



Confinement and Struggle for Liberation in John Maxwell Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K*

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ABSTRACT

The African countries were colonised by the European countries and they segregated the native people under apartheid system. The colonial rule suppressed the native people so they fought vigorously to obtain independence. Human rights were violated by the colonisers and they ill treated the colonised people. During Apartheid era the native people were forced to abandon their homes and made to stay in the camps where they were confined like prisoners. People were forced to work in the factories, estates, farms owned by the colonisers. The camps which they were made to stay were controlled by the colonisers.

KEYWORDS

Apartheid, Independence, Camps and Colonisers.

Introduction:

Life and Times of Michael K by J.M.Coetzee portrays the trauma faced by Michael K, the native man who struggles for freedom. The novel takes the background of South Africa during a civil war period. Michael K, a hare lipped, simple gardener Michael K who has minimal intelligence strives hard to maintain his dignity. J.M.Coetzee has magnificently depicted the long journey of Michael K to acquire freedom.

Michael K:

During the apartheid era in the early 1970-80's the life was hard in South Africa. The city was surrounded by riots, boycotts, violence and bloodshed. Michael K, a simple man born in South Africa, flees from the society to obtain liberation. He goes to the mountains to taste freedom. Even though being disabled he struggles and comes out of all his adverse situations and remains unchanged by the political happenings in the city. From birth he suffers from deformity of lips which affects his speech. He was very affectionate towards his mother. He helps during her last days and as a dutiful son undertakes an ardent journey to fulfill his mother's last wish. Twice he was confined in the camps, ill treated in the hospital by the police officers. He was robbed off his little belongings by thieves and also by soldiers. When he was taken to the camp was addressed as: 'Michael Visagie—CM—40—NFA—Unemployed' (LT 70). The civil war has ruined his freedom, identity and livelihood. He was made as a jobless and homeless man.

K does not have access to language and thought, however, and has knowledge of a sort (of good and bad plants, for example). His weak hold upon the survival strategies of the ego ensures that the differend is not dissolved into a convenient mutually exclusive binary- instead K remains a site where principles that, in the interest of the Idea of the human, should be mutually exclusive, reside uneasily in the same place. (Monson 97)

Michael K's Camp Life:

Michael K was confined in two different camps in the novel. First he was kept in Jakkalsdrif relocation camp where he was refused basic amenities like food, clothing, etc. The camp officers extracted work from him by taking him to the farms of the landlords. He was given only meager wages. In the camp, life was very difficult. The camp was guarded by the soldiers with guns. If anyone tries to escape they shot them ruthlessly. Poor sanitation and lack of medical facilities made the people sick. Children were affected by diseases and they died. Michael K on seeing the death of a child wonders that why people are passive towards the atrocities committed by the colonisers. Michael K did not allow himself to get used to the camp life. J.M.Coetzee here raises a

question that Michael K, a man of minimal intelligence registers his repulsion to the system of apartheid. But normal people passively accept the rules of the camp and lead their life which the colonisers dictated. He also gives a clear representation of the structure of the society which is based on economic inequality. The colonisers oppressed them in terms of politics and economy and they suppressed the natives by using brutal violence. The army and police were given utmost power to keep the native people under their control.

Not only does the State apparatus contribute generously to its own reproduction (the capitalist State contains political dynasties, military dynasties, etc.), but also and above all, the State apparatus secures by repression (from the most brutal physical force, via mere administrative commands and interdictions, to open and tacit censorship) the political conditions for the action of the Ideological State Apparatuses. (Althusser 150)

J.M.Coetzee has realistically depicted the situation which prevailed in South Africa during colonialism. Michael K was very sick and he was not able to do physical labour. Even in that condition he was employed in a farm and made to work. Camp life served as an eye opener for Michael K. He was exposed to the cruelties and callous behaviour of the colonisers. Michael K was made to jump, squat and do hard labour even though he is physically weak. Michael K was victimized and he withdrew himself from the society by living a secluded life. People in the camp advise Michael K to adjust himself to the camp life. They justify that it is a social service scheme provided by the government for the welfare of the destitutes. But they did not realize the fact that they were made destitutes in their homeland by the ruling government.

Michael K flees from the camp and seeks refuge in the Visagie farm house. For some time he lived in a burrow like an animal and he cultivated his own food. He came out only for eating and watering the plants which he had cultivated like a hibernating animal he found happiness in the burrow. He also had a sort of fulfillment in hiding in the burrow. The tender and warm earth gave him solace like his mother's womb. When he came out of his burrow he was arrested by the soldiers and taken to the Kenilworth camp. He was accused for providing food to the local guerrillas. Michael K was delirious so he was admitted in the camp hospital. He showed his resistance to the political system by not eating the camp food. In the camp hospital, "Smelling the food, he felt the saliva seep in his mouth. It was the first hunger he had known for a long time. He was not sure that he wanted to become a servant to hunger again; but a hospital, it seemed, was a place for bodies, where bodies asserted their rights" (LT 71). In order to obtain freedom he even

ignores the basic need of food and remains hungry. This brings out his necessity for liberation.

Michael K escapes from that camp and reaches the city where he lived. To retain his freedom he ate whatever he cultivated. His ultimate aim was to stay away from the camps. He achieved it through his strong determination. In the camp he refuses all the support which will help him to live. The Medical Officer who helps Michael K also makes an imaginary speech and he addresses the character as 'Michaels'. Even though he is addressed by others as weak, he is physically fragile and mentally strong. All that he cared was his mother and mother earth. His actions reveal that Michael K is unique from others. Michael K not only escapes from the camp and also from the world of brutality and violence.

Michael K's Liberation:

Michael K's story depicts his fight for identity. Michael K does not wish to live under the empathy of others. For example when the Medical Officer bought food for him he refused and remained stubborn in his intention. In spite of his bad physical condition he was candid and resolute towards his ambition. He survived the tough situations like civil war, act of violence of the soldiers and the camp life. He felt that only liberation from all these societal issues will give him peace and security. If he remained in the camp listening to his fellow mates' advice he would be counted as one among the native men. Michael K overcomes all the obstacles and creates a space for himself. J.M.Coetzee through Michael K insists that freedom must be given to each and every individual. Michael K stands as a symbol of a common man's right to freedom and dignity. His struggle for recognition forms the base of *Life and Times of Michael K*.

J.M.Coetzee here portrays the agony of the native people. He empathizes with them and states that equality should be achieved. "We are not simply expressing thereby the apathy we have had to bring about in ourselves to be equal to the task of understanding our subject, nor are we striving to make our interpretative interventions take on the oracular quality they must possess against this backdrop of inertia". (Lacan 87)

Michael K's Ardent Journey:

Michael K undertakes a long journey to accomplish the task of burying his mother's ashes at her birth place. He was stopped for permits and accused for traveling without permits. He makes an improvised cart to carry his mother. He is innovative and uses the available resources to make himself comfortable. Michael K is not attracted by money and power. He uses money only to get food. He cultivates his own food. He understands others' problems and does not wish to share his problems with others. His soft nature was taken advantage by others and they exploited him. He was misused by soldiers, Visagie grandson and the nomads for their benefit. Michael K is an introvert and this nature made him to develop an inner self and he avoids contact with the world around him. During his confinement in the camps he feels isolated and raises a number of questions to his fellow mates. He understands the philosophy of life which was not understood by the people of normal intellect.

It is useful at this juncture to observe the deep metaphorical implications and ramifications of Michael K as a child born with a harelip and consequently being unable to suckle its mother's breast. Coetzee certainly intends us to see beyond Michael K's physical disability. The tropes of war, permits to move, curfews and camps found in the novel reveal the text as dwelling on modern phenomena, thereby showing K as an archetypal character, an everyman. (Kehinde 49)

Sum up:

Michael K's character fascinates the readers. His idea and theory of freedom is diverse from others. He strives to create individuality in a civil war torn country. Michael K comes back to his place without being affected by the political turmoil in the city. Michael K does not react to the policy of racial segregation in the city, but he is very receptive to the sufferings of his brethren. He utters only a few

words at the time of his need. His actions speak more than his words. J.M.Coetzee brings out the position of a native man in Apartheid South Africa. Michael K like other native people is victimized and not allowed to live freely in his homeland. Through Michael K, J.M.Coetzee brings out the importance of freedom and insists that harmony must be maintained among the races.

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