

Life and Times of Michael K: The Enigma of Michael

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Abstract

*J.M. Coetzee is one of the few African writers who has won the Nobel Prize in literature and that is in 2003. Among his diverse subject matters, the physical impact of war and consequently the psychological impact of it is one of the most dominant themes. The theme of war is very much relevant to the present situation of the world. The world in which we live is severely tormented by the threat of war and political turmoil. In actual fact, at the present time “fuel” is one of the main issues of this conflict. It is not hard to infer that in future “water” will be added as the issue of conflict. Living in a world like this, human race is constantly bearing the threat of the so called The Third World War. Hence, Coetzee has worked on the theme of war in the novels like *Life and Times of Michael K*, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Dusklands*. Among these three, in this study, the first one has been selected to dissect and to find answers of some certain questions that this novel raises. The principal character of this novel, Michael K, is an enigmatic character and chiefly for this enigma some questions come to the forefront.*

In world literature there are ample examples which are tainted with the marks of war-mongering. In this respect, the epics produce the principal role. By presenting and elevating the deeds of the heroes the epics create one kind of zeal for war.

The two famous examples are *The Iliad* by Homer and *The Faerie Queene* by Edmund Spenser (as it is not our principal projected area and these two are the chief strongholds of this genre). In *The Iliad* the few voices which utter something in opposition of war are always shattered and portrayed in a negative way. The word “manly” is estimated highly there and anti-war-mongering is considered to be “womanish”. If manly qualities mean slaughtering human beings, then it is better to be women and at the present time we need such womanish women. J M Coetzee has sketched such a character in his novel *Life and Times of Michael K*.

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Life and Times of Michael K that it is not mandatory to be informed about the apartheid background of South Africa. The concepts of time and place have been made insignificant here deliberately by Coetzee. Only in one place there is a reference of a decade and that is 1930 (Coetzee 1998: 153). Major Noel informs the Medical Officer that it is thirty years since he last played cricket, when he was a school student. If we consider his age at that time as 15, then the probable time of the incidents of the novel is 1970 (considering the latter part of the 1930s, 1940+30=1970). Almost same data has been provided by David Attwell,

“...*Life and Times of Michael K* was written partly- with the emphasis on partly- in response to a particular political and constitutional debate in South Africa in the early 1980s, when the nation seemed to enter in a cycle of insurrection and repression whose outcome threatened to be bloody” (Attwell1993:88)

David Attwell reemphasizes on the word “partly”. Same kind of attitude is expressed by Derek Attridge,

“Since it, too, occurs in a setting that is outside actual history (though in this case not outside real geography) South Africa in an imaginary future is therefore understood as an extension of South Africa at the time of writing, that is, the early 1980s.” (Attridge 2004:48-49)

It is our assumption that J. M. Coetzee has universalized the novel intending to show what may be the response of a man who is vandalized by war irrespective of time and place.

Rest of the article we will deal with the abnormal behaviors of Michael, the incidents which lead him to behave in such abnormal way, and the chief psychological impact of this on his mind. In this connection it should be remembered that J. M. Coetzee emphasizes more on the psychological exploitation of war than the physical exploitation.

Unlike the tradition he does not bother about the description of war technologies. Rather, he is very much interested about the exploitation of war-influenced human psychology. He delves deep into the mind of Michael k and derives the original reasons of his mental derailment.

Questions like why he had been brought into the world, keeping distance from almost the total human race, unusual indifference about the opposite sex, engaging himself more and more on dreamless sleep for abnormal long time, eating beetle-flowers-larvae of ant-grasshoppers-roots, beginning to lead the life of a beast, losing interest for life, denying normal food in spite of forcing: all these are the abnormal behavior shown by K. Analyzing his whole life as depicted by Coetzee in the aforementioned novel, we can form a clear concept of his unusual activities.

Michael was brought up as a physically handicapped man as he has a hare lip. In the second part of the novel, we are informed by the Medical Officer at Kennilworth that he has to face problems in talking. But this problem is not mentioned anywhere in the novel by Michael’s speech or by the thought process of him. He wants to hide his drawback and it forces him to be a man of few words and later completely silent. Again to survive in a world which is war-

tormented physical fitness is a must. But for years of malnutrition, he becomes a feeble man. His physical weakness eroded all his mental strength.

Huis Norenius, the special school for disfigured boys, shaped his life and it comes as a flashback in his thought process recurrently. There he is brought up among many inflicted children and his mentality is inflicted also by them. We can consider the twenty one rules and the first one is “There will be silence in dormitories at all times”. In this way, he is silenced at the very early stage of his life. Later in his life, the Medical Officer, who is sympathetic to him, wants to understand the reasons of his abnormalities, but for this institutional silencing he is unable to tell anything even to such a benevolent character for him. He is not interested to tell the story of his life because it is the story of the “cages”. Besides, in Huis Norenius he is not taught the art of telling stories but of making baskets and other things. Hence, it can be deduced that the education system there is decayed and faulty. It only thinks about the physical aspect of life, it does not give the mental strength essential for life. It produces a lot of physically as well as mentally crippled men like Michael. He thinks Huis Norenius as his father; this father is not any affectionate one, but stays in an elevated place far from him and dictates him. It is one kind of never ending dictatorship, as Michael recognizes the presence and activity of this father in the middle of nowhere in his brain cells and he cannot remove this alien body.

Huis Norenius played certain kind of music in order to calm the children, but K was greatly disturbed by it. This contributed greatly to his later insanity. This speech delivered to the Medical Officer sounds insane,

“I used to think about flying. I always wanted to fly. I used to stretch 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. When they switched on the music I became too restless to do it, to fly.” (Coetzee 1998:133)

Speech pictures him as a lunatic. By emphasizing the word “fly” and considering the connotation of the word, it is possible to find the craving for freedom which is one of the central problems. This problem occurs when he is informed in Cape

Town that he cannot leave his “magisterial district” without authorization and later he understood that the permit will never come. What is the true form of Michael’s sense of freedom is echoed by the speech of the Medical Officer,

“May be he eats the bread of freedom.” (Coetzee 1998: 146)

Freedom is the principal life-juice which provides Michael the strength of taking earthly foods essential for the operations of the body. It is true that the Jakkalsdrif Relocation

Camp is able to provide him a comparatively secure life than outside, but in reply he will have to sacrifice his freedom. For K freedom is more important than security and hence he deserted the camp. His camp life at Jakkalsdrif teaches him that he has no story to tell about his life but the story of endurance. Like every human being he wants to be victorious. He thinks that life is perfect where there is the proportionate blend of adventures, victories, defeats, and escapes. In camp life he does not relish the taste of these. Hence, he cannot identify as one of the members there. He has a severe detestation of being the servant of

somebody else. For this reason, he abandons the company of the “grandson of Visagie” for the reason that he starts to treat him as his servant. For the same reason, he abandons the idea of uniting himself with the guerrillas, though such an idea peeps in his mind. He does not want to be subordinated to them. Subordination means becoming one kind of creature to him, “Would it not better to hide day and night, would it not better to bury myself in the bowels of earth than become a creature of theirs?” (Coetzee 1998: 106)

Only one profession fascinates K and that is farming because this profession assures freedom. Between the heaven and earth there is only one place where he feels comfort and this is best understood by the Medical Officer,

“The garden for which you are presently heading is nowhere and everywhere except in the camps. It is another name for the only place where you belong, Michaels, where you do not feel homeless.”(Coetzee 1998: 166)

Michael thinks that gardening is for him one kind of sacred responsibility. For the reason of war men have abandoned gardening. He thinks it his duty to keep gardening alive because if nobody holds the practice, it will be extinct. He thinks that it is one kind of chain that must be maintained, otherwise it will be abolished. But it is the same farm in Karoo which cannot stop him from leading an unusual life. He stops eating though he had a lot of vegetables and for this he becomes physically weak which pushes him in a state of continuous delirious slumber. So, even his mostly liked profession is unable to present him a sound life. There are many reasons behind this. He is in a great risk there from the guerrillas as well as from army and police. This sense of insecurity makes him restless.

Michael makes a Crusoe-like island in the farm situated in Karoo. Robinson Crusoe survives in his island and does not show any sign of insanity because he had a companion cum servant, Friday, who reminds him always what the basic qualities of a man are and if any man severs himself from these qualities, he will be no longer a human. Side by side, from the ruin of the ship he discovers a Bible which provides him spiritual help. At least he establishes the Bible as a dynamic entity beside him. But the case of Michael in this regard is diametrically opposite. It is reported in the novel that he has not the habit of reading books,

“He had never liked books...” (Coetzee 1998: 17)

So, there is no scope for him to make books his companion during the time of his distress. Another contrast from Robinson Crusoe is that Crusoe tries to keep a record of time, but Michael has not done so because the concept of time has become useless and obsolete to him. As a result, he loses himself in the black hole of time.

His disinterest about passing a sound life is related to his mother. This is the most sensitive issue of his life. The Medical Officer notices that when he has to talk about his mother he becomes too much distressed. After the death of his mother he reaches in such a position where nothing matters. At this moment he surrenders himself to the ebb. Describing the situation Coetzee says,

“He did not believe that any harm would come to him; and if it should come, it would not matter.” (Coetzee 1998: 34)

In the hospital at Stellenboch he is informed that his mother has been cremated after her death. This news strikes him gravely. He becomes wordless. But a tormented stream of thought passes over his mind. Suddenly he verbally pronounces, "How do I know?" He does not have any control over the verbally expressed sentences and the sentences meditated in his mind. The nurse beside him becomes confused and asks, "How do you know what?" As he expresses only a part of his total thought verbally, it becomes inconsistent to others. In the remaining part of the novel this thing happens again and again.

Seeing the overall condition of his life one question emerges in his mind and the question is why he had been brought into the world. Later he convinces himself that he had been brought into the world to look after his mother. Throughout his life he never becomes intimate even with a single character, man or woman. Undoubtedly it is a risky position.

His mother is the life-stimulating blood for him and after the death of his mother the blood inside his body congeals.

Another reason of Michael's unwonted behavior is the loss of faith, belief and hope. He discovers that both he and his mother are not only unimportant but also forgotten. So, he loses faith about himself. After the bombing in the Central History Museum in Prince Albert, the authority locks the Jakkalsdrif camp and disconnects all communication from the outside world. The authority shows staunch indifference about the matter that the people living there will have to starve to death. This incident is a blow to Michael's faith about the world. It becomes clear to him that they treat him as good riddance to bad rubbish. He realizes that this thought begins to unfold itself in his head like a plant growing and this makes him delirious. When he is apparently successful in the farm, this plant has taken the shape of a tree and has occupied the whole thought process of his mind. After the death of his mother K treats the taking the ash of his mother to Prince Albert as his one and only mission of life. This box of ash accompanies him for a long period of time. He thinks that in some sense she stays inside the box. In the farm he scatters the ash on the soil. After performing this, one thought come to his mind that he has nothing to do as he has performed the principal work of his life. It is a common human trait to feel one kind of passivity on highest achievement. Even Alexander the Great once thought, "What is there left to conquer?". In the same way, after the first successful harvest he becomes passive for life. It is the peak of his life. After this what is there for him to conquer? And the most important question is for whom he will conquer, "He had no appetite; eating, picking up things and forcing them down the gullet into his body, seemed a strange activity." (Coetzee 1998: 12)

His life with his mother in fact, shows ingenuity about the making of the cart. At that time there remains a hope that one day he will reach Prince Albert, their dreamland. In order to actualize this dream they need a permit. So the permit has become another hope for them. Both these two hopes become frustrated. These two appear like "goddot" of Samuel Beckett which never comes. Pandora was able to keep hope in her box as the only ingredient for human race, but for K and his mother Pandora's hope does not work. Perhaps these persons have been eliminated from Pandora's list.

His mother's death provoked him think to start his life in a new form. But in this regard his dead mother stands as an obstacle. The following quotation is worth provoking, "...a whitewashed cottage in the broad veiled with smoke curling from its chimney, and standing

at the front door his mother, smiling and well, ready to welcome him home at the end of a long day.” (Coetzee 1998: 9)

In such visualization of a heavenly place there is no beloved of him but his mother. His physical deformity and mental sloth confines his thought as a child. Only for one occasion in his life he feels love for a girl in Jakkalsdrif camp. But he rejects the idea for the reason that he has not the capacity to perform the duty of a father and there is a fear of being the worst of fathers. If he fathers any child, it will be another Michael K and his luck will be confined within the wire of any camp. This kind of negative thought creates one kind of pessimism for life. He mediates over his childless situation, “That is why it is good thing that I, who have nothing to pass on, should be spending my time where I am out of the way.” (Coetzee 1998:105)

Thus the whole matter is decided and he stops eating. In this way, by losing hope, faith, and belief he becomes a stone. In the second part of the book the readers are taken from a delirious world to a real world. From the point of view of the Medical Officer the life of Michael K is dissected. This quotation is worth-mentioning which summarizes the life of Michael, “When we told you to jump, you jumped. When we told you to jump again, you jumped again. When we told you to jump again for the third time, however, you did not respond but collapsed in heap... So we picked you up, finding that you weighed no more than a sack of feathers, and set you down before food, and said; eat.” (Coetzee 1998: 163)

The third part is again another unusual one, as it is controlled by Michael. In this part K is greatly disturbed by a sexually perverted girl in the beach of Cote d’Azur. But this physical assault opens his desire for sex which is very essential in order to become a normal man. Coetzee describes,

“He watched their backsides ascend the steps and surprised in himself an urge to dig his fingers into the soft flesh.” (Coetzee 1998: 180)

Without having the sex-desire and woman companions K is an imperfect man. The libido is dormant in him. But whenever that girl sexually harasses him, his dormant desire comes to the forefront. If he had indulged this sex-craving, he could have started a new life. The main reason of this failure is that this sex-initiation is devoid of love.

Finally in should be mentioned that Michael wants to unburden the load of his life by making his life empty, but it is the harsh reality that the more life becomes empty, the heavier it comes to carry.

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