

Politics and Cultural Disorientation in J.M. Coetzee's
Life & Times of Michael K and *Disgrace*

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ABSTRACT

The study examined the treatment of the themes of oppression and psychic disorientation of the Blacks in J.M. Coetzee's novels *Life & Times of Michael K* and *Disgrace*, with a view to exposing the evil of the apartheid system and articulating the solution proffered by the author to the problem of racial conflict in South Africa.

The methodology adopted was a close reading of the two novels, using the postmodernist and postcolonial theories. Particularly, the critical concepts of defamiliarization and foregrounding were used to analyze Coetzee's deployment of such elements of the novel as characterization, conflict, language, plot and setting in the two texts. Secondary material was used.

The results showed that, having suffered cultural, historical and social dislocation as a result of colonial conquest, the Black people of South Africa struggled and resisted exploitation, oppression and the apartheid policy of the Whites. The main conflict in *Life & Times of Michael K* centred around the interplay of cultural differences. The Whites enjoyed the privilege of cultural and political hegemony and practised the politics of exclusion, which caused disaffection and disorientation in the Blacks. This led the two races to the war path: the way of death and destruction, the culture of hatred and violence, to which Michael K's gardening culture, the way of life, served as a contrast. The conflict in *Disgrace* was over the sexual exploitation of Melanie, a Black student, by Lurie, a White professor. The series of terrible experiences suffered by Lurie and his daughter, such as arson, robbery, shame and vandalism, was a consequence of Blacks' violent reactions to racial discrimination and oppression, unjust economic relations and the loss of their land to the Whites. A paradox of human creativeness and destructiveness, war was represented in both

novels as the problem posed by apartheid and as the solution to it. Coetzee employed narrative device of defamiliarization and foregrounding to a high degree, and with dexterity, to signify the intricacies of politics in apartheid South Africa. He also used images of ashes, blood, dreams, murder, pumpkin seeds and rape to articulate ideas of suffering, social neglect, political oppression, cultural deracination, hope and liberation.

The study concluded that J.M. Coetzee thematized power relations in the two novels and considered violent protest by the marginalized Black South Africans as a legitimate weapon in the struggle against apartheid.