

A Great Escape Artist—An Analysis of Michael K's Constant Attempts to Escape

Xiaochun Su & Revathi A/p Gopal
Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris

To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v13-i9/18053>

DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v13-i9/18053

Published Date: 20 September 2023

Abstract

Life and Times of Michael K is the masterpiece of the South African writer J.M.Coetzee. It is set against a background of the Civil War in South Africa and it depicts Michael K— a modest hare-lipped gardener who is constantly attempting to flee from being persecuted and imprisoned by various types of oppression, such as the government and army. This study mainly analyses Michael K's five attempts to escape under the guidance of new historicism and post colonialism and tries to figure out what is the significance of Michael K's escape, which is the research question of this article. Through analyzing what happens to Michael K and what Michael K does during his journey of running away, it presents a great escape artist who never gives up pursuing freedom and defending his dignity although he suffers from mental and physical torture of being hounded and imprisoned. This study aims at revealing the meaning of Michael K's five attempts to escape.

Keywords: Escape, South Africa, Apartheid, New Historicism, Post Colonialism

Introduction

Life and Times of Michael K is one of the most important novels among the works created by the South African writer J.M.Coetzee. It is about a South African humble man's story. In the novel, the protagonist carefully looks after his pumpkin patch and keeps a profound inner calm in times of war. He spares no effort to hide himself from a complex social environment and seeks for freedom. The spirit of the protagonist is admirable and this is why the author of this article intends to analyze this novel.

This article will conduct a research into J.M. Coetzee's work *Life and Times of Michael K*. The objective of this research is to reveal the meaning of the protagonist Michael K's five attempts to escape in the novel *Life and Times of Michael K* by J.M. Coetzee. Through the understanding of J.M. Coetzee and the historical background of the book, this article mainly analyses the protagonist Michael K's five attempts to escape by applying the new historicism theory and postcolonial theory and tries to figure out what is the significance of Michael K's escapes, which is the research question of this article. By this way, this study answers the research question.

J.M. Coetzee and *Life and Times of Michael K*

J.M. Coetzee is short for John Maxwell Coetzee. J.M. Coetzee is a contemporary writer from South Africa. He was born in 1940 in Cape Town. At that time, the apartheid policy was invented as a means to cement the government's control over the economic and social system. The political background of South Africa has a great influence on J.M. Coetzee's literary creation. He hopes to express his resistance to the apartheid regime through literary creation. J.M. Coetzee made his debut as a writer of novels in 1974 and published his first book *Dusklands* in South Africa. His international breakthrough came in 1980 with the novel *Waiting for the Barbarian*. In 1983, he won the Man Booker Prize in the United Kingdom for the book *Life and Times of Michael K*. In 2003, he won the Nobel Prize for Literature.

J.M. Coetzee's works are often set on the post colonialism background of South Africa. The book *Life and Times of Michael K* paints a picture of the most rampant apartheid era in South Africa. The novel tells a story of a simple gardener Michael K's arduous journey from the city to his mother's rural birthplace in apartheid era of South Africa. It is written in a powerful, plain, and unpretentious style, it strikes deep inside the heart.

The Theories Applied in This Paper

This essay examines Michael K's five efforts to flee in J.M. Coetzee's novel *Life and Times of Michael K* using new historicism and post-colonialism theories as a guide. Before analyzing the protagonist's constant attempts to escape in *Life and Times of Michael K*, this essay will first briefly introduce what is new historicism and post-colonialism.

New Historicism

New Historicism emphasizes the links between literature and culture. New Historicism is a neutral approach towards historical events, and it is claimed to be sensitive to all kinds of cultures (Abrams & Harpham, 2014, pp.162-165). New historicists usually study the works through their historical context and understand cultural history through literature. They advocate bringing historical research into literature. That means new historicists usually examine the social and psychological background of the author, the books and theories that may have influenced the author, and any other factors which will influence the works of art. This study investigates the historical and cultural context of the book *Life and Times of Michael K* by employing the new historicism theory. It connects literary inquiry with history and culture.

Post-Colonialism

Post-colonial Criticism is a type of cultural criticism. Post-Colonial Criticism refers to a collection of theoretical and critical approaches used to study the culture of former colonies of the European countries. It usually deals with literary works produced in countries that were once, or are now under the control of European colonial powers (Abrams & Harpham, 2014, pp.252-258) It also deals with literature written by citizens of colonial countries that used colonized people as its theme. J.M. Coetzee's work *Life and times of Micheael K* describes the post-colonial era in South Africa, so postcolonial theory is one of the valid theoretical bases of this study.

After the analysis of what is new historicism and post colonialism theories, this study is going to have a look at the background of South Africa in Times of War.

Part II South Africa in Times of War

During the Civil War, the Republic of South Africa is in a complete shambles, the people of South Africa are facing a problematic future because of the apartheid system, and they are eager to eliminate racial discrimination and they desire to live in a free and equal country. The story of *Life and Times of Michael K* is set on the background of the Civil War, so it is necessary to have a deep understanding of the apartheid policy and the living state of the people in times of war in South Africa.

The Apartheid Policy

“Apartheid” means “segregation” in Afrikaans. It was a policy of legalized racial segregation implemented by the South African government between 1948 and 1994. It came from the tradition of settler rule and the Dutch and British colonialism. The apartheid policy divided people into whites, blacks, Indians and other colored people. Then according to the legal classification, groups of various ethnics were geographically separated, the black majority were forced to live in a special community and then become citizens of special homelands. Michael K, the protagonist of *Life and Times of Michael K*, is one of the poor little men who live under the apartheid system. This system prevented the black ethnic groups from getting their rights. At that time, education, health and other public services were sometimes claimed to be separate but equal, but in fact only the inferior public services were available to the black ethnic groups. The blacks were stripped of their citizenship. The system of apartheid sparked much domestic resistance and international attacks and economic sanction. In 1994, under the international pressure, the apartheid policy was abolished.

People’s Yearning for Freedom

Everyone yearns for equality, freedom and peace, especially those people who lived under the segregation system. At that time, the majority of South Africans, regardless of black or white, recognized that the apartheid system would have no future. In order to ensure peace, security and freedom, they realized that they must rely on their massive and decisive action to end the apartheid system. They knew that apartheid system had caused incalculable damage to their continent, their basis of life had been destroyed and thousands of people had become homeless. They desired to overthrow the tottering government and establish a democratic country which would be equal for everyone regardless of his skin color. They yearned for a free society, in which, everyone could live with freedom and in harmony, including Michael K, whose only longing is to fight for freedom. In the book *Life and Times of Michael K*, people can easily sense the author’s hatred towards the racial discrimination system and his longing for freedom. From the perspective of new-historicism, the growing background has a great influence on the author’s literary creation. The author of the novel grows up under the apartheid policy, and as Riding (2003) mentioned, “he is a scrupulous doubter, ruthless in his criticism of the rationalism and cosmetic morality of Western civilization.” Since the background of South Africa in times of war has been analyzed, the main plot of the novel *Life and Times of Michael K* will be analyzed in the following sections.

Part III Michael K’s Five Attempts to Escape

The protagonist Michael K’s five attempts to escape are the principle plot to *Life and times of Michael K*. Through presenting Michael K’s constant attempts to escape from all kinds of camps during the apartheid system, the author can explore in depth the significance of these "escapes" that the author is trying to convey.

The Attempt to Escape from the City

Michael K, born with cleft lip and grows up in a school for the disabled, lives with his mother. He is simple and kindhearted. In the coordinate of his life, he never knows where the road of his life will head. When there is growing unrest in the country, the political condition in South Africa is bad, and his mother's health condition is deteriorating, he trumps up his courage to comply with his mother's wish, and to flee from the city with his mother back to a small village called Prince Albert where her mother used to live in her childhood. However, the complicated bureaucratic system delays their passports, so they cannot buy tickets. At last, he makes a cart, puts his mother on it and flees the city. In Michael K's first attempt to escape, he does not have his own will. He has no other families but his mother in his life, his mother's wish is the most important thing in his life, and he wants to help his mother lead a tranquil and peaceful life as she dreams of. However, Michael K and his mother do not know at the very beginning that it is quite difficult to find a single space which is free from wars in South Africa. Powers have been like an octopus' tentacles, spreading out into every corner of the society, the rural areas are also engaged in wars.

The Attempt to Escape from the Labor Gang

Michael K and his mother are trudging over the road on their way to Prince Albert. Unfortunately, stricken with all the illness, Michael K's mother cannot bear the pain and cold the bumpy journey has caused and dies half way. After losing his only family, Michael K does not know what to do next. In order to fulfill his mother's wish, he pulls himself together and makes up his mind to take the ashes of her mother with him and to move on for his mother's rural hometown. Without a passport, he has to avoid the main road, and to escape along the barren mountain trail. He hopes no one will notice him and block the path of a small ant among the vast sea of people like him heading home.

In *Life and Times of Michael K*, Coetzee sets the protagonist's constant attempts to escape as a major clue. From the perspective of new historicism, literary creation and culture are inseparable. J.M.Coetzee grew up in South Africa when the apartheid policy there was gradually taking shape and finally became prevalent. South Africa's political and social background had a very profound influence on his literary creation. In his work *Life and Times of Michael K*, readers can easily find that he is worried about the social unrest caused by the white colonial rule and the apartheid system, the trauma of apartheid haunts this book. The protagonist Michael K spares no effort to run away from the war and the apartheid system,

However, the era is like a night owl, any sound of leaves rustling in the wind cannot escape its ears and any sign of trouble cannot escape its eyes, even an unknown little man such as Michael K, who always walk on his own way quietly, when, in an unconscious state, will be caught by the arm by some people, then be given some identity and be divided into certain groups. He will be forcibly drawn into this ever-operating machine of age, an individual person is part of the society, and his activities are placed in the society in which he lives. However, as for Michael K, he instinctively wants to live outside of history while he is always inevitably coerced into the rolling torrent of history. The author seems to show us in this book that in front of grand social history and the various powers, an individual person is so small and humble.

Michael K is caught by times. First he encounters a soldier, who robs the money and jewellery that his mother leaves him, then he is caught by the police and forced to repair the railway. This is the first time he is captured for no reason, he does not know why he should join the labor gang, but he has the strong desire that he should run away and keep finding

Prince Albert, a little farm where his mother once happily lived. He deeply believes he can find freedom in this little farm. So he escapes.

The Attempt to Escape from the Farm

After escaping from the labor gang, Michael K walks into the wilderness of the quiet countryside, after several days of trekking, finally he reaches the abandoned farm. Here, although he is racked with unbearable hunger, hot and cold, he feels free. He finds some pumpkin seeds and sows them. He repairs an abandoned dam brake, uses it to irrigate his pumpkins. He buries his mother's ashes, then makes himself a slingshot and shots birds and grills them to feed himself. He now lives a life away from the war.

At this time, a young soldier, who is a grandson of his mother's family, flees to the farm. He regards himself as a master. After enjoying the grilled birds Michael K shots with the slingshot, he begins to dominate Michael K. He gives K money and orders K to buy basic necessities for him, he has tried to turn K into a body-servant (Coetzee, 2019). Michael K just wants to live a tranquil, peaceful and free life with his pumpkins, and although he is reluctant to leave his pumpkins, he tears himself away from them and runs away once again. Michael K's life is hard. The loneliness, helplessness and pains of his life reflect the track of social history and guides people to re-examine history.

The Attempt to Escape from the Refugee Camp

Michael K flees to the mountains, feeding himself with wild berries and ant larvae. When he comes down from the mountains, he is arrested by the police again. With extreme weakness, he is sent to the refugee camp after simple treatment. In this camp which is with barbed wire around, K has to live together with countless men and women. Under the policemen's guard, he has to do all kinds of slave labor in exchange for food. In this refugee camp, there are non-stop fighting and riots, but no one ever thinks about escaping, no one ever has a suspicion that there is something wrong in here. People accept and get used to this kind of custody and management, and they are willing to accept all kinds of so-called transformation. They labor in exchange for food to feed their families, and when the darkness comes, there are barracks that will shelter them from wind and rain. As for K, he cherishes the simplest idea that he should live on his land, where he can live freely with his pumpkins. He knows that he must stay away from the barrack, and he listens to his heart, then in a riot K runs away proudly.

The Attempt to Escape from the Rehabilitation Camp

Michael K escapes back to his mother's abandoned farm, where he finds that the grandson of his mother's family has gone. K is afraid of living on the farm again so he moves to a valley away from the farm and digs a hole for himself. He chooses to hide in his hole like a mole. He sleeps through the day, moving only by night, so that no one will see him. He reclaims the land and plants his pumpkin seeds. Although life here is hard, and every day he lives with scarcely enough food to feed himself, he feels very happy and basks in the love of his "children"—the pumpkins (Coetzee, 2019,p.118). He wishes one day in the future that the barren land will be full of pumpkin flowers. However, to achieve his dream is easier said than done. K is eventually found by some officers. They pity this extremely "thin monster", pity this poor "dying non-human thing" and they give him food. However, when they find K's cave and his orderly life traces and his pumpkins, immediately they accuse K of providing food reserves for the guerrillas. In order to find out whom K works for, the officers blow all the land up around the farm, including K's pumpkin patch. K is again arrested and brought into a

rehabilitation camp. In the rehabilitation camp, they begin to give persistent treatments for K's body and mind, because he cannot stand any torture, he will die at any time. Although there is a doctor who is very concerned about Michael K's health, and who has been trying to make him eat, he is unwilling to accept the doctor's good intention, and he refuses to accept food which is not free.

From the post-colonialism perspective, the author of *Life and Times of Michael K* wants to reflect the historical problems of colonial society in South Africa from the viewpoint of the protagonist Michael K. In this book, all kinds of camps are portrayal of apartheid policy in South Africa. In the hospital, the kind-hearted doctor carefully takes care of Michael K, he spares no efforts to persuade Michael K into eating food and to bring him back to health. The reason why the doctor tries his best to do all this good deeds is that he hopes one day soon Michael K can rejoin the camp life and have a chance to march back and forth across the racetrack and shout slogans and salute the flag and practice digging holes and filling them again (Coetzee, 2019). What the doctor does shows the purpose of colonialism, that is, to help the colonized so that they can better serve imperialism. It is for this reason that the doctor tries hard to save Michael K's life. In the name of charity, colonialism is able to continue.

As for K, in order to get real freedom, he must escape from all the oppression and all the charity, including the "well-meaning" doctor, because in the hospital, he is deprived of will, and is required to live. What K really wants is to choose his own living style freely, even though he should hide in holes with his body suffering from hunger, because in this way, his spirit is free, and freedom of the soul is more important for K, so he escapes from the camp again.

K flees to his original city where he and his mother once lived, there, curfew is still played. On the beach, a woman provides K a sex experience as charity, with generous love she wants to wipe out K's sex illiteracy. Later, Michael K lies in his mother's small room, reflecting the woman's wet lips and his experiences, he knows that there are all kinds of camps for all kinds of people who need help. Michael K knows that he has become an object of charity, everywhere he goes there are people waiting to exercise their forms of charity on him. Finally he reaches the conclusion that it is his fault not to have enough seeds, and it is him to blame for planting all his seeds together in one patch, he looks forward to once again beginning his journey in search of a land of freedom.

Part IV A Brief Comment on Michael K's Constant Attempts to Escape

Previous studies have discussed a lot about Michael K's constant attempts to escape, and after the main plot of the book *Life and Times of Michael K* has been deeply explored, it is obvious that the indomitable spirit of Michael K shows people during his journey of running away ignite their desire for freedom. Michael K is a brave fighter, people should all "take off their hats to him" (Coetzee, 2019,p.166)

During the Civil War, South African society is in turmoil, and people are displaced. Homeless people occupy all the city's streets, begging for food, waiting for relief, and looking for shelters. The government establishes all kinds of labor camps, hoping to control the floating population. They do not allow these people to destruct social order.

People in the camp live without freedom. This is an era of wars and camps, the authorities want to maintain order, so they implement a variety of constraints on individuals. In K's eyes, a resettlement camp is a place where people are deposited to be forgotten (Coetzee, 2019)

K manages to escape from a variety of camps, although he is pulled back again and again, his desire for freedom is so strong that he overcomes the difficulties. Michael K's Garden of Eden is a land full of pumpkin flowers. Every time he runs out of the camps, his heart is full of confidence and serenity. No matter where he goes, he will carry the pumpkin seeds, they are the hope of freedom. Michael believes that when South Africa is covered with pumpkin flowers, perhaps a free, peaceful and harmonious society will come. Although the protagonist of *Life and Times of Michael K* is small and humble, the indomitable spirit he shows people in his pursuit of freedom is admirable. Although Michael K is slow in mind, unlike those who stay in the lifeless camps enduring mental and physical torture, he dares to refuse all the confinement imposed on him. Hiding from a complex social environment, Michael K remains calm and peaceful in his mind in times of wars, he is preoccupied only by his pumpkins. He seeks for balance between human being and nature and he guides people to explore human nature. From this, people can see Michael K's courage in his pursuit of freedom. He uses his great courage and tenacity to tell people that one can live without food and language, but one cannot live without the will to search for freedom. He would like to tell people that society should respect individual's choice. People always tell him how life should be, but he protests against the oppression by constantly running away.

Michael K refuses to be detained in camps, that means he has the courage to challenge the colonial kingdom, especially the apartheid system. In the novel, by presenting Michael K's constant attempts to escape, the author exposes the widespread pains and suffering that the war has caused. He wants everybody to see the living state of the blacks and the whites in South Africa under apartheid.

Part V Conclusion

According to the analysis above, it is clear that South African society during the apartheid era was extremely complex, entangling everyone in a never-ending time machine from which they were unable to escape. Michael K., a low-income individual who experiences the society's ruthlessness the most, is one such individual. However, he refuses to be played as a pawn by wars and times, so he begins his journey of running away, he keeps creeping away in corners to escape the times, Coetzee (2019) he always thinks that he has escaped the camps; perhaps, if he lie low, he will escape the charity too (Coetzee, 2019). Although Michael K suffers from mental and physical torture of being hounded and imprisoned, he never gives up the pursuit of freedom. He is "a great escape artist" (Coetzee, 2019, p.182). Michael K's spirit inspires people to fight for a peaceful society.

In conclusion, the plot of the protagonist Michael K's five attempts to escape in *Life and Times of Michael K* reveals people's pursuit of freedom through the protagonist's constant attempts to escape. It reveals the cruelty of the war, but also inspires people to seek for peace. It also explores the way of South Africa's future, that is, the government needs to love its people instead of imposing the racial discrimination system, and only in this way can South Africa build a free and fair society. By means of exploring the plot of the novel *Life and Times of Michael K* through post-colonial and new-historicism theories and analyzing the novel through its historical context, this paper aims at appealing for peace, freedom and equality.

In recent years, research on the novel *Life and Times of Michael K* has mainly focused on the whole text as well as the historical background, etc., and relatively few scholars have combed through the details of the article. This paper examines the details of Michael K's five escapes, which can make the readers more intuitively feel the author's intention of writing and can contribute to the current study of Coetzee's works from a detail perspective.

References

- Abrams, M. H., & Harpham, G. (2014). *A glossary of literary terms*. Cengage learning.
- Riding, A. (2003). *J. M. Coetzee Wins Nobel Prize for Literature*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/02/books/j-m-coetzee-wins-nobel-prize-for-literature.html>
- Attwell, D. (1993). *JM Coetzee: South Africa and the politics of writing* (No. 48). Univ of California Press.
- Attridge, D. (2021). *JM Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*. University of Chicago Press.
- Bolin, J. (2015). Modernism, Idiocy, and the Work of Culture: J. M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*. *Modernism/modernity* 22(2), 343-364. <https://doi.org/10.1353/mod.2015.0029>.
- Coetzee, J. M. (2019). *Life & times of Michael K*. Text Publishing.
- DeLoughrey, E., & Handley, G. B. (Eds.). (2011). *Postcolonial ecologies: Literatures of the environment*. OUP USA.
- Hayes, P. (2010). *JM Coetzee and the novel: Writing and politics after Beckett*. Oxford University Press.
- Head, D. (2009). *The Cambridge Introduction to JM Coetzee*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kehinde, A. (2010). Ability in disability: JM Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* and the empowerment of the disabled. *English Academy Review*, 27(1), 60-72. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10131751003755948>
- Neimneh, S., & Muhaidat, F. (2012). The ecological thought of JM Coetzee: the case of *Life and Times of Michael K*. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 4(1), 12-19. <https://doi.org/10.3968/j.sll.1923156320120401.1700>