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## Interrogating Apartheid: An Analysis of J M Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life and Times of Michael K*

Imran Ahmad, M. A., M. Phil.



John Maxwell (formerly Michael) Coetzee

John Maxwell (formerly Michael) Coetzee, a novelist, essayist, academic of great repute, literary critic and above all a Nobel laureate, was born in Cape Town, South Africa, in 1940. He was the first novelist to be awarded the Booker Prize twice. In 2003 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in recognition of his work in which, according to Westberg, Coetzee has frequently “given voice to those outside the hierarchies of the mighty. With intellectual honesty

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and density of feeling, in a prose of icy precision, [he has] unveiled the masks of our civilization and uncovered the topography of evil” (Gregory O’Dea, 2004: 2).

### **The Strength of the African Novel – the Reciprocal Nature of Art and Society**

Commitment to the socio-politico-historical reality has been, and continues to be, the forte of African novel in general, and South African novel in particular, since the 1950s. In the face of social exigencies and the gravity and intensity of socio-political vicissitudes emerges the writers’ commitment to address the problems faced by their society and seek solutions thereby.

A piece of literature is a social phenomenon in the sense that it does not grow from a vacuum; rather it is conditioned by the socio-economic and politico-historical circumstances of the time. The relationship between the two – art and society – is a reciprocal one: art influences society and vice versa. Events in the history of a society, therefore, cannot but be a source of inspiration to its writers. Literature in this sense is considered to be an effective means of chronicling and analyzing societal problems and aspirations.

### **John Maxwell Coetzee**

Most of the South African writers, black as well as white, use their works to address the issues and virulent policies of the apartheid period. John Maxwell Coetzee is one of them who in his novels, focused more or less on the South African situation, partakes of the business of exposing the evils of apartheid as well as their detrimental effects.

In his fictional oeuvre Coetzee has, although implicitly, always tried “to denounce injustice, to unmask fears and express uncertainties about South Africa, giving voice to those social, political and racial elements that in South African apartheid era were for a long time silenced and deprived of any form of expression” (Michela Canepari-Labib, 2005: 23).

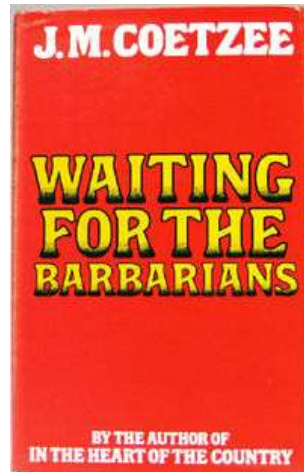
### ***Waiting for the Barbarians***

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J M Coetzee's third novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (henceforth referred to as WFB) was published at a time when the socio-political situation in South Africa seemed to be "degenerating towards a general holocaust" (Michela Canepari-Labib, 2005: 86). Protest against apartheid and its virulent and evil off-shoots had already resulted into Sharpeville Massacre (1960) and Soweto School Rising (1976). The passive resistance initiated by African National Congress (ANC) in the year 1952 had by the time gained in momentum with the emergence of militant organizations like Pan African Congress (PAC), and culminated into a pure and violent protest in the face of socio-political exigencies of the time.

Fearing a threat to the white minority rule in South Africa, the white Nationalist Party in power resolved to maintain the status quo at all costs. The crisis resulted in increasing militarization, mass arrests, violence, torture, military despotism and denial of natural human rights. Torture, one of the burning issues of South African socio-political history, became rampant in the state.

### **Deaths in Prison**

The cruelties and violence inflicted upon the prisoners during detention and deaths in mysterious circumstances including that of the popular leader associated with Black Consciousness Movement, Stephen Biko in 1977 stand a testimony to this fact. The gravity and intensity of the issue attracted the attention of world community as is evident from the fact that the year 1978 was proclaimed as International anti-apartheid year by the United States and the report *Political Imprisonments in South Africa* by Amnesty International dates to the same year (Michela Canepari-Labib, 2005: 87).

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An investigation report by Amnesty reads: “all the evidence indicates that torture is extensively inflicted on political detainees, and the government sanctions its use” (Terence Dowdall, 1992: 458). The common forms of torture reported by Amnesty International include physical assault, electric shock to different parts of body, psychological tortures including death threats to the victims and their families and sleep deprivation. Torture, besides being an instrument of oppression and annihilation, is an instrument of power and can be understood fully in the context of power relations in any country (Terence Dowdall, 1992: 452). In the South African context, after engineering and legalizing the malevolent policy of apartheid, the chief architect of the policy, H F Verwoerd had said in the House of Assembly in 1963:

Reduced to its simplest form the problem is nothing else than this: we want to keep South Africa white. Keeping it white can only mean one thing, namely white domination. Not leadership, not guidance, but control, supremacy (Terence Dowdall, 1992: 453).

To fulfill this desire – “to keep South Africa white” and to assert its “supremacy” over the black majority – the state needed instruments of power to crush any voice of protest and, torture was one of the means to achieve this end.

### **The Writers on the Scene**

Given the dilemmas of South African reality, the writer could not remain disinterested to the ruthlessness of the monolithic and authoritarian regime especially when the genesis of art is governed by the desire to engage, analyse and interrogate burning issues like torture. As Coetzee, in an interview with Richard Begam, confesses:

Yes, art is born out of burning issues, issues felt deeply, whether these issues are specific (political issues, for instance) or general (questions of life and birth, for instance) or internal to the medium... (J M Coetzee, [www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org)).

### **The Theme of the Novel *Waiting for the Barbarians***

Written “as part of a growing international debate on torture,” (Michela Canepari-Labib, 2005: 87) WFB deals with the issue of torture in its varied manifestations: physical, psychological, racial and sexual. The novel deals, though obliquely, with the past horrors, racial dissonance, police brutality and the impact of such evil and detrimental off-shoots of apartheid policy on the psychological make-up of both the oppressor and the oppressed. Judged against the backdrop of South African socio-political reality, WFB “investigates Coetzee’s idiosyncratic presentation of an allegorical picture of the tortured contours of South African reality during the painful era of apartheid” (Ayobami Kehinde, 68).

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J M Coetzee represents one of the seminal voices in postcolonial literature in English and writing from the position of post-colonialism in terms of growing up in an erstwhile colony, it is always germane to see how colonialism forms a backdrop for Coetzee's fictional oeuvre. The colonial mission in its myriad designs has to a large extent silenced or given a new voice to the *Other*, a voice which has not been theirs. Or, one could say, it has imposed a set identity on the *Other*. In order to validate and legitimize its imperial rule, the Empire resorted to all sorts of means – *mission civilisatrice*, constructing and *energizing myths*, etc. – available to it.

### **Justification for Colonization and Intervention**

Sometimes mission civilisatrice (a rationale for intervention and colonization) was used as a mask to conceal the bankruptcy and brutality of imperial projects and sometimes violence exacted to serve the expansionist projects to justify their search for a state of security. Among other important weapons, devised and manipulated by the Empire to justify its occupation and expansion, was the creation and rendering of myth regarding the “Other” in terms of binary oppositions. Through the creation of such myths, the Empire not only justifies its incursion into another's territory and the brutal acts of violence on the “Other” but also its imperial projects backed by expansionist ambitions. As Elleke Boehmer points out:

In its attempt to comprehend other lands, and also in its need to propagate itself and, importantly, legitimize its presence, colonial authority depended on imaginative backing, what have usefully been called *energizing myths*... (Elleke Boehmer, 2005: 23).

The colonial mission of silencing the “Other” and then reconstruct it at pleasure and rewrite it according to its own whims “necessarily meant *un-forming* or *re-forming* the communities that existed there already...” (Ania Loomba, 2005: 8). Even the term “colonialism” itself as defined in OED, according to Ania Loomba, participates in the colonial act of silencing the *Other*. The term “colonialism,” defined as “a settlement in a new country” which maintains its “connection with the parent state”, according to Loomba “evacuates the word ‘colonialism’ of any implication of an encounter between peoples, or of conquest and domination”. It “avoids any reference to people other than the colonizers, people who might have been living in those places where colonies were established” (Ania Loomba, 7).

### **Ideology of the White Writing**

In the domain of issues related to the imposition of a set identity onto the “Other,” the concept of “ideology,” central to Gramsci's theory of hegemony, according to Loomba, finds its place and comes to the rescue of the colonizer and the beholder of power. In *White Writing*, Coetzee shows how an ideology of hardwork and labour – which considered idleness as “ungodly” – brought by the Europeans provided an impetus to the construction of the

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“Hottentot” as lazy and idle, helping thereby in the construction of the other (Sigrid Solhaug, 2008: 15).

Coetzee is fully aware of the fact that it is the colonial discourse that constructs the binary structures and then the myth of the “Other”. In an interview with Richard Begam, Coetzee says, “...who are these blacks and whites? Surely it is colonial discourse (of which the Discourse of Cape is only a variety) that creates blacks and whites....The black are black as long as the white constructs himself as white” (J. M. Coetzee, [www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org)).

### **Deconstructing the Myth of the Other**

In his works, Coetzee not only exposes and deconstructs the myth of the “Other” but also unmasks the ulterior motives of the colonizers in constructing such myths. In his fictional oeuvre, among other things, Coetzee deals with various aspects of colonialism and, one of the aspects that receives the most extensive treatment is that of “power and powerlessness: the relation between master and servant, overlord and slave” (Stephen Watson, 1996: 14).

The desire and need of the colonizer to construct another individual as “Other” in order to achieve purpose and power has been Coetzee’s subject of interest since his very first fictional work, *Dusklands*. “The promise, so brilliantly fulfilled in his later work, is clear in this earliest novel” (Daily Telegraph). In both the novellas, *The Vietnam Project* and *The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee* that together form the *Dusklands*, the natives (Vietnamese as well as the Bushmen and Hottentot) are identified as inferiors – the “other”. In *The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee*, Jacobus describes the natives as sub-humans, identified not by the essence which characterizes “higher humanity” (J M Coetzee (a), 2004: 85) but by their “animal soul”. The narrator goes to the extent of comparing the natives to dogs (J M Coetzee (a), 2004: 58) and suggests some means to catch, tame and breed them as if they were cattle (J M Coetzee (a), 2004: 60). Thus, by portraying Hottentots and Bushmen as inferior and denying them humanity, the narrator relegates them to the position of the subhuman “Other”.

### **Quietism and Reluctance**

Although Coetzee is labelled by several critics and fellow South African Writers with “quietism and rarified aestheticism” and accused of his reluctance to deal with the politico-historical events of his country directly, Coetzee has confounded his critics by approaching “the South African situation more allegorically, as an embodiment of a more universal phenomenon of imperialism and the crisis of civilized values” (Paul Rich, [www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org)).

### **Exposé as the Main Goal**

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From a postcolonial perspective, Coetzee's fiction offers an exposé of the systems of denigration, subjugation and exploitation and resistance to such systems. And it often takes the figure of Empire as an historical embodiment of such systems (Gregory O' Dea, 2). All this fits squarely with Coetzee's novel WFB with which we are concerned here. In the words of Stephen Watson, it is "Coetzee's finest novel to date", "a novel of an imaginary empire, of an imperialism which is merely an extension of colonialism" (Stephen Watson, 14).

Coetzee in his novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and for that matter in almost all of his novels, makes explicit the game of deceit, denigration and exploitation innate in a colonial discourse constructed by colonizers in order to justify their occupation and expansion. The narrative while touching upon and mentioning in passing issues like land grabbing – "the all-too-material reason for the very existence of the empire" (Stephen Watson, 19) – and the impact of colonialism that the settlement brings on the native environment, deals at length with issues that the Empire takes recourse to in justifying its oppression and exploitation, maintaining its supremacy and legitimizing its expansionist project. The issue of torture, so central to the politico-historical reality of apartheid South Africa that it cannot be simply glossed over, also forms one of the dominant themes of the novel. Coetzee shows how torture becomes both an instrument of oppression as well as power at the hands of the beholders of power.

### **The Issue of Torture**

The issue of torture is a complex one and has been analyzed from multiple standpoints in both the truly realistic (e.g., Human Rights Publications) as well as in imaginative literature. Whether it is in the fictional works like André Brink's *A Dry White Season* (1984); Sipho Sepamala's *A Ride on the Whirlwind* (1984); and Mongane Serote's *To Every Birth Its Blood* (1986) or, in the non-fictional works like Metin Basoglu's *Torture and its Consequences* and Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, to name a few, torture with its social, political and psychological dimensions remains central and the most intriguing issue.

The issue poses a number of questions to both the writer and the reader. Coetzee himself has tackled the issue in his essay "Into the Dark Chamber". The dilemmas it poses for the writer are whether or not to depict torture and "how to treat something that, in truth, ... is offered... to terrorize the populace and paralyse resistance, deserves to be ignored" (J M Coetzee, 1992: 363). Coetzee obviously cannot and does not ignore torture, but the question it raises is "how not to play the game by the rules of the state, how to establish one's own authority, how to imagine torture and death on one's own terms" (J.M. Coetzee, 363). In WFB, Coetzee is, however, not only concerned with the problematic questions the issue of torture raises, but also with social, political and psychological dimensions of torture. In "Into the Dark Chamber," Coetzee writes:

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[The] relations in the torture room provide a metaphor, bare and extreme, for relations between authoritarianism and its victims. In the torture room unlimited force is exerted upon the physical being of an individual...with the purpose of, if not of destroying him, then at least of destroying the kernel of resistance within him (J. M. Coetzee, 1992: 363).

With the unmaking of the voice, the prisoners are left only with their mutilated bodies, lacking one of the essential components that supposedly distinguish human beings from animals. Furthermore, torture becomes a weapon of annihilation and destruction. It destroys both the physical as well as the psychological being of an individual and, thus, becomes a “mimetic of death” (Barbara Eckstein, [www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org)).

### **Form and Function of Torture in the Novel *Waiting for the Barbarians***

The theme of torture is introduced at the very outset of the novel. As soon as the reader turns the first page of the book, s/he comes across what Coetzee calls, with reference to Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, the “black flowers of civilized society,” i.e., the prison (J M Coetzee, 1992: 361). The prison is “simply a storeroom attached to the granary” without any windows and the “two prisoners lie bound on the floor” giving “smell of old urine” (WFB, p.2). “One is an old man, the other a boy”. “The boy’s face is puffy and bruised, one eye is swollen shut” (WFB, p.3). The description of the prison and the deplorable condition of the prisoners with their stink of sweat and urine alerts the reader that the narrative deals with some gloomy episode. As anticipated, after a few pages, the reader comes across the description of torture:

The grey beard is caked with blood. The lips are crushed and drawn back, the teeth are broken. One eye is rolled back, the other socket is a bloody hole (WFB, p.7).

Though a detailed description of how an old prisoner is tortured to death is not given, the sentences are potent and forceful enough to drive home the brutality of the torture.

### **Colonialist Truth**

The Empire, as represented by Colonel Joll and Mandel, in WFB believes itself to be the questor and upholder of truth. It runs the business of constructing its own version of truth by manipulating its written code and power. The report that the interrogator (Joll) submits to Magistrate regarding the death of an old prisoner during interrogation throws ample light on the manipulation of power and the written code. The report reads as:

During the course of the interrogation contradictions became apparent in the prisoner’s testimony. Confronted with these contradictions, the prisoner became enraged and attacked the investigating officer. A scuffle ensued during which the prisoner fell heavily against the wall. Efforts to revive him were unsuccessful (WFB, p.7).

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The report is simply a blatant and barefaced lie as is evident from the statement the guard makes to Magistrate. Colonel Joll sees “torture” as an inevitable means to seek truth or, to be more precise, he views the torture of prisoners and the quest for truth with the same lens. “Pain is truth; all else is subject to doubt” (WFB, p.5). His queer method of eliciting the truth is shocking and reminiscent of third degree torture. As he says, “First I get lies, you see – this is what happens – first lies, then pressure, then more lies, then more pressure, then the break, then more pressure, then the truth. This is how you get the truth” (WFB, p.5).

In yet another shocking episode, the reader comes across a naked description of torture that sends shivers down one’s spine. The prisoner’s are “stark naked” and are “tied neck to neck” like a “file of men”. “A simple loop of wire runs through the flesh of each man’s hands and through holes pierced in his cheeks” (WFB, p.113). A soldier slowly pulls the cord till the prisoner’s faces touch the ground. Before thrashing them heavily, Colonel Joll “rubs a handful of dust” on the naked backs of the prisoners and inscribes “with a stick of charcoal” the word “ENEMY”. After this begins the “game” of heavy thrashing, “raising red welts on the prisoners’ backs and buttocks” till the “black charcoal and ochre dust begin to run with sweat and blood...and till their backs are washed clean” (WFB, p.115). The painful and miserable state of the prisoner’s is turned into a game by the men of Empire like Colonel Joll who even invites the spectators to join the soldiers in thrashing. Through this scene of torture it becomes clear how the Empire creates its own version of truth. The so called barbarians or prisoners are constructed as enemies because such a status is being written, on a part of their body (their backs) they cannot see and in a code (English) they cannot decipher (Laura Wright, 2006: 77).

Thus, torture in the context of the novel becomes, above all, a means of writing what the Empire wants to write or engrave on its subjects. And this power of the Empire to write establishes its supremacy over those who lack this skill. “The power and skill of the Empire, its art, lie in its capacity to generate and then interpret its own signs” (Michael Valdez Moses, 121). Thus, by creating the notions of the “Other”, “powerless”, “unlettered”, and so on, the Empire achieves power and identity. And in the context of the novel, Joll, Mandel and Magistrate, as emissaries of the Empire are in the same business to achieve power and identity for themselves and the Empire they represent.

### **The Issue of Sexuality**

The issue of sexuality or sexploitation, like the theme of torture, receives an extensive treatment at the hands of the novelist in WFB. The issue has attracted divergent critical opinions from different critics. Whereas some critics like Wang Jinghui see “sex and violence” as “complex and intricate texture of truth” (Kailash C Baral, 2008: 58), some like Wang Ayni see it as a negative trait. Ayni maintains that “in Coetzee’s novels, no matter political ones, why does he always sum up the ultimate meaning with sex? How many resources are there in sex itself?

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How much meaning is there in it? ... Why do people stick only to this?"( Kailash C Baral, 2008: 52). Although Ayni's opinion that Coetzee's novels are infused with sex and violence cannot be rejected altogether, the motive behind her view is not tenable. She fails to take into consideration the fact that "class conflict, sexism, racism and other forms of dissonance are ubiquitous and perennial traits of postcolonial society" (Ayobami Kehinde, 71).

Sex in the context of the novel is neither a means of procreation nor a means to mutual satisfaction. It becomes a power relationship and a discursive practice similar to that of torture. The Magistrate's sexuality becomes a medium through which he gains power over the "Other" and exhibits his allegiance to the Empire. Although he feigns to be a liberal man with a patronizing and benevolent attitude towards the "barbarian girl", he betrays his complicity with the Empire in a number of ways. Working within the framework of a colonial ideology and under the complete sway of a "national narrative", the Magistrate's sexuality becomes a mechanism to cope or deal with his powerlessness, as he loses his political power with the coming of the new men of Empire, represented by Colonel Joll.

### **Colonial Justice**

Through his cleansing ritual of washing the girl and his painstaking expedition to return the barbarian girl to her own tribal people, the Magistrate seems to declare his attitude as a benevolent and patronizing one. But "it so often characterises the colonizers' *mission civilisatrice*, and thus simply corresponds to mastery masquerading as charity" (Michela Canepai- Labib, 96).

For the magistrate, the woman symbolizes "the conquered land" (Ania Loomba, 129) and in his objectification of the barbarian girl, he reduces her to a mere "text" or, a "wooden slip", the engravings of which he wants to decode. Similarly, in his sexual encounter with the woman named "The Star", the Magistrate reveals his colonial mentality of occupation, subjugation and destruction of the colonized. He confesses, "to desire her has meant to unfold her and enter her, to pierce her surface and stir the quiet of her interior into an ecstatic storm; then to retreat, to subside, to wait for desire to reconstitute itself" (WFB, p.46). This act clearly displays the power-relationship where the Magistrate, as if on an imperial offensive possesses ("enter"), destroys ("pierce") and disturbs ("stir the quiet") the conquered land ("The Star").

The Magistrate's attitude towards the barbarian girl is also not free from imperialistic designs. His objectification of the barbarian girl reduces her to a "blank slip" (Michael Valdez Moses, 120) or "a text" (Rosemary Jane Jolly, 1996: 127) which in the words of Lucia Folena becomes "an object of the violence of interpretation, a mere text to be read by the hermeneutics of inquisitor" (Rosemary Jane Jolly, 128). Despite the Magistrate's claims, "There is nothing to link me with torturers" (WFB, p.48) and "my alliance with the guardians of the Empire is over, I have set myself in opposition, the bond is broken, I am a free man" (WFB, p.85) after he is

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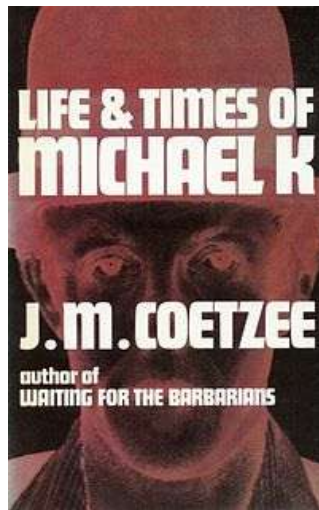
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imprisoned for “treasonously consorting” with the enemy, he continues to work under the imperial ideology. His “faith in the civilization of the empire has not entirely vanished” (Paul Rich, 383) and what he “assumes to be benevolent colonialism” is an “insidiously oppressive paternalism” (Laura Wright, 78).

The men of Empire (Joll and Magistrate) differ in their approach towards the barbarian girl, however, both “violate the girl” (Rosemary Jane Jolly, 128): one by engraving the marks of torture upon her and the other by trying to decode those engravings. The Magistrate, by means of objectification and sexuality, claims his superiority and authority over the women he sleeps with and thus asserts his masculine power. By perpetuating the objectification of the barbarian girl, the Magistrate “becomes an accomplice of the system’s discriminatory policy” (Michela Canepari-Labib, 96). The influence of the “national narrative” on Magistrate is so complete that even his language and sexuality has not remained personal but has become the “machinations of hegemony” (Kailash C Baral, 51). The Magistrate reduces the barbarian girl to an inferior entity by equating her to animals on a number of occasions. On one occasion, he says, “people will say I keep two wild animals in my rooms, a fox and a girl” (WFB, p.37). The Magistrate also admits of the pain that he inflicts upon the barbarian girl and “instead of giving her a good time”, he “oppressed her with gloom” (WFB, p.68). The magistrate’s attitude towards the barbarian girl is not different from the method of torture that the Empire indulges in: “with this woman it is as if there is no interior, only a surface across which I hunt back and forth seeking entry” (WFB, p.46). In his washing, oiling, massaging and tracing the torture marks of the barbarian girl, the Magistrate is not guided by a selfless service but by a selfish motive of “seeking oblivion and sleep for himself” (Sigrid Solhaug, 89).

### ***Life and Times of Michael K: The Intellectual Commitment of the Author***



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The intellectual commitment to highlight, analyse and interrogate the dilemmas of South African socio-political reality that Coetzee exhibited in WFB makes itself evident again in his fourth novel *Life and Times of Michael K* (henceforth referred to as LTMK). Despite a host of critical accusations against the novel for its lack of focus on the socio-political realities of modern South Africa (the ambiguity in the portrayal of setting and lack of concrete politico-historical reference), it is grounded in the reality of the socio-political turmoil in South Africa of the 1980s. The socio-political turmoil in the South Africa of 1980s was intensely fuelled and conditioned by the malevolent policy of apartheid. Charged with an atmosphere of violence, racial dissonance, political uprisings and guerilla warfare, the situation seemed to move towards an Armageddon of chaos and confusion. Written under such a surcharged atmosphere and ambience, Coetzee's LTMK "reflects and participates in this national unease" (Susan VanZanten Gallagher, 1991: 136).

Set against the backdrop of socio-political turmoil, LTMK not only refers to the South Africa of 1980s but also highlights the oppression that the authoritative and colonial state institutions resort to in order to consolidate and confirm their identity and reality. In this novel, as in WFB, Coetzee's commitment to interrogate and analyse the dilemmas facing South African society in the wake of socio-political vicissitudes find its expression in its very interrogation of colonialism. The narrative not only explicates the motivation that govern the oppression of autocratic and bureaucratic institutions but also raises questions regarding the issue of power, identity, representation and interpretation that often inform such projects.

The issue of colonialism, as Stephen Watson sees it, is at the heart of narrative in LTMK: "while it might appear to treat of something rather different, [it] has to do with colonialism. Its protagonist is a man intent on eluding colonisation, whether it be the colonisation of the body (through labour camps) or the colonisation of the mind (through charity) (Stephen Watson, 14). In its exposition, interrogation and castigation of colonialism that was exacerbated during apartheid, LTMK highlights the struggle of the coloniser to dominate the Other in order to achieve an identity and supremacy, to explore the means and motivations of the colonial enterprise of domination and the problems that follow such a project of exploitation.

### **Grim, Bitter and Heart-rending**

LTMK narrates the grim, bitter and heart-rending experiences of Michael K, a South African who is identified as "CM"—coloured male. Michael K, physically disfigured by a harelip, is a municipal gardener who spent his childhood in a home meant for physically handicapped children. To fulfill his mother's wish to return her to Prince Albert in the Karoo where she had spent her childhood, K undertakes a journey in the middle of the civil war. Although the narrative setting is not explicitly and descriptively mentioned, the malevolent, authoritative and repressive institutions refer to the South African society torn by civil war during the era of

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apartheid. The narrative avoids depicting the war scenes directly and the enemies but nonetheless, its “focus on the rhetoric of war and the dehumanizing effects upon individuals of the bureaucracy which keeps the system alive” recurs again and again (Michela Canepari-Labib, 58).

Even though a naked description of war is eschewed, it is very much pronounced in this novel than in WFB as is made clear by the epigraph of the novel. Quoting Heraclitus’s *Cosmic Fragments*, the epigraph reads:

War is the father of all and king of all.  
Some he shows as gods, others as men.  
Some he makes slaves, and others free.

Whereas in the context of WFB war is a creation or construction of the Empire or, “a mental fiction born of colonial paranoia and a political convenience,” it is a stark reality in LTMK (Kailash C Baral, 45). “Here the state is having to battle with a real enemy, a majority population whom they have thus far controlled and oppressed” (J M Coetzee and T Kai Norris Easton, [www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org)).

### **A Period of Chaos and Confusion**

The period of civil war in South Africa was a period of chaos and confusion. Violence was at its worst. South Africa witnessed excessive militarization and police despotism in response to growing uprising and guerrilla warfare. It was a society of curfewed nights and police brutality. Under the vicious police state life was simply unbearable, if not to all, at least to the black majority. Referring explicitly to this situation, the urban landscape in LTMK is almost fragmented and dislocated by bombings and looting.

The “civil war” with its “sirens” announcing the “curfew,” “the checkpoints,” the “guerrillas” and their attacks, and the “permits” people need from police in order to move to, or leave a place form the background to LTMK. The sufferings of the protagonist and his ill mother represent the condition of “the millions of black South Africans who were removed, dumped, set wandering, hiding from Endorsement Out under Group Areas Act” (Nadine Gordimer, 1996: xi).

Michael K’s enslavement at the hands of the state institutions (represented through various camps which try to confine Michael K within the bits of barbed wire, with guards on duty) becomes metaphoric of the victimization and subjugation of black majority by the white minority during the painful era of apartheid. Viewing the narrative as an accurate reflection of this national fragmentation and dislocation, Nadine Gordimer writes: “The harried homelessness of Michael K and his mother is the experience, in 1984, of hundreds of black people in South African squatter towns and ‘resettlement’ camps” (Nadine Gordimer, 1984: n.p).

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## Colonialism and Apartheid

The root cause of this situation in South Africa, needless to say, was colonialism or what is loosely called apartheid. It has its damaging and dehumanizing consequences, among other things, on organic relationships. Through its draconian laws and acts, the oppressive government was instrumental in suppressing the human voice and creating an organic divide that ultimately culminated as a setback to familial relationships. The theme of relationships among individuals (in particular familial relationships) and the damage it has received at the altar of colonialism becomes a recurring motif in Coetzee's fiction.

### Devastating Effect on Familial Relation

In LTMK the anticipation of what the system of apartheid has done to familial relationships is quite evident, though, it reaches its culmination in *Age of Iron* (Michela Canepari-Labib, 40) The relation between Michael K and his mother, Anna K in LTMK lacks intimacy and emotion and is essentially seen as a duty the son feels towards his mother. Michael K never experiences an intimate bond based on emotions and feelings with either of his parents. Although his father does not make a physical appearance in the novel and is hardly mentioned, Michael K refers to him as “the list of rules on the door of dormitory, the twenty-one rules of which the first was ‘There will be silence in dormitories at all times’” (LTMK, p.105).

Instead of love, Anna K regards her son with disdain simply because he is born with a harelip. In contrast to the joy that a woman experiences on becoming a mother, Anna K “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” (LTMK, p.3). Having delivered the child from her womb, Anna K sends him to Huis Norenius – a school meant for physically and mentally handicapped or, otherwise the unfortunate. This lack of emotion in relationships can be considered one of the reasons for Michael K's isolation and solitude that ultimately halts an essentially organic relationship. The death of his mother en route to Prince Albert is not seen in terms of loss rather what we come to know from the narrator is that “he did not miss her” (LTMK, p.34).

Despite Michael K's acceptance of the duty that “he had been brought into the world to look after his mother” (LTMK, p.7), the bond between the two is devoid of emotions and feelings. The reason for this breakdown is the fact that Anna K and his son are the products of an oppressive system where the suppression of human voice is aimed to push individuals into isolation. Michela Canepari-Labib makes an apt comment in this regard: “[I]t is precisely this relationship [familial] which the South African political situation has rendered unnatural, and, in fact, impossible” (Michela Canepari-Labib, 41).

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## **Relationships: Emotionally Not Balanced and Meaningful?**

The failure to establish emotionally balanced and meaningful relationships on part of Coetzee's characters tempts a reviewer identified only as Z. N. to denounce the novel: "The absence of any meaningful relationship between Michael K and anybody else...means that in fact we are dealing not with a human spirit but an amoeba... whose life... is too removed from the norm, unnatural, almost inhuman" (David Attwell, 1993: 92). The reviewer's comment, though apt, fails to take into consideration the socio-political circumstances that condition and determine such relations.

## **Issues of Domination, Representation and Identity**

LTMK not only deals with this aspect of colonialism – the breakdown of human relationships – but also raises the issue of domination, representation and identity. Coetzee interrogates thread-bare the issue of domination and identity and the means through which a colonial enterprise achieves and maintains it. The inevitable desire and need on part of the coloniser/master to construct another individual as "Other" in order to achieve and maintain its supremacy finds expression in LTMK as master-slave opposition. As an aspect of colonialism, "power and powerlessness: the relation between master and servant, overlord and slave" (Stephen Watson, 14) receives an extensive treatment in Coetzee's fiction.

## **The Manichaeic Allegory**

The binary oppositions, or dualism or what Abdul JanMohamed calls the "Manichean allegory" (converting racial difference "into moral and even metaphysical difference") is not unfamiliar in colonial discourse or in traditional western philosophy. Postcolonial theoreticians like Fanon and Said have referred to this duality in terms of "settler/native" and "occident/orient" respectively. These binary oppositions by which "the colonizing project of the West was set in motion" emanate from the "Cartesian project of separating subject from object, self from world in a dualism which privileged the first of the two terms and thereby assured his domination of nature and any other obstacle he might confront". The relationship between the two: self and other, subject and object, coloniser and colonised, master and slave is, in Hegelian terms, a dialectic one in which the master always needs a servant in order to be recognized as Master and thus to achieve a form of identity.

## **Ceaseless Effort to Achieve Recognition**

In LTMK the will to dominate the system in order to achieve recognition and identity is staged through the relations, often seen as master/slave, of Michael K with people like the Medical Officer and Visagie grandson. The enslavement and victimization of Michael K by the oppressive state through its various apparatuses like soldiers, camps, bureaucratic systems and

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the Medical Officer aim at the domination and subjugation that often informs a master-slave discourse. Whether it be during Michael K's imprisonment in various camps or, during the interrogation conducted by Medical Officer on him, Coetzee not only refers to the physical conquest of the suppressed/other but also to the epistemic violence that the Medical Officer indulges in.

As an apparatus of the colonial state or an emissary of the Empire, the Medical Officer's attitude towards Michael K is conditioned by his will to dominate. After having grown physically weak and deranged, Michael K is sent to Kenilworth hospital where the Medical Officer makes every possible effort to revive him. Although the Medical Officer's attitude towards Michael K seems to be benevolent and sympathetic, it is not so. It is conditioned and determined by an ulterior motive: the motive to reduce Michael K to the role of a slave and thus to achieve an identity through the subjugation of that slave. It is simply mastery masquerading as charity as he betrays it in his benevolent nursing: "He [Michael K] needs a gradual diet, gentle exercise, and physiotherapy, so that one day soon he can rejoin 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" (LTMK, p.133). The coloniser that hides behind the Medical Officer's facade is exposed even in his efforts to persuade Michael K to speak or to bring him to the world of words. Contrary to Michael K's wishes to be alone and silent like "a stone" and "a pebble" (LTMK, p.135), the Medical Officer insistently persuades him to express his heart:

Do you want the story to end with you?... 'We give you a nice bed and lots of food...but we expect something in return. It is time to deliver, my friend. You've got a story to tell and we want to hear it... Tell us what we want to know, then we will leave you alone... 'Give yourself some substance, man, otherwise you are going to slide through life absolutely unnoticed... You don't want to be simply one of the perished, do you? You want to live, don't you? Well then, *talk*, (emphasis original) make your voice heard, tell your story! (LTMK, p.140).

### **Saving Michael K**

The Medical Officer believes that he is the only one who can save Michael K (LTMK, p.151), if only he agrees to talk. When the persistent demands of the Medical Officer to make Michael K speak are negated, his persuasive demands turn more urgent and threatening, compelling him to "yield":

The truth is that you are going to perish in obscurity and be buried in a nameless hole in a corner of the racetrack...and no one is going to remember you but me, unless you yield and at last open your mouth. I appeal to you, Michaels: *yield!* (LTMK, p.155).

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The Medical Officer's efforts to break Michael K's silence and incorporate him within the linguistic discourse aims at his will to dominate. Unless he makes him speak or incorporate him within his own discourse, his identity and supremacy cannot be consolidated and confirmed. His efforts of translating Michael K's silence can be seen as a means to "domesticate" him by bringing him into the world of interpretation. The Medical Officer's attitude to Michael K is similar to that of the Magistrate towards the Barbarian girl whom he views as a text to be interpreted and deciphered. Both, the Medical Officer and the Magistrate are in the process of creating the Other – a means or a solution to achieve recognition and identity. Their seemingly paternalistic, benevolent and nursing attitude is colonialism masquerading as charity. By exposing the ulterior motives of the colonizers who claim to be liberal humanists, Coetzee punctures the liberal humanists' claim of serving the humanity.

### **Miserable Conditions of Living**

The depressing lives of the poor, destitute and homeless in prison camps of LTMK serve as a means to highlight the miserable lives of the poor and black South Africans during the tumultuous years of apartheid. The textual reality, replete with scenes of horror, oppression and violence, correspond to the reality of the South African state during 1980s. A slice from this reality in which the "prisons, 'those black flowers of civilized society,' burgeon all over the face of South Africa" (J M Coetzee, 1992: 361) is incorporated into and analyzed in LTMK. The society in the novel (though it can hardly be called a society) is a society of camps and prisons where the destitute, poor and homeless, symbolizing impurity and a threat to the authority are dumped, oppressed and exploited under the garb of charity.

The Jakkalsdrif Camp, among other camps, gives us a peep into the miserable lives of hundreds of poor and destitute people; those sub-human others who need to be excluded and forgotten. The camp is a site of diseases without any doctor and nurse (LTMK, p.88). Brandy and aspirin is the only medicine for the prisoners who are "shut up like animals in a cage" (LTMK, p.88). Confined to the barbed wires of the camp, the prisoners are not allowed to move outside "except on labour calls" (LTMK, p.92). The camps or "prisons are used as dumping-places for people who smell wrong and look unsightly and do not have the decency to hide themselves away" (LTMK, 92). By doing this the state is able to put out of sight the sub-human Others who both reproach and threaten it.

The Jakkalsdrif camp is "a place where people [a]re deposited to be forgotten" and its location is "out of sight of the town on a road that led nowhere else" (LTMK, p.94) for "[i]n South Africa the law sees to it as far as it can that not only such people but also the prisons in which they are held become invisible" (J M Coetzee, 362). Behind the mask of charity and the seemingly "nice life" (LTMK, p.78), as it appears to one of the prisoners, hides a colonizer whose sole aim is the exploitation, subjugation and dehumanization of the Other.

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