

SUBALTERN IDENTITY, A CONUNDRUM: A CRITICAL READING OF J. M. COETZEE'S 'LIFE AND TIMES OF MICHAEL K.'

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Abstract

Identity is the kernel of an individual's life. But for it, one's existence would be reduced to its rudimentary aspects of breathing and mere being. However, the question arises as to whether everyone has got an identity of his/her own. If so, does one realize it? In particular, whether or not a subaltern has an identity must be probed. Besides, one must also analyze as whether or not the world takes pains to fathom the identity of those who live in its fringes. As this said, the paper critically analyses the conundrum of subaltern identity in J. M. Coetzee's 'Life and Times of Michael K.' it also establishes the instability of such identity. Besides, it highlights subaltern identity as viewed from the vantage of the mainstream. It also underlines as how a subaltern runs the risk of given a false identity by the society. In conclusion, the paper proposes inarticulateness being a peculiar conundrum of subaltern existence.

Key words: Subaltern, Identity, Fringes, Inarticulateness, J. M. Coetzee.

Identity, as defined in 'Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary', is "the fact of who or what a person or thing is" (770). As definition indicates, it is a fact, or an established view of somebody as who he is. The question arises as to whether or not everyone can be identified with a specific set of traits. In addition, is there anyone who defies the limits of a particular identity and even lives without one? This brings the discussion to the question of subaltern identity. Does subaltern have an identity, or is someone who does not have an identity a subaltern?

Subaltern, living from the pivot of the society—at its periphery, struggles to establish an identity for himself. Even if he does so, he runs the risk of the society invalidating it. It is at this juncture that the question of identity turns problematic. As this said, the paper critically examines the conundrum of subaltern identity in J. M. Coetzee's 'Life and Times of Michael K.' It highlights the varied lenses through which the mainstream attempts to see the novel's eponymous hero. Underscoring the instability of a subaltern identity, the paper concludes with showcasing inarticulateness as a typical aspect of subaltern condition.

As Peter Brooks puts it, identity points to "who you are--in the sense of what you can legitimately call yourself, and what others call you" (*Enigmas of Identity* 4). In view of this definition, a few questions pertaining to identity should be posed at the outset of the paper: Who is Michael K? Who is he to himself? How is he viewed by others? Does he possess self-knowledge? Does he think it is important to his existence? Does he think, above all, that he is important to the collective identity of the society?

To start with, one has to study who Michael K is. The difficulty of such an attempt is that the reader does not have a wholesome picture of who he is. Coetzee does not offer all that is necessary to pin down his identity. For instance, given that the Apartheid South Africa forms backdrop of the novel, the immediate question arises as to his colour. One does not know whether he is black or white. However, one can assume from his poverty and jobs that he is put to that he must be a black South African. In the essay ‘Against Society, Against History, Against Reason COETZEE’S ARCHAIC POSTMODERNISM,’ Anton Leist calls Michael K a “withdrawn colored man of thirty-one” (*J. M. Coetzee and Ethics: Philosophical Perspectives on Literature* 216). This confirms the assumption that he is a black South African, who, by his colour, is at a greater disadvantage in an Apartheid landscape.

Next to his skin colour, one moves to notice the fact that he is physically and mentally at a disadvantage right from his infancy. In other words, he has a hare lip, a gaping left nostril, and a crooked nose, all forging to give him an unprepossessing facial appearance. In addition, he is mentally slow, which thwarts him from mixing with other children in his schooling and with other people when he becomes an adult. For instance, Anna K, writes Coetzee, “kept it away from other children” seeing that his child is jeered at by them (3).

This exclusion from the social circle makes him go into a shell, and never does he come out from it even in his adulthood. This lets his otherness grow pronouncedly. His feeling of discomfort is marked when he comes into contact with others, as opposed to the feeling of ease and comfort when he is by himself, as Coetzee confirms, “He was easiest by himself” (4). As this said, one can note that as he grows, he grows the element of an outsider within himself, eventually turning out to be one.

Although his deformity gives him an inherent vulnerability, he manages to earn himself a job as a gardener in the municipal services in the city of Cape Town at the age of fifteen. It is ironic that someone who is not beautiful himself is made to keep up the beauty of such places as parks and gardens. After a particular phase of unemployment, he gets hired as a night attendant to clean the public lavatories. At this point, one has to note that he becomes a dispenser of people’s dirt. Although K is given a menial job in one way or another, he is nevertheless forced to live in a perpetual state of uncertainty. As only a stable employment can make an individual feel at home, he is deprived of such an opportunity.

His deformity, given that it is glaringly visible, prevents him from any healthy socialization, leave alone interaction, with the rest of the world. To give an example, when K goes to apply for permits to leave Cape Town, the woman at the desk gets impatient with him for his repeated questions and rudely shoos him off. Humiliations as this become an everyday phenomenon in his life and that in turn severely affects his sense of himself. His deformity not only falls in the way of his interaction with the world, but also renders him defenseless in the face of a physical assault. For instance, he is set upon by a band of robbers and is left with “a dislocated thumb and two broken ribs” (4). This underlines the precariousness of his condition and its subsequent impact on his identity.

The only consolation as far as the life of Michael K is concerned is his mother Anna K. although the latter has long ceased to earn, and has become an invalid, suffering from dropsy, no point in his life does K see her as a millstone around his neck. Instead, he is too willing to fulfill her needs and interests. For instance, when Anna proposes a plan to move out of the city and get settled in her girlhood farm in Prince Albert, he blindly accedes to it without weighing its pros and cons. Coetzee writes, “He accepted without question the wisdom of her plan” (8). This

makes the reader see K as a dutiful son, an identity (laden with responsibility) that he would cling on to till the end.

K, at his thirty-first age, turns a new leaf in his life—that of leaving Cape Town for Prince Albert. This movement has multiple resonances, leaning itself to several symbolic readings. First, on a surface level, it is a quest of two weaklings for a haven from their increasingly perilous living. Second, it marks the first of a series of escapes that K would undertake throughout his life. Third, it symbolizes a movement from the centre – Cape Town – to the margins – Prince Albert – reflecting that physical proximity to the centre does not mean inclusion and subsequent empowerment. Fourth, it suggests a kind of reverse mobility of a subaltern from the pivot to the periphery due to the incompatibility with the mainstream. Fifth, it epitomizes an archetypal journey from pandemonium to peace, from darkness to light, from stagnation to motion, and from evil to good.

K's journey hits an impasse in Stellenbosch, where his mother dies of overexposure to cold. The hospital episode is crucial as far as the reading of subaltern identity is concerned. Having passed sleepless nights and passive days in hope of his mother getting better, what he receives is his mother's ashes, neatly stashed away in two packets. His response to what he is given is one of defiance and distrust. He asks the nurse, "Why do you give me this" (33). This is a well-pointed question at a system that deprives, starves, kills and reduces to ashes the vulnerable whom it is supposed to provide for. Besides, one also realizes as how the life of a subaltern is rendered valueless, his existence erased, and identity obliterated. If it is Anna K today, it could well be Michael K the next day.

The death of Anna K not only orphans Michael K, but it also leaves a permanent void in his existence, a void that none can fill. Peter Brooks opines, "Orphan status gives one the opportunity for self-definition" (*Enigmas of Identity* 4). But such is not the case with K. he does not take pains to discover who he is, and what is his stake on the future of humanity. Instead, he continues to do what he has been doing right through: to play a dutiful son to his dead mother. When Anna K was alive, he attended to her needs, and now that she has passed away, he embarks on a solitary pilgrimage to join his mother to the land of her birth. i.e., to give his mother an honourable burial.

It is en route his journey that K comes face to face with different facets of the society. It is during his pilgrimage that a number of questions, seemingly simple yet stirring, are thrown at him. For instance, a soldier blocks his way and asks, "So who are you? Where do you think you are going?" (*Coetzee* 36). It is a situation that he has never been in, a situation that demands his self-definition and destination. For an answer, he remains silent. The reader knows that he cannot verbalize his identity, nor can he validate the purpose of his journey. According to rationality of the society, one will not make a troublesome journey afoot for miles merely to bury his mother's ashes. This shows as how difficult is reverse mobility, that the society does not approve of anything that is beyond its terms and conditions.

Second, although K hides in bushes, takes refuge in dilapidated houses, feeds on unripe fruits, the society does not pass him off as a mere "footloose vagrant" (39). Instead, it picks him up and finds a use for him in one way or another. For instance, K, along with fifty vagrants, is made to clear a hillside railway track that is covered by "a mountain of rocks and red clay" (41). The more he thinks himself to be irrelevant to the collective identity of the society, the firmer becomes the society's enunciation of his utility.

Though few, K's journey is not utterly devoid of a confrontation with the good side of humanity. At Laingsburg, for example, a family hosts him, giving him food and shelter. When

they ask him of his journey, he cannot say anything save he is bound for Prince Albert to bury his dead mother's ashes. The reader can see that he gives nothing but a brooding silence in response to the questions posed to him. Although this episode is lighter seen against the broad picture of the novel, it nevertheless reiterates an important aspect of the subaltern identity: inarticulateness. As he slowly but steadily loses the civilized man in him, he also loses the ability and use of language in the process.

On reaching Prince Albert, K once again confronts the difficulty of identification. In other words, he does not know whether his mother's girlhood farm belongs to "a Mr. Vosloo or a Mr. Visser" (50). At last, he is led to the crumbling, long-deserted farm of one Mr. Visagie. As this said, the very arrival at his pilgrimage site is open to uncertainty. He does not know whether or not he has arrived at a place that his mother meant to. Along with the conundrum of identity, destination as well suffers a lack of certitude. Second, one has to note that the Visagie's farm is located at the outskirts of Albert, far from the regular habitation and close to the woods. This highlights that he is not only geographically at a distance from the mainstream, but is also sociologically and demographically, confirming his existence at the fringes.

It is after settling in the farm that one gets a glimpse into his real identity and who he thinks himself to be. He proclaims thus: "I am a gardener" (59). What he does not do is to become a regular inhabitant of the deserted farm, letting himself to become yet another confined creature. Instead, he digs a burrow in the bowels of the earth and starts to lead an existence akin to an animal's. He cultivates pumpkins and melons, and occasionally hunts birds. One witnesses K letting his primitive self overwhelm the traces of civilization in him, and living solely on his instinctual needs.

However, his trance-like spell comes to an end when an army deserter, claiming himself to be the grandson of the Visagie's, appears on the farm. K sighs as in, "I let myself believe that this was one of those islands without an owner. Now I am learning the truth. Now I am learning my lesson" (61). He learns that no scrape of land is without its master, nor can he live entirely cut off from the civilization. After all, the fringes skirt nothing but the mainstream. At the same time, K is averse to the idea of working under a master. As the reader has seen him living independent of any system, it is no surprise when he flees the farm and loses himself in the mountains.

However, the fleeing is not without its anguish. Coetzee writes, "There was a cord of tenderness that stretched from him to the patch of earth beside the dam and must be cut" (65). When he flees, he is fleeing from a strip of land where his mother lies, and where his children—pumpkins and melons—lie. As this said, there exists an emotional bond between him and the farm. Besides, every place of refuge of his is beset by an intruder or an invader of one kind or another. This makes his life so nomadic, a home so unsettled, and an identity so stunted. His escape into the mountains also hints at his desire to make himself as obscure as possible, as distanced from the mainstream as possible. In his words,

"Now surely I have come as far as a man can come; surely no one will be mad enough to cross these plains, climb these mountains, search these rocks to find me; surely now that in all the world only I know where I am, I can think of myself as lost" (66).

He thinks of himself being lost to the world, but he finds his true self amid the mountains, stripped of all traces of civilization, all alone to himself. He increasingly becomes animalistic, surviving merely on ants and lizards. However, it is unclear as to why Coetzee makes him move out of the mountains and go downhill. As long as he hides himself in the mountains, he lets

himself drift into oblivion and become a null. But the moment he appears on the plains, the reader sees him subalternized by the mainstream.

Consequently, the society tracks him down and shoves him under its ambit. It does so by leveling accusations ranging from being unemployed, vagrant, leaving his district without an authorization, infringing the curfew, to being “drunk and disorderly” (70). He remains apathetic to all these charges, readily letting himself be toyed by the establishment. He is tossed from jail to hospital and then to a camp called Jakkalsdrif, which symbolizes the system that kept K in fetters all his life.

It is in camp that his essential being comes to brace a huge threat: threat of being shaped and molded according to the whims of the society. He is tasked to work even when he does not have strength for it; forced to earn even when he does not have need for it; compelled to eat even when he finds it no longer a necessity to do so. He cries in desperation, “Why have I been sent here? How long do I have to stay?” (75). though all his primal needs are better taken care of in the camp than either in the farm or in the mountains, he does not like it because of what it stands for. Although the camp serves as a relocation site, it represents a place where the misfits and the marginalized of the society are forcibly cooped from visibility. In providing for the unfortunate (not without extracting work from them), the society prides itself of being virtuous and egalitarian, and kind to the vulnerable. The true reason behind is that the society can put them in a camp and forget them for good.

Once again he makes an escape for the Visagie’s farm. He resumes his animal life with more vigour, cultivating pumpkins and melons as usual. One has to note that wherever he goes or whatever he does, he comes back to being a gardener at any cost. He rewrites the definition of man, that he digs a burrow for a dwelling place, has wood and leather and gut for tools, does everything in such a way that he does not leave behind anything as legacy even accidentally. He expects to be called a “shiftless creature,” with neither pride in himself nor in his works (101). This showcases that he gains an identity in stripping himself of any identity.

While it is true that he dislikes to work under a master, he nevertheless desires to serve the rebels with the produce of the land. For instance, he says,

“I could say: Be sure to come back to the dam next time, and I will feed you. I will have pumpkins and squashes and melons by then, I will have peaches and figs and prickly pears, you will lack nothing” (109).

This shows the difficulty of spotting any coherent pattern in his thoughts. In addition, one cannot conclude that he no longer likes to play gofer to anybody. However, one can attribute this sudden burst of wish to a sense of hospitality that he inherits from being close to nature. Keeping his wont to escape from any place of confinement, it is safe to conclude that he would have done just that had the rebels tried to take advantage of him.

Even when he lives in his self-made abode for a considerable streak, he does so with a perpetual fear of being caught by the society. But after a certain point, he becomes listless of any looming trap. Nevertheless, an occasional helicopter or a jet fighter reminds him of the presence of the society. This shows that no corner, however neglected, escapes the reach of the society. At last, he is caught by the soldiers under the headship of one Captain Oozthuizen. It is from this point that the world takes notice of him, foists an identity that it thinks would fit him, and so on. For instance, K loses his very name when Captain Oozthuizen confidently asserts that his name is not Michael but “Michaels” (124). This reflects K’s inability to defend the rudimentary of his identity—that is—his name.

According to Adriaan van Heerden in her essay ‘Disgrace, Desire, and the Dark Side of the New South Africa,’ “The figure of the outsider is a constant presence in his work,” indicating the poetics of Coetzee (*J. M. Coetzee and Ethics: Philosophical Perspectives on Literature* 49). The placing of Michael K as an outsider is nowhere apparent than in the second part of the novel where a medical officer of an infirmary to which he is admitted takes up the string of narration. In this vein, K runs the risk of increasingly distanced and otherized. One has to note here that the medical officer is the first ever person to acknowledge the fact that K has cut himself off from the society for good. He wonders, “I am not sure whether he is wholly of our world” (*Coetzee* 130).

Given K is an outsider, the society tries in vain to comprehend him and of his needs. For instance, the doctor attempts to force some story out of K but to no avail. He asks, “Do you want the story to end with you? That would make it a sad story, don't you think?” (*Coetzee* 139). All such vehement questions are met with a dead-pan silence. As Jarad Zimmler points out, “One might note in the meantime that the various characters and narrators in this novel are perpetually seeking some way of understanding its eponymous protagonist, some conceptual framework into which to translate him” (*J. M. Coetzee and the Politics of Style* 121). One might register at this juncture that neither K has means to explain himself nor the world has means to define him. It is the absence of such a conceptual framework that makes his identity a null.

Second, K’s silence also denotes the aspect of inarticulateness characteristic of a subaltern. It suggests as how he has lost the ability to construct a story out of words that the world gave him. In other words, it invokes a question as to whether or not it is possible to narrate the subaltern experience with words available in the lexicon of the mainstream.

As he is mute about himself, the world takes upon itself to define him. The tags range from a vagrant, outlaw, sympathizer of the rebels, host for the army deserters to arsonist. All these hint at a dangerous conceptualization of a subaltern who does not fit in with the established scheme of things. On the other end of the spectrum lies a series of tags that invite ridicule and mockery. i.e., the doctor calls him with such names as pebble, stone, insect, and skeleton. He goes to an extent of metaphorizing K’s entire existence and identity when he says, “He is one of those sticks held together with rubber bands” (*Coetzee* 133). As this said, it is clear that when someone does not have a voice, he runs the risk of grossly misrepresented by those who have it.

K once again does what he does so well: escaping from the infirmary. He ends up where he began: Cape Town. It is bewildering as how, a man deprived of all physical strength, managed to reach the city all the way from Prince Albert. An important episode upon his arrival in the city is that of his confrontation with a band of wanderers. At this juncture, one sees the incomprehension of the society reaching its acme when a girl invades his privacy and gives him pleasure unasked. He rightly muses that he has always been seen as an “object of charity” (181). Irrespective of where he is, be it in the camp, in the hospital, or in the city, the world has always misunderstood him and has given him what he least requires.

Towards the end of the novel, K realizes the need to talk. He says, “I must speak before it is too late” (176). Yet, he is neither equipped with the language to express himself nor is sure whether the world would understand him if he did so. Coetzee writes, “He simply did not know how to tell a story” (176). This shows that the vocabulary of self-definition is absent in the subaltern’s language, and that the vocabulary of the mainstream does not possess similar language to fathom him. Besides, Michael is someone who defies the very meaning-making itself, as Anton Leist in his essay ‘Against Society, Against History, Against Reason COETZEE’S ARCHAIC POSTMODERNISM’ notes, “It seems that Michael is not to be

understood because in him there is nothing to be understood; he personifies the point from which one can look at the problem of understanding and living in society” (*J. M. Coetzee and Ethics: Philosophical Perspectives on Literature* 219).

“I am a gardener, he said, aloud” (*Coetzee* 182). This echoes a similar proclamation he made upon his arrival in the Visagie’s farm. He still sticks to his identity as a gardener even after a many number of harrowing experiences is remarkable. However, one is not sure whether the world would understand him if he evinced his desire of becoming a gardener. It is because of the fact that the world has always seen him either as an object of eccentricity or as a creature of helplessness. In addition, it has either taken an aggressive stance or a sympathetic one when dealing with him. What it has not done, is that it has not empathized with him.

As this said, it is his very inability to speak out makes K a subaltern. It is his uncertainty, diffidence, feeling of sounding discordant and monotonous, gives him the identity of a subaltern. As Gayatri Spivak puts it, “If the subaltern could speak--that is, speak in a way that really mattered to us--then it wouldn't be subaltern” (*Subalternity and Representation: Arguments in Cultural Theory* qtd. 1). Such being the case, his inarticulateness makes one conclude his subalternity. As this said, identity, in its purest sense, eludes a subaltern. In other words, he cannot say who he is. At the same time, the outside world cannot fix him who he is either. It is this strange sense of dubiousness, this ground of instability, that becomes a conundrum of subaltern identity.

To conclude, a critical reading of J. M. Coetzee’s ‘Life and Times of Michael K’ affirms that subaltern identity defies fixity and is characterized by uncertainty. It also, inter alia, highlights such identity is prone to falsifications and manipulations in the mainstream discourse. Besides, it asserts that inarticulateness of the subaltern, on one hand thwarts the mainstream from eliciting any response from him, and on the other it proves a disadvantage for the former. Eventually, the paper suggests such voicelessness as a peculiar feature of a subaltern.

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