



Original Article

Theme of Alienation in J. M. Coetzee's Disgrace and Life and Times of Michael K

Navanath Dnyandev Lokhande

Research Student, Shivaji University, Kolhapur

Asst. Professor in English Arts and Commerce College, Pusegaon

Manuscript ID:

IBMIIRJ -2025-020638

Submitted: 20 May 2025

Revised: 30 May 2025

Accepted: 20 June 2025

Published: 30 June 2025

ISSN: 3065-7857

Volume-2

Issue-6

Pp 46-48

June 2025

Correspondence Address:

Navanath Dnyandev Lokhande
Research Student, Shivaji University,
Kolhapur
Asst. Professor in English Arts and
Commerce College, Pusegaon
Email: ndlokande@gmail.com



Quick Response Code:



Web: <https://ibrj.us>



DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.17067766

DOI Link:

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17067766>



Creative Commons

Abstract

The South African novelist J.M. Coetzee is one of the most highly respected and most frequently studied – contemporary authors. His novels occupy a special place in South African literature and in the development of the 20th and 21st century novel more generally. Being a 'white writer' of his generation, Coetzee writes about apartheid. For much of his career, Coetzee lived and worked in South Africa, under the apartheid regime until 1990, and then witnessing the political difficulties of the transition to democratic government. His novels often address this period and the subsequent political challenges of the transition to a democratic government. Coetzee's fiction is characterized by its brevity, loaded sentences, and a cold beauty that can make readers feel ashamed of being human. His works raise fundamental questions about human life, questioning selfishness, cruelty, and hypocrisy, and often focus on the "cruel face of the colonial mentality with special reference to South Africa". The theme of alienation is central to his novels, and his characters are often unable to avoid disgrace. This analysis explores the theme of alienation in two of his major works, Disgrace and Life and Times of Michael K.

Key Words- Alienation, rootlessness, Black Consciousness, allegory

Introduction

To go through the novels of J. M. Coetzee is a humiliating experience. Though he is falsely supposed to be one of the most difficult writers of all times, he raises fundamental questions about human life. He questions the selfishness, cruelty and hypocrisy. The exposition of the cruel face of the colonial mentality with special reference to South Africa has been the major theme of Coetzee's novels. Coetzee has a complex relationship with his country, South Africa. He tried to run away from the country in his youth but had to return to it unwillingly. After living in Europe for eight years he had developed a modern, European sensibility. Though the thought of living in South Africa was 'disgraceful' for him, he was not at home in Britain or U.S. Coetzee writes with such a cold beauty that makes the readers feel ashamed of being human. He sees no positivity in human behaviour and his characters are unable to avoid disgrace in life. What Nadine Gordimer said about the novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* is true of Coetzee's all fiction: J.M. Coetzee's vision goes to the nerve-centre of the being. What he finds there is more than most people will ever know of themselves, and he conveys it with a brilliant writer's mastery of tension and elegance (Roberts 2005).

Brevity is the soul of J. M. Coetzee's fiction. None of his novels until the 1990s exceed two hundred pages. To read his loaded, broken sentences in present tense is a humiliating experience. The agony and the ecstasy would be unbearable if the novels would have been lengthy. The disgrace in his novels doesn't end with the end of the novel. Rather it sharpens as a lump in a throat. It forces the reader to see the ugly, shameful face of life which the people generally tend to avoid. Thus, there is no escape from disgrace in Coetzee's fiction. It haunts the reader throughout the reading and even follows him thereafter.

J. M. Coetzee's most praised, prized and also condemned novel *Disgrace* (1999) is, as described by Gerald Kaufmann, 'an allegory about what is happening to the human race in the post-apartheid era.' For him, it is a millennial book, because it takes us through the twentieth century into a new century into which the source of power is shifting away from western Europe (Kaufmann 1999).

Creative Commons (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

This is an open access journal, and articles are distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/) Public License, which allows others to remix, tweak, and build upon the work noncommercially, as long as appropriate credit is given and the new creations are licensed under the identical terms.

How to cite this article:

Lokhande, N. D. (2025). Theme of Alienation in J. M. Coetzee's Disgrace and Life and Times of Michael K. *Insight Bulletin: A Multidisciplinary Interlink International Research Journal*, 2(6), 46–48. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17067766>

Boyd Tonkin called it 'the first masterpiece to emerge from the new South Africa (Tonkin 1999). The story of the novel is interwoven with personal and public life of a white professor and his grown up daughter. David Lurie, a professor of modern languages at the Cape Town Technical University, formerly Cape Town University College, who has specialised in Romantic Poetry, has to teach communication skills as classics and modern languages were closed down as part of the great rationalization (3). He is not satisfied with his profession as a teacher because 'he has no respect for the material he teaches, he makes no impression on his students. They look through him when he speaks' (4). Lurie is fifty-two and divorced. (married twice, divorced twice- 29)

David is not at home either on the farm or in the city. The life for him has become disgraceful beyond limit. Back in Cape Town, Lurie goes to The Dock Theatre to watch a play in which Melanie Isaacs was playing a role. Ironically, her name is 'Gloria' in the play. A girl who brought such a huge disgrace for Lurie was now Gloria, a novice hairdresser, in the play. She looked mature, more confident to him. The holidaymakers among whom Lurie was seated were enjoying the play in a rather vulgar manner. They were laughing uproariously when the characters were insulted and slurred. Though Lurie was an African, he couldn't help feeling alien in his own land. He is unable to relate himself with the new rulers of South Africa.

David Lurie is threatened, though not actually attacked, by Melanie's boyfriend, Ryan. When Lurie is back in Cape Town, Ryan threatens him "to stay with his own kind" (194). The sense of alienation in Lurie is evident throughout the novel. When he returns to Cape Town it does not feel like a homecoming (175). When he visits Lucy's farm for second time, he feels that he is an outsider, an imposter. In spite of spending his whole life in South Africa, Lurie couldn't accept it as his own land. He has no affinity towards the land. He can't stop feeling alien in South Africa. Lucy, too, lives on the farm not because she loves it but because she has nowhere to go. When Lurie pleads her to leave the farm before it is too late, she tells him that it is not the 'farm' for her, but just 'a piece of land.' Obviously, she doesn't love the country. However, she has decided not to leave it as she wants to pay for the sins of the whites in the past.

J. M. Coetzee's fourth novel *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983), though nominally placed in a near future, resonates with the sense of the 1980s. Contrary to *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the novel is told from the perspective of the colonized rather than colonizer. The novel was awarded the British Booker Prize of the year 1983. Coetzee worked on the novel for three years and employed various storylines. He had proposed first person narration as in his first three novels which he later rejected. Instead, for the first time, he employs an omniscient third-person narrator. The novel handles the issue of irrelevance of innocence and goodness which seems to be misfit in the world of cruelty and injustice. The story is about the suffering of K's indignities and deprivation of apartheid hardships intensified by the social disintegration of civil war. The primary narrator in the novel seems to answer the objections of those critics who had faulted Coetzee for not taking a clear political stance in his artistic writing, in the manner of his fellow South Africans such as Paton, Gordimer, and Fugard.

Michael K is a man born with a harelip. He is fatherless and has no great intellect. He thinks of himself as 'an ant that does not know where its hole is' (83). He also compares himself to 'a woman whose children have left the house: all that remains is to tidy up and listen to the silence' (111). However, K is, first and foremost, a gardener. He thinks that being a gardener is the only truth about himself. He grew up in an orphanage. Being from a deprived class, he knows the art of being quiet. He has spent his childhood watching his mother polishing other people's floors (4). This experience of several years has transformed him into a silent observer. K hates the charity shown to him. He is fed up of vain acts of charity towards him. He feels that the charity has dehumanized him:

I have become an object of charity. Everywhere I go there are people waiting to exercise their forms of charity on me. All these years, and still, I carry the look of an orphan (181).

Alone at the end of the novel, K envisions a scene in which he helps a derelict old man obtain water from a water puddle with the help of a spoon by saying "one can live" (184). K is comfortable at the Visagie's farm house. he enjoys a complete freedom there. He thinks, "Here I can make any sound I like" (56) He thinks, "I could live here forever, or till I die." He intends to live a peaceful life by settling in the region. For him the farm is just a place of adventure (63). He equally feels at home at the dam. He tells himself:

I want to live here forever, where my mother and my grandmother lived. It is as simple as that. What a pity that to live in times like these a man must be ready to live like a beast (99).

Michael K is, thus, closely connected with his roots. He has no ambitions except to live a quiet, unknown life in Prince Albert. He considers himself lucky for having no children, "How fortunate that I have no children. How fortunate that I have no desire to father. I would not know what to do with a child, out here in the heart of the country who would need milk and clothes and friends and schooling" (104).

Coetzee himself has a great affinity for the Karoo region. K plants pumpkin seeds on the farm. In *White Writing*, Coetzee writes, "The myth of a garden and the return to an innocent Eden never took hold with the arrival of the Dutch colonies at the cape, manifests itself in Michael's impulse to cultivate the land." However, K's wish to own a plot of land remains unfulfilled as the grandson of the Visagie, an absent farm owner refuse to give him the land. The young man has deserted from the army to save his life. He refuses to undertake the violence in war. He has his own philosophy regarding the war in the country that he shares with K. The doctor, who reminds the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* feels that K doesn't wholly belong to the world, "He is not of our world. He lives in a world all his own" (142). He cannot think of him as a man. He is an 'unbearing, unborn creature' (135). He imagines K as the product of a clumsy God: someone has scuffled together a handful of dust, spat on it, and patted it into the shape of a rudimentary man, making one or two mistakes...but coming up nevertheless in the end with a genuine little man of earth (181). Coetzee's white characters are victims of perpetual self-doubt. They suspect everything including their own thoughts. they constantly put themselves under suspicion and interrogation.

Methodology

This research paper analyzes the theme of alienation in two of J.M. Coetzee's novels, *Disgrace* and *Life and Times of Michael K*. The methodology is a comparative literary analysis, focusing on how Coetzee explores the concept of alienation through his characters and their experiences in post-apartheid South Africa. The study examines the differing forms of alienation experienced by the protagonists, David Lurie in *Disgrace* and Michael K in *Life and Times of Michael K*, and how these experiences reflect their relationships with their country, its people, and their own identities. The paper draws on specific textual evidence from both novels to support its claims, referencing character dialogues, internal monologues, and narrative descriptions. It also incorporates critical perspectives on Coetzee's work, including interpretations of *Disgrace* as an allegory for the post-apartheid era and the allegorical nature of his fiction as a whole. The analysis also considers Coetzee's own complex relationship with South Africa and how it may be reflected in his writing.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the novels *Disgrace* and *Life and Times of Michael K* by J.M. Coetzee both delve into the theme of alienation, but from different perspectives. In

Disgrace, the character David Lurie embodies a deep sense of alienation, feeling like an outsider in his own country, South Africa. He is unable to connect with the new rulers of the country and does not feel at home either on the farm or in the city. This feeling of being an imposter is a persistent part of his identity, despite having lived his entire life in the country. In contrast, Michael K

from *Life and Times of Michael K* is also an outsider, but he is more connected to his roots and finds a sense of home and peace in the Karoo region. He longs for a quiet, unknown life and has a strong affinity for the land, even though his wish to own a plot remains unfulfilled. The doctor in the novel even views K as being "not of our world" and an "unbearing, unborn creature". Ultimately, both novels demonstrate Coetzee's exploration of the human condition under the pressures of a complex social and political landscape, showcasing how alienation, whether physical or emotional, is a central and unavoidable part of life for his characters.

Acknowledgement

This research paper was written by Navanath Dnyandev Lokhande, a research student at Shivaji University, Kolhapur. The author also holds the position of Assistant Professor in English at Arts and Commerce College, Pusegaon.

Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References:

1. Coetzee, J. M., *Disgrace*, London: Vintage Books, 2011
2. *Life and Times of Michael K*, London: Vintage Books, 2011
3. Attridge, Derek. J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event. Scottsville: University of KwaZulu- Natal Press, 2005
4. Attwell, David. J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing: Face to Face with Time. New York: Viking Books, 2015
5. Attwell, David. J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing, Berkeley, Cape Town: University of California Press, 1993
6. Kannemeyer, J. C.J. M. Coetzee A Life in Writing, London: Scribe Publications, 2012