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Shaping of Protagonist's Subjectivity in J. M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*

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Abstract : Human subjectivity signifies human self consciousness which, in turn, indicates the state of awareness. An individual is recognised in a society through his/her family name. Consciously or unconsciously, he adopts the family identity that gives him recognition. In other words, self consciousness reflects the ability to locate, identify and experience. The individual takes decisions based on his/her experiences. Besides, consciousness also stands for the judgement of an individual which is shaped by his/her beliefs and views.

Index Terms - Human Subjectivity, Identity.

The present study attempts to discuss the subjectivity of the protagonists of J.M. Coetzee's novel, namely, *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983). In this novel, Coetzee has depicted the interregnum when the apartheid era had ended in South Africa and the country was heading towards independence. Behind the massive social unrest lurked the Soweto protest which affected the whole of South Africa in 1976. It pulled the entire nation along in its wave. The atmosphere in South Africa got highly charged and the blacks started revolting against the white government. The black students participated in many strikes and boycotts. In this context, William Beinart firmly believes, as quoted in Jane Poyner's *J. M. Coetzee and the Paradox of Postcolonial Authorship*, that the Soweto protest is an extremely important movement in the history of the apartheid era which had changed the mindsets of South Africans for good. As a result of this protest, the colonized people turned against the white government. Moreover, they grew increasingly aware of their sense of self. Consequently, their long pent-up hatred and resentments burst out in great fury bordering on insanity (11).

The protagonist Michael K is a very silent character whom the society never allows to let him speak just because of his cleft lip. But after the half of the novel, there is a sudden transition comes in his life. He soon realises that he has a special purpose to serve on this earth. He is a gardener. Therefore, it becomes his duty to nourish the life on the earth. Human subjectivity signifies human self consciousness which, in turn, indicates the state of awareness. An individual is recognised in a society through his/her family name. Consciously or unconsciously, he adopts the family identity that gives him recognition. In other words, self consciousness reflects the ability to locate, identify and experience. The individual takes decisions based on his/her experiences. Besides, consciousness also stands for the judgement of an individual which is shaped by his/her beliefs and views. In this context, Ruth Robbins holds the view that the awareness of the individual pertaining to his self shapes his/her individuality which is a part of his/her subjectivity. In this regard, subjectivity can be defined, in a sense, . . . subjectivity: the consciousness of their own being, their own personality, their own individuality. This consciousness implies that we might well be preoccupied with our own selves, . . . it is foundational in the construction of our personalities. . . To be conscious of oneself is part of what subjectivity appears to mean; and from that self-knowledge all other personal traits proceed – self-consciousness can mean self-possession, poise, confidence. . . (Robbins 8)

Moreover, agency also contributes very significantly to constructing human subjectivity. Since an individual lives in a society, he/she is assigned a certain role. The various social agencies instruct him/her regarding his role. Thus, socio-cultural and political agencies play important roles in defining the identity of an individual. Social institutions such as parents, family, caste, ethnicity, class and nationality compel one to think who he/she is and where he/she stands in a society. These institutions give recognition to an individual. These institutions direct the individual to perform a specific role in the society. In this context, Donald E. Hall has suggested that many factors such as different social roles also influence human subjectivity. A human being performs all these roles in different situations. As a result, human subjectivity is sub-divided, incomplete and unstable. It cannot be considered uni-dimensional (118).

In this novel, Coetzee's main concern is not describing explicitly the apartheid or the anti-apartheid days. Instead of this, he highlights the chaos which had caught South Africa in its grip. He narrates the story of those innocent people who had to pay the price for nation's independence. It got increasingly difficult for them to secure their lives. These people were not able to rejoice in the independence. Their plight is described through the story of an ordinary young man named Michael K. He is a thirty one year old South African native. Michael K is a quiet character who has a cleft lip. His mother as well as the society disregards him due to his deformity. In this context, Duncan McColl Chesney suggests that Michael K can be regarded as the son of silence. There are many reasons which are held responsible for his silence. Firstly, it is his cleft lip condition. Secondly, the humiliation that he has to face due to his deformity is very intense. He has to spend his time in Huis Norenius. These circumstances have reduced him to be a man who has no voice whatsoever in the South African society (310).

The civil war has given rise to widespread social unrest in South Africa. There are curfews in place everywhere. Also, every-day clashes and thefts have disturbed the social milieu of Cape Town. In such a disturbed environment, the countrymen have to obey the laws of the government. So far as Michael K is concerned, he is an ordinary man who is unable to understand the reality of the civil war. It can be said about Michael K "He is not of our world. He lives in a world all his own" (*Michael K* 142). The political and social unrest of the society makes him wander from place to place. In the first half of the text, he just tries to safeguard his life. He wants to lead a peaceful life. In the second half of the text, he starts discovering about his self. He wanders in the mountain range of the countryside. These rural mountains provide him a peaceful environment wherein he hears the voice of his inner conscience for the first time.

In the first section of the text, we get a description of Michael K and his family. He lives with his mother named Anna K in Cape Town. There is no word on his father. His mother tells Michael K that he is the fourth child by her second husband. There is nothing mentioned in the text about his race. Meanwhile, the civil war has broken out in South Africa. The white soldiers keep on patrolling the roads in their jeeps. It gets more and more unsafe for the people to come out of their houses. Consequently, they secretly start fleeing Cape Town. The reason for this is that, officially, the non-whites are not allowed to leave the city without permits and proper travelling documents. So, for blacks, in a sense, "War-time is time of waiting, . . . through the motions of living, fulfilling one's obligations, keeping an ear turned all the time to the hum of the war beyond the walls, listening for its pitch to change?" (*Michael K* 158).

Coetzee touches the authentic humanitarian chords in dealing with the story of Michael K. The readers come to know that the civil war uproots an individual from his native place. Thus, Michael K gets displaced since he has to leave behind everything associated with his motherland. He remains alone after his mother's death. Also, other black people also had to leave their native areas like Michael K. Here starts the journey of Michael K since he is completely unknown in the rural society. Moreover, now, he has to fulfil the responsibility of taking his mother's ashes to Prince Albert. Coetzee places his focus on the identity concern of the ordinary blacks in the apartheid and post apartheid regime. Michael K does not have any identity in the society. He is treated as the other in the societal order. Besides, he becomes an object in the hands of the corrupt political system. He just knows that he has two objectives to meet in his life. Firstly, he has to take his mother's ashes to the farm in Prince Albert. Secondly, he has to secure his existence and discover his self. Michael K does not have a slave mentality. For him "Time passed. He had no idea how much time" (*Michael K* 42). He finds it difficult to live in restrictions since he has tasted some kind of freedom. Once he gets a chance to escape the railway line, he follows the national road. Somehow, he crosses the fences and enters the veld of convoys. He gets exhausted living the life of a worker. When

he reaches the mountain range, he feels immense happiness. He finds himself to be a complete man. He feels that he has finally got rid of all restrictions. He says, "At last I am living off the land" and "I could live here forever, he thought, or till I die" (*Michael K* 46). Nature proves to be a balm to his tired nerves and a host of aches and pains. Michael K reaches the farmhouse and watches it carefully. The farm is deserted. There is a rockery garden and a dam near this farmhouse. Michael feels that perhaps his destiny has brought him to the right destination. He can fulfil the purposes for which he has tolerated all the hardships. Moreover, he realises that he has reached the right place where he can discover his inner self.

Michael K passes through very hard times. After quitting his job, he remains unemployed and, thus, has no professional identity in the society. At a more practical, mundane level, he carries no proper identity documents with him. Secondly, he has very little communication with others due to his deformity of a cleft lip. Since others consider Michael K to be stupid, so he feels insulted. His cleft lip has reduced him to be an uncommunicative and lonely man. Indeed, Coetzee has chosen a very simple fellow as his protagonist who is exceptionally quiet. How can such a man encourage others to revolt against the apartheid system?

The farm serves a new start for Michael K. Coetzee highlights the transformation through which K's life passes. In fact, farms occupy a very important place in most of the novels of Coetzee. K also seeks freedom and quietude. He has no wish to participate in the political life of South Africa. Moreover, he has nothing to do with the civil war. He resists the laws of the white government in a silent way. Also, he has no wish to participate in any guerrilla war. All he wants is to live his life on his own terms. On the farm, a new phase of life starts for Michael. According to Patrick Hayes, it is noteworthy that Michael K does not participate in the civil war; rather he is interested in gardening. He prefers doing gardening and stays away from any kind of political activity (86). Moreover, the task of gardening is akin to sowing a land with dreams and hopes where no patriarchal and colonial dominations exist (76).

At this juncture, Coetzee introduces a new facet of Michael K's personality. Having faced many hardships in his life, Michael begins to transform. By and by, he is a changed person. Indeed, the tough times have played an important role in Michael K's life. Moreover, time serves as a metaphor also. Michael talks about the present times in which he lives currently. There is no one who would instruct him. It is a different space which he has created for himself. Indeed, K intends to hide himself in such complete silence that nobody could possibly trace him out. He lives as an unrecognised man amidst the rural hills. Obviously, if Michael K were to reveal himself before the society, he would be put either in a prison or a camp. His days pass nicely and satisfactorily on the farm. Here, life provides nourishment to one's being. In sharp contrast to this, war sucks out the lives of innocent black people. In fact, it annihilates everything in nature. Michael knows that South Africa is caught in some such destructive war. In his innately wise way, Michael describes the importance of time in the following words

. . . all that was moving was time, bearing him onward in its flow. Once or twice the other time in which the war had its existence reminded itself to him as the jet fighters whistled high overhead. But for the rest he was living beyond the reach of calendar and clock in a blessedly neglected corner, half awake, half asleep. Like a parasite dozing in the gut, he thought; like a lizard under a stone. (*Michael K* 115-16)

Thus, Michael K lives in complete isolation. He loses all contacts with the society. Still, he has to pay the cost for his freedom. His body stops accepting food. This shows the dual aspects of his personality. Outwardly, he appears to be a slow-witted man. In reality, he has matured and evolved so much that he chooses to struggle against the political structure of South Africa in his own way. He does not want to become a part of this society. He creates his own space and grows his own food. All he wants is the peace and quiet that he has grown all around his self. Fortunately, his hard work bears fruit. All the pumpkins planted by him ripen so well. His happiness knows no bounds. When he tastes his pumpkins, it gives him real satisfaction. Earlier, he was not satisfied with the food provided at the camp. Here, Coetzee has emphasised that Michael loves freedom and quietude. Only the pumpkins grown on the farm satisfy his hunger. The soldiers keep patrolling all around in the rural mountains. They arrest those blacks who supply food to the guerrilla fighters. Some soldiers come to the farm with their dogs for the purpose of inspection. Captain Oosthuizen immediately recognises Michael K since he had fled from the camp. They start torturing him. They hold him by the neck and inquire about the stock of food and tunnels. Michael K has already suffered so much at the hands of the war. He does not have any information that the soldiers are asking about. He remains silent and just shows them his pumpkins. Thus, the war crushes many such

innocent people as can hardly make both ends meet. The soldiers put them in jails, particularly those who are without proper identity papers, ostensibly for helping the guerrilla population with food. The soldiers believe that Michael too must have been supplying food to the enemies. As a result, he is arrested.

This is the second time Michael had tried very hard to make a good start. He had nourished life on the farm via gardening. His efforts had borne fruit too. The white soldiers blow up the farm and destroy everything. Also, they mark Michael as a criminal and a runaway from the camp. Once again, Michael K becomes so weak that he cannot even stand properly. He is finally taken to a hospital in Kenilworth. His body has stopped accepting food. He always kept on thinking about freedom. He wanted to step out of that institution. He opens his heart out to the doctor for the first time. He says, “. . . I used to think about flying. I always wanted to fly. I used to stretch out my arms and think I was flying over the fences and between the houses. I flew low over people’s heads, but they couldn’t see me. . .” (*Michael K* 133). This statement indicates Michael’s love for freedom. In fact, nature has given a new meaning to his life. Michael gets successful in escaping from the hospital. On one hand, the war has caused widespread destruction in the African society. On the other hand, Michael enriches life on earth through his gardening. His behaviour and actions towards the society show his reluctance to live life on borrowed terms. Rather, he creates his own space in his own inimitable way.

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