

**A MANIFESTATION OF LIFE AND TIMES OF MICHAEL K: A STUDY OF
CIVIL WAR AND POLITICAL TURMOIL IN THE APARTHEID ERA**

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Abstract

Life and times of Michael K, winner of Booker Mc Connell Prize in 1983, is a rich piece of fiction of Coetzee's literary reign. The setting of the novel is of the civil war in South Africa and it is influenced by the political events of the years 1978 to 1982. Michael K the protagonist of the novel refuses to be part of the system and the war. He is "not quick" and is a simple gardener. The novel depicts emotional, physical and mental isolation in the life of Michael k. He is closely associated with the mother earth. Political conditions of South Africa help Michael K to realize his full potential in the world. The present work helps the reader to mirror man's inherent desire for freedom and identity. Michael K throws challenges at the State to subvert power and political authority. Coetzee puts Michael K as an individual, who is disappointed with the food of the 'civil' society, in existentialist misery.

Key Words: Michael K, Coetzee, Civil War, South Africa, Freedom, Identity, Isolation, Desire

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“Everywhere I go there are people trying to exercise their forms of
charity on me.” (MK181)

In recent years, scholars from various disciplines who study a variety of areas referring to identity crisis and sustenance of individuality, have shifted their concentration from assessing collective social agitations to study individual or class assertion. In their research, quest for identity have therefore become the focus of the study. Such studies are based on the analysis of class, gender, race and caste prejudices where the powerful always in superior position regulates the subordinate groups while the latter tries to break free. This combat keeps power constantly challenged by the subordinate who make desperate attempts to escape domination. Resistance to power in whatever form it may be, as such emerges as an attempt of an individual to assert his/her identity and to establish that he /she stands in opposition to authority. Such dissatisfied people are also seen to resort to various methods to express their discontentment against authority through different resistance strategies.

Under the apartheid laws, South African blacks were stripped of their citizenship. The Government segregated education, medical care and other public services. The black education system within white South Africa was prepared by design to restrict the black for lives as a labouring class. There was a deliberate policy of making services for black people inferior to those meant for the whites. The blacks were banned from residing or working in the white areas, unless they had a pass. The blacks were not allowed to buy hard liquor. They were allowed to buy state produced poor quality beer. Public beaches, public swimming pools, parking spaces, graveyards, ports, and public toilets were separated.

Africans were prohibited from attending 'white' churches under The Churches Native Laws Amendments Act of 1957. The blacks were not allowed to acquire land in the white areas. Thus Apartheid increased dissatisfaction among the black majority and the coloured.

The novel is set in modern South Africa at the time of rebellion in society. The violence in South Africa increased radically after Soweto uprising in 1976-1978. The Soweto protests had taken place first in the black areas. The strikes and student boycotts in 1980 reached first time among the coloured population. The novel is also enveloped with the social breakdown of post-Soweto South Africa during the 1980s. The subject of the novel represents worries and unease of the time. The epigraph of the novel is quite noteworthy

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. (MK 1)

Dominic Head depicted the political condition in the following words:

The scenes of *Michael K* evoke the social breakdown of post-Soweto South Africa in the 1980s, just as the novel's themes represent governing fears and concerns of the time. The operations of Umkhonto we Sizwe (the military wing of the ANG) are of especial significance. The most dramatic action, in a campaign of strategic bombings, was the attack against the SASOL oil from-coal plants in June 1980, part of a series of acts of symbolic resistance which are representative of the historical background evoked through the setting of guerilla warfare in the novel. (Later perations targeted the Koeberg nuclear power station (1982) and Air Force headquarters in Pretoria (1983). In short, the novel, in the manner typical of the *auvre*, is constructed in such a way that it simultaneously alludes to, and withdraws from, its context. (93-94)

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Life and Times of Michael K is divided in three sections. The first part is a third-person narrative and South Africa is in a state of emergency and war. In this section Michael K wants to make a home for himself on the land of his origin. But possibly in apartheid era he is not native in his own country as according to apartheid rules he should

carry an identity card with himself always. He is captured by army camps many times though he escaped all of them with his skill. This part ends with his capture by the army “A cloud of dust billowed up till he could see nothing of what he was leaving behind.” (MK 126) The second part is first-person narrative which is narrated by the medical officer who has taken care of Michael k. The section begins with “THERE IS A NEW PATIENT IN THE WARD, A LITTLE OLD MAN.” (MK 129) The medical officer becomes fascinated with K during his stay in a provisional prison hospital. The medical officer plays the part of an oppressive state who is captivated by its subjects yet it wants to control his subjects. The medical officer says him “We will make up a story to satisfy the police, and instead of travelling back to the Prince Albert ...you can lie in clean sheets listening to the cooing of doves in the trees, dozing, thinking your own thoughts. I hope you will be grateful one day.” (MK 142) He tries to exercise his authority by putting himself in the position of power and by treating Michael k as powerless. Though in the end Michael k gains his freedom by escaping from the camps “I have escaped the camps ; perhaps, if I lie low, I will escape the charity too. (MK 182)The medical officer at the end of this section calls Michael K “a great escape artist.” (MK 166) The final section is again a third-person narrative. Michael K is back in Cape Town. He is homeless and his old room have been occupied by a squatter. He imagines himself as a gardener but now with a company of a friend:

Coetzee wants to emphasis on rebellion of Michael K against society. Mike Marais, a critic states thus, “Indeed, the novel consists of a series of replicated episodes, each of which brings Michael K into contact with a character who attempts to assert himself by negating K’s alterity.”(68)

The very first line of the novel depicts the unfortunate condition of the protagonist and the apartheid in South Africa. “...he had a harelip. The lip curled like a snail’s foot, the left nostril gaped.”(MK 1) The harelip means that the mouth of Michael K would not close and it will be exposed to the outside. Similarly conditions of the country are exposed to the outside world. Michael K is son of political father. He is the victim of war. Michel K is presented as an isolated individual whose life is punctuated by institutions of confinement and imprisonment like Kafka’s Joseph K of *The Trial*. The age of Joseph K and Michael K are also same both are in their thirties facing disorder in society as well in their life.

Michael K is named and classified as “Michael Visagie - CM - 40 - NFA – Unemployed” (MK 70), ‘CM’ here refers to coloured male. Thus Michael K is a coloured male and in apartheid terms he belongs to mixed race which is politically marginal. His race is neither completely of the colonizers or colonized. Though state bears his expenditure to make his childhood fruitful yet he spends it with other unfortunate children. He lives in an era of political conflict and confinement. His school Huis Norenius is a strict place for unfortunate kids in Faure. He has been taught silence and obedience. “Michael K passively accepts his marginality” (Poyner 69) “Year after year Michael K sat on a blanket watching his mother polish other people’s floors, learning to be quiet... At the age of fifteen he passed out of Huis Norenius and joined the Parks and Gardens division of the municipal services of the City of Cape Town as Gardener, grade 3(b)” (MK 3-4). He belongs to a class of servants and manual workers in Cape Town. He is a spectator of brutality of an oppressive state yet he prefers to live in isolation as a gardener. Dovey explains it in rather precise manner:

[i]f, in the mode of realism, Michael K is the victim of an oppressive and exploitative system, in the mode of text construction he is the victim of a hierarchy of authorities, which range from the structural needs of the narrative and the prescribed codes of the genre, to the desire of both writer and reader, and to the ultimate *author-ity* of the discursive context, of language as Other. (267)

Michael K flees from Cape Town with his ailing mother. He encounters many problems on the way because in apartheid era coloured or black man cannot travel without permit. He is stopped on the way and asked for the permit. He is forced to return to Sea Point where he is treated very rudely by the officers. “I don’t care who you are, who your mother is, if you haven’t got a permit you can’t leave the area, finished.” (MK 23). Coetzee depicts the unkind situations and officers of apartheid era. Although the police know that Michael and his mother are innocent and cannot harm the society yet they behave rudely and they do not care about them.

Coetzee describes the camp as one among various areas in South Africa which the whites reserved for the blacks. The government has set up several camps to keep the unemployed and problem initiators away from the society to sustain harmony in South Africa of the civil war period. The camp is enclosed by “a three-metre fence surmounted

with a strand of barbed wire... It was dark inside, there were no windows." (MK 73), is a concrete space of imprisonment allied with the "stifling heat" (MK74) of the sun. He feels domineering heat and he says to himself: "This is like Huis Norenius, he thought: I am back in Huis Norenius a second time, only now I am too old to bear it." (MK 74) Later the narrator states his inner mind "It is like going back to childhood, he thought: it is like a nightmare" (MK 77).

Though Jakkalsdrif is not considered a prison, yet "The only way to leave is with the work party." (MK 85) One has to do various jobs for food. The work camp is an epitome of white authority. The policeman describes it to Michael K as home for poor: "You've got a home here, you've got food, you've got a bed. You've got a job. People are having hard time out there in the world, you've seen it, I don't need to tell you. ...we live pretty well" (MK 85-86).

The blacks in the camp are exploited by the Railways and the farmers as they get cheap labour. Michael never desires to be there. He wants his freedom even at the prospect of going hungry. "I don't want to be in a camp, that's all" he says (MK 85). Michael K does not want to be an object of political conditions of apartheid. He loves freedom and rejects to pity of white authority. Men, women and children are beaten up brutally by the police officers when one of the police stations is burnt. The chief officer yells at them: "What are we keeping here in our backyard"... A nest of criminals! Criminals and saboteurs and idlers! ...You ungrateful bastards... Who gives you tents and blankets when you are shivering with cold? Who nurses you, who takes care of you...? And how do you repay us?" (MK 91-92) Robert the other individual in the camp define it as an excuse to thrash marginal he says: "That fire was the excuse they were looking for. Now they are going to do what they wanted -- lock us up and wait for us to die" (MK 94). The whites always find one or the other way to torture the natives just to show supremacy over them. They try to strike terror in the natives with a show of violence.

Coetzee, like Kafka, seems to believe that social stigmas should not deter an individual in his search for freedom and identity. Attwell says that *Michael K* is:

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; we might

also appreciate the contextual sensitivities of *Foe*, a novel that, while apparently rich in post modern play, is also a skeptical, indeed scrupulous, interrogation of the authority of white South African authorship. (89)

Michael K negates the impact of power and determines himself not to be dominated. He maintains intentional silence in society. He will not let anyone take his freedom and lives his life the way he wants to.

Though in the society only disgrace is guaranteed yet Michael K is positive to live happily even with minimal resources and facilities. Derek Wright considers *Life and Times of Michael K* to mark a turning-point, "the end of a phase in Coetzee's writing', after which it can be said 'realism has . . . gone to ground, the imperial text to earth'. According to Dominic Head "Wright's argument is that the attempt to speak for a non-white protagonist is a kind of interim stage on the way to a more sophisticated postmodernism in which no attempt is made to speak *for*."(5)

Michael K flees from the camp and reaches Cape Town again. Cape Town is in the war-torn ruins He roams the familiar areas of the city, observing people, sleeping and dreaming and goes back to his mother's old apartment. He has begun his life as a gardener and even at the end of the novel he also finds his true job the same, "The truth, the truth about me" "I am a gardener"(MK 181) At sea point he again becomes the object of charity. "They want me to open my heart and tell them the story of a life lived in cages" (MK 181). Michael K consciously remains silent in order to resist being dominated. His same silence displeases the whites and even the Medical Officer is anxious by Michael's silence. David Attwell states :

The transfiguration of the elements of fiction to the field of writing is a developmental feature of Coetzee's novels, reinforced by the fictionalization of certain features of deconstruction.... There are obvious links between the state of civil anomie through which South Africa is passing in *Michael K* and the nightmarish world of *The Trial* and *The Castle*. Doubtless, "K" is a nod to these Works. (101)

To conclude *Life and Times of Michael K* exhibits indifference to suffering of apartheid era. The protagonist wants to live a life of solitude and does not want sympathy

from anyone. For him his freedom is more important than the food or any other comfort of apartheid society. He controls his emotions even in adversity. *Life and Times of Michael K* deals with conflict between white and non- white race which arise when territorial or cultural boundaries are crossed. The theme of this novel is not limited to political conditions of South Africa only rather it is universal. The powerful novel ends with a hope for a non-white to live happily and as a successful gardener.

Michael K has begun his life with nothing. Coetzee gives an impression that a civil war is going on in South Africa between opposite races. The novel, ultimately, functions as a confirmation of the survival of human nature beyond the history and civilization. Michael K is presented as a determined persona who simply follows his nature to live day after day, regardless of the rapidly changing political situations. He does not agree with power just to survive. The medical officer describes him: He is like a stone, a pebble that, having lain around quietly minding its own business since the dawn of time, is now suddenly picked up and tossed randomly from hand to hand. A hard little stone, barely aware of its surroundings, was enveloped in itself and its interior life. He passes through these institutions and camps and hospitals and God knows what else like a stone, through the intestines of the war. An unbearing, unborn creature. (MK 135)

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