

# Ecoconsciousness and J. M. Coetzee: A Study of *Life and Times of Michael K*

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**ABSTRACT:** Environmental destruction has been a prominent issue from the last few decades. Due to capitalism, modernization, rationalisation and change in cultural outlook man has led to the imbalance of the environment. The novel *Life and Times of Michael K*, selected for this study, highlights the environmental concerns, expose human actions, and technological advancement responsible for the degradation of environment. The research work delineates the impact of war on human life, oppression, environmental destruction, suffering of animals, loss of basic rights of humans and animals. The research traces man's relation with nature and writer's consciousness towards minor forms of life. It also figures out the marginalisation of Coetzee in South African society.

**Key Words :** Man v/s Nature, Civil War, Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K*.

## Ecocriticism in the Global Context

Environmentalism began to take shape in the second half of the 20th century, in response to perceptions of how environmental damage has become the threat to all lives on earth. Whereas industrial development affected the environment, it also tainted man and nature's bond. Since ages, man considered himself an entity of nature, but, now he has become a tool of commercialisation. White in this context says, "Formerly man had been a part of nature, now he was the exploiter of nature" (1206). The separation of humanity from nature has a long history. Ecocritics have paid more attention to its' roots in Christian and post-Christian Western culture, because industrial capitalism first appeared in Western Europe and spread by colonialism. The modern cultural practices adopted by the people leads to the deprivation of nature, Howarth states that, "the dogma that culture will always master nature has long directed Western progress, inspiring the wars, invasions, that have crowded the earth and strained its carrying capacity (77). Ecocritical texts mirror the convoluted relationship between humans and their physical environment. It begins from the belief that direct environmental concern can significantly contribute to the understanding of environmental harms. In the field of literary criticism, attempts have been made to keep focus on environment and defining close affiliation between nature and culture, while analysing literature. Ecocriticism looks at culture as an expression of ecology as Kerridge writes, "It analyse the history of concepts such as 'nature' in an attempt to understand the cultural developments that have led to the present global ecological crisis" (530).

## Introduction to the author

J. M. Coetzee is a white writer born on 9th of February at Cape Town in South Africa. He wrote several novels and non-fictional works, and won several prizes including literary awards. On December 10, 2003, he won the Nobel Prize in Literature, and is one of the first authors to get the Booker prize twice; one is for *Life and Times of Michael K* in 1983 and second is for *Disgrace* in 1999. His other well known works are *Dusklands* (1974), *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), *The Lives of Animals* (1999).

## Ecological Outlook of Coetzee in *Life and Times of Michael K*

J. M. Coetzee is a significant author, taking into consideration the various current issues specifying conditions of his own country in his respective work. *Life and Times of Michael K*, is elaborated on the ecocentric notions. Coetzee describes the issues related to environmental dilapidation, culture, social, identity complex and sees himself as a marginalised subject on an African land. The opening lines of the novel, depicts the marginalisation of a writer in society, which he traces through the protagonist Michael K that, "he had a hare lip" (1). Michael's mother, police-men and other characters in the novel treat Michael as a mere animal. He feels isolated in the society because of treatment he gets from the surroundings. Coetzee is an eco-conscious writer, it is well judged from his earth-centered approach, and his immense concern for minor forms of life. Similarly, the novel, *Life and Times of Michael K* depicts the story of an oppressed

character named, Michael K and his mother Anna K in the city Cape Town, South Africa. The novel describes the civil war torn out in South Africa and martial law was imposed. K and his mother despite taking active participation in the war escape from the city to rural landscape to live a happy and tension free life as Ruskin stated, “we find all men of true feeling delight to escape out modern cities into natural landscape” (qtd. in Clark 17). K’s mother want to go back on her birth place called Prince Albert. The study brings into notice that, Nature plays a vital role in making man happy. He can feel pleasure in the isolation if he is in the lap of the nature.

The work explores that after the death of his mother, Michael K finds, his life entirely purposeless. But later he went for gardening and finds another purpose of his life by making gardening as his hobby as K declares, “Whereas the truth is that I have been a gardener . . . gardeners spend their time with their noses to the ground” (181). K loves his life as a gardener and realises that most other people would not be able to survive as he did. Even, Gordimer asserts in this milieu, “It’s better to live on your knees, planting something?” (qtd. in Murray 46). He chooses ‘gardening’ to make the deserted land of Karoo farm bloom, which gives a glimpse of the real life of Coetzee, who struggles to establish his identity on an alien land. Similarly, K’s disfigured lip makes him different from the main stream of the society as Coetzee being a white writer lives on the verge in the society of blacks.

With the death of K’s mother a period of trouble and regeneration starts in his life. There he lives with minor forms of life with pleasure. These minor forms of life on earth enhance the ecological richness of the novel as Neimneh portrays, “The novel demonstrates a triangular relationship between K, animals, and plants. The interrelationship between history, politics, and ecology makes the novel a critique of the domination of species and the earth” (13). The work traces that due to civil war the country is led to chaos, violence, destruction. Coetzee aptly justifies the title of his novel by depicting the hardships in the life of Michael K by linking it with the images of loss and hope, and constraints K to live on the verge. The research defines although environment nourishes man, but in turn he destructs it. The indication of nurturing of human by nature can be seen in the novel when K, during escape from city and policemen said, “Let darkness fall soon, let the earth swallow me up and protect me” (107).

The use of plants and animals imagery has a significant meaning in nature writings. Coetzee knows that these minor forms constitute ecology. But by deconstructing nature, man is affecting himself and bio-diversity. He rarely mentions about the race of K and his mother in the novel, but the treatment they get from police, administration and other people of Cape Town described them as the oppressed members of society and in par with animals. As during the train reservation and to get a permit to leave the city, they waited for a long time in the queue at the station in the rain. At this Anna K whispered in trouble, “I feel like a toad under a stone living here” (9). Later, Anna K falls sick and hospitalized, where Michael K steals his mother’s tea, “gulping it down like a guilty dog” (30). The words like ‘toad’ and ‘gulp’ describe the marginality, ‘otherness’ and loss of rights of both man and animals.

The study explores through Michael K that this earth is a universal phenomenon, and every creature possess equal rights under the order of Supreme power as explains in text, “began to pull yellow half-grown carrots out of the soft earth. It is God’s earth, he thought, I am not a thief” (39). But in the age of modernisation the outlook towards nature changed and it is treated as a material to be consumed. Whereas, Michael K opts gardening as social purpose so that anyone can come and eat from his garden, there people like medical officer encourages him for market gardening. It shows man’s basic tendency of insatiable greed to exploit the natural beauty and resources like, “there is good soil in the Peninsula . . . It would be nice to see market gardening” (135). Another clue of insatiable greed and fondness for abundant storage worries man for future despite enjoying his present, as K is depicted eating a goat without pleasure in the text, “What will I do when the goat is consumed” (56).

As the idea to make the earth pollution free is a universal and global activity. It is the duty of every human being to keep it hygienic.No one can complete this task alone by his efforts. Similarly, everyone has equal right on nature, it belongs to all, and we are its’ products as indicated from conversation between K and his friend Neol, “What we grow is for all of us. We are the children of the earth” (139). Further, Coetzee’s views are traced against unnecessary development in the country, and he thinks that it would be a curse for the environment. According to research, it pollutes the natural life, creates Marxist binary class distinction, and makes ‘the rich more richer and poor more poorer’. It is depicts through the escaping scene of Michael K from the Cape Town, “By noon they were passing through the ghostly industrial quarter . . . A couple of workmen sitting on a wall . . . in silence” (21). Several other environment conscious intellectuals tried to depict the degrading atmosphere and its consequences in their publications. Mira Behn who joined Mahatma Gandhi in 1927, expresses herself as a devotee of the great ancient Mother Earth, and said that,

“the tragedy today is that educated and moneyed classes are altogether out of touch with the vital fundamentals of existence– our Mother Earth” (qtd. in Guha 67).

*Life and Times of Michael K* particularly describes the conditions of Third-World nations where the idea of democracy is in its infancy. The issues have been put up in the form of question in the novel. Coetzee tries to deconstruct the history and portray the condition of the third world countries by visualising the sufferings of the marginal section due to the inner turmoil. Coetzee put forths the idea that plants and animals have feelings and life like human-beings. They are equally imperative as human beings. The research work mark out this attributes as, “pumpkin leaves pushing through the earth. Tomorrow will be their last day, the day after they will die. I would not be too late to save them” (65). The anthropocentric tendency of a man makes him the real enemy of environment and exploiter of animal rights. He uses animals and birds for his personal needs and for commercial purpose. Coetzee indicates loss of animal rights and cruelty during war, as mentioned in the novel, “K passed the truckload of sheep, packed so tight that some stood on their hind legs” (36). Coetzee’s focus on the non-human ‘other’ depicts his concerns and positive attitude headed for ecology. It seems that he tries to de-center human beings and their tendency to dominate upon ‘other’, as in the expression of Woodward, “Coetzee has made profound ecological statements about the dualistic thinking of racism, speciesism and their reticulations” (113). Coetzee also demonstrates brutality instigated on animals in the form of meat eating through K’s action, when he dragged a small dead goat into his house for eating and tears it brutally. At one point of time in the novel, it seems that eating of goat is a need of K, because he is dying of hunger. But the way Coetzee expressed, it confirms the barbaric crime done on animals by man as refers, “He slit the belly. He peeled back as much of the skin as he was able but could not cut off the feet and head until, searching in the shed, he found a bow-saw” (55). It reveals not only the indifferent attitude, merciless actions of man, but highlights a sense of pity shown by writer for animals, who himself is a vegetarian.

Coetzee is aware about the rights of non-human ‘other’, he uses several symbols and metaphors to describe this argument. In his novels “dogs” occupy a special significance as in *Life and Times of Michael K* dogs are use for sniffing by police men to search K. Coetzee is not only aware about the rights to be devised for animals but he deals with their psychological condition in the times of political distress. Animals are not recognised as ‘loved ones’ but as unwanted beings or one can say as unwanted things, Pritchard supports the view and says, “Coetzee’s investigation of the problem of evil, represented in how humans treat each other, and humanity treats animals” (209). Though our civilisation has progressed a lot but human beings were part of nature and in the future too they will be a part of it. His rootlessness from nature will lead him to future dangers.

Ecofeminism is a sub-concept, considers the Earth as mother and promote ecological wisdom in order to save the earth and female from oppression. It treats both in equal terms. The glance of Ecofeministic concerns can be seen in *Life and Times of Michael K*, when Anna K dies on the way. At this K brings her ashes with him and later spread on the earth by thinking, it is the real place of my mother by saying, “the time came to return his mother to the earth. He laid the packet of ash in the hole and dropped the spadeful of earth on top of it” (58). In this way research work shows the oneness of woman with the Earth. The work also points out that the forced migration is a repression enforced on the weaker sections of society.

The present research work shows the inhumane effect of war, nuclear bombs on human and non-human life, and traces technological advancement as a curse for universe. It is obvious that the objective of research work is not to criticise the technological advancement, but use of nuclear weapons, bombs create air and noise pollution, and harm this planet as portrays, “There was a heavy explosion. The air shook, there was a clamor of birds, the hills rumbled” (124). The writer also describes the chaos, and disturbance occurred in the whole system during civil which enforced Anna K to get away from the city, and this whole scene exemplify as, “The careless violence, the packed buses, the food queues . . . the curfew, the cold and wet, returning to a countryside . . . she would at least die under blue skies (8). The consciously use of words like ‘cold’, ‘wet’ and ‘blue skies’ describes the psyche of the writer about pollution and hustle-bustle city life, and equally describes the clouds full of mist in the city.

## Conclusion

To sum up, it is said that *Life and Times of Michael K* forms an optimistic note of life at the very end. It traces Michael K as an eco-friendly figure and promote ‘ecological wisdom’ that man can lead his life simply and with minor forms of life. It also conveys that, there is nothing to be ashamed of being simple. The research work concludes that one can live with earth to the noses in order to get rid of from the problems and miseries of daily life. It draws out that man should avoid unnecessary developments, wars, and be one with

nature. It suggests to coming generations, to develop a kind of cultural outlook which benefits nature, as novel ends with a metaphor, "He would lower [the spoon] down the shaft deep into the earth, and when he brought it up there would be water in the bowl of the spoon; and in that way, he would say, one can live" (184). This metaphor describes the positive attitude of writer for nature, and outlines that man's needs are limited, and he must put checks on his greed through the medium of novel.

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