

# Theme of Racism in Coetzee's Life and Times of Michael K

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## Abstract

In recent days, the non-white community people of South Africa are oppressed badly in the two provinces of Cape and Natal. These two provinces were part of British empire a half century ago. Afrikaner nationalism has centered on the racial issue and started to fight against British rule. According to the imperialistic policy in South Africa the native people would be treated as human being and they are eligible to possess some basic rights. The black community people did not come under the circumstances. Afrikaner nationalism they trend to the racism. It was firmly seated in power from the first day of the Union's existence. After that, Afrikaner nationalism steadily gone to the new triumphs, irrespective of which wing of Afrikaner nationalism has been in power. So the attempt has been made in this article to explore conventional themes and ways in post-apartheid South Africa. From the black people would be stopped from the racial discrimination and injustice shown to them.

**Keywords:** Injustice, Post apartheid, Racism, South Africa, Struggle, Triumphs

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## INTRODUCTION:

Coetzee is considered to be the most influential African writer of his generation. His writings introduced readers throughout the world to the creative use of language and form of modern African life and history. Not only through his literary contributions but also through his championing of bold objectives for Africa, he has helped to reshape the perception of African history, culture, and place in the world affairs.

The story of Life & Times of Michael K is about the suffering of K's indignities and

deprivation of apartheid hardships intensified by the social disintegration of civil war. The primary narrator in the novel seems to answer the objections of those critics who had faulted Coetzee for not taking a clear political stance in his artistic writing, in the manner of his fellow South Africans such as Paton, Gordimer, and Fugard.

His novel Life and Times of Michael K is split into three parts. Michael K was born fatherless and with a disfigurement: a harelip that prevents him from being nourished at his mother's breast. His mother, Anna K does not

think of operating his disfigurement and she does not like it also. She puts him into a government institution and ignores him until she has no one in her illness. Michael is dull in school but sincere towards his duty as a son. The novel begins when Michael is 31 years old and he has to help Anna K, who is seriously ill. Formerly a gardener in Cape Town, Michael sets out to take Anna, as per her wish, to the farm of her birth in Prince Albert. It is not easy to go to Prince Albert because they need permit to move there. They do not get the permit in spite of Michael's sincere efforts.

Michael builds a cart to take Anna to Prince Albert. Anna dies in a hospital during the journey. He decides to continue his journey to Prince Albert to deliver Anna's ashes there. Along the way, he is detained for not having the required documents and is assigned to work on a railway track. After this job he makes his way to the farm as his mother spoke of Prince Albert. Though, he is not sure whether the farm belongs to his mother, he is able to discover the joy of cultivation. Unfortunately, one of the relatives of the real owners of the farm arrives and treats Michael like a servant. Michael dislikes this treatment and so he escapes into the mountains.

K doesn't actively resist his marginalization or systems of oppression through the novel. K seems to have a small sense of his social status but never discusses it. K also doesn't know much about the political climate of South Africa throughout the novel or historically. While being kept a prisoner in the labor camp Jakkalsdrif, K asks a nurse, "Tell me, I have always wanted to know, who is Prince Albert?...And who is Prince Alfred? Isn't there a Prince Alfred too?" (LTM70-71). These questions that K asks the nurse, clearly tell the reader that K is ignorant to the English

colonization of South Africa. If K doesn't know who Prince Albert is then one can also assume that he doesn't know the history of how oak trees came over to South Africa as well. Since K is so unaware of the why's and how's of the violence perpetrated against him throughout the novel, one may also assume that K isn't conscious of how his gardening resists the powers of colonialism and land theft.

K doesn't view his gardening and role as a gardener as something that actively resists systems of oppression and the oppressive South African government but, he views gardening as a necessary duty. When soldiers have arrived at the farm where K gardens towards the end of the novel, K remains in hiding. While K is in hiding, he thinks to himself, "K knew that he would not crawl out and stand up and cross from darkness into fire light to announce himself. He even knew the reason why, because enough men had gone off to war saying the time for gardening was when the war was over; there must be men to stay behind 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. That was why". (LTM109) In this passage, K informs us that he is tactically gardening. He's gardening to 'keep gardening alive' and make sure that the earth doesn't become completely dry and forget that the earth has created so much. The soldiers whom K is hiding from, have forgotten that they are the earth's children since they're participating in the civil war. The donkeys destroying the crops demonstrates that the soldiers have forgotten that plants are necessary for a thriving environment, ecosystem, and economy.

K understands the affiliation that humans have with land and fights to keep the attachment to

earth. The use of “cord” in this passage reinstates the mother/child imagery of this passage. This cord, reminiscent of an umbilical cord, suggests that once we break that cord we will be out alone on the earth without her protection anymore, much like when the umbilical cord is broken after giving birth to a child.

The soldiers, in this case, view culture and nature as mutually exclusive, whereas to K, culture and nature are indistinguishable. K criticizes the white soldiers and their culture of hunting when soldiers are looking for him near the dam. As K is being looked for, he thinks to himself of the people looking for and questions what if they're the kind of soldiers who came to shoot the goats for sport, hefty men who would hold their sides laughing at my pathetic tricks. The soldiers culture is killing the goats and laughing at K's garden, while K's culture is cultivating the earth and letting the goat roam free.

In a malnourished condition, Michael finds his way down to a town and is picked up by the police and is sent to the resettlement camp at Jakkalsdrif. The people of this camp are taken to town for work. Eventually, there is an attack on Prince Albert and the workers of the camp are blamed. Michael escapes from the camp and returns back to the farm. He builds a shelter now in the open where he is able to watch his garden. Rebels come out of the mountains and use his garden but Michael stays in hiding till they leave. Again, Michael is found by some soldiers. They suspect him for sheltering the terrorists. He is taken to a rehabilitation camp in Cape Town. At this camp, a medical officer becomes interested in Michael. For him Michael's nature is extremely simple and fascinating. He finds Michael to be badly accused of helping rebels. Michael becomes very sick as he refuses to

eat. The doctor tries to understand Michael's stubborn ways while attempting to get Michael released. Somehow, Michael escapes and returns to the apartment where his mother lived in Cape Town. The novel ends with his thoughts of farming and longing for freedom.

Thus one can sum up, there are many examples of violence in the novel. They can be studied by dividing them into two types of violence: socio-political and psychological. The novel delineates many situations of civil and military terror. The race of Michael is not mentioned in the novel. But his mother's work as a servant and Michael's suffering insist that he is not a white. He and his mother are uprooted from the peaceful life in the war-torn South Africa.

### **CONCLUSION**

The character of the novel shows a conflictive relationship with history. Michael's relationship is more complex. He unsuccessfully tries not to leave any trace of his existence in this world and resists telling his story to those who can keep a record of it and lives a life of subsistence that he can abandon anytime he wants. During the post apartheid period the black people have not been recognized as human being. Michael's mother was not shown human tendency in the hospital. But it was topsy-turvy. In the post-apartheid era the novelist Coetzee is reshaping the perception of African history, culture and place in the world affairs.

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