statement about David, the portrayal of Lucy and Melanie’s rape allows the novelist to show the process of social transformation that is undergoing in the country: the collapse of the old system in favour of the new South Africa. This is shown by Lucy and David’s encounter with the Other in the new post-apartheid reality. The aim of this section will be to deal with these major subjects in order to offer a complete analysis of the theme of violence in Coetzee’s novel.

The novel’s beginning introduces the narrative’s main theme: “For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well” (Coetzee 2000: 1). David’s “problem of sex” underlines his problematic nature: he is a middle-aged man who is experiencing a sexual decline and who is dissatisfied with his life. As a result, he attempts to reassert his sexual power through meetings with several women. However, the day he decides to seduce and invite to his home his student Melanie Isaacs, something different happens. Not only does David feel sexually attracted by Melanie, but he also feels a deeper connection with her: Melanie becomes “a presence in his life, a breathing presence” (Coetzee 2000: 23). The text seems to reflect this change; as McDunnah observes: “This intensification of realism signifies a shift in Lurie’s consciousness, a more genuine engagement” (McDunnah 2009: 22). From their first sexual encounter, the girl seems to offer some signals that what is going on between them may be wrong. Yet, instead of rejecting his intrusion, her behaviour is



rather submissive: “Her body is clear, simple, in its way perfect; though she is passive throughout, he finds the act pleasurable” (Coetzee 2000: 19). Then: “Averting her face, she frees herself, gathers her things, leaves the room” (Coetzee 2000: 19).

Only when David forces himself upon Melanie at her flat, does the reader realize that the described scene is rape:

She does not resist. All she does is avert herself: avert her lips, avert her eyes. She lets him lay her out on the bed and undress her: she even helps him, raising her arms and then her hips. Little shivers of cold run through her; as soon as she is bare, she slips under the quilted counterpane like a mole burrowing, and turns her back on him.

Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core. (Coetzee 2000: 25)

In this scene, which illustrates male dominance over female vulnerability, an authorial presence that could give some comments on the protagonist’s repellent action would be pertinent: the narrative only provides David’s focalization. Language contributes to reflect the brutality of rape; although David interprets the girl’s lack of resistance as complicity, the use of the term “resist” outlines that what is happening is an act of transgression: in showing her reluctance, Melanie does not give her overt consent to have sex with him. Moreover, she is objectified through animal associations: she is like a mole that burrows into the earth.<sup>52</sup> David feels the urge to deny the word “rape”; he refuses to be responsible for his sexual violence. Nevertheless, the narrative suggests that David seems able to comprehend his culpability: “A mistake, a huge mistake. At this moment, he has no doubt, she, Melanie, is trying to cleanse herself of it, of him” (Coetzee 2000: 25). At this point, the reader may wonder whether David and Melanie’s first encounter has been consensual or not. On this point, I agree with McDunnah when he affirms:

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<sup>52</sup> Throughout the narrative, Melanie is described as a mole, as a gopher and, ultimately, as a rabbit.

“The only difference between the two scenes may be Lurie’s level of self-awareness” (McDunnah 2009: 26). It seems that both incidents represent a rape scene. As a result, why does Melanie decide to make love a second time with the protagonist? Does every reader perceive the scene as rape? Why does Coetzee prevent direct access to Melanie’s thoughts? As Middleton and Townsend state, *Disgrace* presents “the unarticulated experience of rape from the victim’s perspective” (Middleton and Townsend 2009: 121).

One might wonder: is this the starting point for David’s process of self-transformation from a state of disgrace to a state of grace? More specifically: is David beginning his pathway to become a more sympathetic man? When David leaves the city in disgrace, a much more sympathetic character is presented to the reader in contrast with the unsympathetic man of the novel’s opening. First, it should be argued that the chance to become a different man is provided by his daughter Lucy, whose humble lifestyle, sense of adaptability and equality with other human beings, both men and animals, are all factors which trigger David’s reflection on his state of disgrace. Secondly, in order to redeem himself, David attempts to be a good and altruistic person through his relationship with animals. In fact, his initial contemptuous attitude towards them is replaced by his involvement with Bev Shaw’s animal clinic, the animals’ “last resort” (Coetzee 2000: 84): here the animals are euthanized and their remains are then brought to the incinerator. David is the person who has taken on the disposal of the animals’ remains; he observes: “Why has he taken on this job? . . . For himself, then. For his idea of the world, a world in which men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing” (Coetzee 2000: 145). A sympathetic bond is established between David and the animals: David is moved by the way in which the animals strive for their survival even if they are hopeless. He can be defined as the dog saviour: “A dog undertaker; a psychopomp; a *harijan*”<sup>53</sup> (Coetzee 2000: 146). Although in this work

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<sup>53</sup> The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines the word “harijan” as follows: “A member of the outcaste group in India”. A synonym for this word is “untouchable”. According to Griffin: “These people, whose ancestors were left out of the four-tier Hindu caste hierarchy, are literally outcasts. Known as “untouchables” because they are shunned by the rest of

nothing is glorious, thanks to it he can achieve a new state of grace, finally redeeming himself. In addition, the animal realm suggests a further reflection on the way in which the human world could be. As Anker points out: “The animal world provides a vision of a society free from the class and race hierarchies afflicting postapartheid South Africa” (Anker 2008: 252). The animal world is a homogeneous, equal world, something which does not exist among South Africans. This can be evinced when the novel presents its most important scene: Lucy’s rape, the moment in which her farm is attacked by three black men.

Lucy’s premonitory sight of three wild geese precedes the rape scene and reminds of the three black men that, in turn, will abuse her. She says: “They come back every year. The same three. I feel so lucky to be visited. To be the one chosen” (Coetzee 2000: 88). It is ironic that David, who in the first rape scene is the perpetrator of violence, now becomes the victim. As far as Lucy’s rape is concerned, the narrative provides access to David’s process of thinking only; Lucy’s perspective is not offered. The rape happens in a room that the reader cannot approach. Whilst David is locked in the lavatory, all the sympathy, love and fear for his daughter are revealed:

So it has come, the day of testing. Without warning without fanfare, it is here, and he is in the middle of it. In his chest his heart hammers so hard that it too, in its dumb way, must know. How will they stand up to the testing, he and his heart?

His child is in the hands of strangers. In a minute, in an hour, it will be too late; whatever is happening to her will be set in stone, will belong to the past. But *now* it is not too late. *Now* he must do something. (Coetzee 2000: 94)

David, who is not able to provide some help to his daughter, sees all his life turned upside down and, worst of all, becomes witness to Lucy’s fall into a

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society, and labelled Harijan (children of God) by Gandhi, they have adopted the name Dalit, from the Sanskrit for “downtrodden” (Griffin 2009).

state of disgrace. As a consequence, he is seized by an uncontrollable rage. The following words show the bond between Lucy's rape and the reality of post-apartheid South Africa, they inform the reader that the violence portrayed in the novel is a customary habit in the country:

It happens every day, every hour, every minute, he tells himself, in every quarter of the country. Count yourself lucky to have escaped with your life. Count yourself lucky not to be a prisoner in the car at this moment, speeding away, or at the bottom of a donga with a bullet in your head. Count Lucy lucky too. Above all Lucy. (Coetzee 2000: 98)

The assault on Lucy's smallholding by the three assailants has severe consequences: since the three men have tortured David, the protagonist is both physically and psychologically injured; all of a sudden "his pleasure in living has been snuffed out" (Coetzee 2000: 107). All Lucy's dogs have been killed (with the exception of the bulldog Katy) and Lucy has been sexually abused.

From this point onwards, the novel presents a new phase. How do David and his daughter react to Lucy's rape? It can be suggested that whereas David urges his daughter to talk about her disgraceful experience, Lucy claims her right not to speak: "As far as I am concerned, what happened to me is a purely private matter. In another time, in another place it might be held to be a public matter. But in this place, at this time, it is not. It is my business, mine alone" (Coetzee 2000: 112). Lucy does not want to be represented as a rape victim, especially in public: the rape of a white South African woman by three black men would be surely linked to the question of race and she does not aim to trigger the re-emergence of old social and racial hierarchies. Thus, Lucy strives for her own privacy, her own story.

Lucy's rape can be viewed as the starting point for a reflection on the new South Africa and the protagonists' relationship with each other. As far as Lucy is concerned, the woman sees a new possibility for the future of the country, where the contrast with the other, which has persisted from colonial

times onwards, can be substituted by interracial collaboration: together with Petrus, she is the only character able to adapt to the post-apartheid situation. Lucy does not want her entire life to be destroyed by the rape incident. Due to her independent character, her lesbian sexuality, her background and skin-colour (she is a white woman from Dutch origins), the woman has struggled to adapt herself to the Salem world (so different from David's Westernised world). She profoundly loves the land in which she lives and she shows a genuine respect for the people she has met. She cannot be labelled as a victim of violence, an image that, in Middleton and Townsend's words, "utterly circumscribes her within a set of discourses (political, feminist, juridical, colonial) that preclude the formation of social bonds in her world" (Middleton and Townsend 2009: 132). In Salem, she has the possibility to be part of a community and, most importantly, to forge "an identity that is satisfactory within the context (historical, geographical) of her life" (Middleton and Townsend 2009: 133). Hence, she does not respond to her rape asking for justice or for further violence: what Lucy desires is just to go on with her life. This is the reason that underlies her choice to marry Petrus and to keep the baby: she discovers to be pregnant after the rapists' assault. Although Petrus might have known about the rapists' intentions to attack her farm, Lucy is prone to become his third wife because he is the only man who could guarantee her some protection: a white lonely woman cannot survive in the Eastern Cape without safekeeping. As a result, marriage constitutes for Lucy the certainty of a peaceful future:

For Lucy, the kinship bond – with Petrus, his extended family, and her child – might function as a replacement for the pitfalls of an individual identity seen in David's world. We might consider it a structural repair for the impossibility of forging an identity that is satisfactory within the context (historical, geographical) of her life. Withholding accusation and judgement, along with the establishment of kinship, play out as an effective example of responding to violence with non-violence. (Middleton and Townsend 2009: 133)

Overall, it can be observed that, in the same way in which Melanie's rape triggers David's process of redemption and transformation, Lucy's rape becomes the catalyst for a new compromise: as Shattuck asserts, Lucy and Petrus represent "the new parents – or business partners – of the new South Africa" (Shattuck 2009: 146); together, they will work to prevent further violence. At the same time, it is also important to understand the degree of Lucy's tenacity. Despite her sexual abuse, she is willing to accept both an unwanted union and a child born out of violence for the sake of her life in Salem: the love for the South African land is shown to be limitless. Thus, Petrus and Lucy's union becomes the symbol for a new interracial alliance; as Shattuck notes: "Willing to change and compromise, Lucy and Petrus try to accommodate past crimes, to transcend obsession with the "tension of power", and to achieve a peaceful synthesis between black and white, between oppressor and oppressed" (Shattuck 2009: 146). At first, David is not able to accept her daughter's choice; however, he then realizes that he must consent to her will: the child will be the emblem of a new cohesive community, where the black group and the white group will learn to coexist; I believe that these are the exact demands presented by post-apartheid South Africa.

Conversely, how does David respond to the challenges posed by his daughter's rape? How is his relationship with the Other portrayed in the context of the new South Africa? As far as the first question is concerned, David responds to Lucy's rape asking for justice. Whilst in Melanie's case he clearly scoffs at the law, in Lucy's case he changes his attitude towards the law. As Anker observes: "Suddenly, Lurie embraces rather than derides the law's normative function and aspires for it to incorporate and even enforce "principles" for meeting out justice" (Anker 2008: 238). Now David longs for the rapists' contrite behaviour, something very similar to the committee's request of public penitence in Melanie's case.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless,

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<sup>54</sup> It should be observed that many critics have seen a link between David's disciplinary hearing and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)'s proceedings, originated by

Lucy does not trust the judiciary system (although in the novel's previous chapters she advises her father to defend himself before Melanie's official charges). Anker proposes: "In the context of South Africa, Lucy apparently recognizes that the only "principle" her narrative of violation could give expression to would fuel interracial animosity of the sort systematized under apartheid" (Anker 2008: 240). As a result, as has already been noted, David surrenders to Lucy's demands and attempts to go on with his life, focusing his attention on his work at the clinic and on his opera.

Correspondingly, whereas Lucy perfectly conforms to the demands of the post-apartheid moment, David's character totally collides with this new world. This is shown by his relationship with the Other and, in particular, by his contrast with Petrus. First, it should be mentioned that the historical and geographical context in which the novel is set is undergoing significant changes; the old apartheid system is collapsing in favour of the new South Africa. Barnard highlights that one of the main features of the new South Africa is "the urge to stake one's claim, to own, and to procreate" (Barnard 2003: 205). This attitude is particularly representative of Petrus. This black farmer is ambitious, efficient, and fully aware that the South African situation has altered; he looks to the future and is ready to prevail. Petrus's absence during Lucy's rape scene underscores his plan to reduce the woman's role in order to expand his farm: he wants Lucy to be his subordinate and David is not ready to accept this radical change. As David observes: "It is a new world they live in, he and Lucy and Petrus. Petrus knows it, and he knows it, and Petrus knows that he knows it. (Coetzee 2000: 116). This means that, in Attridge's words, "the distribution of power is no longer underwritten by racial difference, and the result is a new fluidity in human relations, a sense that the governing terms and conditions can, and must, be rewritten from scratch" (Attridge 2004: 172). As a result, black people have finally the

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the Government of National Unity to cope with the apartheid legacy. In the novel, the disciplinary committee encourages Lurie to declare: "I acknowledge without reservation serious abuses of human rights of the complainant, as well as abuse of the authority delegated to me by the University" (Coetzee 2000: 57). These are the charges pressed against David.

opportunity to reinvent themselves and, in this new context, new bonds can be created: although Petrus is the black neighbour of a white South African woman, he is not her enemy anymore.

Secondly, it should be noted that from the novel's beginning, the protagonist's academic background seems to influence the way in which the words are meticulously chosen: in the narrative, David ruminates on the words' etymology and on the most appropriate verb forms, inserting also foreign words<sup>55</sup>. However, in the Eastern Cape, the general impression is that the rules of dialogue have changed. In fact, as Barnard argues: "The new relationships in post-apartheid South Africa require a new lexicon" (Barnard 2003: 212). For example, when David is locked in the lavatory during the farm's attack, he considers himself to be linguistically unready to face such a situation since he is not capable of communicating with the black men's local language in order to protect his daughter. Barnard suggests: "At this moment Lurie's failure to translate is complete: he is bereft of any terms in which to articulate this experience, other than the most cartoonish colonial stereotypes about the incomprehensible otherness of savages and their "lingo"" (Barnard 2003: 211). Moreover, when David asks Petrus about Pollux, Petrus does not seem to follow the customary conversational rules; David appears to be confused by Petrus's answers: "Is it a question? A declaration? What game is Petrus playing?" (Coetzee 2000: 137).

The figure of Pollux provides an additional example of David's hostility towards the Other. Pollux is one of the three rapists that has sexually abused Lucy. Petrus attempts to protect him: not only is the boy mentally and emotionally problematic, but he also belongs to Petrus's family. In the novel, Pollux has a significant function since his presence unveils the theme of racial hatred in post-apartheid South Africa, whereby the legacy of colonialism is discernible in deepening racial conflicts between whites and blacks. When David finds out that Pollux is peering at Lucy through the window, the

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<sup>55</sup> In chapter twelve, David reflects on the origin of the word "friend": "Modern English *friend* from Old English *freond*, from *freon*, to love" (Coetzee 2000: 102). In chapter fourteen, he describes Ettinger with the adjective "*eingewurzelt*", from the German verb "*einwurzeln*", which means "to take root" (*PONS Online Dictionary*).



protagonist's rage reaches the highest level: whereas David despises the boy for his daughter's abuse, Pollux hates David for being a white man, an intruder in the Salem community. David uses a language of domination to refer to the young man, racist comments that he has rarely used: "*Swine . . . Teach him a lesson, Show him his place*. So this is what it is like, he thinks! This is what it is like to be a savage!" (Coetzee 2000: 206). While David strikes the boy, even the bulldog Katy joins the assault. However, in the end, David realizes that violence is not the right answer to the boy's faults.

The boy's name "Pollux" deserves further attention. In the novel, when Lucy tells his father that the younger rapist is living with Petrus, David discovers that the young man's name is Pollux: "Not Mncedisi? Not Nqabayakhe? Nothing unpronounceable, just Pollux?" (Coetzee 2000: 200); Lucy replies: "P-O-L-L-U-X. And David, can we have some relief from that terrible irony of yours?" (Coetzee 2000: 200). According to Shattuck, "Pollux has been named by a colonial Master, or by a person steeped in the European classical heritage" (Shattuck 2009: 142). As far as the classical heritage is concerned, in the Greek and Roman mythology, Castor and Pollux were twin brothers (also called Dioscuri), the sons of Zeus and Leda, who were the patron gods of horses and of the Roman knights. An interesting bond between the Dioscuri classical tradition and the theme of sexual violence can be found in Rubens' painting *The Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus*.<sup>56</sup> Rubens uses this myth to portray, in a perfect Baroque style, the human body and, in particular, the female body. According to the myth, the sisters Phoebe and Hilaeira, the Leucippides, were supposed to marry the brothers Idas and Lynceus. However, Castor and Pollux abducted the women and then raped them. In Rubens's picture, they are depicted in the precise moment in which they are taken away to be raped by the Dioscuri. Rubens represents a tragic moment: in *The Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus*, there is a sense of

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<sup>56</sup> Peter Paul Rubens, *The Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus*, 1617-18, oil on canvas, 224 x 210.5 cm (Alte Pinakothek, Munich).

frenetic movement, a tension between the two female bodies, which seem to merge, to become a unique figure, falling down and then rising up.<sup>57</sup>

Since in the classical tradition Pollux's twin is Castor, Shattuck wonders whether in the novel "David Lurie himself could stand in for Castor. Both are rapists (mythologically and in the novel), and both must be educated about the new South Africa" (Shattuck 2009: 141). As far as I am concerned, I believe that Coetzee aims to stress the similarity between the protagonist and the young man. The link between mythology and *Disgrace* underlines the affinity between Melanie's rape, in which David figures as the perpetrator of violence, and Lucy's rape, in which Pollux, despite his problematic nature, participates in the rape of Lucy. In the end, although they belong to different worlds, David and Pollux become two sides of the same coin.

To conclude, after having focused on Lucy and David's relationships with the other in the new South Africa, this section has to go back to the protagonist's initial process of redemption and self-transformation in order to have a complete picture of the novel. As has already been suggested, Melanie's rape has been the source that has triggered David's process of change. This has been allowed by his transfer to the Eastern Cape, where Lucy's presence and his work at Bev's animal clinic have helped him to become a more sympathetic person. However, David's passage from a state of disgrace to a state of grace can be considered almost complete only when other two details are provided; they concern David's apology to the Isaacs family and David's opera. In the first case, David feels the urge to make peace with his past. He is now the father of a victim of violence, something that connects him to Melanie's father. As a result, David takes the decision to apologize with him, justifying his relation with Melanie as follows: "Something unexpected happened. I think of it as a fire. She struck up a fire in me" (Coetzee 2000: 166). After Melanie's father listens to David's explanation, he invites him to his home: "Break bread with us" (Coetzee

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<sup>57</sup> Rubens's painting's explanation refers to: Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker, "Peter Paul Rubens, *The Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus*", in *Smarthistory*, December 9, 2015, <https://smarthistory.org/peter-paul-rubens-the-rape-of-the-daughters-of-leucippus/>. Accessed 30 August 2018.

2000: 167).<sup>58</sup> Here, David apologises to Melanie's mother and sister too, getting to his knees in front of them. David says to Melanie's father: "I am being punished for what happened between myself and your daughter . . . I am living it out from day to day, trying to accept disgrace as my state of being. Is it enough for God, do you think, that I live in disgrace without term?" (Coetzee 2000: 172). However, what appears to be an ideal "pilgrimage of penitence" (Van Wyk Smith 2014: 28) is soon disrupted by David's sexual phantasies over Melanie's sister; one may wonder whether David's old self has come back again. As far as I am concerned, I believe that this behaviour shows David's imperfect nature. During the narrative, his process of transformation has required considerable effort; in the first part of the novel, it has been much easier for him to be a selfish man, regardless of other human beings' feelings. Now that he is a different man, despite his imperfections, I believe that David will follow his daughter's advice: "To be a good person" (Coetzee 2000: 216).

On the other hand, it can be argued that David's process of change is reflected on his opera too. In *Disgrace*'s first part, the protagonist plans to write a musical work based on Byron's last love affair with the married Contessa Guiccioli. However, David feels not passionate about his work: his lack of commitment expresses his inability to represent the other. From the attack on Lucy's farm onwards, something different happens; as David's inward change progresses, so does the opera alters too: the work becomes a composition in which David's sympathetic abilities are reflected. This is the reason why David resolves to deal with a different subject: the opera will be centred on the figure of a middle aged Teresa rather than on Lord Byron. In Coetzee's words: "The new Teresa is a dumpy little widow installed in the Villa Gamba with her aged father . . . is this the heroine he has been seeking all the time? Will an older Teresa engage his heart as his heart is now?" (Coetzee 2000: 181). In this new version, the opera becomes a work of

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<sup>58</sup> This religious language underlines David's redemptive act. The scene can be a reminder of *Waiting for the Barbarians*; in one of his dreams, the Magistrate sees the barbarian girl building a clay oven in the desert and offering a loaf of bread to the Magistrate. In both cases, bread functions as a symbol of forgiveness.

sympathy where David gives voice to an outcast figure, relegating Byron off-stage; David's sympathetic attitude allows him to be capable of putting himself into Teresa's silenced perspective. According to Anker: "This work of compassion, while not explicitly conceded to by Lurie, clearly extends beyond the frame of the artwork, rendering Teresa a figure at once for the Soraya's, Melanie's, and Bev Shaw's of his life, for society's excluded – such as Petrus – and also for his newly fractured subjectivity" (Anker 2008: 258). Despite David's total absorption into his work, in the last part of the novel he is not sure about how to deal with it. Coetzee displays his character in a sorrowful mood:

He sighs. It would have been nice to be returned triumphant to society as the author of an eccentric little chamber opera. But that will not be . . . Poor Teresa! Poor aching girl! He has brought her back from the grave, promised her another life, and now he is failing her. He hopes she will find it in her heart to forgive him. (Coetzee 2000: 214)

The reader may wonder whether David's inability to end his work reflects his inability to reach a full state of grace: will David be able to finish his work one day?

I would like to illustrate the novel's main narrative strategies in order to have a complete overview of *Disgrace*. First, it should be observed that from *Disgrace*'s first sentence the narrative focalization is established. The novel is based on David Lurie's limited perspective and poses a challenge to the reader. As McDunnah states, there is a "tension between the technique's compulsion towards identification and the reader's ethical impulse towards disassociation" (Mc Dunnah 2009: 16). Coetzee wants his reader to identify with the protagonist; at the same time, David's behaviour causes a sense of discomfort and the reader feels the need to distance himself/herself from his questionable actions.

It may be noted that, despite the third-person narrative, David should be viewed as an unreliable narrator. According to Fludernik, the unreliable

narrator is someone who “will lose credibility because s/he violates valid social norms in word or deed” (Fludernik 2009: 27). The unreliable narrator “may give a distorted picture of (fictional) reality as a result of being obsessed by certain ideas . . . [or] reveal her/himself to be an immoral or dishonest person” (Fludernik 2009: 27). The use of the third-person narrative and the present tense form contribute to guarantee a sense of neutrality: neither the narrator nor the reader never totally condemn the protagonist. In addition, David’s perspective constantly limits the other’s perspective and one never knows what other characters think; this reinforces David’s sense of alienation. This is the reason why in the novel he lacks credibility; this is evident in certain passages in which the reader would wish for an authoritative narrator who could oppose David’s wrongdoings. In relation to this, Mardorossian states:

Lurie’s character is intelligent and adept at scrutinizing his own and others’ motivations and emotions. He points out the different angles from which a same event can be viewed, an analytical skill that implies a critical distance that obscures the biased nature of his own perspective. He is so forthcoming about his own imperfections that he appears trustworthy. (Mardorossian 2011: 77)

For instance, as far as Melanie’s rape is concerned, the reader finds it very difficult to disapprove of David’s violent act because he/she is immersed in his process of thinking. Since the event is described from David’s focalization, the reader does not perceive the protagonist as a rapist; conversely, he/she is inclined to judge Melanie’s behaviour rather than David’s immorality.

Furthermore, in the narrative, which is written in a realist mode, the protagonist’s inward dialogue carefully ponders everything that happens around him. As Van Wyk Smith notes: “The very text bears the lesions of the protagonist’s anxieties, even as it also reveals that we are dealing with a mind capable of pondering such issues despite its unpromising ethical dimensions”

(Van Wyk Smith 2014: 16). The reader has access to David's world as he sees it; when he does not note something or dismisses it, the reader suffers the consequences of David's omissions.

To conclude, one of the main narrative strategies of *Disgrace* is irony. Irony is used by Coetzee to provide a portrayal of the post-apartheid South African situation and, in particular, an account of inter-racial relations. Through the employment of irony, the author is able to give a realistic account of the new South Africa. Roy points out:

In *Disgrace* irony creates a nuanced awareness of the impasses of interracial relations in South Africa. This realistic appraisal of the postapartheid situation does not deny possibilities of reconciliation; instead, it envisions a more ethical inter-racial cordiality – one that accounts for a deep history and opens discourses to the other. (Roy 2012: 719)

## CONCLUSION

Violence, South Africa and literature have represented the basic themes of my work. In our contemporary world, where the threat of violence has become a permanent fixture, the role of literature in exploring such an issue is significant in order to call one's attention to the profound and enduring effects that this phenomenon has on human beings.

At the beginning of my dissertation, I have highlighted the difficulty of dealing with an author such as Coetzee, whose innovative writing requires an active role from the reader, who is asked to go beyond the reality of South Africa and to interpret the text on a more general level. I have also underlined the author's challenge to tackle a theme such as violence from a white South African perspective.

The purpose of this work has been to show the approach of Coetzee's writing when he deals with the issue of violence in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) and *Disgrace* (1999). In particular, the topic of violence has been fundamental to demonstrate the relationship between literature and history in his novels and Coetzee's will to depict violence according to his particular approach, invoking the power of imagination over history. On the one hand, the blend between the literary and the historical discourses have allowed the novelist to shed light on the fragile and contrasting nature of the human condition through the figures of the Magistrate and of Professor David Lurie. I have underlined how the novelist puts into question the characters' identity, especially in the moment in which an encounter with the Other occurs; both protagonists undergo a process of moral elevation that renders them radically different from the novels' openings.

Conversely, the conflation between the literary and the historical subjects has allowed a reflection on the history of South Africa, on the violence that has pervaded the country's political systems from colonialism to the post-apartheid era. I have suggested that in his novels Coetzee offers a subtle criticism of South African history, an interpretation that can be applied to other historical contexts in which a dichotomy between two opposing factions appears. Not only have I tried to underline the contrast between two

different worlds; I have also strived to understand the degree of violence that has been rooted in South Africa from colonialism onwards. Whereas *Waiting for the Barbarians* has been read as an allegory both of the colonial world and the apartheid regime, *Disgrace* has furnished a crystal clear portrayal of post-apartheid brutal society.

Through the distinction between the perpetrator of violence and the victim of violence, my dissertation has focused on the analysis of torture and rape. I have highlighted how *Waiting for the Barbarians* approaches torture from the Magistrate's perspective. In the novel, the protagonist becomes conscious of the psychological and physical impact that this violent practice involves; moreover, he also undergoes a process of self-transformation and acceptance of the other thanks to his relationship with the barbarian girl. The power of Coetzee's work stands in its ability to give the reader the chance to become a producer of meaning; despite his indirect references to colonialism or apartheid, the reader can attach his/her own significance to the text.

As far as *Waiting for the Barbarians* is concerned, I have explored the role of history through the Magistrate's wooden slips and the barbarian woman's marks. It has been noted that the protagonist's poplar slips and the girl's signs symbolise Empire's violence and its difficulty to be erased. In reading both the slips and the signs on his own conditions, the Magistrate attempts to re-imagine history. As the reader is requested to attach his/her own meaning to the text, the Magistrate strives for a new interpretation of history. In the novel, imagination and historical discourse are shown to be strictly linked.

*Disgrace*, conversely, has allowed a reflection on the theme of sexual violence in the context of the new South Africa through the protagonist's (David Lurie's) focalization. It represents a double perspective from both perpetrator and victim of violence. In particular, my work has aimed at observing the meaning of rape, the reasons behind the practice of rape against women in post-apartheid South Africa, with a final focus on Melanie Isaacs and Lucy Lurie's rapes. Rape effects have been studied through the



protagonists' reactions so that David Lurie's subsequent process of moral elevation and redemption has been investigated.

My dissertation has demonstrated how the narration of violence becomes possible thanks to the writer's challenge against the discourse of history. Rather than offering a realistic portrayal of violence, Coetzee adopts certain personal narrative techniques that enable him to write about that phenomenon through the protagonists' perspectives. Thus, Coetzee presents a perfect blend between the literary and the historical discourses, so that a scrutiny of the human experience is achieved.

Although this work has presented a general overview of the author's main narrative techniques, a more extensive research on the novels' narrative strategies should be carried out in order to understand Coetzee's powerful narrative style better. Moreover, a further study of the novels' secondary characters as well as a scrutiny of the secondary narrative themes could enrich a full understanding of both books. It would be also interesting to juxtapose the novels with their media adaptations; for instance, *Disgrace* could be compared to its 2008 film adaptation directed by Steve Jacobs, whereas a comparison could be drawn between *Waiting for the Barbarians* and its stage adaptations (an example is Alexandre Marine's stage adaptation of 2012).<sup>59</sup>

My wish is that my dissertation might help to extend the discussion on the topic of violence in relation to the great field of South African literature. One of the main purposes has been to draw the readers' attention to the power of literature making them aware of the impact of violence on human life in the hope that the horrors of South African history may never be repeated.

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<sup>59</sup> It should be underlined that a film adaptation for *Waiting for the Barbarians* directed by Ciro Guerra has been recently announced; the film will probably be released in 2019.

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## RINGRAZIAMENTI

*Questa tesi è interamente dedicata al mio amato papà Pasquale, che è stato la mia fonte d'ispirazione durante questo lavoro. Mi manchi ogni giorno e spero che, ovunque tu sia, tu possa essere fiero della tua bambina.*

La realizzazione di questa tesi sarebbe stata impossibile senza il supporto delle seguenti persone che voglio ringraziare dal profondo del mio cuore:

Ringrazio il mio relatore, il professor Marco Fazzini, per il suo indispensabile aiuto durante gli ultimi mesi. I suoi preziosi consigli, la sua conoscenza relativa al Sud Africa e il suo incoraggiamento mi hanno condotto al completamento di questo lavoro.

Ringrazio il mio correlatore, il professor Shaul Bassi, che ha accettato di essere il secondo lettore della mia tesi. Lo ringrazio per la sua disponibilità e per avermi aiutata nel cercare alcune fonti fondamentali per la mia tesi.

Ringrazio mia madre Francesca, la quale mi ha insegnato che le grandi soddisfazioni possono arrivare solo attraverso il duro lavoro. La ringrazio per essere la mia forza e per incoraggiarmi ogni singolo giorno.

Ringrazio mia sorella Carmen per essere la miglior sorella che si potesse mai desiderare. Ringrazio lei e Matteo per essere sempre presenti.

Ringrazio la mia piccola nipotina Celeste, per essere un'inesauribile fonte di felicità nella mia vita. La ringrazio per avermi insegnato che dopo dei momenti difficili la luce arriva sempre.

Ringrazio Chiara e Silvio, i miei secondi genitori, per avermi supportata durante i miei studi e, in particolare, per avermi dato l'opportunità di vivere la mia esperienza Erasmus.

Ringrazio la mia stupenda e grande famiglia per donarmi un amore incondizionato e per avermi seguita durante le mie avventure universitarie. Mi piacerebbe ringraziare la mia nonna Caterina, le mie zie Nina e Giovanna, i miei zii Andrea e Pino, e i miei adorati cugini Chiara, Maria Pia, Cosimo, Francesca, Andrea e Giuseppe.

Ringrazio tutti i miei amici per avermi insegnato che la vita deve essere vissuta al massimo.

Ultimo, ma non d'importanza, ringrazio Jonny per essere l'amore della mia vita e il mio migliore amico. Lo ringrazio per aver sempre creduto in me e per avermi insegnato che non devo mai mollare. Lo ringrazio per essere il sole nella mia vita.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*This dissertation is entirely dedicated to the memory of my beloved father Pasquale, who has been my greatest inspiration behind this work. I miss you every day and I hope that, wherever you are, you could be proud of your little daughter.*

This dissertation would have been impossible without the support of the following people, whom I would like to thank with all my heart:

I thank my First Reader, Professor Marco Fazzini, for all his invaluable help during the last months. His precious advices, his knowledge about South Africa and his encouragement have led me to the completion of this work.

I thank my Second Reader, Professor Shaul Bassi, who has willingly accepted to be my dissertation's Second Reader. I thank him for his availability and for helping me in finding some fundamental sources for this work.

I thank my mother Francesca, who has taught me that only through hard work one can achieve immense satisfactions. I thank her for being my strength and for encouraging me every single day.

I thank my sister Carmen for being the greatest sister one could have ever desired. I thank her and Matteo for being always present.

I thank my little niece Celeste, for being a constant source of happiness in my life. I thank her for teaching me that after hard times light always comes.

I thank Chiara and Silvio, my second parents, for supporting me during my studies and, in particular, for giving me the chance to live the Erasmus experience.

I thank my great big family for giving me unconditional love and for following all my adventures during my university years. I would like to thank my grandmother Caterina, my aunts Nina and Giovanna, my uncles Andrea and Pino, and my lovely cousins Chiara, Maria Pia, Cosimo, Francesca, Andrea and Giuseppe.

I thank all my friends who have taught me that life should be lived to the fullest.

Last but not least, I thank Jonny for being the love of my life and my best friend. I thank him for believing in me, teaching me that I should never give up. I thank him for being the sun in my life.