

# Juxtaposing Nation and Nature: An Eco-political Appraisal of Life and Times of Michael K

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## Abstract

The ecological trajectory of the novel is set for intellectual vivisection from the very outset. Coetzee demonstrates the negative ramifications of civil strife and power politics. The novel offers an insight into how these factors are responsible for the unwarranted exploitation of nature. The research paper shall analyze how the novel interrelates political crisis with ecological degradation. Moreover, in a country like South Africa that abounds with languages and cultures, the underprivileged are often relegated to the level of animals. The non-humans are ruthlessly slaughtered, and the earth is excessively defiled. This is because the essential requirements of the indigent are not heeded. The novel addresses all these concerns and links them with gardening. A seminal question is whether the ideal time for gardening is when the war is over. Gardening, therefore, is a central motif in the novel, which is both an act of resistance and a means of survival. The novel, thus, highlights the environmental crisis which, if unchecked, may lead to a tremendous cataclysm.

**Keywords:** Apartheid, politics, ecology, gardening, war, anthropocentrism

J. M. Coetzee's critically acclaimed novel, *Life and Times of Michael K*, was the recipient of the Booker prize in 1983. The novel accounts for Michael K's taut adventures and implacable adversities while he travels from Cape Town to Prince Albert. The narrative is divided into three sections, all of the uneven length. It begins with the eponymous K, born with a cleft lip and a gaping left nostril. This physical irregularity marginalizes him from society. He, however, works as a gardener in the parks and gardens division of the municipality services in Cape Town. K is thirty-one years old

when the country plummets into a civil war. The novel's epigraph taken from Heraclitus' *Cosmic Fragments* sets the tone for the narrative based on turbulent times. Amid this political mayhem, K's mother, Anna K, falls ill and sends a message to her son to come and fetch her from the hospital. K's sick mother yearns for her birthplace and earnestly desires to be taken to a farm in Prince Albert, where she had spent her childhood.

K was raking leaves in the De Waal when the news about his ailing mother reached him. He quits his job for this filial duty and sets out to procure the required travel permits and book the train tickets to Prince Albert. As time passes, K realizes that the permits would not come or maybe would take a long time and hence, decides to leave the city without any papers. He makes a crude trolley cart and carries her in this make-shift carriage. Anna K's health deteriorates en route to Prince Albert, and she eventually dies in a hospital in Stellenbosch. K, nonetheless, decides to resume his journey to take his mother's ashes to Prince Albert. His endeavor is often halted by the police, who restrain him for not having adequate travel documents. They force him to work as a manual worker on a railway track. Soon after his task on the track is over, he again embarks on his journey to Prince Albert.

On its surface, the novel is an unembellished rendition of human struggles and ways of survival. However, a comprehensive reading of the text delineates that K's journey is both physical and spiritual. It is a stark portrayal of K's perseverance in a world working against him. When he reaches the district of Prince Albert, he enquires about a Visagie farm that his

Mother had talked about it. Moreover, when he finds the farm, he observes that it is unruly and deserted. In his tiring journey from Cape Town, he survives on scanty food and consumes crushed mealies and bonemeal. Occasionally, he roasted a turtle dove and ate it. Sometimes he gobbled unripe carrots and rotten fruits to go on. However, once he is on the Visagie farm, he puts his gardening skills into action, cultivates the land, and finally sows some seeds. After enduring so many hardships, he becomes an enlightened person. He can now discern the truth about himself that '*I am a gardener*' (Coetzee 181). Because of the utter isolation, K can apprehend the depth of human quandary in a war-torn country. The novel evinces the cruelties inflicted upon plants, animals, and the earth. Therefore, the novel pronounces its political and ecological concerns from the very outset. It offers profuse ecological details by paying close attention to all living things ranging from tiny insects to mighty men. Apart from deliberating upon the geographical terrain of the region, it also shows how the extreme weather conditions affect and compound the already miserable lives of the poor.

In Prince Albert, K killed a ewe and feasted on it for some days. However, when it started to stink, he had to bury it. This act exerted a palpable influence on him. It inculcated in him a sense of compassion. He deduced that one should never kill large animals. He began to cultivate pumpkins, mealies, and melons and became a cultivator on the farm. He sincerely desired to rejuvenate the life of the farm. He repaired the dam to irrigate the farm. He lived off by killing sparrows and doves with a natural catapult during this time. When the pumpkin seeds began to sprout, the forsaken farm suddenly had a new visitor; it was the grandson of the Visages. This Visagie boy had quit his service and was hiding from the military.

K is a sensitive person who alone takes care of the forsaken and neglected land in times of war. He buries his mother's ashes on the farm and considers earth a formidable mother. He

does not consider himself a participant in the war because his soul belongs to the earth. He eats the bread of 'freedom,' and his occupation is gardening; that is the truth he whispers to himself. Nature provides him solace in the agonizing days of political strife. Consequently, one can say that "the ecological meaning emerges from the political" (Head 102).

Throughout his journey, K sees signs of neglect and abandonment everywhere. Once the Visagie boy comes on the farm, he tries to master K and command him. This conduct of the new proprietor exasperated K, and he went away to live in the mountains. There he endured his life as a hermit. While he was up in the mountains, the only thing that occupied his mind was the Visagie farm. He continuously thought about the pumpkins and the melons that he had planted. The rugged terrain and the lack of sustenance took a toll on his health. K's escaping into nature is symbolic of some significant lessons that life taught him. He consistently retreats to the earth only when he fully fathoms the administrative vacillation and the dehumanizing ways of the world. (Garrard 27-28). Thus, Coetzee clarifies that political turmoil adversely affects humans, birds, and animals. Apart from this, it also violates the resourcefulness of the earth. The novel raises both political and ecological questions. This juxtaposition of the humane and the vicious also sheds light on K's persona, who, despite his passive attitude, comes across as a compassionate person who not only takes care of the farmland but feeds the Visagie boy too.

The changing scenario made him think of himself as a changed man. After his sojourn in the mountains, he made his way down; it took him a whole day to reach the street. His undernourished condition made him feverish. Eventually, he was found by the police, who put him in a cell. They charged him for defying the curfew and leaving the city of Cape Town without the authorities' permission. He was not carrying any travel documents or an identity card. Hence, they labeled him as Michael

Visagie— CM—40—NFA—Unemployed.  
Michael Marais very succinctly notes:

The point here is that the state authorities “write” the story of Michael K’s life and times. The state creates an identity for Michael K by arbitrarily naming him and then manipulating him through language. Language thus emerges as the ‘companion of empire.’ (69)

K's freedom is curbed, and the author sheds light on the racist social system and the workings of the authoritarian state, which decides where a person can inhabit and where not. The narrative deftly brings attention to K’s status. Set against the background of the apartheid era, K is doubly segregated because of his race and physical deformity. The mother-son duo is deprived of the privileges that a human being enjoys. They are often declassified to the level of animals. Even the police recognize that K is in lousy health, so they take him to the hospital. After the brief medical attention, he is driven to Jakkalsdrif relocation camp, surrounded by a barbed wire and guarded by the soldiers. However, K secures an opportunity in due course of time and escapes. This is because they infringe on his freedom. The officials in charge of the camp use coercion to achieve order and discipline. This echoes what Foucault suggested in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*:

It aimed to establish presences and absences, know where and how to locate individuals, set up good communications, interrupt others, supervise each individual's conduct, assess it, judge it, and calculate its qualities or merits. Therefore, it was a procedure aimed at knowing, mastering, and using. (143)

It is a war that curtails human freedom in the novel. K shared similar experiences in one of the camps where he was asked to jump and then jump again and again until he collapsed. He is asked to sing, and when he refuses, he is given a severe punishment that completely destabilizes him. Coetzee ably weaves in the menace of racism as a latent factor that leads to

environmental degradation precisely because the needs of the blacks or poor are not considered. When K went to the Visagie farm, he noted that it was dead. There was no sign of pumpkins or mealies. K is isolated throughout his life. He lives in the terrible times of peril which force him to hide in an underground burrow. For days, he went on without eating, and then it came home that he must go back to gardening. K's attempt to elude the war, breaking off from the camps and evading the police, suggests that he privileges nature over the nation. The novel enunciates a reasonable question regarding the ideal time for gardening. The protagonist in the novel stays back on the veld

So he again sowed pumpkin and melon seeds, tended them, and waited for them to grow food. During his stay on the veld, he witnessed some men coming on the farm while he was hiding in a burrow. He was not aware that they might be the guerrillas. Soon afterward, the soldiers came to the veld and picked him up and interrogated him on account of having helped the insurgents. They tried to beat him but then soon became mindful of his sickness. They put him in a rehabilitation camp where he was treated with proper care and responsibility. In addition to this, a medical officer in the camp became fascinated with him. He tried to know K’s story and the hardships he had endured in life. However, K remained unyielding for the most part. He refused to eat the camp food. The medical officer at the Kenilworth camp tried to dig into K’s soul and ultimately inferred that K is a human soul beyond any race or color classification. He bestowed K with an affection that he had lacked all his life. He looked into K's being without being affected or repulsed by his harelip. He observed K's distinctiveness and that he must have been wrongly accused of aiding the guerrillas. The medical officer goes out of his way to help him get rid of this case.

K, however, breaks free from the Kenilworth camp too. He then meets a group of genial and easy-going people. A woman from this group becomes intimate with him. Soon

afterward, K returns to the place where his mother lived in the city of Cape Town. Finally, the novel ends with K reminiscing how people behave toward him and how they desperately want to know his story. He abhors the charity that people vouchsafed him and hopes to escape it as he escaped all the camps and cages throughout his life. He reflects on the life he lived on the farm and the plentiful resources it offers and finally reckons that one can live off the land.

The deadpan narrative tone of the novel makes K's melancholic measures efficacious. The simplicity of the protagonist lends both a sense of originality and finesse to the novel. The protagonist never comes across as a fictional character or a figment of the author's imagination.

The reader almost correlates with K as a natural person embroiled in a war-torn zone. A very responsive and sensitive reader vicariously identifies and feels all his misfortunes. As the narrative gains momentum, the reader realizes that the perceived doltish nature of K is a result of unequal treatment meted out to the members belonging to the lower strata of the society. The acronyms used to describe K ostensibly refer that he is a colored male, unemployed with no fixed abode. However, Coetzee never overtly establishes the race of any of his characters. However, then the tacit hints and the arresting imagery of the novel presuppose that the protagonist and his mother most probably belong to the community of the blacks. The narrative breaks in the second section of the novel, where the omniscient narrator is replaced by the medical officer who functions as a caregiver to K. He does not spell K's first name rightly; he calls him 'Michaels' instead of Michael. He strives to penetrate and unravel K's concealed self and, therefore, remarks that "Michaels means something, and the meaning he has is not private to me" (165).

K refuses to yield to the whims and fancies of the white medical officer. His silence, therefore, becomes a powerful weapon of

resistance against oppression inflicted on the people of color. He falls silent because the authority stifles him with an iron fist. The state gives him inappropriate labels and decides where he can go and what he can do. Hence, his silence accentuates as the pace of the narrative gains, and he becomes a solitary wanderer. His refusal to eat in the Kenilworth camp is also an implied resistance against camp life and food, and his stubborn stance makes the medical officer realize that K's refusal to eat was not because he wished to die. It was because "He just does not like the food here. Profoundly does not like it. He will not even take baby food here. Maybe he only eats the bread of freedom" (146). The plot of the novel is allocated a secondary position. What is crucial is how Michael K lives and acclimatizes himself in the difficult times of apartheid politics, where he is constantly put under siege. This is precisely the reason that no war is depicted in the novel. It is only the functioning of the fractured system that is constantly referred to. K annihilates himself to the extent that he becomes one with the earth. He merges so much with the land that he says, "Let darkness fall soon, let the earth swallow me up and protect me" (107).

The novel abounds with animal imagery, and the novelist consistently compares K and his mother to animals to foreground the inhuman racial discrimination rampant in the country. The writer brings forth a vital point that landscapes and adverse climatic conditions affect the poor more forcefully. For example, Anna K feels "like a toad under a stone" (9) when she slips a towel under the door to prevent the seepage. Also, when the locality witnessed a state of fear and tumult, "Anna K and her son huddled quietly as mice in their room" (12). Subsequently and his mother sleep "on a bed of leaves" (25) like vagrant beggars while going to Prince Albert. Michael K also stole tea in a hospital at Stellenbosch and gulped "it down like a guilty dog" (30) and then "climbed into a great wire cage containing soiled linen and slept there, curled up like a cat" (32). Moving on through the farms, he came across an apple orchard where

signs of neglect were evident with excessive grass and weeds. When he entered the orchard, he started chewing on an apple “as quickly as a rabbit, his eyes vacant”(39). When he lived in the mountains, K “thought of himself as a termite boring its way through a rock” (66). While he lived on the veld, he behaved “Like a worm...to slither towards his hole” (107). Even the medical officer compares him to a stick insect. He says:

You are like a stick insect, Michaels, whose only defense against a universe of predators is its bizarre shape. You are like a stick insect that has landed; God knows how in the middle of a tremendous broad flat bare concrete plain. You raise your slow, fragile stick-legs one at a time, you inch about looking for something to merge with, and there is nothing. (149)

Thus, the narrative questions the disquieting reality of the political system and incessantly juxtaposes the country's war zone with the quiet and serene countryside. Coetzee highlights the significance of other living beings and the landscapes and how they become a source of survival and solace for death and plague. The novelist portrays the atrocities inflicted upon animals by depicting a “truckload of sheep, packed so tight that some stood on their hind legs” (36). The novelist also underscores the poverty-stricken conditions of the non-whites, which force them to eat roots and lizards in a racist political system.

When K experiences the pangs of hunger, he pulls out carrots from the earth and exclaims that “It is God’s earth...I am not a thief”(39). The novel has explicit references that reveal how K lives in an authoritarian bureaucracy and how he tries to escape the social and racial categorization that seeks to impose an order on the majority of the population that consists of the non-whites. K denounces the idea of camp life that he experiences; he thinks: of parents bringing up children behind the wire, their children and the children of cousins and second cousins, on earth stamped so tight by their

footsteps day after day, baked so hard by the sun, that nothing would ever grow there again. (104)

Therefore, K takes a cue from these circumstances and develops a desire never to raise a family. He feels fortunate to be all alone and without a spouse. He recognizes that it is unsuitable to survive in a turbulent country and troublesome to raise children and look after a family. Gardening is the only source of succour during these times. He looks after the seeds like a father:

Among the seeds, he had sown been a melon seed. Now two pale green melons were growing on the far side of the field. It seemed to him that he loved these two, which he thought of as two sisters, even more than the pumpkins, which he thought of as a band of brothers. Under the melons, he placed grass pads so that their skins should not bruise. (113)

The protagonist, in some sense, represents an ancient or an early man. In her novel review, Gordimer comments, “The single sure joy Michael K can experience is the taste of a pumpkin he has grown, hidden from the just and unjust of marauding history.” In a highly dependent world on machinery and automation, the protagonist detests a simple radio because the music never comforts or soothes him. “Whenever someone played the music, he felt that “the air was full of nervous electric rhythms that unsettled him”(123). He said: "The music made me restless...I used to fidget; I could not think my thoughts" (133). Besides this, Coetzee pays close attention to plants, animals, and little birds. He delineates the slaughtering of the sparrows in poignant terms. Specifically, when K saves the goats and kills four sparrows to feed the Visagie boy. Moreover, when he killed them, he “held up the four dead birds, their feet together in a tangle of claws. There was a pearl of blood at the beak of one of the sparrows so small you do not taste it as it goes down”(63).

This attention to detail toward the non-human other makes the novel rich in ecological ethics. It deplores anthropocentric activities and

technological advances, which pose severe physical and mental hazards when taken to an extreme. This juxtaposition between humans and animals is also seen in the writings of Derrida. In "The Animal That Therefore I am," he philosophically reflects on the subject concerning the animal or the non-human in his typical deconstructionist vein. He problematizes the concept of the animal by terming an animal as '*wholly other that they call animal*' (380). He mainly focuses on the dialectical tension between humans and animals and the ontological distinctions between the two. He explores the definitions of the human and the non-human in a critical light and further notes:

The animal is there before me; they are close to me, there in front of me-I who am (following) after it. Moreover, therefore, since it is before me, it is behind me. It surrounds me. Moreover, from the vantage of this being-there-before-me, it can allow itself to be looked at, no doubt, but also something that philosophy forgets, perhaps being this calculated forgetting itself-it can look at me. It has its point of view regarding me. The point of view of the absolute other.... (380)

Derrida points out that philosophers and thinkers have seldom attempted to analyze the concept of human and non-human in a holistic manner. For him, 'animal' is a reductionist term that clubs all non-humans in one category. Hence, the essay then is an indictment directed toward the maltreatment of animals. Apart from this, the novel echoes the idea of textuality as posited by Derrida. The novelist very skilfully makes the protagonist elusory. He does not point out his race and does not establish what K stands for. He depicts him as a silent man who is a "great escape artist" (166). He portrays him as "The obscurest of the obscure, so obscure as to be a prodigy"(142). He makes him an itinerant who belongs to nowhere except the garden. Even the medical officer at the camp describes his stay as an allegory. He opines: "It was an allegory—speaking at the highest level—of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can

take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it"(166).

The protagonist's disposition adeptly illustrates Derrida's concept of difference. He is never able to comprehend himself:

Invariably, when he tried to explain himself, there remained a gap, a hole, darkness before which his understanding balked, into which it was useless to pour words. The words were eaten up, and the gap remained. His was always a story with a hole in it: a wrong story, consistently wrong. (110)

Coetzee does not mention the year in which the story takes place or the time duration the story takes to unfold. When the novel opens, K is thirty-one years old, and according to his preliminary calculations about time, he is around thirty-two or thirty-three years old at the end of it. Similarly, the narrative is open-ended, where K heads toward the farm after learning some basic lessons about life, love, survival, and society. His deep connection with the land is a direct result of his disquietude with the enforced humiliation of the people belonging to the poor sections of the society. Gardening becomes the *raison d'être* against the ennui that modern civilization provokes in him. It nourishes him and becomes a potent weapon in his hands against all the vicissitudes that life brings upon him. The novel, thus, offers a wealth of political and ecological insights.

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