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Michael K. of J.M. Coetzee: A Primitive Man in a Complex World

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Abstract:

This paper entitled, **Michael K. of J.M. Coetzee : A Primitive Man in a Complex World** is based on J.M. Coetzee's novel *Life and Times of Michael K*(1983). It is a work of fiction awarded with the prestigious Man Booker Prize in 1983. In the character of Michael K., J.M. Coetzee has created a creature of nature, a natural farmer, primitive in aspect who is often confounded by the complexity of the world around him. Michael K. believes in leading a simple life in conformity with nature. These characteristics of Michael K are unlike that of any 'Civilized' man who is principally concerned with hoarding more and more material goods for his living, often plundering the natural resources of the earth and thereby depleting nature of its beauty as well as bounty.

The primitive traits in the personality of Michael K show orientation towards Ecocentrism which is opposed to Anthropocentrism. While Anthropocentrism stresses on the autocratic rule of the human species over all other forms of life leading to destruction of the natural environment, Ecocentrism is primarily focused on presenting the dignity of human life while living in harmony with nature and preserving the delicate balance existing in the ecosystem.

Keywords: Primitive, hoarding, plundering, Ecocentrism, Anthropocentrism, Autocratic rule.

The word 'primitive' means lack of civilization, a simplicity of aspect, a tribal not used to the ways of the world, or a person lacking any formal training.

'Primitiveness' also denotes naivety or it may be related to an original or earlier stage of development, also called as primeval. Crudeness and uncivilized state is also referred to as 'Primitive.'

A 'primitive' man is different from a 'civilized man' in many respects. Some of his attributes make him superior to a city-dweller while in some ways he is at a disadvantage if at all a comparison is drawn between the two.

The primitive man is characterized by the presence of exceptional visual acuity, remarkable power of hearing, an instinctive ability to adjust to the natural environment, which obviously is due to his vast knowledge of his environment.

Being quite adept at interpreting natural signs, a primitive man is endowed with the power to reconstruct very complex pictures of happenings based on the faintest of track. The acuity of the senses in a primitive man is often the result of practice ; the city-dweller being deficient in acute sensory perceptions due to lack of practice or living a life in enclosed surroundings.

When compared to the civilized man, the primitive man is rather helpless due to his inability to perform complex calculations, cogitation and recollections. All these failings of the uncivilized man make the civilized man to associate a primitive man with a 'child' or an 'animal'.

The language of a primitive man is crude, less developed and he does not know how to express himself abstractly, or in a conventional manner compared to the sophisticated language of a city - dweller, a so-called civilized man.

Since primitive man lives in intimate contact with nature, his activities are determined to a great extent on natural phenomenon such as changes from light to darkness and vice - versa and the changes due to seasons. The diurnal, lunar and seasonal cycles all have their effects on the physical and mental functioning of man, more so on a primitive man who depends on nature for his day to day existence.

With reference to the article entitled '*Man's Nature-Innate Determinants of Response to Natural Environments*' by B.L. Driver and Peter Greene, the given quotation is worth noticing :

A distinguishing characteristic of man's evolution is his ability to think, remember and predict what will happen to him. The premise is that man needs a certain amount of familiarity with, or knowledge about his surroundings, before he can function efficiently in them. Therefore, before man can "enjoy" natural environments compatible with his nature, he must have a necessary level of familiarity with or understanding of his environment.

In the light of the above statement by B.L. Driver and Peter Greene, it is apparent that the character named Michael K. of J.M. Coetzee's novel *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983) is endowed by nature with an inherent capacity to adjust to his natural surroundings which is very similar to the knack of a primitive man who is so much a part of nature that his existence can not be segregated from any of the other constituents of the natural environment.

As a primitive man, Michael K has certain characteristics of body and mind, which distinguish him from a civilized man of his times.

Michael K is born in poverty in a suburb of Cape Town. His oddity of appearance is a hare-cleft mouth and a feeble mind unable to learn things easily. His appearance is not at all pleasing, in fact abhorring so much that even his mother keeps him away from herself and other people of the neighbourhood and she institutionalizes him to the care of Huis Norenus, where he is trained to be a gardener as he is capable of nothing else due to the simplicity of his demeanour. He is a natural farmer, capable of producing bounteous crops from nature, without the least damage to the environment.

As a son, he is emotionally attached to his mother although she had more or less abandoned him, assigning him to an institution to care for him. She calls him only when she is totally helpless, incapacitated due to illness and old age. However, Michael K never looks for nor finds any fault in his mother's nature. He is determined to serve her till his last breath. In his service to his mother, he seems to have discovered his meaning of life, his motive and purpose to exist in the complex world he is born into.

Michael K is like a child or an animal but very unlike a person of the contemporary world. He is freedom - loving. He hates to be commanded and confined within boundaries of the complex world of his times. He is never too tired of his loneliness, in fact relishes every

moment spent is solitary existence. After his mother's death, he roams around aimlessly in the town, unable to understand the norms of the civilized world. However, he is an independent, self-sufficient individual. He does not require that the world should fulfil his meagre needs. The barest of necessities are sufficient to satisfy his conditions of subsistence.

Michael K is a person whose sole concern in life is to attain freedom; liberation from circumstances which limit his movement and conduct. He revolts against bondage and manages to flee from every place which demands orderly and well-settled ways of living. He is prepared to live a life of utter poverty and deprivation, even misery, but not a life of slavery. He earnestly longs for his freedom and is ready to give up all comforts for being in a state of freedom. Like a caged bird, his soul yearns for freedom and he relinquishes every tie with the civilized world, in order to lead a self-sufficient, and totally free life amidst natural surroundings living from moment to moment each day.

He is a born farmer, knowing very well how to grow his food without upsetting the natural balance of the environment. He could pass his days with perfect peace of mind, without any kind of need of interaction with society. His body and mind adjust to the natural environment with the barest minimum of goods. He firmly believes that "a human being should live so that he leaves no trace of his living."

He finds his niche in gardening, never longing for interaction with human society, he is totally comfortable with the lonely and desolate life he leads on his farm at Prince Albert. Days, weeks and months slip by smoothly for him without causing as much as a ripple of disturbance in his solitary life on the farm. Like a primitive man, he is hardly ever in the grip of boredom.

Regarding the characteristic of a primitive Hottentot tribal, J.M. Coetzee's character in the novel *Dusklands* remarks quite appropriately :

Boredom is a sentiment not available to the Hottentot, it is a sign of higher humanity (42).

Michael K is much like an animal, mute and not willing to share his thoughts and feelings. Whenever jilted out of his muteness, he utters the most incomprehensible words. His silence makes him a non-entity in the complex human world surrounding him.

He is a gifted gardener, a hardworking farmer who tends to his plants lovingly, nurturing them like a mother and succeeding in bringing forth healthy offspring from his 'well-cared' for plants. He believes in conserving water, saves every drop of it. His life among plants shows his care for nature. He does not believe in disturbing the natural environment to even the least extent, to gain any benefits out of the depleted mother earth. His own life is one which expects the least of things for himself. Material comforts are not cherished by him ; a life of luxury holds no charms for him. His needs are paltry and his existence is inconspicuous in the world.

The attitude of the world towards him is one of abhorrence and neglect. People shirk him and treat him with contempt. Wherever he goes, he is taken advantage of, considered a non-entity and ill – treated. Nevertheless, Michael K cares not a straw for worldly gains. All he ever dreams of is a life in the lap of nature. His life on the Prince Albert farm was the happiest he had ever lived. On this farm he was a self-sufficient farmer, independent and free from bondage.

The personality of Michael K shows orientation towards Ecocentrism which is environment-oriented approach to living. This is against Anthropocentrism that is human-centred approach which focuses on the exploitation of natural resources at the cost of precious ecological balance.

A relevant quotation from *A Handbook of Literary Terms* by M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, wherein the terms Anthropocentrism and Ecocentrism have been discussed meaningfully is as follows :

Some environmental critics maintain that the ecological crisis can only be resolved by the rejection, in the West, of the Judeo-Christian religion and culture, with its anthropocentric view that human beings, because they possess souls, transcend nature and are inherently masters of the nonhuman world, and by adopting instead an ecocentric religion which promulgates the sacredness of nature and a reverence for all forms of life as intrinsically equivalent (84).

Thus, Michael K. is a primitive individual with the inherent capability to live successfully in natural surroundings. He is aloof from the civilized norms, finding it complex and uninteresting to interact with. He is freedom-loving and self-willing like an animal in the wild. Possessing an acute sense of perception, he can predict natural phenomenon and is very well-adjusted to the natural environment. In the character of Michael K, J.M. Coetzee succeeds in creating a person with primitive attributes who is in a way, spiritually superior to any so called 'civilized man', a man of civilized society whose greed exceeds far beyond his needs, who plunders the natural resources at the detriment of mother earth, causing irreparable damage to nature. Michael K's life is appreciable, an instance of peaceful coexistence in nature, not without worthy lessons for the civilized man who may profit immensely by emulating some of his primitive traits.

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