



A Postcolonial Analysis of J. M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K*.

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Abstract:

Colonialism is a type of domination in which political, racist, economic and cultural issues are imposed on the colonized groups through the medium of exploitation, degradation and torture. For centuries Western nations, their supreme position and imperial power, exploited the colonized economically and culturally by destroying their traditions and culture. The term 'post-colonial' was originally used by the historians to describe the period after colonization. The study focus on J. M. Coetzee, one of the pioneers of South African literature, and his novel *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983) as a post-colonial literary texts. The paper has been written using MLA 8th edition of referencing and style of documentation.

Keywords: Post-colonialism, Colonialism, hegemony, racist, discriminatory discourse, pole-vaulter etc.

Introduction:

J. M. Coetzee's fourth novel, of *Life and Times Michael K*. published in 1983, won Britain's Booker Prize and Jerusalem Prize for the Freedom of the Individual in Society. Told from the perspective of the colonized rather than colonizer, *Life and Times of Michael K* was a great success for its emphasis on human condition in general and the protagonist's unconscious search and wish for freedom. Atwell (1993: 89) describes the novel as "a novel about a subject who, miraculously, lives through the trauma of South Africa in a state of civil war without being touched by it". Although Coetzee does not specify the race of the protagonist and does not tell about the setting of the novel directly, the country described in the narrative is a place in which there is a civil war.

In the novel, there is also no direct implication about the color of the protagonist of the novel. However, the places that Michael K is detained reluctantly railway gang, resettlement camp, rehabilitation camp-are associated with places where nonwhite South African people have suffered.

Rather than emphasizing the exact setting or historical or political doctrines and ideas, Coetzee's way of narration becomes more universal and general in *Life and Times of Michael K*. Freeing his novels from a determined historical and political doctrines and surroundings, Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K*. presents common human values, struggles and problems in general terms.

Coetzee divides the narration into three chapters in which the first and the last chapters are told from the perspective of an unspecified narrator. The second chapter is told through the voice of a medical officer in Kenilworth where Michael K. is kept under a clinical observation. The medical officer who tries to formulate and decode Michael in hospital becomes the voice of silent Michael. Michael, who remains silent and feels disturbed in the hospital, is treated as a precious stone which must be discovered and appreciated, the novel opens with the birth of the protagonist, who has shortcomings at birth:

The first thing the midwife noticed about Michael K when she helped him out of his mother in to the world was that he had a harelip. The lip curled like a snail's foot, the left nostril gaped" (Coetzee, 3).

Contrary to a protagonist who is trying to achieve great success through many adventures and heroic deeds in his process of becoming, Michael thinks of himself "not as a something heavy that left tracks behind it, but if anything as a speck upon the surface exhilaration. Michael is described by the medical officer in Kenilworth as a simple, ordinary and slow-witted man who is unable to articulate his own state of feelings, emotions explicitly:

He is a poor helpless soul who has been permitted to wander out on to the battlefield. (Coetzee, 141). Even at the time of his mother's death he keeps on his silence and reticence. When the nurse informs him of his mother's death, he explores his uncertainty and despair non-verbally:

He clasped his hands stared hard at his feet. Was he expected to say something? He separated his hands and clasped them, over and over. (Coetzee, 3).

Michael is repeatedly able to escape from the iron laws of his country and he returns to nature which is gentle, merciful and compassionate towards him. Surviving in a place far away from society and civilization, Michael feels relief and serenity in nature. When Michael K is detained in Jakkals drift, he raises questions himself about the hosts (may implicitly refers to South Africa's white government) and parasites.

It was no longer obvious which was host and which parasite, camp or town. If the worm devoured the sheep, why did the sheep swallow the worm? What if the hosts were far outnumbered by the parasites. . . .Could the parasites then still be called parasites? Parasites too had flesh and substance: parasites too could be preyed upon. Perhaps in truth whether the camp was declared a parasite on the town or the town a parasite on the camp depended on no more than on who made his voice heard loudest. (Coetzee, 116)

He always rejects being categorized and classified by people who have touched him barbarously. Michael, without a social status, is a lonely, friendless and fatherless man, Anna K leaves him alone at an early age, so Michael tries to fill in this gap in his life by dedicating his whole life to grow plants and pumpkins that he regards them as if his children. In this respect "K's pumpkins and melons become his family, his brothers and sisters, suggesting, in attenuated form, the possibility of community" (Atwell, 97). Michael explains his affection towards the pumpkins as:

I am like woman whose children have left the house, he thought: all that he remains is to tidy up and listen to the silence. (Coetzee, 111).

While people in his country are trying to defend their lands against the destructive forces of guerillas, Michael K goes on watering and protecting his pumpkins and melons against the attacks of donkeys and goats. Refusing to be involved in the colonial history of dominant powers, Michael K is a man who wants to be ignored by the men who are involved in the war to shape and make the history. He feels freedom rather than imprisonment when he lives out of time and history. When Michael is accused of helping the guerillas and is interrogated in the hospital by the major, he rejects being involved in the war:

Tell us the truth, tell us the whole truth and you can go back to bed, we won't bother you anymore. The silence lengthened Noel did not speak, passing the whole burden to me. 'Come on Michaels,' I said 'we haven't got all day, there is a war on!' At last he spoke: 'I am not in war' (Coetzee, 138)

Michael K as a simple gardener tries to build an invisible tie and connection between the earth and him. He feels better himself when he is in outdoors-in nature- than being kept in indoors or settlement camps. He spends all his time and effort to grow pumpkins and melons:

The pumpkins grew. In the night K would creep about, stroking the smooth shells. As time passed he permitted the hope to grow up again in his breast that all would be well. He woke during the day and peered out over the acre. Among the seeds he had sown had been a melon seed. Now the two pale green melons were growing on the far side of the field. It seemed to him that he loved these, which he thought of as two sisters, even more than the pumpkins, which he thought of as a band of brothers. (Coetzee, 113) Through the silence of Michael, the medical officer insistently labels him with different labels:

He is like stone, a pebble that, having lain around quietly minding his own business since the dawn of time, is now suddenly picked up and tossed randomly from hand to hand" (Coetzee, 135)

When I passed an hour later he was asleep, his mouth nudging the pillow like a baby's. (Coetzee, 135)

Who is Michaels but one of a multitude in the second class? A mouse, who quit an over-crowded, foundering ship. Only, being a city mouse, he did not know how to live off the land and began to grow very hungry indeed. (Coetzee, 136)

He is a poor helpless soul who has been permitted to wander out onto the battlefield . . . (Coetzee, 141)

He must be a pole-vaulter- that is what I thought. Well, you may not be a pole-vaulter, Michaels, but you are a great escape artist, one of the great escapees: I take off my hat to you! (Coetzee, 166)

Michael's dedication himself to silence and in articulation throughout the novel may lead him to explore his identification of the self at the final chapter because he consciously describes himself as: "I was mute and stupid in the beginning; I will be mute and stupid at the end. There is nothing to be ashamed of being simple" (Coetzee, 182).

The novel ends with the evasive Michael who sees him returning to his farm. The farm where he sprinkled the ashes of his mother like a seed can be seen the end of his cycle. He imagines himself as finding water by mending the broken water pump. Here Michael combines the two important elements- farm and water- in order to survive in his peaceful nature beyond history and politics. The narrator concludes:

He, Michael K, would produce a teaspoon from his pocket, a teaspoon and a long roll of string. He would clear the rubble from the mouth of the shaft, he would bend the handle of the teaspoon in a loop and tie the string to it, he would lower it down the shaft deep into the earth, and when he brought it up there would be water in the bowl of the spoon; and in that way, he would say, one can live. (Coetzee, 184)

Conclusion:

In a nutshell, In *Life and Times of Michael K.*, although Michael's color is not directly stated, the places that Michael K is detained reluctantly railway gang, resettlement camp, rehabilitation camp-are associated metaphorically with grounds where nonwhite South African people have suffered. In the novel, Michael appears to be an invisible enemy for the Empire which is governed by white men. The novel presents a portrait of the colonized and the colonizer as dictated by the Western hegemonic, racist, and discriminatory discourse in which the colonizer always think of him as idealized and idolized since he is dominant and supreme but the colonized undergoes a kind of alienation and degradation because of the imperialistic behaviors of the colonial powers.

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