

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

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### Abstract

The South African, Nobel Laureate John Maxwell Coetzee is a unique white writer. His all works being a relationship with South African people and their life style. He supports the freedom of gardening via against the socio-political ethos by a way of approach with allegorical interpretations and symbols through his novel *Life & Times of Michael K*. This paper argues that J.M. Coetzee's work assign the dignity and central position of the gardening in the universe. It operates on how non-white people treated by white people using a political system of Apartheid and how they overcome from their atrocities, oppressions, and harassment.

**Keywords:** Gardening, Universe, Political System, Atrocities.

### Introduction

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

### Allegorical Interpretations

The great writers' of 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 are being an allegorical sense that his writings 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 point of view. A study of an allegorical piece of writing easily give us an insight.

The declaration of J.M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* is an allegorical novel, is referring to the whole life of Michael K, considered an enough time to change in life. The term, Michael K is an allegory. He involves a complete narrative, stand 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 the two levels, the specifically South African, and the Universal. According to the meaning of the Karoo in Merriam Webster's Dictionary: "a dry tableland of Southern Africa," thereby, reading of the *Life & Times of Michael K* is an allegorical representation of Southern Africa's deformed Apartheid regime.

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 represents that he spent his childhood days in a government institution, is 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). From getting experiences of gardener, night attendant at the public lavatories, and a laborer of constructing railway track, in these the three categories of work, he only enjoys his experiences of gardening and irrigating the garden from a dam, tending his pumpkin plants. He is completely egocentric in his thought. *Life & Times of Michael K* depicts the life of Michael K.

According to Nadine Gordimer in her articles "The Idea of Gardening" 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)

Similarly, some critical reviewers comment a connection between the novel of *The Trail*'s protagonist Josef K, initial, by Franz Kafka and *Life & Times of Michael K*'s protagonist Michael K's initial by J.M. Coetzee. *Life & Times of Michael K* is not only telling the Michael K's story, but is being mentioned by two different narrators. Wim Bronzwaer's article "Een Zuidafrikaani Meesterwerk" comments on the allegorical feature of Coetzee's works: "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).

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. Although Anna K absents to caring his child, Michael K. He wants to take care his mother until her death. When Anna K becomes ill, both of them desire to leave the place to live as a child. He built a rickshaw for carrying his sick mother, while their journey Michael K's mother dies. But nevertheless, he continues the journey with keeping 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. Its major themes are the value of human life, time and war and military authority.

Though an allegorical reading of *Life & Times of Michael K* reveals that Michael K, is a representation of the South African's Apartheid regime. He has multi-dimensional and complex problems in his gardening life. Making Michael K, belongs to the non-white race; he is a poor; he does not want to involve a war, and 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 is trying to fight for his individual self-determination and privacy. Because of South African literature usually privileges the white people and citizens at the topmost rank of the social hierarchy of the society.

In this paper, Michael K is being in the camp, he is avoided to eat food for continuing his gardening job in his Cape Town: "He won't even take baby food" (146). It reflects a basic tenet of Gardening; the collapse of the gap between a given a high privilege of the eponymous hero in postmodernism and low level of the minority. Michael K is a hybridized character, suppressed people are believed 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)

Although, based on socio –economical condition of Michael K is a poor and victim with 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 farm. Because of the compels to assigned to a gang to clear the railway line. Michael K, is an individual represents the whole black people of South Africa, and the second class people, deprived, and oppressed. He is facing this oppression. After his mother’s death, he wants to desired to live in a lonely place where he settles down from the outside world. Mostly, he is distinctly inferior to other people of the society. On account of 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 Camp, the medical officer became interested in him because of his simplicity. Michael K met the nomadic people. They feed him and introduced to a nomadic girl.

## Conclusion

Michael K, is a being in displacement, considers as a color, as a postmodern everyman, struggles to find out a place in a community and finding a remedy. Although Michael K’s life is devastated from a multidimensional, painful problems, yet he is having a good relationship with an account of environmental. 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 slave or beggar. Michael K is underestimated in the novel of *Life & Times of Michael K*, based on color and treating him as a slave. This paper focuses on how to the South African people overcome their atrocities, harassment, and violence in the period of Apartheid.

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