

Elusiveness is Resistance in J. M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*

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J.M. Coetzee in *Life & Times of Michael K* portrays a tragic fable of colonialism that surpassed the boundaries of his native South Africa. The novel is written in response to a particular political and constitutional debate in South Africa in the early 1980s, when the nation has been in the throes of insurrection and foreboded bloody outcomes. *Life & Times of Michael K* appeared in 1983 by the time Coetzee's reputation as a fiction writer had already been established. *Life and Times of Michael K* has been awarded England's prestigious Booker Mc Connell Prize in 1983, apart from winning Central News Agency (CNA) Literary Award (South Africa) and Prix Femina Etranger (France) in 1984.

Michael K, the protagonist is a man who eludes colonization whether it is the colonization of the body through labour camps or the colonization of mind through charity. Michael K is an unassuming assertion of Coetzee's artistry adopting a political stance as has been the practice of fellow South African writers such as Alan Paton, Nadine Gordimer and Athol Fugard. The locale of the novel is specifically South Africa, but it seems to be South Africa in the future. The background conflict is probably a civil war which is predicted as occurring in South Africa and the smouldering scenes of such anticipated civil strife that have already marked Gordimer's latest novel *July's People*. The civilians' movement from district to district controlled by means of the Pass laws, the compulsory military service, the imagined civil war pointing to the bleak picture of what the future holds, the presence of the homeless and the destitute taking up the urban space, all these depictions reflect the historical 1980s of South Africa. The realistic stir in the beginning pages of the novel are referred to by Susan van Zanten Gallagher in *A Story of South Africa: J.M. Coetzee's Fiction in Context* as "an apocalyptic parable which reflects the chaos and the hope for salvation" (1991: 145-6) marking the novel's revolutionary urge. In her review "The Idea of Gardening" in *The New York Times Review* Nadine Gordimer reminds that the blacks and Whites are engaged in civil war in 1984 on South Africa's borders and the underground liberation movements resorting to bombings within the country have caused "R 508 millions of damage in five years. (1984: 2)

The narrative presents an individual asserting his freedom through inarticulate defiance towards the agencies of the state and escapes through the trauma without being the victim of the ravages of the civil war. The actual war remains peripheral to the central conflict in the novel because it is peripheral to Michael K's concerns. It seems that the main conflict is between Michael, the individual and the enemy others.

Coetzee does not directly tell us the colour of Michael K's skin, the issue that by all means defines South Africa, its politics and its people. The midwife who attends the laboring of K's mother mentions that K has "a harelip" (1984:3) obliquely refers to

the physical deformity other than the colour of Michael K's skin. It becomes a distinguished feature of K from not being generalized as *Everyman*. It is clear from K's position in the society that he is not a member of the ruling class and he is not White. K's harelip so repelled his mother that she placed him in a state school, Huis Norenus in *Faure*, where, until the age of fifteen he spent his time in the company of the other rejected and unwanted children. Although Michael K is an outsider by nature and a loner by preference, his experiences in sharing among the destitute are very much humane. Before he and his mother set out on the road, he assures her and himself that "people were decent, people would stop and give them lifts" (18) which is proved later when a man in a lorry gives them a ride. At the hospital where he takes his mother, he mentions that he is hungry, and stranger buys him a hot meat pie. The narrator underscores the bonding as Michael sat on a bench and ate. The pie was so delicious that tears came to his eyes.

Michael thinks he has found a place "that belonged to no one yet" (47) when he reaches the abandoned Visagie farm, which seems to be inhabited only by wild animals and where nothing grows in the garden. After exhausting himself killing a goat, only to discover that flesh repels him, he draws a significant lesson, "not to kill such large animals (57). Relegating the questions regarding ethics to the background, the question of survival overpowers Michael. He considers the relation of life to death and perceives a duality. He believes that his mother who was in some sense in the box and in some sense not being released will be more at rest and peace as "she was nearer to the natal earth" (57). It is life and nurturing that absorbs his attention most. He scatters his mother's ashes on the earth, restores the dam and plants his seeds. He has an awakening concerning the essence of his being. He thinks that gardening is in his nature and in a fit of exultation takes pride in regarding that "he, alone and unknown, was making this deserted farm bloom" (59).

A short time later he is confronted by a pale plump young man who introduces himself as "boss Visagie's grandson" (60). K's accepting Visagie's farm was one of those islands without an owner gets disillusioned through learning a lesson that no piece of land is left without a claim of ownership. Defying submission, Michael hides in the mountains, he at first eats whatever comes to hands, roots, bulbs, ant-grubs, flowers after which he fasts until he reaches a state where he "emptied his mind, wanting nothing, looking forward to nothing (68-69). Here Michael K draws parallel with Kafka's "Hunger Artist", a connection which Dovey traces in *Novels of J.M. Coetzee* when he realizes that he can no longer bear starvation, he comes down from the mountain seeking food. He is captured and sent to Jakkalsdriff camp, a resettlement camp for the unemployed, the inmates of which are deployed to work on state projects of building and reconstruction.

Soon after this incident, Michael begins to reflect on the ideas of the man named Robert, who got accused of political association after he and his family of eight were turned off a farm where he had worked for twelve years. Robert explains to Michael that the police had arrested him and his family on the road for having "no fixed abode" (80), the day after he had been terminated from his job which showed a place in Jakkalsdrif. Robert believes that such camps exist for two reasons: to prevent

the discontented lot joining the ranks of rebels in the mountains and to avert the too terrible a look that people wear owing to sickness and die.

If we just grew thin and turned into paper and then into ash and floated away, they wouldn't give a stuff for us....They want to go to sleep feeling good. (1984: 88)

Michael K imagines people in the camp digging a big hole, climbing into it, and being buried and covered over, as the narrator lays out his thoughts.

When we had exhausted ourselves digging, and had dug a great hold in the middle of the camp, they would have to order us to climb in and lay ourselves down: and when we were lying there, all of us, they would have to break down the huts and tents.....and cover us with earth, and flatten the earth. Then, perhaps, they might begin to forget about us. (1984: 94)

Michael K escapes from the Jakkalsdrif camp and returns to the Visagies farm, lying at the dam, he comes to realize that the house is never a safe place for him, that he must live in a hole, hide by day and leave no trace of his existence. In a sense, he chooses to be forgotten, so that he would not be exploited and oppressed by the system. K goes literally underground, burrowing without trace, like the animals, insects and grubs which he eats and likens himself to, or is ploughed back into the earth like a fallen seed. Earth has become his element and is a constant touchstone and is constant touchstone and referent for his existence.

Michael K considers himself a parent of plants, one so closely related with the earth that his seedling children growing into a family of "sister-melons" and brother-pumpkins" (113), the fruit of this real mother, to whom he is connected by an invisible cord of tenderness. Michael K is less a man than a spirit of ecological endurance. A question that looms large is where in lies his relevance, whether to the contemporary political situation of South Africa or to the ecological situation of the African continent at large. The African soil resents not the industrial aggravation but the colonialism and the war generic of South African context. It is not industrial plants but jails and camps like Jakkalsdrif that cause earth to be "stamped so tight.....and baked so hard.....that nothing would ever grow there again" (104). K tells his mother and argues

....there must be men to stay behind (from the war) and keep gardening alive, or at least the idea of gardening, because once that cord was broken, the earth would grow hard and forget her children. (1984: 109)

Of Coetzee's protagonists in his first four novels, only Michael K can be said to have escaped historical event to enter a realm of being outside of linear time. He lies in his burrow, whiling away time that bears "him onward in its flow" (115). In such isolated idleness, Michael occasionally falls into self-conscious reflections. Michael falls silent and almost inarticulate. He lives in terror of life spent with people and at one point envisages himself as an earth-hole into which words disappear.

Always, when he tried to explain himself to himself, there remained a gap, a hole, a darkness before which his understanding balked, into which it was useless to pour words. The words were eaten up, the gap remained. (1984: 109-110)

The best communication is of silence of being without words. He loves idleness, surrendering himself to time “flowing slowly like oil from horizon to horizon over the face of the world” (115).

A former race course club near Cape Town styled into a rehabilitation camp for the captured rebels stages Section-2 of the novel. Michael gets arrested as a suspected rebel for running a storage-site for the rebels at the end of the Section-1. Michael is an object of punitive action undergoing imprisonment and an object of charity being a patient in the hospital attached to the camp. Coetzee narrative point of view takes a shift from Third person narrative to first-person account of a Medical Officer who supervises K's treatment at the Kenilworth rehabilitation camp. The Medical officer grows inquisitive and carves out a meaning to K's reluctance to take food as a program of resistance. The Medical officer is shown as a representative of Empire, colonialism, and White South Africans extremely disillusioned at the chaotic conditions in his country. The Medical officer is assigned with the task of restoring health to patients like Michael K.

The Medical officer observes that he is the agent converting Michael to being a follower of the diktats of the state rejoining camp life marching back and forth across the race course shouting slogans and saluting the insignia practicing “digging holes and filling them up again” (133). The commanding officer is interestingly named Noel, being equally frustrated as the Medical officer, and invigorated by their official purpose. K is suspicious of the Medical officer's charity because he has learned from his mother's experience that benevolence is never innocent. After a lifetime of scrubbing other people's floors, Anna K is abandoned not only by her employers, but also by the society to whose economy she has contributed. K tells the Medical officer when she became old and sick her employers had forgotten her and put her away out of sight. When she died they threw her away into fire and gave Michael an “old box of ash” (136) asking him to “take her away, she is no good” (136) to them. Tired at Michael's silence in offering his story, the Medical officer warns him of being directed to back-breaking work of filling sandbags and digging holes “if you don't survive tough luck” (138). This resistance on the part of Michael K constitutes an apolitical withdrawal, when K tells the Medical Officer “I am not in the war” (138).

Michael K's unyielding attitude to tell his story and his escape from camps go at even length throughout the narrative. The resistance to tell his story gains its strength by turning it into a metafictional question of what constitutes a story. In the first section of the novel, the sense of nothingness becomes the gap in the narrative. The narrative seems to take a strange stride as Michael dozes off all the time listening to the silence pervading the farm. The silence of Michael K, which is a kind of resistance, can also be understood as being imposed by the colonizer on the colonized to push the colonized to the realms of obscurity. Dominic Head in *J.M. Coetzee* asserts that where issues of material advantage are concerned, “K's silence and compliance assist in his oppression” (1997: 98). The silence speaks out the strangled truth about the magnitude of suppression of the colonized. The Medical officer is disturbed at Michael K's rejection to render his story. Stephen Watson considers the Medical officer is wrought to a pitch of desperation by Coetzee, who in

their efforts “escape the intolerable burdens of the master-slave relationship” (1986: 378).

Both the Medical officer and Noel, the arsonist calls Michael as “Michaels” insisting on the plurality of the non-white countrymen much like every White South African. The Medical officer displays a spectrum of taking stance of Michael K ranging from compassion, to condescension and paternalism, to hostility, ending finally in idealization. Michael’s starved look spurs the officer to nurse him to bring Michael back to healthy state; he even offers to provide surgical correction to K’s harelip which is met with K’s unwillingness to ingest food of captivity, as he is reluctant to accept the bread of charity. The Medical officer concludes that K survives on “the bread of freedom” (146). Noel, the commanding officer is conscious of the real intent of running the Kenilworth camp, as he says that a war is being fought “so that minorities will have a say in their destinies” (157), but the objective at first does not seem admirable, since one of the minorities in South Africa, the White governing race is also fighting to preserve the “say in their destinies.”

Coetzee forecasts a grim future for the Afrikaner cause as the already overtaxed medical staff receives a shipment of four hundred new patients, many of them in “a state of life in death or death in life” (159). His paternalistic attitude is evidenced when the officer proclaims, “I am the only one who can save you” (151), commanding him to “yield” (152). Though the Medical officer’s opinions cannot always be trusted, the narrative perspective concurs with his description of K as “a great escape artist” (166), “a human soul above and beneath classification, a soul blessedly untouched by doctrine, untouched by history” (151). His escape from History, whether intentional or passive, is what puzzles the Medical officer. He narrates in an imagined letter to Michael K

....we have all tumbled over the lip into the cauldron of history; only you, following your idiot light, biding your time in an orphanage (who would have thought of that as a hiding place?) evading the peace and the war, skulking in the open where no one dreamed of looking, have managed to live in the old way, drifting through time, observing the seasons, no more trying to change the course of history than a grain of sand does. We ought to value you and celebrate you, we ought to put your clothes on a maquette in a museum. (1984: 152)

What Michael K represents is a mode of existence that history has never encompassed. History is not only what devours individuality but also what witnesses one’s status. In the historical context of South Africa, Afrikaner history erases black Africans in double senses; that is, black Africans are recognized either as non-existing or as the other. Many critics have attributed positive significance to this elusiveness of Michael K. Coetzee, in his interview with Dick Penner referring to the two prominent features of the novel, one being Michael’s elusiveness and the other being the exclusion of racial specification of the protagonist points to a conspicuous strategy of resistance to the population Registration Act of 1950.

It is open to question whether Michael K’s disappearing so as to be forgotten can be an act of effective rebellion, since he confronts the authority through meek surrenderance rather than through a vehement revolt against the political anarchy. The

Medical officer finally resolves that the originality of Michael K's resistance lies in the fact that he does not resist at all.

As the time passed, however, I slowly began to see the originality of the resistance you offered. You were not a hero and didn't pretend to be, not even a hero of fasting....when we told you to jump, you jumped. When we told you to jump again, you jumped again. When we told you to jump a third time, however, you did not respond but collapsed in a heap; and we could all see, even the most unwilling of us, that you had failed because you had exhausted your resources in obeying us. (1984: 163)

To resist, paradoxically, Michael K chooses to obey. The power of domination gives rise to revolution as a natural phenomenon and revolution is the Siamese twin of domination and authority. But Michael's elusiveness develops a different logic transgressing duality of domination and revolution by being immune to be dominated or exploited through his elusiveness. Toward the end of his narrative, the Medical officer idealizes the unyielding Michael in an imaginary letter asking Michael to forgive him and is gratified for having chosen Michael "to show the way" (163) for him. Michael K's resistance to social, racial and political identifications must be understood as a tacit critique. The Medical officer convincingly insists, K's story an allegory "of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it" (166). His story stands as an emblem to the non-conformist's right to have freedom protected from the will of the community.

Section-3 of the novel is a brief one. At the end of the novel, K has come full cycle and is back in Cape Town, where he is offered food, drink and sex. He has survived, but his freedom is only a matter of degree. He has no money, for instance, and he cannot raise his own food although he is left with a half packet of seeds. The final section portrays a return to the beginning to where Michael's mother lived briefly in a room when she was sick in the Cape Town, near by a sea point. There by the sea, he finds love in a lavatory. He confronts two pimps and their whores, one of the pimps insist that K drink wine which causes dizziness to K. One of the prostitutes seduces Michael K, which makes him reflect that "I have become an object of charity" (181). He is extended charity by the people wherever he goes. The essence that Michael K has come to realize occupies significance as he contemplates the truth that "I have been a gardener....The truth, the truth about me. I am a gardener (181).

Michael had had the insight to tell his own story, he "would have told the story of a life passed in prisons" (181). He imagines himself as a gardener with "plenty of seeds.....seeds for each pocket" (182). The novel concludes as he dreams of finding a friend and returning to the farm. The novel ends with Coetzee reminding that earth endures, life endures. Michael remembers

.....the mountains purple and pink in the distance, the earth grey and brown beneath the sun save here and there, where if you looked carefully you suddenly saw a tip of vivid green, pumpkin leaf or carrot-bush" (1984: 183)

Towards the end of the novel, he considers the meaning of his experiences. He recalls the moral of the story and resolves that "there is time enough for everything? Is

that how morals come, unbidden” (183). This statement is treated by Kelly Hewson “as a definition of complacency” (67) in “Making the Revolutionary Gesture.” The novel concludes as he dreams of finding a friend and returning to the farm. There they stand, Michael K imagines, by the pump blown up by the soldiers. As his friend says “what are we going to do about water?” (183). Michael produces a teaspoon and a long roll of string from his pocket, clears the rubble from the mouth of the shaft bending the handle of the teaspoon in a loop tying the string to it. He lowers the bent spoon down the shaft deep into the earth fetching spoonful of water and in that way “he would say, one can live” (184).

The final line of the novel points to one of the many possibilities that through the exemplified resourcefulness of Michael a community can be founded though there is minimum subsistence. K dons the principal role of leading the people who want the “bread of freedom” (166). The final line suggests the means of achieving individuality and relying on interdependence, never missing the salience of individual integrity and privacy.

When Anna K, Michael’s mother, falls sick her son rejects everything represented by the father in South African culture, encompassing the military establishment, special institutions and penal system, and the war fought to defend and preserve them. The novel’s epigraph, drawn from Heraclitus’s *Cosmic Fragments*, presents the war, too, as belonging to the domain of the father:

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.

The idea that war can produce order through strife is curiously close to the Foucauldian notion of power as a force dispersed through every level of social relations, including the production of subjectivity. Michael, however, is on a quest in the novel to discover who his true mother is. From the beginning of the book, K’s two mothers are closely associated. On the first page his harelip forces his natural mother to feed him with a teaspoon and on the last page is “fed” water, in an identical manner, by the earth, whose hills are elsewhere represented as “two plump breasts” (1983: 137).

As the mother opposes the father, gardening is the opposite of this corrosive notion of power. From the moment K leaves Cape Town and travels into the jaws of the war with his mother in the cart, his resistances become associated metonymically with the mother, and when K distributes her ashes like seeds and turns them into the soil of the farm, Coetzee exploits the symbolism of mother earth. Thus, out of the burial of his natural, biological mother is conceived the tending of his greater, cosmic one, and K can reply ambiguously to the doctor’s enquiries about her whereabouts saying “she makes the plants grow (1983: 178).

Coetzee’s fiction endeavors to unmask the power structure on which the representation and knowledge of the *other* relies. To some extent, realism, as a mode of representation embodies such power structure. David Atwell aptly points out that reflexivity and referentiality are not necessarily in contradiction with each other in Coetzee’s works, in which reflexivity is a key element, “directed at ‘the mechanics and assumption of composing, interpreting, structuring, positing’” (1993: 18). From

this point of view, Coetzee's rejection of realism doesn't mean that his fiction shuns reality, but it intends to challenge the assumptions about realistic representation which, more significantly, involves the authority of interpretation. As Dominic Head sums up Coetzee's concern in *Life & Times of Michael K*,

...Coetzee has termed 'limited omniscience' in the novel, a third-person narrative in which the extent of the narrator's knowledge about Michael K's story is unclear. In fact, an important impetus of the novel is to raise doubts about this knowledge; but there is still a convention of realism which suggests appropriation in the narrative mediation of Sections 1 and 3, akin, perhaps, to the medical officer's overt attempts at appropriation in section 2. (1997:98-99)

In other words, the third-person narrator's insufficient knowledge parallels the medical officer's failure to interpret. Even in the first and third sections, the purpose of "lingering realism" in the novel, to use Head's phrase (1997:98), is to expose the problem of realism.

While the portrayal of an oppressed protagonist wins applause from those who expect literature to be a social criticism, Michael K's eventual resistance to get in contact with his social and political milieu marks him as an anti-hero. The lack of any revolutionary solutions to the structural injustices renders both the text and Michael K's body vulnerable to attack. In fact, the text and the body are in a similar relation to history and politics. Michael K's precarious life on the verge of being devoured by history and politics corresponds to Coetzee's disbelief in the domination of history over the novel.

As David Atwell in *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* states about Coetzee's metafictional frame that produces the deconstructive gesture of the entire story. He states about "the capacity of the novel to 'get behind' itself and displace the power of interpretation in such a way that K is left uncontained at the point of closure" (1993: 99). The novel exposes the violence implicated in representing the other, and suffering successfully imbibed into the narrative. The narrative strikes at the sense that otherness and suffering in true terms can't be represented but must be felt. Michael K's inability to tell his mother's story should be understood as a refusal to lament a trauma that can't truthfully echo the trauma of suffering.

Thus, the narrative is the worshipping the earth as a deity with the protagonist serving it as an ecological priest. As Nadine Gordimer's incisive review "The Idea of Gardening" states

J.M. Coetzee has written a marvelous work that leaves nothing unsaid – and could not be better said – about what human being do to fellow human beings in South Africa. (1998: 143)

The Nobel committee in its citation for J.M. Coetzee commended

...he writes of men and women doing their best to duck under history or simply float above it".

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