



THE THEME OF SELF-RECOGNITION IN COETZEE'S NOVEL *LIFE AND TIMES OF MICHAEL K*

Dr. ARUN KUMAR MANDAL

+2 English Teacher, Adarsh High School, Atihar, Darbhanga

Email: akpatel199@gmail.com



Article Received:02/10/2020

Article Accepted: 28/10/2020

Published online:02/11/2020

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.8.4.69](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.8.4.69)

Abstract

Life and Times of Michael K, is set in South Africa during the civil war period. Published in 1983, it narrates the journey of a simple gardener who has minimal intelligence. J. M. Coetzee has brilliantly shown the long journey of the central character Michael K to acquire freedom. The determination with which the protagonist strives for dignity forms the major theme of the novel. J. M. Coetzee has used an innocent and disabled man of strong will, as the central character of the novel. *Life and Times of Michael K* has won the CNA award. "J. M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K* is preoccupied with the way in which social relations are founded on a struggle for recognition in which the self-constitute and then maintains itself as a subject by negating the otherness of other existents. Michael K, a disabled man competes with the government in a civil war-torn society. He easily adapts himself to all the situations and makes himself free from the oppressive situation. His perception of freedom and dignity is evident from the difficult situation in which he survives to escape from the clutches of repressive society.

Keywords: freedom, social struggle, oppression, colonisation, civilisation

Introduction

This novel brings out J. M. Coetzee's hatred towards colonisation. The colonisers targeted the underdeveloped countries and colonised them. They oppressed the native people and tried to enforce their culture upon them. The colonisers utilized the natural resources and man power for their benefit and the betterment of their native country. In the name of civilization, they dominated the African countries and imposed laws and rules which benefitted only the colonisers. The colonial nations were suddenly exposed to change in all the fields and they were not able to cope up with the

immediate change. "The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarians, nations into civilization." Economically downtrodden, sick mother, fatherless child, physical disfigurement, slow mind are the physical problems of Michael K. Due to the disfigurement of his lips, Michael K was not able to speak continuously. His hare-lip impairs his speech. In the world surrounded by oppression, chaos, selfishness, lack of compassion, Michael K wants to lead a peaceful life. He remains pure and innocent throughout the novel in spite of the hardships. *Life and Times of Michael K* is narrated in

three parts. The first and third parts are narrated by an unknown narrator. The second part is presented by a medical officer. The first part portrays the adventures and the other two parts depict the hardships and Michael K's quest for freedom.

War is the father of all and king of all. Some he shows as god, others as men. Some he makes slaves, and others free.

In spite of all the hardships, we can find rays of hope and beauty in *Life and Times of Michael K*. Even though Michael K is disfigured and his mind is not quick, he is sensitive to the sufferings of his fellow men. J M Coetzee has stoically portrayed the war and human rights violations in this novel. Suffering of the people due to the conflict and the military regime are realistically depicted in the novel. The author has insisted that the utmost importance and value to the human life should be guaranteed. The author speaks for the poor and the have-nots who are marginalized from the mainstream society. J. M. Coetzee, through the character Michael K has portrayed the life of a simple man in South Africa who suffers from psychological trauma due to a war-ravaged society. He has described how the ruling majority suppresses the working class. The colonizers treat the native people very cruelly and harshly. These people were not given basic amenities like food, clothing, shelter, education and they were also ill-treated by the people wielding power. Moreover, these people were not allowed to live in their houses and they were made to stay in the camps where epidemics were rampant due to improper sanitation. The camp officers extract work from them by taking to the farms of the wealthy landlords for cheap labour. The colonizers lacked humanity and concern for the poor natives. Nowhere there is equality, even among the colonizers there is hierarchy between the bourgeois and the land owners. Coetzee has given a clear picture of the structure of the society which is based on economic disparity. Karl Marx conceived the structure of every society as constituted by 'levels' or 'instances' articulated by a specific determination: the infrastructure, or economic base (the unity of the productive forces and the relations of production) and the superstructure, which itself contains two 'levels' or 'instances': the politico-legal

(law and the state) and ideology (the different ideologies, religious, ethical, legal, political etc.). The problems that arise between the oppressor and the oppressed become the crux of the novel. J. M. Coetzee has sketched Michael K's character as a man who withdraws into inner self in order to escape from the surrounding environment which is gruesome to bear. "Michael K's life has a lot of relevance to the life of the common man in Apartheid South Africa, a world inundated with unrest, trauma, materialism and marginalization. K is thus a victim of flights from the city, his captors and his immediate society."

Discussion

Michael K lived a solitary life. On Sundays he visited his mother Anna K who worked for the Buhrmanns, at Sea Point. She stayed in a room under the stairs of the building and she was allowed to stay there as an act of charity by her employer. Anna K adapted to the condition of the room which had no electricity and proper ventilation. The Buhrmanns were reasonable people who paid her fair wages. But when she suffered from dropsy and swollen legs, they engaged her for cooking and hired a young woman for household work and in turn they also reduced her wages. Anna's condition gives a realistic picture about the position of the downtrodden in the colonial South Africa. The servants were treated as slaves by their masters and were not given proper wages. They did hard labour and earned only meagre salary. Comparatively, Anna's masters were kind to provide her a room and fair wages. Anna K's health condition became worse and Michael K took his mother to the Somerset hospital. The hospital staff did not treat her properly and they did not inform her health complaints to Michael K. Through this incident J. M. Coetzee describes the manner in which the poor people are treated in the hospital. They were not given proper attention and care. However, Anna K recovered. She asked for a wheel chair and was not provided. Even at the time of sickness the poor people were deprived of their rights. After a long queue he managed to get the bus and travelled footboard to Sea Point. Michael K was not even given a vehicle to carry his sick mother. Despite of her illness, she was made to wait and also refused a seat in the public

transport. Hence, this incident reflects that the colonised people were not allowed to utilize their rights. The ruling class people identified the colonised people in terms of their race. They gave importance to their own people rather than the native people. They did not respect the culture of the colonised people. They merely imposed their culture and they wanted to create a new community based on their cultural tradition. But the native people wanted the present political condition to be changed.

Michael K is a victim of colonisation. He was left with his sick mother in a small room and he tried to keep his mother comfortable. In spite of his physical inability he always remained as a loving and caring child. He warmed up the soup, lit the candle and finally he consoled her. He slept on the mat with his coat on because there was no space in the room to lie down. Michael K could not get out of the room because of the curfew. He was disturbed by his mother's swollen legs and he helped her out of the bed. Anna K sometimes had the fear of losing the room so she kept her money in a handbag.

Anna K wished to go back to the farm in Prince Albert, where she spent her childhood. She often "...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 country side where, if she was going to die, she would at least die under blue skies."⁷

To fulfil his mother's last wish, Michael K quits his job and plans to take his mother out of Cape Town to Prince Albert. Hence, Michael K applied for the permit to take his mother to Prince Albert. In colonial South Africa, if a person wanted to travel from one district to the other, He or she should apply for permit. At the checkpoint if people are found without papers, they might even be shot for violating the regulations. Thus, the native people were suppressed by the colonisers and their freedom was curtailed. Michael K was informed that they will receive the permits only in the month of August. Disappointed Anna K whispered "I feel like a toad under a stone living here." Therefore, Michael K decided to take his mother in a cart by road to

Prince Albert. By using his gardening equipment, he prepares an improvised cart to make his mother sit and travel. They didn't want to wait till August because the situation started to grow worse in Sea Point. A riot started in the city when a military jeep struck a native youth who was about to cross the road. This incident initiated a chain of violent reactions. Soon there began a fight on the road side where parked cars were opened and damaged, ambulance was hit by a hail of stones and the white people's houses were attacked. J. M. Coetzee has described the people's anger and how the suppressed people became furious through violent means. The rioters entered Buhrmann's house and tore all the curtains, broke the furniture and ransacked the food items. The looters also set fire inside the flat and burnt all the clothes. During the riot Anna K and Michael K huddled quietly in their room.

Michael K frequently went to the office to enquire their permits. He pleaded to the Policewoman to give their permits soon as his mother is sick. But the lady gave a harsh reply, "I am telling you for the last time, if the permit is granted the permit will come! Don't you see all the people waiting? Don't you understand? Are you an idiot? Next!" The native people were treated as slaves by the government servants. Hence, Michael K packed his cart and made his mother to sit comfortably in the cart and started towards Prince Albert. Michael K loved his mother very much, so he took pains to fulfil his mother's dream. They were stopped and sent back by the soldiers for not having proper permits. Due to the civil war Michael K was not allowed to move from one place to another freely. The civil war has curtailed the freedom of the marginalized. Michael K didn't give up and he started again by taking a different route. They got drenched in rain and he used a plastic apron to cover his mother. A group of passers-by blocked their way to steal their goods. But Michael K took his sole weapon, the axle rod to sustain their attack. By his ferocious attack the youth backed off and moved away. Even though Michael K is soft natured, at the time of adversity he acts shrewdly to defend him. Unfortunately exposed to wind and rain Anna K gets critically ill and Michael K took her to the hospital in

Stellenbosch where she passes away. In the hospital without the knowledge of Michael K they cremated his mother's body and gave him a parcel which contained his mother's ashes. He was very much worried and this describes that the native people were denied their basic right of getting their relative's body for funeral ceremony. Michael K was not allowed to stay with his mother and was not informed about the condition of his mother. His mother lost her health because she was treated like a bonded slave by her employer. She worked for the white people as a servant maid. This reflects the oppression native people underwent in the society. Michael K wanted his mother to get rid of her oppressed status.

Conclusion

Life and Times of Michael K is ahead from the other South African literary texts. Michael K can be described as a man of undaunted spirit. Even his simple philosophy of life to eat what you grow was not understood by people with normal intellect. His struggle to safeguard his personal freedom is indeed a saga equivalent to epic personages taking into consideration that by birth a person of limited intellect. In many novels the disabled characters are portrayed as victims. But Coetzee portrays Michael K who struggles, fights and shines bright after all the hardships. Michael K unchains himself from the camp life, society and proves that people with disabilities can also create wonders and form a community. Michael K can be considered as a symbol denoting quest for individual freedom. He strives to maintain his dignity as well as identity. The novel authentically portrays the social injustice that prevailed in apartheid South Africa. Problems that curtailed personal freedom and dignity practiced during apartheid such as civil war, camps, permits, riots, boycotts are depicted in the novel. Amidst all these socio-political chaos Michael K leads his own way of life. He goes to job regularly takes care of his sick mother. He resigns his job, travels without a permit, escapes from the camp twice, seeks refuge in the mountains, cultivates melons and silently witnesses the happenings in the city; he is a reserved character and speaks only a few words wherever it is necessary. Michael K is psychologically affected by violence and also by the death of his

mother. Despite of all these problems, Michael K approaches life with an optimistic point of view. Michael K is given special identity by J. M. Coetzee in the novel. The protagonist even though disabled, astonishes everyone by his undaunted spirit for the efforts he takes to attain freedom. He is courageous and escapes from the camp in spite of the security guards to lead a simple life away from oppression, marginalization and segregation. Through Michael K, J. M. Coetzee tries to establish the importance of safeguarding individual freedom and dignity by a just society through political means as it is the real sign of civilization.

Works Cited

1. Marx, Karl and Engels, Friedrich, *The Communist Manifesto*. London: Pluto Press, 2017.p.16
2. Coetzee, J.M. *Life and Times of Michael K*. London: Vintage, 2000.p.1
3. Ayo, Kehinde. *Ability in Disability: The Empowerment of The Disabled in J. M. Coetzee's Life and Times of Michael K*. Nigeria: University of Ibadan,2008, p.46-47
4. Coetzee, J.M. *Life and Times of Michael K*. London: Vintage, 2000. p.3
5. Gordimer, Nadine. *Telling Times: Writing and Living 1950-2008*. London: Bloomsbury, 2010.p.397
6. Coetzee, J.M. *Life and Times of Michael K*. London: Vintage, 2000. p.8
7. *Ibid*.p.9
8. *Ibid*.p.20