

Can Coetzee's Michael K be called a Gandhian hero?

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Abstract

Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K* can be viewed as a novel of resistance. The title character Michael K, born with a physical deformity, refuses to submit to the situation he is subjected to. He withdraws himself from the world torn with an incomprehensible war. With a quest for a place free from bomb blasts, economic recession, colonized politics, and chaotic city life, Michael starts his journey for refuge. He finds it impossible because of intruding authority. Being tracked down and locked up with the rural guerrillas, he starts to live a life of invisible existence. Becoming a camp prisoner he refuses to take any kind of food. His refusal to eat reflects a kind of resistance. His resistance to the situation is not active, rather he resists in a very passive way. He does not offer any violent attempt and his resistance appears as non-violent and passive. Michael's passive resistance reminds one of Gandhi's famous doctrine of passive resistance - *Satyagraha*. Gandhi preaches the philosophy of non-violent passive resistance, the concept of *Satyagraha*, as a forceful means of achieving socio-political goals without using violence. Michael K, living amid all, creates his own world, listens to the voice inside, and becomes the symbol of suffering. This paper explores whether Michael in any way embodies the principle of non-violent passive resistance against the authority.

Coetzee's short novel *Life and Times of Michael K* which won Booker Prize in 1983, deals with the continuous effort of a South African young gardener Michael K to live in his own way and to escape all the burdens of the running civil war. Michael is a typical Coetzee character: lonely, isolated, and stigmatized with a harelip. He resists against the situation which wants to entrap him, and wants to be liberated from the oppressive systems of apartheid. He removes himself from the society altogether, even from the rare charity of the oppressors. His resistance to all the structured systems leads him to a life in communion with nature. But his resistance is not active resistance; rather he fights with the odds of his life very passively. David Attwell in his *South Africa and the Politics of Writing* calls it "a novel about a

subject who, miraculously, lives through the trauma of South Africa in a state of civil war without being touched by it" (89). The authority under which Michael lives tries to unravel the mystery where it is not. So when he escapes from the labour camp, he is arrested as a spy and is placed in the rehabilitation camp. He escapes again and goes back to Sea Point from where he started. His effort to escape, his silence before all questions, and his hunger strike draw our attention to the fact that it is a kind of non-violent passive resistance by which he tries to shake the conscience of all.

Michael's effort to materialize his mother's dream of reaching her childhood place Prince Albert remains incomplete. On the way she dies leaving Michael alone to suffer the meaninglessness of life. The ash box of his mother's body directs him to Prince Albert where he accommodates himself in a secluded farmhouse, and he starts a life of insect thinking himself far away from the ongoing war, and attempts to live a life of his own. In this Visagies farm he becomes a different kind of man, "smaller and harder and drier everyday" (67), and his hunger for food decreases. He feels no urge for anything but to live in the cave. He is arrested and taken to the relocation camp which defines itself as the place for homeless and jobless people. To Michael it is just a jail where people are "shut up like animals in a cage" (88). Michael discovers himself in the camp listed as one with no identity. Here he is forced to do manual work in spite of his pathetic physical condition. In return, he is offered poor food which Michael refuses to take. He feels the meaninglessness of camp life or war, and finds himself chained with an invisible chain. Not only he, but the guard of the camp also nourishes the dream of being free. The guard wishes, "the day I get orders to go north I walk out. They'll never see me again. It's not my war. Let them fight it, it's their war." In the words of the camp commandant Noël, "We are fighting this war so that minorities will have a say in their destinies" (157), and at the end war has lost its meaning because "the exigencies of the war itself have superseded the issues that precipitated it" (Attwell 89). The fake concern of the camp authority for the poor and the dumb innocence of the victims like Michael before them are mirrored in one prisoner's conversation with Michael, "'You're a baby,' said Robert. 'You've been asleep all your life. It's time to wake up. Why do you think they give you charity, you and the children? Because they think

you are harmless, your eyes aren't opened, you don't see the truth around you" (89).

Coetzee shows human suffering to ludicrous extremes in the portrayal of Michael as one symbolizing the unshakeable human faith in ability to survive on nothing but willpower. Michael suffers in the hand of authority like Kafka's Joseph K. in *The Trial*, who struggles and encounters with the invisible law and the untouchable court, becomes the pathetic victim of the Austro-Hungarian bureaucracy and is finally killed like a dog. The malicious treatment in the labour camp and the agonizing picture of the oppressed shatter Michael's total faith in remedy. Living within the reach of the so-called masters he decides to remain out of reach, and to destroy their hegemonic superiority through non-violence. His fight is against all camps, the warmongers, the imperialists, the colonizers, the white hegemony, and the total system which wants to lock him up and waits for him to die like dog. Michael runs away from the camp where people "have nothing to tell but stories of how they have endured" (109). Reaching the Visagies place second time, he dreams to live there forever like a beast remaining out of all war. Here starts his passive fight for survival. He thinks, "whatever I have returned for, it is not to live as the Visagies lived, sleep where they slept . . . It is not for the house that I have come" (98).

Survival becomes a challenge for Michael in the Visagies farm. Like Jacobus Coetzee in *Dusklands*, Michael here becomes a civilizer of the wilderness, a gardener of his own garden. Hunger gradually leaves him and he spends days in a dam like cave. His spiritual hunger overrides his physical hunger. Coetzee writes, "Hunger was a sensation he did not feel and barely remembered" (101). Ashamed of being a human being Michael tries to level himself with the insects. He even raises himself beyond the bond of relationship and does not hope for "building a house out here by the dam to pass on to other generations" (101). His disillusionment with family or social life is portrayed by Coetzee, "The worst mistake . . . would be to try to found a new house, a rival line, on his small beginnings out at the dam" (104). Like a cosmopolitan, he rejects all conventional desires, mastering his mental attitude, and contemplates, "How fortunate that I have no children, he thought: how fortunate that I have no desire to father . . . I am one of the fortunate ones who

escape being called" (104). From the very early life Michael exists without existence. He is invisible like Ralph Ellison's unnamed African-American narrator in *Invisible Man* where the narrator considers himself non-existent, as he says, "I am invisible . . . simply because people refuse to see me" (Prologue 3), and like him Michael also does "walk softly so as not to awaken the sleeping ones" (Prologue 5). He does nothing; he just let things happen to him. His sudden visibility before authority makes him uneasy. Like Ellison's narrator, Michael wants to survive only without leaving any trace, "A man who wants to live cannot live in a house with lights in the windows. He must live in a hole and hide by day. A man must live so that he leaves no trace of his living. That is what it has come to" (99).

After the second arrest as a spy for the rural guerrillas, Michael is taken by the soldiers to the rehabilitation camp where his main resistance starts. He becomes almost a skeleton in the farm, and in the camp hospital he is registered as an old man. He wants to remain asleep and forgotten, but he is awakened. He asserts that he does not need food in sleep and cries, "Why do you want to make me fat? Why fuss over me, why am I so important?" (135). He is asked to eat, but he does not. He is forced to talk, but he refuses. He is requested to tell the whole truth and yield, but he ignores. Keeping Michael a passive figure always Coetzee portrays the Doctor to speak for K. The more Michael withdraws himself, the more the Doctor feels a mysterious bond for K, who is "but one of a multitudes in the second class" (136). His hunger strike and refusal to talk puzzle the Doctor of the hospital who has the insight of Michael's inner self. The Doctor calls Michael a "pyramid of sacrifice" (164). He knows that Michael wants to be liberated from systems of power and violence. He refuses to be a part of such system by "neither resisting nor submitting to the brutal tyrant-figure" (Northover 361). Michael resists against all the irregularities of his surroundings in a very passive way and ultimately his 'let it go' tendency becomes his habit. When acceptance becomes a habit, it reflects the gradual seclusion of a person from the usual life. "We will wear you down by our capacity to suffer" (1963) - these words of Martin Luther King Jr. get proper significance in Michael K's life and times. His dream world is shattered when he is questioned, "Are you alone here?" (121), "When are your friends coming?" (122). Torture on Michael starts for not telling his story though "his was always a story

with a hole in it: a wrong story, always wrong" (110). Michael's words, "I'm not what you think . . . I was sleeping and you woke me, that's all" (123) creates no impact on them. Like tongue-less Friday in *Foe*, Michael "resists all attempts to make him tell his story" and thus "thematizes processes of colonial inscription and silencing" (Barnett 299). As the oppression of the state increases, Michael's urge for freedom increases and his need diminishes. Coetzee refuses to represent the voices of active resistance to reproduce the effects of silencing.

Michael's resistance makes him an albatross around the neck of the dominant authority. He succeeds in shaking the authority by his passive protest. Words have fixed meaning but silence has no boundary. Michael perceives that words will bring no result, so he decides to make them restless with the whip of silence and proves that one can survive without any charity. His resistance is not simple, rather it is so striking that it draws the attention of a duty Doctor who everyday treats many patients like K. But Michael's silent protest makes the Doctor realize that Michael has decided to walk his walk to freedom holding the hand of suffering. In one point he raises himself beyond the sense of suffering. Gandhi also believes that suffering causes spiritual purification and Parekh quotes Gandhi in his book *Gandhi: A Very Short Introduction* in this way, "The appeal of reason is more to the head, but the penetration of the heart comes from suffering. It opens up the inner understanding in man. Suffering is the badge of the human race, not the sword" (68). "He is locked up as an insurgent, but he barely knows there is a war on" (130) - these instant thoughts of the Doctor are not void of truth at all. In this novel Michael's character is summarized by the Doctor rightly, "He is like a stone, a pebble that . . . is now suddenly picked up and tossed randomly from hand to hand. A hard little stone, barely aware of its surroundings, enveloped in itself and its interior life. He passes through these institutions and camps and hospitals and God knows what else like a stone" (135).

Michael's silence before all questions and refusal to be treated infuriate the Doctor who utters, "it is a camp where we rehabilitate people like you and make you work! . . . till your back breaks!" (138). Against this cruel system Michael fights, to the last remains his own person, refuses to be imprisoned either in the literal camps or in the nets of meaning cast by those who follow after him, and becomes a

principle of limited, provisional freedom. He remains a "human soul above and beneath classification, a soul blessedly untouched by doctrine, untouched by history" (151). Michael is a simpleton and not even an interesting simpleton who "lives in a world all his own" and has "no papers, no money; no family, no friends, no sense of who you are . . . obscurest of the obscure, so obscure as to be prodigy" (142). He is a "creature beyond the reach of the laws of nations" (151) with a universal soul. Michael is someone who is born into a wrong world and he wants to rectify his birth by indirect protest. His hunger for the food of freedom is exposed by the Doctor, "There are hundreds of people dying of starvation every day and you won't eat! Why? Are you fasting? Is this a protest fast? . . . What are you protesting against? Do you want your freedom?" (145).

His hunger for the bread of freedom makes the Doctor question, "Was it manna? Did manna fall from the sky for you?" (150). Michael makes a simple reply that "It's not my kind of food" (145) and "I can't eat camp food" (146). The Doctor feels that Michael eats only bread of freedom and he is a harmless vegetarian who is entrapped in a violent system. Michael starves because he does not want to sustain himself on the products of violence. Michael's suppressed pain comes out in his speech, "No one was interested before in what I ate" (148). The whole world fails to allure Michael against the food for which he runs away from the hospital. Michael's fast and silence make the Doctor think about the meaninglessness of this worldly life, about the invisible circle, about the fixed system within which people like the Doctor are trapped and chained. He feels that he should have followed K to be out of the camps and to reach the areas "that lie between the camps and belong to no camp" (162). The pioneer of this path is neither maps nor roads; rather Michael himself who, living within the camp, "did not belong inside any camp" (163). As a follower of Michael the Doctor focuses light on Michael's passive opposition to the situation, "As time passed, however, I slowly began to see the originality of the resistance you offered. You were not a hero and did not pretend to be, not even a hero of fasting. In fact you did not resist at all" (163). This non-resistance is the striking method used by Michael to show strong resistance.

Coetzee as a South African writes both about and from within the South African situation. Attwell observes that this novel "stands as perhaps the most accurate of

several attempts in South African fiction of the period at giving concrete shape to an imagined future" (91). It can be assumed that Coetzee projects Gandhian traits in Michael. He has presented Michael in contrast to the white minority against which he fights. The resistance which Michael shows against the situation around him makes him appear as a Gandhian, a non-violent passive subject in resistance. Coetzee has the advantage to know about the non-violent passive resistance theory of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi- known as Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi has coined the word *Satyagraha* in 1906 in South Africa to emphasize the need of searching for truth and attempts to change the heart as well as the actions of the opponent through civil disobedience. *Satya* and *Agraha* both are Sanskrit words meaning 'Truth' and 'Effort or Willingness' respectively. He uses "passive resistance" as the English version of his philosophy of *Satyagraha*, though he believes that the English term fails to carry the full appeal. The term "passive resistance", also used as a synonym for non-violent resistance, means resistance by inertia or refusal to comply, as opposed to resistance by active protest or physical fight. This is a gigantic effort of bringing developmental change with the philosophy of *ahimsa* or non-violence. Like modern pacifism, non-violent resistance forbids both individual violence and state violence. Gandhi introduces this form of non-violent campaigning as a philosophy and strategy for social, political, and spiritual change by which he tries to materialize his dream of establishing peace through cordial love of truth, as he says in his autobiography *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, "Satyagraha is essentially a weapon of the truthful" (420). He emphasizes on truth as far more powerful weapon than any weapon of mass destruction. And about the consequence of non-violence he says in his autobiography that all through history the way of truth and love has always won.

Gandhi offers non-violent strategy to the British people during the war with Nazi Germany in 1940 and asks them to lay down the arms. In colonial India Gandhi uses the non-violent struggle as a powerful tool against British rule which helps him bring independence for India in 1947. He preaches the religion of non-violence not for the saints only, but for the common people as he believes that violence is the law of the brute, and strength comes only from indomitable will. Gandhi believes in winning his country's freedom through non-violence which is,

for him, the most harmless and equally effective way of dealing with the political and economic wrongs of the downtrodden portion of humanity. The American author Henry David Thoreau gives birth to the idea of passive resistance in his essay "Civil Disobedience" (1849) which is originally entitled "Resistance to Civil Government." Here Thoreau proves that one does not necessarily have to physically fight the government or the opponent. Gandhi's first important encounter with Thoreau's essay comes in 1906, in South Africa when he fights for the Indians' rights in South Africa. Gandhi believes that civil disobedience is the inherent right of a citizen to be civil. For Gandhi, "Satyagraha . . . aimed to penetrate the barriers of prejudice, ill-will, dogmatism, self-righteousness, and selfishness, and to reach out to and activate the soul of the opponent" (Parekh 68). As Parekh writes, "Satyagraha was a 'surgery of the soul', a way of activating 'soul-force'. For Gandhi, 'suffering love' was the best way to do this" (68). Gandhi asks for the development of tolerant attitude among the passive resisters and points out certain formulas, such as:

- A Satyagrahi or civil resister will harbour no anger.
- He will suffer the anger of the opponent.
- In so doing he will put up with assaults from the opponent, never retaliate; but he will not submit, out of fear of punishment or the like, to any order given in anger.
- When any person in authority seeks to arrest a civil resister, he will voluntarily submit to the arrest.
- He will, however, never retaliate. ("The Theory of passive resistance or non-violent campaigning")

We find that Coetzee's Michael shows no anger, never retaliates, nor does he hate; rather voluntarily submits before the army officers, follows the path of truth, and thus tries to win over the opponents. By rejecting the path of violence Michael, like a passive resister, becomes stronger and more spirited in the end than he is in the beginning. He decides, "I was mute and stupid in the beginning; I will be mute and stupid at the end. There is nothing to be ashamed of in being simple"(182). He

remains mute till the end like all dominated people, but his silence overwhelms the hegemonic minority. And on behalf of Coetzee the Doctor utters, "you are a great escape artist, one of the great escapees: I take off my hat to you!" (166), and feeling Michael's inner thought the Doctor thinks, "Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory . . . of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it" (166). We never find Michael using physical violence or reacting directly against the adversities of his life. The way Michael reacts does not prove him a weak one, because he brings great change in the mind of the camp authority. Gandhi is equally conscious about people's attitude towards non-violence as a weapon of the weak and so he clarifies that non-violence is not a resignation from all real fighting against wickedness. Rather non-violence is a more active and real fight against wickedness than retaliation.

Gandhi's campaign requires people of great courage. He notes, "Non-violence means courage of the highest order and, therefore, readiness to suffer" (Fareed 111). Michael shows his courage by welcoming suffering and thus becoming the embodiment of Truth. Fareed quotes Gandhi, "For Satyagraha and its offshoots, non-cooperation and civil resistance, are nothing but new names for the law of suffering" (113). Michael takes the path of suffering, shows patience, does not run after victory; rather he shows his dignity as a man by remaining obedient to the strength of the spirit. Gandhi observes that "no power on earth can make a person do a thing against his will" (Fareed 100). He repeatedly affirms that *Satyagraha* is fit for the strong-willed and is unfit for the weak. Michael is forced to tell his story again and again, but his strong will power disappoints the authority. He does not react, not because he is weak, but because he is the devotee of Truth. Michael purifies his soul through suffering and sacrifice, and his purification necessarily leads to the purification of his surroundings. The Doctor is purified being touched with the force of truth of Michael and many others to follow. Coetzee distances him from any counter attack, from every form of violence, direct or indirect, veiled or unveiled.

As part of passive resistance Gandhi takes some initiatives. To simplify his life he starts an experiment in communal living, a living with the rejection of his needless possessions and living in a society with full equality. Non-violence

involves extending it to animals also, usually through vegetarianism. He joins the London Vegetarian Society and becomes a vegetarian avoiding meat, but feels its ineffectiveness to purify the heart. Then he takes the vow of *brahmacharya* in 1906 in South Africa concentrating on the control of the palate as the essential part of the vow. He writes in *Autobiography*, "the *brahmachari*'s food should be limited, simple, spiceless, and, if possible, uncooked" (Gandhi 198). So from strict vegetarianism he shifts to unspiced and uncooked foods. He also believes in the important role of fasting as a means of self-restraint and says that "fasting could be made as powerful a weapon of indulgence as of restraint" (Gandhi 293). He is conscious about mind's co-operation with the starving body and so he writes, "if physical fasting is not accompanied by mental fasting, it is bound to end in hypocrisy and disaster" (Gandhi 304). To reach to the purest form of *brahmacharya* he states that "extinction of the sexual passion is as a rule impossible without fasting" (Gandhi 199). In *Selections from Gandhi* Nirmal Kumar Bose mentions the rules of self-restraint as formulated by Gandhi, such as: with regard to food, fasting, continence, non-possession, and to put a curb on the mind. Realization of truth is impossible without complete renunciation of the sexual desire. So having control over these bodily desires Gandhi concentrates on his concept of *Satyagraha* as the truth force accompanied with the theory of *ahimsa* to conduct socio-political campaign.

Coetzee also attaches too much value to vegetarianism. In the Visagies farm Michael at first, eats meats of animals, but gradually he starts to become a vegetarian, hates killing of animals, and avoids eating any kind of meat. Michael's act shudders himself when he kills a ewe where Coetzee writes, "He would have liked to bury the ewe somewhere and forget the episode" (55). Coetzee's vegetarian attitude is apparent in *Elizabeth Costello* where the Australian writer Elizabeth is a vegetarian by choice and finds it appalling that animals are killed to be eaten. Coetzee himself is a vegetarian and this is reflected in his characters. Michael puts curb on sexual desire too. He shows no desire for sexual intercourse and at the end of the novel he ignores the allurements of the prostitutes very casually. Coetzee reflects himself in Michael's indifference to sex and family life. Coetzee's Michael is mirrored in John Coetzee's failures in relationship, lack of family, his vegetarianism, his physical awkwardness in Coetzee's autobiographical novel

Summertime where Coetzee emphasizes on his ordinariness and where a “weak character’s constricted heart struggling against the undertow of suspicion within South Africa’s claustrophobic, unpoetic, overtly macho society” is portrayed (Urquhart).

Apparently there are some similarities between a Gandhian hero and Michael. Michael’s resistance appears as the influence of Gandhi on Coetzee who presents Michael as a non-violent passive resister. But if we make an in depth analysis, we find that there is no similarity between the ulterior motives of Gandhi and Coetzee’s Michael. Gandhi’s resistance is truly political. He fights for people’s right in South Africa using non-violent method and he partly gains success in bringing socio-political change with the philosophy of *Satyagraha*. Even his *brahmacharya* and vegetarianism also result from his active political concern. But Coetzee offers no political commitment. His Michael is fighting passively against the situation which is not political at all. He does not fight for his political right, nor does he hope for it. Rather he tries to ignore the issues with which he feels no connection. In *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* Derek Attridge states that “K’s relation to the earth and to cultivation implies a resistance to modernity’s drive to exploit natural resources” (53). Michael just wants to withdraw himself from the running war. He has only one reply, “I am not in the war” (138) when he is thrown unnecessary questions regarding his so-called friends from mountains, their whereabouts, and the whole truth about his father and family. It is the society which does not let him remain out of war. Even his vegetarianism is not his conscious decision. It is the inevitable result of his decision to live on his own grown food and to lift up himself beyond the earthly materials. His libidinal withdrawal also results from the environment in which he grows up. His mother-centered boyhood and youth do not leave him any place for sexual hunger.

His resistance reflects his concern for survival only and his hunger strike asserts that “one can live” (184) simply without being attached to the typical life schedule. The way Michael resists does not show him as a Gandhian hero. Coetzee’s portrayal of Michael is a personality without any political end whose withdrawal and survival become the front-line issues of this novel. Gandhi’s non-violent campaign sounds anachronistic in the context of South Africa under apartheid

where people like Michael are suffering every moment in the hand of strong minority. How Michael is so apolitical in a chaotic politically active society deserves our thought. Many reasons work behind it. As a human being Michael has grown up amid poverty, negligence, and insecurity. He grows up fatherless, sees his mother suffering, and he himself is deprived of all basic human rights. He has only one partner in his dream and it is his mother Anna K. Her death completely cripples his mind. He realizes that his existence is not essential in the society and so he leads a metaphysical life where politics is an absurd idea.

From the above discussion we can say that Michael is not a Gandhian hero in full sense, but certainly he has some Gandhian traits. It is not the same Gandhian non-violence which can claim Michael as a "hero of fasting" (163). Coetzee portrays Michael's passive resistance in his own way. About Michael's resistance Northover writes, "The resistance to which Doctor refers resembles more closely Kafka's individual passive resistance than Gandhi's mass passive resistance although it shares the commitment to the non-violence of both" (360). So at the end of the novel Michael remains a unique personality with his inner consciousness and reflective attitude. Like other Coetzean heroes Michael is also a lone individual who keeps himself aloof from the usual hopes and desires, and goes on searching for a world of his own.

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