

## Dignity and Deprivation: A Study of J. M. Coetzee's Life and Times of Michael K.

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**Abstract:** *The study aims to highlight the significance of dignity in human life and the necessity for liberation through Michael K, the protagonist of Life and Times of Michael K by the South African Nobel Laureate J.M. Coetzee. The novel portrays the humiliations faced by Michael, who struggles for identity and dignity in South Africa under apartheid system. The research descriptively analyzes the sufferings of K's indignation and deprivation of motherly affection and Job in the war devastated South Africa. The paper focuses on thirty one year old Michael who refuses to submit to the situation he is suspected to. He feels that only liberation from all these social issues will give him peace and security. So, he desperately overcomes all the obstacles and creates a space for himself. Hence, the paper states that freedom must be given to each and every individual. Thus, through Michael K, J.M. Coetzee brings out the importance of dignity and freedom and insists that harmony must be maintained among the races.*

**Key Words:** *Dignity, Deprivation, Liberation, Apartheid, Freedom, Indignation, Devastation, Race.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION:

Dignity is the right of a person to be valued and respected. It is the quality of being honourable, noble, excellent or worthy. As human beings are regarded as the most supreme living creature, dignity in its appealing sense, is better referred to as human dignity. It is the conceptual basis for the formulation and execution of human rights and is not granted by society. An imperative implication of human dignity is that every human being should be regarded as very invaluable member of the community with uniquely a free expression of their right to life, integrated bodily attributes and their spiritual nature. (Chapman Audrey,2010) Human dignity is a sense of self worth. Therefore dignity is a sense pride in oneself that a human being is in a humiliating or compromising situation then this is a major threat to their dignity not because of their lifelong achievement but by the fact that they are already human beings.

### 2. VIOLATION OF HUMAN DIGNITY:

Colonialism and Apartheid stripped South Africa of their dignity. Slavery, displacement, violent subjugation, racial classification with its humiliating tastes, making people think they were inferior because of the colour of their skin. Between 1948 to 1989, South Africa gradually became one of the most isolated states because of these inhuman systems. The Apartheid state made human rights violations an art form. During this period South Africa consolidated one of the most racist states, basing its reason on the apartheid system and doctrine of political, social and economic participation and exclusion of its citizenry according to crude racial criteria. In the battlefield of life, human beings are often reduced to miserable status, especially when they become victims of atrocities, they themselves create. War is a calamity caused by man's inhumanity and it throws them into a reductive existence. "Life and Times of Michael K "is such reduction. The novel is set against the background of war and the eventual dissolution of human institutions. The research centres around a withdrawn and inarticulate municipal gardener, Michael K, who spent his childhood in a children's home, becomes ensnared in the incomprehensible and undeclared civil war. The title character born with physical deformity, refuses to submit to the situation he is subjected to. He withdraws himself from the world with a quest for a place free from colonized politics and chaotic city life. The study finds that South African state attempts to maintain apartheid by any means. The analysis of the plot reveals that the protagonist, Michael K struggles throughout his life for freedom and strives hard to maintain his dignity. He strives hard to create individuality in a civil war torn society. In order to obtain freedom, he even ignores the basic need for food and remains hungry. Hence, through Michael K's suffering and humiliation, Coetzee depicts the importance of liberation and the necessity of freedom in human life.

### 3. MAJOR WORKS OF J.M. COETZEE:

JM Coetzee is an outstanding South African writer, who deals with sensitive issues like depicting the colonial situation, indignity, deprivation, history and exploitation. He is strongly influenced by his own personal background of being born and growing up in South Africa. His novels occupy a special place in South African Literature and in the development of the twentieth century novel. His first novel to win booker prize is *Life and Times of Michael K*, (1986) which is set in Cape Town, a city torn by civil war and portrays the social, physical and political improbabilities of the

protagonist, Michael K. ,who miraculously lives through the trauma of South Africa and its civil war .He lives through a life of torment and ignorance into the vast expanse of natural land .Coetzee continued to explore themes of the colonizer and the colonized in *Foe* (1986),his reworking of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. In *Age of Iron* (1990) Coetzee dealt directly with circumstances in contemporary South Africa, but in the *Master of Petersburg* (1994) he made reference to the 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia; both books treat the subject of literature in society .

#### 4. ANALYSIS OF LIFE AND TIMES OF MICHAEL K:

The novel is set against the background of war and the eventual dissolution of human institutions. The book is told in three parts. The first part covers most of his adventures, until he's scooped up again by the army and suspected of helping the collaborators .The second part is narrated by a doctor at one of the camps he is sent to. Grossly malnourished, Michael is kept under medical supervision, and the doctor, intrigued by him, writes about him. Michael eventually escapes from the camp, and the last section returns to the city he started out in.

It is a story of survival and isolation, the individual struggling against a society gone awry and struggling to survive in nature. There is only a vague, ominous sense of how bad things really are in the greater society, as when the doctor speaks with a camp administrator.

But we are soft, I suggest. Perhaps we are even scheming a bit , at the back of our minds. Perhaps we think that if one day they come and put everyone will step forward and say, "Let those two off, they were soft." "Who knows?" Even Coetzee appears to tire of his limited character, switching to a first –person narrative when the doctor takes over the telling of the tale. A basically decent man, the doctor comes up against the brick wall that is Michael. The doctor never gets it, writing to a letter to Michael which he closes with what is a plea for the impossible: "I appeal to you, Michael :yield!"Instead, of course, Michael flees. This is,perhaps, a society that can only be abandoned ;living within it in any way is perhaps to be complicit-but that 's a hard, harsh lesson. Coetzee tells his simple story well.

The book is full of ugly and sad scenes, and few glimmers of hope or beauty, but Coetzee presents his material fairly well .It's the underlying message, and the aftertaste the book leaves, that is so unpleasant.

J.M. Coetzee has deistically depicted the situation which prevailed in South Africa during colonialism Michael K was very sick and he was not able to do physical labor. Even in that condition he was employed on a farm and made to work. Camp life served an eye opener for Michael K. He was exposed to cruelties and callous behavior to the colonizers. He was made to jump, squat and do hard labor even though he himself from society by living a scheduled life. People in the camp advice Michael to adjust himself to the camp life. They justify that is a social service scheme provided by the Government for the welfare of the destitute in their homeland by the ruling government.

Michael K flees from the camp and seeks refuge in the visage farm house. For some time, he lived in a borrow like an animal he cultivated his own food. He came out only for eating and watering the plants which he had cultivated like a hibernating animal he found happiness in the borrow. He found solace from the mother earth. When he came out from the borrow , he was accused of providing food to local guerrillas: Michael was delirious so he was admitted in the camp hospital. He showed his resistance to the political party system by not eating the camp food. In the camp hospital, "smelling of the food, he felt saliva slip in his mouth. It was the first hunger he had known for a long time. He was not sure that he wanted to become a servant hunger again; but a hospital. It seemed, was a place of bodies, where bodies asserted their rights." In order to obtain freedom, he even avoids the basic need for food and remains hungry. This points out his irresistible desire for liberation.

Michael K escapes from that camp and reaches the city where he lived, to retain his freedom, he ate whatever he cultivated. The ultimate aim was to stay away from the camps. He achieved it through his strong determination and iron will. In the camp, he refuses all the support which will help him to live. Through the confinement in the camps, he feels isolated and raises a number of questions to his fellow mates. He understands the philosophy of life which was not understood by the people of normal intellect.The medical officer who helps Michael also makes an imaginary speech and he address the character as " Michaels". Even though he is addressed by others as weak, he is physically fragile and mentally strong. All that he cared was his mother and mother earth. His actions reveal that Michael K is unique from others. He returns to the apartment where he and his mother lived in Cape Town, the same apartment and city he had tried to escape some time ago. Michael reflects on the garden he made in Prince Albert.

#### 5. CONCLUSION:

Michael K's story depicts his fight for identity and dignity. Michael K does not wish to live under the empathy of others. For example, when the medical officer bought food for him he refused and remained stubborn in his intention. In spite of his bad physical condition, he was candid and resolute towards his ambition. He survived the tough situations like civil war, the act of violence of the soldiers and the camp life. He felt that only liberation from all these social issues will give him peace and security .If he remained in the camp and listen to his fellow mates advice he would be counted as one of the native men. Michael K overcomes all the obstacles and creates a space for himself. In this context, J.M. Coetzee insists that freedom must be given to each and every individual. Hence, Michael K stands as a symbol of

common man's right to freedom and dignity .Thus, through Michael KJM Coetzee brings out the importance of freedom and dignity and insists that harmony must be maintained among the races.

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