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## Reductive Existence: A Study of J. M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K*

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This article probes into the reductive existence of the protagonist of the novel *Life and Times of Michael K*. The setting of the novel is of a civil war infested locale and links it to the life and times of the slow-witted and hare-lipped protagonist Michael K. The backdrop seems consciously isolated and empty. The novel's scenario of militarism and civil erosion seems to be devoid of human existence. An analysis is made of man's lack of humanitarian feeling, love and sense especially during war by looking at nature which like man becomes bleak, bare and dry and reveals the inner sensibility of human beings. It also studies how the exterior landscape and the locales like Huis Norenius, the hospital in Stellenbosch, the farm house in Prince Albert reflect the barrenness and emptiness of Michael K's life and of the life of people around him.

In the battlefield of life, human beings are often reduced to a miserable status, especially when they become victims of the atrocities they themselves create. War is a calamity caused by men's inhumanity and it throws them to a reductive existence. J. M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K* is about such a reduction. Tamlyn Monson opines, "The novel aims to portray the violence of subjectivity and the negation upon which representation is predicated" (*JCL* 83). The novel is set against the background of war and the eventual dissolution of human institutions. Positioned in a South African police state that attempts to maintain apartheid by any means, the plot unfolds as an unyielding analysis of the reason for the tyranny of apartheid. The novel is a relentless dissection of the logic of oppression and traces the protagonist Michael K's search for real freedom. Michael K, a withdrawn and inarticulate municipal gardener, who spent his childhood in a children's home - Huis Norenius - becomes ensnared in the incomprehensible and undeclared civil war and struggles to scratch out a refuge with his limited sources. He is very simple and strives for something in the face of these dissolutions. He ultimately becomes a spectre that is barely noticed in the everyday life. He is a poor helpless soul who wanders out on the combat zone of life. The letter 'K' in his name is ambiguous, anonymous and open-ended. The novel portrays the social, physical and political improbabilities of Michael K, who miraculously lives through the trauma of South Africa in a state of civil war without being touched by it. He journeys through a life of torment and ignorance into the vast expanse of the natural land. He does not seem to bother about the civil war in progress, the city and its life. His preoccupation seems to be how to develop a garden and grow his seeds to facilitate the germination of a new generation, in a quiet and serene place, but his efforts seem to be futile in such a background. The novel's scenario of militarism and civil erosion challenges the destiny of minorities in South Africa.

On the surface *Life and Times of Michael K* is a story of a relentless struggle of, as Mark Hawthorne writes in an article, "a thirty-year-old mentally deficient child in a man's body who seems to answer the confusion of modern life by ignoring it and a man mechanically competent but so distrustful of language that he inadvertently cultivates the appearance of a child" (*CNE* 122). The forces against Michael K, a gardener, are very many. He takes his own route, the best

way he knows to travel, until he is left with everything debilitated, misplaced and lost. He begins his journey in Cape Town and ends the journey in the same place after a winding journey to Prince Albert and with varied and frustrating experiences. The novel probes into man's life in this modern world and this is the real essence of Coetzee's writing.

Coetzee probes into the social and political complexities of a war-torn South Africa in the novel. The epigraph of *Life and Times of Michael K*, drawn from Heraclitus's *Cosmic Fragments*, presents war as the political background of the times:

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 novel pictures two juxtaposed states of life – human life in the midst of war and human life in a place untouched by the impact of war. Coetzee presents war as the background and shows its influence on human beings and in the locales inhabited by man. The effects of war are microcosmically shown in a scene where a youth is struck by a military jeep at Sea Point. A fight ensues and this incident initiates a chain of violent reactions. This civil war leads to a variety of other conflicts, destruction and damage where people are killed and things and properties are damaged beyond recognition. Human beings seem to have lost values as war has resulted in just having many hungry mouths with “no work, no accommodation” (*LTMK* 14) and an “army of the homeless and destitute” (13). Everything goes out of control of the authorities in a war torn country and war makes the common people the ultimate sufferers.

The social panorama of the novel is presented against official rules and guidelines that stand in the way of free movement of its citizens. It features as a backdrop of a Southern Africa stripped down to almost mythic conditions in the midst of a civil war. There are large, empty spaces on which humanity has made little impression, interspersed with small but intense areas of misery where humanity has made all too great an impression. This results in the experience of Michael K, who slips out of the existence of the city into the background where he attenuates almost to nothing. All that the simpleton sees are huge, vacant spaces and a few human beings. Derek Wright aptly states: “. . . the topography lends itself to no myths, offers no mystical bond or blood-intimacy, and altogether lacks humanizing dimensions, being not merely silent and empty – a place where nothing happens” (*MFS* 436). The novel deals with the flight of an insignificant citizen from growing disorder and impending war to a state of indifference to all needs and speechlessness that negates the logic of power.

The novel is full of ugly and sad scenes, with few glimpses of hope or beauty. Michael K himself looks ugly as his “lip curled like a snail's foot, the left nostril gaped” (3). “Because of his disfigurement and because his mind was not quick” (4), poor Michael K prefers solitariness and avoids human company. Anna K, Michael K's mother, too is “suffering from gross swelling of the legs and arms; later her belly had begun to swell too” (5). Such ugly descriptions of the characters find parallelism in the author's description of the war ridden locale too.

The novel pictures South Africa raging in a civil war and the state of man in a war soaked society is grimly presented. There do not seem to be many places to actually live in. Loot, arson and war camps are the common routine of the day. The simple, ignorant and jobless are captured

and put into war camps. The condition of the land which has no farmers to tend it and the predicament of the really ignorant in the society are alarming. The few positive strokes in the novel are short lived and they only help to heighten the bleak aspect of the novel.

There are several locales of action in the novel which help in reflecting the pathetic conditions of the characters. Anna K is employed as a domestic servant in Sea Point. The room where she stays is under the stairs and is intended for an air-conditioning equipment and “There was no electric light and no ventilation; the air was always musty” (6). Anna K’s stuffy and dingy room is symbolic of their lifeless existence. On the door of her room is a sign of a skull and crossed bones painted in red. “I feel like a toad under a stone living here” (9), says Anna K. Crippled by war, Michael K too has to seek refuge in this room. The darkness and lack of ventilation are physical evidences for their drab and cheerless existence in the midst of civil war. Sea Point is a civil war choked place and it allows no space for freedom, growth or development. The room of Anna K also symbolically represents the lack of humanity and the lack of basic needs. Disfranchised from human existence on the earth’s surface, Michael K and his mother are directed to a number of underground existences like the cave like downstairs room which Anna K occupies and into the earth where Michael K lives later in the farm.

The lifelessness and lack of relationship in a war-torn city is vividly brought out. Common man is made to lead an aimless and limited life. He is kept within bonds and not given freedom. In the city, when there is a clash between the police and the public, Michael K and Anna K feel trapped in the besmirched room in Sea Point. They huddle quietly as mice in their room beneath the stairs. The civil war results in destruction both materially and mentally. People become desolate, homeless, jobless and aimless. All these thoughts and scenes disturb and perturb Anna K and she thinks of quitting the city and “returning to the quieter countryside of her girlhood” (7), Prince Albert, where she hopes to live in peace and away from the cry of the homeless, and the desolate.

The consequences of the civil war can be felt everywhere. Man has entered his cocoon and becomes self-centred. Hoping to get some help on the way from others, Anna K and Michael K start their journey to Prince Albert on a makeshift cart, but they are “struck by the emptiness of the roads. There was such stillness that he could hear birdsong” (21). Life gets limited and diminished in a war prone society and the displacement of man due to war is very powerfully presented. Human beings are not to be seen easily and the few who are seen do not bother about the welfare of others and are self oriented. As they travel, Anna K and Michael K do not see any common man’s vehicle on the expressway. The only noise that can be heard now and then is the thunder like rumbling of uniformed motor-cyclists with rifles strapped across their backs. An olive-green army truck, with a canvas hood under which two rows of helmeted soldiers are seated, passes them. The commonly seen people are the soldiers. When Michael K and Anna K move along the road, they see very few people and no one extends a helping hand to them. In a war infected locale, man is limited in his view and thoughts and life is decadent. Everything seems to have lost peace, man and nature like, resulting in a kind of silence that deceptively covers an indescribable turbulence underneath, silencing human words and even the song of the birds.

Man’s lack of humanitarian feeling, love and sense is revealed in the landscape and in nature too. Just like man, nature becomes desolate, empty and dry, thus revealing the inner

sensibility of human beings. “By the roadside a tangle of weeds grew as high as a man’s chest; the road surface was cracked, and grass sprouted in the cracks” (26). People do not seem to bother about two poor people travelling on a makeshift cart. Anna K and Michael K observe how the countryside is and comment on the places around. The landscape around them is dry, uninhabited and desolate. Leafless vineyards stretch before and behind. The streets are empty and cold wind gusts. This reveals the lifelessness, dampness and rottenness existing at the time of war: “In this half-world of straggling roots and damp earth and subtle rotten smells no site seemed more sheltered from the elements than any other” (24). The landscape is open and vulnerable to the elements. It has no shelter or roof. Chased and hunted by the civil war, mother and son take shelter on the wayside, but this shelter is roofless suggesting that the displaced people have no friendly locale to embrace them. The mother and son encounter not merely the aggressive government machinery, but the hostile nature that thwarts the mother’s ultimate dream of reaching Prince Albert, the land she dreams of to breathe the air of freedom and where she could rest in the benign bosom of nature.

Man is never happy in an unfriendly locale nor is nature happy when man is not allowed to enjoy freedom and hurdles are imposed on natural things. When this mutual bond is jeopardized, it results in a destructive imbalance that causes damage. Human beings and the land they live in seem exhausted and lack life and energy due to continuous war and its impact.

Michael K is disfigured and his mind is not so quick. The war torn land also looks sickly, disorganized and empty as the physically and mentally disoriented Michael K. His mother is not happy with his appearance and the stares of others and so she admits him in Huis Norenus, a “godforsaken institution” (132). This stifles Michael K’s growth mentally and socially. His attempt to control hunger here makes him averse to free food and that is why he is not able to eat the food given to him freely by the Medical Officer, later in the camp hospital.

Anna K has been suffering from gross swelling of the legs, arms and belly and is admitted in Somerset Hospital for dropsy. The atmosphere in the hospital is quite symptomatic of the indifference and apathy that prevails during war. She understands how indifferent the world can be to an old woman with an unsightly illness in time of war. The hospital is a locale revealing a part of South Africa where people in pain and agony generally go to get relief. However this becomes a site where people are unresponsive and uncaring and even basic needs are not met by the hospital authorities during the civil war. Anna K is not considered a person with feelings and needs. She is treated on par with inanimate objects by her fellow patients and even by the hospital authorities in the hospital. Even her basic need for a bedpan is not met and “The needs of her body became a source of torment” (5). Man, in his avaricious attempts to subdue his fellow human, flouts all norms of values and it is this that gets reflected in the atmosphere and care available in the hospital. All these lead her to utter frustration and helplessness.

The hospital in Stellenbosch, on the way to Prince Albert, where Michael K admits his mother for fever and cough throws light again on the situation during war. On detecting no breathing in his mother, Michael K runs to the nurse on duty and asks her to check his mother. The nurse pathetically says:

‘Do you see all these people here?’ She gestured towards the corridor and the wards. ‘These are all people waiting to be attended to. We are working twenty-four hours a day to attend to them. When I come off duty. . . I am so tired I can’t

eat, I just fall asleep with my shoes on. I am just one person. Not two or three – one.’ (28)

There are so many patients but few to serve the hospitals in the war soaked society. Man’s conscience has gone so morbid, indifferent and sinister, that the staff in the hospital do not take either the living or the dead seriously. The hospital authorities take an upper hand and cremate Anna K after death and just hand over the ashes to the ignorant Michael K without giving prior information. He cannot understand how his mother has turned into ashes and does not know what to do with the ashes as he is ignorant of the processes and the situations existing then. Thus he has to face an anarchic world of brutal, roving people on military trucks and all around all alone. After his mother’s death, his existence becomes a struggle for survival in isolation - the individual struggling against a society gone awry and struggling to survive in nature with disturbing thoughts about his dead mother. With the ashes of his mother in his hands, Michael K looks around to realize that neither the humans nor nature around him is friendly and gracious to offer him support or solace or is not even ready to understand him.

So Michael K, without family or money or even a plan about what to do next sleeps under cardboard boxes near the Stellenbosch hospital for days as he has nowhere else to go and he is truly one of the lost. He becomes a solitary figure with no one to help him or guide him. He bears a resemblance to the land which is forgotten by human beings who are concentrating on war. To escape the reality of the civil war and its consequences that are going on around him, Michael K uses sleep as an escape mechanism. He ceases to observe the curfew and spends his time sleeping anywhere, any time in any position. “Sleep settled inside his head like a benign fog; he had no will to resist it” (34). He comes to a shattered bungalow and sleeps intermittently, woken by high winds and heavy rains. He moves deep into an orchard where worm eaten fruit lay everywhere. “Everywhere was evidence of neglect” (39). He goes on his knees and hands pulls out yellow half grown carrots and justifies to himself his poaching saying “It is God’s earth . . . I am not a thief” (39). His agony gets multiplied when this confidence he has in nature and earth is not reciprocal.

As Michael K walks along the countryside, he sees “From horizon to horizon the landscape was empty. He climbed a hill and lay on his back listening to the silence, feeling the warmth of the sun soak into his bones” (46). Coetzee’s theme is the wild and merciless power of inanity. All around Michael K is emptiness and desolation. The landscape is empty and the characters are also empty, devoid of meaning and significance. Michael K himself gets accustomed to the utter silence and negated landscape he is living in - “Perhaps I am the stony ground, he thought” (48). The exterior landscape reflects the barrenness and emptiness of Michael K’s life and time. He seems to have lost the capacity to think, talk and socialize with other human beings. The after-situation of a post-war region is also evident in the lonely land. Man in fear has retreated within himself and forgotten the landscape which is growing barren along with him. Thus, the dismal landscape is the material evidence of man’s gradual undoing of himself.

Michael K simply exists on the land, and hardly lives a full life. He also ends up in the labour camp or internment camps that have sprung up all over the nation and as he finds himself miserable there he longs to escape from there. He longs to be left alone. Being slow-minded and

with a harelip, Michael K has no girl friends and no family. He feels happy to be alone in such a situation where no one interferes with his way of life and says:

How fortunate that I have no children, he thought: how fortunate that I have no desire to father. I would not know what to do with a child out here in the heart of the country, who would need milk and clothes and friends and schooling. I would fail in my duties, I would be the worst of fathers. Whereas it is not hard to live a life that consists merely of passing time. I am one of the fortunate ones who escape being called. (104)

Having realized that he is deserted by an unfriendly society, hostile government and an apathetic nature, Michael K desires to escape from the world of reality and face a world of illusion without friends or family as he feels he is not a complete person in an incomplete world which does not accept

Michael K is pushed back into a very insignificant and negligible position because he is an ignorant, uneducated man. He knows nothing and does not bother to know or understand what is taking place in his own land because he has been suppressed physically, mentally and economically. In his article in the *Journal of Modern Literature* Gary Adelman quotes Coetzee saying:

The deformed and stunted relations between human beings that were created under colonialism and exacerbated under what is loosely called apartheid have their psychic representation in a deformed and stunted inner life. All expressions of that inner life, no matter how intense, no matter how pierced with exultation or despair, suffer from the same stuntedness and deformity.

The Medical Officer on analysing Michael K's position says, "No papers, no money; no family, no friends, no sense of who you are. The obscurest of the obscure, so obscure as to be a prodigy" (142). Michael K thus represents every human being who is being oppressed in the society by power and political play and who cannot express himself in his own locale of living. He is a non-entity, with no society, government, relatives and even nature that shows the least recognition or acceptance.

One aspect of Michael K's elusiveness is his silence and he acknowledges that he "lives in silence" (182). His grasp of language is tenuous and his harelip makes him unable to "talk like everyone else" (131). His language itself "has become as disorganized and empty as the war – torn city" (127) opines Mark Hawthorne. When he was a child watching his mother work and in Huis Norenius, Michael K was silent. Thus, Michael K's silence has grown to be silence in the face of disregard, rejection and/or oppression. This simple man is deceptively heroic in his challenge against dictatorial regimentation and, thus, his elusiveness establishes a simulated zone which is beyond the control of discipline. He does not express himself and is like an "unbearing, unborn creature" (135), comments the Medical Officer. On being interrogated by the Medical Officer and the Major, "There was a silence so dense . . . a silence of the kind one experiences in mine shafts, cellars, bomb shelters, airless places" (140).

Failure of language is yet another undercurrent that pervades people who are kept within bonds and limits. Michael K is not a good user of language because of his physical disability: "he had a hare lip. The lip curled like a snail's foot, the left nostril gaped" (3). He does not communicate

much and can stay for days without even uttering a word to himself. Whenever he speaks or utters a sound, people would look at his disabled mouth and this hurts him. So Michael K avoids having friends or human companions completely. Because of his disfigurement and because his mind is not quick, Michael K feels mortified and does not have any friends. “He was easiest when he was by himself” (4).

The silence is all pervasive engulfing both the humans and the non humans alike. “He could understand that people should have retreated here and fenced themselves with miles and miles of silence . . . he wondered whether there were not forgotten corners and angles and corridors between the fences, land that belonged to no one yet” (47).

Nothingness may be used as a device for escapism. In spite of having been ordered off the veld, Michael K reenters it and finds himself in a vast empty land where he imagines himself living the rest of his life in a state of nothingness. A similar moment occurs when he is in a cave in the mountains, having escaped from the Visagie grandson “Now, in front of his cave, he sometimes locked his fingers behind his head, closed his eyes, and emptied his mind, wanting nothing, looking forward to nothing” (69). The Medical Officer on analyzing Michael K regards him as a person who knows nothing, who does nothing and who does not bother about anything. Michael K is not a demanding person and does not bother about himself and what goes on around him because his life and the situations around him have stifled him and prevented his normal growth and development. There is emptiness all over very severely experienced. The landscape is empty all around and Michael K sees “mile after mile of bare and neglected vineyards circled over by crows” (41).

Michael K eventually escapes from the camp, and in the last section returns to Cape Town where he had tried to escape from, thus revealing that full fledged salvation is yet to come. Finding no security and life in Cape Town, Michael K and Anna K had escaped to Prince Albert hoping to find refuge away from the war-infested town. Unfortunately, the countryside had not provided him with asylum. His return to Cape Town is symbolic in the sense that the cycle of his movement is complete but of no use. His mother’s residence at Cape Town is in shambles and Michael K is again at where he started – destitute, bleak and hopeless.

Michael K achieves the pastoral ideal of “living off the land” and sympathizes with its pursuit of silence. It is ironical that this rural bequest of silence has been blazed into loud and noisy political oppression of which Michael K is a victim. The landscape offers no bond and no humanizing dimensions; it is silent, empty and a place where nothing happens. Derek Wright says, “the topography lends itself to no myths, offers no mystical bond or blood – intimacy, and altogether lacks human dimensions, being not merely silent but empty – a place where nothing happens. Coetzee’s Cape gardener, faced with the harsh, inhospitable earthscapes of the Karoo . . . feels himself assuming the character of the bare mineral scrubland” (*MFS* 436). Michael K finds life devoid of real meaning. His is the story of a human searching for himself and his purpose on the earth.

Michael K’s birth, job and life in general seem meaningless and it is in the midst of nature that he searches for the real meaning of life and his purpose of existence on the earth. So,



he literally goes underground, leaving no trace of himself. He is ploughed back into the earth like a fallen seed as he had thought it would be “better to burry myself in the bowels of the earth” (106). Coetzee consciously diminishes Michael K into something small and associated with nature. Gilbert Yeoh in his article “J. M. Coetzee and Samuel Beckett: Nothingness, Minimalism and Indeterminacy” comments:

K’s minimal being is further underscored by Coetzee’s use of metaphors connoting smallness. He is variously referred to as “a little man” (129), “a pebble” (135), “an insect” (135), “an ant” (83), “a termite”(66), “ a little speck” (97), “a mouse” (136), “a snail” (112), “a parasite dozing in the gut” (116) and “an earthworm” (182). (129)

Michael K assumes his present landscape’s vacant and dormant condition and feels aged. Earth has become his element and is a constant touchstone and referent for his existence. He feels “like an ant that does not know where its hole is,” (83). When removed from the garden to the camp, he burrows, plants and hides in the earth. He even carries his mother’s ashes to the part where she came from. He also eats only what he has laboured and planted. His relationship with the land becomes one of filiality. He considers his seedling children growing into a family of sisters and brothers, the fruits of his mother earth. “He lay thinking of these poor second children of his beginning their struggle upward through the dark earth toward the sun.”(101) and displays a material concern for them, worrying that “he had not provided well” (101) for them “stroking [their] smooth shells” (113). When the donkeys destroy his plants, he feels “like a woman whose children have left the house” (111).

The backdrop of the novel *Life and Times of Michael K* as well as the neglected and isolated self of the protagonist has many things in common. Both experience emptiness, loneliness and dryness. The pangs of Michael K get heightened and intensified in a setting that never understands human sufferings nor offer any solace. All his hopes to turn back to mother earth are shattered as even the plants he wanted to cultivate fail to be a source of support or sustenance. The dismal landscape is the material evidence of man’s gradual undoing of himself and of his reductive existence. Coetzee presents nature and the locale not merely as reflecting the inner being of the humans but as one that plays no comforting role in times of distress.

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