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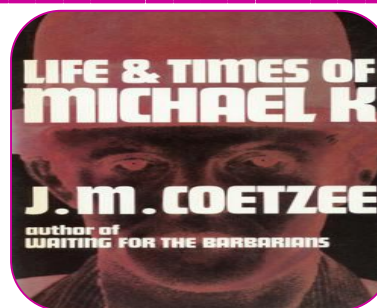
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### J.M.COETZEE'S *LIFE AND TIMES OF MICHAEL K: A STORY OF A VOICELESS LIFE IN A CHAOTIC COUNTRY*

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#### ABSTRACT

*Life and Times of Michael K* is a Booker Prize (1983) winning novel by J.M.Coetzee. The novel was published in 1974, the span of South Africa under colonialism and civil war. The novel presents turmoil of the scattered country, only controlled by police and military power. The protagonist, Michael K, here is a wretched person with physical and mental disabilities. The novel has a feature that it contains very little conversation, that's why known as 'silence and violence'. The story of the protagonist is his journey which starts from his efforts to seek treatment to her diseased dying mother. He faces the violence of the disturbed country. He goes through riots, interrogation, and torture. Through his journey J.M.Coetzee presents the burning issue of state approved violence. The novel juxtaposes the crucial social condition of the country under the colonial oppression. J.M.Coetzee is considered one of the rare dynamic authors, because it is courageous to represent the wrong done by the country through distinctive but significant literary work.

**KEY WORDS:** colonialism, violence, civil-war, war-violence, visual pains, police encounters, police violence, state approved violence, mob-violence, riot, protest, emergency, curfew, military operations, interrogation, violence in imprisonment, refugee camp.

#### INTRODUCTION :

All of the colonial countries are packed with chaotic history full of violence. Explicitly, it was the conflict between the natives and the colonists. History has recorded the major happenings and sufferings. In this respect J.M.Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K* stands distinct as it contains the sufferings of a common man seen through general eyes. At the very beginning of the novel there is an incident of the road robbery. Slow at mind the protagonist Michael K., while returning from his job of attendant at public lavatory, is robbed and beaten severely. It has become a common thing in the whole country. The incident matches with the heroes of the picaresque novels. In this incident the hero is helpless, lip-cleft and slow at mind. J. M. Coetzee juxtaposes the violence of road robbery and innocence human nature. The violence causes Michael K. to leave the job. The violence during the robbery seems to be trivial, but it heightens the question of safety. Its impact can be found leading a simple injury into stabbing and killing. Badly wounded condition of Michael K creates the wonder among the readers that he is lucky enough because he is not permanently crippled or stabbed to death. The enduring through such type of violence creates thought of escaping than resisting the violence. It is a brilliant example of the street violence and robbery.

Michael K's mother, Anna K suffers from a disease and receives treatment in a civil hospital. She is discharged and waiting for her son in the Somerset Hospital. The condition of the hospital becomes very critical as a large number of patients injured in war are admitted there. There is an emergency announced in

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the city. Due to the emergency regular patients are neglected. There is not enough space to admit many more injured people. Frightened Anna K is entangled in the hospital due to the violent situation. Her condition is miserable and helpless. Through the experiences of Anna K and many others, J. M. Coetzee presents how the emergency and violence cause the disturbances and lack of facilities for the daily life. The violent act of a few people affects the common life of remaining majority. Anna K can't bear the vision of the sufferings of the injured admitted in the hospital and wishes to escape from the visual pains.

Diseased Anna K wants to quit the city because of the violence spread in the area. Actually, Anna has born and spent her childhood in a small town with the fresh air. That place is peaceful and full of the happy memories of the past. She thinks that it is the only place to which she belongs. They shift to Cape Peninsula which is a busy but peaceful city. Later everything goes out of control and the warlike situation occurs. Her disease becomes worst and in addition to it the war like situation becomes unbearable to her. Remembering the past happiest memories, she always keeps planning for the escape from the city:

"Lying in bed in her airless room through the winter afternoons with rain dripping from the steps outside, she dreamed of escaping from the careless violence..." (MK-8)

She wants to spend her last days in a natural and smooth atmosphere. Anna's thoughts highlight the human urge to escape from the world full of violent atmosphere.

There are riots and police encounters while Anna and Michel K stay at De Wall Park. The military jeep dashes a youngster and the event turns into an uncontrolled fight. In order to control the angry mob, the police blow the siren of curfew. There are acts of chasing and hitting. The crowd turns violent and starts destroying the parked cars and other vehicles. The mob expresses the anger against the police openly. Then there is an encounter of a man who shoots from the apartment:

"Then from the balcony of a fourth floor flat a man began to fire revolver shots. Amid screams the crowd dashed for cover, spreading into the beachfront apartment blocks, racing along the corridors, pounding upon doors, breaking windows and lights The man with the revolver was hauled from his hiding-place, kicked into insensibility, and tosses down to the pavement ." (MK-11)

Through the description J. M. Coetzee projects the estimate of a disturbed city under riot and violence. Violence is strengthened by both the police and public. The anger of the people is caused due to the inconvenience and disturbance in the normal life. On the other side police tries to retain the law and order by using power and violence. Through this episode J.M. Coetzee simultaneously focuses on the police violence, mob-violence and the impact of warlike situation.

The episode of encountering the looters in the apartments directly shows the violence laid by the police. The police and special force take actions to control the riots. The heartlessness and inhuman nature of the policemen can be clearly sighted in their shooting operation against the looters at the apartment. They clear the apartment floor by floor like the rats and cockroaches are cleaned out. Police shoots the people mercilessly and the rioters also counter-fire in protest. The event of encounter of a looter woman is described as:

"One looter, a woman who did not run fast enough, was shot dead. From streets all around the police picked up abandoned goods which they stacked on the lawns. There, late into the night, the folk of the flats searched by flashlight to recover their own....a rioter with a bullet through his lung was discovered huddled in an unlit angle of a passageway in a block further down the road and taken away." (MK-12)

The firing of police continues until the midnight. After shooting all the rioters, the clearance is declared by the force in-charge. Here, J. M. Coetzee places an example of the military operations and public violence.

Michael and Anna K plan to move at Prince Albert. The war breaks while they travel towards their destination. Unable to bear the inner suffering and outer disturbance, Anna surrenders to death in her way to Prince Albert. The hospital authorities criminates Anna's dead body and handover the ashes to Michael K. With his mother's ashes Michael K moves towards Prince Albert to bury it in the land of her parents. He also carries his mother's belongings with him. In the process he is interrogated by a soldier. The interrogation is very humiliating. The soldier continuously bombards questions and slow at mind Michael K fails to answer

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any of them. Unaware of Michael K's mental and physical background, the soldier instead of waiting for the reply pushes his case open upon the road. The scene of scattering contents from the case creates sympathy. Michael is abruptly questioned about his identity and the belongings. He has been accused of stealing them. The violence during interrogation results into the humiliation and suffering of the innocent people. The innocent people suffer for no fault of them. Common people like Michael K forced through the mental torture as they are asked trivial, unexpected and eccentric questions for which they are not prepared. This is an example of violence while interrogation. During the interrogation Michael K innocently questions the soldier: 'what do you think the war is for?'

The war violence drags a number of people in death. The scared common people are unaware of the definite reason and results of the war. They have many questions in their mind and ironically there is nobody to answer them properly. Through this situation, the reality becomes clear that the common people have to suffer through the war violence without any questioning. J.M. Coetzee compels the readers to think about the reasons and functions of war. The motives behind the violence are unrevealed and the executers remain speechless when questioned.

Similar to other novels of J.M. Coetzee, this novel also has the animal killing episode. As per Anna's plan, Michael K reaches to Prince Albert. There he shelters at an abandoned Visagies' farmhouse. Without any food and livelihood, he starves there for some time. Hungry Michael listens the noise of some goats at the farm. Without any thought, eccentrically he runs towards the goats and kills one of them violently. The hunger drives innocent Michael K's innate violent nature into action. Impulsively he takes the decision to hunt the goat to satisfy his dire hunger. Sober and slow minded Michael decides to become 'hard' to kill the goat. Thus, J. M. Coetzee shows how hunger transforms a temperate person into a wild hunter. The episode of hunting goat points out the need of becoming violent for existence.

At Prince Albert Michael K is forced to join the workers camp. It was not a refugee camp but a camp where the workless, wondering and starving people are exploited together. They are offered medical services, tents, clothes and nominal wages for their work. Michael considers it as a sort of jail where they are caged like slaves and compelled to work. He refuses to work and wants to leave the camp. But his companion tells that no one is allowed to leave the camp. The camp is fenced and there is a guard with a loaded gun at the gate of the camp. Michael demands excuses for being sick and inability to work. Michael inquires at the guard about the possibility of leaving the camp. When he innocently asks; 'what will you do if I climb the fence', the guard rudely answers; 'you climb the fence and I'll shoot you dead, mister. No hard feelings. I'm just telling you'. Through the administration of the workers' camp, J. M. Coetzee focuses on the facts related to the war violence which provides opportunities to exploit the helpless people. There are many opportunists like the camp runners who earn prestige out of capturing the helpless people and let them live as working slaves.

The conversation between Michael K and the guard of the camp throws light on various aspects of the violent war. The guard expresses his feelings about war. He is an aged person and really dislikes the war because of its inevitable force and compelling nature. He is excused from fighting in the battle field only because he suffers from diabetes. He explains to Michael K:

"Still, I'll tell you one thing, my friend, and this is the truth: the day I get orders to go north I walk out. They'll never see me again. It's not my war. Let them fight it, it's their war." (MK-86)

The statement of guard represents the voice of soldiers who unwillingly participate in the war. Many of the soldiers fight, kill and die in the wars unknown to the motives of the war. Many fight the war only because they receive orders from the higher authority. A few soldiers like the guard and Visagies' grandson reject the unwanted violence imposed on them by the war. J.M. Coetzee presents the true psychology of the soldiers who do not wish to participate in the war violence.

The episode of three men running away from the camp exemplifies the violence in imprisonment and disobedience. The men restricted in the camp are never allowed to leave the camp. They are warned that they will be shot dead if they try to run away. Some of the men and children are captured who tried to run away from the camp. The camp is a kind of prison. However three men from the camp succeed in

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running away from the camp. The furious captain starts shouting. He started humiliating and scolding people by calling them criminals, saboteurs, vagrants and idlers. He warns the residents of the working camp:

"I am putting my own men on guard, and I am locking the gates, and if my men see any of you, man, woman, or child, outside the wire, they have order to shoot, no question asked!"

The furious nature and threatening of the captain turns the camp into jail. The camp residents fear of the punishment they are going to receive. The medical facility has been stopped. They believe that the captain considers them cheaters. In fear they say that:

"They are going to starve us.... That fire was the excuse they were looking for. Now they are going to do what they always wanted-lock us up and wait for us to die."(MK-94)

J.M. Coetzee shows the violence produced out of disobedience. Violent acts are done by the camp workers also. At one night the workers fight for liquor in the camp and the guard on duty is stabbed. The anger of the imprisoned camp workers turns into violence. It is an example of violent rebel.

Michael K escapes away from the camp and reaches to the farmhouse of Visagies. There he develops farm of pumpkins in area of an acre. He harvests and stores the pumpkins. He eats only the pumpkins during these days. The soldiers come in search of the enemies and find him as a stranger without identity residing at the abandoned farm. They consider him as a friend of the enemies who provides shelter and food to them. The storage of pumpkins found there leads the soldiers to believe that Michael is assisting their enemy. According to the orders the soldiers rudely interrogate him, take the storage of pumpkins in their custody and blast the old house of Visagies. The soldiers torture Michael. J.M. Coetzee frequently presents the events of violence during interrogation in his novels. The interrogation of Michael K runs in the same fashion. These suspicious interrogations go on even during Michael K's illness. Michael is provided with medical treatment not out of humanity but in hope of seeking information about the enemy. He is forced to do severe physical exercise as a kind of punishment. The doctor feels pity for him and discharges him from the hospital. But the duty officer forces him to do the exhaustive physical exercise. At the next morning doctor finds: "Michaels slogging it out around the track with the rest of them, stripped to the waist, a skeleton trailing behind forty vigorous human bodies." The doctor remonstrates with the duty officer who rudely replies: "When he can't take any more, he can drop out." Doctor protested by saying: "He will drop dead. His heart will stop."(MK-144) Thus, without pity for the captives and confirmation of their guilt, the soldiers continue physical and mental torture to them. J. M. Coetzee sustains the torture and violence while interrogation until the end of the novel.

The novel can be categorised as the tragedy in a picaresque manner. J.M.Coetzee presents the hopeless future of the country under anarchy. The chaotic country as experienced by the common man gives the realistic effect to the series of the agonizing events. It is only due to J.M.Coetzee's indomitable manner of presentation that the burning issues and the agony of the suffering country became visible to the world through the literary form.

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