

## Liberty Unbound: A Critical Examination Of Freedom In J.M. Coetzee's 'Life And Times Of Michael K'

S.KUMARAN ARUL DEVARAM<sup>1</sup>, Dr. S.GUNASEKARAN ( Corresponding Author )<sup>2</sup>

### ABSTRACT:

*“Liberty Unbound: A Critical Examination of Freedom in J.M. Coetzee’ s ‘ Life and Times of Michael K’ ” meticulously explores the theme of freedom in Coetzee’ s novel. Employing literary, political, and postcolonial lenses, the paper dissects the complex layers of autonomy within the socio-political context of the narrative. Unveiling the protagonist’s pursuit of freedom amid external influences, the study scrutinizes Coetzee’ s narrative techniques, emphasizing symbolism and language. Engaging with existentialism, it interprets Michael K’ s journey as a microcosm of existential dilemmas, expanding the discourse on freedom. This interdisciplinary analysis challenges conventional notions, contributing fresh insights to the ongoing literary and philosophical dialogue. “ Liberty Unbound” prompts a reconsideration of personal agency amidst external constraints, offering a nuanced understanding of freedom that transcends the novel’ s confines. In essence, this paper invites readers to critically engage with Coetzee’ s work, unraveling the intricate dynamics of freedom and oppression, resonating with broader philosophical and political inquiries.*

**Key words:** *J.M. Coetzee, Life and Times of Michael K, Freedom, Autonomy, Literary Analysis Socio-political Context, Symbolism, Existentialism, Postcolonial Perspectives, Interdisciplinary Approach.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION:

In the enthralling tapestry of J.M. Coetzee’ s literary oeuvre, ‘ Life and Times of Michael K’ stands as a poignant exploration of the human condition, dissecting the intricacies of freedom in the face of opp<sup>1</sup>ressive forces. This paper, titled “ Liberty Unbound: A Critical Examination of Freedom in J.M. Coetzee’ s ‘ Life and Times of Michael K’ ,” endeavors to unravel the layers of autonomy and constraint woven into the narrative fabric of this seminal work. Coetzee, a master of linguistic precision and nuanced storytelling, crafts a world where the quest for freedom becomes a compelling motif, with the enigmatic protagonist, Michael K, serving as a conduit for exploring the broader complexities of personal agency in the midst of socio-political upheaval.

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<sup>1</sup>Ph.D. Research Scholar Department of English Anna University University College of Engineering BIT Campus Tiruchirappalli-620 024

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor (Senior Grade) Department of English Anna University University College of Engineering BIT Campus Tiruchirappalli- 620 024

As we delve into the heart of this analysis, our journey begins by situating ‘ Life and Times of Michael K’ within the socio-political landscape that serves as the backdrop for the characters struggles. It is within this intricately constructed world that external forces exert their influence, shaping the contours of freedom that the characters seek to navigate. The paper aims to illuminate how Coetzee’ s narrative prowess captures not only the tangible manifestations of oppression but also the subtle nuances that define resistance and the pursuit of autonomy.

Crucially, this study extends beyond a mere literary analysis, embracing an interdisciplinary approach that draws from political philosophy and postcolonial perspectives. Coetzee’ s exploration of freedom transcends the confines of the novel, inviting us to engage with broader philosophical questions about the nature of autonomy and self-determination. By weaving together threads of existentialist philosophy, political critique, and literary theory, this examination seeks to offer a holistic understanding of the profound implications embedded in the narrative.

“ Liberty Unbound” strives to contribute to the ongoing discourse surrounding freedom in literature, providing a fresh lens through which to view Coetzee’ s work. In challenging conventional perspectives and unraveling the intricate dynamics between personal agency and external constraints, this paper aspires to not only illuminate the profound depths of ‘ Life and Times of Michael K’ but also to resonate with broader philosophical and political inquiries that endure beyond the confines of the novel. As we embark on this critical exploration, the stage is set for a nuanced examination that transcends the boundaries of fiction to illuminate essential truths about the human quest for liberty.

## 2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

1. **Deconstruct Coetzee’ s Concept of Freedom:** Unravel J.M. Coetzee’ s nuanced conceptualization of freedom in ‘ Life and Times of Michael K,’ examining how the author interprets and presents the multifaceted nature of liberty within the narrative.
2. **Analyze Societal and Political Influences:** Investigate the impact of socio-political factors on the characters pursuit of freedom, drawing connections between the fictional world and real-world historical and contemporary contexts to illuminate the broader socio-political commentary within the novel.
3. **Evaluate Narrative Techniques:** Critically assess Coetzee's narrative craftsmanship, emphasizing linguistic choices, symbolism, and literary devices to elucidate how these elements contribute to conveying the complexities of oppression, resistance, and the quest for autonomy.
4. **Explore Existential Dilemmas:** Engage with existentialist philosophy to decipher the existential dilemmas faced by characters, particularly Michael K, and analyze how these dilemmas shape the overarching philosophical themes of freedom explored in the novel.
5. **Contribute to Interdisciplinary Discourse:** Employ an interdisciplinary approach, integrating literary analysis, political philosophy, and postcolonial perspectives, to enrich the exploration of freedom beyond traditional literary boundaries, fostering a deeper understanding of the novel's implications for broader philosophical and political discussions.

## 3. LITERATURE REVIEW:

J.M. Coetzee's 'Life and Times of Michael K' has garnered extensive critical attention for its profound exploration of freedom, both as a thematic concern and a complex philosophical inquiry. The literature surrounding Coetzee's work and the broader themes of freedom provides a rich foundation for understanding the depth and significance of "Liberty Unbound: A Critical Examination of Freedom in J.M. Coetzee's 'Life and Times of Michael K.'" "

Scholars such as Ato Quayson (2007) and Derek Attridge (2015) have delved into Coetzee's novels, emphasizing the author's adept use of language and symbolism. Quayson, in particular, underscores the role of Coetzee's narrative techniques in conveying the intricacies of power dynamics and resistance. Attridge, on the other hand, emphasizes the ethical implications embedded in Coetzee's narratives.

In the exploration of freedom within literature, the works of Martha Nussbaum (1990) and Amartya Sen (1999) have been instrumental in providing a theoretical framework. Nussbaum's capabilities approach and Sen's capability theory offer lenses through which to understand the nuanced dimensions of freedom as experienced by individuals within societal structures. These perspectives will inform the analysis of freedom within the socio-political context of 'Life and Times of Michael K.'

Existentialist philosophy, a key aspect of the paper, finds resonance in the works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. Sartre's exploration of existential freedom and Camus's philosophical inquiries into absurdity provide critical touchstones for understanding the existential dilemmas faced by Michael K and other characters in the novel.

Moreover, postcolonial scholars such as Homi K. Bhabha (1994) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) have contributed significantly to discussions on the intersection of power, resistance, and agency. Their theoretical frameworks will be instrumental in dissecting the socio-political dimensions of 'Life and Times of Michael K,' particularly in the context of colonial legacies and power structures.

In summarizing the existing literature, it is evident that scholars have recognized Coetzee's prowess in crafting narratives that delve into the complexities of freedom. However, this paper aims to contribute by synthesizing these perspectives, adopting an interdisciplinary approach, and offering fresh insights into the thematic richness of 'Life and Times of Michael K.' Through a critical examination of Coetzee's work within the broader theoretical frameworks of political philosophy, postcolonial studies, and existentialist thought, this study seeks to push the boundaries of existing discourse on freedom in literature.

#### **4. METHODOLOGY:**

The critical examination of freedom in J.M. Coetzee's 'Life and Times of Michael K' in the paper titled "Liberty Unbound" employs a rigorous and interdisciplinary methodology, encompassing literary analysis, political philosophy, and postcolonial perspectives. This methodological approach is designed to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the theme of freedom within the novel.

##### **1. Literary Analysis:**

- **Close Reading:** Conduct a close reading of key passages in 'Life and Times of Michael K' to discern linguistic nuances, symbolism, and literary devices employed by Coetzee in conveying the themes of freedom, oppression, and resistance.

- **Character Analysis:** Scrutinize the characters, especially Michael K, to understand their motivations, conflicts, and the evolution of their pursuit of freedom throughout the narrative.
  - **Narrative Structure:** Analyze the novel's structure, exploring how Coetzee's narrative choices contribute to the thematic development and portrayal of freedom.
2. **Political Philosophy:**
- **Capabilities Approach:** Apply Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach and Amartya Sen's capability theory to evaluate the characters' agency and the limitations imposed upon them, shedding light on the philosophical dimensions of freedom.
  - **Power Dynamics:** Utilize Michel Foucault's insights to examine power dynamics within the socio-political setting of the novel, focusing on how institutions and societal structures influence the characters' quest for freedom.
3. **Existentialist Analysis:**
- **Sartrean Philosophy:** Employ Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy to dissect the existential dilemmas faced by characters, particularly Michael K, and analyze how their choices contribute to the exploration of freedom as an existential concept.
  - **Camusian Absurdity:** Explore Albert Camus's concept of absurdity to understand the characters' responses to the challenges they encounter, emphasizing how absurd situations shape their perceptions of freedom.
4. **Postcolonial Perspectives:**
- **Colonial Legacies:** Examine the novel through a postcolonial lens, considering the impact of colonial legacies on characters' experiences of freedom and oppression.
  - **Hybridity and Otherness:** Apply Homi K. Bhabha's notions of hybridity and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the subaltern to investigate how these postcolonial perspectives inform the characters' identities and agency.
5. **Interdisciplinary Synthesis:**
- **Integration of Perspectives:** Synthesize findings from literary analysis, political philosophy, existentialist analysis, and postcolonial perspectives to provide a holistic understanding of the complexities surrounding the theme of freedom within the novel.
  - **Critical Engagement:** Encourage a critical dialogue between different disciplinary lenses, fostering a nuanced and multifaceted interpretation of Coetzee's exploration of freedom.

This interdisciplinary methodology aims to uncover the layers of meaning embedded in 'Life and Times of Michael K,' offering a comprehensive analysis that extends beyond traditional literary critique and engages with the broader philosophical and political inquiries posed by the novel.

## 5. RESEARCH ANALYSIS:

J.M. Coetzee's initial foray into Booker Prize success, "Life and Times of Michael K" (1983), sets the stage for a narrative rife with irony, as suggested by its very title. The life of the central character, Michael, lacks the conventional markers of vitality and temporal progression, rendering the title itself a paradox. Michael, an ethereal figure, finds himself severed from social bonds, resembling an angelic being navigating a world devoid of meaningful connections. The novel unfolds as a testament to Michael's rebellion against a political system persistently striving to ensnare him within the confines of a welfare state.

Endowed with a harelip and a contemplative yet unhurried mind, Michael traverses a life devoid of paternal guidance. His formative years transpire under the state's care alongside other disenfranchised children. Joining the municipal services of Cape Town as a gardener at fifteen, Michael rises to the position of gardener grade 3b before departing after three years. Subsequently employed as a night attendant at a public lavatory on Green Market Square, Michael faces adversity when two assailants rob him, leaving him beaten and bereft of possessions. Despite this setback, he retraces his steps to the parks and gardens, resuming his role as a gardener.

However, this past serves merely as a backdrop to the novel's central focus—the events transpiring in Michael's life during his thirty-first year. The epigraph, drawn from the text, resonates with significance: "War is the father of all and king of all. Some he shows as gods, others as men. Some he makes slaves and others free" (p.88-89). This profound statement frames the narrative, highlighting the omnipotent influence of war in determining the destinies of individuals and shaping societal structures.

The civil war forms the tumultuous backdrop of Coetzee's novel, a period marked by disorder and anarchy. Amidst this chaotic landscape, authorities vigilantly monitor the situation, and hospitals become veritable purgatories. Corridors are crowded with serious patients, bearing witness to the aftermath of stabbings, beatings, and gunshot wounds. Coetzee's portrayal emphasizes the dehumanizing nature of hospitals, where individuals become mere objects subject to oppressive and absurd formalities, emblematic of the broader power structures within the state.

In the novel, the father figure represents the political authority, and Michael emerges as his son—a casualty of the ongoing war. This conflict further widens the chasm between the ruling class and the innocent populace, ensnared in the oppressive order of the day. Michael, portrayed as the ugly offspring of a South Africa yearning for freedom, grapples with the dehumanizing impact of the prevailing social and political structures.

As Michael's mother is released from the hospital, he endeavors to bring her back to Cape Town. However, the town itself is engulfed in turmoil, reflecting the broader societal unrest. In a poignant suggestion, Anna K., Michael's mother, proposes that he abandon his role as a gardener and accompany her to her native place, Prince Albert, where she has secured accommodations and he may find work on a farm. The envisioned escape to Prince Albert becomes a metaphor for the pursuit of freedom in the face of societal turbulence. Yet, the obstacles persist, epitomized by the lack of swift reservations for train journeys, emphasizing the arduous journey toward liberation within the confines of an inhuman order.

In the narrative's progression, the characters, including Michael K, encounter formidable challenges as they attempt to break free from the constrictions of their environment. Amidst the chaos of curfews, strikes, and ransacked flats, South Africa becomes a crucible of unrest. Michael, seeking an escape from the pervasive turmoil, constructs a makeshift barrow for his mother in a bid to navigate through a convoluted life. Tragically, Anna falls ill on their journey, and her eventual demise leaves Michael emotionally bereft. His silence in response to the procedural demands after her death underscores the depth of his loss, as he transforms into an orphan without kin.

Upon receiving his mother's ashes and unwanted possessions, Michael embarks on a journey toward Prince Albert. However, his path is fraught with challenges. The specter of war

and social upheaval continues to haunt him, as he is perceived as a thief attempting to evade capture. His escape unfolds through abandoned lands and encounters with strangers, leading him to a life of uncertainty and precariousness.

As Michael navigates this arduous journey, the narrative explores the themes of confinement and resistance. His brief respite on a deserted farm allows him to reconnect with nature and attempt a semblance of a normal life. However, even in this newfound sanctuary, the oppressive reality reasserts itself. Visagie's grandson, a fellow deserter from the army, introduces Michael to a world devoid of monetary transactions and modern conveniences.

The narrative takes a poignant turn as Michael, ignorant of the complexities of currency and bureaucracy, is thrust into a legal quagmire. The absence of official documentation relegates him to the status of an unrecognized and neglected child of South Africa. The resettlement camp, ostensibly a place for those without employment, becomes another form of captivity. As Michael grapples with the nightmarish reality, the camp emerges as a microcosm of exploitation, where residents are cheap labor for the state and are systematically subjected to economic exploitation by unscrupulous shopkeepers.

Within the confines of the resettlement camp, the narrative paints a stark and disheartening tableau of state-sponsored atrocity and exploitation. The state meticulously enforces its formalities, creating an illusion of order while perpetuating systemic oppression. On Sundays, a pastor's visit ostensibly introduces a semblance of spirituality through a prayer service, yet it serves as a veneer for the state's hypocrisy and its complicity in conspiracies against the very individuals it claims to serve.

The camp's harsh reality is underscored by the absence of medical facilities and essential medicines. Michael's fellow resident within the camp bluntly awakens him to the bitter truth, stating, "You have been asleep all your life. It's time to wake up. Why do you think they give you charity, you and the children? Because they think you are harmless, your eyes aren't opened, you do not see the truth around you" (p.88-89).

Michael's defiance takes shape against the oppressive system entrenched within the camp, where the provision of basic necessities—food, shelter, and clothes—coexists with a systematic design that perpetuates the imprisonment of its residents. Despite the seemingly benevolent facade, Michael rejects this life of dependency, yearning to earn his sustenance on his own terms.

Coetzee employs the metaphor of parasitism to illustrate the complex relationships between individuals and institutions, mirroring the Foucauldian notion of power as a pervasive and influential force within various social dynamics. However, unlike Foucault's perspective on power as both pervasive and productive, the power portrayed in the novel is corrosive. The state, asserting its dominance, legitimizes the exploitation of the impoverished, breaking the very backbone of civil life in South Africa.

In a damning characterization, the people in the camp are derogatorily labeled a "nest of parasites: 'who eat substance, giving no nourishment back'" (p.116). This depiction underscores the dehumanizing impact of the state's power, reducing individuals to mere recipients of charity without providing avenues for personal agency or self-sufficiency.

The novel intricately explores the delicate boundary between the roles of host and parasite, where the power dynamic allows for a potential reversal of positions: "Perhaps in truth whether the camp was declared parasite or the camp depended on no more than one who made his voice loudest" (page 116). This fragility underscores the tenuous nature of power relations, highlighting the potential for those in power to redefine the narrative to suit their interests.

Amidst the corrosive power within the camp, gardening emerges as Michael's only alternative for resistance. From the inception of his journey as a gardener to his eventual realization at the novel's conclusion, Michael identifies with this vocation as his true calling: "The truth, the truth about me. I am a gardener" (p.181). The symbolism of gardening extends beyond a mere occupation; it becomes a profound ideological stance, a counterforce to war and destructive influences.

Scattering the ashes of his deceased mother across the uncultivated land becomes a symbolic act of connecting with Mother Earth. Michael transforms patches of barren land into his Eden, cultivating melons and pumpkins. This cultivated space stands as a testament to the abundance that the earth can provide for all humanity. Despite the toil of his tender hands, Michael rejects the notion of possession, emphasizing a communal ownership of the bounties grown on this land.

Even when the police intervene and confiscate Michael's vegetables, he remains undeterred. His proclamation, "We are all the children of the earth" (p.139), encapsulates the ethos of shared existence and collective responsibility.

Coetzee draws a profound parallel between Michael and the Eternal Gardener, akin to Christ. In this literary exploration, Michael's gardening becomes a humble yet powerful negation of destructive forces. He embraces a perspective where his deceased mother is not truly gone but has integrated herself with Mother Earth, actively contributing to the growth of plants: "She makes the plants grow" (p.130). This symbolic connection transcends the conventional boundaries of life and death, positioning Michael as a steward of life.

The narrative suggests that Michael is acutely aware of the absurdity inherent in the ongoing war. He comprehends the reasons behind it, articulating a poignant observation: "Because enough men had gone off to war saying the time for gardening was when the war was over; whereas there must be men to stay behind and keep gardening alive" (p.109). This insight underscores the transformative power of gardening, not just as a practical activity but as a symbol of resilience against the destructive forces of war.

Throughout the novel, Michael appears to be devoid of any genuine human connections. His solace comes from tending to his garden, where he creates a sense of community for himself. However, a notable absence of strong bonds among the characters is evident. At one point, Michael even refers to his melons and pumpkins as his close relatives. Despite this unconventional connection, there is a palpable void in his life when it comes to traditional human relationships.

The narrative takes a turn when Michael encounters legal trouble, leading to his arrest. Subsequently, he finds himself admitted to a hospital. The attending doctor, who also serves as the narrator, is taken aback by Michael's physical condition, weighing less than forty kilos. The doctor is left with a sense that Michael seems disconnected from the world, referring to him as "Michaels."

Amidst his struggles, Michael's singular desire is to attain freedom. He expresses this longing by reminiscing about the idea of flying, stating, "I used to think about flying. I always wanted to fly" (p.133). This poignant reflection adds another layer to Michael's character, hinting at a deeper yearning for escape and liberation.

He vehemently protests against the polished system of state-sponsored slavery, showcasing remarkable tenacity to endure. The doctor accurately observes, "He passes through these institutions and camps and hospitals and God knows what else like a stone. Through the intestines of the war" (p.135), highlighting Michael's resilience in the face of oppressive systems.

Even in the hospital, Michael's refusal to consume the offered baby food is symbolic of his unwavering commitment to principles. As expressed, "He only eats the bread of freedom" (p.146), emphasizing his dedication to the pursuit of liberty.

The doctor, acting as both narrator and observer, discerns a divine spark within Michael. The doctor reflects on Michael's nature as, "...a human soul above and beneath classification, a soul blessedly untouched by doctrine, untouched by history, a soul stirring its wings within that stiff sarcophagus, murmuring behind that clownish mask" (p.151). This insightful portrayal captures the essence of Michael's character—a soul unencumbered by societal norms, history, or doctrinal influences, symbolizing a yearning for freedom and authenticity.

Yearning to live freely like a bird, Michael manages to escape from the hospital, leaving the doctor astounded. The doctor perceives Michael as an angel originating from the Garden of Paradise. When admitted, Michael's weight had dwindled to a mere thirty-five kilos, his emaciated form reflecting his two-week abstinence from food. Despite his weakened state, Michael defies expectations by climbing walls and eluding capture—a miraculous feat that leaves the treating doctor in awe.

The doctor observes shades of divinity in Michael's personality, recognizing that he seeks the "food of freedom" that neither the camp nor the hospital can provide. Seated on a bench overlooking the sea, Michael encounters three individuals who offer him wine and meat. Their surprise at Michael's presence is palpable. One of them astutely remarks, "It is difficult to be kind to a person who wants nothing" (p.179), capturing the enigmatic and self-reliant nature of Michael's character.

The medical officer at the government hospital endeavors to grasp and portray Michael's otherness, but these efforts prove futile. Michael's enigmatic and perplexing otherness remains intact, both in the eyes of the officer and the reader. Michael himself does not attempt to offer a logical or plausible explanation for his escapes or his way of life. In fact, he accepts life as it comes, cognizant of his insignificance in a native country plagued by perpetual strife and an oppressive system threatening human dignity.

Coetzee consistently provides hints that reveal Michael's true nature, contrasting it sharply with the identity imposed by those in power. From birth to his final escape, a stark contrast emerges between Michael's capabilities and the constructed narrative imposed by those in authority. Born with a little lip curled like a snail's foot, Michael is deemed an ugly and unwanted child in South Africa. His vulnerability persists throughout the novel, evident even as an infant struggling to suckle and feed properly. This early struggle foreshadows the challenges he will face in life.



Raised by his mother, a housemaid, Michael is deemed incapable and disfigured, leading to a premature departure from school. Society's classification process pigeonholes him into menial tasks of manual labor, such as swiping, scrubbing, and digging. Despite his potential, he is unfairly labeled as abnormal or mentally challenged. Orphaned and relegated to a government-run orphanage in apartheid-era South Africa, Michael finds himself working as a night attendant in a public lavatory.

His mother's perpetual illness renders her incapable of raising him. The entire classification system works to confine Michael within accepted standards, limiting his education and opportunities. Despite the hardships, Michael endures and challenges the imposed narrative, embodying resilience and a refusal to conform to society's prejudiced expectations.

The hospital's conditions within the police state are dire, marked by the aftermath of stabbings and beatings. Michael's mother, upon admission, finds the hospital a place of unrest where the sounds of gunshots persist throughout the nights, preventing her from getting any rest. Instead of providing a healing environment, the hospital exacerbates her suffering, making her nights unbearable. Despite her desire to leave on the third day, she faces obstacles, only being allowed to depart on the sixth day. Coetzee vividly depicts Anna K's ordeal: "The tears she wept on the sixth day were thus largely tears of relief that she was escaping this purgatory" (p.5).

Even basic necessities like a bedpan and wheelchair are denied to patients, adding to their misery. Ordinary citizens find travel nearly impossible as special permits from police authorities are required to move between districts. The entire country resembles a prison or a police state, entangled in a labyrinth of bureaucratic processes. This portrayal mirrors the Kafkaesque world found in Franz Kafka's "The Castle," where delays, suspicions, gloating, and violence disrupt civilian life, throwing it into disarray. The pervasive atmosphere of tension and control renders everyday existence challenging for the people trapped within this oppressive system.

While Michael is initially portrayed as someone perceived as lacking intelligence and incapable of specialized tasks, Coetzee subtly suggests his hidden talents and intelligence, particularly in certain practical endeavors. A striking example is when Michael crafts a wheelbarrow with a box seat for his mother, ingeniously utilizing the wheels from his bicycle to construct a cart. Faced with the challenge of preventing the wheels from slipping off the axle, Michael dedicates an entire afternoon to the task, employing a hacksaw blade. Throughout this endeavor, he sacrifices meals and sleep, showcasing his skill and creativity in building the wheelbarrow. Remarkably, Michael remains oblivious to the quality of his work, reflecting his natural and unassuming approach to tasks—a characteristic that lends him an almost angelic quality in the novel.

After the passing of his mother, Michael finds himself at the Visagie's place. Here, he carves a Y-shaped stick and, using an old shoe tongue and rubber strips from an inner tube, crafts a catapult for knocking birds out of trees. His talents extend to cultivating the land, demonstrating both his remarkable love for and skill in agriculture. In his view, nothing is deemed useless, and he effortlessly applies his innate abilities to solve practical problems. In just a week, he successfully clears the land near the dam and restores the irrigation system's furrows, showcasing his miraculous problem-solving abilities grounded in his natural approach to life.

When liberated from the clutches of the military regime, Michael perceives himself as a free man, as Coetzee articulates: "He was not a prisoner or a castaway, his life by the dam was not a sentence that he had to serve out" (p.115). This newfound freedom grants him the ability to think and judge independently. Out of the seed of freedom, he cultivates metaphysics, a nuanced and thoughtful perspective. Unlike the coarse dogma of a killer, rebel, or terrorist, Michael doesn't align himself with guerrillas. Instead, he observes vulnerable children from various angles—the runaway seeking care and the carefree insurgents resembling young men after a challenging game. His perspective reflects a keen awareness of the complexities of human experience, free from the rigid ideologies often associated with conflict and rebellion.

Michael's unwavering yearning for freedom is palpable, especially behind the gates of the camp where eating becomes a struggle and nourishment seems elusive. His concept of food is entwined with freedom, a stark contrast to the wire fences and political organization enforcing curfews and restrictions. Within this stifling environment, where essence is smothered by oppressive laws and deceit, Michael is marginalized as a seemingly mindless and unfit creature, labeled a simpleton, idiot, or savage. The doctor marvels at Michael's ability to survive in such conditions, recognizing the resilience within him.

Color and power hold no significance for Michael; he focuses on the obvious and elemental, caring for matters divinely ordered. He does not label anything as tyranny and directs his care towards his mother and the earth. Eventually, he discovers that, in the end, these concerns converge.

From his time in the orphanage, Michael confronts the harsh realities of South African life—curfews, permits, interrogation, patrols, guns, and violence cast dark shadows on his mind. Choosing to live apart from the world of history and war, he decides to embark on a new life as a cultivator or gardener. The land and his cultivation offer a healing vision, temporarily placing him beyond the ongoing war.

One night, black guerrillas camp near Michael's garden, helping themselves to his pumpkins and melons. Despite being initially entranced by their proud laughter and tales of battle, he resists the temptation to join them. Reflecting on his sacred vocation as a gardener, he understands the importance of men staying behind to keep the idea of gardening alive. He articulates this realization, noting that enough men have gone to war believing the time for gardening is after the conflict ends. Michael sees himself as one of the essential individuals who must stay behind, preventing the earth from growing hard and forgetting her children: "because once the cord was broken, the earth would grow hard and forget her children" (p.109).

The power of the land is evident as Michael transcends the roles of a soldier, a supposed intellectually challenged boy, an orphan, or a refugee—he identifies himself as a gardener.

While the vision of peace that Coetzee's protagonists attain exists outside the confines of history, it is not devoid of consequences within historical contexts. Michael symbolizes an alternative way of living in relation to history and people, one that goes beyond the master-slave relationship. Upon escaping from the camp, he walks through the night without experiencing fatigue, trembling with the exhilaration of newfound freedom. He feels unburdened, and hunger becomes a distant sensation, the camp's tasteless and dusty food a mere memory. It is only upon arriving at the farm that he anticipates recovering his appetite and savoring food that emerges from the earth.

Despite becoming almost skeletal during his hardships in the camp, Michael, after escaping, moves about his field with a profound joy in his physical being. He achieves a state of weightlessness, a manifestation of the joy of freedom. Coetzee aptly captures Michael's bliss: "His step was so light that he barely touched the earth. It seemed possible to fly; be both body and spirit" (p.102). This description vividly conveys the transformative power of freedom and the profound connection Michael experiences with the land.

When Michael gains freedom, his natural abilities find expression. In need of a means to make fire, he resourcefully opens a suitcase of broken toys and discovers a red plastic telescope. Using one of the lances, he focuses the sun's rays sharply to coax smoke from a handful of dry grass. Michael possesses the skill to craft simple tools from wood, leather, and gut. In a testament to his pragmatic philosophy, he avoids leaving traces of his personality or identity after his departure, believing that insects will consume the tools when no longer needed.

The novel subtly alludes to Michael's relationship with his father, portraying him as an orphan with the state assuming the role of his father. As Michael articulates, ". . . and my father was HuisNorenius. My father was the list of the rules on the door of the dormitory, the twenty-one rules of which the first was ' There will be silence in dormitories at all times,' and the woodwork teacher with the missing fingers who twisted my ear when the line was not straight, and the Sunday mornings when we put on Khaki shirts and our Khaki shorts and our black socks and our black shoes. And marched two abreast to the church on Papegai Street to be forgiven. They were my father, . . ." (p.104-105). This passage underscores the institutional nature of Michael's upbringing, emphasizing the state and its rules as his perceived father figures.

The rules and regulations of the state serve as Michael's father, but this paternal figure has turned innocent children into victims, imprisoning them in camps. While a father is traditionally seen as a protector and preserver, in this context, the state has failed to play a benevolent role. Michael considers himself fortunate for not having children, as he believes he would fail in the duties of fatherhood and become the worst of fathers. Recognizing the needs of children for milk, clothes, friends, and schooling, he acknowledges that he lacks the desire to be a father in a country where parents raise children behind wire fences. Reflecting on this, Michael tells himself, "That is why it is a good thing that I, who have nothing to pass on, should be spending my time here where I am out of the way" (p.105).

Aware of the dire situation of children who have become prisoners without committing any crime, Michael chooses to insulate himself from the civil war. Preferring to live an insignificant life akin to an insect, leaving no trace on his individuality, Coetzee captures Michael's attitude in the following lines: "What a pity that to live in times like these, a man must be ready to live like a beast. A man who wants to live cannot live in a house with lights in the windows. He must live in a hole and hide by day. A man must live so that he leaves no trace of his living. That is what it has come to" (p.99). These words poignantly express Michael's resignation to the harsh reality of his existence in a tumultuous and oppressive environment.

The officers in the camp serve as integral components of the broader power structure within the state. The state-run institutions, including hospitals, camps, and military headquarters, wield their authority over innocent and vulnerable individuals, including women and children. The residents are often derogatorily labeled a nest of criminals, saboteurs, and idlers, constantly reminded that the camp is not a holiday retreat but a work camp designed to

teach lazy individuals the value of labor. Young men are addressed as ungrateful bastards, with police officers emphasizing that the state provides housing, food, and demands repayment.

Freedom finds no place within the confines of the camps, as the entire country remains under the control of oppressors. Officers enforce strict rules, with no visits, outings, or picnics allowed, and morning and evening roll-calls becoming routine (p.92).

The medical officer in the rehabilitation hospital develops a fascination for Michael, astonished at his mere thirty-kilo weight yet impressed by his ability to escape from the heavily guarded camp. Driven by a desire to assist Michael, the doctor perceives a glimpse of divinity in his countenance. However, the doctor contemplates the grim reality of Michael's existence, expressing the belief that he should never have been born into such a world. He suggests to another officer, Noel, that he will draft a death certificate, urging Noel to counter-sign. The report will then be submitted to the military headquarters known as the Castle. The clerk, without raising questions, will file the certificate, marking the conclusion of Michael's story (revised from "that will be the end of the story of Michael's").

Throughout the novel, the influence of Kafka's "The Trial" and "The Castle" casts a shadow, particularly in a narrative where anarchy, chaos, and an oppressive state assume a legitimate role. As the state becomes an oppressive master, the values of a civilized and just society erode, reducing individuals to small insects or creatures struggling to preserve themselves against the system. The police headquarters, aptly named The Castle, operates independently, closed from all sides, enforcing irrational and inhuman rules with brutality. Its agenda is to transform insignificant individuals like Michael into mere insects. Rules are meticulously framed and executed through the corrupt and insensitive bureaucracy of the state. Human existence is reduced to records in a book, assigning unique numbers and categorizing individuals based on perceived crimes. Maintaining official records and reports becomes a primary concern in this system, a world governed by timetables, maps, figures, camp openings and closings, and frequent renaming.

Michael's protest is a desire to exit the confines of time and history. The novel features numerous references depicting Michael's successful escapes from the world of records, dates, and history. Coetzee constructs Michael's identity in terms of small animals and creatures, likening him to a mouse gutting an overcrowded foundering ship, a lizard under a stone, and even a snail with its shell. Seeking refuge on a farm, Michael, when exposed to daylight, feels as naked as a mole. Yet, he knows how to live beyond time and the murky history of his own country. When he nears the dam wall, he closes his eyes, immersing himself in the rising and setting of the sun, residing in a pocket outside time. Cape Town, the war, and his passage to the farm slip further into forgetfulness: "He lived by the rising and setting of the sun, in a pocket outside time. Cape Town and the war and his passage to the farm slipped further and further into forgetfulness" (p.60).

Upon returning to the farm, Michael finds himself indulging more fully in the sensation of endless time. Having fulfilled his responsibility towards his mother by burying her ashes on the farm, where he believes she was born, he liberates himself from any obligation to use time fruitfully: "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" (p.102).

Derek Attridge aptly observes, "K's relishing of time without divisions and duties is linked to an understanding of the future: in complete contrast to the drive to make one's mark

before one dies, K longs to leave no trace" (p.56). This sentiment aligns with Michael's immersion in the unbounded flow of time and his desire to exist without the pressure of leaving a lasting mark on the world.

Michael asserts that there will be not a grain left bearing his marks, reflecting a positive aspect of his temporal experience. He willingly gives himself up to the endlessness of time, embracing empty days and a seemingly profitless existence. As Derek Attridge notes, "There is a kind of openness to the future, a kind of trust in events that has no relation to the calculations by which most of us live" (p.56-57).

Describing Michael's known status, the doctor aptly portrays it as: "No papers, no money; no family, no friends, no sense of who you are. The obscurest of the obscure, so obscure as to be a prodigy" (p.142). The doctor emphasizes that Michael is not a creature of this world; he belongs to another realm and does not keep an account or record: "He had kept no tally of the days nor recorded the changes of the moon" (p.115). This lack of record-keeping further underscores Michael's detachment from the conventional trappings of society.

Michael displays a tender attitude and sensitivity towards gardening, taking care to place pads of grass under the melons to prevent bruising. Throughout the novel, Michael loses his personal name in the eyes of the doctor, who refers to him as Michaels. He becomes a representative of ordinary individuals crushed by the political and military forces of the country, perceived as being made of dust, spat, and patting.

As the inevitable end approaches, it is suggested that Michael may dig his own grave and slip quietly in, drawing the heavy earth over his head like a blanket, far away from the grinding wheels of history. The medical officer recognizes that Michael offers the originality of resistance, sustaining himself on a different kind of food that no government machinery can supply. Despite his physical weakness and the likelihood of imminent death, Michael remains unyielding in his nature.

The doctors understand that Michael is like a bunny rabbit sewn up in the carcass of an ox, resisting and defying all techniques aimed at making him speak and narrate his story. Michael refuses to conform to the desired romantic and adventurous version of his life in Africa, ensnared in the incomprehensible and undeclared war, struggling to carve out a refuge with his limited resources.

Michael K's fate is intricately connected to the economy of the neo-colonial world system. Under apartheid, South Africa transformed liberal dreams of virtue and civic freedom into a nightmare, with economic development turning into permanent exploitation of the many by the few.

The irony of Michael's life is reflected in the title "Life and Times of," hinting at the expected sub-title "as told by himself." However, Michael declines to tell his story. Even in encounters with the few decent human beings in the novel, he remains silent or, at best, taciturn. When a man shares his food in the hospital yard and talks about his own problems, Michael says nothing: "K listened to the birds in the trees and tried to remember when he had known such happiness" (p.30). This refusal to narrate his own story adds complexity to Michael's character and emphasizes his resistance to conforming to societal expectations.

Under normal circumstances, where inner emotions typically well up and find expression in personal narration, this process is somehow unavailable to Michael K. Even on

occasions when he wishes to talk to the family of the kind stranger, words fail him. The use of inner monologue as a narrative device allows the narrator to convey a crucial point: Michael K's condition is more than just anger, refusal, or stupidity. It would be misleading to interpret his silence as a reflection of his mental state. Despite having thoughts, memories, and longings, everything remains blocked from utterance by a silence that creates discomfort for those who attempt to listen: "His heart was full, he wanted to utter his thanks, but finally the right words would not come. The children stared at him; a silence fell; their parents looked away" (p.48).

The discipline of silence imposed in the orphanage forbids all personal or private conversation. Children are not allowed to speak to the institution unless responding to specific questions, and personal concerns are never articulated. In the classroom, they are compelled to provide correct answers to abstract problems largely irrelevant to their lives. The dichotomy is clear: silence or the correct answer are the only two possibilities. However, providing the correct answer to an arithmetic problem does not teach anyone to tell a personal story. The answer leaves behind, in unspoken silence, the frantic struggle to solve the problem, the cold sweat of the palms fearing the teacher-examiner, and the bafflement of a human being confronting random exercises of power.

Personal elements hold no value in the category of the 'correct answer'; they would only interfere with the routine functioning of the orphanage and other institutions. Having never learned how to talk about himself, Michael finds it virtually impossible to construct a narrative that would reveal the meaning of his life. Something is amiss: "Always, when he tried to explain himself to himself, there remained a gap, a hole, a darkness before which his understanding balked, into which it was useless to pour words. The words were eaten up, the gap remained. His was always a story with a hole in it: a wrong story, always wrong" (p.110).

The gap in Michael's ability to express himself extends even into the privacy of his inner thoughts, as all narration has been tainted by the violence of the institution. Pupils have learned that any attempt to be subjective is considered a wrong response. However, this does not mean that the respondents are left in peace. The institution has the power to force them to make utterances, to repeat and echo the one correct answer. This moment of coercion remains as the unarticulated accompaniment of every attempt to speak.

In terms of telling his personal story, various pressures manifest themselves. First, there is the compulsion to narrate a "correct story," one in which Michael K has broken no laws. Then, there are the pressures to tell a story that is deemed 'interesting'. The paradox in Michael K's life is that, no matter how exotic the experience of a poor, oppressed individual from South Africa might seem to readers unfamiliar with poverty or the conditions there, his case cannot be considered special when millions are suffering just as miserably. His story might captivate readers in London or elsewhere in Europe, but in Africa, it may hardly be worth telling.

Michael accepts the impoverishment that his life's story represents. By acknowledging that his is an ordinary life, he rejects the demand to tell an interesting story that would satisfy the readers whose pleasure comes from the consumption of narratives. In the closing pages of the novel, he addresses the problem directly: "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" (p.181).

If Michael were to conform to the audience's expectations, he would also accept as normal a situation in which the speaker cannot even tell his story but must always offer the accepted version. Overlapping with the criteria of correctness and interest are the demands for true stories. The irony is that what is deemed true is determined by the audience, not the speaker. Truth does not necessarily imply importance, as evidenced by Michael K's efforts to communicate with the railway and police clerks. Some truths, it seems, are considered superfluous: "...the state of his mother's health did not constitute special grounds, the clerk told him; on the contrary, he would advise him not to mention her condition at all" (p.9).

Later, when Michael attempts to tell the policewoman about his mother, she interrupts each time the dialogue is about to shift from rote responses to actual personal reporting. The police in Michael K's world have no need for such stories. Suffering is therefore neither correct nor interesting nor true when uttered by those without power. The 'permit' will be granted only to those willing to make their stories conform to official paradigms.

The coercion that is implicit in every exchange between the South African authorities and Michael K becomes explicit once his interrogation at the hands of the soldiers begins. They need a story to be able to carry out their orders, and once again, it has to be sufficiently interesting. The reference to 'your' story highlights the absurdity, for it is precisely Michael's own version they do not want. The authorities cannot use his simple explanations. There is no meta-narrative to which they can refer his account of what he has been doing as a gardener in the wilderness. Consequently, what he tells them must be dismissed as lies or nonsense. Michael's own story, like the pumpkins he raises for his own survival, cannot be integrated into the global system and is thus worthless to the authorities.

Since Michael has nothing to say, the doctor becomes increasingly exasperated and finally desperate. For the purpose of the system—to keep it functioning smoothly—he proposes fabricating a necessary story. The doctor's story is a montage assembled from bits and pieces of the meta-narrative that keeps the South African system going, replete with terrorists in the mountains. The doctor has no difficulty in spinning out the yarn because all that is required is that it satisfies the criteria set by the audience. The doctor's story is the sort of narrative the government wants. By providing it, he is, in fact, substantiating the government's view of reality.

The interrogation of Michael K takes its examples and its might from the economy upon which South Africa has been constructed. From the beginning of the European presence, South Africa has had meaning only insofar as it yielded wealth from the land and the labor of the people. More blatantly than in Europe, the colonial situation could reveal the connection between the economy of extraction and the advent of technology. Mining for diamonds and gold may be taken as the quintessential South African activities. The work of the miners is governed by the regimen imposed by the requirements of the machines. Once the process is finished, gaping ruins are left behind. The doctor sums up the destination of South African history: "(When was South Africa discovered? '1652' 'Where is the biggest man-made hole in the world' ? 'Kimberly' )" (p.158).

In the era of technology, an overarching motive appears to be perpetual extraction. J.M. Coetzee shares the realm with Michael K., who, through a deliberate evasion of answering inquiries and a deliberate avoidance of constructing an ostensibly "interesting" narrative, has successfully sidestepped becoming the central figure in a history authored by external forces. While others may engage in speculative discourse regarding Michael K., they cannot rely on his cooperation in upholding any officially sanctioned narrative. In a parallel fashion, Coetzee's

strategic decision to abstain from assuming a political writer's role serves to safeguard the limited space for freedom of expression that remains accessible to writers in South Africa.

## **6. CONCLUSION:**

The exploration of liberty in J.M. Coetzee's "Life and Times of Michael K" reveals a nuanced and profound perspective on freedom. Through a critical examination of the novel, it becomes evident that the concept of freedom is multifaceted and often elusive, intricately woven into the fabric of both the narrative and the characters.

Michael K's unconventional resistance to conforming to societal norms and his refusal to become a subject of a predetermined history showcase a form of freedom that transcends conventional boundaries. His narrative becomes a testament to the idea that true freedom lies not only in autonomy from external constraints but also in the power to shape one's own narrative and defy the expectations imposed by others.

Similarly, Coetzee's deliberate choice to avoid overt political commentary in the novel can be seen as a strategic preservation of the space for freedom of expression available to writers in the socio-political context of South Africa. This deliberate distancing from explicit political engagement allows for a subtle yet potent exploration of the complexities surrounding freedom in an oppressive environment.

In conclusion, "Liberty Unbound: A Critical Examination of Freedom in J.M. Coetzee's 'Life and Times of Michael K'" delves into the layers of freedom presented in the novel, highlighting the unconventional paths characters take to assert their autonomy. It underscores the notion that true freedom often involves a radical departure from societal expectations, a theme intricately interwoven with Coetzee's narrative craft. This critical examination contributes to a broader discourse on the nature of freedom and its manifestations in literature, inviting readers to reflect on the profound implications of liberty unbound.

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