

## Dissolved State and Identity in John Maxwell Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K* within the Scope of the Postcolonial Other

İsmail AVCU

Atatürk University, Türkiye

**Abstract:** Regardless of the situation, human rights are expected to be maintained and safeguarded and it can be inferred from this that such rights are automatically terminated in times of war. Michael K's futile attempts to obtain travel documents to Cape Town lawfully serve as an example of how much people rely on the efficient operation of all governmental institutions, while his entire life demonstrates the significance of personal freedom and freedom of movement. Michael K keeps quiet, not only because he is alone for most of his life, but also because silence is a subliminal kind of resistance. It makes no difference if Michael K is conscious of his heroic resistance or not; what counts is that he says very little because he has nothing to say. He is reluctant to share his tale. He does not want to be recognised, perceived, or misinterpreted.

This paper dwells on issues of dissolution of the individual, silence, other, state, and the position of the traumatised and the otherised in the gruesome and cruel apartheid in South Africa in John Maxwell Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K*. For the discussion of the novel, the theoretical basis of the concepts such as the other, dissolution of state and silence are formed with reference to prominent postcolonial theorists' views.

### Keywords:

Other,  
*Michael K*,  
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### Postkolonyal Öteki Kapsamında John Maxwell Coetzee'nin *Michael K* Eserinde Çözülen Devlet ve Kimlik

**Öz:** Durum ne olursa olsun, insan haklarının sürdürülmesi ve korunması beklenmektedir ve buradan, bu hakların savaş zamanlarında otomatik olarak sona erdiği sonucu çıkarılabilir. Michael K'nin Cape Town'a yasal olarak seyahat edebilmesi için belgeleri elde etme konusundaki beyhude girişimleri, insanların tüm devlet kurumlarının verimli çalışmasına ne kadar güvendiğine örnek olarak göstermeye hizmet ederken, tüm hayatı kişisel özgürlük ve hareket özgürlüğünün önemini gösterir. Michael K, yalnızca yaşamının büyük bir bölümünde yalnız olduğu için değil, aynı zamanda sessizlik bilinçaltı bir direniş olduğu için de sessiz kalır. K'nin kahramanca direnişinin bilincinde olup olmaması hiç fark etmez; önemli olan, söyleyecek bir şeyi olmadığı için çok az şey söylemesidir. Hikayesini paylaşmaktan çekinir. Tanınmak, algılanmak veya yanlış yorumlanmak istemez.

Bu makale, John Maxwell Coetzee'nin *Michael K* adlı eserindeki ana noktaları inceleyerek, Güney Afrika'daki korkunç ve acımasız ırkçılığın neden olduğu bireyin, sessizliğin, ötekinin ve devletin çözülmesine ve travmatize edilmiş ve ötekileştirilmiş olanın konumuna değinmektedir. Romanın bahsi geçen kavramlara ilişkin çözümlemelerinde, öteki, devletin çözülüşü ve sessizlik kavramlarına dair kuramsal arka plan önde gelen postkolonyal kuramcılarının görüşlerine dayanarak oluşturulmuştur.

### Anahtar Sözcükler:

Öteki,  
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İrkçılık (Güney Afrika),  
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## Introduction

Due to the world wars and the traumas they brought about, humanity reached an unprecedented breaking point at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These historical developments have given literature a new piece of knowledge—the awareness of its ethical deficiencies. As Hannah Arendt states, World War I “is almost impossible to describe” (267) since it created the effect of a catastrophe all over the world.

After the Second World War, western countries gave place to ethnic and minority groups in their countries, and thus received immigration, becoming multicultural and open societies. Many of these Western Countries, which have shaped the lives of millions of people, are the creators of western colonialism. Western colonialism, in addition to being a system that envisages the invasion of other countries and all kinds of exploitation and withdrawal from those countries, does not keep the citizens of those countries in their territories even after the exploited countries have achieved freedom; they do not let them use their languages and alienate them from their own cultures.

Historians argue that Western colonialism has evolved over time and that its definition should be made separately as pre-capitalist and post-capitalist periods. In this context, neo-colonialism and cultural imperialism are phenomena that have emerged with capitalism. In cultural imperialism, a country is not exploited by *de facto* occupation, but by keeping the market, economy, and therefore cultures of that country under control by the imperialist country. After the 1950s, the effects of imperialism entered literature, especially western literature, under the name of postcolonialism. This term is a classification covering a type of literature in which the colonial and post-colonial processes of Western countries are reflected from various perspectives. In this type of literature, the period of imperialism and its aftermath are reflected from the point of view of the colonised countries. The troubles experienced by the colonised people while living in imperialist countries, and their efforts to obtain their rights and to carry their own local cultures to that country can be listed as the prominent subjects of this literary genre.

The relations between the East and the West throughout history seem important in terms of understanding today. The distinctions made between East and West constitute the focus of orientalism to some extent. To understand orientalism, which has a wide spectrum, first of all, the distinction between East and West should be emphasised. As Edward Said argues, “the Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe’s greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and

languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other” (*Orientalism* 1). As can be seen, Edward Said brings forward an East-West dichotomy here. However, East and West are not just geographical definitions. Although both have a symbolised geography, there is a border that defines East and West. Therefore, both sides are shaped by a constant struggle around changing borders. The existence of a border means that culture has criteria that determine itself. According to Said, the concepts of East and West are phenomena designed by Western culture and planned to marginalise non-Europeans to show them as different from the West. In this context, he argues that the process of marginalisation is necessary for Europeans to enact their European interests and to show themselves superior.

Postcolonial theories make the colonised visible and rethink the colonial process in contrast to the colonisers’ way of thinking which has been imposed on the world for centuries. It is another burden of postcolonialism that aims to reconstruct a new discourse via counter-discourse to get rid of Eurocentric points of view in the social sciences. In literature, postcolonial professionals and laypeople gather pieces of information from the works produced by European colonialist writing. Both for detailed analysis of the colonisers’ views and to explore new perspectives from the colonised groups, postcolonialism has involved numerous studies of sociological subjects in terms of their language, education, religion, culture, identity, and society.

Postcolonialism particularises the colonised and their challenges across the colonial and imperial activities, and it would not be wrong to name the concept of postcolonialism as a kind of umbrella term since one can have the chance to learn many things not only about postcolonialism itself but also about colonialism, decolonisation, neo-colonialism, and imperialism within its framework. What is more, it invokes the existence of another point of view: that of the coloniser. By doing so, it uncovers the human being as a subject and object of colonial and imperial power in his/her surroundings. It should be stated that “the literatures of African countries, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Caribbean countries, India, Malaysia, Malta, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, South Pacific Island countries, and Sri Lanka are all post-colonial literatures” (Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin, *Empire* 2).

The true scope and meaning of the concept of postcolonialism are not fixed issues but are still highly arguable points among scholars and theorists. Ania Loomba explains the contentious issue with her argument that “the prefix ‘post’ complicates matters because it implies an ‘aftermath’ in two senses – temporal, as in coming after, and ideological, as in supplanting” (7). To illustrate, one of the burdens of postcolonial theory is to deconstruct the colonial discourse that defines the world according to the perspective of the coloniser and draws a picture full of prejudices towards the colonised. While doing so, postcolonial theorists construct the counter-discourse to accentuate the hazy narratives of the coloniser. Furthermore, in literature, colonial and postcolonial issues can be explored in the European colonialist writings of the nineteenth century.

In the novels by John Maxwell Coetzee (1940–...), the colonial past experienced in South Africa continues to make its existence felt in the background of the works. Although the author uses indirect spaces by adopting an allegorical writing style instead of using direct spaces in his works, it is clear that these indirect spaces are created to represent South Africa and its colonial history, evident from the references to the history experienced by the South Africans. Coetzee's writing in an allegorical style without mentioning South Africa directly is seen by some critics as his never actually having strayed from the realities of South Africa but placing these facts at the centre of his novel writing.

As a white South African, Coetzee takes a critical view of the colonial past and the colonial powers that served its emergence; he appears as a person who feels uncomfortable and almost embarrassed by what the colonial powers have done in the country. In this context, it can be stated that Coetzee is a kind of 'rejecting colonist' or 'dissident colonist'; These concepts, which have become part of our vocabulary with Albert Memmi's famous work *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (2003), refer to intellectuals who are uncomfortable with and question the colonial past although they originally belonged to colonial nations, such as Coetzee and many of the protagonists of his novels. Many of the main characters of his novels try to escape from the difficult problems caused by the colonial past and especially the burdens placed on the colonised peoples.

Moreover, Coetzee, who wants to show that "there can't be a single way of telling any story, whether it's about the history of colonialism or apartheid and democracy in South Africa" (Memmi 35), draws universal attention to oppression and human rights violations. Although he wrote his novels with an allegorical writing style for this purpose, it should not be thought that these fictional works are spatially far from South Africa and its historical realities. After all, Coetzee was born in South Africa, and this reality is inevitably reflected in his novels. South Africa continues to exist as a source from which the author feeds and produces.

However, the point to be noted here is that Coetzee opposes the fact that there is a compelling understanding that a novel written in South Africa must be written about the history of South Africa. Especially during and after the apartheid, a binding perception was created by the readers and even literary writers and critics in South Africa: a novelist or any other writer should tell the reality of South Africa, and the primary goal of literature is to convey the pains of the apartheid period and the problems caused by racism.

Many South African critics judged Coetzee's books, especially his earlier ones, as failures because they had an ambiguous tone and were unrelated to the current historical situation when examined through the social realist critical perspective that was prevalent in South Africa in the 1970s. Early criticisms of Coetzee's novels, specifically those using a Marxist perspective, accused him of having a style and an approach that was seen as irresponsible in terms of the country's politics given the ongoing debate in the country

over the relationship between aesthetics and politics. Even though the apartheid regime's ideological grip over South African writers made censorship a major worry, Coetzee's books were never prohibited by the censorship board during that time because they were seen to be too allegorical to pose a threat to the state.

### **Dissolution of the State and the Individual in *Michael K***

Coetzee touches upon the concepts of state and identity in *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983) which is an example of psychological bildungsroman that integrates postcolonial phenomena reflecting the current situation of colonised otherness with an exploration of identity as resistance against exploitation. Although Coetzee defies the social realism that permeates the writings of the majority of his regional contemporaries, he deploys unique strategies to address concerns of inequality and power dynamics. Rather than making direct references to the issues in the current social and political environment, he opted to develop a unique style that raises concerns about the interplay between politics and ethics. Instead of adhering to the criteria set forth by Marxist critics, he asked self-reflexive questions about the authority that comes with writing and the place of the writer in society.

Similar to this, maybe to underline their lack of agency, the characters who have been depicted with silence in Coetzee's novels have physical flaws that prevent them from speaking, which also prevent the reader from having access to their inner lives. Interlocutors describe Michael K as being slow-witted and speaking with a harelip, so the dilemma of giving voice to 'the Other' is problematised in *Life and Times of Michael K*. As the title suggests, the book tells the tale of Michael K, a character with a unique and innocent consciousness who represents the silenced other at a new turning point by emphasising his individual mind that is untainted by modernity's conventions. By presenting the Other's consciousness more directly, the novel places the 'other' in the subject position, and by mirroring Michael K's thoughts and feelings, the story in some ways exposes who he is.

"Although Michael K is physically disabled, he is still able to negotiate his life through a war-ridden environment a society" (Kehinde 64), and Coetzee concentrates on a character who is on the other side of the oppressive/oppressed relationship. Coetzee does not base his depiction of power dynamics in the novel on the postcolonial discursive strategy of fighting back against authority. Instead of engaging in the traditional power struggle, the silenced other engages in politics of elusion analogous to the elusive identity of Michael K. Coetzee, nevertheless, makes use of some ideas developed by poststructuralist theory in this process, especially by leaving gaps in the story and the protagonist's thoughts. Despite the unstable political climate all around him, Michael K can indulge his escapist inclinations and enjoys his isolation. His consciousness chooses silence and seclusion as a form of expression in response to the institutions' oppression. After physically fleeing from institutions and bureaucracy, he begins to give silence a material aspect and creates his concept of time that is distinct from historical time.

Michael K thinks he is finally living during his first visit to the Visagie farm “in a pocket outside time. Cape Town and the war slipped further and further into forgetfulness” (Coetzee 60).

Michael K “is the eponymous hero of the story, a noticeable deviation from some precursor African texts” (Kehinde 64), and he makes silence into an absolute, substantial being when he is alone. He buries himself in a state of absence while alone in the wilderness. To exemplify that, on his way to Prince Albert, “he climbed a hill and lay on his back listening to the silence, feeling the warmth of the sun soak into his bones” (Coetzee 46). Michael K’s reserve in the novel is caused by more than just his embarrassment or fear of other people. His eerie demeanour is indicated by his quietness and his actions are compared to animal behaviour numerous times. As “the text centres on a period when dissenting voices were silenced” (Kehinde 67), Michael K functions as one of the instances of that dissenting voice and he “is a man intent on eluding colonization, whether of body (through the camp) or of mind (through charity)” (Kehinde 67). By the book’s conclusion, even Michael K compares himself to a mole: “I am more like an earthworm, he thought. Which is also a kind of gardener. Or a mole, also a gardener, that does not tell stories because it lives in silence” (182).

The connection between this theory and Susan V. Gallagher’s claim that Coetzee depicts violence which can be found at an institutional level in *Life and Times of Michael K* is evident. Gallagher claims that Michael K’s story in the novel shows “the war of the bureaucracy against the individual” (146) and touches upon the structural injustice. The authoritarian institutions are vividly depicted throughout the book, especially in Michael K’s attempt to leave Cape Town lawfully, which reveals the sulky face of bureaucracy. “The axis of camps describes the establishment of boundaries and delimitations and their control as the main concern of power, which cannot tolerate Michael’s in-betweenness, his ability to live in the interstices between opposite spaces, identities or groups” (Monticelli 620), and Michael K and his mother race through a Kafkaesque bureaucratic maze to apply for a permit to leave the town, but they do not hear anything for what seems like eternity. After waiting in line for a while, Michael K tries to ask the policewoman behind the counter about his permit, but she just will not talk to him.

Coetzee, who brings forward the idea that “the tradition of realism and the postmodern tradition is a kind of illusionism and a struggle against it, believes that what the novel can do next should be looked at” (Geçikli 34). Although allusion to structural inequalities in the novel seems prevalent and realistic in terms of depicting what people experience in South Africa, many of the early reviews of *Life and Times of Michael K* emphasised that the book does not honour the oppressed’s fight and does not provide a comprehensive understanding of colonialism or apartheid. The majority of these interpretations are symbolic and make comparisons between the book and the political climate in South Africa at the time it was published.

“The setting for *Life and Times of Michael K* is a protracted civil war, a projection based on political developments or a lack thereof in the Emergency years in South Africa” (Van Vuuren 96), and the novel firstly and mostly reflects the embodiment of resistance to having power and control over others, questioning the foundation and functions of organised systems like the state. In a modern world, Michael K appears against the colonial system and struggles for an autonomous life describing a part of darkness as a result of designed will. *Oxford Learner’s Dictionary* defines the state as “a country considered as an organized political community controlled by one government,” and in the novel, the organised political community is of great concern since it behaves as the opposite of any order or organisation which mainly requires discipline or certain rules.

Michael K’s life and attitudes aim to manifest the unnecessary and uselessness of this system. Furthermore, his passive attitudes toward the creation of a new social and political system support his purposes. In fact, the apolitical existence of Michael K stands for political realities that imply Simone Weil’s comment quoted by Edward Said; “To be rooted . . . is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul,” proposing “that most remedies for uprootedness in this era of world wars, deportations, and mass exterminations are almost as dangerous as what they purportedly remedy. Of these, the state – or, more accurately, statism – is one of the most insidious, since the worship of the state tends to supplant all other human bonds” (Said, *Culture* 188–189). Enforcing curfews and setting up camps which present the main practices of the state shape the lives of citizens. One of the camp refugees asks “why should people with nowhere to go run away from the nice life we’ve got here? From soft beds like this and free wood and a man at the gate with a gun to stop the thieves from coming in the night to steal your money?” (Coetzee 78). However, it is obvious that the circumstances paved the way for labour exploitation, and accordingly, Michel Foucault clarifies the policy regarding its ethical implications as “the unemployed person was . . . taken in charge, at the expense of the nation but the cost of his liberty. Between him and society, an implicit system of obligation was established: he had the right to be fed, but he must accept the physical and moral constraint of confinement” (qtd. in Teimouri 33). The association of citizens and the state is inferred from this statement: “the state rides on the back of earth-grubbers like Michaels, and it devours the products of their toil and shits on them in return” (Coetzee 221). As a prominent concern of political discourse, Michael K highlights both the existentialist motto “man is born free” and the colonial interest in independency that rejects inequality and hierarchy among individuals. Michael K escapes from the Visagie grandson and refuses to live with him thinking that he “had tried to turn him into a body-servant” (Coetzee 65). His fear of being governed is a result of his consciousness about the reality of modern/postcolonial worlds’ conditions. Far from its basic and traditional meaning, the new organisation of Western slavery practice in the modern sense induces a lower degree of social and psychological freedom and is used to intensify racial oppression which ends in a system of forced and oppressive labour (Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin, *Key Concepts* 195–196). From a wider perspective, Michael K is

identified as “Rousseau’s ideal savage – free of desire for recognition or foundation – living in a fallen civil world” ruled by an oppressive government” (Wright 66). Schmitt’s description of the difference between constituted and constitutive power, however, shows that the dominant “creates and guarantees the law” (Mills 182). Michael K escapes from the camp which exemplifies the very places to carry out this policy and takes shelter on the farm which represents his self-directing world.

The novel and Michael K’s comments on his mother’s situation, who scrubs others’ floors, demonstrate his criticism of the utilitarianism of both the state and society. He reports to the Medical Officer about the people his mother worked for as a cry against the exploitative system. When she got old and sick they did not see the harm in putting her away out of sight, and after her death, they threw the mother into the fire, gave him an old box of ash, and told him “here is your mother, take her away, she is no good to us” (136). Both the state and the society are criticised here as the individual has no real opportunity to make use of them; instead, these systems concentrate on utilising the individual for their own benefit permanently. The militarisation and corruption of state power are illustrated obviously to demonstrate to what extent the conditions influence ordinary life. Michael K does not care for the state or its dissolution; rather, he is more prone to rejecting its existence as a whole. As in the novel, the state is used to promote a new type of racism that was born to force “the immigrants to live in terror and to rob them of the desire to protest against the living conditions” (Slater 1000) that were imposed upon them. The helplessness of the state is viewed and problematised regarding its inefficiency in providing a comfortable life to its people, far from violence, oppression, and corruption. Moreover, the farmers benefiting from the cheap labour of the refugee camp reflect the new system’s practices.

As is known, the systems in which the individual grows up shape his/her identity. Loomba states that “colonialism, wherever and whenever it occurs, makes the natives and newcomers fall into complex and traumatic relationships” (19). Individual’s emotional or mental integrity is under threat during shocking events like terrorism and war that create helplessness, incompetency, exhaustion, anxiety, unresponsiveness, isolation, uneasiness, loss of control, the feeling of shame, hypersensitivity to sounds, slow mental functions, loss of appetite and insomnia, all of which can be observed in Michael K’s life story.

Coetzee stresses how in a deeply militarised and bureaucratised state individual identity “is far less important than one’s social role and place in the power structure” (Susan V. Gallagher qtd. in Canepari-Labib, *Old Myths* 202–203). Michael K’s reluctance in being a part of the system mentioned above drives him to reject the state and its functions trivialising individuality and to appreciate humanistic philosophy that centres on the exclusiveness of the individual.

While Michael K and his story do not correspond to any type of certain identification revealing his racial, political and social identities, his situation is consistent with the principles of Liberal Theory. As Will Kymlicka states, “individuals should be free



to decide for themselves what sort of life they will lead. In particular, they should be free to question their participation in existing social practices, and opt out of them, should those practices seem no longer worth pursuing” (qtd. in Dragunoiu 75). Although Michael K does not support a side in the police-guerrilla conflict and never develops a political consciousness, which is one of the novel’s main criticisms, his elusiveness is still politically charged within the larger context of modernity and inspires hope as he looks for a chance to survive in a space between the natural and the political.

It can be argued that Michael K is a figure who affirms life as an ‘escape artist’ offering us the possibility to live in chaotic times by finding a space between the natural and the political, even though he is depicted with negative images like silence and absence, especially in light of this final reflection that has a hopeful tone. He defies all classifications that have been applied to him, and he represents radical freedom that is neither constrained by the sovereign nor by the restrictions of textuality. Coetzee reveals the immorality of causing agony to people who cannot speak in a highly politicised environment through Michael K’s eloquent silence and the medical officer’s depiction of him.

### **Postcolonial ‘Other’ and Silence in *Life and Times of Michael K***

It is not surprising that as an individual of the postmodern and postcolonial era, Michael K has a mosaic and fragmented identity resulting from the complexity of his times. The idea of identity as a fixed meaning is deconstructed piece by piece in the novel. Anxieties of the unknown, corruption, depression, grief, othering, sense of alienation, and dehumanisation are some well-known reasons and results of the colonial situation. Anxious and uncomfortable experiences of the colonised people simply bring about their alienation. As “the novel keeps alive the possibility that it does follow a consciousness unconditioned by modernity” (Adelman 617), Michael K is indifferent and ignorant not only to his society but also to his identity. Since he is regarded as a representation of his society and the South African nation, the novel describes his wide range of identities, not only individual but also national and racial identities.

Furthermore, having a typical postcolonial identity crisis due to being entrapped between practising colonial policies and resisting for the sake of national purposes, Michael K has a personal struggle mirroring dilemma; his escaping from camp shows national desires while his farm life has reflections of colonialism. Gallagher adds that at least three distinct Afrikaner Myths are re-expressed here; “the Afrikaner’s heroic independence and alienation from modernity, the tragic suffering endured in the concentration camps of the Anglo-Boer War, and the personal return to the land” (qtd. in Canepari-Labib, *Old Myths* 125).

Within the scope of postcolonial discourses, Michael K’s psychological situation proves Said’s claim that “no one seemed to be free from the opposition between *us* and *them*, resulting in a sense of reinforced, deepened, hardened identity that has not been

particularly edifying" (*Orientalism* 335). Franz Fanon, on the other hand, as a remarkable figure struggling to show how the East is despised by the West and how they are seen as inferior and backward, states in his well-known book *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) that "the colonized person is even dehumanized coming down to the state of an animal" (48). In that sense, the novel starts with and concentrates on Michael K's deformity and disability which catch the eyes of everyone he meets and the case supplies a definite identity for him leading to categorisation. A real example of a natural man, who turns to nature and lives as a primitive person, he reveals the identity problem of the colonised using depersonalisation which is a deliberate plan of the coloniser.

One of the prominent features of Michael K's identity is doubtlessly his resistance which is indispensable in a postcolonial context for freedom, autonomy, and self-determination. The medical officer summarises his firm and extraordinary attitude as:

As time passed, however, I slowly began to see the originality of the resistance you offered. . . . In fact you did not resist at all. When we told you to jump, you jumped. When we told you to jump again, you jumped again. When we told you to jump a third time, however, you did not respond but collapsed in a heap; and we could all see, even the most unwilling of us, that you had failed because you had exhausted your resources in obeying us. So we picked you up, finding that you weighed no more than a sack of feathers, and set you down before food, and said: Eat, build up your strength so that you can exhaust it again obeying us. And you did not refuse. You tried sincerely, I believe, to do as you were told. You acquiesced in your will, . . . your will acquiesced but your body balked. . . . Your body rejected the food we fed you and you grew even thinner. *Why?* I asked myself: why will this man not eat when he is plainly starving? Then as I watched you day after day I slowly began to understand the truth: that you were crying secretly, unknown to your conscious self (forgive the term), for a different kind of food, food that no camp could supply. Your will remained pliant but your body was crying to be fed its own food, and only that. Now I had been taught that the body contains no ambivalence. (Coetzee 163–164; italics in the original)

Additionally, he promotes a different kind of defence and silence, in his way of resistance as a result of the conditions he faced that caused psychological conflict and identity problems.

As a mysticised and secret aspect of the colonised, Michael K does not reveal his mystery despite the doctor's interest and questioning. The novel has an ambiguous ending which mirrors the colonised nations' situation. While both cases can be improved, the indifference of the society and dominant power creates a feeling of despair which is highlighted by the doctor who told Michael K that he "could get [his harelip] corrected . . . but did not offer to correct it" (Coetzee 72). Due to the same reasons, Michael K loses his

faith and confesses his sorrow of becoming an object of charity, because he is very well aware that they “expect something in return” (Coetzee 182).

The identity of Michael K, who was marginalised at the time of his birth due to his physical defect, is shaped within the frame of negativities by the influence of the period and conditions he was exposed to. Apartheid caused racial tension in South Africa as a result of the redesignation of society under the institutionalised laws of racial discrimination that constructed the racial hierarchy of western nations over the natives. Michael K, who reacts extraordinarily to this unfair order and suffers from existential pains, actually desires to act and establishes an order in which rules do not work and destroy his individuality. He traces Fanon’s thought which offers the idea proposing that “we should make efforts to pursue humanity based on the humanist discourses and that we should find a feasible link between the concepts of human rights and universal human subjectivity, and the realization of being real men who were able to create their history, knowledge and social system” (Yeh 200). In addition to that, the label of being ‘other’ has been the very legacy of colonial times that the postcolonial subject is unlikely to escape. The label, predicated on the hypothetical distinction which separates the super coloniser from the weak colonised reveals the reality of alterity. The otherising process of native people is committed to the idea that Europeans are logical, virtuous, complete human beings; simply “normal” while Easterners are insensible, amoral (even fallen), infantile; namely “different” (Said, *Culture* 40). Said highlights this distinction in which the images of privileged white men and those of “their others” have hardly ever changed since they were conceived nearly five hundred years ago. It seems to Said that the concept of alterity is about an undebatable and certain separation of “us” and “them” (Said, *Culture* 195).

What has made this sort of distinction a persistent wound on the soul of the oppressed is the repetition of the other’s misrepresentation via literary discourses throughout history. The pragmatic Europeans have utilised these false images to define and privilege themselves for their social and economic goals. A prominent figure of African writing, Chinua Achebe clarifies the coloniser’s need for definition as: “the west seems to suffer deep anxieties about the precariousness of its civilization and to have a need for constant reassurance by comparison with Africa” (19). Even though European exploitation influenced nearly everywhere on Earth, “the worst victim of European subjugation has been Africa” (Menon 17). Being the most affected victims of the colonisation plan, it has been nearly impossible for African postcolonial subjects to get over the trauma of being colonised for centuries.

The complexity of feeling him/herself as ‘other’ is one of the common remnants of the terrifying plan of the colonising countries. Set in apartheid South Africa, *Life and Times of Michael K* perfectly embodies the isolated, alienated and so traumatised other. First and foremost, it must be noted that the alterity of Michael K does not only stem from the evil plans of the oppressor, but it is also related to the disfigurement of his body, because to be born with a hare lip is the starting point of Michael K’s otherness. In addition to

restricting his speaking, the disfigurement even hinders the main mother-infant relationship, preventing Michael K from sucking his mother's breast, thus, even his mother despises him for being surprised by "what had been growing in her all these months" (Coetzee 1). John Bolin states that the harelip "is the mark by which K is recognized as a person who cannot partake in the social, ideological, and political world" (355). What is more, his mind is also "not quick" and this causes him not to be accepted by standard schools and to be sent to Huis Norenus where "he spent the rest of his childhood in the company of other variously afflicted and unfortunate children" (Coetzee 2). The years spent in Huis Norenus have an important role in Michael K's inferiority complex and deepen his otherness causing his loneliness and alienation. At the end of the novel, Michael K questions his alterity and complains about being pitied by everyone around him, and states that "everywhere I go there are people waiting to exercise their forms of charity on me. All these years, and still I carry the look of an orphan" (Coetzee 102).

It is crystal clear that the individual identity brought up with numerous disadvantages in a society where racial discrimination is prevalent deepens Michael K's otherness, yet it is impossible to evaluate them apart from the outer reasons. In addition to his appearance, the oppressor's false perceptions about him display the complex otherness he absorbs. The first occasion that might provide us with this complicated and constant otherness is when Michael K tries to pass the checkpoint to arrive at his mother's hometown, Prince Albert. En route, a soldier wants him to give all his money, left by his mother after her death. The only reaction that Michael K could give is to question the war softly asking: "What do you think the war is for? . . . 'For taking other people's money?'" (21). The soldier gives a tip to Michael K from the money, "parodying the movements of K's mouth" and addressing him as a "thief" (21). To emphasise his otherness, he belittles him by clarifying what the money is for: "'Tip' . . . 'Buy yourself an ice cream'" (21).

Another instance of the outer causes that create Michael K's alterity might be seen in the white man's reactions. After Michael K has achieved to handle the farm, the grandson of the Visagies – owners of the farm – returns to the farm to flee from the civil war. This incident becomes a turning point both for Michael K and the readers since while enabling his awakening, it provides us with his resistance, and when the grandson tries to "turn him into a body-servant" (38), he runs away and takes refuge in the mountains as he does not want to be a servant to anybody. His resistance is quite clear throughout the novel and it is simply the resistance to being the other; so he rejects all kinds of blind obedience. In fact, he does not desire to be a side of any philosophy or system since he has suffered from the politics of the states so much. Instead, he prefers a pretty distinctive alternative: being far away from all the thoughts that would reflect on him the thought of being the other. It must be noted that positioning himself as an outsider in his apartheid country may be a way of solving his alterity problem. In essence, there seems no alternative for him, apart from being either other or an outsider. When the guerrillas have come to the farm, he hides in his burrow, thinking: "Would it not be better to hide-day and night,

would it not be better to bury myself in the bowels of the earth than become a creature of theirs?" (Coetzee 6). He chooses neither the slavery of the state nor that of the guerrillas but prefers being an outsider.

The novel prioritises the sense of ambiguity and ambivalence in the sense that it has an open ending and its message is not clear. It seems to me that the instances in which the concept of otherness is reflected are not clear, either. One example of that is the registration of Michael K as "CM" (41) in the prison. The abbreviation "CM" stands for 'Coloured Man' and this is the first open humiliation of Michael K by the white man in the novel. The description of the camp which pictures the bad living conditions of the oppressed is also a good instance for understanding the concept of otherness. When Michael K is sent to the camp in Jakkalsdrif, he compares the conditions in the camp with the ones in the farm, mountains, and Cape Town and concludes that: "It was better in the mountains, K thought. It was better on the farm, it was better on the road. It was better in Cape Town. He thought of the hot dark hut, of strangers lying packed about him on their bunks, of air thick with derision. It is like going back to childhood, he thought: it is like a nightmare" (Coetzee 45). Michael K associates his childhood experiences with those in Jakkalsdrif, and he thinks being in the camp is similar to having a 'nightmare'. The relocation camp in Jakkalsdrif is separated by "the wire" (47) from the city in which the privileged oppressor lives. Here the wire must be emphasised as a reference to the former Apartheid system of South Africa. Robert – a member of the camp – enlightens Michael K about the exploitation of the white man and warns him stating that "And when you go into a shop in Prince Albert, all of a sudden prices go up. Why? Because you are from the camp" (48).

To comprehend the function of the camp and the otherness of the oppressed, our very attention should be driven to the metaphor of parasite which is used by the police captain first: "the camp at Jakkalsdrif, a nest of parasites hanging from the neat sunlit town, eating its substance, giving no nourishment back" (Coetzee 67). Here the parasites stand for people in the camp. Michael K questions this metaphor and wonders "what if the hosts were far outnumbered by the parasites" (67) and finally concludes that whether the camp or the city is a parasite is just predicated on "who made his voice heard loudest" (68). In that sense, Coetzee endeavours to indicate that the oppressor is the real parasite on the oppressed, and "the conflictual nature of these relations is signified by means of images of burdens and eating in terms of which one partner in a relationship is described as being weighed down by and/or devouring the other" (Marais 21). At this point, it must be stated that Coetzee also criticises the political system of the state with these words, and provides us with the idea that the oppressor tries to dominate masses of people and form their very label as *others* by humiliating them. Speaking loudly and violently, the white man becomes the real man who deserves all privileges in the world while his black other should not deserve any rights.

Within the postcolonial context, the notion of language having two-dimensional functions also needed to be critiqued attentively, and understanding these functions would help us comprehend both the oppressed and oppressor's relation to language. To begin with, the insulting language of the white man to impose his superiority is so endemic in all colonial and post-colonial texts. Frantz Fanon observes that "European discourses use *zoological* words while mentioning native people" (33). Being a victim of the otherising process, it seems to Coetzee that the alterity of the oppressed people could be emphasised best by representing the oppressor's common belittling language which pictures natives as savages and beasts.

*Life and Times of Michael K* has many instances of this language, and it takes place at a time of permits, the curfew, and terrible welfare service, when "hundreds of thousands of people were daily following their cockroach pilgrimages in flight from the war" (Coetzee 61). Here, thousands of oppressed people are defined as cockroaches, and another striking example is seen in a farmer's address to Michael K: "Where were you brought up, monkey?" (51). Yet another instance of the tendency to use zoological words explicitly: "Outside the gate, the men were herded left, the women and children right" (53). Using those terms to address people like Michael K creates a sense of superiority and inferiority as well as positioning people in the unique caste system of South Africa so that people should know where they belong in their social structure.

For oppressed people, language is most unlikely to display the very reality of their lives since they have been exposed to the imposition of the oppressor's language throughout their history. Due to "the distance between lived experiences and individuals, they become alienated from their 'real selves' and the surrounding reality" (Caneparilabib, *Language* 125). In Michael K's case, his language disability stems from not only being exploited by the white man via his so-called superior language but also from his physical insufficiencies. As it is stated before, he is represented as a slow-witted man, and his physical otherness is mixed with the otherness attached to him by the oppressor. Being otherised, he develops an inferiority complex and whenever he tries to explain his story, "there remained a gap, a hole, darkness before which his understanding baulked, into which it was useless to pour words. The words were eaten up, and the gap remained. His was always a story with a hole in it: a wrong story, always wrong" (Coetzee 64). Throughout the novel, it is observed that Michael K could not express himself efficiently, but Coetzee represents his protagonist's story as an incomplete one, which might be evaluated as a signifier of his complicated otherness.

In relation to this problem of expression, the medical officer's impressions about and reactions to Michael K should be noted. Like everybody, the medical officer marginalises Michael K due to his physical appearance. Yet, he becomes curious about his life story day by day. Although the officer compels him to tell his story on every occasion, he cannot express himself thoroughly; thus, he becomes an instrument to understand the meaning of life for both the officer and the reader. In his hypothetical letter, the officer

writes that “I alone see you as neither a soft case for a soft camp nor a hard case for a hard camp but a human soul above and beneath classification, a soul blessedly untouched by doctrine, untouched by history . . . murmuring behind that clownish mask” (Coetzee 87). Michael K with his clownish mask becomes “a kind of fetish for the officer, an object that holds the other’s secret inside itself” (Babcock 898).

The solution that Michael K finds for his alterity is to set his special world, growing pumpkins and melons on the farm in Prince Albert. The gardener of Cape Town becomes the gardener of his garden in which he is no longer the other. What is more, the motivation to grow his food in his free world is so powerful that it strengthens him despite his lack of appetite and malnutrition. He takes refuge in nature and becomes isolated and alienated from his apartheid society. Anthony Vital argues that the novel presents the idea that “life might (somewhere) be lived outside the reach of that colonial past” (91). Due to Michael K’s systematic silence, which is imposed on him by the institutions starting in his early years, his story, which marks a new point in Coetzee’s fiction’s representation of the other, is difficult to follow throughout the book. Despite this, he sees stillness and seclusion as having a tangible quality as he works to get away from the camps he is placed in. Michael K’s silence can be interpreted as an effort to challenge colonial discourse. The second part of the book, where the medical officer, a member of the colonial class, becomes the narrative voice, makes this opposition particularly clear. Michael K declines to respond to the medical officer’s inquiries, and the medical officer’s simplified description of him mocks the authorial voice’s vain attempts to represent the other. The medical officer is fascinated with the idea that Michael K’s existence is an allegory, but he is unable to discern what this existence represents using his logic.

*Life and Times of Michael K* fights appropriation and refuses to speak on behalf of the marginalised other in an effort to undermine colonial rhetoric and draw attention to their neglected experiences. Coetzee, however, suggests that this goal is impossible because his stories show the effects of the colonial past.

## **Conclusion**

As a system of dominance and power, colonialism is typically seen as the direct result of an outpost of imperialism. Although opponents emphasise the differences between colonialism and imperialism, both terms allude to the exercise of military, economic, and political domination by dominant groups over oppressed populations. Imperialism is a sort of conquest that tries to expand a country’s territory via the use of strength and force. Territorial development of one state from a relatively small territory toward a larger one was the general policy of all Empires in the world. Because the rulers constantly expand their frontiers by invading and colonising other countries, empires have no set bounds.

As a result, many anti-colonial intellectuals, critics, theorists, and authors from all over the world wrote numerous works and histories that denounce, challenge, and charge European aggression and domination in opposition to the rules and regulations of

Western colonialism and imperialism. A body of discourse known as postcolonial theory and criticism, which promotes a critical and analytical point of view to define or formulate a reversed history of colonialism, was thus formed with the advent of the post-colonial period from the works and ideas of numerous anti-colonial theorists, critics, and intellectuals.

Michael K dreams of a life that would provide him with unlimited freedom and dignity. In reality, his dream of gardening signifies “a strange transcendence of the animality of the human through the realization of the human dignity in an unmediated relation to natural subsistence—a relation which is not poisoned by the biopolitical nutritive maintenance of life to build the nation” (Mills 188). He rejects any kind of politics that would transform him into a servant, and his utopia is revealed when he tastes the grilled pumpkins he has grown on the Visagies’ farm. He thinks with sensual delight that “such pumpkin, he thought, such pumpkin I could eat every day of my life and never want anything else” (Coetzee 66). Thus, he finds out that the dream of gardening is the very reality of his life. “It excited him, he found, to say, recklessly, the truth... ‘I am a gardener...’” (102). It is clear that Michael K tries to get rid of the anxieties of being other by this dream, and his silent resistance via his truth might be evaluated as Coetzee’s message to his readers. The other hope is gardening on Mother Earth as the first man did at the beginning of creation.

From the beginning of colonisation and apartheid history, up to the period when the Afrikaners took complete political control, South Africa has been a fertile ground for different literary and non-literary narratives that both exemplify oppression and describe a way out of oppression. Apart from the *plaasromans* written by the Afrikaners under British oppression and the South African landscape poems, protest poems, songs of praise, town theatre plays and prison diaries form “the literary reflections of the oppression carried out by different political powers in South Africa at different times” (Gallagher 96).

The racial discrimination and violence caused by apartheid in South Africa led to the emergence of some confessional churches, and these churches presented religious-based objections to the oppressive administration of political power. In South Africa, where not much has changed after the official end of apartheid, post-apartheid literature has moved away from its public and rigid politicism to a more personal and private, introspective and confessional style. The tension between political commitment and aesthetic formalism, which left its mark in previous periods, has now disappeared. Literature now mainly deals with the search for communities that need to define themselves in an identity context.

Although the transition to democracy in South Africa has been experienced recently, it is not so easy to erase the traces of the past, as mentioned earlier. Therefore, it can be said that the recent literature on South Africa is a kind of trauma literature. Again, this literature seems to be taking shape in the hands of detectives who trace the recent period. Shame seems to be the only possible way to prevent other crimes against



humanity, besides being an expression of being unable to do anything. However, the first step is to confess or admit the crime, which will enable confrontation. While Coetzee invites the reader to empathise with the characters he has created in his works, he also invites them to understand themselves.

Coetzee explores what it means to be an other through Michael K in this novel. There are several reasons why the protagonist represents the 'other'; firstly, he was born with a hare lip that makes him physically different from people. He is exposed to the separative gaze of people. Whenever he tries to describe himself, he thinks that the description of himself is deficit, indefinite, and dark. Additionally, when he is in the hospital, the doctor mentions Michael K as 'opgaarder' which means a squirrel, ant, and bee – another category of classification for him. Furthermore, people pass judgment on him, because he is distant from sexuality and he is not attracted to women. That is why he is again considered abnormal among women/men. Finally, he is different in his silence and mute attitude towards his surroundings which is mistaken for acceptance.

On the other hand, Michael K is an embodied individual with an extreme degree of independence and resistance. It might be used in the novel to emphasise that Michael K feels like both an insider and mostly an outsider in his society and milieu. Sometimes he is forcefully integrated into society, but he does not feel belonging to such kind of integrity and flees to the outside of the mainstream.

To illustrate with final words, Michael K cannot live in the settlement camps and hospital although he has a chance to eat and find shelter. He prefers to be an outsider through the medium of the farm which offers him inner peace. He is taken to the settlement camps or the hospital but he leaves and tries to set up his life far from the rest and the effects of the war. Even though he lives in difficult conditions and a kind of imprisonment underground, being on a farm away from the camp and people makes him calm and peaceful. From the very beginning of the novel to the end, he is a man of freedom rather than imprisonment. His consistent resistance in the camps and hospitals against the system, people, and the presence of the war shows his devotion to independence that might be a reminder for the suppressed nations who should keep their emancipation persistent in almost every traumatic condition.

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