ARPIT KUMAR
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR
SHYAMA PRASAD MUKHERJI COLLEGE
DELHI, INDIA

THE DYNAMICS OF DEHUMANIZATION: TORTURE AND DEMOCRACY

> "The distinctive feature of modern liberal governance, I would submit, is neither compulsion (force) *nor* negotiation (consent) *but* the statecraft that uses "self-discipline" and "participation," "law" and "economy" as elements of political strategy." (Asad 3)

The appearance of the word 'democracy' in the public discourse of modern liberal states has gained a kind of currency where it can camouflage as many things and therefore functions as a prominent nothing. The deep shadow of 'totalitarianism', a term referring to the fascist regimes and the communist experiments of the twentieth century, lingers in the collective memory of the Western world to the extent that alternative forms of social and political organization are immediately sensed as dangerous and "anti-democratic". The secular, liberal democratic state constantly establishes itself as the norm in such public discourse with the consequence that its authority is constantly evoked, through a necessary evocation of the terrible totalitarian past, to legitimate 'democratic', 'legal', 'rational' acts of governance. The conflation of the word 'democracy' with "the universally correct way of life", its synonymy with the *secular, liberal* state, entails a certain attitude towards the religious, alternative economic modes of organization of material resources and alternative definitions of the political. The constant evocation of 'democracy' in the public sphere as an incontestable order reveals the coercive assertion of the superiority of the dominant Western, especially American, ways of organizing the social, the economic and the political. It is coercive because, as the last two decades and more, have proven that in the name of "democracy" the West, and especially the United States, can undertake a new imperialism, bring "peace" to troubled nations, support rebel groups and coups in other regions and neutralize non-existing weapons of mass-destruction.

At the outset, it is critical to underline that such a denunciation doesn't amount to a rejection of the principle of true democracy. In George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four*, the dystopian totalitarian regime sets about diminishing and disturbing language to inhibit the possibilities of free thought and to dictate meaning. This deterioration of language allows

slavery to become freedom, war to become peace and ignorance to become strength. The proliferation, and the frequent deployment of 'democracy' as a rhetorical tactic to justify acts of state sanctioned terror, blatant human rights violations indicates that such evocations may be more authoritarian that other espousals of alternatives (formation of collectives, acts of protest and resistance) that are frequently dubbed threats to democracy. This paper shall focus on torture, its occurrence and appearance in the public domain, as an indicator of a larger structural malaise in the secular, liberal 'democratic' state. In doing so, the paper will draw attention to how the secular, democratic state monopolizes the prerogative of defining who qualifies as human under the judicial order which in turn is also subject to suspension revealing an underlying realm of absolutism, authoritarianism and tyranny. Those who fail to meet these definitions are liable to be dubbed 'barbarian', 'irrational', 'anti-democratic', 'enemies (or 'enemy combatants') and 'inhuman' such that they fall outside of the discourse of rights. The paper will illustrate these arguments through a reading of J. Coetzee's *Waiting for Barbarians* (1980) with a dual emphasis: on the dynamics of dehumanization that lead to torture and the possibility of cultivating a resistant subjectivity from within language.

Torture and excessive violence, until very recently, were talked about as aberrations in the modern civilized world. It is important to acknowledge that we cannot talk about state executed violence in the same way as medieval and early modern occurrences of it. Michel Foucault has highlighted the close link between the sovereign and excessive use of violence. The sovereign laid its claim on its subjects through a claim on the material wealth of the subject, which in the last instance, is the body of the person. The excessive and spectacular appearance of violence in those regimes was directed towards the display and publicity of the authority of the sovereign (Foucault 10). It was a moment when the original contract of obedience and protection, as outlined by Thomas Hobbes, was considered lapse and this moment was elaborately dramatized through different forms of torture. Foucault has documented this in *Discipline and Punish* as well as the gradual transition to societies of surveillance, techniques of 'governmentality'. The modern state doesn't pride itself in spectacular violence but rather posits itself as a nurturer of the life of the people. Foucault has called this 'bio-politics', a paradigm within which the human body becomes the site of conducting politics, manifest in widespread state measures for the preservation of the health of its population (vaccination, universal medical care etc.) In this sense, the modern state denies, condemns and legally prohibits the use of excessive violence against its citizens. The public appearance of torture and excessive violence has been accompanied, till very recently, by a strain of denial, guilt where admitted, and defiance by misleading explanations of such events through reference to

fascist, psychopathic eruptions in an otherwise legitimate order. However, liberal democratic torture exists and its identification is the first step of resisting it.

The location and functioning of state sanctioned liberal, democratic torture has become fundamentally different in the post 9/11 world. The attack of 11th September 2001 led the United States of America to adopt a mode of politics that has foregrounded the logical, internal contradictions of the secular, liberal democratic state. George W. Bush, the U.S. President at the time of the attacks, made a blatant declaration after the attack on the World Trade Center declaring that the 'gloves were off' betraying not just the fact that nothing was off-limits anymore against 'them' but also the fact that the battle had been ongoing by other means before. The logic of profit that drives the neo-colonialist aspirations of 'the developed world' is carried out in the name of their propagation of democracy. Since that statement, the Unites States, with the complicity of other major European powers such as the United Kingdom, has systematically side-stepped structures of legality, international human right's laws to carry out a "war on terror".

In this context, the work of two theorists is essential to develop a more comprehensive understanding of why torture is symbolic. It derives its power from the deeper logic of Western liberal democracies. The first is Giorgio Agamben who adapts Carl Schmitt's idea of the 'state of exception' to articulate the paradigm of politics in a post 9/11 world. Agamben argues that the state of exception can no more be understood as a temporary suspension of citizen's rights and liberties in the face of an expected or actual external threat. The reality of this threat is immaterial to the deployment of the state of exception, it can merely be evoked for the declaration of 'the state of exception'; an almost prophetic instantiation of this appearing in Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) which shall be discussed below. Instead, Agamben highlights how the vacuum of law, the lapse of legality has become a technique of governance integral to the very functioning of the larger structure such that it is always already deployed in some sense (*State of Exception* 2). The camp, in such a conceptualization, ceases to be a concrete, identifiable space where people are subjected to hard labour and degrading treatment. The camp has instead become a paradigm of governance such that we can understand modern society to be under a permanent state of exception where legality, rights (including the right to be human) are deployed (*Homo Sacer* 181). Agamben's conceptualization throws the concept of human rights right out of the window as it foregrounds the fact that in the permanent state of exception there is nothing like 'inalienable human rights'. The qualifications to be human are specific and deployed in specific circumstances through different sets of tools that aren't merely visibilized in extreme situations of captivity such as the detention centers of

Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib. These are evident in the state's monopolization of the right to certify life and death through birth certificates, the state's right to suspend rights temporarily during curfews and the state's executive powers increasingly becoming a more dominant actor as compared to its legislative arm.

However, the case of Guantanamo is specifically instructive in understanding the exact nature of the functioning of the secular, liberal democratic state. Guantanamo Bay, located in Cuba on a piece of land leased by the United States Government, houses a prison detention center where 'people' suspected of being terrorists have been kept without a proper process of trial. These prisoners do not enjoy the status of Prisoners of War which would have entitled them to certain basic rights under the Geneva Convention. Their status has been that of an 'enemy combatant' which entails that they enjoy no rights, legal or otherwise. Amy Kaplan has highlighted: "Guantanamo's geographic and historical location provides the legal and political groundwork for the current violent penal regime" (833). It has been frequently described as 'a legal black hole' engendering "a permanent United States penal colony floating in another world" (Kaplan 831). This concoction of legal loopholes is characteristic of liberal democratic torture: a calculated tactic is deployed to escape the binding accountability to written law, international treaties and human rights regimes. The prisoners for a long time did not enjoy the right to trial by United States judiciary. The violation of the human rights regime becomes clearer in connection with another associated emergent phenomenon – the rise of 'clean torture'.

The second theorist is Darius Rejali, an Iranian born American scholar, who has documented the many diverse modern techniques of torture in *Torture and Democracy* (2007), providing a genealogical narrative, outlining their histories and their appearance in different regimes. The larger argument in the book is that torture is bred, nurtured and spurred to evolve in democratic regimes due to the fact that it is inherent in the very logic of liberal democracies and the modern state. In this context, Rejali has coined the term 'clean torture' referring to the emergence of a new paradigm characterized by a repeated deployment of a specific kind of techniques that leave no marks and use very little or no instruments of torture (8). These are techniques such as sleep deprivation, positional tortures involving endurance, extremely cold temperatures and water boarding (a technique through which a sensation of drowning is created in the body of the detained prisoner such that the technique can be repeated numerous times). The idea behind emergence of clean torture is, once again, a systematically calibrated attempt to side-step a system of checks and balances that is characterizes, and is glorified, in liberal democracies (8). This system of checks and balances is primarily constituted by the

international human rights regime (organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights watch have documented the rise of 'clean torture'). These organizations collect information about the execution of torture and are facilitated in their audits by state authorities and hence, largely, their work is already framed by authorities. These restrictions entail that the appearance of torture in the public sphere isn't just heavily mediated by already compromised news agencies but also dependent upon information leaks and other risky ways of breakthrough.

It is critical to understand that the belief that torture works derives its credence from more than one source. The first source has been heavily debated and talked about in the public domain in the last decade. This is, in a specific sense, an entirely new phenomenon since torture was, prior to this, universally condemned and the staple reaction towards it in the public domain was an instinctive disgust. However, now there is a wide ranging debate on the issue of whether torture is effective which betrays the fact that the question of the acceptability of torture has already been answered in an affirmative. The unconditional rejection of torture has been replaced by an attempt to understand, scientifically and with cold pragmatism, the ways and probabilities of its effectiveness. This in the first place is a problem. This has been facilitated by the constant evocation of the 'ticking bomb scenario' in popular culture. Television Shows (Fox Network's *24* is a prominent instance where the protagonist Jack Bauer faces a 24 hour deadlines to kill assassination plots and so on) and movies reproduce these false dichotomies where the life of a population is balanced against the life of a known, established terrorist beckoning the viewer to understand the necessity of extreme measures.

The second aspect is the very fact of who is being tortured. Talal Asad discusses torture in the context of his larger discussion about modern secular state and the political doctrine of secularism in *Formations of the Secular*. He begins by identifying a key definition of torture available in United Nation's Declaration of Human Rights ("No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment.") to locate the implication that there is "a cross-cultural criterion for making moral and legal judgments about pain and suffering" (Asad 101). Asad, like Agamben, foregrounds the conflict between the modern liberal state's promise of eliminating excessive violence with its other commitments of proving a stable political order and individual liberty. He argues that the tendency of liberal, secular states is to "measure", calculate and calibrate ideas of pain and suffering lead to the absurd situations of torture. Through this process of calibration, some kinds of pain and suffering are rendered legitimate as long as they fulfil a higher, more valuable end. Asad says, "In the process of learning to be "fully human" only some kinds of suffering were seen as an affront to

humanity, and their elimination sought. This was distinguished from suffering that was necessary to the process of realizing one's humanity-that is, pain that was adequate to its end, not wasteful pain" (111).

In this context, it is instructive to note how the tortured body is imagined by the apologists and perpetrators of torture. Torture, by definition, is an asymmetrical situation in which the perpetrator has an absolute authority over the body of the other but the apologists of torture continue to frame the situation as a continuation of warfare. The tortured body is so demonized and racialized that its very being is considered and framed as a threat. Even in a state of complete passivity, and approaching 'bare life', it is imagined in the mind of the apologists as capable of counter-violence. I borrow an anecdote here from Liz Philipoz to illustrate this paranoia and anxiety the root cause of which needs theorization. Three detained prisoners committed suicide by hanging at Guantanamo in 2006 (Mani Shaman Turki al-Habardi al-Utaybi, Yasser Talal al-Zahrani, and Ali Abdullah Ahmed). In response to this incident, Navy Admiral Harry Harris concluded that the suicides were a mode of carrying out yet another act of terror. The claim made by him was that these actions were evil, tactical attempts to malign the professional, well organized detention facilities provided at Guantanamo. He said, "They have no regard for life, neither ours nor their own. I believe this was not an act of desperation, but an act of asymmetrical warfare waged against us" (Philipose 1055). A very similar demonization is to be seen in Coetzee's novel where the barbarians, in spite of being merely nomadic people with a differing culture and way of life, are suspected of being capable of an organized violent rebellion.

The above discussion of torture and its centrality to an analysis of deeper flaws within the structural framework of the secular, liberal democratic state leaves a few questions unanswered. The attempt here shall be to illuminate these concerns through a literary narrative which provides a productive counterweight to a largely analytical, conceptual and historical narrative. Literature is another discursive mode of shaping, constituting and perceiving reality. It encompasses, and at the same time, transforms the social, political and economic is certain specific ways that can be isolated and analysed for the articulation of a different dimension of the debate.

Coetzee's novel is set in 1980 and if the author's larger oeuvre is representative, the novel is allegorizing the specific playing out of the Apartheid regime in South Africa. However, the novel is located in an unnamed country and in an unnamed time which forces us to consider – not its universality for that would be to assume the transferability of the dynamics of one situation to another – but it's fertility for adaptation in the post 9/11 world for the critique of

the secular, liberal democratic state. The novel is written as a personal monologue from the perspective of the character of The Magistrate who is in charge of an outpost of the Empire. The novel, at the very outset, makes us aware of the exceptional nature of the events that would ensue – something akin to a state of exception – considering that the outpost had been a largely peaceful place before the barbarian prisoners are brought in and tortured by Colonel Joll.

The novel reflects on the fundamental absurdity of the situation of torture. The discourses of duty and nationalism drive the carrying out of torture as the perpetrators are able to distance their own humanity from a disembodied role they are supposed to perform. It is critical to note that both the character's identities are dominated by their assigned role in the empire. This is illustrated in the narrative's withholding of their first names. This erasure of identity, its deterioration into an instrument, remains a lesson unlearnt from the mid-twentieth century experience of Nazi gas chambers and Soviet Gulags. A whole people cannot participate in the degrading treatment and annihilation of another people until and unless they are convinced of the primacy, or necessity, of another idea (racial purity, the futility of poverty or the). The Colonel's desire to interrogate isn't driven by any rational presence of suspicion or evidence but rather a pre-formed conviction of their perceived lack of culture, their 'barbarity'. This is amplified by his own unflinching trust in his own superiority and the complete lack of self-reflexivity. This comes across in his dialogue with the magistrate:

> "What if your prisoner is telling the truth," I ask, "yet finds he is not believed? …Imagine: to be prepared to yield, to yield, to have nothing more to yield, to be broken, yet to be pressed to yield more! …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 have to exert pressure to find it. First I get lies, you see this is what happens first lies, then pressure,—— then more lies, then more pressure, then the break, then more pressure, then the truth. That is how you get the truth" (Coetzee 9).

This complete lack of self-reflexivity and the corollary arrogance is evocative, in the context of 9/11, of the discourse of American exceptionalism. The United States continues to harp on a narrative of exclusivity, framing itself as a champion of individual liberty and 'democracy' inspite of the fact of its all too obvious neo-colonial adventures, its existence in a state of permanent combat and increasing internal hostility. It is instructive that inspite of lessening, if not withdrawing, the combative and reckless approach of the Bush administration, Barack Obama continues to thrive on and inflate the narrative of American exceptionalism. It

is a part of the truth of its coercive regime built on a rampage of exploitation; the political counterpart of a profitable road rage.

Coetzee's narratives have a distinctive signature because they attempt to occupy such an uncomfortable space. The Magistrate is someone who is very much a part of the empire and conditioned to look at the 'barbarians' as less than human beings but is at the same time not without a degree of ethical self-reflexivity. He is someone who's, to put it in Orwell's fashion, a blatant 'thought-criminal' because of what he thinks, because of what he dreams and because of what he murmurs in his sleep. His consciousness must be read as an exercise in restoring the possibility of self-reflexivity of thought and doubt in language.

In fact, language within the novel seems to go through a period of profound crisis. Much like the emptiness of the rhetoric of democracy, the language of the officials of the empire is characterized by evasion, procedure and falsity. This language is incapable of bearing the burden of reaching out to the other, of bridging the gap between the civilized and the barbarian. It is the silence of the tortured Barbarian Girl, instead, that ironically communicates the intensity of the loss to the reader through the blank gazes, and frequent loss of words. The text can be read as an exercise in re-constructing language as a means of communication, expression and sharing. The Magistrate is a sharp literary critic who is slowly reading the words, commands and signs that appear around him. He is somebody who excavates, who has an obsession with reading signs, reading the language of pleasure and reading the characters he comes across. He assumes the role of the spectator while continuing, for the most part, to lack control over his actions. He maintains a distance from the Empire in his thought but is permanently sceptical of its motives and actions. His internal monologues, his dream narratives represent desperate attempts to harmonize thought, language and feeling to articulate that which is the injustice, corruption and degradation that occurs before his eyes.

This is Coetzee's literary transformation of the socio-political through the prism of the literary and in doing so he comes close to hinting at an alternative, or at least a form of resistance, within the novel which hinges on an active consciousness that is continuously sceptical and probing. Its existence and survival is dependent upon the purification of language and alertness to the manacles of power that linger behind rhetoric.

Works Cited

Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1998. Print.

---. *State of Exception*. London: University of Chicago Press, 2005. Print.

Asad, Talal. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2003. Print.

Coetzee, J. M. *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1982. Print

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage, 1995. Print.

Kaplan, Amy. "Where Is Guantanamo?" *American Quarterly* 57.3, Legal Borderlands: Law and the Construction of American Borders (2005): 831-58. *JSTOR*. Web. 1 July 2015.

Philipose, Liz. "The Politics of Pain and the Uses of Torture." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 32.4 (2007): 1047-069. *JSTOR*. Web. 3 July 2015.

Rejali, Darius M. *Torture and Democracy*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007. Print.