

The Greatness of Freedom: Michael K's Lifelong Desire to be United with the Inseparable Root in J.M Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K*

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Abstract:

*This paper critically explores some of the post-colonial experiences with the lens of the latest psychoanalytic theories. By giving a deconstructive reading of the text *Life and Times of Michael K* by J.M. Coetzee, the article relates the psychological and other troubles of the central character Michael K who lives in a post-colonial Africa, with the psychological troubles of an individual in the Lacanian 'Symbolic Order' where the child faces similar sort of alienation and emptiness after the biggest separation from its mother. To explain the experience of the endless attempt of the individual in particular and the colonized society in general to meet the unconscious that is, the desire to be in fullness of power in the imaginary world with the mother or the pre-colonial states, this paper's literary review section discusses Lacanian 'Mirror Stage,' Freudian psychoanalysis, nationalism, decolonization and existentialism and relates them with the main argument. Divided mainly into three parts, this paper firstly shows the conflicts rose following the imposition of the colonial or patriarchal rules. Then, it describes the process of the natives' turning back to the innocence or the pre-colonial state to face the trauma and finally elaborates how, when the conflicts are unresolved, the problems become unavoidable which symbolize the unending colonizer-colonized relationship as complex and frustrating.*

Key Words: *Freedom, Root, Michael K, Psychological, Colonialism.*

I

Colonialism has a complex and cruel history. Some people from overseas started to create new worlds in the distant territory of the natives. The natives found themselves alienated in the new world. The subsequent clashes between countries produced numerous drastic effects. The colonized people, however, started looking back to their root. They began celebrating their language, culture etc. This process known as decolonization has been a very complex phenomenon because once the root is broken it cannot be fully recovered and that is why the conflicts and wars remain a continuous process of frustrations. Through a different approach to post-colonial studies, this paper, with the help of psychoanalytic theory, symbolically attempts to focus on the individual struggle to achieve freedom from the Freudian father figure that is the

colonizer. By studying the most significant aspects of *Life and Times of Michael K*, this paper explores that the nostalgic utopian vision of a nation to face the effects of colonization symbolically represents one individual's struggle to return to his/her mother.

II

Because the focus of this paper is on psychoanalytical interpretation of the post-colonial struggle of the individuals to return to the imaginary homeland that is the mother, it concentrates on elaborating crucial concepts— Lacanian mirror stage, Oedipus complex, decolonization, nationalism and existentialism.

Lois Tyson's discusses Freudian psychoanalysis in *Critical theory today* which asserts that the unconscious is the storehouse of those painful experiences and emotions, those wounds, fears, guilty desires, and unresolved conflicts we do not want to know because we feel we will be overwhelmed by them. This paper represents Freudian father figures as the colonizers with whom the colonized individuals compete to win the motherland that is the mother. "Perhaps the most influential development of Freud's theories of the unconscious was made by Jacques Lacan's combination of psychoanalysis and structuralist analysis of language." (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 222) Lois Tyson, in *Critical theory today*, also discussed Lacanian psychoanalysis which asserts that at some point between six and eight months, the Mirror Stage occurs. The child now develops during this stage a sense of itself as a whole rather than a formless and fragmented mass. The Mirror Stage initiates what Lacan calls *the Imaginary Order*. It is a world of fullness, completeness, and delight: my mother is all I need and I am all my mother needs.

Lacan refers to the child's acquisition of language as its initiation into the *Symbolic Order* which involves the experience of separation from others and the biggest separation is the separation from the intimate union we experienced with our mother during our immersion in the imaginary Order. We've exited the Imaginary Order and now we inhabit a world in which others have needs, desires, and fears that limit the ways in which we can attend to our needs, desires, and fears. The first rule is the rule that Mother belongs to Father and not to me. Our desire is always the desire of the 'Other.'

Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, in *Key concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*, describes this part of Lacanian psychoanalysis saying that entering into the stage, the subject is both produced in language and subjected to the laws of the symbolic that pre-exist it. Before colonization, the natives were in the imaginary stage and the mirror stage. Then the colonization acted like the Symbolic Stage, making the mother/motherland 'the other' and the everything else as 'Other'. The colonialist discourses are like the culture and order in the symbolic stage.

John Mcleod in *Beginning post-colonialism* summarizes the myth of the nation: Nations are imagined communities. Nations evoke feelings of belonging, home and community for the people. Nations stimulate the people's sense that they are the rightful owners of a specific land. Nations place borders that separate the people "within" from different people outside.

Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, in *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*, assert that decolonization is the process of revealing and dismantling colonialist power in all its forms. Decolonization is a complex and continuing process rather than something achieved

automatically at the moment of independence. This paper focuses on the revival of the native culture in the process of decolonization.

In T.Z. Lavine's *From Socrates to Sartre: the Philosophic Quest* it is stated that 'Existentialism' is the philosophic standpoint which gives priority to existence over essence. Existentialism gives primacy to existence as a conscious subject rather than to any essence which may be assigned to me, any definition of me, any explanation of me by science or philosophy or religions or politics. The other existentialist themes are anxiety, absurdity, nothingness, death and alienation. For Jean-Paul Sartre, conscious being has freedom from objects and from the casually determined world. It has power of negation. It has total freedom in its own existence and total responsibility for own world.

III

Conflicts in the post colonial and symbolic Stage

This chapter finds out the elements from J.M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K*, to show how the colonization and its legacy with discourses and oppression, break down the mental stability of the native individuals and make them feel inferior and undergo existentialist crisis. This analysis would reveal, how colonialism and its aftermaths are related to the Lacanian symbolic order and Freudian authoritative father figure.

Though never explicitly mentioned, the apartheid started a series of crisis in the life of Michael K and Anna K. As the child becomes restless after losing its control like in the territory of the imaginary state, Anna K and Michael K have to face the symbolic order which has destroyed the harmony existed in the preliminary stage. Anna K's happiest experiences in Prince Albert come several times in her memory which ignites her desire to leave the war for a better living. Micheal K suffers alienation and nothingness after the death of her mother in the hospital which causes him to depart for Prince Albert in search for the "Garden of Eden" that is the home of her mother. "Nothing that her son said could calm Anna K's fear of what might happen to her if she lost her room. Her nights among the dying in the corridors of Somerset Hospital had brought it home to her how indifferent the world could be to an old woman with an unsightly illness in the time of war." (Coetzee 1: 7)

K finds himself amidst the exigencies of a civil war—ostensibly one of the many struggles arising under Apartheid, but which Coetzee avoids naming presumably so as to shift the focus from matters of race and ethnicity and on to the individual instead—and is soon lost amongst a confusion of new laws, requirements, and permits, the very notion of which is entirely at odds with his (deceptively) simple desire to be able to exist without external intervention. (Stephanie 2 pars)

"The food absorbed him more deeply. He showed his mother a picture of a gleaming flank of roast pork garnished with cherries and pineapple rings and set off with a bowl of raspberries and cream and gooseberry tart. 'People don't eat like that anymore,' his mother said. He disagreed. 'The pigs don't know there is a war on,' he said." (Coetzee 1: 16) The pigs may refer

to the colonizers or the father figure who do not care about the sufferings of the people or the child.

Michael K is out of the influence of the discourses of science and philosophy. He wants to be existed in his own realm. "He had never liked books, and he found nothing to engage him here in stories of military men and women ... and other places in the world." (Coetzee 1: 17) The war has brought out alienation. "The damp weather was not good for her, nor was the unending worry about the future." (Coetzee 1: 18) While going to home "He was struck by the emptiness of the roads." (Coetzee 1; 21)

They were searching for the permit to leave but it was too delayed. This delaying may symbolize the father's threat not to go back to the mother. "Anything nearer, you can get shot, no warning, no questions asked. Understand?" (Coetzee 1 : 22) "Have you got permit, yes or no ? demanded the corporal in command. 'I don't care who you are, who your mother is, if you haven't got a permit you can't leave the area, finished.'"

After being caught without permit, they have to return to the apartment. But they will go to Prince Albert. They again start the journey. "They were accosted by some passers by who coming upon a man of meager build and an old woman in a lonely place, concluded that they might strip them of their possessions with impunity... In the instant of the flash of the blade, K saw before him the prospect of being humiliated again while his mother watched..." (Coetzee 1: 25) Here the psychoanalytic idea of trauma is present which tortures K constantly. Like Cholly in *The Bluest Eye* who had to suffer humiliation in front of the whites when he was forced having sex with Darlene, Michael K suffers from the same fear. This creates the trauma which remains for many years to come. In Michael K's case, it is more profound because he has to suffer the humiliation in front of her own mother that is humiliation in homeland by the colonizers or the foreigners.

The nothingness in Michael K is created through indifference that is shown to his mother in hospital. . "He had a dream: his mother came visiting him in Huis Norenus, bringing a parcel of food. 'The cart is too slow,' she said in the dream—'Prince Albert is coming to fetch me.'" Her concern is about the progress towards freedom or independence. Now after his mother is dead, he does not find any root to hold on. "They took him downstairs to see his mother. She lay with her arms at her sides, still wearing the smock with the legend KPACPA on the breast. The tube was gone. For a while he looked at her; then he no longer knew where to look' (Coetzee 1: 31)

Silence came over K after the separation.

The novel takes place in South Africa during a civil war in the 1970-80s,... more than once he is taken into a "camp" that vaguely resembles a concentration camp. There, they are given food but K denies it. He grows weaker and weaker until he finally escapes. Later on he is taken to a hospital instead because he is too weak to work. There he refuses food as well. This refusal of food represents K's opposition to the war and to higher order. He doesn't like taking direction from anyone. (Life and Times of Michael K last pars)

Michael wants a world only for himself. This indicates that he wants to be re-united with his mother. The castration complex re-ignites the desire to be united with the mother. Individualism

is manifested in K. “Do I believe in helping people? he wondered.” (Coetzee 1: 48) “He had a dream in which he lay in pitch darkness in the dormitory of Huis Norenius.” (Coetzee 1: 56)

The grandson’s appearance in the hill proves that the child can never achieve that fullness of the imaginary state in the symbolic order. Michael K is thinks “I let myself believe that this was one of those islands without an owner. Now I am learning the truth. Now I am learning my lesson. The grandson’s humiliation of Michael symbolizes the father figure’s domination. The grandson says “I’m just a fish in the big ocean.” (Coetzee 1: 65) This again refers back to the nothingness produced by the effect of the war or the colonization and its legacy in Africa. Perhaps this symbolizes the child’s loneliness in the world or order and discourse.

“He did not know what was going to happen. The story of his life had never been an interesting one; there had usually been someone to tell him what to do next; now there was no one, and the best thing seemed to be to wait.” (Coetzee 1: 67) Now he is free and can decide whether to accept the war or to face it indifferently.

Even though Michael K always tries to escape the order but he has to go back to the camp. “K thought: I needed more warning, I should have been told I was going to be sent back amongst people.” (Coetzee 1: 74) Like existentialist philosopher, he asserts in the camp “why have I been sent here?” (Coetzee 1: 75) Inhumane conditions in the Jakkalsdrif camp give a picture of the war. “My father was the list of rules on the door of the dormitory, the twenty-one rules of which the first was ‘there will be silence in dormitories at all times’” (Coetzee 1:104,105)

His constant attempt of to get freedom faces questions and problems.

“ What grounds had he for thinking that he open door meant the return of the Visagies or the arrival of the police come to consign him to the notorious Brandvlei ? In a vast country across whose face hundreds of thousands of people were daily following their cockroach pilgrimages in flight from the war, why should he be alarmed if some refugee or other hid away in an empty farmhouse in a desolate strip of country?” (Coetzee 1: 15, 106)

He does not want to be their slave. He is a conscious individual and would never be internalized by the white ideology or colonial ideology. “Would it not be better to hide day and night, would it not be better to bury myself in the bowels of the earth than become a creature of theirs?” (Coetzee 1: 106)

A contrast between imaginary and symbolic state in action can be found here. Talking about the men of the mountains, K says:

“The stories they tell will be different from the stories I heard in the camp, because the camp was for those left behind, the women and children, the old men, the blind, the crippled, the idiots, people who have nothing to tell but stories of how they have endured. Whereas these young men have had adventures, victories and defeats and escapes. They will have stories to tell long after the war is over, stories for their grandchildren to listen to open-mouthed.” (Coetzee 1: 109)

These young men symbolize the child in the imaginary state who has a perfect story to tell, a story of fulfillment, desires and control. “He says that his name is not Michaels but Michael” (Coetzee 2: 131) He is alone and a conscious human being out of any discourse. The doctor asserts “the music was to soothe your savage breast.’ (Coetzee 2: 132) This may refer to ‘Orientalism’ by which the colonized world is taken as savage and this creates trauma and inferiority complexes when the defenses are broken.

“At last he spoke: ‘I am not in the war.’(Coetzee 2: 138) The narrator replied “you are not in the war? Of course you are in the war, man, whether you like it or not! This is a camp, not a holiday resort, not a convalescent home...” (Coetzee 2:138)

IV

Returning to the root

Relating psychoanalytic theory with post-colonial experience that have been discussed earlier, this part explores how Anna K, Michael K search for the mother figure in different forms but ultimately they cannot fulfill their desires. In Lacanian theory, language constitutes separation and the biggest is the separation with the mother. Michael K remains silent most of the time avoiding any language of the “Others.” But most importantly what the paper would argue finally is that once the defenses are broken like in psychoanalytic theory, the colonized individuals suffer anxiety which includes low self esteem and unstable self. The conflicts never end. It is like *Petal of Blood’s* “La Luta Continua” that is ‘struggle continues.’ The sign is Michael K’s returning to the town. Neo-colonialism and neo-capitalism are the legacy of colonialism.

“The problem that had exercised him years ago behind the bicycle shed at Huis Norenius, namely why he had been brought into the world, had received its answer: he had been brought into the world to look after his mother.” (Coetzee 1: 7) From the frustrations in Cape Town to the peace in Prince Albert, Michael K’s journey connotes Lacanian mirror stage and this would be from symbolic to imaginary stage. First with her mother and then alone after her death, Michael K searches for freedom and the fullness that exist in the imaginary stage. “A project of quitting a city that held little promise for her and returning to the quieter countryside of her girlhood.” (Coetzee 1: 7) For Anna K, the journey is towards her homeland with which she has fascinating memories. “She dreamed of escaping from the careless violence, the packed buses, the food queues, arrogant shopkeepers, thieves and beggars, sirens in the night, the curfew, the cold and wet, and returning to the countryside where, if she was going to die, she would at least die under blue skies.” (Coetzee 1: 8) She expects a full recovery in her home.“Once settled in Prince Albert she would quickly recover her health.” (Coetzee 1: 18) After being asked about her mother in the hospital, Michael K answers “‘I was taking her home,’ ‘It was cold where she lived in Cape Town, it was raining all the time, it was bad for her health. I was taking her to a place where she could get better.’” (Coetzee 1: 31)

Among the hill and exquisite natural beauty Michael K says”“ I could live here forever, he thought, or till I die. Nothing would happen, everyday would be the same as the day before, there would be nothing to say.”” (Coetzee 1: 46) This ‘nothing to say’ may refer to the sense of fullness of the child with the mother in the imaginary stage which is later replaced by the

language in the symbolic order. In this story, language finds extremely important extra emphasis because Michael K is found silent most of the time which may connote his unconscious desire to be united with his mother similar to the imaginary stage where no language is an emergency medium to express feelings.

Talking about the ashes Michael K says 'I am taking them back to where my mother was born long ago.' (Coetzee 1: 48) The imaginary stage may refer to the Garden of Eden or heaven or the 'natal earth.' "The box of ashes waited in a corner of the living-room. He hoped that his mother, who was in some sense in the box and in some sense not, being released, a spirit released into the air, was more at peace now that she was nearer her natal earth." (Coetzee 1: 57)

"There were times, particularly in the mornings, when a fit of exultation would pass through him at the thought that he, alone and unknown, was making this deserted farm bloom." (Coetzee 1: 59) The bond with the homeland must be kept alive. The root cannot be denied and forgotten. "There must be men to stay behind and keep gardening alive, or at least the idea of gardening; because once the cord was broken, the earth would grow hard and forget her children. That was why." (Coetzee 1: 109) The 'gardening' refers to the nourishment of the native culture or the homeland.

The grandson speaks about peace and he indicates the farm as a place of peace which perhaps connotes pre-colonial Africa. "Michael, I am speaking to you as one human being to another. There is a war on, there are people dying. Well, I am at war with no one. I have made my peace. Do you understand? I make my peace with everyone. There is no war here on the farm. You and I can live here quietly till they make peace everywhere." (Coetzee 1: 64)

Comparing the camp life with the life of the farm and the mountains, Michael K says "It was better in the mountains, K thought. It was better on the farm..." (Coetzee 1: 77) The unconscious is suppressed by the culture or society. Michael K can not express his desire for his mother consciously "there was a silence. Now I must speak about the ashes, thought K, so as to be complete, so as to have told the whole story. But he found that he could not, or could not yet." (Coetzee 1: 79)

Referring to his desire to live in his homeland that is Prince Albert he says "I want to live here, he thought: I want to live here forever, where my mother and my grandmother lived. It is as simple as that." (Coetzee 1: 99)

His only dream is to be united with his mother in the afterlife "how fortunate that I have no children, he thought: how fortunate that I have no desire to father." (Coetzee 1: 104) "My mother was the one whose ashes I brought back, he thought, and my father was Huis Norenus. My father was the list of rules on the door of the dormitory, the twenty-one rules of which the first was 'There will be silence in the dormitories at all times'" (Coetzee 1: 104, 105) Father may represent the centre and mother may refer to margin. Michael K escapes the rules of his father in order to live with his mother. "Such pumpkin, he thought, such pumpkin I could eat every day of my life and never want anything else." (Coetzee 1: 114)

His mother searched for her root- previous generations. The desperate search is the outcome of the horrible nightmares during the time of war in Cape Town.

When my mother was dying in hospital, he thought, when she knew her end was coming, it was not me she looked to but someone who stood behind me: her mother of the ghost of her mother. To me she was a woman but to herself she was still a child calling to her mother to hold her hand and help her. And her own mother, in the secret life we do not see, was a child too. I come from a line of children without end. (Coetzee 1: 117)

The origin of mankind may be related to the origin of a nation or the root of a nation. No language could replace the original culture and activities of the homeland. "He tried to imagine a figure standing alone at the head of the line, a woman in a shapeless grey dress who came from no mother; but when he had to think of the silence in which she lived, the silence of time before the beginning, his mind balked." (Coetzee 1: 117) "He also dreamed of his mother. He was walking with her in the mountains. Though her legs were heavy, she was young and beautiful." (Coetzee 1: 119)

The obliviousness of the people towards their motherland is depicted here. Once in colonial world, they forget their root and become immersed in the colonized state. Michael K says that although her mother worked all throughout her life for others but when she was old and sick they forgot her. They said "she is no good to us" (Coetzee 2: 136)

The importance of the mother figure is again referred through the inquiries "tell us about your father," the doctor says "You talk a lot about your mother but you never mention your father. What became of your father?" (Coetzee 2: 139)

In the letter to Michaels, The doctor says that he wants to know Michaels' story that is how has he come to join the war where he has no place? What purpose is there to come to the camp? He says that he can do nothing to rehabilitate him from the vengeful mother with flaming hair who comes to him in his dreams. The doctor goes on to say "why did you ever leave the bushes, Micheals? That was where you belonged." (Coetzee 2: 149)

"And--- if I may be personal---you should have got away at an early age from that mother of yours, who sounds like a real killer." (Coetzee 2: 150) The doctor says that he imagines Michael's mother eating out his brains, glaring about triumphantly, the very embodiment of great Mother Death. He asserts that now that she is gone "you are plotting to follow her" (Coetzee 2: 150). This letter also has query like is it the food (Pumpkin) that Michael eat in the wilderness which has made all other foods tasteless?

V

Failure in returning to the root

Michael K's returning to Cape Town connotes the failure of his journey to be united with his mother or with his homeland or native culture. The child finally has to live with the rules in the symbolic order. Michael K only finds his mother in imagination when going back to Prince Albert living in Cape Town. The ambivalent attitudes may be traced in Michael K when he says "so what is it, he thought, that binds me to this spot of earth as if to a home I cannot leave .We

must all leave home, after all, we must all leave our mothers. Or am I such a child, such a child from such a line of children, that none of us can leave, but have to come back to die here with our heads upon our mothers' laps, I upon hers, she upon her mother's, and so back, generation upon generation? "(Coetzee 1: 124) Michael K, the primitive innocent, is generally treated fairly decently and softly. Someone suggests to him: 'You're a baby,' said Robert. '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.' (Complete Review of *Life and Times of Michael K*, pars 10)

VI

Unresolved complexes and the following results

When the oedipal complex remains unresolved, the conflicts increase. Also when the child no longer can return to the imaginary stage to gain the full control of the environment and therefore has to remain obedient to the symbolic order, the conflicts never come to an end. In the post-colonial world, when the colonized people or individuals cannot return to their motherland after competing with the colonizers, the problems become evident and conflicts spread everywhere. In Lacanian theory, identity formation plays a big role. In the post-colonial world, the identity of the colonized is seen as normal but actually it is patriarchal which means that it is hybridized or colonized which suffers from the loss of the real.

These issues create a world where the colonized people struggle to fight with the colonizers or the centre. The colonized people cannot take the colonial imposition or the hegemony as stable and therefore they return to their root culture which inevitably involves chaos. Benita Parry discusses Coetzee's theme of silence as marked by social power and ethnic heritage. She says, "the reader is simultaneously offered intimations of a non-linguistic intuitive consciousness, and is invited to witness the fruits of speechlessness when there is a failure of the dialectic between the 'Imaginary' and the 'Symbolic'" (Parry 154). (Sreinwand, pars 38)

His life-threatening thinness operates as a supple metaphor for the novel's ambivalent relationship with liberal doctrine. As a marker of the staggering cost of K's commitment to self-determination, it highlights the suffering that attends a liberal prioritization of freedom over welfare. (Abstract--net)

It is that strong unavoidable bond with the mother that the child cannot leave. Once rooted it cannot be uprooted and failure of satisfaction to that bond produces trauma which causes an individual to suffer a lot with an effect of alienation. This relationship symbolically represents the relations between the imaginary homeland and the individuals. The colonization with its strategy and panopticon gaze maintained by discourses disturbs the peaceful coexistence but cannot destroy that bond.

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