

THE DEATH OF ‘SELF’ IS THE BIRTH OF ‘OTHER’: A POSTCOLONIAL STUDY OF J.M. COETZEE’S THE LIFE AND TIMES OF MICHAEL K

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Abstract:

Post colonialism is a discourse examining cultural and linguistic impacts on the colonised countries especially the third world countries. It focuses on how European countries succeed in getting hold of the other countries through invasion and settling. Texts, in this mode of theory, are usually written from the point of view of the colonised people who are victimised by the daunting rule of colonialism. The loss of identity, culture, language, and religion are the core topics of this study. This paper turns the spotlight on the miserable life of Michael K who has lost his identity in a vortex of colonialism. This paper also tries to explain the cause and effect of hegemony, a propellant tool used in Postcolonial discourses. Michael K is a social victim from the pen of Coetzee, a Postcolonial writer who has written many novels about imperialism and colonialism.

The key terms are: colonial education, hegemony, mimicry, subaltern, victim, imperialism, and identity.

Phantom pain is a term used in medical science referring to a simulated discomfort experienced by a patient who has recuperated from a serious illness. The physical pain will be subsided with the passage of time but the phantom pain stays permanently in the life of a person. The colonised people are succumbed to the above –said pain which is like an albatross around their neck and there is no silver bullet invented by academicians and critics to iron out their wrinkles. They are the forced victims of marginalisation, discrimination, and isolation posed by the colonisers who are in the catbird seat to command over the weaker people. This noisome practice has been echoed through the ages and encouraged by the superior people who take pride in ruling over the underprivileged either insidiously or consciously.

“Where wealth accumulates, and men decay” (Goldsmith 111). The term ‘colony’ means a small portion of land cherished by impoverished farmers. The real meaning has been tampered when lands are valued by money. Unable to discharge their debts owed to the rich people, the

farmers are pushed to surrender their lands. Lured by the pecuniary instinct, the ambitious men start usurping lands from the poverty-stricken folks. Fuelled by greediness, they widen their boundaries by hoodwinking the gullible people. Thus, hegemony comes to play a dangerous role in the lives of common people. The ruling class becomes more powerful and diminishes the value of the deprived people who fall prey to the cruel hands of hegemony which creates a rift in the unity among people.

Caliban, a blithering idiot, was a creation by Shakespeare. He was the first victim to pull through 'the colonial throes' awarded by Prospero, a settler who captured the island by his force and magic. He saved Caliban from death and tendered freedom. To pay off his debt of gratitude, Caliban started serving Prospero with all his heart. He heartily obliged all the commands bombarded by Prospero and carried out a lot of menial tasks. Making use of this opportunity, Prospero gradually enslaved the dutiful Caliban by his cunning force. Caliban was forced by circumstances to bank on his master for everything. Thus, the self-dependency and self-will of Caliban were weakened by his master. He was made weak by 'dependency complex' on which he floundered to escape. If Caliban broke off the emotional entanglement with his master, he would taste the fruit of freedom.

When Robinson Crusoe stranded on the island like a deer in the headlights, he was humbled by fate to spend his youthful life on the seashore. He was habituated to acclimatising adverse climates and learning the art of taming wild creatures. After many years, one day, he met a stranger who was caught by cannibals on the shore. The years of contemplation on escaping from the place pushed him to save the stranger from the man-eaters. After saving, he brought the stranger to his abode and named him Man Friday. The communication between the civilised and the uncivilised was terribly hard so Crusoe taught his language instead of picking up the language from Man Friday. For Crusoe, acquiring a language from a black man was socially unacceptable. As a settler, he wanted to rule over the gullible man so he imposed his language on Man Friday. He instructed, ordered, and commanded Man Friday who, in response, passively obeyed.

The lives of Caliban and Man Friday are a big lesson for the colonised people to realise their plight. Caliban was a native man who lived in the island for many years. Prospero, on the other hand, was a foreigner who could hardly know the rough sketches of the island. Swayed by fate, he landed on the island to sustain his miserable life with his charming daughter, Miranda. As a dethroned king, he made use of every opportunity to push his life ahead. He wanted to civilise Caliban so he decided to teach his language. For a coloniser, teaching a language means teaching a civilisation. In general, language is a medium to express thoughts and emotions by means of words. But the very language was used as a cultural weapon to bulldoze the ideologies of Caliban and Man Friday.

Language and culture are indivisible. Caliban slowly picked up the English culture through the language. He gradually absorbed the beauty of the other language which, many years later, made him the real 'Other'. The acquired language was turned out to be a poisoned chalice

but this bitter truth dawned on him many years later. He cursed Prospero, “You taught me language; and my profit on’t is, I know how to curse; the red plague rid you, for learning me your language!”(Shakespeare 34). The first thing, according to many colonists, is to impose their languages that have been spoken and approved by the majority of people. Raja Rao, an Indian novelist, beautifully states:

The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word ‘alien’, yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up – like Sanskrit or Persian was before – but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. (02)

Whatever the majority opine, that will become an accepted truth and there is no gainsay against it. So the language has become the first step to inject the ‘thought poison’ into the minds of crippled people like Caliban and Man Friday.

When a language is imposed on a particular person, it will become an inevitable condition like a quicksand. If people struggle to escape, the very act will kill them. Caliban loathed speaking the alien language initially but his condition pressed him to speak the very language spoken by the colonisers. He wanted to express his repressed emotions and thoughts by using the language understood by Prospero. In *Decolonising the Mind*, Thiong’o openly declares the death of his mother tongue. People from his community prefer the English language to their native tongue. The minds of his people are ‘Europeanised’ and the English language has become the fashion for his people. Thiong’o says, “The language of education was no longer the language of my culture” (07). If language rusts, what shall culture do?

J. M. Coetzee is one of the acclaimed writers basking in the attraction of world literatures. His writings hold up a mirror to reflect the bothersome violence reaped in the name of Apartheid, the blight that devoured the disadvantaged people in South Africa during 1980s. To surface the bitter truth about the cruel system, he penned *The Life and Times of Michael K*, a Postcolonial novel focusing on the aftermath of colonialism. Coetzee was heavily influenced by the surroundings in South Africa where he painfully witnessed the horror of Apartheid, a system that encouraged disruptions among people in the same soil charged by racial discrimination. “The problem of finding and defining ‘home’, physical and emotional confrontations with the ‘new’ land and its ancient and established meanings – are still present in literature” (Ashcroft 26). People were alienated in their own land and lost their lives. Benumbed by the grim horror, Coetzee developed a strong anti-imperialist sentiment against the heinous system and recorded the tumultuous life of Michael K in *The Life and Times of Michael K*.

The Life and Times of Michael K is a Postcolonial novel, delineating the life of a simple and middle-aged man who is tossed among higher officials for seeking permission to transport

his claustrophobic mother who lives on borrowed time. Brought up in tearing poverty, his life is engulfed in sorrow and desolation. When the town is boiled with racial supremacy owing to the Apartheid system, his personal worries and grief pale into significance. The very atmosphere of hue and cry blunts the spirit of Michael K. The government is unable to quell various protests staged by the citizens due to the lopsided system that supports socially and politically enriched people. "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold" (Abrams 346). To curb the hullabaloo, the government imposes a curfew on its people. But, the restriction, riddled with a deluge of loopholes, thrives only on the vulgar people who are caught in the eye of the baneful system. Collapsed by the war and curfew, he strives beyond his strength to save his dying mother.

The problem starts not only in his living but also in his birth. Born with cleft lips, he is not in a position to taste the first warm milk from his mother. He is very dull, boring, and sluggish. As a fatherless son, he grows fond of solitude which is a true bliss for him. He, as a gardener, earns scanty wages that can hardly meet his basic needs. Though he is mired in poverty, he takes care of his mother. He never picks up quarrels with his limited friends in his life. He wants to cut aloof from his friends and society. The passiveness forced by circumstances is a chink in his armour. He responds but never reacts even in dire situations and his calm nature makes him a weak puppet in the hands of colonialism.

Time and circumstances make him weak but his will is very strong to defy the odds. As a Caliban, he patiently accepts the truth that he is a humble human and can't voice out his suppressions. He disinclines to brood over his misfortunes and he doesn't want to spend his time on bootless complaints against the authorities because he is keen on saving his mother. In hospital, nobody cares his mother and no respect is rendered. "At the desk Michael K asked for the use of a wheelchair and was refused it" (5). He braves the situation and finally takes his mother to an adjacent hospital. He happens to meet police, permits, patrols, convoys, sentries, guns, and a camp with wire fences on his way. Life is very difficult for a man, especially, a social victim who lives in such deplorable conditions.

Imperialism is a canker that debilitates the social order and nips the very humanity in the bud. The colonial system makes Michael K as an untouchable. He sleeps on roads and picks up a handful of food to kill his appetite. The very appearance of K is repulsive; tattered coat, untidy shirts, dishevelled hair, sun-stained face, and dirty fingers. While undertaking the arduous journey, he has to face many soldiers on his way. To make his fate worse, the authorities withhold the permit to access cities so his Hobson's choice is to defy the curfew and he is bent on getting his mother admitted to a city hospital. All his efforts are proved vain when a nurse announces the death of his mother after a day. The very tone of the nurse is lackadaisical and authoritative. She says, "The parcel contains your mother's ashes. Your mother was cremated this morning" (45) He is not even allowed to see the tear-stained face of his mother. The last rites, traditionally a religious ceremony for people irrespective of cultures, are denied. It is not the disease that has killed his mother rather the cruel man-made system.

The survival of the grass roots among colonisers is very difficult. Michael K is one of the examples. His slice of life in every stage is irksome. He knows very well that he can't oppose the law made by 'untouchable people' who thrive at the expense of the poor people. Postcolonial texts always underline the paradox behind the term 'untouchable' which has two meanings; one is used for the people who are born into a high-class society, holding high positions and respected by everybody. The Other is used for the lower people who are born into a low-class society, confronting troubles in every stage of their life.

Motherless K searches for his drop of life in the vast ocean of struggles. While fleeing, he encounters the police on his way. Having no permits, he is seized and sent to a labour gang. He works with strangers on the railway tracks. He wants to go back to his town, Prince Albert where his mother once worked. He does not have the courage to seek help from somebody. Forced by hunger, he takes shelter in a cave on the outskirts of a town. "It came to me with great force that I was wasting my life, that I was wasting it by living from day to day in a state of waiting that I had in effect given myself up as a prisoner to this war" (156). He grows weaker for lack of food and water. He is on the verge of departing this life. Fortunately, he is saved by the police and sent to a hospital where his death is put off.

Having refreshed from the fatigue, he is sent to a rehabilitation centre, "Jakkalsdrif" (105). A man named Robert befriends him in the camp. K works against his will and earns a little money. He wilfully sends this money to the members of Robert family who are sick. People, inside the camp, hate Michael K because he is considered an outsider. They think he is a social outcast. "It was an allegory speaking at the highest level of how scandalously and outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it" (96). His life is not only destroyed by the rulers but also the common people so he leaves the place for a change. After many days, he is discovered by the police who implicate him in a criminal case. As an innocent, he pleads for mercy but it is denied too. The war, camp, and police are a menacing threat to Michael K. He finally reaches his mother's place where he sees an old man staying there. Coetzee concludes the novel thus: "He would clear the rubble from the mouth of the shaft, he would bend the handle of the teaspoon in a loop and tie the string to it, he would lower it 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" (139).

The self-will of Michael K is 'calibanised' when he is confined to a camp by the soldiers. He is not a prisoner to the soldiers but his own mind. His own mind breeds inner conflicts that dissipate the energy of his life. He wants to dispel his wild fears but he does not materialise them. Even his silence becomes a sin when he fails to vent his emotions out. The author declares, "Maybe he only eats the bread of freedom" (123). He, as a modern Caliban, lives in dreams of freedom. He can't speak about injustice inflicted on him and he passively accepts the unsavoury incidents. He takes the path of least resistance and braces himself for the worries. He knows that "from one seed a whole handful: that was what it meant to say the bounty of the earth" (125).

As a colonised victim, Michael K admits the culture, language, education, clothing and habits of the colonisers, while staying at the camp. He wants to be associated with the refugees but his expectation is ruined when he comes to know he is neglected by them. His glimmer of hope is dashed once again. His latent aggression is slowly dampened by his inability of exacting vengeance against the police who are the real rulers in his life. He has little opportunity to bring forth his repressed thoughts to surface. Finally, tired of his meaningless life, he has come to a conclusion that he has lost the appetite for living his life. He passively acknowledges his inability and swallows his damaged pride. “It was no longer a matter of growing a fat crop, only of growing enough for the seed not to die out. There will be another year, he consoled himself, another summer in which to try again” (166). He is a ‘complex subaltern’ who can speak but will not. His subjugation is self- made. Of course, he is marginalised by the Apartheid system but he is calibanised by himself; stoically accepting the worst. He has many questions regarding his life, but, the worst thing is, all the questions are still unanswered. “There is no home left for universal souls, except perhaps in Antarctica or on the high seas” (189).

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