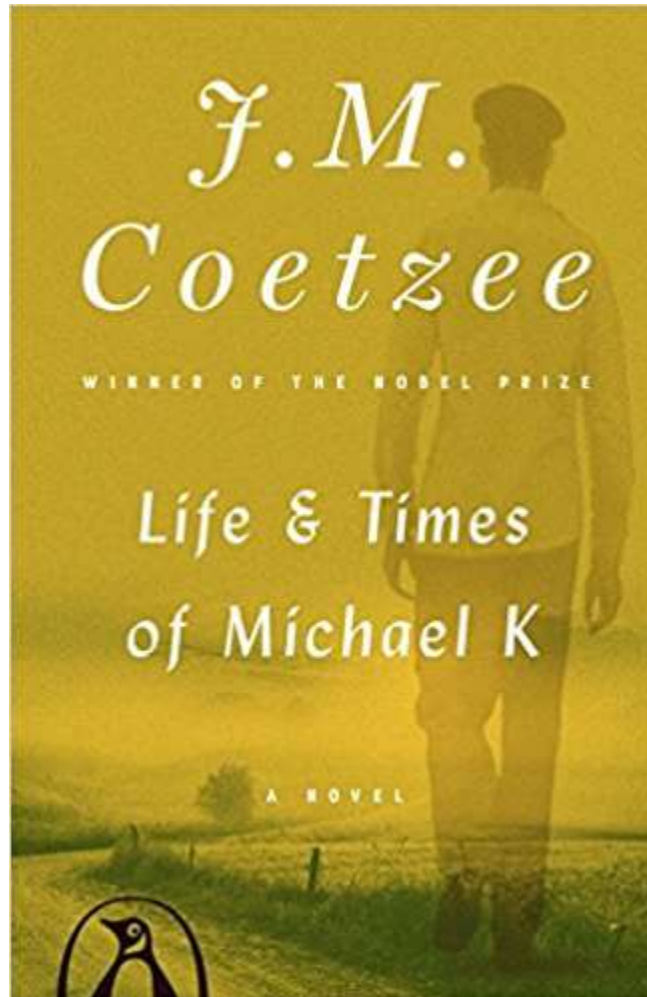


**Allegorical Interpretations of Gardening in J.M. Coetzee's
*Life & Times of Michael K***

Dr. T. Deivasigamani and A. Saravanan



Abstract

The South African Nobel Laureate John Maxwell Coetzee is a unique white writer. His works deal with South African people and their life style. He supports the freedom of gardening with allegorical interpretations and symbols through his novel *Life & Times of Michael K*. This paper argues that J.M. Coetzee's work asserts the dignity and central position of gardening in the universe. It shows how non-white people were treated by white people using a political system of Apartheid and how non-white people overcame the atrocities, oppressions, and harassment.

Keywords: Life & Times of Michael K, Gardening, Universe, Political System, Atrocities, Allegorical interpretation.

Introduction

John Maxwell Coetzee is an outstanding, famous, prolific, unique, and a prominent South African writer. He was born in South Africa. Later on he became an Australian citizen. He is an essayist, linguist, novelist, literary criticizer, vocalist, and translator. He was honoured with many prestigious literary awards including the Nobel Prize in 2003 in literature. His novel *Life & Times of Michael K* is placed in Booker Prize Winners list in literature in 1999. J.M. Coetzee's writings often centre around the South African non-white people, who were ruled by systems of apartheid. His writings mirrored the realities of South African life. The novel has been divided into three parts, the first and third parts are narrated by an omniscient narrator, remaining second part is narrated by a Medical Officer (a doctor). J.M. Coetzee's novel takes place in South Africa during a civil war from the 1970s to 1980s.

Allegorical Interpretations

The great writers of allegorical works are Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queen*, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Young Goodman Brown*, and Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. In this series, typically speakers or writers use allegories as rhetorical devices or as literary devices. Some Plato's works contain passages with minimum two meanings, called "allegories" or "symbols." J.M. Coetzee also handles the allegorical interpretations as a literary device. It has the hidden meanings through symbolic actions, figures, events, and imageries, which together create the moral, political meaning the author wishes to convey. It has minimum two levels of interpretation.

The usage of allegory is to add different layers of meaning to Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*. It makes the character of Michael K as multidimensional. So, Coetzee stands for something larger in meaning than what he literally stands for allegory permits writers to put forward their political and moral points of view. A study of an allegorical piece of writing easily gives us an insight.

The declaration that J.M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* is an allegorical novel is referring to the whole life of Michael K, with enough time to change in life. The term, Michael K is an allegory. His narrative stands for an abstract. In *Life & Times of Michael K*, the protagonist makes his way east from Cape Town to the great Karoo and back again. It is interpreted as the two levels, specifically the South African and the Universal levels. According to the meaning of the Karoo in Merriam Webster's Dictionary: "a dry tableland of Southern Africa," Thus *Life & Times of Michael K* is an allegorical representation of Southern Africa's deformed Apartheid regime.

At Birth and Subsequent Experience

In the very beginning of the novel, Michal K is introduced as: "THE FIRST THING THE MIDWIFE NOTICED ABOUT MICHAL K when she helped him out of his mother into the world was that he had a hare lip. The lip curled like a snail's foot, the left nostril gaped" (3). It

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Dr. T. Deivasigamani and A. Saravanan

Allegorical Interpretations of Gardening in J.M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* 41

represents that he spent his childhood days in a government institution, a home for homeless special-challenged children, where he learnt many skills. Having been discharged from this institution, he starts his career as a gardener at the age of fifteen in Cape Town, South Africa: “At the age of fifteen he passed out of Huis Norenius and joined the Parks and Gardens division of the municipal services of the City of Cape Town as Gardener, grade 3(b)” (4). He gains a variety of experience: a gardener, a night attendant at the public lavatories, and a labourer of railway track construction. In these the three categories of work, he only enjoys his experience of gardening and irrigating the garden from a dam, tending his pumpkin plants. He is completely egocentric in his thought.

In her article, “The Idea of Gardening”, Nadine Gordimer describes the character of Michael K in the following lines:

He is marked out, from birth, by a harelip indelibly described as curled like a snail’s foot. His deformity distorts his speech and his actual and self-image shrinks from the difficulty of communication through words and the repugnance he sees holding him off in people’s eyes. (140)

Similar to Some Protagonists in Some Leading Narratives

Some critical reviewers find a connection between Josef K, the initial K, by Franz Kafka and *Life & Times of Michael K*’s protagonist Michael K’s initial K by J.M. Coetzee. *Life & Times of Michael K* tells Michael K’s story, but this story is being mentioned also by two different narrators. Wim Bronzwaer’s article “Een Zuidafrikaani Meesterwerk” comments on the allegorical feature of Coetzee’s works as follows: “Coetzee as a writer is to a large extent defined by the South African environment, which is somehow a side condition of his work, just like Prague for Kafka. But his books are realistic descriptions of this country and the historical situation” (23).

Parallel Representation of Colonizers and Colonized

It can be seen as a parallel representation of colonizers and colonized people. Michael K’s mother, Anna K is a domestic servant to a wealthy family. She lived with fear, getting sick, abandoned, and put out on the street. Michael K states about his mother:

My mother worked all her life long, he said. ‘She scrubbed other people’s floors, she cooked food for them, she washed their dishes. She washed their dirty clothes. She scrubbed the bath after them. She went on her knees and cleaned the toilet. But when she was old and sick they forget her. They put her away out of sight. When she died they threw her in the fire. They gave me an old box of ash and told me, ‘Here is your mother, take her away, she is no good to us.’ (136)

She put his son into a government institution and forgot about him. Anna K absented herself from caring for her child, Michael K. But he wants to take care his mother until her death. When Anna K becomes ill, both of them desire to leave the place. He built a rickshaw for carrying his sick mother, and during their journey Michael K’s mother dies. But nevertheless, he continues the journey keeping with him his mother’s ashes.

In *Life & Times of Michael K*, the character of Michael K more actively practices silence. Michael K wants to open his heart and tell his story of a cage life. He has an intellectual disability. He found himself assigned to a gang working on the track, which was dislocated for some distance short of the obstruction. They broke off for a supper of bread, jam and tea. He escapes up into the mountains.

Representation of South African Apartheid Regime

Allegorical reading of *Life & Times of Michael K* reveals that Michael K is a representation of South African's Apartheid regime. He has multi-dimensional and complex problems in his gardening life. Making of Michael K shows he belongs to the non-white race; he is poor; he does not want to get involved in a war and in the nation's curfews. "At last he spoke: 'I am not in the war' " (138). He is born a homeless boy and many more painful incidents. "He slept at the roadside and woke wet with dew. Before him the road wound upward into the mist. Birds flitted from bush to bush, their chirping muffled" (35). Here, Coetzee uses a third person's narrative technique. Michael K is a gardener as well as a disabled man who is trying to fight for his individual self-determination and privacy. South African literature usually extends privileges to the white people and citizens at the topmost rank of the social hierarchy of the society.

Michael K is in the camp, but he avoids eating food to continuing his gardening job in his Cape Town: "He won't even take baby food" (146). It reflects a basic tenet of Gardening; it also reflects the collapse of the gap between the high privilege of the eponymous hero in post-modernism and the low level of the minority. Michael K is a hybridized character, and the suppressed people are believed to consistently try to live hopeful in their life.

He returned to eating insects. Since time was poured out upon him in such an unending stream, there were whole mornings he could spend lying on his belly over an ant-nest picking out the larvae one by one with a grass-stalk and putting them in his mouth. (102)

Based on the socio-economic condition of Michael K, he is poor and a victim of materialism, unrest, trauma, and marginalization: "So he watered the seeds one by one, carrying water from the dam in an old paint-tin" (101).

After escaping from the camp, he wants to continue farming because he was compelled to join a gang to clear the railway line. Michael K is an individual who represents the whole black people of South Africa, and they were second class citizens, deprived, and oppressed. He continues to face this oppression. After his mother's death, he wants to live in a lonely place where he settles down from the outside world. He is distinctly inferior to other people of the society. Michael K still moves forward to reach his destination.

Coetzee takes a pessimistic message and offers an optimistic view:

A flashlight woke him but he could not separate it from the dream in which he was involved. To the questions of the police he gave unclear answers, shouts and

gasps. ‘Don’t! . . . Don’t! . . . Don’t! . . .’ he said, the word coming out like a cough from his lungs. Understanding nothing, repelled by his smell, they pushed him into their van, took him back to the station. (70)

In the Camp, the medical officer became interested in him because of his simplicity. Michael K meets the nomadic people. They feed him and introduce him to a nomadic girl.

Conclusion

Michael K is a postmodern everyman. He struggles to find out a place for himself in a community and finds a remedy. Although Michael K’s life is devastated from multidimensional, painful problems, yet he is having good relationship. He says:

I am more like an earthworm, he thought. Which is also a kind of gardener. Or a mole, also a gardener, that does not tell stories because it live in silence. But a mole or an earthworm on a cement floor? (182)

The gardener is a giver, not a slave or a beggar. Michael K is underestimated by other people in the novel of *Life & Times of Michael K*, based on color and they treated him as a slave. This paper focused on how the African people in South Africa overcame the atrocities committed against them, and how they lived through harassment and violence in the period of Apartheid.

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Allegorical Interpretations of Gardening in J.M. Coetzee’s *Life & Times of Michael K* 44