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J. M. COETZEE'S 'LIFE AND TIMES OF MICHAEL K': AN ALLEGORY OF APARTHEID

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Abstract

Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K* depicts the ruin of history as the deconstruction of country and land through apartheid. It also develops a narrative thread of allegory that posits through a meta-fictional discourse, a redemptive function for writing within material history. The novel, set in South Africa, presents events of history in the form of allegory. The novel is a story of a man named Michael K, who makes an arduous journey from Cape Town to his mother's rural birthplace, amid a fictitious civil war during the apartheid era, in the 1970-80s. This research article investigates how novel as a genre of literature presents the prevailing scenario of politics of any particular time period utilizing allegory as a medium. The whole paradigm followed by J.M. Coetzee is a fine example of how literature and life/society as complementary to one another. Complementary not in the sense of completing one another but in the sense of analyzing one another to the extent of the pursuit of truth. The novel *Life and Times of Michael K* shows the unacceptable intrusion of state/authority in the life of simple human being who cherishes freedom of expression, movement and life. It is set in a dystopian South Africa of around the 1970s in which there is a civil war going on because of the imposed injustice. The poor conditions of the blacks in South Africa have been highlighted in the novel. It is all because of racial discrimination that blacks are suffering.

Keywords: Allegory, apartheid, discrimination, politics, inequality, incarceration

An allegory is the expression of truths about human existence by means of symbolic fictional figures and their actions. It is a story in which the characters and events are symbols that stand for ideas about human life or for a political and historical situation. It is a story in verse or prose with a double meaning: a primary or surface meaning and a secondary or under the surface meaning. It is a story therefore can be read, understood and

interpreted at many levels. A political allegory is a story that, on the surface, tells one tale, but has a hidden political meaning underneath. An allegory becomes political if it covers a political event or situation by producing a subtle commentary on it using other symbols.

J. M. Coetzee's Life and Times of Michael K: An Allegory of Apartheid investigates how novel as a

genre of literature presents the prevailing scenario of politics of any particular time period utilizing allegory as a medium. The whole paradigm followed by J.M. Coetzee is a fine example of how literature and life/society as complementary to one another. Complementary not in the sense of completing one another but in the sense of analyzing one another to the extent of the pursuit of truth.

The General themes touched recurrently in the writings of J.M. Coetzee are of discrimination among human beings by the human beings themselves; of politics of race, of politics of color, of politics of gender and a politics of state. The novel *Life and Times of Michael K* shows the unacceptable intrusion of state/authority in the life of simple human being who cherishes freedom of expression, movement and life. It is the life and times of the millions of South Africans who were removed, dumped, set wandering, hiding from Endorsement out under the Group Areas Act. Not only this act but several of such brutal inhuman acts were imposed on colored South African people. The novel is set in a dystopian South Africa of around the 1970s in which there is a civil war going on because of the imposed injustice.

In the beginning of 1948, the Nationalist Party came to power in South Africa by a narrow majority. It has remained in power since then. Its platform was 'apartheid'. Apartheid is the policy of enforced separation of black and white people in every sphere and prohibition of the integration of races. By 1948, political picture has changed. Black workers were flocking to the towns. The government aimed to control this influx and so passed the Group Areas Act, under which the non-whites were to be moved as far out of sight as possible; the Bantu Authorities Act, which officially classed urban Africans as aliens; the Native Laws Amendment Act which specified that aliens be deported to the reserves at the arbitrary order of authorities; the Native Labor Act which prohibited strikes by the African workers; the prohibition of Interdicts Act which deprived the Africans of the right to file a protest in the court if they felt themselves illegally removed from an urban area; and the Urban Areas Amendment Act which gave city councils the sweeping powers of ejecting

Africans on grounds of 'peace and order'; the Population Registration Act which fixed for every man his race; Mixed Marriages Act to forbid miscegenation penalizing any sexual crossing of the color line without marriage. Africans were excluded from established universities. They were prevented from attending white church services. The Population Register fixed the racial divisions in a manner not quite consonant with biological fact. A small portion of Africans hovered near the borderline of the colored race while a small portion of white could pass off as colored. Passing has been possible in these cases, usually at the cost of permanent separation from the family.

In 1952, the African National Congress, with the support of a few whites, starts its passive resistance campaign. Their objectives were to reduce apartheid to absurdity by making it ineffective at the lower levels. The government's reaction was immediate. They passed the Criminal Law Amendment Act, 1953, which made even a trivial law breaking a major offence. The punishment could be any two of the following - a fine of three hundred pounds, imprisonment for three years or a whipping of ten strokes. In 1960, the 'Unlawful Organization Act' was passed through the Parliament, under the purview of which both the African Congress were banned. The rule of law was totally suspended under emergency and thousands were arrested and detained without trial.

Forced underground, African nationalism turned militant. After this in 1963, the General Laws Amendment Act was passed. Under which anyone suspected of having information to give could be kept in solitary confinement for ninety days and a confession forced out of him. In July, six whites and twelve non-whites were arrested in a house of Rivonia, fashionable suburbs of Johannesburg, for aiding the terrorist organization. A trial, the notorious 'Treason Trial' followed and six Africans, one European and an Indian were sentenced to life imprisonment. Nelson Mandela was one of them:

I was made by the law a criminal, not because of what I have done but of what I stood for, because of what I thought, because of my conscience. Can it be any wonder to anybody

that such conditions make a man an outlaw of society? (Nelson Mandela's first court statement in 1962)

Mandela's speech, made in his trial before the sentence passed, a powerful speech that extols the suffering of his people, echoed around the world. It is likely to find a permanent place in the literature of political struggle. Ironically, his countrymen have not heard what he had to say in his trial; he is a banned person:

I would say that the whole life of any thinking African in this country drives him continuously to a conflict between his conscience on the one hand and the law on the other... a law which, in our view, is immortal, unjust and intolerable. (Nelson Mandela's first court statement in 1962)

Mandela represents a danger to the South African regime; his invisible but palpable figure looms as challenge to the ethos of apartheid. The apartheid in South Africa has its economic, social and political importance. The idealism of apartheid was perverse to begin with. The cruelty perpetuated by the vicious police state is daily growing worse. The blacks are shot, slashed and beaten. Houses are broken into at all hours in "Swoops" or "illegal liquor raids."

Life and Times of Michael K is set in the same South Africa or around 1970s in which there is a civil war going on. The setting matters come, but what might be thought to be the obvious -- issues of exploitation, political unrest and inequality are at the forefront. These themes are undercurrent in the novel, though from the surface level it is a simple story of a simple, innocent character that seems to be a misfortune in the beginning but later develops as a great escapist.

Michael K is a simple South African, the reader infers he is non-white--subjected to the oppressions of apartheid (enforced Labor, incarceration, and so on), while finding ways of eluding the mechanisms of state control. As the novel is set at a time of violent social breakdown, the instruments of control appear to have become

intensified, and yet not fully effective, creating the space for Michael K to live in the gaps.

Michael K is thirty-one when the story begins. His mother, Anna, who works as a domestic servant is ill, and things are looking bleak in the coastal city where Michael also lives, so she persuaded him to take her back to the town where she was born and grown up. K resigns from his position as a gardener working for the city of Cape Town.

Anna is shown curious about her journey to her birth place. This somehow shows the popular South African belief of attachment to their birth places. She seems to want get rid of all social foundations which defines them as subjugated:

Lying in bed in her airless room through the winter afternoons with rain dripping from the steps outside, she dreamed of escaping from the careless violence, the packed buses, the food queues, arrogant shopkeepers, thieves and beggars, sirens in the night, the curfew, the cold and wet, and returning to a countryside where if she was going to die, she would at least die under blue skies. (MK 67)

When Michael is seeking for the reservation in train, he is being asked for the state permits to travel outside. The whole incident of permit is encoded from the political point of view, it seems to reflect the presence of Group Areas Act which has been discussed earlier in the chapter. This act can be seen as the ban on the non-white South Africans from moving. It seems impossible for Michael K to get state permit:

They were wasting their time waiting for permits, he [Policeman] said. The permits would never come. And without the permits they could not leave by train. (MK 18)

Michael does not seem to wait for the permit, so he makes a barrow for his mother. And he eventually packs his mother in the barrow and starts his journey to the Prince Albert. But he is stopped on the way at the check point and asked for the permit. He is warned by the police:

You can't travel outside the Peninsula without a permit. Go to the checkpoint and show them your permit and your papers. And listen to me: you want to stop on the expressway; you pull fifty metres off the roadside. That's the regulation: fifty metres either side. Anything nearer, you can get shot, no warning, no questions asked. Understand? (MK 22)

K's mother sickens on the journey and dies in hospital at Stellenbosch. Bearing his mother's ashes, K eventually arrives at a deserted farm in the Prince Albert district, which may or may not be the one his mother described. He decides to bury her ashes here and begin to cultivate some patches of land.

Michael K's experiences are punctuated with episodes of State interference or institutionalization. After his mother's death he is forced to work as a railway Labor gang. Michael K during his journey is forced to work on a railway Labor gang, and escaped from that Labor gang. Later he is picked up by the authorities and taken to the Jakkalsdrif Camp:

So, I hear you ask who is in favor of the camp. I'll tell you, first the railways. The Railways would like to have a Jakkalsdrif every ten miles along the line. Second the farmers. Because from a gang from Jakkalsdrif a farmer gets a day's work blood cheap, and at the end of the day the truck fetches them and they are gone and he doesn't have to worry about them and their families, they can starve.... (MK 82)

The poor conditions of the blacks in South Africa have been highlighted in the novel. It is all because of racial discrimination that blacks are suffering. As Robert further explains to Michael:

When you go into a shop in Prince Albert, all of a sudden prices go up. Why? Because you are from the camp. They don't want a camp so near their town. They never wanted it. They ran a big campaign against the camp at the beginning. We breed disease, they said.

No hygiene, no morals. A nest of vice, men and women all together. (MK 81-82)

After the death of his mother, K becomes totally primitive and starts hunting animals and birds and later depends on lizards and insects too. K develops a minimalist philosophy of Survival. Allegorically K presents a resistance to the so-called cultured society. K's all strange habits question the entire social order. K also faces challenges from the society. K's time as a cultivator on the farm appears to form an allegory of repossession.

K is able to pursue his career as a cultivator. Incarceration is thus a counter motive, set against gardening; and in the novel, incarceration carries the broader connotation of discipline exercised through institutions. In this respect, the novel reveals a Foucauldian preoccupation with the role of institution socialization process. The Jakkalsdrif Labor Camp is an obvious instrument of social control, transforming the homeless into a work force. The Kenilworth Camp, originally a 'rehabilitation' camp is re-designed as an 'internment' camp. As the civil war progresses, the policy hardens; but the important point is that 'Labor battalions' can be supplied just as well from internment camps as rehabilitation camps. Disciplinary practices may change arbitrarily or unpredictably in order to serve a particular end:

Noel very despondent. He heard today that interchange was just the beginning that the distinction between rehabilitation camps and internment camps is to be abolished. Baarkskeerdersbos is to be closed down and the remaining three, including Kenilworth, will be converted into straight internment camps. Rehabilitation, it would seem, is an ideal that has failed to prove itself; as for the labor battalion, they can be supplied just as well from the internment camps. (MK 153-54)

Equally important is the association made between the camps and other forms of institution, such as schools and hospitals, which have a disciplinary function. The special school for Civil war afflicted and unfortunate children attended by K with its curriculum dominated by various forms of

physical works, is another form of labor pool. Before arriving at Jakkardsdrif, K is taken to hospital while in police custody, a point that hints at another form of institutional control. K's mother dies in hospital in Stellenbosch, an event that K subsequently describes as the culmination of a life of disciplined Labor.

In the last section of the novel, K's thoughts summarize his story and make the camp motif central to it. He concludes:

Perhaps the truth is that it is enough to be out of the camps, out of the camps at the same time. Perhaps that is enough at an achievement, for the time being. How many people are there left, who are neither locked up nor standing guard at the gate? I have escaped the camps. (MK 182)

There is an enactment of that seminal deconstructive procedure in which a binary opposition is reversed and then undermined. The end result of such a procedure is to expose the hegemonic assumption in a framework of interpretation. The gardening / farming, subsistence/accumulation parallel proceeds so that the oppositions are reversed, and then undermined. The novel eludes final interpretation just as much as its central protagonist Michael K does. The final effect is not to obscure meaning but to lay it bare: interpretive assumptions are questioned as the function of allegory is critically examined. Being a self-conscious novel *Life and Times of Michael K* encourages self-conscious interpretations.

As deconstruction invalidates origins and privileges textuality, it also challenges the idea of being as a state of existence prior to knowledge. K now emerges as the embodiment of the principle of being, in an apparent demonstration of the novel's use of deconstruction.

The novel makes the problem of interpretation central, and gives the issue of elusiveness a material political edge, even though it retains its postmodernist connotations. There is clearly an obvious parallel with Derridean notions of textuality in the elusiveness of Michael K; yet the way in which the novel is rooted in its content ensures that its treatments of textuality are more

than mere abstractions. For example, the absence of any overt reference to Michael K's racial identity or appearance is a denial of apartheid obsessive system of classification. He is equally resistant to all social and political affiliations. The motif of textuality, in one sense gives a purposive political edge to K's elusiveness. Yet the issue is also ambiguous, because another feature of K's elusiveness is his propensity to fall silent, a sign of disenfranchisement as well as resistance.

K's silence colludes with his material oppression and his marginal position in the society. And this concern is provoked in the second section of the novel in which the medical officer makes his more overt attempt to interpret and appreciate K's story and this makes *Life and Times of Michael K* a self-conscious interrogation of its form. The medical officer makes an attempt to allegory that suggests that the entire novel is rooted in a deconstructive principle:

You stay in the camp was merely an allegory, if you know that word. It was an allegory--speaking at the highest level--of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming term in it. (MK 166)

Thus, J. M. Coetzee has used the allegory to its fullest in his art of painting the truest picture of life and society through this novel because an allegory was the most appropriate tool to express the reality in a distanced manner. The beauty of his writings is apparent in that there is distancing from reality in his writing. He never lost touch with what the direct expression of reality could have managed.

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