

## Imperial Nationalism in J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*

**Shadi Neimneh**

English Department

Hashemite University, Zarqa-Jordan

### Abstract

In *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), J. M. Coetzee interrogates the foundations of imperial states by highlighting the differences from the barbarians that the anonymous Empire maintains. The Empire defines itself and reinforces its identity by constructing a distance from the barbarians on many grounds. It maintains state institutions and keeps records, seeing itself as a modern state, an evolved version of “primitive” barbarians. Coetzee’s novel exposes the Empire’s precarious efforts at establishing the Other and its confused notions of state building. While the dominant interpretations of the novel focus on torture and the body, this article analyzes the novel’s involvement with imperial state building and nationalism. Torture and the body are important insofar as they expose the Empire’s efforts to identify itself and build a nation. The Empire’s failure in most of these respects—as suggested by the ending with the Empire losing its hold on the frontier settlement and the settlement’s people waiting for the arrival of the barbarians—makes us question the false assumptions on which many imperial enterprises are based. The Empire’s failure to protect its borders, its retreat to its heartland, and its failure to maintain civilized behavior in its treatment of its subjects and barbarian prisoners are manifestations of a chaotic, nascent administration rather than an identifiable and civilized imperial nation. In exposing the unstable distinctions colonial nations use to justify their existence, Coetzee’s work asserts an alternative ethic of engagement with the Other founded on the idea of essential humanity and tolerant recognition of difference.

**Keywords:** Imperialism; Nationalism; Identity; Coetzee; *Waiting for the Barbarians*

**Cite as:** Neimneh, S. (2015). Imperial Nationalism in J. M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*. *Arab World English Journal*, 8 (1).

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol6no1.3>