

# A Quest for Identity in an age of Alienation

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## Abstract

## Introduction

Literature is well recognized for mirroring the contemporary issues of society. South African literature is replete with the theme of Apartheid but it was in hands of J M Coetzee who brought this issue worldwide. John Maxwell Coetzee who was awarded Nobel Prize for Literature and won the Booker Prize took the issues of poverty, crime and violence as the central themes of post-apartheid literature and Coetzee faces the difficult of cultural authority. Being a white South African writer he confronted the problem of representing the black population in his narratives. He required being extra careful in applying cultural divisions into an imaginary work. The quest for identity is highly explored theme among authors and critical theorists. If we examine, the South African Literature 'search for identity' is one of the main theme and undoubtedly Coetzee has no exempted from it. The present paper would study for the quest for identity in the novel *Life & Times of Michael K* by J.M. Coetzee. Identity is essential for the existence of humans and through the present paper examines the heart breaking reality of human life in South Africa which is 'search for identity'.

**Key Words:** Search for identity, post-apartheid, apartheid, South African literature.

## Life and Time of Michael K

*'Life and Time of Michael K'* is J. M. Coetzee's first novel which wins Booker Prize. The entire novel and the title of the novel are ironical. In this novel there is nothing which focuses on the life or time of the central character Michael K. Michael, the central character is an angel like human being who cut off himself from all sorts of various social relationships. This novel portrays his revolt against the socio-political system of then South African society which has been constantly attempting to convert Michael as slave for the welfare state.

Existentialism is a philosophical movement, which started in the 20th century. It aims at the idea of existence and of how human being tries to find out sense in their life of existing in the world. It is up to the individual to make a decision the moral constraints in life. It lies in the hands of an individual to decide between the opposing dyads like good and bad or correct and incorrect. Man will have to search for the meaning of life with the struggle and without a struggle, there can't be any living.

This work of fiction focuses spotlight on what happens in the life of Michael K when he was thirty-one years old. In this vision the novel's heading is very important, 'War is the father of all and king of all. Some he shows as gods, others as men. Some he makes slaves and others free.' Coetzee displays that the civil war is at the backdrop of the novel and as well the time of disorder and anarchy.

The novel published in 1983 and told a story of a disfigured man named Michael k that has neither proper education nor a job but his love for his mother is copious. The society has isolated him from birth as of the defacement in his look by birth and dull in mentally and bodily activities. Without his mother on his way, to Prince Albert, he discovered several things in his life.

Once by misfortune on his way to Prince Albert he is caught by a soldier. Now Michael became a member of a labor group but he escapes from camp because he does not want to accept the life of a convict. He decides to come in the town from the South there he asks a shopkeeper about Mr. Vasloo or Mr. Visser, these are the names mentioned to him by his mother. Indeed there is no person like Mr. Vasloo or Visser but there is Visagie's place which has been isolated for years. In addition to this he arrived at Prince Albert, the place is more fascinating than Cape Peninsula and he settles himself in a broken house that is remote from the country. "The box of ashes waited in a corner of the living room. He hoped that his mother, who was in some sense in the box and in some sense not, being released, a spirit released into the air, was more at peace now that she was nearer her natal earth." (57Coetzee). Because of the absence of his mother, he is psychologically ill and distresses but he struggles to adjust himself in the place. People abandoned him from childhood but now he discarded everyone by staying in an isolated place. But his dream spoilt when Mr. Vissers grandson came there. Now at home Michael sleeps on the floor such as an animal, lives on birds and lizards. He has no knowledge about money. Someday Visagie's grandson asks him to go to Prince Albert to bring something for him and suggests him not to talk to anyone. Michael leaves the farm

hauling the list of things but at the gate of the farm he buries money in the tin beneath a stone. Following to he goes in the way of Prince Albert and he finds a cave but once more he is caught by police. This time in police station he is locked with other five men. He has no official permit and no document related to identification. He is the deserted kid of South Africa who is born in the Africa but still he must have ID to show his own identity in his own country. There is a resettlement camp, and again he becomes a prisoner. Coetzee portrays the image of camp life which presents a bleak picture of the state sponsored massacre and exploitation. Michael's companion in the camp tells him:

You have been asleep all your life. It's time to wake up why do you think they give you charity, you and the children? Because they think you are harmless, your eyes aren't opened you do not see the truth around you. (LTMK 88-89)

Revolution of Michael against this system because the camp supplies food, shelter and clothes but is systematic technique of making the people prisoners and labors forever for state. This type of life he didn't want to live in its place of he wants to earn his bread on his own way. Coetzee uses the symbol of parasitism for it and Persons and institutions are likely in terms of parasite-host connection.

Through every level of social relations we find an idea of power as a force. For Foucault power is both pervasive and productive. Carefully if we analyze the novel, we find that power is pervasive throughout but it is not productive in any intellect. It is acidic authority. The state has thrust its authority to use the poor as it is more influential. This power has broken the extremely backbone of the civil life in South Africa.

By doing jobs, he tries to find life in an isolated place which gives him pleasure. In isolation, he sang loudly and heard his reflect voice. He covered his mother's ashes on the ground. "He laid the packet of ash in the hole and dropped the first spadeful of earth on top of it. Then he had misgivings. He closed his eyes and concentrated, hoping that a voice would speak reassuring him that what he was doing right- his mother's voice if she still had a voice or a voice belonging to no one in particular, or even his own voice as it sometimes spoke telling him what to do. But no voice came. So he extracted the packet from the hole, taking the responsibility on himself, and the set about clearing a patch a few metres square in the middle of the field. There, bending low so that they would not be carried away by the wind, he distributed the fine grey flakes over the earth, afterwards turning the earth over spadeful by spadeful." (59 Coetzee)

This is how he starts his journey as a grower by sowing seeds on the ground and watering the plants and he tries to survive without his mother's occurrence. He feels like a possessor of the land, because there is no one to question him regarding his work. Now his daily routine starts to water plants just for the sake of food. He does things according to his wish. He revealed the sense of his life is to live a cultivator of crops thus he starts growing crops and stayed happily in place without any companion. For anyone it is difficult to stay in an isolated place without any facilities, specifically for a city resident like Michael K but he proved it wrong as he stayed there lacking of many facilities.

Beginning of Michael life as a gardener and even at the end of the novel he discovers his actual place in the world. He states that 'The truth, the truth about me.' 'I am a gardener.'(LTMK 181) All over the novel, Michael is blank of any real human relationship. For this reason doing a work of gardening he discovers a sense of community for himself. At one point he calls his melons and pumpkins as his close relatives because there is no any strong connection of human relationship among the persons in the novel. On one occasion again he is caught by the police but this time he is admitted to a hospital. To see Michael weighs less than forty kilos the doctor, who is also the narrator of the novel, is surprised and thinks that Michael does not belong to this Earthly world. He calls him Michaels. Michael's single wish is to be free he claims, 'I used to think about flying. I always wanted to fly.'(LTMK 133) He has the obstinacy to stay alive hence he has been protesting against the refined structure of slavery of the state. He wants to live like a bird like a free soul so escapes from the hospital. Even he does not attempt to provide a rational description for this flee.

## Conclusion

To demonstrate Michael's reality and the opposite representation of the identity constructed by the world around him in the South Africa Coetzee offers us a number of implications. Initial from his origin to his last escape here develops a sharps difference between what Michael is able of doing and the projection of the capacity as constructed by the people in supremacy. The dream of silence which Coetzee's heroes arrive at in their life is not without results but it is concealed inside the past. He shows the possibility of a

new method of living in correlation with history and people this is a way further than the master – slave relationship.

Being a writer J. M. Coetzee attempts to build Michael identity in conditions of small animals and creatures in the South Africa. He is equated with a mouse that guts an over-crowded foundering ship. Further under a stone he is also presented as a lizard and similar to a snail with its shell. He hides himself from the police when he was on the farm house. He never comes out in the daytime. He feels himself as nude as a spy in sunshine. To make sense of his life, in the struggle K knew that he would not move slowly and stand up and cross from the darkness into firelight to make known himself. Searching for nothing and everything he finds himself traveling around a village or countryside aimlessly. However a few commentators have suggested that Michael is trying to search for an impressive sense of his life. Lastly I conclude my paper mentioning the fact he is intensely anxious to arrive at a characteristically metaphysical understanding of him and continually he himself searches for identity and keeps trying to decide what his correct reason is.

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