

Chapter II

Chapter II

Life and Times of Michael K - Marginalization and Quest for Freedom

Life and Times of Michael K, is set in South Africa during the civil war period. Published in 1983, it narrates the journey of a simple gardener who has hare lip and minimal intelligence. J.M.Coetzee has brilliantly depicted the long journey of the central character Michael K to acquire freedom. The determination with which the protagonist strives for dignity forms the major theme of the novel. J.M.Coetzee has used an innocent and disabled man of strong will, as the central character of the novel. *Life and Times of Michael K* has won the CNA award. “JM Coetzee’s *Life and Times of Michael K* is preoccupied with the way in which social relations are founded on a struggle for recognition in which the self constitutes and then maintains itself as a subject by negating the otherness of other existents” (Marais, Labour of Negation 107).

Michael K, a disabled man competes with the government in a civil war torn society. Michael K easily adapts himself to all the situations and makes himself free from the oppressive situation. Michael K’s perception of freedom and dignity is evident from the difficult situation in which he survives to escape from the clutches of repressive society. Descriptions in the novel bring out J.M.Coetzee’s hatred towards colonisation.

The colonisers targeted the underdeveloped countries and colonised them. They oppressed the native people and tried to enforce their culture upon them. The colonisers utilized the natural resources and man power for their benefit and the betterment of their native country. In the name of civilization they dominated the African countries and imposed laws and rules which benefitted only the colonisers. The colonial nations were suddenly exposed to

change in all the fields and they were not able to cope up with the immediate change. “The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilization” (Marx & Engels 16).

Economically downtrodden, sick mother, fatherless child, physical disfigurement, slow mind are the physical problems of Michael K. Due to the disfigurement of his lips, Michael K was not able to speak continuously. His hare-lip impairs his speech. In the world surrounded by oppression, chaos, selfishness, lack of compassion, Michael K wants to lead a peaceful life. Michael K remains pure and innocent throughout the novel in spite of the hardships. *Life and Times of Michael K* is narrated in three parts. The first and third parts are narrated by an unknown narrator. The second part is presented by a medical officer. The first part portrays the adventures and the other two parts depict the hardships and Michael K’s quest for freedom.

Michael K in Coetzee’s text is a self-narrating subject (the narrating self) who is entrenched in the ongoing process of history, the experience of which he seeks constantly to translate, revise and update. It is safe to describe ‘the self’ as a protagonist of his/her own individual history or drama. K is also a narrative self that is constructed in the discourse of a narrative genre (a novel, *Life and Times of Michael K*). As a narrative self, K is dynamically constructed and reconstructed, transforming and adapting in response to the text’s experience, turning points, crises and trials. (Kehinde 46)

This novel depicts the story of endurance of the protagonist. Michael K struggles against the society where inhumanity prevails. He wants to escape from the inhuman world and finds solace in the company of nature. Michael K completely dislikes the concept of living in a camp. The author portrays the oppressive circumstances which induces Michael K the gripping need to escape from the existential agony of survival. J.M.Coetzee has introduced a quote from Heraclitus in this regard before starting the novel.

War is the father of all and king of all.

Some he shows as god, others as men.

Some he makes slaves, and others free. (LM 01)

In spite of all the hardships, we can find rays of hope and beauty in *Life and Times of Michael K*. Even though Michael K is disfigured and his mind is not quick, he is sensitive to the sufferings of his fellow men.

The novel is written in the third-person past-tense, centered in K's consciousness. The events presented to the reader are filtered through K's perception. Making K, a disabled man, a hero is a re-writing of the plaasroman of South African literature which usually privileges the able bodied people and the citizens at the upper-most rung of the social ladder of the society. (Kehinde 46- 47)

J M Coetzee has stoically portrayed the war and human rights violations in this novel. Suffering of the people due to the conflict and the military regime are realistically depicted in the novel. The author has insisted that the utmost importance and value to the human life should be guaranteed. The author speaks for the poor and the have-nots who are marginalized from the mainstream society. J.M.Coetzee, through the character

Michael K has portrayed the life of a simple man in South Africa who suffers from psychological trauma due to a war ravaged society.

J.M Coetzee has described how the ruling majority suppress the working class. The colonizers treat the native people very cruelly and harshly. These people were refused the basic amenities like food, clothing, shelter, education and they were also ill treated by the people wielding power. Moreover, these people were not allowed to live in their houses and they were made to stay in the camps where epidemics were rampant due to improper sanitation. The camp officers extract work from them by taking to the farms of the wealthy landlords for cheap labour. The colonizers lacked humanity and concern for the poor natives. Nowhere there is equality, even among the colonizers there is hierarchy between the bourgeois and the land owners. Coetzee has given a clear picture of the structure of the society which is based on economic disparity.

Marx conceived the structure of every society as constituted by 'levels' or 'instances' articulated by a specific determination: the infrastructure, or economic base (the unity of the productive forces and the relations of production) and the superstructure, which itself contains two 'levels' or 'instances': the politico- legal (law and the state) and ideology (the different ideologies, religious, ethical, legal, political etc.). (Althusser 134)

The problems that arise between the oppressor and the oppressed become the crux of the novel. J.M.Coetzee has sketched Michael K's character as a man who withdraws into inner self in order to escape from the surrounding environment which is gruesome to bear. "K's life has a lot of relevance to the life of the common man in Apartheid South

Africa, a world inundated with unrest, trauma, materialism and marginalization. K is thus a victim of flights from the city, his captors and his immediate society” (Kehinde 56).

The first thing everyone noticed when Michael K was born that he had a hare lip. “The lip curled like a snail’s foot, the left nostril gaped” (LM 03). His mother was highly disappointed to see her son’s hare lip. Michael K’s adversity started when he was a baby. Due to his curled lip, he was neither able to drink milk from his mother’s breast nor from the feeding bottle. He coughed spluttering milk and cried with hunger. As a consequence, Michael K was kept away from the other children because his mother thought their smiles and whispers will hurt her. This curled lip has made him as a laughing stock. Thus, Michael K’s isolation started from his childhood itself. “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” (Gordimer 140).

Because of this disfigurement and not having a quick mind, Michael K was sent to Huis Norenius, a boarding school for the distressed and unfortunate children where he learnt the art of counting, writing, reading, bed making, scrubbing, dishwashing, basket weaving, sweeping, wood work and digging. After passing the course, Michael K worked as a gardener at the municipal services at the city of Cape Town and later at the public lavatories as a night attendant. Michael K was an introvert and his disfigurement kept him away from others. Hence, he went to his job and remained in his room for the rest of the time.

Michael K’s routine life was affected by the insecure situation that prevailed in the city. When Michael K was returning from duty late night he was attacked by two men who looted his money, shoes, watch etc. He was also badly injured as his thumb was

dislocated and two ribs were broken. This incident throws light upon the rampant violence in the society. Safety of the night workers was not ensured in the country. Assault on Michael K depicts the real situation that prevailed in South Africa. The native people were suppressed by the colonisers. They were robbed by the superior people in terms of money as well as labour. As a result of the attack Michael K returned to his former employment and rejoined his duty as a gardener.

Michael K lived a solitary life. On Sundays he visited his mother who worked for the Buhrmanns, at Sea Point. She stayed in a room under the stairs of the building and she was allowed to stay there as an act of charity by her employer. Anna K adapted to the condition of the room which had no electricity and proper ventilation. The Buhrmanns were reasonable people who paid her fair wages. But when she suffered from dropsy and swollen legs they engaged her for cooking and hired a young woman for household work and in turn they also reduced her wages. Anna's condition gives a realistic picture about the position of the downtrodden in the colonial South Africa. The servants were treated as slaves by their masters and were not given proper wages. They did hard labour and earned only meager salary. Comparatively, Anna's masters were kind to provide her a room and fair wages.

Anna K's health condition became worse and Michael K took his mother to the Somerset hospital. The hospital staff did not treat her properly and also they did not inform her health complaints to Michael K. Through this incident J.M.Coetzee describes the manner in which the poor people are treated in the hospital. They were not given proper attention and care. However, Anna K recovered. She asked for a wheel chair and was not provided. Even at the time of sickness the poor people were deprived of their

rights. After a long queue he managed to get the bus and traveled footboard to Sea Point. Michael K was not even given a vehicle to carry his sick mother. Despite of her illness, she was made to wait and also refused a seat in the public transport. Hence, this incident reflects that the colonised people were not allowed to utilize their rights. The ruling class people identified the colonised people in terms of their race. They gave importance to their own people rather than the native people. They did not respect the culture of the colonised people. They merely imposed their culture and they wanted to create a new community based on their cultural tradition. But the native people wanted the present political condition to be changed.

Social differences are not simply given to experience through an already authenticated cultural tradition; they are the signs of the emergence of community envisaged as a project – at once a vision and a construction - that takes you 'beyond' yourself in order-to-return, in a spirit of revision and reconstruction, to the political conditions of the present. (Bhabha 03)

Michael K is a victim of colonisation. He was left with his sick mother in a small room and he tried to keep his mother comfortable. In spite of his physical inability he always remained as a loving and caring child. He warmed up the soup, lit the candle and finally he consoled her. He slept on the mat with his coat on because there was no space in the room to lie down. Michael K could not get out of the room because of the curfew. He was disturbed by his mother's swollen legs and he helped her out of the bed. Anna K sometimes had the fear of losing the room so she kept her money in a handbag.

Anna K wished to go back to the farm in Prince Albert, where she spent her childhood. Anna K often "...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 a country side where, if she was going to die, she would at least die under blue skies” (LM 08).

To fulfill his mother’s last wish, Michael K quits his job and plans to take his mother out of Cape Town to Prince Albert. Hence, Michael K applied for the permits to take his mother to Prince Albert. In colonial South Africa, if a person wanted to travel from one district to the other they should apply for permit. At the checkpoint if people are found without papers they might even be shot for violating the regulations. Thus the native people were suppressed by the colonisers and their freedom was curtailed.

Michael K was informed that they will receive the permits only in the month of August. Disappointed Anna K whispered “I feel like a toad under a stone living here...” (LM 09). Therefore, Michael K decided to take his mother in a cart by road to Prince Albert. By using his gardening equipment he prepares an improvised cart to make his mother sit and travel. They didn’t want to wait till August because the situation started to grow worse in Sea Point. A riot started in the city when a military jeep struck a native youth who was about to cross the road. This incident initiated a chain of violent reactions. Soon there began a fight on the road side where parked cars were opened and damaged, ambulance was hit by a hail of stones and the white people’s houses were attacked. “A woman, trapped at the end of a corridor, had her clothes torn from her body; someone slipped on a fire escape and broke an ankle. Doors were beaten down and flats ransacked” (LM 11).

J.M.Coetzee has described the people’s anger and how the suppressed people became furious upon the colonisers. The native people struggle to gain their freedom

through violent means. The rioters entered Buhrmann's house and tore all the curtains, broke the furniture and ransacked the food items. The looters also set fire inside the flat and burnt all the clothes. During the riot Anna K and Michael K huddled quietly in their room.

Michael K frequently went to the office to enquire their permits. He pleaded to the Policewoman to give their permits soon as his mother is sick. But the lady gave a harsh reply. "... I am telling you for the last time, *if the permit is granted the permit will come!* Don't you see all the people waiting? Don't you understand? Are you an idiot? Next!" (LM 20). The native people were treated as slaves by the government servants. Hence, Michael K packed his cart and made his mother to sit comfortably in the cart and started towards Prince Albert. Michael K loved his mother very much, so he took pains to fulfill his mother's dream. They were stopped and sent back by the soldiers for not having proper permits. Due to the civil war Michael K was not allowed to move from one place to another freely. The civil war has curtailed the freedom of the marginalized.

Michael K didn't give up and he started again by taking a different route. They got drenched in rain and he used a plastic apron to cover his mother. A group of passers-by blocked their way to steal their goods. But, Michael K took his sole weapon, the axle rod to sustain their attack. By his ferocious attack the youth backed off and moved away. Even though Michael K is soft natured, at the time of adversity he acts shrewdly to defend him. Unfortunately exposed to wind and rain Anna K gets critically ill and Michael K took her to the hospital in Stellenbosch where she passes away. "After his mother's death, however, he becomes inarticulate, unable to understand the "code" in the language of the people at the hospital; he neither understands euphemisms for death nor knows how to act or speak when there is no familial authority to command his actions" (Hawthorne 123).

In the hospital without the knowledge of Michael K they cremated his mother's body and gave him a parcel which contained his mother's ashes. He was very much worried and this describes that the native people were denied their basic right of getting their relative's body for funeral ceremony. Michael K was not allowed to stay with his mother and was not informed about the condition of his mother. Michael K's mother lost her health because she was treated like a bonded slave by her employer. She worked for the white people as a servant maid. This reflects the oppression native people underwent in the society. Michael K wanted his mother to get rid of her oppressed status.

K's problems are multi-dimensional and complex. He is handicapped; he belongs to the colored race; he is fatherless, and he is from a very poor background. He is thus an object of manifold subjectivities. He is born into a world of oppression, deprivation, homelessness, chaos and raging unceasing wars. All these and many other painful backgrounds, including curfews and the debilitating death of his mother conspire to make life unbearable for K. (Kehinde 49)

Michael K plans to go to Prince Albert to bury his mother's ashes. Meanwhile, he was stopped by the police convoy, which took all the things from his suitcase. The soldiers considered him as a thief and grabbed all the money which Michael K had. They gave him a ten-rand note and asked him to flee from that place. Michael K pleaded him that his mother earned that money by working but the soldier did not listen to his words and left that place. J.M.Coetzee describes the atrocity committed during war by the dominant class.

J.M.Coetzee has depicted the hard heartedness of the oppressors and the penury of the oppressed. The conflict is between the Soldier who has power and Michael who is

powerless. They exploit the common people and torture them cruelly. These natives were deprived of human dignity. As he was travelling without permit Michael K was not allowed to go further and was taken to work in the railway track along with other bonded labourers. The native people were made as homeless destitutes and were recruited as bonded labourers for doing hard labour. He was assigned the work of clearing the railway track along with other labourers. Michael K describes the situation prevailing in the city “ ‘I met a man the other day,’ he said, ‘who told me they shoot people they find on the land’ ” (LM 48).

The native people are forced to do the work which they don't like. If anybody violates the law they were shot dead. The ruling class people framed many ideologies to control the colonised people. They were taken from their homes and taken as apprentices in the farms, industries etc. They were exploited for the benefit of the colonisers. “...it is by an apprenticeship in a variety of know-how wrapped up in the massive inculcation of the ideology of the ruling class that the relations of production in a capitalist social formation, i.e. the relations of exploited to exploiters and exploiters to exploited, are largely reproduced” (Althusser156).

Michael K flees from that place and reaches Prince Albert. “Is this the voice of Prince Albert? He wondered. I thought the Prince Albert was dead” (LM 49). Michael K reached the abandoned farm house where his mother wanted to die. He stays there and kills goats, birds using a catapult for his food. He walked through the farmhouse and explored a little rectangle of weathered mud brick from the bare earth. He thought to be the place of his mother's birth and buried his mother's ashes under the earth. Michael K developed a sort of satisfaction as he has fulfilled his mother's dream. Later, he cleared a

patch few meters in the middle of the field to cultivate pumpkin and mealie seeds which he got from the farm house. “This was the beginning of his life as a cultivator” (LM 59). He had a great pleasure in watching the water passing from the dam to the plants which looked like a little stream.

It is because I am a gardener, he thought, because that is my nature.

He sharpened the blade of his spade on a stone, the better to savor the instant when it clove the earth. The impulse to plant had been reawoken in him; now, in a matter of weeks, he found his waking life bound tightly to the patch of earth he had begun to cultivate and the seeds he had planted there. (LM 59)

Michael K’s peaceful stay at the farm house was disturbed by the man who came and introduced himself as the Visagie’s grandson. He mistook Michael K to be the servant of the Visagie farm house and started to use him as his servant. Michael K did not like the treatment of the Visagie grandson. Actually the grandson was a deserter from the army and he asked not to tell about his presence to anybody when he goes to the shop for buying food for him. Though both are refugees Visagie’s grandson dominates Michael K. Thus, the theme of oppressor versus oppressed is brought out.

Man's very desire is constituted, he tells us, under the sign of mediation: it is the desire to have one's desire recognized. Its object is a desire, that of other people, in the sense that man has no object that is constituted for his desire without some mediation. This is clear from his earliest needs, in that, for example, his very food must be prepared; and we find this anew

in the whole development of his satisfaction, beginning with the conflict between master and slave, through the entire dialectic of labor. (Lacan, *Ecrits* 148)

Visagie grandson has a desire to control Michael K and he tries to impose authority on him. He also dictates Michael K and wants him to do the work which he assigns. He also wants Michael K to bring his food. He craftily devices a plan to make Michael K work for him. He attracts Michael K by giving money. But Michael K who does not love money, escapes from him. Here raises the conflict between the master and the slave. The grandson states that “‘My grandparents were lucky to find you’... ‘People have a hard time finding good farm servants nowadays’” (LM 62). The relationship between Michael K and the Visagie grandson suggest that if there are two or more people, easily they can slip into the roles of master and servant.

The grandson assigns duties to Michael K and offers some advice to Michael K. “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... There is no war here on the farm. You and I can live here quietly till they make peace everywhere” (LM 64). The Visagie grandson tries to subjugate Michael K. But he persuades Michael K to escape from the clutches of the camp life. He further adds that: “...I could give you figures that would shock you. I am not the only one. Soon they are not going to have enough men... to track down the men who are running away! This is a big country! Just look around you! Lots of places to hide!” (LM 64-65).

Michael K goes to the mountains and stays there in a cave. “K’s unwillingness to cooperate with Visagie’s grandson demonstrates, a self sustaining political association

cannot prioritize the interests of some over the interests of others” (Dragunoiu 75). He started to eat the flowers, lizards and insects but nearly starved to death. “Instead of listening to the crying of his body he tried to listen to the great silence about him” (LM 66).

K goes literally underground, leaving no trace of himself, like the animals, insects and grubs which he eats and is constantly likened or likens himself to. He is ploughed back into the earth like a fallen seed and rises, as if from the dead after surviving three dungeon- like incarcerations. Coetzee shows him changing into the landscape until he becomes integral with it and begins to take his character from it, exchanging the vegetal soil and rotted leaves of the Cape’s parks and gardens for harsh mineral scrubland of the Karoo. (Wright, Chthonic Man 6)

Michael K remembered his old days, when he worked in the Wynberg Park. The civil war has turned his life topsy-turvy and now he wandered in the mountains without a place to dwell.

In Life and Times of Michael K, Coetzee shows us a man attempting to realize such a dream with predictably disillusioning results. Michael’s attainment of freedom, as the depiction of his relationship with society demonstrates, involves a certain amount of sacrifice... His disfigurement and early brutal experiences make him shun the company of others and retreat into himself. Only silence, darkness, and isolation provide him with any sense of security. (Stephenson 83)

Michael K ate even the ants which tasted like fish. After few days his gums started bleeding. Michael K’s world changed day by day. He deliberately avoided other

human beings. He loved to be alone always. He felt safe and secure when he was alone. “I am becoming smaller and harder and drier every day. If I were to die here, sitting in the mouth of the cave looking out over the plain with my knees under my chin, I would be dried out by the wind in a day, I would be preserved whole, like someone in the desert drowned in sand” (LM 67-68).

Unfortunately when he came down he was taken to the Jakkalsdrif relocation camp where Michael K meets a man named Robert who tells him about how the workers are exploited for cheap labour by the townspeople. In the camp the native people were made to work hard for cheap labour. They were not given freedom to go out and kept confined in a prison like place where the sanitation was very poor. They were kept like caged animals. “In *Life and Times of Michael K*, the men who end up in the camps are significantly labeled the “army of the homeless and destitute”. They are capable of as much insensitivity and mindless cruelty as the men who imprison them” (Stephenson 79).

Working is mandatory in the camp for getting food. The colonisers didn't like this type of camp inside the town. “We breed disease, they said. No Hygiene, no morals...” (LM 81). Michael K did not allow himself to adapt to the camp life. The camp watchman informs him that if anybody tries to escape, he will not show any mercy and he has the right to shoot any person who climbs the fence.

Michael K was compulsorily taken to work by the captain of police, Oosthuizen to his relative's farm house and was given heavy farm work which he was not able to do because of his poor physical condition. Seeing Michael K's condition the farm owner said, “Where do they pick up rubbish like that? ... He's half- dead! They'll be digging up corpses for us next!” (LM 87). This incident throws light into the situation of how the

native people are tortured by the ruling class people in terms of physical labour.

Even people like Michael K who are fragile and sick are employed to do hard labour.

The colonisers were selfish and whatever happened to the colonised they never mind and they wanted their work to be completed. “A reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology for the workers, and a reproduction of the ability to manipulate the ruling ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression, so that they, too, will provide for the domination of the ruling class 'in words'” (Althusser 132-133).

In spite of their unwillingness the workers were compelled to do hard works and were given a meager salary which was not enough to run the family. They were subjected to poor economic condition and were made dependent on the colonisers for their livelihood. The ruling ideology is set up by the colonisers who happen to have colonised the country. Those who oppose the system were ruthlessly killed and others to avoid being killed followed the rules laid by the ruling people.

They were made to stay in the camps and due to the poor hygiene people suffered from dysentery, measles, flu, etc. Even Michael K was very tired when he reached the camp and could not sleep because of the continuous cry of a child which was sick. Michael K's camp mate Robert advises him not to take things to heart. “You're a baby,... You've been asleep all your life. It's time to wake up” (LM 88).

Michael K comes to know that the child was dead and thinks that “Is this my education?... am I at last learning about life here in a camp? It seemed to him that scene after scene of life was playing itself out before him and that the scenes all cohered” (LM 89). Children suffered from malnutrition and died. Medical aid was not provided

properly by the colonisers. The native people were shut up like animals in that camp and the guards simply watched the people dying.

The poor native people are exploited and they are made voiceless victims. The colonised people do not have compassion and they treat the native people in an inhuman manner. "His gradual growth towards understanding and towards fusing his conscious and unconsciousness selves is shown in his growing ability to reflect upon his own nature and the nature of the world around him" (Stephenson 81). Michael K learns about the harsh realities of life in the camp.

Michael K remains quiet and calm even when he was subjected to humiliation in the Jakkalsdrif camp. He becomes a witness to the inhumanity that prevailed in the camp. This victimization made Michael K to withdraw from the society. He wonders how people are confined to the brutal camp life. When Michael K tried to escape from the camp, his fellow mate Robert justifies that camp is not a prison, it is a social service scheme provided by the state for the homeless. He also wonders why should people escape from the camp. Michael K is unable to understand the reason for being imprisoned in the camp surrounded by fences with soldiers guarding with guns.

Robert tells that camps were created with a motto of social service to the state. But the camps were exploited by the landowners. The camp people were employed to toil the land and to work in the estates of rich landowners. They provided them cheap and short-term contract labour, rather than long-term jobs. The dominant section of the society demanded the camp people to work for cheap labour but kept them ostracized from mainstream society. The State curtailed the freedom of the marginalized people to such an extent that they were unable to lead a dignified life. "A civilization whose ideals

are ever more utilitarian, since it is caught up in the accelerated movement of production, can no longer understand anything about the expiatory signification of punishment” (Lacan, *Ecrits* 112). The colonisers did not understand the problems of the colonised people. They were confined like animals within an enclosure, strict punishments were implemented. When they were unable to do hard work they were punished and refused food. This made them sick and many people died in the camps. The colonisers wanted their work to be completed and they did not mind the hardships faced by the poor native people.

Michael K observes that people are being suppressed and subjugated for political benefits. He reminisces the incident when people of the camp expressed their displeasure by digging a mass grave and lay in it. As they were confined within the camp they feel eliminated from the society. The mainstream society thought that the camp people to be savages. Michael K tries to resist himself from being imprisoned within the camp. He neither involves in any political struggle nor gives room to any vague principles.

A riot broke out and the camp inmates were blamed for causing this attack. To bring everything under control the local police captain takes over and the camp life became very strict. The inmates were made to starve for few days. The camp captain called the people as parasites and ill-treated them “‘What are we keeping here in our backyard!’ ... ‘A nest of criminals! Criminals and saboteurs and idlers!’” (LM 91). Michael K doesn’t want to submit himself to the clutches of camp life; so he escapes and reaches the Visagie farm house.

Michael K begins to cultivate and digs a burrow in the soil to watch his new garden. He slept in the daytime and started to work in the night. Once he dreamt of the

Visagie grandson “Let him not steal my first day from me! He groaned to himself. I did not come back to be a nursemaid!” (LM 99). The indomitable spirit of Michael K is depicted in these lines. Michael K planted pumpkin seeds and waited patiently for the earth to give food. Michael K’s necessity for food was very less and he ate only the pumpkins which he cultivated; sometimes he fed on roots, insects, etc so he became delirious “Hunger was a sensation he did not feel and barely remembered. If he ate, eating what he could find, it was because he had not yet shaken off the belief that bodies that do not eat die. What food he ate meant nothing to him. It had no taste, or tasted like dust” (LM 101).

Michael K felt proud to be a cultivator. Even though he stayed away from his real home he considered this abandoned house, the farm, the burrow, the plants as his home and he loved and cared them a lot. Michael K has a strong bond with the mother earth. He dwelt in the burrow and he came out only for nursing his pumpkins. Eric Paul Meljac compares Michael K’s burrow with Kafka’s burrower in *The Burrow*. J.M. Coetzee inspired by Kafka’s Burrow makes his character Michael K to construct his own burrow in the veld.

Coetzee’s source for Michael K’s corrugated iron-covered hole is Kafka’s incomplete story “The Burrow.” Kafka’s narrator constructs his burrow not solely out of fear, but also out of a desire to use his mind.

The immense difficulty the narrator faces in his effort to keep the burrow undetectable while maintaining a clear opening passage into which he might scurry should an intruder approach, or out of which he might flee

for the same reason, serves to facilitate the art of building rather than the act of defense. (Meljac 70)

Both the characters share a common element. Kafka's character rushes to the burrow when the intruders saw him. Likewise when Michael K finds some men at the dam "Like a worm he began to slither towards his hole, thinking only: Let darkness fall soon, let the earth swallow me up and protect me" (LM 107). He considers the burrow as his protector and the pumpkins as his children.

Day by day his love for the burrow increased. "He could lie all afternoon with his eyes open, staring at the corrugations in the roof- iron and the tracings of the rust; ... he was himself, lying in his own house, the rust was merely rust all that was moving was time, bearing him onward in its flow" (LM 115). The burrow made him to be idle and moreover it also allowed him to care for his children, the pumpkins.

A group of rebels visited the farm and Michael K hid himself in the burrow. These rebels blew up the railway tracks, attacked the farm house, drove the cattle and caused disturbances in the city. They camped in the farm house, started to roast the meat and they released the brake of the dam. Michael K slowly came out of his hiding and he saw the devastation caused to his crops. "I am like a woman whose children have left the house, he thought: all that remains is to tidy up and listen to the silence. I would have liked to give them food, but all I fed were their donkeys, that could have eaten grass. He crept into the burrow, stretched out listlessly, and closed his eyes" (LM 111- 112).

Michael K came out of his hiding only in the night. His melons and pumpkins started to grow and finally one day he got them to eat. He ate them with happiness. "The only progeny that Michael does envisage for himself is that of the plants he

grows...” (Franssen 458). Michael K also felt that was the good pumpkin he had ever tasted and this was the first time he found pleasure in eating.

After the hardships of the mountains and the camp he is all bone and muscle with hardly any appetite to eat. But feels a deep joy as he moves about his field where he begins to plant the pumpkin seeds once again in the conviction that gardening had to be kept alive or the earth would grow hard and forget her children. Such is the bond that binds him to Mother Earth that when the seeds sprout and the fruits are ready he looks upon two pale green melons as “sisters” and a band of pumpkins as “brothers”. Indeed, the first pumpkin becomes “the first born”. (Ramachandra 43-44)

Michael K cultivates his land, minds his own business, withdraws from the war and even stays away from the power struggle. “In the earth around the pit there grew up a multifarious insect life drawn by the benign, continuous warmth” (LM 115). But during a course of time Michael K felt delirious and he felt a continuous taste of blood in his mouth. He also suffered from giddiness. “K does not speak, and he hardly eats. He hardly sees; he loses track of time; He surrenders to sickness and delirium. K becomes an entity so liminal as to be barely alive; barely human, in the conventional sense of the word” (Monson 96).

When he came out of his hiding due to shivering he was discovered by the soldiers. They considered Michael K to be the friend of the rebels and took him to the camp. They said, “We’ll take you home and give you a new start in life” (LM 123). Michael K was not able to leave the farm because of his attachment to gardening.

“So what is it, he thought, that binds me to this spot of earth as if to a home I cannot leave?” (LM 124)

Michael K was taken to Kenilworth camp and was admitted in the hospital to treat him for malnutrition. The local police captain discovered Michael K as the one who escaped from the Jakkalsdrif camp. The medical officer was very affectionate towards Michael K and he asked him to agree for an operation to correct his hare-lip. But Michael K replied ““I am what I am. I was never a great one for the girls”” (LM 130). The Medical Officer didn't compel him after that. The Medical Officer was impressed by Michael K's different way of thinking

Although the interlude in the rehabilitation farm is narrated by the camp Medical Officer in the past tense, more often than not, it is K who takes the reader round the cosmos, with mythical resonance, the heart of South Africa, the Karoo and then returning to the chaos and corruption of the city. As an eye/I-witness of the troubles bedeviling the nation, he exposes the (mis)deeds of South African rulers. This feat is an attempt to debunk a popularly-held view that life in the camps was an El Dorado. Rather, he portrays the camps as places which rob human beings of their individual self-determination and privacy. They also deprive people of the needed human dignity. (Kehinde 47)

A Pharmacist is made into a Medical Officer to meet out the wartime emergency. This incident throws limelight upon the condition of the poor native who were not given proper medical treatment. There were more number of patients than the hospital could accommodate. Even mentally retarded people are recruited as soldiers and false cases

were fabricated against the natives. The camp leader Noel filed a false complaint even on Michael K which stated; ““Michael’s is an arsonist. He is also an escapee from the labor camp. He was running a flourishing garden on an abandoned farm and feeding the local guerilla population when he was captured. That is the story of Michaels”” (LM 131).

The Medical Officer didn’t agree with the complaint which they have recorded on Michael K and says, “This Michaels doesn’t know how to strike a match. If this Michael’s was running a flourishing garden, why was he starving to death?” (LM 131). The medical officer supports Michael K and wants him to be in the hospital because he suffered from dysentery. Even though Michael K didn’t respond properly, the doctor felt a sense of moral responsibility towards saving him. The medical officer discovers that Michael K wanted to fulfill his mother’s wish. The medical officer remarks,

You made a great mistake, Michaels, when you tied her on your back and fled the burning city for the safety of the countryside. Because when I think of you carrying her, panting under her weight, choking in the smoke, dodging the bullets, performing all the other feats of filial piety you no doubt performed, I also think of her sitting on your shoulders, eating your brains, glaring about triumphantly, the very embodiment of great Mother Earth. (LM 150)

The medical officer appreciates his daring act of taking his mother out of the city without getting permits. Hence, his admiration towards Michael K increased and he also sympathizes with him. Michael K who was always neglected is bewildered by the compassion of the doctor. He asks ““Do you think if you leave me alone I am going to die?” He said. ‘Why do you want to make me fat? Why fuss over me, why am I so

important?’” (LM 135). The doctor sympathizes with Michael K and he is also worried about the unfair complaint against him.

One might read this refusal of the nutritive facts of existence as a radical attempt to isolate the human within the human being- a rejection of the biological animality of life in order to become fully human. This could be supported by Michael K’s refusal to eat camp food in particular, and to seek his nourishment only in the bounties of the earth, or the ‘bread of freedom’. In this, the desire to eat nothing but the pumpkin and melons grown in ‘freedom’ indicates a strange transcendence of the animality of the human through the realization of human dignity in an unmediated relation to natural subsistence- a relation which is not poisoned by the biopolitical nutritive maintenance of life for the purposes of building the nation. (Mills 185)

The medical officer is worried because Michael K strictly refused to eat the food provided. “K objects to the injustices perpetrated by a society that ascribes no intrinsic value to human life. His refusal to eat in the rehabilitation camp is an attempt to evade an exploitative system that claims to be founded on an ethics of care” (Dragnoiu 71).

Michael K was taken for enquiry by the police officers because there was an attack in the town’s water supply. They doubted that Michael K’s rebel friends from the mountains would have done that. The camp leader Noel wanted Michael K to speak the whole truth. Noel further adds that the civil war has been waged to safeguard the rights of the marginalized. This statement made by Noel is a great irony to the situation which actually prevailed in the city. In reality the poor native people were tortured and deprived of basic needs.

Through Michael K, J.M.Coetzee has described the real situation in the country. The police officer demanded Michael K to tell the truth he answers, "I am not in the war" (LM 138). Moreover he also adds, "I am not clever with words" (LM 139). The medical officer also asked Michael K to narrate his story but he didn't do so because he couldn't relate his experience coherently.

"Man is not merely a possibility of recapture or of negation. If it is true that consciousness is a process of transcendence, we have to see too that this transcendence is haunted by the problems of love and understanding" (Fanon, *Black Skin* 04). Even though the medical officer compelled him to tell the story Michael K refuses because he feels reserved as this is the first time he comes across a person who loves and cares him. All these years nobody loved him. He does not have anyone to share his feelings. But when the medical officer pesters him to tell his story he remains silent. The medical officer is unable to understand the problem of Michael K because he merely sympathizes and is unable to empathize with him.

Michael K's innocence made the medical officer to the extent of buying food from outside by spending his own money. When the medical officer compelled him to eat he said "'I am not going to die,' you said. 'I can't eat the food here, that's all. I can't eat camp food'" (LM 146). He refused to eat the camp food and the police officer tells that if Michael K wants to die by starving let him die. Through this incident the author describes the atrocity of the ruling majority towards the natives. "J.M.Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983) charts its eponymous protagonist's progression towards death by starvation. Michael K's ghastly thinness is appalling and he is repeatedly offered food by

those whom he encounters during the course of his journey” (Dragnoiu 69). Michael K protests against the system by remaining silent and abstaining from food.

The medical officer convinces the camp leader Noel to register Michael as dead so that Noel need not be accountable for Michael’s curious activities. Eventually Michael K escapes from the camp. The doctor considered Michael K to be the hero, who starved for a great ideal of gaining freedom. ““I was the only one who saw that you were more than you seemed to be’, I would have proceeded” (LM 164). Michael K made the medical officer to understand the importance of freedom. Michael K’s relentless striving for freedom made the Medical officer to retrospect that he was leading a mechanical life without a motto.

When Noel, the police officer tries to imprison Michael K, the Medical officer insisted that his health condition is very bad and he must be admitted in the hospital. When the police officers came to interrogate Michael K they get only silence as an answer from him. “There was a silence so dense that I heard it as a ringing in my ears, a silence of the kind one experiences in mine shafts, cellars, bomb shelters, airless places” (LM 140).

Michael K has taught the medical officer the importance of freedom. He was fascinated by Michael K’s will power and his aversion towards the camp life. He realizes that Michael K finds solace outside the camp and he also remains as an embodiment of freedom. Although he remains passive throughout the novel, his activities reflect his resistance towards oppression represented by the civil war and camp life. The medical officer praises Michael K’s journey towards the holy and enthralling garden. “The garden for which you are presently heading is nowhere and everywhere except in the camps. It is

another name for the only place where you belong Michaels, where you do not feel homeless. It is off every map, no road leads to it that is merely a road, and only you know the way” (LM 166).

Michael K reached the beach and meets a group of nomads who offered him milk, bread and wine. A woman shows her compassion by having sex with Michael K who was just a skeleton. The group was very friendly with Michael K and advises him, “‘It is difficult to be kind,’ he said, ‘to a person who wants nothing. You must not be afraid to say what you want, then you will get it. That is my advice to you, My thin friend’” (LM 179). Later Michael K reaches the house where his mother Anna lived at Sea Point.

I have become an object of charity, he thought. Everywhere I go there are people waiting to exercise their forms of charity on me. All these years, and I carry the look of an orphan... They want me to open my heart and tell them the story of a life lived in cages. They want to hear about all the cages I have lived in, as if I were a budgie or a white mouse or a monkey. (LM 181).

Michael K remembers the camps and also he sympathizes for the people who are shut up in the camp like animals. He also worries about his mistake of planting all his pumpkins together in one patch, as a result of that only he was caught and accused of producing food for the rebels “Is that the moral of it all, he thought, the moral of the whole story: that there is time enough for everything? Is that how morals come, unbidden in the course of events, when you least expect them?” (LM 183).

Michael K imagines himself as a little old man who wants to take a holiday in the country. The novel ends with Michael K dreaming of convincing a stranger to go to the

Visagie farm and how to get water by using a teaspoon from the bottom of the earth. “As the pumpkins K cultivates serve as better index of a decent humanity than the landmines planted by the state, so too K’s teaspoon of water is measured against the name of the building in which he daydreams” (Vital 106). At the end, Michael K understands himself and the life he was leading. “. . .the truth, the truth about me” (LM 181). He comes to a conclusion about himself and understands his own nature.

At the end of the novel, Michael has some tentative understanding of himself, his life, and his achievement, and consequently it is tempting to see the novel as having the narrative progression of a quest, in particular a quest for freedom. But the term “quest” is to a certain extent unsatisfactory. It suggests a conscious intention, a deliberate movement towards a discovery. There is no such suggestion here; until the final pages of the novel, Michael is unaware he is seeking anything.

(Stephenson 80-81)

J.M.Coetzee has given many examples of how the poor people are turned into an object of oppression. The story of Michael K depicts the quest for freedom and dignity. The problems faced by Michael K are because of the colonial system which prevailed in the country. Through Michael K and the medical officer J.M.Coetzee voices out the importance of freedom. Michael K’s disfigurement and the bitter experiences of being marginalized made him to pursue his own sense of freedom. Michael K felt that only isolation and silence gave him peace and security. Michael K prized freedom completely rather than the companionship.

Ironically, K's story has been told. The narrator and the medical man, from their different perspectives, each of which limits K by transforming him into a verbal rather than ontological experience, have transformed him into their "stories"... These story tellers save K from that oblivion though he does not tell his story himself. (Hawthorne 131)

J.M.Coetzee has universalized the problem of social hierarchy that operates between the oppressing majority and oppressed minority who happen to be the have-nots. But Michael K doesn't know anything about racial discrimination and political oppression; he knows and cares only about his mother and the earth. He feels attached to the land and he considers pumpkins and melons as his children. After coming from the farm wherever he went he carried a packet of seeds with him. Michael K longed for freedom and he tried to avoid being treated as an underdog by the majority. "K's reticence in the novel is not just that of shame and intimidation. His silence is more profound and passes a harsher judgment on his 'times'" (Chesney 310).

Michael K leaves the city and moves to the country side in search of peace because he was not able to find compassion anywhere in the war-torn country. Michael K's longing for freedom is a quest that continues throughout the novel. When Michael K's freedom is intruded upon, Michael K moves from the country to the isolated Visagie farm house. So, he realizes how to lead his life. "Like Kafka's Hunger Artist, who might figure as a major subtext, K's freedom from the ordinary demands of the flesh sets him apart; however, K, who never starves himself with the conscious intent of the Hunger Artist, has found the food that he truly wants in the melons and pumpkins" (Hawthorne 122).

Michael K remains as a symbol of man's right. He wanted to enjoy his freedom to the fullest.

At first, K is complicit in subjugating things-in-themselves to his own consciousness. On his first visit, K recognizes and designates the deserted house and land a farm, and settles in the house, observing the conventional hierarchical structure of colonization and taking on the role of the missing "owner", making the house, the land and the animals utilitarian objects for his own exploitation. (Monson 91)

The society's heart of darkness, mental stress of the people, and their psychological trauma of being victimized is beautifully depicted in this novel. To live amidst entire society which is governed by hostile power one must need courage, confidence and self-determination. Michael K longed for freedom and he never wanted to be under the clutches of the superior race. "The horrors of nightly curfews, restrictions of inter-district movements, forced labor, dubious resettlements, rehabilitation and internment camps, armed patrols, widespread lawlessness, looting by the poor, corruption on the part of the few, repression and deep economic crisis do not move him or rattle his will" (Kehinde 52).

Michael K is trapped in a tough situation wherever he goes. But he survives using the minimal resources available in those places. Even when he is compelled by the medical officer he rejects the food and rather wanted freedom. He is not afraid of anything. He does not need money or food. He cultivates his own food. He also doesn't try to earn money by illegal means. Michael K is portrayed as a daring individual who was able to endure the hardships and the problems caused by the civil war.

“Commendably, K is always to the task, as he is innovative in fighting against the horrors of living in his painful and dehumanizing milieu. He creates a haven in his soul where he can withdraw himself” (Kehinde 56). Even though he is neglected by the society, Michael K teaches the importance of freedom through his endeavors. Michael K opposes the system of colonisation through his non-cooperation and non-violence. He survives the torture and remains unchanged. In a society surrounded by hatred, violence and greediness, noble men like Michael K endure all the pain to retain his independence.

Michael K’s nobility lies in creating a space and place for himself where he can retain his individuality. His capacity to overcome the hurdles, turning everything into opportunities, not becoming a beggar or slave and wanting to create an identity for himself are the greatest virtues of Michael K. Right from his childhood he has faced all sorts of difficulties and he is marked as a victim from birth itself. Michael K empathizes with the land and thinks that people forget earth during the war time. He also adds that if a land is not cared, it will forget how to produce. Michael K’s refusal to stay in the camps denotes his irrationality but his actions emphasize that he strives for freedom and personal comforts are immaterial to him.

K is able to control his urges; he forgoes basic human needs because of the necessity of war. He requests and needs nothing; he sparingly eats to sustain himself. This is a unique characteristic of K in a society of gluttonous beings. Attempts to make him an under-confident, passive and highly despondent ‘Other’, excluded from the society by an arrogant, bullying and destructive ‘Self’ are rejected by him. (Kehinde 51)

Narrated in past tense, J.M.Coetzee has created the character Michael K, a disfigured man as the hero of the text. Michael K has inspired others through his silence, thirst for freedom, genuineness, attachment to his mother and motherland. Even though he is robbed off self determination, privacy and deprived of self-esteem, “K’s story is “stern rebuttal to the common justification of the white majority that blacks in South Africa are much better off in a material sense than those in the black ruled nations of Africa” (Gallagher 149). Michael K is a good creator and he innovates new things like cart, hunting techniques etc. He loves nature and abandons city life which is full of violence and advises others to involve in farming. J.M.Coetzee through Michael K, suggests the significance of freedom and he also advises the people to maintain harmony inspite of race and culture.

Even though Michael K is put in a tough situation like caring for an ailing mother, camp life, lack of freedom etc, Michael K’s spirit is not crushed. He comes out of the situation and he leads his life according to his wish. When his freedom is encroached Michael K ignores everything and escapes to the mountains to remain free. For the sake of freedom he sacrifices his basic need of food and eats whatever he gets in the mountains. He cannot accept being dominated by the colonisers. He pacifies himself and even though if somebody assaults him he maintains silence. He avoids being in that place and tolerates the inhumanity done to him. Even at the time of adversity he maintains his faith and avoids being immoral.

Life and Times of Michael K is ahead from the other South African literary texts. Michael K can be described as a man of undaunted spirit. Even his simple philosophy of life to eat what you grow was not understood by people with normal intellect. His struggle to

safeguard his personal freedom is indeed a saga equivalent to epic personages taking into consideration that by birth a person of limited intellect. In many novels the disabled characters are portrayed as victims. But in J.M.Coetzee portrays Michael K who struggle, fight and shine bright after all the hardships. Michael K unchains himself from the camp life, society and proves that people with disabilities can also create wonders and form a community.

Michael K can be considered as a symbol denoting quest for individual freedom. He strives to maintain his dignity as well as identity. The novel authentically portrays the social injustice that prevailed in apartheid South Africa. Problems that curtailed personal freedom and dignity practiced during apartheid such as civil war, camps, permits, riots, boycotts are depicted in the novel. Amidst all these socio-political chaos Michael K leads his own way of life. He goes to job regularly takes care of his sick mother. He resigns his job, travels without a permit, escapes from the camp twice, seeks refuge in the mountains, cultivates melons and silently witnesses the happenings in the city; he is a reserved character and speaks only a few words wherever it is necessary. Michael K is psychologically affected by violence and also by the death of his mother. Despite of all these problems, Michael K approaches life with an optimistic point of view.

Michael K is given special identity by J.M.Coetzee in the novel. The protagonist even though disabled, astonishes everyone by his undaunted spirit for the efforts he takes to attain freedom. He is courageous and escapes from the camp inspite of the security guards to lead a simple life away from oppression, marginalization and segregation. Through Michael K, J.M.Coetzee tries to establish the importance of safeguarding individual freedom and dignity by a just society through political means as it is the real sign of civilization.