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Kamlesh Thakur
Associate Professor,
Department of English,
R.K.M.V. Shimla,
Himachal Pradesh, India.

Divine Idiocy streaked with Gandhism as an alternative to Racism in J.M. Coetzee's novel *Life and Times of Michael K*

Kamlesh Thakur

Abstract

Coetzee wrote this award-winning novel just before Late Dr. Nelson Mandela was crowned the first Black President of South Africa -- a nation torn apart by apartheid. The success story of Dr. Mandela has been repeated by Barack Obama in the United States, yet racist attacks make headlines every now and then in the developed world where the Whites bask in the glory of their superior race. The book under study not only paints a realistic picture of a war ravaged country being gnawed by racism but also offers a solution to it by celebrating idiocy over worldly-wisdom. Michael K, a grotesque-looking, hare-lipped man gives up his job as a gardener in Cape Town to carry his ailing mother away from the violent city to the countryside of her childhood, i.e. Prince Albert. The mother dies on the way but he manages to reach Prince Albert and starts his life afresh as a cultivator by sprinkling his mother's ashes on the earth. After that he is twice imprisoned, but his captors, who have power and cynicism on their side, are bewildered by the simplicity of this man, who, in life, seems to want nothing. He becomes an enigmatic figure for the worldly-wise. He is prepared to die rather than betray his instincts. He stands by his principles and attains a level of freedom, significantly in a country torn with strife that no ordinary human being can hope to attain. The civil war serves as the backdrop against which Michael spends a whole year. The unnamed authorities in the book are ever-watchful but uncaring, demanding loyalty from the common people but neglecting their safety. When Coetzee wrote this book, it was impossible to imagine a peaceful, democratic end to the apartheid in South Africa.

Keywords: Divine idiocy, worldly-wisdom, intuition, rationality.

1. Introduction

A distinct tradition of 'divine idiot' found in several literatures is based on the assumption that madmen, deviants and outcasts are somehow holy or blessed, or possess a knowledge that normal people do not have. They are seemingly ridiculous in action and outward appearance but can behave better at the intuitive level, better than so-called wise people. Meekness, especially accompanied by lack of cleverness, is the single most distinguishing feature of divine idiocy and the sanction for such privileging of simplicity is available in religious texts such as The Bible, in Bhakti Literature of medieval saints such as Kabir, Meera, Nanak, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and also in Sufi literature. Many contemporary novels extend this tradition in spite of their individual differences and on the basis of an appraisal of these texts one could argue that all divine idiot figures are "oppositional" figures, figures opposing more by their "being" there than by any conscious or articulated stance, the prevailing life-style, pattern of behaviour, and moral-ethical scheme. They are oppositional by virtue of being altogether different from the accepted "image of man." Not every idiot is idealised, but more often than not, their presence casts a satirical light on the un-idiotic figures around them. It is possible to see in the divine idiot the author's discontent with the way things are, with the way people live. This discontent can generate a divine idiot via several routes, primitivistic, as in *Of Mice and Men*, romantic-religious, as in Wordsworth and *The Idiot*, satirical, as in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse – Five*, spiritual-cum-ironical-cum-comic as in R.K.Narayan's *The Vendor of Sweets*, and literary, as in Angus Wilson's "interpretation" of Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*. Coetzee traverses many miles ahead as Michael K, the idiot, combines in him the shades of Jesus, the Buddha and Mahatma Gandhi and the implications of this ambitious work are mystical, philosophical and political.

Michael K is a Black, a second-class citizen. The novelist, however, does not play up the racial identity of Michael K too much. Attention is drawn on the first page of the novel to the hare-lip and not to the colour of the protagonist: "The first thing the midwife noticed about Michael K when she helped him out of his mother into the world was that he had a hare-lip."^[1] But it becomes clear from Michael K's position in society that he is not a member of the ruling class

Correspondence:
Kamlesh Thakur
Associate Professor,
Department of English,
R.K.M.V. Shimla,
Himachal Pradesh, India.

and hence not a White. It is entirely possible that Coetzee deliberately omits mentioning Michael K's colour precisely because he does not want K to be labelled or formulated either as a Black, or White or Coloured. In an interview with Richard Begam, Coetzee says, "The Black is Black as long as the White constructs himself as White."^[2] To Coetzee differences of race and colour are insignificant, though colour was a burning issue at that time and resoundingly defined South Africa, its politics and its people.

Through Michael K's physical deformity, Kelly Hewson writes, Coetzee makes it clear that "K is not going to be everyman."^[3] It is, however, possible to argue that the allegorical impulse behind making a character 'Everyman' need not aim at making that character a representative for each and every human being, that it often aims only at making that character a type, a comprehensive category. In other words, concepts such as "class allegory," "national allegory," and "race allegory," operate over the substantial space in between pure, universal principles neatly denoted by characters and the utterly unique individuals. Michael K is individual, but at the same time he is also made to stand for the weak and disadvantaged everywhere. In any case, Michael K resonates with a great many political, philosophical and mystical implications not at all subsumable under the liberal notion of individuality.^[4]

Michael K's distorted face is his distinguishing mark and it makes him an unforgettable character. This deformity also makes others regard him as a freak and exposes him to uncanny whispers and smiles of people who treat him with contempt and condescension, often with revulsion, making him an object of general suspicion and hostility. And then his inarticulacy, which in Derek Wright's opinion is symbolic of his position as a Black who has no right to speak,^[5] makes him an alienated figure longing for privacy. He is variously regarded as an idiot, a monkey or a child, but in reality none of the images is true. The book is about how wide the gap is between what Michael is and what he is taken to be even when superficially the terms stupid, idiot etc. are common to the two categories. At least, three different meanings are attached to the word 'idiot' in the novel: firstly, the idiot as a conventionally accepted category in the world; secondly, the idiot as a divine idiot, and innocent person; thirdly, the idiot as played by an idiot in his failed attempt to be smart.

Michael K is stupid, an idiot in the sense that he does not know many simple things such as what a quotient is and why rivers flow faster in summer. But he is not an idiot in the sense others use the term. His stupidity surfaces when he encounters clever people. He is an idiot, a simple baby, but the meanings of such words develop a profound resonance in his case; others tend to use the term literally. It is true that sometimes Michael tries to act 'smart' or 'clever' but, there is always something "childlike" about his "clever" moves. They fail, anyway; he is proved wrong. Gradually, he stops being smart and asserts: "I am what I am" (p.179). His instinctive understanding, however, enables him to see whenever the so-called clever people manipulate him.

Michael's perpetual retreat from civilized existence in the city of Cape Town, where he works as a gardener, to a state of vagabondage and near-starvation facilitates our understanding of the times in which he lives. Ellen McDaniel feels that we can only draw inferences about them. Coetzee does not tell anything about the "political parties or issues in conflict, the reasons or means for doing battle, anything at all that might specifically describe the 'times' of

Michael K."^[6] In fact, "the times" of Michael K are generalized to represent all war-torn times in history, with the number of orphaned victims multiplying everyday and morality sinking to its lowest depth. In the war-ravaged South Africa, the ruling White minority de-individualizes and dehumanizes the Black majority. Michael K is animalized by numerous people and is referred to as a monkey, and insect and a grub. The inhuman conditions in which he lives in burrows and caves, sleeps during the day-time and works at night, relies more on smell and lives without food and light bring to the surface the sordid realities of South African life. Hewson observes about the predicament of Michael and his mother: "It seems fitting, then, that those who have been dehumanized, deterritorialized and disenfranchised should be forced to redirect themselves toward the earth, to things weaker and more delicate than themselves."^[7]

Though Michael is not a wisdom-figure, yet he is always open to learning. He observes, notices but does not comprehend the over-all logic behind the perpetuation of exploitation. He learns about the system from a fellow named Robert who is a leftist and an intellectual. This self-appointed teacher underestimates the peculiar intelligence of the divine idiot and uses a condescending, patronising tone while offering an ideological, class-based explanation of camps. Initially Robert's lecture about the inhumanity and insensitivity of the camp-runners sounds unbelievable to Michael as he is a new entrant into the horrible world of camps. Though Michael does not reject instruction he absorbs only what is worth learning in it. Robert's class prejudices do have an effect on Michael for a while, but eventually Michael decides to drop most of the theoretical part of this wisdom. The difference between Michael and Robert is: Michael begins with observation, Robert begins with the theory of class-conflict.

Just as there are stages in the 'progress' of war, so there are stages in the 'education' of Michael. Michael is shocked beyond belief when a baby wails the whole night and dies the next day due to lack of medical care, leaving the poor young mother completely shattered. He asks himself: "Is this my education?...Am I at last learning about life here in a camp?" (p.122). This is the first stage of his education. It is in a camp that he learns about the horror of living and realizes that it is just to assuage the feelings of the poor that the camp-runners indulge in occasional acts of fake religious charity. Although he seems slow-witted to others yet he, as Michael Valdez Moses writes, "eventually penetrates to the insidious and unappealing core of a liberal generosity that implicitly required subservience and verbal acts of self-abasement from its recipients."^[8] Poverty, squalor, misery and apathetic attitude of the officials agitate Michael. It appears that the unspoken wish of the White authorities in the novel is that they want to eliminate the Blacks from the face of the earth. Michael K has a frightening vision in which he sees the Blacks being forced to dig their own graves. However, he has the sense to see that the image is a product of the ideas to which Robert has exposed him and it is Robert who is speaking through him.

The second stage of his education starts now. He introspects, and then rejects those instructions which go against his instincts. These tell him to escape the camp and he does not take long to follow the advice and jumps over the fence unmindful of the risk it involves. He is quick to act, although he cannot make an impressive speech like Robert. Ironically,

the pupil turns out to be wiser than the teacher. Though Robert sees the truth he is not in a position to find any alternative; it is Michael who succeeds in escaping from the camp and its charity and finds an alternative in the countryside where he thinks one has enough time to do the things one likes.

He reaches Prince Albert and here starts the third stage of his education. He commits certain mistakes like killing a big goat since he cannot eat it all. But he learns from his mistakes. In the fourth and final stage of his education, he discovers that accepting charity is as wrong as remaining hard and dry. He must turn gentle and soft and help another old destitute exactly as he helped his mother. The novel thus does not posit divine idiocy as a given state. Here, Michael learns the values that comprise it. To the extent that he learns them, he is different from many a divine idiot in whom divine idiocy resides as an immutable attribute.^[9]

Michael's superiority and other-worldliness are recognised by the unnamed doctor in the second part of the novel. Against the strange perspective offered by him, the unnamed doctor becomes conscious of his own situation. He is forced to alter his image of Michael and then question the very basis of his own life-style and life values. It is his exposure to Michael, the camp-hater, which engenders hatred of camps in the doctor. Although the doctor is realistic enough to see that it is difficult to escape camps, he begins to explore the possibility of occupying some in-between space that is not contaminated by camp discourse or camp ideology. His "intellect" does not allow him to emulate Michael, but the wish is very much there. He does his best to convince Noel, a police officer, that Michael is a simpleton. His otherworldliness boggles his mind. He is the only person "who believes Michael K to have a meaning."^[10] He pays extra attention to him but Michael has not asked him for this. Michael has become an albatross around his neck. The doctor feels that Michael should not have been born because he is too good for this corrupt world. Both Noel and the doctor want to take a leaf out of Michael's book and go on a trip to one of the quieter parts of the country.

The doctor is a good but over-rational man. He and Michael are complimentary to each other; one follows mind, the other follows heart. Michael could have perished without the doctor's care and concern; the doctor could not have undertaken intense introspection or searching self-analysis without his exposure to Michael. It is true that the doctor needs K more than K needs the doctor. Still, each needs the other. Coetzee makes it clear that it is not easy for a divine idiot to change the course of the world despite his courage and convictions. Michael is not complete by himself; he has certain limitations; some sympathisers within the system are needed even by those who oppose it. The unnamed doctor has his uses for Michael. The divine idiots can show the way to others, but without help from some good people who are not idiots, they will fail even to survive.

Many characters in the world of the book look down upon Michael K as if he were subhuman, and even Michael does not have a high opinion of himself. He, nevertheless, emerges as a prophetic figure in the world of the book. The times are difficult, and it is not possible for most people to avoid camps and camp-loyalties. Michael, in his own idiot way, grasps the logic of the apartheid. This logic is war-logic, and is bound to climax into a bloody civil war in his "beautiful tragic country." His simple concern for peace, plants and the earth does not detract from his status as a

victim of the apartheid, but rather exemplifies an 'alternative' to the war and violent conflict between the rulers and the victims. The moral of his life – for the doctor as well as for others – is that while the White people are not bad by themselves, the system of the apartheid is intolerable. And it is a sin for a person to belong to this system or its machinery. The compulsions – security, money, job etc. – are not absolute; it is possible to live outside the system – without a job, without a home. This kind of life is an ascetic's life, and if only a few can take to it, that only heightens the stature of Michael K, the seemingly negligible nothing. So, Michael not only throws light on the demeaning system of the apartheid that once existed in South Africa, but also painfully exemplifies the prolonged battle that the Blacks had to fight before they got their rightful due. The moral strength and passive suffering of this divine idiot is a lesson to the perpetrators of hate crimes that occur even in today's civilized world.

2. Conclusion

Coetzee has democratised the concept of divine idiot by suggesting that one is not born Michael but one can become Michael. Michael K is a universal soul for whom the society is just not a match. His idiocy appears to be quite out of this world but is also the wisest thing in the world. The universality of this simpleton raises him to the level of Mahatma Gandhi, another enigmatic figure who had millions following him in his fight against the repressive regime of the Britishers in India. The apostle of peace and non-violence as Mahatma Gandhi is known as had incidentally started his crusade against apartheid from South Africa – the country Michael K belongs to. Non-violence and non-cooperation were used by both as tools though by the one consciously and by the other unconsciously, yet these means were forged out of love and not swords and guns which destroy everything. Just as Gandhi's philosophy has become even more significant today in the strife-torn world, many can take leaf out of Michael K's life to come to senses and put an end to bloodshed.

3. References

1. Coetzee JM. *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 3. All subsequent references to this novel are to this edition and are enclosed within parentheses.
2. Richard Begam. "An interview with J.M. Coetzee," *Contemporary Literature*, XXXIII, 3, Fall 1992, 425. See also Kelly Hewson, "Making the 'Revolutionary Gesture': Nadine Gordimer, J.M. Coetzee and Some Variations on the Writer's Responsibility. *Ariel* 1988; 9(4):65.
3. Hewson 64.
4. Nadine Gordimer in her review of *Life & Times of Michael K* entitled, "The Idea of Gardening," deprives K of more general, associative and suggestive implications of the surname K by naming him 'Kotze' or 'Kockemoer' but this surname definitely roots him in the cape as coloured. Quoted in Kelly Hewson, p. 63, Hewson argues that 'K' has ties with Joseph K in Kafka's *The Trial* and with the surveyor K in *The Castle*. Another allusion to Kafka is found in the doctor's reference to "the castle" in *Life & Times of Michael K* as the place from which his bizarre orders

issue.

5. Derek Wright, "Black Earth, White Myth: A Note on Coetzee's *Michael K*," *Modern Fiction Studies*, XXXVIII, 2, Summer 1992, 442.
6. Ellen Mc Daniel, "Quiet Heroism in *Life & Times of Michael K*," *Notes on Contemporary Literature*, XV, 1, Jan. 1985, 11.
7. Hewson 65.
8. Michael Valdez Moses, "Solitary Walkers: Rousseau and Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, XCIII, I, Winter 1994, 139.
9. Coetzee has a different view. He speaks of Michael as "and example of being than becoming, one who goes on being (rather) himself, despite everything." Tony Morphet, "Two Interviews with J.M. Coetzee, 1983 and 1987" *Triquarterly*, LXIX, Spring/Summer 1987, 455.
10. Morphet 257.