

AN ECOCRITICAL ANALYSES OF COETZEE'S *LIFE & TIMES OF MICHAEL K*

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**Abstract:**

*All living things are interconnected to each other. All should be treated equally. This relation between human and nature is beyond explanation. The entire living creature in this world has their own importance, when humans start to forget this natural destruction occurs. But when nature is being hampered by humans by considering themselves above it, nature plays silent upon this treatment. This study aims to prove that Michael K is a representative of the colonized who can be equated with the environment which is thought to be inferior to humans. The treatment of both the nature and a colonized subject are parallel. Coetzee in a broader way states that every organism in the universe should be treated equally and no other living thing are lesser to anyone. This article also analyses Michael K as the representation of the deeds that humans do to nature.*

**Keywords:** *parallel b/w nature and colonized subject, colonial prejudice, eco criticism*

J. M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K* is informed by a rich and early ecological vision that has not been sufficiently well thought-out so far. It is said that Coetzee shows an interest in all living organisms and pays attention to their environment and interaction. It is noted that Coetzee's vision is not limited to humans and that he also talked that minor forms of life like plants and animals are as significant as human life on earth. The result is that the "non-human other" is never ignored in Coetzee, which testifies to the importance of a broad philosophical vision that acknowledges rather than counts difference. This paper, hence, makes a connection between Coetzee's ecological vision and his attention to otherness. Also explores and defends an often underplayed theme in Coetzee's fiction, namely gardening. In Coetzee's vision, plants and landscapes are unjustifiably ignored and exploited in times of political rivalry, which accounts for Coetzee's eco critical relevance.

*Life and Times of Michael K*, an extremely bleak novel characterized by its semi-anonymous protagonist' dim and unprofitable knowledge of the apartheid and the war-riven landscape in which he lives. In the novel we came close to one of Coetzee's most singular and controversial characters, Michael K, who in the middle of a civil war badly affecting South Africa retires to an abandoned farm in Prince Albert and tries to live a lonely existence as a gardener. His non-appropriative and non-penetrative relation to the land, his idle lifestyle and his refusal to become a servant, together with his continuous escapes from the confinements and control can be read as the inherent rebellious nature of the South African pastoral tradition.

The camps of *Life & Times of Michael K* clearly stand for its disciplinary distribution and enclosure of individual in space, reminding the 'homeland' created by the National Party government in the apartheid period. The world of this novel is full of homeless and wandering people who are assigned a place to live suggesting to the South African government policy of resettlement during the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s and in the novel it is said like "There were already scores of people queuing under the sign HERVESTING- RELOCATION"(Coetzee 19). Michael realizes that no one is allowed to stand aside from what he been trying to escape, the disciplinary confinement:

Now they have camps for children whose parents run away, camps for people who kick and

foam at the mouth, camps for people with big heads, camps for people with no visible means of support, camps for people chased off the land, camps for people they find living in storm-water drains, camps for street girls, camps for people who can't add two and two, camps for people who forget their papers at home, camps for people who live in mountains and blow up bridges in the night. (182)

K, however was able to resist this control of the territory, enforced through the camps and fences spreading through the South African geography.

K has a physical deformity that is his harelip. This gives him difficulty in articulation it strongly suggests that he is part of the black race. “[F]unctional inarticulacy, in the South African context, is a readymade mark of racial identification” (Wright 442). Moreover, while growing up, he was surrounded by troubled, unhealthy children and often laughed at because of his handicap. Also, “because of his face, he did not have women friends” (Coetzee 4). In general, K is part of a marginal group in society, through his racial identity, or otherwise through his physical deformity. K is a particularly interesting character because he is part of a marginal group of people, and has a strong desire for nature and connection to the idea of living life as a cultivator of the earth. This life as a cultivator begins, when he discover a deserted farm. “In the space of a week he cleared the land near the dam and restored the system of furrows that irrigated it. Then he planted a small patch of pumpkins and a small patch of mealies; and some... he planted his bean, so that if it grew it could climb into the thorn trees” (59). He also buries the ashes of his mother in the ground and feels his mother has reached where she will not be discriminated anymore. In fact, he associates his mother with the earth. Coetzee uses the idea of mother earth to connect the idea of caring for something, namely K's mother by burying the ashes of his natural mother, to caring for a “cosmic one”, namely mother earth (Rao 7).

In fact, throughout the book, K attends the earth. He trusts that gardening is an inborn talent in him. When K stays on the farm, it becomes his earnest wish to re-establish natural resources. He repairs the dam, for example, in order to restore “the flow of water from the earth” (Coetzee 60) also, he takes pleasure in gardening. However, the organic life that he lives is disturbed by the interference of other people on the ground that he cultivates. In reality, Michael is driven off the farmland, but he maintains his sense of freedom by fleeing to the mountains. Thus, K suffers from the movement and rule of the powerful, those that invade the farm he lives on. Without any doubt, he develops feelings of resistance against the colonization of the space he lives in. In many ways this parallels how the government, during apartheid, managed land in South Africa, and they determined where people could live and where not. K needs official papers, permits, to move from place to place and because he was coloured he had to wait eternally to gain these permits which forced him to travel without any of the legal documents. K must negotiate police barricades, forcible assignment as a part of railway labour gang, and detention in various government camps and hospitals. These experiences of confinement and discrimination allow for the interrogation of the right to land-ownership and division. This again parallels how the government in South Africa during apartheid controlled inferiors. The government's land management often stood in the way of the blacks' sense of freedom.

K's sense of freedom is threatened when the grandson of Visagie, the owner, appears on the farm, in which he was living peacefully emerged with nature. The grandson himself as “boss Visagie's grandson” (60), and suddenly shows up and reclaims the farm, as it were. He also tries to make Michael a servant and confine him in his laws of living. Michael has to now share the land he thought “belonged to no one yet” (47). Thus this piece of land is not without a “claim of ownership” (Rao 3). However both K and Visagie's grandson has a particular ancestral connection to the land. Since K is considered black, his ancestors probably lived on the land before colonizers took over land of blacks in South Africa, if *The Life & Times of Michael K* is compared to the situation in South Africa. At the same, Visagie, the grandfather and owner of the farm bought it, so also the grandfather has right to the farm. Because both men have a particular right to

the land, or so it seems, essentially it is difficult to determine who has *more* right to the land. In South Africa, in fact, before the advent of the majority rule, pieces of land were not accessible to all races, or all people in South Africa. Who could lay claim to land often had to do with the position one held in society. Some did not have opportunity to a particular piece of land because of their race or ethnicity. Racist zoning laws were particular for the South African context during the apartheid. As a result black and coloured communities couldn't own land.

The direct problem lies in the encounter between the two men. They relate differently to the land. Though the grandson says that "the two of us will manage" (Coetzee 63), Michael is unable to trust him, because of the grandson's way of relating to the farmland. Michael thought the farm for the Visagie boy might be "A soldier without a gun. A boy on an adventure. To him the farm is just a place of adventure" (63). K greatly values the piece of land and finds joy in cultivating it, though he cultivates the land out of the necessity of feeding himself. The Visagie grandson, on the other hand, expresses rather depreciative words when he comments the farmland to be a wasteful "adventure".

In fact, the grandson does not recognize the value of K's care for the land. K with all his heart and effort has made the dry, infertile soil fertile again. However, it is as if the grandson interrupts Michael's agricultural efforts, in a way. He eagerly eats of Michael's crop, "like a hungry boy", but as a result, "there was not enough for both of them" (61). It seems to be suggested that the grandson eats more than K, leaving one of them with less food, or hungry even. K is portrayed as a person who loves earth more than himself. For him everyone will become one with nature now or then. He feels more connected with nature and extracts pleasure from it. It is more visible in these lines in which the love for nature and his consideration of nature as his home;

He emerged into sunlight and took the track across the veld to the dam and the field where once he had scattered his mother's ashes. Every stone, every bush along the way he recognized. He felt at home at the dam as he had never felt in the house. (98-99)

More often, the needs or desires of K are not taken into consideration or not even cared and completely neglected. In fact, as seen above, besides K's agricultural efforts served the grandson of Visagie, K also has to work on land for the benefit of the powerful whom we can assume to be the whites in the camp. More specifically, when K is placed in a labor camp, which is described as a "stone-hard veld" (95), a piece of land hardly fit for agriculture, he needs to work. Initially, K strongly refuses to comply the demands that the soldiers make on him. They are unable to exploit the services of Michael as he is a gardening man not a stone worker. Michael rather desires to escape and live and work in open space. The countryside promises freedom to Michael K. When K finally complies and joins other laborers in fencing around fields of a white farmer in the countryside, the farmer (the employer) commends K's fencing skills. He even suggests that K should become a professional fencer. This is highly ironic. "[D]riving stakes in the ground, erecting fences [and] dividing up the land" (97) completely goes against K's idea of freedom. K continually wants to escape control of others. Fencing, in fact, may very well signify "the political stratification and social divisions" (17) in the apartheid system. Thus, K is resistant to work on the land the way the authorities want him to. It goes against his sense of freedom, and he is against "such negative forms of relating to the land necessitated by the political situation in the county" (Neimneh 17)

As a man interconnected with nature K is unaware of those what happens outside him and he even spends time without eating. From the house of Visagie he shifted his resting place closer to the dam because he felt at home when he is with nature;

His first step was to hollow out the sides of the crevice till it was wider at the bottom than the top, and to flatten the gravel bed. The narrower end he blocked with a heap of stones. Then he laid the three fence posts across the crevice, and upon them the iron sheet, with slabs of stone to hold it down. He now had a cave or burrow five feet deep. When he backed away towards the dam to inspect it, however his eyes at once picked out the dark hole of the

entrance. So he spent the rest of the afternoon looking for ways to disguise it. When dusk fell he realized with surprise that he had spent a second day without eating. (Coetzee 100)

Michael effortlessly works on land as if he is the favourite child of mother earth. He does not feel tiredness nor he feel hunger, all he feels is the urge to cultivate his pumpkins and to hide them from the eyes of the colonizers, “In his burrow he lay thinking of these poor second children of his beginning their struggle upward through the dark earth toward the sun. His one misgiving was that by planting them in the latter days of summer he had not provided well” (101). The colonizers who colonize people along with their land, destroys and shatters the continuum of ecology by planting explosives on the land. They never gave importance to the land or to the minority people. For them they are mere obstacles on their way of pursuing power and so they destroy them without any consideration.

Being the son of earth K spread his mother's ashes to field in which he started cultivating vegetables and by doing that he gave new birth to his mother. All must leave home and all the marks will be washed away like “Every grain of this earth will be washed clean by the rain, he told himself, and dried by the sun and scoured by the wind, before the seasons turn again” (124). K being a part of the coloured race faces many a number of difficulties throughout his life. Along with that his physical deformity also contributes to the situation. He considers himself as weak he is neglected by both his mother and society. But Michael finds serenity through gardening. Being a black neither Michael nor his mother can own any lands. Throughout their lives they remained servants to their colonial masters. These colonial masters not only sabotage the lives of the discriminated coloured people but also the lands they invade. For these whites the minorities are those from whom they can extract benefits and they don't have any personal feelings for them. They don't care if it is the blacks who are suffering or the land which is being destroyed by the explosives they implant.

K the protagonist of the novel finds solace in nature, both are being taken advantage by the overpowering whites so the treatment of both in the novel are alike. Michael trespasses to Prince Albert without any permits because he was denied or pushed away from his right of having it. During this time of civil war this trespassing of Michael K is a very offensive crime so Michael K travels through the forest hiding from the soldiers so that he could fulfill his mother's last wish of dying in her hometown. This wish of dying person is also left incomplete because of the apartheid. When Michael travels through the forest we can see that the dead branches of trees foreshadows the upcoming events in K's life. K is a child of mother earth and an instance to prove it is “When he was brought in he had a brown paper packet which he put away under his pillow. Now he has taken to holding the packet against his chest. I asked him whether it contained his *muti*. No, he said, and showed me dried pumpkin seeds” (135). He carried his mother's ashes like this which clearly shows his affection towards the children of earth. For him there is no discrimination between races nor between the living things on land “What grows is for all of us. We are all the children of the earth.” (130)

The race and other means of discrimination are all unnecessary to live in this world. Through the life of Michael K, Coetzee puts forward a model for everyone on treating Mother Nature. Because if nature turns its silence as a rebellion like that of Michael K what happens next will be much worse than anyone ever imagined. Along with that one can also see that K is as tormented as nature. Through Michael K one can see the victimization of nature. Also if humans lead a life with no care and concern for the environment he will end up in having nothing in life. No organism is lesser than any and no race is superior to any, in a broader sense the author advises to consider nature as it was for Michael K.

Ecocriticism explores the way of representing the relationship between humans and nature. Current literary critics give much importance to the ecological aspects in both literary and artistic reproductions. J. M Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K* is a brilliant work which explores the intricacies in the relationship between the protagonist Michael K and the nature in which he exists. The analysis of *Life & Times of Michael K* showcases the conflict of who possesses the land is experienced by the

protagonist. Being a black person, his right to land is undermined because of his race and other characteristics which make him part of a deprived group in society. Even though Michael K cultivated the abandoned land out of nowhere the Visagie boy comes and claims it and takes him as a servant only on the basis of his complexion.

Thus, it becomes clear how unfair it is that blacks are not allowed to own land, which is represented through Michael K who is threatened with losing his garden, while he does not even lay claim to it as he always says its "God's earth" and we all are children of the mother nature. Thus, Coetzee in his book makes an argument for how life in nature, freedom from governmental control is to be desired. The widespread environmental racism can be seen clearly in this work.

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