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Michael's Search for Identity and Belongingness in J. M. Coetzee's novel *Life & Times of Michael K*

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ABSTRACT: J. M. Coetzee's novel *Life & Times of Michael K* is thought-provoking and addresses complex issues in a politically charged setting. The novel represents Michael K as a physically and mentally challenged man, as he navigates a war-torn South Africa. It delves into his struggle for survival and his determination to live on his terms. Coetzee uses Michael's journey to comment on the socio-political landscape of apartheid-era South Africa. The novel raises questions about the oppressive government and the impact of war on individuals. The novel *Life & Times of Michael K* is a thought-provoking novel that addresses complex issues in a politically charged setting. The search for identity and a sense of belongingness is the central theme of this novel, and it is depicted through the character of Michael K. His journey highlights the search for identity and a sense of belonging in a society that rejects those who don't conform to its norms. The novel critiques the dehumanizing aspects of bureaucracy and government institutions, as Michael faces numerous obstacles and humiliations while trying to secure a pass to move freely. This research paper explores the tension between individual freedom and societal expectations, as Michael's simple desires clash with the demands of a rigidly controlled society. His struggle underscores the challenges faced by individuals who do not conform to societal expectations. It portrays the resilience and inner strength required to assert one's identity in the face of a society that often rejects or marginalizes those who are different.

KEY WORDS: Racism, Discourse, Identity crisis, Bureaucracy, Alienation.

INTRODUCTION

The novel *Life & Times of Michael K* is considered to be the fourth novel written by J. M. Coetzee which was published in 1983. The novel has been awarded the Britain's Booker Prize and Jerusalem Prize for the Freedom of the Individual in Society. The novel, *Life & Times of Michael K*, deals with human conditions in South African society more particularly with the protagonist's quest for meaning in life. Atwell describes the novel as, "a novel about a subject who, miraculously, lives through the trauma of South Africa in a state of civil war without being touched by it" (Attwell 1). The novel reveals the life of the protagonist Michael K and the events that took place in his life. The search for identity and a sense of belonging in society is a central theme, and it is depicted through the character of Michael K. Michael is born with physical and mental challenges, making him different from the norm in society. He is born with a harelip and other health issues, which affect his appearance and ability to speak. His appearance and abilities set him apart and make it difficult for him to fit in. These physical challenges lead to self-consciousness and difficulties in asserting his identity. He has no father; his mother has been working in people's houses as a maid. Michael lives a largely isolated life, especially at the beginning of the novel. He resides in a rural area, far removed from the urban society that often marginalizes people like him. He is marginalized due to both his physical disabilities and his black race.

His speech impediments make it challenging for Michael to express himself and communicate with others. This hinders his ability to connect and assert his identity effectively. This isolation amplifies his sense of being an outsider. Michael is being represented as a failure which raises the question of survival in a world that is torn by world war. The novels tend to pose questions such as the reason for his entry into this world, why he shows indifference towards the opposite gender, the reason behind his engaging in more and more disturbed sleep for an adversely long duration, surviving by consuming the beetle-flowers-larvae of grasshoppers-roots, living as a beast, losing passion for life, refusing typical food which is needed for living a life of a human being. Coetzee depicts Michael's views in this way,

What a pity that to live in times like these a man must be ready to live like a beast. A man who wants to live cannot live in a house with lights in the windows. He must live in a hole and hide by day. A man must live so that he leaves no trace of living. That is what it has come to. (LTMK 99)

Michael's status in the world is bizarre, which is described by the physician in the novel, who says about him: "*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*" (LTMK 142). Michael's condition was very pitiful and he has been trying to gain his freedom through gardening in the novel.

The novel has been narrated from the view of three narrators. The first and the third chapters are recited from the point of view of an unspecified narrator and the second chapter is told from the perspective of a medical officer. Michael has been represented as an individual who is very simple and does not possess high thoughts about himself. The medical officer in Kenilworth describes Michael as, an ordinary, simple, and slow-witted man who is incapable of articulating his state of emotions explicitly: "*He is a poor helpless soul who has been permitted to wander out onto the battlefield*" (LTMK 141). At Huis Norenius, a school, where children like Michael were kept for the development of their mental and physical health, but instead, the very first rule of the school has been mentioned: "*There will be silence in dormitories at all times*" (Sarker 84). The music that has been played in the school has contributed to their insanity instead of calming and soothing the children's minds. This also contributed to Michael's different behaviour from the others and led him to the extent of half insanity. When the medical officer asked about Michael's condition, he delivered his speech, "*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*" (LTMK 133). Now Michael's first desire was his freedom, he left the company of the "grandson of Visage" who starts treating him like his servant. Instead, he opts for farming because farming is the only profession or way that can help him achieve his freedom. His refusal to conform to societal norms, such as obtaining a pass to travel freely, illustrates his desire to assert his identity and live by his principles. His resistance to authority reflects his determination to define himself on his terms. Throughout the novel, Michael finds solace and purpose in his relationship with the natural world. His gardening efforts and connection to the land provide him with a sense of belonging and identity that transcends societal norms. His journey to reunite with his ailing mother becomes a central aspect of his quest for belonging. His deep love and dedication to caring for his mother highlight his desire for familial provide a familial sense of identity. After the death of his mother, he has been least affected by the things happening around him and with himself. As Coetzee says, "*He did not believe that any harm would come to him; and if it should come, it would not matter.*" (LTMK 34). Michael's mother was everything to him, and that's why he remains as a living dead after she has passed away. However, his actions and choices reflect a strong sense of humanitarianism and compassion. He provides aid to others in need, demonstrating his commitment to a set of values that define his identity, even in a society marked by cruelty and indifference. In a country like South Africa, racism has almost destroyed the blacks and the colonized people's identity and left them to alienation and dislocation. Racism is not just an ideology it is a system of discriminating against people based on colour, creed, and culture by leaving them to torn pieces and snatching their identity and sense of belongingness. R. Miles and Malcolm Brown in their book *Racism Pine, state that,*

The problem, then concerning racism as an ideology is the implication that racism distortedly represents human beings and the social relations between human beings, especially in terms of 'race' and this undermines attempts to create a 'race' consciousness among the victims of racism. (Brown and Miles 7)

The colonial oppressions have deeply influenced Michael's life and psyche and are a complex issue in the novel. While the novel doesn't excavate into Michael's internal thoughts, it provides insights into how colonialism has shaped his experiences and worldview. Michael is born in a society marked by apartheid, a system of institutionalized racial segregation and discrimination. As a person with physical and mental challenges, he is already marginalized within this system. Colonialism and apartheid further isolate and displace him, exacerbating his sense of alienation and powerlessness. He was unable to communicate with people around him as colonial oppressions and racial brutalities had severe effects on his psyche. Ashcroft, Bill, et al. in their work *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* claims that,

Discourse is important because it joins power and knowledge together. Those who have the power have control of what is known and the way it is known, and those who have such knowledge have power over those who do not. This link between knowledge and power is particularly important in the relationship between colonizers and colonized. (Ashcroft 72)

Michael's attempts to navigate the bureaucracy of the colonial government, such as obtaining a pass to move freely, expose him to the dehumanizing effects of colonial rule. He faces discrimination, indifference, and humiliation at the hands of the bureaucratic machinery, which can lead to feelings of frustration and despair. His decision to leave the urban environment and retreat to the rural countryside can be seen as a rejection of the oppressive urban colonial society. His choice to live off the land reflects a desire to distance himself from the harmful effects of colonialism, seeking solace in a simpler, more natural existence. However, this isolation comes with its challenges, as he must fend for himself and find purpose in a solitary existence. Michael's resistance to authority figures and his refusal to conform to societal norms can be interpreted as a form of psychological resistance against colonial oppression. His determination to live on his terms represents a rejection of the colonial power structure and an assertion of his own agency. As he often feels powerless in a world where people like him are disenfranchised and dismissed. His refusal to obey these regulations puts him in direct conflict with the authorities. Throughout his journey, Michael lacks the support and understanding of society, particularly from those in positions of authority. This lack of support makes it even more challenging for him to navigate the intricacies of gaining identity. Throughout the novel, Michael exhibits a strong sense of compassion and humanity. His actions, such as caring for his sick mother and helping others in need, can be seen as a response to the dehumanizing aspects of colonialism. These acts reflect a form of resistance against the dehumanization inherent in colonial systems. His bond with his mother is a central aspect of his identity crisis. His dedication to caring for her reveals his willingness to define himself about his role as a caregiver.

The alienation and displacement play a vital role in reshaping Michael's life in the novel. These themes profoundly affect his character and his actions throughout the novel. His physical and mental challenges set him apart from society. His appearance and abilities make him an outsider, leading to a sense of alienation from the very beginning of his life. This physical alienation shapes his identity and his interactions with the world. Michael's decision to leave the urban environment and retreat to the rural countryside reflects a deliberate choice to distance himself from the oppressive urban society. This rural isolation reshapes his life by providing him with a sanctuary where he can be self-reliant and live on his terms. In the countryside, Michael's isolation necessitates self-sufficiency. He started leading his life as a gardener and to a great extent, finally, he found his real position in the world. He asserts that "...the truth, the truth about me. *I am a gardener*" (LTMK 181). He assumes his garden as his heaven, and he scatters the ashes of his late mother on the uncultivated farm, as he desires her mother's blessings and love. He has been working there without any greed or desire. Whatever he cultivates and grows, admires it as beneficial for himself and for the whole social beings as well. He learns to survive by growing his food and relying on his resourcefulness. This experience turns him into a more independent and self-reliant individual, in contrast to the dependency often imposed on marginalized people in a colonial society. His fate once again got reversed and brought him in front of the police officers and they got him arrested again. Michael does not lose hope after the police carry off all his vegetables and fruits. He said, "*What grows is for all of us. We are all the children of the earth*" (LTMK). Coetzee compares Michael with the eternal plantsmen-Christ; Michael's vegetation abolishes the destructive power in a very cordial way. Michael says that his mother is not dead she is always with him as she has unified herself with Mother Nature. He affirms that "*139She makes the plants grow*" (LTMK 130). Michael is aware of the instability of the civil war and he is conscious of the incentives behind it, "...because enough men had gone off to war saying the time for gardening was when the war was over; whereas there must be men to stay behind and keep gardening alive." (LTMK 109). Throughout the novel, Michael is empty of any true human-relationship. He creates a sense of belonging for himself by doing the work of gardening. In the novel, there is no sort of strong bond of human relationships between the people so, at the one stage, he indicates to his

pumpkins and melons as his adoring and closest relatives. It has been cleared by his gardening that he is no more a slave or a prisoner through the line in the novel “*He was not a prisoner or a castaway, his life by the dam was not a sentence that he had to serve out.*” (LTMK 115). This germinating kernel of freedom makes Michael rebel and rebel against the bureaucracy of the state peacefully.

Coetzee portrays the condition of people’s life in the camp which depicts a gloomy image of the state-approved cruelty and exploitation. In the camp, all the amenities and requirements are strictly examined by the state bureaucrats. At the end of the week, a priest came to the camp to harmonize the prayer facility and Michael figures out this act of state as a clarified way of fraud and deception against its low-grade public. Michael’s companion told him, “*You’ve been asleep all your life. It’s time to wake up. Why do you think they give you charity, you and the children? Because they think you are harmless, your eyes aren’t opened you don’t see the truth around you*” (LTMK 88-89). Michael’s refusal to conform to bureaucratic norms imposed by the colonial government, such as obtaining a pass, demonstrates his determination to reject the systems that have alienated and displaced him. In the camp, the people were called as a nest of parasites, “*...a nest of parasites hanging from the neat sunlit town, eating its substance, giving no nourishment back*” (LTMK 116). There’s a very minor disinterest between a parasite and a host; to a greater extent powerful has dominances and can easily reverse the position, “*Perhaps in truth whether the camp was declared a parasite on the town or the town a parasite on the camp depended on no more than on who made his voice heard loudest.*” (LTMK 116)

The non-conformity rebuilt Michael’s life by allowing him to assert his agency and autonomy. His bond with the natural world during his time in the rural countryside reorganizes his life by providing him with a sense of purpose and belonging. His gardening efforts and connection to the land become a source of solace and identity, counteracting the alienation he experiences from human society. His relationship with his sick mother is another aspect influenced by alienation. His dedication to caring for her in her time of need reshapes his life by providing him with a sense of purpose and love amidst a society that often rejects him.

J. M. Coetzee does not explicitly provide his views on Michael’s search for identity and sense of belongingness within the novel. Coetzee is known for his minimalist and indirect narrative style, often leaving readers to interpret the characters and their motivations. However, through the novel itself, Coetzee can be seen exploring these themes and allowing readers to draw their conclusions. Coetzee’s works often delve into complex and morally ambiguous situations, inviting readers to reflect on the human condition and societal issues. Coetzee’s writing style is minimalistic and straightforward, mirroring Michael’s simple and direct approach to life. This minimalism allows readers to feel the starkness of Michael’s world and his sense of isolation. Coetzee’s portrayal of Michael K’s struggle for identity and belonging can be seen as a commentary on the broader human experience. He may not provide explicit views but rather leaves it to the readers to consider the challenges faced by individuals who do not conform to societal norms and how they navigate their own paths to self-discovery and belonging. The readers are encouraged to interpret the novel and Coetzee’s intentions in their way, drawing insights and conclusions from the narrative and the characters’ experiences.

CONCLUSION

Michael K’s search for identity and belonging emphasizes the challenges faced by individuals who do not conform to societal expectations, especially in the context of a society marked by discrimination and oppression. His journey serves as a reflection on the complexities of personal identity and how external forces can shape and challenge one’s sense of self. His quest for identity and sense of belonging portrays the resilience and inner strength required to assert one’s identity in the face of a society that often rejects or marginalizes those who are different. While, the novel *Life & Times of Michael K* doesn’t clearly dissect Michael’s psyche, it portrays how colonialism, particularly through the lens of apartheid, shapes his experiences and influences his actions. Michael’s journey can be seen as a subtle critique of the dehumanizing effects of colonialism on individuals and their efforts to find autonomy and meaning in a hostile environment. The alienation and displacement forces Michael to adapt, find resilience, and seek meaning outside of the oppressive societal structures that have marginalized him. His experiences in isolation, rejection of norms, and connection to nature reconstruct his life in profound ways, allowing him to carve out a unique existence on his terms. Coetzee’s accomplished use of narrative techniques and the character of Michael K allow him to effectively represent the themes of identity and isolation in the novel. Through Michael K’s experiences and struggles, readers are prompted to reflect on the human condition and how societal structures can both define and isolate individuals. All the problems collectively shape Michael K’s journey as he seeks to understand himself and assert his identity in a society that is often hostile and indifferent to those who deviate from the norm. His struggles and challenges make his quest for identity and a sense of belongingness a central and poignant theme in the novel.

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