

Humanitarianism in J.M.Coetzee's novels

Babita Negi

Research Scholar English Department

Kanya Gurukul Campus Dehradun

babita20negi@gmail.com

J.M .Coetzee a Noble Prize winner and two times winner of booker prize in literature was born in Cape Town, South Africa in 1940 and educated in South Africa .Coetzee the South African novelist, critic, and translator well known for his novels about the efficacy of colonization. The thing which fascinated me towards his work was that he was a champion of humanity and regarded the value of human life in high esteem- the novels were mainly inspired by the social discrimination in the form of apartheid, and disintegration of the human life by the powerful and the authoritarians.

J.M.Coetzee's perspective towards humanitarianism is depicted in his novels in the elucidation of the value of human life. Almost every incident picturized in his works is a phenomenon of analysis and representation of the truth of life. In this paper I have focused on these incidents which affected the life of the characters and through which they learn to move against the current. *The Life &Times of Michael K* is a representation of human longings and the snatching away of dignity and freedom of the central character Michael K and subjecting him to follow the rules and instructions of the powerful, thereby revealing the inhuman behavior of the society.

Life &Times of Michael K exposes the alliance between communitarian and consequentialist ethical principles, and reveals the ways in which these principles abet oppression and exploitation by prioritizing the maximization of good outcomes over the claims of freedom. (Page no. 69)

The mother of Michael K was suffering with disease in the hospital with hardly any treatment provided to her and was left to suffer on the corridor. She persuaded her son to take her back to her birth village Prince Albert. Michael K's attempted to fulfill his mother's desire and met with a number of hurdles as he was denied the permission to go to Prince Albert and unfortunately his mother died on the way. Michael K developed a deep aversion towards the police of civil war who captured him and took him to the rehabilitation camp where his remaining freedom was also snatched away and he no more remained master of his own will. Michael started living his life on the mountains where he fed on ants and other insects and lived inside the earth by digging burrows so as not to be recognized by the police from the

sky. He lived there by growing melons and pumpkins cherishing them and was disheartened when they were destroyed by the militants. Later Michael K was coerced to admit to be one of the persons of militant group responsible for the outrage against the then administrative authorities.

Mother of Michael K was leading a scourge full life and her sufferings were increasing due to the effects of internal war and curfew.

For months Anna K had been suffering from gross swelling of the legs and arms; later her belly had begun to swell too. She had been admitted to hospital unable to walk and barely able to breathe. She had spent five days lying in a corridor among scores of victims of stabbing and beating and gunshot wounds who kept her awake with their noise, neglected by nurses who had no time to spend cheering up an old woman when there were young men dying spectacular death all about.

Page no. 5, *Life & Times of Michael K*

However, her son, the protagonist of the novel managed to fulfill his mother's desire as to visit her native place as she wanted to breathe her last there. But Coetzee marked out veracity related to our life that it is not possible that all our dreams come true, whatever be the reason, as showed in the novel itself that K's mother dies on the way to her native place. On the journey they met with many problems. First of all Michael K was denied permit. When he asked for permit, he had to tolerate a lot of humiliation. In this way a great power politics is depicted by Coetzee in the form of irony as, on one side, Michael K cannot leave the city without the permit and on the other hand he was not being granted the permit.

'The police woman slapped the counter to still him. 'Don't waste my time .I am telling you for the last time, if the permit is granted the permit is granted the permit will come! Don't you see all these people waiting? Don't you understand? Are you idiot? Next!' She braced herself against the counter and glared pointedly over K's shoulder: 'Yes, you, next!'

Page no. 20, *Life & Times of Michael K*

It seems the writer also wants to suggest something through his Booker prize winning novel, that though the outer circumstances are brutally harsh still we can take a little sigh of relief, if we come across good people through our course of life irrespective of their relation to us and irrespective of the number in which they are present in the society. What matters is the realization of the fact that each one of us is related with humanity and kindness and we all belong to the same mother earth and to the same universe.

Michael K, the protagonist being a dutiful son gave a few moments of happiness to his mother which might have reduced her pain, not of body but of the soul.

He found the sight of his mother's swollen legs disturbing and turned his eyes away when he had to help her out of bed .Her thighs and arms were covered with scratch marks (for a while she even wore gloves at night). But he did not shirk any aspect of what he saw as his duty. The problem that exercised him years ago behind the bicycle shed at Huis Norenus, namely why he had been brought into the world, had received his answer: he had been brought into the world to look after his mother.

Page no.7, *Life &Times of Michael K*

Coetzee also focuses on the ultimate objective of our life in a subtle manner. It is not only a son's duty but this should be the duty of every human being to take care of our near and dear ones.

Michael K. will always remain an immortal name like that of Shrawan Kumar and Ram Chandra described in the holy book of Hindus the Ramayana, who threw away their comfort of life to serve their parents. While taking his mother to her native place he has to undergo extreme difficulties created by the civil war as well as the uncertainty of weather .He did not reveal his sadness or difficulties instead he kept smiling, in other words we can say his happiness abides by his duty as to give his mother some moments of contentment .It seems the ultimate aim of his life is to serve his mother. This incredible virtue is remarkably illustrated in these lines:-

Now, the more his mother slid down the box trying to make herself comfortable, the greater the deadweight he found himself lifting. He kept smiling face to hide the strain he felt.

Page no. 21, *Life &Times of Michael K*

In this beautiful novel the writer also gives the illustration of the severe spasm of life which is common in human society and good human relation. Coetzee throws the light on the virtuous human beings who empathize other's pain. Human suffering could be reduced to some extent, due to presence of a handful of worthy people.

You don't know where I could get something to eat, 'asked K.'I haven't eaten since yesterday.' 'Man, 'said the man, why don't you go and get us both a pie, 'and passed K a one- rand coin. K went to the bakery and brought back two hot chicken pies .He sat beside his friend on the bench and ate . The pie was so delicious that tears come to his eyes.

Page no.30, *Life & Times of Michael K*

The happiness which is delineated in the above lines is not an ordinary happiness but a deep happiness is present in the form of satisfying hunger of the protagonist who was undergoing a tough time. The contentment that brings tears, the delight which gives extreme blitheness to hunger is nothing but a mingling of sorrow and joy. Coetzee gives the impression happiness which is sometimes over a trifle, though certain things sometimes seem very little but possess greater content.

At every step Coetzee gives the glimpse of how we can make this earth a better place to live in, amidst difficulties, if we think of selfless service of others and materialize it. Such an instance occurs when K. had nowhere to spend his night and was also hungry and shivering with cold, he met a stranger on the way who not only provided him shelter in his house but fed him and provided him bed to rest and sleep that night peacefully. K told him that he met a man sometime earlier who told him that they shoot people they found on their land, then the stranger said, “

‘People must help others ,that’s what I believe.’”

Page no. 48, *Life & Times of Michael K*

These lines explain how just as we expect help from others, we should also be ready to help others, whenever they are in need. This is the way to lead a valuable life, by doing this kind of deeds we can make this earth heaven. After hearing this from the stranger, Michael K is compelled to think whether he was ready to help others. Through this incident the writer leaves the impression of human’s moral duty, which contributes in maintaining happiness in every person’s life and minimizing his sorrows. Human life has some value only if we all compel ourselves to think in this way.

The *Age of Iron* also contains the characteristics of dutifulness and selfless service of society which are clearly seen in the character of Mrs. Curren ,the protagonist, a sensitive character who in spite of being a cancer patient and a white fights for the rights of blacks. The novel depicts the journey of Mrs. Curren who plays the role of a philanthropist in reviving the lives of apartheid victims. She has always heard of the atrocities that prevailed upon the blacks but never has been the active spectator. Now during the last days of her life suffering with cancer she came across the horrors of the brutalism of apartheid. Despite being a white, a colonizer, she has always disapproved of administrative design to promote apartheid and non – violence. The fiendishness of the administration on Bheki, son of her maid-servant Florence left her aghast and with a feeling of utter disgust of being a white. The writer’s works are full of the incidents which put question marks against the value of human life and if we focus on his novels we find there are also plenty of examples through which we can say that J M

Coetzee's heart is full of altruism and that is why he with the depiction of human sufferings suggests that it is the duty of the people as human beings to give another person's life a meaning.

In *The Age of Iron* the protagonist Mr. Curren's character is full of love and passion. Love for humanity and passion for helping those are sufferings due to any kind of reason. Ethics such as love and selfless service which provides relief to the people who are suffering due to the inhuman behavior and indifference of one human to another. Through depicting these ethics the writer proved that in spite of being white he cares for blacks as well as he is not indifferent towards the plights of whites because he loves humanity rather than races.

This love and indifference is also considered by Gilbert Yeoh in his paper named Love and Indifference in J.M.Coetzee's *Age of Iron*.

In this article, I argue that a significant way in which *Age of Iron* respond to era 'intense violence conflict is by positing an ethics of love. Elsewhere Coetzee has said: "In my heart I am so sick of contestation -contestation and spectacle of contestation." *Age of Iron* intervenes in the country's polarized condition not through a mere further assertion of right; rather it seeks to go beyond contestation to posit a minimal ethics of love. Still, though love is the key theme in the novel, its treatment is elliptical and tricky. Love in Coetzee's text, I argue, is properly perceptible only after the reader has apprehended the novel's implicit chiasmic form, which invites one to enact a reversal of the dynamics in the novel. A crucial reversal reveals that it is not Mrs. Curren who loves Verceuil, but Verceuil who loves Mrs. Curren. Verceuil, not Mrs.Curren, emerges as the character associated with love. (Page no.107)

A remarkable question arises here in this novel as to what is the value of human life when every step towards life is full of terror. Michael K wanted to live a contented life, he was happy with his life of poverty, without having great expectations but still he had to struggle a lot to live a peaceful life.

After reaching Prince Albert, K had nothing to eat not even a single piece of bread to satisfy his hunger, now such a starving person suddenly develops an idea of killing animals which were in front of him for his survival. He killed the sheep, though he had never done this before in his life but situation compelled him to do this, as he had no any other way to fill his empty stomach, in this way an innocent person keeps all his emotions aside and is converted into a butcher. He has no utensils to cook in and he had to eat the uncooked meat without any taste but only for his survival.

He had never cleaned an animal before. There was nothing to use but the penknife. He slit the belly and pushed his arm into slit; he expected blood –heat but inside the goat

encountered again the clammy wetness of marsh-mud .He wrenched and the organs came tumbling out his feet, blue and purple and pink; he had to drag the carcass a distance away before he could continue. He peeled back as much of the skin as he was able but could not cut off the feet and head until, searching in shed, he found a bow-saw.

Page no. 55, *Life & Times of Michael K*

‘He brushed the stove clean and made a fire .There was nothing to cook in. He cut off a hunch and held it over the open flame till it was charred on the outside and juices dripped.

He ate without pleasure, thinking only: What will I do when the goat is consumed?’

Page no. 56, *Life & Times of Michael K*

After a great struggle K got success in reaching his mother’s village. As it was the reason of his arrival in Prince Albert to give a respectable place to his mother who is now in the form of ashes, K completed his duty. While performing his duty he got a clue for his livelihood. He learnt how to cultivate and started sowing seeds and cultivating vegetables to sustain his livelihood, “

This was the beginning of his life as a cultivator.”

Page no. 59, *Life & Times of Michael K*

As we go through the novel we find ample examples which reflect that J.M.Coetzee is a profound thinker as well as a great writer. In this remarkable piece of writing Coetzee in a very simple manner suggests that a man should collect things according to a person’s requirement. When Michael K killed a goat in a gush of hunger and after consuming the goat according to his requirement he stored the rest of the meat in the pantry for the other days. But soon he realizes that it is foolish to store things when he found the meat is stinking in the pantry and so he then decides that he will kill only a bird in a day instead.

The goat in the pantry was stinking. The lesson, if there was a lesson if there were a lessons embedded in events, seemed to be not to kill such large animals.

Page no .57, *Life & Times of Michael K*

K fed himself sometimes by killing birds and sometimes on crops which he cultivated in the field. In this way K was trying to settle a new life with which he was happy and contented. This shows a person’s will power for survival. No matter how harsh the conditions are, what matters is only a strong will power which enables a human being to fight with difficulties and change the worse conditions into favorable ones.

The impulse to plant had been reawaken in him ; now ,in a matter of weeks, he found his waking life bound tightly to the patch of earth he had begun to cultivate and seeds he had cultivate there.

Page no. 59, *Life &Times of Michael K*

No sooner had he entered his new life in Prince Albert when the landlord Visages' grandson came and disturbed his life. He tried to subjugate K and make him as his servant. The latter wanted Michael to be his servant. Being a self-respecting person K does not want to compromise with his freedom. So when Visages' grandson gives forty rand in notes and sent him to buy some goods for him, K buried the money under a stone in a tin and later on secretly moved on to other place.

In this way Coetzee gives the reflection of human tendency to suppress, the poor and weaker, and leaving no chance to reveal his selfishness as well as power as is depicted by the character of Visages' grandson.

When a person loves his freedom and self esteem, problems which are the never ending process of human life engulf him and trouble him; this is clearly delineated by Coetzee through the agonies of the life of K. After leaving the house of Visages, K had trouble in finding an abode and food, and in this way his problems started again. He had to live in the caves like animals with the unfavorable weather conditions and the only things he had to eat were lizards and partic vegetables "In the first days in the mountains he went for walks, turned over stones , nibbled at roots and bulbs". Page no. 68, *Life & Times of Michael K*

Coetzee wants to depict that in this world no one has time to share our sorrows or the feelings we have buried in our heart. We have to live with our sorrows in any condition without showing them. So it is better to keep our pains in our heart. Life is just synonymous with going with the flow. In the welfare camp when K was asked where he had come from, and while replying he noticed that everyone was busy listening to music So, K remained silent. This shows that life is nothing but to go with the flow. We too have to flow with stream of time rather than thinking about past happenings.

Now I must speak about the ashes, thought K, so as to be complete, so as to have told the whole story. But he found that he could not, or could not yet. The man with the guitar began to pick out a new melody. K felt the attention of the group drift away from him to the music. Page no. 79, *Life & Times of Michael K*

Coetzee understands the philosophy of life very deeply and also has an art to depict that philosophy by picturizing different types of characters and the events which happened in their lives. Such as *In the heart of the country* almost all the characters are victims of circumstances. In *Disgrace* the protagonist was the victim of his uncontrollable desires and in *Life & Times of Michael K*, the protagonist was enduring the circumstances created by some powerful and insensitive persons. In this way we can say that Coetzee indirectly tells us that throughout our life we have to face dejection. Even sometimes our misfortunes are so bad that we feel completely helpless and get the punishment for our innocence. Sometimes we are captured in the web of problems so badly and have to fight for our freedom as well as to save our identity. Sometimes the problems are born out of situations and, sometimes the powerful people of the society become problem for gullible people. This truth of life is defined here by the writer through the problems faced by Michael K. The protagonist had been drowning in the problems one after another since he took birth. He had to move from place to place from Cape town to Stellenbosch, then Stellenbosch to Prince Albert afterwards the mountains and then to the Welfare camp.

The tent next door glowed, lit from within by a candle; figure moved in silhouette against the walls larger than life.

Page no. 79, *Life & Times of Michael K*

K did not want to live in the Jakkalsdrif so called welfare camp, in other words an open prison but he was forced to live there. He was brought there by the police. In this way he was prisoned there. Though the Jakkalsdrif was not a prison but it was no less than a prison. Every person wants to lead his life according to his own whims and fancies. So when K was compelled to live in Jakkalsdrif without his will in this way the welfare camp was no less than a jail for him. A kind of power politics is revealed here. People who do not have place to live in as well have food to eat, were forcefully brought into the welfare camp in the name of giving them shelter and food.

This isn't a prison said the man. Didn't you hear the police man tell you it isn't a prison. This is Jakkalsdrift. This is a camp. Don't you know what a camp is?

Page no. 78, *Life & Times of Michael K*

As the above sentence reflects that Jakkalsdrif is not a jail but reality was just the opposite. So called welfare camp was the centre of exploitation where the innocent people were exploited in the name of earning livelihood, as they were prisoned in the open prison and can come out of the camp only to work in the field with the guard to have an eye on them. Otherwise, they were not allowed to go out. If anyone of them showed his desire to go out of

the camp, he was warned to be shot at the moment by the guards. "You climb the fence and I'll shoot you, I swear to God I won't think twice, so don't try.

Page no. 85, *Life & Times of Michael K*

If anybody had been ill, he was treated only with sedatives or painkillers, moreover he was forced to work. Consequently, the person in the absence of proper treatment used to die. Life of the people in the camp was totally under control of others.

Thus questions arise here: what is the definition of a jail? Does life has any value in the jail? What is the meaning of life if we are not free to do whatever we want? Can we live peacefully in that environment where at every step we are threatened by powerful people? It is clearly seen that in the welfare camp people were brought to be kept as slaves and exploited brutally.

In this way we experience the suppression of human desire. First K's wish to get his mother to her birth place was ruined by the circumstances which were not under his control, then his efforts to live a contended and peaceful life was collapsed by some powerful people of the so called civilized society as unfortunately K had become the victim of power politics. In the welfare camp he was brought strenuously then coerced to work there even when he was sick. He was not allowed to breathe in an environment free from terror. Altogether his life was a chapter full of woeful incidents.

In *Age of Iron* the life of the black people was abandoned by the white colonizers. The victims were getting the punishment for being born as black and at every point of their life they were discriminated and were not given the right to live a dignified and honorable life.

In *Disgrace* the protagonist was expelled from his job. Later on he took refuge in his daughter's house trying to live a dignified life but falls in the hands of circumstances which further ruined his life and even spoiled his relationship with his daughter, every where there is suppression of human desires.

The circumstances are not alone the culprit; the conservativeness of human thoughts is also equally responsible for ruining the life of David Lurie and his daughter. If we delve deep into the novel and analyze it we find that though it seems that the protagonist and his daughter suffered due to racial discrimination but the question arises that what is the origin of this racial discrimination? The answer will be certainly from the conservativeness of human mind because of which one thinks that one's race is better and others inferior. Then this narrow mindedness completely affects the human life and put a question mark on the value of human life.

Saurabh Kumar Singh described J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* as a tale of trouble as this novel is also full of incidents which tell the sufferings of human beings due to the narrow mindedness of the people.

A middle-aged, divorced scholar of Romantic poetry, formerly a professor of modern language in Cape Town, David Lurie would have undoubtedly been a pathetic figure under the old regime – one imagines an ineffectual white liberal teaching Wordsworth to bored Afrikaners while largely ignoring the atrocities perpetrated in his name. But in the Mandela era, David has become a victim of “the great rationalization.”

Page no. 167, J.M.Coetzee's *Disgrace*: A Tale of Troubles

M. Kamalakkannan in an article depicted the incident which is a great example of that how the actions influenced by conservativeness of human thoughts spoils the life of others so badly that the victim is compelled to lead a life beyond his/hers imagination and all the dreams are being shattered in hands of cruelty originated by the conservativeness of human mind.

After the dismissal, He visits rural South Africa where his daughter Lucy lives and owns a small piece of land. Though the novel seems to narrate the events pertaining to the life of Lurie, the main focus of novels is Lurie's daughter Lucy's rape by the blacks and decisions she makes following the terrible incidents.

Page no. 127, Implausible Representation: Race and Rape in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*,

So, we can say that the novels of J M Coetzee are full of evidence, on the Value of Human life. After delving deeply into the life of the characters of the novels, sensitive human beings can easily get the answer to the questions which are mentioned above thereby all this psychologically persuades us to stop for a moment and take heed of what it means to really being human.

Coetzee gives adequate illustrations of the values of human life which when emulated can give the meaning and value to human life.

Works Cited :

Coetzee, J.M. *Disgrace*. Great Britain: Vintage Publication. 1999

.....*Life & Times of Michael K*. Great Britain: Vintage Publication 1983

.....*Age of Iron*. Great Britain: Penguin Publication 1990

Dana Dragunoin. J.M.Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* and *Thin Theory of the Good*

London: Sage Publications. 2006

Gilbert Yeoh. "Love and indifference in J.M.Coetzee's *Age of Iron*." New Delhi: Sage Publication. 2003

Saurabh Kumar Singh. J.M.Coetzee's *Disgrace*: A Tale of Troubles. Haridwar: The Vedic Path Vol. LXXXVII (No.1&2) Jan-March/April – June 2013 (Quarterly English Journal)

M Kamalakkannan. "Implausible Representation: Race and Rape in J.M.Coetzee's *Disgrace*". Chennai: Eclectic Representations. 2014