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Liminal Landscapes of Otherness: Postcolonial Interpretations of *The Self and the Other* in J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a textual analysis of J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* within the framework of postcolonial theory with special emphasis on the dichotomy between the Self and the Other, which is embedded within the text. Frantz Fanon is credited with introducing the concept of Other in postcolonial studies. Fanon perceives the dualistic construct of Self and Other as an outcome of what he terms a 'Manichean Delirium.' This phenomenon engenders a profound schism in the entirety of human existence, delineating it into interconnected yet opposing dichotomies such as virtue-vice, dominator-subjugated, and Caucasian-African, wherein the presence of blackness serves to validate the identity of the white Self, simultaneously relegating the black subject to objectification. In a colonial context, the coloniser saw the colonised merely as his binary opposite. The coloniser saw himself as the subjective, conscious Self while refusing to see the Other even as human. The Other was divested of his/her humanity, was objectified, and rendered a beast by the Self. Waiting for the Barbarians engages in a profound exploration of themes surrounding power dynamics, the perpetuation of torture, and the construction of the Other, which is achieved by superimposing an arbitrary identity upon individuals who deviate from the framework of the subjective imperial Self. However, the relationship between the Self and the Other is not simply that of dominance and meek obedience, rather the relationship is always fraught with tension, resistance and even defiance. This paper seeks to discursively interpret the mutual tension between the Self and the Other, as well as the resistance mounted by the Other against the Self's dominance that has been poignantly captured by Coetzee in Waiting for the Barbarians.

Keywords: *Postcolonialism, Self, Other, Subjectivity, Hybridity.*

Since the inception of postcolonial theory as an academic discourse, its premises have posited a contentious issue among the scholars. Initially, it has been associated with the concerns of former colonies in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean. In other words, only the literature of the third world countries qualified to be brought under the purview of postcolonial critical inquiry. However, some scholars backed by the literary studies which was instituted in the late 1970s by Australian critics such as Helen Tiffin, Gareth Griffiths, and Bill Ashcroft have claimed that

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the literature produced by the settler colonies of Canada, New Zealand and Australia namely the colonised first world countries can also be examined through the postcolonial lens. Such ambivalence in determining the framework of postcolonial studies challenges the notion that postcolonial studies is constituted of non-diverse theoretical framework.

Despite the apparent contradiction in the two stances taken up by the scholars, there seems to run a common thread through the seemingly contradictory and incongruous frameworks ascribed to postcolonial studies. This common thread has been tapped by many scholars such as Laura Moss. Laura Moss recognises a similarity between the literature produced by the former settler colonies such as, Canada and the former colonies in third world countries such as India or Nigeria, because all of these former colonies, irrespective of their present-day status are "in the process of trying to build nations on a common model that is predominantly British" (Moss 2). According to Moss, postcolonialism is concerned not only with "cultural imperialism" and "emergent nationalisms," but it also lays emphasis on equally relevant issues such as "the process of decolonization" and the evaluation of "hierarchies of power, violence, and oppression," which can be observed in the literature produced by all the former colonies, despite their varied colonial experience (4).

Hence, novels as varied as Wide Sargasso Sea which deals with Caribbean creole experience, The God of Small Things which deals with post-independent Indian experience, and A Grain of Wheat dealing with Uhuru and Kenyan experience, can all be brought under the purview of postcolonial critical inquiry. Despite their varied cultural and geographical settings, they all are essentially concerned with the experience and ambivalence of the once colonised subjects. They express the colonised subjects' "frustrations, their direct, personal and cultural clashes with conquering culture, and their fears, hope, and dreams about the future and their own identities" (Al-Saidi 95).

As postcolonial studies consolidated itself as a field of scholarly inquiry, it assimilated within itself multiple and varied discourses such as subalternity, post-structuralism, feminism, Derridean deconstruction, hybridity, binary opposition of Self and Other, etc. Thus, postcolonial studies offer a plethora of tools for analysing and comprehending the myriad experience of the former colonised subject. Homi Bhabha (1994) observes that the ambivalence embedded within the dichotomous relationship between the colonizer and the colonized relationship has been an essential component of postcolonial theory:

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> "…The colonial presence is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative. It is this ambivalence that makes the boundaries of colonial positionality- the division of self/ other and the question of colonial power – the differentiation of colonizer/ colonized- different from both Hegelian master-slave dialectic or the phenomenological projection of 'Otherness'." (107)

Frantz Fanon (2004) pioneered the notion of the Other within the domain of postcolonial scholarship. Fanon perceives the dualistic construct of Self and Other as an outcome of what he terms a 'Manichean Delirium.' This phenomenon engenders a profound schism in the entirety of human existence, delineating it into interconnected yet opposing dichotomies such as virtue-vice, dominator-subjugated, and Caucasian-African, wherein the presence of blackness serves to validate the identity of the white Self, simultaneously relegating the black subject to objectification. Within the context of colonial scenarios, the Self and the Other symbolize the colonizing entity and the colonized population, respectively. The Self requires the existence of the Other as a counterpart entity in order to define itself. Despite claiming to be radically different from the Other, the Self cannot exist in in itself, the very assertion of its identity is dependent on its being different from the Other. Hence, the Self and the Other subsist as dualistic contradictions within an intricate framework of colonial supremacy and colonial subjugation. According to The Key Concepts in Postcolonial Studies the notion of Othering "was coined by Gayathri Spivak for the process by which imperial discourse creates its 'Others' . . . Othering describes the various ways in which colonial discourse produces its subjects . . . the construction of the Other is fundamental to the construction of the Self" (Ashcroft 172).

However, the binary opposition of Self and Other does not confine itself merely to the representation of the coloniser and the colonised, rather it extends itself to include the dichotomy between the civilised/savage, the moral/lascivious, the Christian/pagan, thus legitimising the discourse of the white man's burden. In a colonial context, the coloniser saw the colonised merely as his binary opposite. The coloniser saw himself as the subjective, conscious Self while refusing to see the Other even as human. The Other was divested of his/her humanity, was objectified, and rendered a beast by the Self. The coloniser's identity which he perceives as white, moral, civilised, rational, industrious, and Christian sustains itself only when he imposes a starkly opposite identity on the colonised subject rendering him as the Other. Hence an identity is imposed upon the colonised whereby he becomes the opposite of the coloniser, thus the colonised is black, lascivious, savage, irrational, lazy and pagan, who needs to be colonised in order to lead him to the right path. Thus, the discourse of the Self and Other deftly accommodates and justifies the imperialistic mission of the white man.

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This paper attempts to offer a textual analysis of J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* within the discursive framework of postcolonial theory with special emphasis on the discourse of the Self and the Other implicit within the text. The title of J.M Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* is taken from the 1904 poem of the same name by the Greek poet Constantine Cavafy. The poem portrays a decaying and stagnated Roman Empire which awaits an invasion by the barbarians so that it can revive itself and regain its former glory by vanquishing the horrendous barbarian hordes. The barbarian invasion is perceived as a solution for the Roman Empire to revive itself from the decadence which has plagued it. Hence the grand Empire in both, the poem as well as the novel, is contingent on the Other, i.e., the barbarians to revive and consolidate its regime. Waiting for the Barbarians associates itself with the issues of ambivalent identity that resulted from the clash between two cultures, and torture, which becomes significant in the colonial context. However, the text is not just a reductionist portrayal of social reality and the horrors of torture confined to South Africa, rather it is an allegory of the Empire which resonates with the colonial experience across the globe.

The commencement of the novel entails the arrival of Colonel Joll at the frontier town, tasked with scrutinizing the circulating whispers of a potential barbarian insurgency that has instilled fear among the governing bodies within the remote imperial metropolis. Colonel Joll, a representative of the Third Bureau, captures and tortures any native who happens to cross his path, homogenizing them as the Other and labelling them as the enemy of the Empire to ensure that frontiers of the Empire and its laws remain unviolated. The Magistrate, the imperial authority of the frontier town is initially indifferent to the tortures meted out by Colonel Joll but gradually he finds himself drawn into the nasty assertion of Imperial supremacy. Subsequent to the Colonel's departure from the border outpost, it is at this juncture that the Magistrate assumes responsibility for a youthful barbarian woman who remains abandoned. Her mutilated physique, serving as overt testimony to her inherent distinctiveness, becomes a poignant manifestation of her Otherness. Later, to extricate himself from his malicious connections with the Empire, the Magistrate ventures into the forbidden barbarian territory to return the barbarian girl to her folks. However, when he returns, he finds himself labelled as Other and is subjected to the same tortures which is meted out to the barbarians. And only then does the Magistrate comprehends the relativity of the word 'truth' and the flimsiness of such binary divisions.

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The novel is suspended in a liminal space which can be observed in the opening paragraph itself. Coetzee adeptly forges a form of archetypal ambiguity, not only temporally but spatially as well, thereby alluding to the pervasive theme of Otherness. It can be inferred from the opening scene that the novel is not set in the twentieth century because the Magistrate is intrigued by the Colonel's sunglasses and has clearly not seen any before. Nevertheless, the artillery of the Empire seems very much the product of the twentieth century and the name, Third Bureau to which the Colonel belongs, sounds modern enough to be placed in the twentieth century. Hence, the precise temporal backdrop within which the novel unfolds remains elusive and uncertain, it seems the novel is suspended in a liminal space where everything is in a flux, even the rigid binary opposition of the Self and the Other. It is an allegory of the Empire, and the indistinctiveness of the text's time and setting renders it universal significance.

Waiting for the Barbarians grapples with the discourse of power, torture, and the construction of the Other by imposing a whimsical identity on anyone who differs from the subjective, imperial Self. Gallagher (1991) is of the view that the Empire "achieves strength, unity and identity" by constructing the Other, the unknown enemy at the gate. Colonel Joll and Mandel, the representatives of the Empire seek to consolidate the Empire by constructing a narrative of invasion by the savage barbarian hordes, thus they aim to unite the Imperial subjects against the dreadful other. According to the Magistrate, "one thought alone preoccupies the submerged mind of Empire: how not to end, how not to die, how to prolong its era" (Coetzee 129). However, the Magistrate himself is "no less infected with such obsessive, insidious thought than the faithful Colonel Joll," (129) and as Homi Bhabha argues that such unity occasioned by a shared hatred against the unknown Other, inevitably backfires and leads to the loss of identity of the assured Self, as happened with the Magistrate.

Hitherto, it has been argued that the discourse of Otherness involves the rigid binary division between the Other and the Self. Nevertheless, upon subjecting *Waiting for the Barbarians* to the scrutiny of the Otherness theoretical framework, it becomes evident that the inflexible dichotomy inherent to the discourse of Otherness becomes fragmented. In its place, a more intricate interplay among the three entities materializes, delineated by the three principal characters of the narrative: the barbarian girl, Colonel Joll, and the Magistrate. This proposition can be substantiated by drawing on the French anthropologist René Girard's 'Triangle of the Mimetic Desire' (1965).

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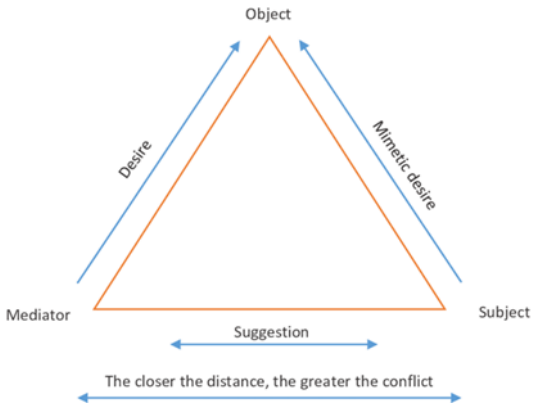

Figure 1. Triangle of the Mimetic Desire

Hence, in *Waiting for the Barbarians* the discursive framework of constructing Otherness manifests itself through the three entities of mediator (Observer), subject (Self), and object (Other) as is demonstrated in the diagram. The three entities are represented by the three main characters of the novel, however none of them is assigned a fixed, unchanging role. The roles of the main characters as mediator (Observer), subject (Self), and object (Other) keep shifting as the plot progresses. Though it is obvious to expect the girl in the exploited position of the object (Other) because of her barbarian background, yet the indeterminacy of a fixed identity in the liminal space pushes both the white characters of the Colonel and the Magistrate into the inferior position of the object (Other) in the triangulate structure of the Otherness. Despite the shifting roles of the three main characters, it is intriguing to note that the girl never assumes the role of the subject (Self) in the triangulated structure, though both the Magistrate and the Colonel can be perceived as occupying all the three positions of the triangle. However, she occupies the position of the Self, when the plot pushes her into a binary relation with the magistrate, when they venture into her own, forbidden, barbarian territory.

In the initial phase of the novel, the triangulate structure accommodates Colonel Joll as the superior subject (Self), the Magistrate as the mediator (Observer), and the girl as the object (Other). In this scenario, the Colonel clearly exhibits the assurance of the Self, wields power and tortures the barbarians with impunity. While, the girl is labelled as the Other by both the Colonel and the Magistrate, and the depiction of her physical body consolidates this label of the Other: "… Her skin is dark and [she] has straight black eye-brows, the glossy black hair of the barbarians" (Coetzee 25). The Colonel tortures her mercilessly in order to extract 'truth' from her, which renders her crippled. In this entire episode of the horrific torture, the Magistrate hovers at the periphery staying true to his role of the indifferent observer.

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Even after the Colonel left the frontier outpost, the Magistrate and the girl continued with their roles of the observer and the Object, respectively. The injured and maimed body of the girl becomes the motif of the conquered land, here South Africa. The magistrate observes her maimed body and tries to penetrate deep within the façade of her physical self. However, her body eludes the Magistrate due to his inability to recollect it in its original form, which is now distorted by the torture inflicted by Colonel Joll. Failing to breach this exterior barrier, he resorts to an invasive approach. In doing so, he transitions from his prior role as an observer to that of the Self, even as the girl remains entrenched in the role of the marginalized Other.

After becoming the Self, the Magistrate takes possession of the girl. Nonetheless, he experiences a profound sense of revulsion, stemming from his perception of being implicated in the culpability associated with the Empire. He attempts to extricate himself from the shameful conduct of the Colonel towards the barbarians but realises that he is not very different from him: "I was the lie that Empire tells itself when times are easy, he [Joll] the truth that Empire tells when harsh winds blow. Two sides of imperial rule, no more, no less" (Coetzee 130). The Magistrate grapples with a profound sense of guilt over the brutalities perpetuated under the pretext of the Empire's authority. Consequently, he opts to attend to the girl, convinced that such care might facilitate his atonement for the abhorrent transgressions committed on behalf of the Empire. Yet, regardless of his earnest efforts to distance himself from the Empire's affiliations, he invariably finds himself mirroring the behaviour of the tormentors in his interactions with the girl. Despite his role as the authoritative Self, the Magistrate relies on the girl, the Other, to aid him in the pursuit of a redefined identity, one that is liberated from the entanglements with the Empire.

The Magistrate develops an intense fixation on unravelling the girl's personal history and her ordeal at the hands of Colonel Joll. This fixation arises from his conviction that comprehending her traumatic past will facilitate a deeper comprehension of his own Self, thereby offering solace to his troubled conscience. He remarks, "It has been growing more and more clear to me that until the marks on the girl's body are deciphered and understood, I cannot let go of her" (Coetzee 33). However, the Magistrate's attempt to seek himself by comprehending the girl resulted in objectifying her, because it seems that the Magistrate lends little value to her as an individual and is interested in her story alone: "People will say I keep two wild animals in my rooms, a fox and a girl" (Coetzee 34). Hence, it appears that his obsession with her body only furthers the oppression perpetuated by her torturers. In his endeavour to unravel truth by

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means of the girl's maimed body, the Magistrate becomes aligned with the Colonel's agonizing quest for truth, both resorting to the invasion of the Other's body as a means to pursue truth. According to Rosemary Jane Jolly (1996), the Magistrate in his obsession with the distortion wrought by the torture on the girl's body, ventures on a "quest of truth involving torture" (113). Laura Wright posits that the ritualistic purification of the girl's body by the Magistrate functions as a symbolic representation of his personal endeavour to cleanse himself from the stain of malevolent complicity and affiliations with the Empire.

However, the girl's response to every endeavour on the part of the Magistrate has been silence. Here, the silence can be interpreted as the colonised subject's resistance to the imposition of an identity by the coloniser. The silence can also be interpreted as the inability of the coloniser and the colonised to communicate with each other, thereby creating an unbridgeable abyss between the Self and the Other. The girl's Otherness can also be connected to her being female along with her native origin. The binary discourse not only differentiates between the coloniser and the colonised but also sets rigid distinctions between the male who becomes the Self and the female who becomes the inferior Other. Hence, both the characteristics of the Otherness converge in the girl, and she resorts to silence to resist the oppression perpetuated by the Self. Being engrossed in their own version of the story, the coloniser entirely dismisses the possibility of the colonised's version of the story: "There is a whole side to the story you don't know, that she could not have told you because she did not know it herself" (Coetzee 167).

Gradually, it dawns upon the Magistrate that the line differentiating him from her torturer, the Colonel has blurred. In his quest to decipher the truth, he has perhaps unwittingly come close to resemble the Colonel, whom he despises wholeheartedly. He introspects, "I behave in some ways like a lover - I undress her, I bathe her, I stroke her, I sleep beside her - But I equally might tie her to a chair and beat her, it would be no less intimate" (Coetzee 45). Perceiving himself as morally and ethically superior to Colonel Joll, the Magistrate assumes the responsibility of repatriating the girl to her community.

Asserting autonomy over the girl and disregarding the Empire, he undertakes an unauthorized journey to the forbidden, barbarian territory. Once again, the assigned roles shift, and for the first time the girl assumes the privileged position of the Self, rendering the Magistrate as the dependent Other. Hitherto, she has been presented by both the Colonel and the Magistrate as a woman devoid of subjectivity. But once she moves out of the Imperial domain into her familiar territory, there is a drastic change in her demeanour. In this context, the Magistrate perceives

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her in a fresh perspective. For the first time, he regards her as a sentient, living individual rather than merely a disfigured corporeal form that is devoid of subjectivit.. He concedes to be "surprised by her fluency, her quickness, her self-possession … I even catch myself in a flush of pride: she is not just the old man's slut, she is a witty, attractive young woman!" (Coetzee 63).

Amidst all the shifting roles implicit in the episodes of endeavours and mutual tensions, Colonel Joll remains as the passive observer, hovering over the periphery yet making his presence felt by the Magistrate's incessant comparison and derision of him. However, the roles of the triangulate structure shifts once again after the Magistrate returns to the town from the arduous journey into the forbidden territory. The Colonel once more assumes the privileged position of the Self, while the girl hovers as an indifferent observer in the distant periphery. For the first time, the white male coloniser becomes the Other. He is arrested on the charges of allying with the enemy, the barbarians; he is dismissed from his position of power. But he is not in the least upset over the loss of his authority, rather he feels liberated on being divested of his power. He cherishes his disassociation from the Empire, as he confesses, "my alliance with the guardians of the Empire is over, I have set myself in opposition, the bond is broken" (Coetzee 76). The realisation that dawns on him and enables him to see through the façade that the Empire builds around itself leads him to proclaim that it actually is "the Empire of pain" which masquerades as "the Empire of light." This awareness pushes him to dissociate from the Empire which leads to his being labelled as the Other.

Being labelled as the Other, the Magistrate was incarcerated, subjected to torture and public humiliation, and was deprived of the basic human needs. Not only was he was labelled as a colonised Other for dissociating himself from the Empire, he was also labelled as a female Other, and was humiliated by forcing to wear a smock. Cloaked solely in a smock that extended to the midpoint of his thighs, the magistrate found himself transformed into an object subjected to the voyeuristic scrutiny of the onlooking crowd. By symbolically castrating him, the Colonel pushes him into the realm of the female, which is passive and silent. Consequently, the Magistrate is stripped of his inherent subjectivity and relegated to a state of complete silence, evoking a parallel to the silence which is reminiscent of the barbarian girl.

As the novel culminates, the positions of the triangular structure change again. The Colonel leads his troops to the treacherous deserts of the barbarian territory in order to vanquish and eliminate the horrendous barbarian hordes, who threatened an invasion on the Empire.

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However, the ulterior motive of this campaign was to strengthen and consolidate the regime of the Empire. But due to the travesty of fate, the troops of the grand and invincible Empire returned as dazed and bedraggled. One of the soldier reports, "They [the barbarians] led us out into the desert and then they vanished! .... They lured us on and on, we could never catch them. They picked off the stragglers, they cut out horses loose in the night, they would not stand up to us" (Coetzee 145). This unexpected defeat at the hands of the imagined enemy shocked and dismayed Colonel Joll. He lost his privileged position of the invincible Self and returned to the outpost as the vanquished Other.

The debacle of the campaign led by Colonel Joll restores the Magistrate once again to the position of power and he occupies the privileged role of the Self. However, by then, he had comprehended the insubstantiality of the binary opposition imposed by the authority on the people, which leads to the divestment of humanity of both the Self and the Other, because the discourse of the Otherness spares none. His experience of torture, incarceration, and public humiliation at the hand of the representatives of the Empire sensitized him to the plight of the Other. Because of his awareness of the flimsiness of such distinctions and the underlying common humanity in both the Self and Other which politically motivated discourses negate, he no longer indulges in the meaningless cycle of oppressing the Other to assert his superiority. His awareness enables him to embrace the humanity which is common to all:

> "I have a lesson for him that I have long mediated. I mouth the words and watch him read them on my lips: 'The crime that is latent in us we must inflict on ourselves' I say. I nod and nod driving the messages home. 'Not on others,' I say: I repeat the words, pointing at my chest, pointing at his. He watches my lips, his lips move in imitation, or perhaps in derision, I do not know." (Coetzee 141)

The theme of the Other becomes a very important concept in Waiting for the Barbarians. The Empire which perceives a threat from the barbarian Other, sets out to conquer and obliterate barbarian enemy, but ironically returns vanquished at the end. The Other can never be ascertained because no rigid binary division can ever be imposed on any human without divesting them of their humanity. Hence, throughout the novel the role of the Self and the Other shifts incessantly among the three major characters. Until and unless one sees through the façade of the politically motivated discourse of Othering, one can never realize hope to realize his/her own true identity. Binding over common hatred can never foster unity or consolidate any group, it is only when one realises the underlying humanity among all, unity and harmony will become achievable.

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The consequents of colonisation become most obvious in the spheres of politics and economics. However, the more insidious effects of colonisation manifest itself in the cultural sphere. Colonisation leads to an inevitable clash between two foreign cultures, which results in an ambivalence among the colonised subjects. The colonised subjects are invariably relegated to an inferior position by the privileged coloniser and a constructed identity is imposed on them by the colonisers. They are never seen as fellow humans by the coloniser, but as objects devoid of subjectivity. Edward Said in his seminal work *Orientalism* presents how the Orient, has been perceived by the European merely as a colonised Other divested of any subjectivity: "The Orient was almost European invention, and had been since an antiquity, a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting happenings and landscapes remarkable experiences … etc." (Said 10). Frantz Fanon builds upon Said's representation of the Orient as the colonised Other in his discourse of Binarism in which the Other is negated by the privileged Self. However, the relationship between the Self and the Other is not simply that of dominance and meek obedience, rather the relationship is always fraught with tension, resistance and even defiance. Everyone dreads the Other, but nobody knows who is the Other. Such mutual tension between the Self and the Other, and the resistance mounted by the Other against the imposed authority of the Self has been poignantly presented in J.M. Coetzee's Waiting for the Barbarians.

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