



## A Study of Racism and Colonialism in J. M. Coetzee's Life at the time of Michael K

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### Abstract

J. M. Coetzee is considered to be the most influential writer of his generation. His writings introduced readers throughout the world to the creative use of language and form of modern African life and history. The novel *The Life and Times of Michael K*, published in 1983. For this excellent novel he got the Booker Prize in 1983 that reflects and explores public concern over the future course of South Africa. The purpose of the present research paper is to analyze of racism and colonialism in his booker winning prize novel *The Life and Time of Michael K*. In this regard, the study deals with the aftermaths and repercussions of racial partiality and separation that affected the lives of people in South Africa. The novel depicts apartheid racial and colonial clashes towards the native people of South Africa. It is one of the most brutally and violently exploited regions. The Black are doomed to live in slums in terrible conditions while the white lived in the most modern areas and conditions. While Africans grapple with poverty, hunger, unemployment, diseases, minority the white are preoccupied with their idea of colonialism. Coetzee's novel then ironically undermines this union by portraying an anti-hero whose purpose is to oppose all forms of social ties and political affiliations. This does not make the novel apolitical: its setting very clearly highlights the racial and colonial unrest of South Africa.

**Key Words:** Racism, Colonialism, Apartheid, unemployment, Political allegory.

Coetzee's first novel to win the Booker Prize, *The Life and Times of Michael K* is a story of hare-lipped, simple gardener Michael K, who starts a challenging journey from civil war ridden urban South Africa to his mother's rural birthplace, Prince Albert during apartheid period in the 1970-80s. The novel takes place in a dystopian South Africa at a time when there is a civil war going on.

The novel is divided into three parts. The first part includes most of Michael's adventures until he is caught by the army and suspecting of helping the collaborators. The second part is narrated by a doctor at one of the camps he is sent to. Michael is kept under medical supervision. He eventually escapes from the camp, and in the last part he returns to the city from where he started his journey. The novel focuses on not only the issue of race but elements of colonialism also. The Life and Times of Michael K is the story of the title character who does not feel like he is a part of a society. Michael K cannot get nourishment from his mother's breast because of his hare-lip. He is a simpleton and was institutionalized as a child. His hare-lip makes him feel isolated and alienated in society, so he does not have an active role or contribute to anything. The novel is a story of isolation and survival as Michael K struggles to survive in nature rather than live in a civil-war ridden society which treats even his own people unfairly. When Michael arrives at the farm of his mother, he finds the farm desolate and starts to live off the land in this farm. Later, one of the relatives of the real owners of the farm appears and commands him like a servant. "As becomes clear when Visagie, the grandson of the erstwhile owners of the farm, later dispossesses him of this residence and relocates him to the servants' quarters, the house suggests the self's need to affirm itself by dominating nature and others. It serves as a complex symbol of settlement, ownership and mastery" (Marais 2010 : 109)

Michael struggles to survive in the farm by tilling the soil as an isolated man from society. Michael K is born with some disadvantages: dull and slow, fatherless, disfigured (hare-lip). The doctor in the working camp depicts him as a weak character in the war of survival: "You are like a stick insect, Michaels, whose sole defence against a universe of predators is its bizarre shape" (LTMK, 149). Michael is not socially or politically engaged but he also became victim of apartheid system of government. He says "I am not in the war" (LTMK, 138). He comes across the harsh realities of the South - African life such as tyranny, guns, curfews, or patrols in the orphanage he was sent to all these dark sides of the society leave that effected deeply on his psyche.

Michael K starts to work as a gardener at the age of 15 in Cape Town, while his mother works as a domestic servant for an elderly couple. Suddenly the country goes into war and the place where they stay is attacked and vandalized, he loses his job. The purpose of the war is told to give minorities their dues as part of democratic idealism. Noel says, "We are fighting this war so that minorities will have a say in their destinies" (LTMK, 157). In South Africa this means the repression of the black majority by the white minority and it turns into a tyrannous shape. Michael K looks for his freedom in this oppressive and racist society by preferring a life in nature. He is like Robinson Crusoe, who leads his own life in his motherland. He prefers solitary existence. Noel brought out the register: "according to this, he said, ' Michaels is an arsonist. He is also an escapee from a labour camp. He was running a flourishing garden on an abandoned farm and feeding the local guerrilla population when he was captured. That is the story of Michaels'" (LTMK, 131). These descriptions are some of the accusations Michael confronts because of some misunderstandings and superficial reasons. The doctor is ready to defend Michael against any accusation as he is interested in

Michael's story and struggles to understand him more than others. He is surprised by his coincident survival in the civil war despite his weak character and ambiguous identity.

The Life and Times of Michael K is the reflection of South Africa that made its own people dependents, prisoners and parasites whether they are black, white or colored. Coetzee avoids any kind of naming and shifts the focus from the issues of race to a more individual platform. Michael K's simple but rebellious life can indicate the desire for an uninhibited and unoppressed life. In the second part of the novel, Michael is arrested and sent to a working camp. The doctor gives his first impression of him:

“You saw him when they brought him in [ ... ] he was a skeleton even then . He was living by himself on that farm of his free as a bird, eating the bread of freedom, yet he arrived here looking like a skeleton.” (LTMK, 146).

In the camp Michael refuses to eat and he retreats physically and socially. He goes far away from real life by cutting off his connection with the outer world. He stops talking and the doctor starts to write his story. The absence of language refers to Michael's lack of control over his life. K's otherness obstructs the medical officer's effort to comprehend him and the diary in which the medical officer notes about Michael just shows his lack of control over Michael. The diary indicates Michael's loss just as he imprisons himself to passivity through the absence of language in the farm. His passivity also signifies his uncompromising views about his society. In other words, we can consider that cutting off his relations with the world through lack of language indicates his desire to remain free from any controlling mechanism. The medical officer points out his opinion of him hopelessly:

“You are never going to get sense out of him [ ... ] he is a simpleton , and not even an interesting simpleton . He is a poor helpless soul who has been permitted to wander out on to the battlefield , if I may use that word , the battlefield of life , when he should have been shut away in an institution with high walls , stuffing cushions or watering the flower - beds [ ... ] don't try beating a story out of him.” (LTMK, 141)

Coetzee reminds us that those in power records history and also that their perceptive is biased. We cannot trust that the story they narrate about Michael is actually his story. The doctor admits that he does not know Michael's story and that he invents it and “tries to speak for him”. This, as a result, makes the story “a third-person narrative in which the extent of the narrator's knowledge about Michael K's story is unclear” (Head “Gardening as Resistance” 99). How accurate the record of Michael's story is with respect to his real story may be compared to how accurate the depiction of apartheid in the novel is. People in power decided and chose whom and what was included in history, even if the resulting narrative is not complete. In order to highlight this lack of information about others, Coetzee makes Michael refuse to talk. Sometimes he declines to tell his own story. He refuses to talk to people involved in institutions. He would rather be considered retarded or insane. When in Kenilworth camp he refuses to talk, the doctor says to the officer that Michael

“should have been shut away in an institution with high walls, stuffing cushions or watering the flowerbeds” (LTMK 141). However, the lack of information does not stop them from completing the story by inventing or manipulating it to fill in the gaps or even by recording what they think they know. When Michael is at Kenilworth camp, before the doctor wants to know his story “[he] says his name is not Michaels but Michael” (131), but they call him Michaels anyway “[come] on, Michaels,’ I said, ‘we haven’t got all day, there is a war on!’” (138). Michael resists their manipulation and does not say what they ask him to: “‘Tell us about your friends who come in the middle of the night and burn down farms and kill women and children,’ said Noël, ‘That’s what I want to hear’”(139). Obviously Michael does not say a word; that is not his story. It is not true, just like “Michaels” is not his identity. These are the identity and stories that officers create for him based on prejudices. Thus, Michael decides to remain silent when he faces institutions or their representatives. Michael tells his story to some characters but he refuses to tell it to those in a position of power in the hierarchy of institutions. As a result, the record of his history is inaccurate and manipulated because those in power are the ones who write it.

In his criticism to apartheid and especially to the white Afrikaner position in society, Coetzee attacks relevant basis of Afrikaner culture: their myths. Susan VanZaten Gallagher points out that Coetzee retells three Afrikaner myths in this novel: “the Afrikaner’s heroic independence and alienation from modernity, the tragic suffering endured in the concentration camps of the Anglo-Boer War, and the pastoral return to the land” (151). Paul Franssen adds one more to the list: the myth of the Promised Land. In Coetzee’s version of the myths, they have the following three characteristics: the protagonists are non-white non-Afrikaner characters, they live the myth and eventually they lose and fail. In the first myth, the pastoral return to the land and the farm as a place of origin has Anna K and Michael as protagonists “Anna K had been born on a farm in the district of Prince Albert. Her father was not steady; there was a problem with dinking; an in her early years they had moved from one farm to another” (LTMK 7-8). In contrast to what would be expected of a traditional version of the myth in which the farm is the place of origin and also a source of happiness, Anna was born in a farm but her childhood was not happy. She was not living at a particular farm but at several and she does not even remember the name or the exact place where the farm was located. She distorts reality and focuses her memories on just one farm where she thinks she was happy. She wants to go back to that idyllic place and she pass her wish on her son. Since the moment they decide to leave the city and start their journey to the farm, Michael embraces the myth and it will become his particular obsession to get there with his mother. In his eagerness to find his mother’s farm, Michael will adopt Visagie’s farm as the farm he is looking for, even when there are several doubts that it is the right one: “Was this where his mother has been born, amid a garden of prickly pear?” (57). Michael wonders if he is right but at the same time he does not care because he is now living the myth. It does not matter anymore if the farm is his mother’s farm because now it is Michael’s farm, where he belongs. Nevertheless his mother was not happy at the farm and he is not happy either. Every time he attempt living there, cultivating or building a home, invaders interrupt his way of



living. The first invader is the owner's heir, the Visagie's grandson. Despite he wants to live with Michael "quietly till they make peace everywhere" (64) Michael refuses and abandons him.

The readers cannot know for sure whose point of view this is. A few lines before this statement the narrator focalizing through Michael's point of view, but in this passage we cannot say if it is Michael's or the narrator's external perspective. Still the narrator suggests that in order to live, one must to be careful and try to go unnoticed. However it does not mean that Michael is not going to be part of history. It means that being part of the powerless, the only way to endure is to survive and become a living witness of one's own story. Michael is close to die twice in the novel. Curiously enough, the army "saves" him and takes care of him until he is healthy enough to work. When he is about to die and disappear, the class in power offers him the opportunity to go on with his story. At the same time they provide the opportunity to transform his story into history by telling them. Nevertheless Michael refuses to speak to those "who [wish] to exercise authority over him" (VanZaten Gallagher, 162). And by doing so, it might seem that he is putting his permanency in history in danger. At least that is what he is encouraged to think: "do you want your story to end with you?" (LTMK 140). The Medical Officer is taking for granted that the story dies when Michael dies, but he contradicts himself as he goes on: "you are not important. But that does not mean you are forgotten. No one is forgotten" (LTMK, 136). This character states that even if Michael's story comes to an end when he dies, Michael will remain in history. And by saying that Michael is not important, he alludes to his social class.

Coetzee criticizes the system of apartheid by using his novel as a weapon against it. He attacks apartheid with great skill by disguising his criticism within the pages. He makes no mention of apartheid and still most critics take it for granted as a basis for their analyses. He writes a novel in which the title *Life & Times of Michael K* gets a new perspective. "Life" is condensed in a few years and still feels like a whole existence. And "times" are not a precise moment but a timeless period. The personal denomination "Michael K" does not provide clues about identity either. Coetzee changes the character's name to Michaels or to Michael Visagie and these changes do not change his story. We know that it is still Michael K although official records say opposite (Michael Visage in the charge sheet at Jakkalsdrif camp, and most likely Michaels at Kenilworth camp). Laraine O'Connell defines Michael as "a skeletal figure, a universal nobody whom we can never know intimately" (41). Following her argument, Michael K allegorically represents more than just one person so his identity is even more blurred. As has been demonstrated, however, we cannot know him closely not because of his identity, but because he is not telling his own story. It would of course be possible for us to have an accurate story about him, even if others narrated it, but in this case we cannot be certain that we truly know him because he sometimes refuses to tell his story and prefers to remain silent. We know that "he has systematically been schooled into silence" (Bohm), so it is not illogical to conclude that he refuses to talk when he faces institutions. Huis Norenius played a decisive role in Michael's life and influences him in his future relation with authorities. Many critics discuss Michael's reluctance to talk and to tell his story. Some of them connect his silence to his hare lip or perceive his imperfection as an obstacle for verbal communication.

But only the Medical Officer supports this statement. Not other character mentions it as a problem to understand Michael's words. Michael chooses not to tell, to remain silent. According to Bohm, "[by] refusing to answer questions and by not producing an 'interesting' story, Michael K has avoided becoming the subject of a history written by others." However he did not avoid it: two different narrators tell his story and help him become part of history. They are recording his life in a book that is going to endure time and make him part of the history. Besides, we must remember that even those who are not in history belong to it. Michael's life is the story of those outside history books that also lived in history.

Finally, Coetzee describes a country where the protagonist does not live, survives. Michael is trapped in a country that does not have any free land without fences and keeps him in a social system that makes him feel like trapped into "cages". In order to recreate the same oppressive system based on discrimination, Coetzee has to portrait a war. Not any war, a civil war, the most terrible of all wars because it is among fellow countrymen. They do not fight for territory but for rights: white people are fighting for their right to keep the status quo and keep themselves in power where the rest of the population is oppressed.

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