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ABILITY IN DISABILITY: THE EMPOWERMENT OF THE DISABLED IN J.M.COETZEE'S LIFE AND TIMES OF MICHAEL K

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RESUME

Ayo Kehinde earned his Ph.D. from the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, where he currently teaches African Literature, Literary Theories, Criticism, and Postcolonial Literatures. Before he transferred his services to the University of Ibadan, he was a Senior Lecturer at the Department of English, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. His papers have been published in many international and local journals. He was a principal participant at the 2008 Institute on Contemporary American Literature, hosted by the International Center, University of Louisville, Kentucky.

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that J.M. Coetzee's works assume the dignity and central position of the disabled in the universe. It operates, in the main, from the template provided by one of Coetzee's novels in which a disabled character is centrally represented and is even the eponymous hero, *Life and Times of Michael K*. This text is read as a postmodern allegory, closely tied to the South African context, a milieu that was handicapped and disabled during the dismantled apartheid. The text also transforms the urgent social concerns into more universal troubles, making disability in Coetzee's literary repertoire a signifier of the decadence and disillusionment in Africa, a continent that is literally disabled. The trope of disability is used as a metaphor to signify black people's struggle to discover their true identity. Michael K, the disabled eponymous hero of the text, attempts to reinscribe the figure of the *Other* black man commonly employed to validate the Afrikaner myth. Through the positive representation of the disabled character, Coetzee has suggested that black people can break out of the racial and social hierarchies on which the traditional Afrikaner identity is based. On a larger political and social plane, Coetzee has insinuated that for political stability and economic independence to be a reality in Africa, the continent's disabled must be involved. To Coetzee, the empowerment of the disabled in Africa is an index of the empowerment of the continent.

Key Words: Disability, Empowerment, Postmodern Allegory, Apartheid, Afrikaner Identity.

INTRODUCTION

Disability is a polysemic term that differs from one culture to another culture. This claim is in line with that of Susan Whyte and Benedicte Ingstad (1995) who opine that “any attempt to universalize the category ‘disabled’ runs into conceptual problems of the most fundamental sort” (5). They however categorize disability into two: manifest physical disability and less manifest forms of disability (for instance, deafness and insanity). Erving Goffman (1963) dwells perceptively on the cultural dimension to disability. Also, in line with Whyte and Ingstad, Ato Quayson (1999) sees disability as both a cultural and physical problem, and he attempts a deconstruction of Robert Murphy’s (1987) claim that stereotypes on the disabled impact on the psyches of the disabled themselves, generating problems with their self-esteem. To Quayson, there is “flow of affectivity” in writers’ representations of the disabled. This affectivity can be in a multiplicity of emotions – guilt, bewilderment and fear. Robert Murphy (1987) clarifies this issue by saying that the disabled serve as

Constant visible reminders to the abled-bodied that the society they live in is shot through with inequity and suffering, that they live in a counterfeit paradise, and that they too are vulnerable (55-56).

Therefore, what is often found in postcolonial writings about disabled people is an uneasy relationship between the disabled and the able-bodied. There are also attempts to link historical epochs with the conditions of disabled people. Ato Quayson’s illuminative comments on the importance and status of disabled people in postcolonial literary works are worth quoting at details at this juncture:

The presence of disabled people in post-colonial writing marks more than just the recognition of their obvious presence in the real world of post-colonial existence and the fact that, in most cases, national economies woefully fail to take care of them. It means much more than that. It also marks the sense of a major problematic, which is nothing less than the difficult encounter with history itself... What is important to note, however, is that the encounter with the disabled in postcolonial writing is as much a struggle to transcend the nightmare of history (65-66).

In postcolonial and postmodern texts, thematic foci have shifted from the centre to the hitherto marginalized plane of discourse (the margin) – the disabled, the poor, the disempowered, the third world, etc. Thus, disability is no longer conceived in postmodern/postcolonial texts as a marginal case (See: Kumor Uprety, 1997).

This paper therefore examines the representation of the dialectics of ‘Self’ and ‘Other’ in J.M Coetzee’s *Life and Times of Michael K*, with regard to the dissonant relationship between the eponymous protagonist, Michael K, the quintessential disabled, and the able-bodied people in his society. Rene Descartes’ Cartesian Dualism, most especially the distinction between the mental and the physical, is very germane to this discourse, and his coining of the ‘I’, the incorporeal yet reflective substance of his proposition, “*Cogito Ergo Sum*” (I Think, therefore, I am), is also relevant as a framework of this study. To Descartes, the function of thinking (cogitation) encapsulates not only the intellect but also volitional activities, such as willing and affirming, and the mental dimensions of imagining and perceiving (Flew, 1984; Daniels 2000). Michael K in Coetzee’s text is a self-narrating subject (the narrating self) who is entrenched in the ongoing process of history, the experience of which he seeks constantly to translate, revise and update. It is safe to describe ‘the self’ as a protagonist of his/her own individual history or drama. K is also a narrative self that is constructed in the discourse

of a narrative genre (a novel, *Life and Times of Michael K*). As a narrative self, K is dynamically constructed and reconstructed, transforming and adapting in response to the text's experience, turning points, crises and trials.

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The novel is written in the third-person past tense, centered in K's consciousness. The events presented to the reader are filtered through K's perception. Making K, a disabled man, a hero is a re-writing of the plaasroman of South African literature which usually privileges the able-bodied people and the citizens at the upper-most rung of the social ladder of the society. Although the interlude in the rehabilitation farm is narrated by the camp Medical Officer in the past tense, more often than not, it is K who takes the reader round the cosmos, with mythical resonances, the heart of South Africa, the Karoo and then returning to the chaos and corruption of the city. As an eye/I-witness of the troubles bedeviling the nation, he exposes the (mis)deeds of South African rulers. This feat is an attempt to debunk a popularly-held view that life in the camps was an Eldorado. Rather, he portrays the camps as places which rob human beings of their individual self-determination and privacy. They also deprive people of the needed human dignity. Therefore, K's story is "stern rebuttal to the common justification of the white majority that blacks in South Africa are much better off in a material sense than those in the black ruled nations of Africa" (Susan Gallagher, 1991: 149).

According to Ato Quayson (1999), literary attitudes to the disabled reveal three critical moves. The first is the Lacanian conceptual apparatus for theorizing what happens in the encounter with the disabled. The second deals with the ways in which the disabled are figured in postcolonial writings. This is greatly evidenced in J.M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K*, Keri Hulme's *The Bone People* and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*.

The third is the contextualization of the problem of disability in postcolonial texts. Thus, all the three Lacanian categorizations are germane to Coetzee's depiction of Michael K. In *Life and Times of Michael K*, Coetzee demonstrates an uncanny understanding of human nature. Biting social and political satires found in the novel reflect Coetzee's abhorrence of social and moral injustices. Reverence for the disabled abounds in African cosmologies. For example, in Yoruba myths, folktales and legends, the disabled are referred to as "Eni Orisa" (Divine beings). It is believed that they are the closest allies of Obatala, the Yoruba god of creation. In The Praise Poetry of *Iran Olufe* (the Olufe Clan), the disabled are said to be welcome visitors at and even residents of "Ile Orisa Obatala" (the Obatala Shrine). The lame, the blind, the albino, the hunchback and the like were always found in the palace of Ooni of Ife in the past. There, they always performed wonderful and unexpected exploits. The following excerpt from the "Oriki" of Iran Olufe is a testimony to this claim:

Mo gbo kinjin nile
 Balufon-Ade, mo gbo kinjin lode
 Mo lo ree woran
 Mo d'ode n o ba onilu
 Emi o ba onijo
 Afin ri mi
 Afin na mi
 Aro s'owo gbogbo
 O' i gba 'mi l'enu (Adeboye Babalola, 2001:12).

I heard a melodious drum sound in the town
 Balufon-Ade, I heard the melodious drum sound outside the palace
 I then went there for sight-seeing
 I reached the place but I did not see any drummer
 Neither did I see any dancer
 The albino saw me
 The albino beat me
 The crippled outstretched his palms
 And used them to slap my mouth (My translation).

In “Oriki Iran Elerin”, there is a story about the first wife of *Elerin Mosa* which privileges the disabled. The Elerin warned his impertinent and dogged wife against going to the deepest side of the Gbingbin River. The elders, young ones and friends of the family also advised her, to no avail. Later, the husband, out of anger, said that if she liked, she should do as she wished. One day, the woman went to the forbidden place. She hung her clothes on a tree before she started bathing. On her return to the tree, the tree had metamorphosed into a very high one. She stretched her hand to take her clothes, but it could not reach the place. Out of fear, she ran home naked, crying. Different kinds of abled people were consulted to help her in felling the mysterious tree, but they all failed. However, it was a deaf and dumb man that finally cut the tree.

Michael K, the eponymous protagonist of the novel, is blemished from birth by a physical disfigurement, a hare-lip: “The lip curled like a snail’s foot, the left nostril gape” (3). This impacts greatly on his speech functioning. The physical disfigurement makes the midwife obscure him for a moment from its mother. Nadine Gordimer (1998) succinctly describes Michael K’s disability in the following words:

He is marked out, from birth, by a harelip indelibly described as curled like a snail’s foot .His deformity distorts his speech and his actual and self-image shrinks from the difficulty of communication through words and the repugnance he sees holding him off in people’s eyes (140).

K’s problems are multi-dimensional and complex. He is handicapped; he belongs to the coloured race; he is fatherless, and he is from a very poor background. He is thus an object of manifold subjectivities. He is born into a world of oppression, deprivation, homelessness, chaos and raging unceasing wars. All these and many other painful

backgrounds, including curfews and the debilitating health of his mother conspire to make life unbearable for K. What then does the future hold for a deformed child in such a society? However, an allegorical reading of the text reveals that K is a representation of the nation's (South African) hitherto deformed political regime. He is "an everyman, the universal human being" (Sikorska, 2006: 97). O'Connell (1989) had earlier confirmed that K is a novelistic hero, "the symbol for man's personal freedom, personal identity and dignity" (40). The tropes of war, permits to move, curfews and camps found in the novel reveal the text as dwelling on general modern phenomena, thereby showing K as an archetypal character, an everyman. K's story, according to Michael Chapman, is an allegory of "the story of the single, vulnerable being in a time of the collective demand" (2003:390). Wim Bronzwaer (1983) also comments on the allegorical feature of Coetzee's works:

like this
Coetzee as a writer is to a large extent defined by the South African environment, which is somehow a side condition of his work, just Prague for Kafka. But his books are not realistic descriptions of country and the historical situation (23).

A few critics have, however, commented that apart from his physical deformity, K's mind is also not quick (for instance, Nadine Gordimer, 1998; Liliana Sikorska,2006). In this paper, it is argued that although K is physically disabled, he is mentally alert. This assertion also negates a provision of "Disability Discrimination Act" which defines disability as "a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term effect on the person's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities' (16). Although K is physically disabled, he is still able to negotiate his life through a war-ridden environment – a society "in an ever-deepening crisis" (136), a society marred by "ideas

and images of a cataclysmic apocalypse” (136). Despite his seeming verbal clumsiness and reticence, simple-mindedness and slow wit, K proves to be positive, crafty, persistent and ingenious. His physical disability is a constant reminder of his vulnerability. However, his disability is adequately compensated for by his strong sense of responsibility and virtues. Despite his disfigurement and ‘unquick minds’, he still seeks employment. For instance, he once had a stint as a night attendant at a public lavatory. Actually, this paper is an attempt to counter some of the claims of previous critics of *Life and Times of Michael K*, most especially their attempt to read K as a mere object and not a subject or an agent. Sikorska’s assertion is paradigmatic of such reductionist readings of K: “Indeed, Michael K is rarely an agent in various events, more often things happen to him” (2006:98).

To reveal the attitude of people towards the disabled in society, K’s mother, Anna K, “from the first, did not like the mouth that would not close and the living pink flesh it bared to her. She shivered to think of what had been growing in her all these months” (30). Even K’s peers do not see him as a worthy member of their age-group. They make jest of him, and “because their smiles and whispers hurt her, she kept it away from other children” (4). The disabled child is repulsive to his mother, and the midwife admonishes her: “You should be happy, they bring luck to the household” (3). There is therefore a contrast between K’s depiction as an “eyesore”, a child that should be concealed or thrown away, and a being that is a harbinger of good luck. This reveals Coetzee to be a humanist. Per Wastberg of the Swedish Academy, in his citation during the presentation of 2003 Nobel Prize to Coetzee, confirms Coetzee to be a humanist:

Coetzee sees through the obscene poses and false pomp of history, lending the voice to the silenced and the despised. Restrained but stubborn, he defends the ethical value of poetry, literature and imagination. Without them, we blinker ourselves and become bureaucrats of the soul (2004:18).

Coetzee shows a positive attitude in the portrayal of the disabled in most of his texts. In spite of his physical disability, K is given a space, an identity, in Coetzee's text. He is the eponymous hero of the story, a noticeable deviation from some precursor African texts which privilege the high and the mighty as their eponymous heroes/heroines. This reflects a basic tenet of postmodernism – the collapse of the gap between the high and the low, the majority and the minority, the first world and the third world, the strong and the weak, etc. Gordimer (1998) asserts that “Coetzee's heroes are those who ignore history, not make it” (142). K is undaunted and daring; he is a soul blessedly untouched by doctrines and by history. His life credo seems to be: “a man is always found in a tough situation”. His first heroic exploit is his embarking upon a quixotic mission to bring his mother back to the Karoo farm where she spent an idyllically remembered childhood. By ignoring the civil war, he is able to accomplish what others dare not do. While the able-bodied shiver due to the war, K, a disabled, is able to assert his inalienable fundamental right – freedom of movement and migration. There is a striking contrast between his boldness and others' cowardice/cowardly acts. He refuses to betray his instincts. According to a blurb of the text, K “achieves a level of freedom which is more than any of them can hope to attain”. His ability to hold the able-bodied people captive is a reversal of the 'status quo'. They are even confounded by his temerity. He even withstands a soldier who tries to brutalize him: “what do you think the war is for? K said, ‘for taking other people's money?’” (50). He is able to defy the curfew, and he negotiates

his ways through police road blocks with ease: “to his left were houses, to his right a brickfield. The only way out was back: he pressed on (54).

K is able to control his urges; he forgoes basic human needs because of the necessity of war. He requests and needs nothing; he only eats to live and does not live to eat. This is a unique characteristic of K in a society of gluttonous beings. Attempts to make him an under-confident, passive and highly desponded ‘Other’, excluded from the society by an arrogant, bullying, and destructive ‘Self’, are rejected by him. This Self-Other paradigm is a mirror of the realities of most African states ruled by oppressive and violent rulers. K is a hybridized character who is an ‘in-between’, a schizophrenic self, cut adrift, belonging nowhere and identifying with no one. He does not allow the dictates of the tyrannical Other to crush him. In a similar vein, K knows how to control his emotion. He is a pacifist who does not repay violence with violence. At times, he is subjected to ridicule and physical violence. For instance, coming back home on a night train, one day after the day’s job, he is beaten, robbed and left stunned – “he was hit with a terrible blow in the pit of the stomach and fainted” (122). Despite this apparent man’s inhumanity to man against K, he is not angry. He only quits the night job.

The ‘total-man’ concept is relevant to K’s ideology. He maintains his statement of faith, proving him to be a man of mission and vision. He insists on telling his own story by himself, thereby struggling to be himself, wriggling out a meaning out of a seemingly meaningless life. He is able to excise himself from frustration, oppression, marginalization, which some people consistently try in vain to lodge in him. The more

they strike at him, the more resurgent, dogged and re-creative he becomes. In fact, he seems to thrive in tense situations. When the going gets tough, the tough get going. There is a didactic message in this K's unwritten principle. Through his exemplary doggedness, disabled people are encouraged to be hopeful in life and to serve as stars beaming hope to others who parade the city streets begging for alms.

K is able to mediate his life through a place where there are instances of inability of the state to govern well, growing social and ethnic conflicts and unabated political and criminal violence. These are indices of deepening social inequity, weak state and lack of social integration. The racial glue in the society is unstuck, manifesting itself in gross levels of social and racial dissonance. Corroding the society's heart of darkness, as revealed in the text, are spiritual voids, mental stresses and excruciating pains. To live through the agony and anomy, one must be a unique, self-determined, spiritually empowered, courageous, bold and reticent being. Therefore, K simply withdraws from both the goals of the society and the means of attaining them. He can thus be called a rebel of a kind. With this strategy of living, K miraculously experiences the trauma of the society during the civil war without being overcome by it. The horrors of nightly curfews, restrictions of inter-district movements, forced labour, dubious resettlements, rehabilitation and internment camps, armed patrols, widespread lawlessness, looting by the poor, corruption on the part of the few, repression and deep economic crises do not move him or rattle his will. It is stated in the text that "sometimes on Saturdays he failed to hear the boom of the noon gun and went on working by himself all through the afternoon" (5).

It is people like K, the undaunted and the bold, who are able to withstand the onslaughts of the period “when the nation is seemed to enter a cycle of insurrection and repression where outcome threatened to be bloody” (Attwell, 88). K is the symbol of the extremely marginalized non-white groups in the hitherto apartheid enclave of South Africa; he finds himself an all-round unfortunate character. However, he is still able to cross border. Disabled characters in some works of art are often treated as victims, but this is not the case with the characterization of K. He breaks free and unchains himself with a view to letting people know that people with disabilities are among the many groups of individuals who make up their communities. In such a time as is described in the text, a person must be ready to live like a beast hiding from the human world around him. K lives in a hole, hiding by day, living without any trace of existence. His dogged refusal to betray his instincts and dignity makes him achieve a unique level of freedom. It is therefore pertinent to say that *Life and Times of Michael K* is a life-affirming text. K, the protagonist, refuses to be narrated or objectified. He is like a Derridean trace, a signifier who evades the tyranny of authority inscribed in the text of the situation (Chapman, 2003).

The Medical Officer, an agent of the repressive authority in the referent society of the text, attempts to dwell on the life of K. This section of the novel, narrated from the point of view of the Medical Officer, is ideologically advertent and merits critical attention. It has received critical expositions as being, among others, reflective and disruptive of the logical unfolding of the narration (See: Michael Chapman, 2003). The Medical Officer, at the end of his wits, only belabours the obvious and fails in his attempts to strip Michael

of his humanity. He depicts Michael as a wretched man, turning him into a malleable symbol. Predictably, the Medical Officer flounders in his narration. He does not live to expectations. His wont is to see K as a sub-human, an inferior being. Yet the so-called superiority of the Medical Officer is deflated later in his own comments. Chapman (2003) aptly captures the inability of the Medical Officer to (mis)narrate K:

Refusing to be colonized by the discourse of relevance, commitment or victimization (that is, by the discourses of history seeking to subsume novelistic imagination), Michael K – we are to believe – remains free of history’s referent (390).

At one time, the Medical Officer sees K as a quintessential freeman in a society where nearly everyone is in bondage. He therefore pleads that K should assist him to be unbound like himself: “I have chosen you to show me the way” (223). This shows that neither the abled nor the disabled can do it alone. What is always effective and expected is a holistic approach whereby all the constituent units of societies unite in their efforts to uplift their nations. The grandson of Boss Visagie serves as the mouthpiece of Coetzee to propagate this ideology: “But I need your co-operation, Michael. You must help me. Otherwise, there is no future for either of us” (89). However, the attitude of the Medical Officer towards K shows that the way society treats the disabled has remained primarily the same. Some able-bodied citizens have looked up to the disabled with respect and pity, yet most continue to shun them and consider them useless and hopeless in societies.

It should be reiterated that K’s poverty is both socio-economic and biological. It is regrettable that even genetics does not favour him. He is born disfigured and pathologically inferior, both of which hand him a burden of warped physiological

epistemology. In fact, right from childhood, he is a victim of social mockery, owing to his unusual anatomy. His physiognomy is a reflection of many truths about the oppressive systems of apartheid South Africa. He is silent, hare-lipped, with speech distortion (aphasia) and alienated. However, despite the tings and pangs of the period of interregnum, the time when the society can be described as a ‘wasteland’, a regrettable scenario of militarism and turbulence, K still survives.

Historically, the text centres on a period when dissent voices were silenced; people and land were immersed in silence. But K is a man intent on eluding colonization, whether that of the body (through the camp) or of the mind (through charity). He refuses to stay put in the camps, the metaphor for the claustal life of the society, places that depict the inhumane ways of the society that dooms its citizens, an anarchic world of brutal roving armies. K prefers to work and be himself: “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” (105). He concludes that living in a camp is like going back to childhood. As a bold man, he encourages his compatriots: “if we are going to be in jail, let’s be in jail, let’s not pretend” (14). K does not want to be imprisoned; that is why he always escapes from confinement. It is apposite to quote the description of the South African camps offered by the Police Captain: “parasite was the word the police captain had used: the camp at Jakkalsdriff, a nest of parasites hanging from the nest sunlit town , eating its substance , giving no nourishment back” (Sikorska, 2003:106). Even his critics commend him for refusing to be caged. According to Sikorska, “Michael refuses to fit into prison life. His

rejection of the institutionalized survival is the only action he ever undertakes (2006:104).

In fact, the cosmos of the text resonates with some realities of 1980s in South African societies – a period of unstable social and political situations marked by occurrences of armed conflicts within and outside the national borders. Nadine Gordimer (1988) captures the mood of the nation thus: “I live in a society whirling, stamping, swaying with the force of revolutionary change” (262). But people like K, unlike the lily-livered ones, give hope of a better, most peaceful tomorrow. In K’s radical temper lies a millennial vision of a new heaven and a new earth, in a monstrous situation in which human bestiality finds an ally in anarchy, and both turn out to be enemies of progress and tranquility of life. As a revolutionary, K rejects the political agenda of the grandson of Visages who attempts to issue him orders trying to “turn him into a body servant” (65). He therefore flees the farm. Thus he rejects the property rights.

K is a loving and caring child. His mother is said to be a domestic servant, polishing other people’s floors. She lives in a cramped room intended for air-conditioning equipment. The room is marked ‘DANGER’, ‘GEVAAR-INGOZI’ (6). It has no light, no ventilation, and the air is almost musty. She looks weary, disabled and is discarded and abandoned by her employers who cut her salary by a third as a result of her ill-health. She is hospitalized for severe dropsy, having been overused by the oppressor class. Her ailment is exacerbated by the ongoing civil war in the country. To aggravate her problem, she is ignored and neglected by the employers when she is hospitalized. But K is the only

companion she has in her last days; K is to her rescue. He is refused a wheelchair for his mother, but somehow helps her to the bus stop. The nearly-rejected stone is now the pillar of the house. He is also the last hope of her mother's wish to achieve her yearning to return to the idyllic farm of her birth. He is the only companion to his mother at her last days on earth: "Carrying her handbag and shoes for her, he supported his mother the fifty paces to the bus stop" (6); "when the bus came there were no seats. Michael held on to a rail and embraced his mother to keep her from lurching" (7). Actually, K believes that "he had been brought into the world to look after his mother" (9). He is able to bury his mother alone. Even the doctors and the attendants in the hospital where his mother gives up the ghost respect his view on how his mother should be buried. They seek his permission before cremating the corpse of his mother.

K is a daring individual in a society replete with cowardly people. He always guides and guards his humanity. He is able to withstand the onslaught of robbers, petty thieves, the army, the police and other problems emanating from the civil strife when he sets out taking his crippled mother in a converted wheelbarrow back to her home in Prince Albert. More often than not, he has no shelter from the stormy blasts of war, guns and bombs, and he has to content himself with chilly nights and pests. He clings to his own 'invented' society. A retreatist, K refuses to be confined to any penal institution, despite the official lies and insistence that the camps are still safer and more bearable than the outside world. He prefers his freedom to prison custodies called penal institutions. He rejects the attempts to convert him into a servant by fleeing the farm, thereby rejecting the material and linear consciousness represented by the Visages and typical of the Afrikaner myths.

Instead, he chooses the garden as a millennial alternative to the cataclysm of the camps. He wants to live in relation to the nature free of ethnic encumbrances and racial dissonance. Through gardening, the reader witnesses some of K's revolutionary gestures. Michael K regains maternal love, self determination, transcendence, and family love, in fact, some of the missing things in his life. Hewson Kelly comments on the importance of K's garden thus: "Michael K's retreat from History to cultivate his own garden can thus be understood as a creative, radical attempt to maintain innocence and to assert his own history" (66).

K's life has a lot of relevance to the life of the common man in Apartheid South Africa, a world inundated with unrest, trauma, materialism and marginalization. K is thus a victim of flights from the city, his captors and his immediate society. Sikorska (2006) comments concisely on the importance of K's constant wanderings: "His constant running away is the upshot of his attempts at survival" (99). Commendably, K is always to the task, as he is innovative in fighting against the horrors of living in his painful and dehumanizing milieu. He creates a haven in his soul where he can withdraw himself. This defines his being; he is a man of himself. This ideology supports Ibitokun's view that a man defines himself:

him and
acts are the
setback and
a beautiful culture or a

All commissions and omissions of man somehow define him as he is. In this respect, his cumulative acts are adjectives which individuate enable us to know his capabilities and idiosyncrasies. Our measure of our progress and growth as well as of our sclerosis. Through our acts, we can turn nature into wasteland (1998:121).

K is assertive and 'energetic'. Not minding his seeming very fragile physical stature, he is forced to do squats, star-jumps and jumping jacks for refusing to participate in the activity of singing at a camp. He surprises his tormentors by attempting the exercises to the best of his ability. He refuses to allow any inferiority complex to weigh him down; he endures the tragic suffering of the concentration camp. There is no respite for people during the period of war. When soldiers and other security agents with barrels of gun temporarily leave K alone, animal pests continue to torment him. At times, he is woken up from his sleep by snorts and a clatter of hoofs of some wild goats, which symbolize unceasing human problems.

K chooses the beast-like existence over becoming entrapped in oppressive social structures. His increasing detachment from reality is to resist the structural injustice and dehumanization in his milieu. The issue of solitude or alienation is a recurring trope in Coetzee's fiction. Because of the problem of alienation, K becomes a vegetal, taking fruits as his relations and friends. His vegetarian condition reaches its peak when he brings his makeshift bed into the middle of the garden, sleeping there to keep vigil over his fruits. He is resolute and decides that "all day, he had to remain on guard, making sorties after them with stones" (103). He tends his fruits with mercy and filial commitment. Aristotle, in *Poetics*, equates a lonely, solitary and politically unassociated man with a beast or a god. K falls into both groups. He lives like a beast – there is nothing for him to fear, and he is unperturbed like a god. He is feared and revered, most especially by his captors, including the Medical Officer, the guards and the like. He is able to transcend and escape the debilitating effects or grasp of disability. K is surely in

the 'chthonic realm' of existence, which is in the transitional gulf. According to Wole Soyinka, the 'chthonic realm' is the space between humans and spirits which Ogun the god of Iron bridges in Yoruba mythology and is inhabited by those whom the Yoruba regard as unfinished, imperfect beings, because they exist half-way between states (See: Biodun Jeyifo, 2004). Michael K is able to assert his will because of his status. He performs incredible acts of heroism to gain acceptance in the society that wishes to neglect him. The Medical Officer attests to this enigmatic quality of K:

You have never asked for anything, yet you have become an albatross around my neck. Your bony arms are knotted behind my head, I walked bowed under the weight of you (199).

The garden of Michael is a metaphor for South Africa. The goats symbolize the white settlers in the country (the able-bodied people), who torment Michael, the native, (the disabled). However, the oppressed person (the disabled) is resolute to fight back. Like the visionary and radical persona of Claude McKay's "If We Must Die", the physically challenged resolves to "rest by day and stay up at night to protect his land and till it" (103). K doggedly reacts against the nocturnal aggression. This is perhaps a rejection of the passive and docile nature of the persona of Oswald Mtshali's "Nightfall in Soweto". The persona of Mtshali's poem only bemoans his fate, without any counter-attack, while the oppressed (the disabled) in Coetzee's novel fights back. The atmosphere of war affords him a renewal of his instinctive drive, as he finds solace and refuge in hard work, his own labour. The plot of his story shows K to be a wayfarer. He is perpetually on the road. Through this, he is educated on the agonies of living and how to adapt in a time of crisis. His journey is a purgatorial adventure used to take him away from a corrupt and violent society. He finds problems relating to other people in the violent, greedy and

pariah society. He therefore leaves his own community in Cape Peninsula for safer and friendlier surroundings of the northern province of Karoo, primarily to fulfil his dying mother's wish and secondarily to escape from the war-stricken place. He is a visionary who knows that in such an environment hostile to human beings, the chances of survival are very slim. His penitential voyage therefore offers him the opportunity of self-rediscovery. A significant statement by Sikorska (2006) supports this claim: "Man is a pilgrim on earth traveling to his celestial home in heaven. The road is infused with traps in the forms of various temptations and transgressions" (87). K's solitary journey thus elevates him to the level of great (tragic) heroes. Sikorska (2006) declares:

Although to a large extent solitude is a social condition as testified by various literary texts, from the classical period to the most recent ones, solitude and, for that matter wandering, are also the quintessence [sic] of tragedy (87).

To some extent, the claim of Sikorska is supported, most especially her elevation of solitary beings to the status of heroes. However, this paper parts company with her in her attempt to categorize a solitary man as a tragic hero. This is because in the extremity of the war going on in his society, K's traveling is a heroic deed, in fact, the focal point of the story - the quest for his own humanity. His solitary journey is for a purpose - to reclaim his maternal inheritance (land). This is a virtuous act that makes K a hero.

K has the rare and laudable virtues of endurance and self-control. He eats just to live and does not believe in living to eat. His life is that of prolonged 'fasting'. In the rehabilitation camp and during his 'great trek', he endures hunger and avoids food. During his trek, he endures the infamy of the camps in order to return to the patch of

garden surrounding the water pump at the abandoned farm in the karoo. This is a reconstruction of the pastoral return to the land, a South African myth. The narrator once says, “he had not eaten for two days, however, there seemed no limit to his endurance” (48). He has a very complex and erratic behaviour towards food. He wants and needs nothing; he is an anorexic because of his tendencies to rebel against his restricted life by starving and only occasionally feeding himself as his only means of exerting control. He often withdraws to an inner world for only Eucharistic meals. This partial hatred for feeding is an act of rebellion. To resist the pervading injustice and dehumanization of his society, K resorts to detachment from reality. He only believes in himself and his ability. He thinks that when his crops yield harvests, he will then recover his appetite; he believes his own products will “have savour” (139). It is his capacity to overcome obstacles, his refusal to become a slave or a beggar, despite his physical status, his commitment to turning bottlenecks on his paths into opportunities and thus making an extremely difficult life livable, his ability to create a space and identity for himself, despite all odds, that remain the greatest virtues of K, a man who exhibits ability in disability. He refuses to become a beggar like many other disabled people. Although a multitude of beggars flood the cities and ghettos, K refuses to join the bandwagon:

Town had been flooded with people from the country-side looking for work of any kind. There was no work, no accommodation to be had. If they fell into that sea of hungry mouths, K thought, what chance would he and his mother have? How long could he push her around the streets in a wheelbarrow begging for food? (18).

In fact, K is a giver and not a beggar. For instance, he offers the grandson of Boss Visagie a share of his food, thereby asserting his ability. This is a contradiction to societal

conception that, for the disabled, the choice is over and the growth of character or the capacity for defining actions has ceased.

Although a perpetual laughing stock to the public gaze, K is an innovator and a visionary. He constructs a hand-cart with which he hopes to chauffeur his mother to her dream place: “now he returned to the project of using the wheels from his bicycle to make a cart in which to take his mother for walks” (21). This action of K is a deconstruction of The Myth of the Afrikaner’s Heroic Independence. Although he is disfigured, he is not retarded. Despite apartheid’s heavy blows on family relations, K’s steady devotion and his instinctive love for his mother is commendable. He is the faithful son who manages the practical details of the trek, not an able bodied person. Despite his disability, he is still an adept hunter: “In the fading light he was lucky enough to bring down a turtle-dove with a stone as it came to roost in a thorn tree” (63). He is also an award-winner, even where the able bodied fail. A farmer commends him, saying, “You have a feel for wire, he said. You should go into fencing. There will always be a need for good fencers in this country, no matter what” (130-131). He can cast surprises when least expected. Even when he is exempted from physical exercise for a minimum of seven days, he still performs well: “Yet when I emerged from the grandstand this morning the first thing I saw was Michaels slogging it out around the track with the rest of them” (77). In K’s exploits and struggles, various manifestations of centralizing and centralized authority are challenged. Julia Kristeva (1982:49) has once opined that the margin is the ultimate place of subversion and transgression. Another branch of French post-structuralism has shown that the margin is both created by and part of the centre, and that the ‘different’ can be

made into the 'other' (Michel Foucault, 1974:21). However, postmodernism tends to combat this by asserting the plurality of the 'different' and rejecting the binary opposition of the 'other'. K's acts, actions and inactions contradict the 'universal' principle or construction of a public/private split which consigns the disabled to the 'private' realm of feeling, domesticity and the body, in order to clarify a 'public' realm of reason, as the able-bodied. As a clever being, K tends his crops by night and camouflages the growing vines with cut grass. This proves him to be a unique disabled character. In this sense, at least, the discourse about literature and disability can be seen as an intrinsically 'postmodern' discourse.

In this age when a majority of Africans are unpatriotic and uncommitted to the progress of their nations, K proves to be a very dedicated man who believes in the corporate existence and uplift of his nation. He believes that since nearly everybody has gone to war fronts, he should be a provider of food, a compulsory need for people. Nadine Gordimer (1998), in her essay titled "The Idea of Gardening", clarifies this claim further:

Because enough men had gone off the war saying the time for gardening was when the war was over; whereas there must be men to stay behind and keep gardening alive, or at least the idea of gardening; because once that cord was broken, the earth would grow hard and forget her children (144)

K is thus a role model. He rejects the corrupt town and embraces the rural life. Through his actions, he demonstrates the alternative to the wrong relationship to the land to each other. This temper is a negation of the English farm novel and the Afrikaans plaasroman.

The aim of K for going on farming is:

To keep the earth alive, and only one salvation, the survival that comes
from her. Michael K is a gardener ‘because that is my nature’: the nature
of civilized man, versus the hunter, the nomad. Hope is seed.
That’s all. That’s everything. It’s better to live on your knees, planting
something (144)

K believes in division of labour. He thinks that some people should continue to tend the abandoned arable lands, and some others, like the guerrillas, should work to establish political and social freedom. Coetzee himself once comments on this: “the question remains: who is going to feed the glorious opposing armies” (1987: 459). Consequently, through the scheme of K, people are advised to live in harmony with the land and with other human beings. Thereby, some of the images which previously had been ascribed to the centre, and hence also to the margin, have been deconstructed, or undermined, in the actions and inactions, speeches and silences of Michael K. This confirms the veracity of Jacques Derrida’s (1989) claim that there is no absolute or fixed point in the postmodern world which is absolutely decentred or inherently relativistic. Thus, instead of conceiving the man K and his actions as a movement or deviation from a known centre/the ‘norm’ (the world of the able-bodied), all we have is ‘free play’. He embraces the decentred universe of free play as liberating. Peter Barry’s (1995) brings this out:

A new Nietzschean universe, where there are no guaranteed facts, only
interpretations, none of which has the stamp of authority upon it,
since there is no longer any authoritative centre to which to appeal for
validation of our interpretations (67).

It is possible to link the acts of K with a basic tenet of postmodernism, because it can be claimed that K is able to act the ways he does because of his postmodern temper. In the main, postmodernism rejects the distinction between ‘high’ and ‘popular’ (low) art; rather, it emphasizes the hybrid blends of the two. His erratic and complex behaviour,

therefore, is a means of rebelling against the attempts of the able-bodied to restrict and victimize him. Actually, his lack of interest in many man's basic needs (physiological, love, belonging, safety, aesthetics, etc) as given by Abraham Maslow (1943) is a testimony to his detachment from reality and ability to be a 'free man' in a world where everybody seems to be in bondage. His lack of preoccupation with material possessions is a form of Christian virtue – holy poverty/contentment. Through his ability, he is able to resist the structural injustice and dehumanization that assails him and his 'times'. Although he does not expect care, love, affection and respect to be bestowed on him by anybody, he still gives others these important values. His philosophy is 'live and let live'. He refuses to be subjected to subjugation, encampment and torture in disguise of solidarity. He believes that, despite all odds, life must go on. This is why his endurance is always tested to the fullest. In an unfamiliar, mysterious, painful and puzzling world, he still moves forward in order to reach his own target. He has the ability to adjust to the dictates of the moment in a war-ridden country. In the words of Sikorska, "Michael K accepts the order of the world and tries to adapt himself to each and every new situation by becoming more and more insensible to the world around" (2003:105).

CONCLUSION

Is Coetzee's message in *Life and Times of Michael K* overwhelmingly pessimistic, as claimed by Sikorska (2006)? This paper argues that rather than giving a pessimistic message, Coetzee, in the novel, has offered an optimistic view, albeit through the aesthetics of postmodern indeterminacy. Michael K, as a postmodern Everyman, is a being showing the whole world the need for salvation and struggle to find a place in a highly stratified society or community and finding remedy against homelessness and displacement. Although his life is devastatingly complex and painful, yet he is intensely human and humane in his response to his (mis)fortunes.

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