

Enigma of the Ultimate Silence: Reading J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and *Life and Times of Michael K* from a Buddhist Perspective *

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Abstract

The paper attempts to contextualize J.M. Coetzee's notion of life within a Buddhist perspective. In a Buddhist vein, Coetzee shows that the entire domain of human mental world centring around the notion of an integrated self is a false construction of language while the entrapment of all lives within a state of suffering and impermanence constitute the only reality. The paper, with a special focus on Coetzee's Disgrace and Life and Times of Michael K, shows how in Coetzee's works the characters' loss of ego due to suffering and humiliation leads to breakdown of subject-object division and to emergence of true compassion. The paper explores human notion of time which is closely connected to construction of human subjectivity and shows how the focus on the immediate present 'now' within Coetzee's works, in a vein similar to Buddhist mindfulness meditation, challenges the temporal foundation of human idea of self. The deep anti-philosophical nature of Coetzee's works is akin to the anti-doctrinal position of Madhyamika school of Buddhism and the radicalness of Coetzee is reflected in his desire to push language towards its own cessation, that is, in his realization of the need for the logical mind to surrender to the ultimate silence beyond language as path to the deepest ontological truth.

Keywords: Buddhism, Impermanence, Self, Mindfulness, Language, Compassion, Silence

J.M. Coetzee and Buddhism

The place of religion and spirituality has been a baffling question in the works of Nobel Prize winning author J.M. Coetzee. As per his religious views, Adam Kirsch in "With Fear and Trembling" refers to Coetzee's autobiographical work named *Boyhood* where Coetzee presents himself in third person as "an atheist and has always been one" (qtd. in Kirsch para 4) though as a child Coetzee felt that "he understands Jesus better" (qtd. in Kirsch para 4) than his religious teacher. Kirsch senses the radically dissident nature of Coetzee's works which he reads as the author's true Protestantism, reflected in "how to dissent from a religious culture that itself was founded on an act of dissent" (para 5). Coetzee's works are centred round deep existential questionings while a predominant focus in his works is on the themes of mortality, suffering and exploration of the deepest core of human existence. Coetzee's refusal to assume a distinct religious position is connected to the fact that he is interested in looking into the deepest existential questions without being influenced by any established metaphysical doctrines. However, the question of a spiritual framework cannot be avoided in Coetzee's work because an undercurrent of dialogue with spiritual notions is very much active in Coetzee's works.

This paper shows that the religious/spiritual school of thought that is most relevant to Coetzee's work is that of Buddhism. This is apt because Coetzee intends to explore the nature of existence through an anti-doctrinal approach and Buddhism, especially the *Madhyamika* school of

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Buddhism, insists on spirituality which is based on negation of any structured philosophical doctrine. Coetzee's works are replete with issues of inescapability of suffering, illusionary nature of human self and the necessity for abandoning ego – themes which are most closely aligned with a Buddhist perspective of life. It is surprising that there is hardly any critical work linking Coetzee's works with Buddhist approach except a review of Coetzee's Jesus Trilogy novels where reviewer Theo Tait briefly mentions the opening section of *The Childhood of Jesus* as a "Buddhist-style afterlife" (Tait para 4) though the dominant focus of the review is in deciphering the Christian analogies. This present paper will analyse two of Coetzee's novels during the author's South African phase of writing– *Disgrace* (abbreviated as *DG*) and *Life and Times of Michael K* (abbreviated as *LTMK*) and will explore how the application of a Buddhist framework elucidates Coetzee's exploration of the existential questions of desire, identity, non-violence, suffering and mortality.

Desire, Impermanence and *Dukkha*

J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* presents desire, mainly sexual desire, as a survivalist compulsion which creates the illusion of overcoming the inevitability of suffering and death. Coetzee, in *Disgrace*, presents all lives, both human and animal lives to be entrapped within the material nature of physical body which is conditioned by compulsiveness of desire on one hand and on the other hand by inevitability of suffering. Through the plight of protagonist David Lurie, Coetzee shows that the same material nature of the body which leads to compulsiveness of sexual desire, also leads the individual human being to ultimate decay and death. *Disgrace* as a novel is about the protagonist David Lurie coming to realize this fundamental entrapped condition of all lives within the material nature of body and this realization leads to his complete loss of ego by the end of the novel. At the beginning of the novel, the fifty-two years college lecturer David Lurie's erotic desire was aimed towards overcoming the approaching old age, that is, to postpone "the proper business of the old: preparing to die" (*DG* 9). But turn of events in his life, first a manipulative sexual affair with a teenaged student which leads to suspension from his job and then the tragic rape of his daughter by a group of assailants, make him aware of the violence that sexual compulsiveness is capable of breeding. Deidra Coleman rightly connects sex, violence and evolutionary survival instinct in Coetzee's *Disgrace* when she writes that "Lurie envisions existence as a struggle and competition in racial, sexual and generational terms" (Coleman 598). Towards the later part of the novel, a disillusioned Lurie is seen to assist Bev Shaw in her animal clinic to nurse sick dogs and even to help in euthanizing the animals as a last resort to end their lives of pain and 'disgrace'. As Lurie observes the dying dogs till the last moments of their lives, he can clearly see that his own life is no different from that of the dogs in being entrapped within the inevitability of desire and death. Marianne Dekoven insists that Lurie becomes "someone who lives fully within the limits of his actual life and in the face, and light, of his own death" (Dekoven 849). Coetzee's focus on suffering and disgrace as the core truth of life is akin to Buddhist emphasis on *dukkha* or suffering as the fundamental nature of embodied existence.

Earlier in the novel, it could be seen that David Lurie, being an academic specializing in Romantic literature, nurtured an essentially romantic attitude towards life and towards erotic desire. Initially, Lurie idealized the sensuous decadence of his favourite romantic poet Lord Byron who in spite of knowing the inevitability of time, used to romanticize pleasures of the body with a sense of tragic beauty. It is not that Lurie was unaware of the inevitability of time but he nurtured an illusion that an erotic fulfilment would create an appearance of freezing time. It is ironic that Lurie argues with his daughter Lucie that human beings are "of a different order of creation from the animals" (*DG* 74) but for the initial part of the novel he does not realize that his romanticized sexual quest masks a raw animal instinct which can be traced to evolutionary instinct of survival and domination. In *Disgrace* Coetzee shows that erotic desire

is a survivalist mechanism of the material body which first tempts the mind into illusion of permanence and then, ultimately deceives man. At the end of the novel, in a very Buddhist vein, Lurie feels that “desire is a burden we could well do without” (*DG* 90). The entire journey of David Lurie is to come to an acceptance of the inescapable conditions of impermanence and change to which all human and animal lives are subjected to. The Buddhist focus on *anicca* or impermanence as the fundamental condition of all material objects finds a strong resonance in Coetzee’s *Disgrace*. David Lurie’s acceptance of these conditions of *dukkha* (suffering) and *anicca* (impermanence) as the unavoidable realities of existence leads to a complete loss of ego whereby, near the end of the novel, he realizes that he is “simply nothing” (*DG* 143). In this context, it needs to be stressed that the Buddhist notion of *dukkha* or suffering emerges from a false attachment to the illusory notion of self or “I”. At the very end of the novel David Lurie is seen to be carrying a sick dog with whom he has developed a personal sense of attachment to the euthanasia table and his last words stating “yes, I am giving him up” (*DG* 220) affirms the unavoidable necessity of letting go of personal sense of self along with personal attachments.

Life and Times of Michael K is one of the most radical of Coetzee’s novels where the author presents a protagonist in the form of Michael K who seems to voluntarily let go of his desire for survival. Critic Bozena Kucala in “Giving Up the Struggles for Life: Coetzee’s *Life and Times of Michael K* and *Disgrace*” points out how the protagonist Michael K increasingly longs to merge with the earth as the novel progresses (5). If *Disgrace* as a novel is about the protagonist’s final realization of the deceptive nature of desire, *Life and Times of Michael K* depicts a deliberate renunciation of desire. Coetzee presents Michael K as an extremely socially marginalized man, possibly of black racial identity, in an unnamed country which is very similar to Apartheid South Africa. Pains of physical existence along with extreme financial and social marginalization creates in Michael K an anti-survivalist inclination which is reflected in his unwillingness to speak and in his increasing stillness. It is true that the bare needs for survival for the socially marginalized Michael K is pushed to such an extreme point that he had, at times, no option but to consume raw flesh of animals (53). Exposure to the stark reality of survival process which is dependent on conflict at its very core makes Michael K apathetic to the very process of survival. In continuation of the theme of *Disgrace*, Coetzee fully demonstrates in *Life and Times of Michael K* that process of survival is rooted in conflict, violence and competition and in the light of this realization, Michael K’s inclination to slip away from life becomes understandable. This is evident also in Michael K’s preference for self-cultivated plant-based food and in his later refusal to eat non-vegetarian food like sausage even amidst extreme hunger (175). Nistha Saxena in “J.M. Coetzee’s aesthetics of *Ahimsa*” reads in Coetzee’s *Disgrace* and *Life and Times of Michael K* the philosophical influence of *Ahimsa* or non-violence which Saxena supports through Coetzee’s professed admiration for Indian tolerance towards animal’s way of being (1). Mangala Chinchore in “Conception of *Ahimsa* in Buddhism: A Critical Note” opines that though Buddhism, unlike Jainism, do not believe in practicing *Ahimsa* as a rigid doctrine, nevertheless insists that “they (Buddhists) accept that *Himsa* (violence) in any form deliberate or otherwise – is bound to lead to pain and suffering” (Chinchore 104). Coetzee connects desire and violence to be at the core of survival process and in *Life and Times of Michael* the author takes the radical task of examining how far can a human being renounce the very desire for survival. It is evident in the novel that, in spite of the extreme physical hardships, the letting go of desire gives Michael K an unconditional sense of freedom which refuses to be subjugated to any authority – whether it is the authority of racially prejudiced state, capitalist economy or even the authority of language. The fact that Michael K’s renunciation of desire gives Michael K a somewhat prophetic presence justifies the magnetic attraction that the white medical officer feels towards the withdrawn persona of Michael K within the novel (164). The medical officer who represents

the intellectual voice of the ‘normal’ within the novel slowly becomes desperate to understand the unbreakable silence within Michael K (164). The medical officer, who is directly working for the state authority, cannot understand why a human being can choose to erase his own self as it seems to be counter to the general desire for survival present within all living organisms. His logical mind cannot accept the meaninglessness that Michael K’s silence implies and he vainly tries to create his own meanings out of it (164). Yet he cannot help but be insanely attracted to Michael K’s withdrawn nature, that is, to the mystery of Michael K’s silence. The absolute anti-authoritarian nature of K’s silence is affirmed as the medical officer finally concludes that Michael K “did not belong inside any camp” (*LTMK* 162). In *Life and Times of Michael K* Coetzee shows how a man free from desire challenges the very structures of social and economic exploitations, thereby associating Michael K with an unconditional sense of independence.

Coetzee also presents an ecological dimension to Michael K’s egoless condition of existence in the sense that Coetzee does not present K’s withdrawal from life as suicidal but instead, as an inclination to be liberated from the ego of individual self and to dissolve back into the natural world. As K’s inner being becomes increasingly empty, his inner self seems to dissolve more into elemental nature. The egoless state of K’s existence facilitates a sense of oneness within which boundary between man and natures dissolves. This increasing lightness of Michael K’s being is reflected in the narration of the novel which presents Michael K as “anything but a speck upon the surface of an earth too deeply asleep to notice the scratch of ant-feet, the rasp of butterfly teeth, the tumbling of dust” (*LTMK* 97). Both *Disgrace* and *Life and Times of Michael K* are very much conducive to be read from a Buddhist framework as the novels reflect Coetzee’s profound questioning into the connection between desire and survival as well as a deep exploration into the possibility of an individual human being’s freedom from desire and ego. It will not be far-fetched to read this death-in-life condition into which Michael K drifts as, at least, a pre-condition for the journey towards Buddhist state of *Nirvana*.

Embodied Soul, *Anatman* and Compassion

One major aspect in which Buddhist position differs from most other religious metaphysics is its rejection of the idea of a soul which is separate from the physical body. Buddhist notion of *Anatman*, that is, absence of soul is a direct challenge to the general Hindu belief in an eternal soul or *Atman* as explicated in the Bhagavat Geeta. Morad Nazari in “Buddhist Concept of Non-Self (*Annatta* or *Anatman*)” clarifies the Buddhist belief that “what we think of our self, our personality and ego are temporary creations of the *Skandhas* (the groups or aggregates that make up a person)” (Nazari 1). In Coetzee’s works, specially *Disgrace*, the constant comparison of human with animals shows the conflict between human desire for a permanent self and the protagonist’s tragic realization of the absence of any separate self apart from the physical body. Coetzee in *Disgrace* shows that all human literature, philosophy and art is founded on the illusion that there is a self which is separate from the material body but at the end of the novel protagonist David Lurie is forced to accept the absence of any separate human self. Similarly, in *Life and Times of Michael K*, Coetzee’s reluctance to reveal the inner subjective self of Michael K and his extreme focus on the physicality of K’s existence, including the gross depiction of his physical deformities, brings home the point that there cannot be any separate soul apart from the physical body. In this context, mention needs to be made of Coetzee’s novella *The Lives of Animals* (abbreviated as *LA*) where the phrase “embodied soul” (*LA* 131) emerges. The protagonist of the novel, the elderly novelist with ailing health goes on to state that to “thinking and cogitation, I oppose fullness, embodiedness, sensation of being” (*LA* 131). Through use of the word “soul” in *The Lives of Animals*, Coetzee is focussing on is the very sensation “of being alive to the world” (*LA* 131) which cannot be separated from the physical body. Elizabeth Costello in *The Lives of Animal* shows that for

animals their entire being is located in their bodies (134) and Coetzee implies that this condition is also true for human beings unless they deceive themselves with the idea of a higher self. Coetzee intends the readers to look into the very core of life which is inseparable from the body and in *The Lives of Animals* Coetzee shows that human beings' complacent termination of an animal's desire to be alive for the sake gratifying taste buds needs to be judged in context of human being's own mortal nature. From a Buddhist perspective, compassion is the natural outcome of realization of the fundamental mortal nature of all lives without any hope of a theological afterlife or of an eternal non-physical soul.

When David Lurie in *Disgrace* looks at the dying dogs in Bev Shaw's animal clinic, he does not attempt to block the emotional pain and suffering within his own heart and unlike "those who work in slaughterhouses" (DG 143) growing "carapaces over their souls" (DG 143), Lurie's "whole being is gripped by what happens in the theatre" (DG 143). This shows David Lurie's complete surrender to pain (*dukkha*) and he allows his own human sense of self to be obliterated through complete empathy with the suffering of the dogs. Here, compassion is not an anthropocentric moral position but emerges from a direct recognition of suffering as the fundamental truth of life which eventually leads to loss of ego and to a breakdown of subject-object division. In *The Lives of Animals* Elizabeth Costello mentions the words "sympathetic imagination" (LA 133) which implies the ability to experience other's suffering by imagining oneself in the position of the other. Rodger R. Ricketts in "Buddha's Empathy and Compassion" states that "as we become less enchanted and fascinated with our "I".....we gain insight into the subjectivity of our identity and how we confound our understanding of the world through the misconception of an inherent dualistic reality" (Ricketts para 4). As per Buddhism, *Karuna* or compassion emerges from the breakdown of binary between self ("I") and the other which takes place through self's confrontation with *dukkha* (suffering) and *anicca* (impermanence).

Buddhist Mindfulness and Inescapability of Now

It is true that J.M. Coetzee does not adhere to any organized spiritual framework in his novels and hence there is no mention of any spiritual practice like meditation in his works. Nevertheless, the quality of meditateness is very much present in his works. Meditateness in Coetzee's work emerges from an intense focus into the immediate present moment. Human sense of time, that is, human ideas of past, present and future is very much connected to the superior human mental faculties of memory and imagination. In fact, construction of human identities also has a definite temporal dimension to it as identity-construction depends upon memories of the past and upon imaginations of the future. In contrast to the subjective human sense of time, it is the immediate present moment when the material process of life is actually happening. Even the act of thinking about the past and of speculating the future is only happening in the immediate present moment, that is, right *now*. Michael C. Corballis uses the phrase "mental time travel" (Corballis 3) which denotes the quintessential ability of human mind to replay past events or imagine future ones – also dubbed as episodic memory and episodic projection respectively (3). Robert H. Sharf in "Is Mindfulness Buddhist?" refers to the practice of mindfulness meditation in Zen Buddhism which is aimed towards an "intense immersion in the moment, in the *now*, such that the practitioner loses touch with the socially, culturally and historically constructed world in which he or she lives" (Sharf 476). So, mindfulness meditation, through allowing the mind to rest in the flux of here and now, cuts off mental constructions of past and future and thus challenges the very process of human identity-construction.

J.M. Coetzee in his critical essay on Kafka's short story "The Burrow," anthologized within *Doubling the Point*, presents the impulsive and unforeseen moment, that is the non-repetitive *now*, when the speaker is under power of natural forces he cannot control or predict, to be

challenging the narrative's attempt to sustain the illusion of a generalized or repetitive present (212). This intense immersion in the present moment is seen in Coetzee's *Disgrace* when David Lurie is observing the last moments of the dogs just before Bev Shaw's act of euthanizing would put an end to the sick dogs' life. The narration focusses on the minute physical details of the dogs before the moment of euthanasia as "they flatten their ears, they droop their tails, as if they too feel the disgrace of dying; locking their legs, they have to be pulled or pushed or carried over the threshold.....but none will look straight at the needle in Bev's hands, which they somehow they know is going to harm them terribly" (*DG* 143). This disturbing portrait of Lurie's intense immersion in the present moment highlights the reality of pain and death without any filter. Lurie's immersion in the inescapable *now* makes him sensitive of the delicate life that is throbbing not only within the dog but also within him. For a moment the boundary between observer and the observed breaks down and the subject becomes one with the object not through any philosophical notion but through raw force of life. Similarly, in *Life and Times of Michael K* the condition of semi-starvation is shown to slow down the Michael K's mental ability to reflect and near the end of the novel his mind blankly witnesses the realities of the present moment without any sense of past or future. The narration states that "he (Michael K) could lie all afternoon with his eyes open, staring at the configurations in the roof iron and tracings of rust; his mind would not wander, he would see nothing but the iron, the lines would not transform themselves into patterns of fantasy" (*LTMK* 115). In such situations, the subject blankly witnesses the object but the ego of the subjective mind is suspended. The description matches the phenomenon of Buddhist meditative state where, according to Sharf, the mind focusses on "whatever sensory object arises in the moment-to-moment flow of consciousness" (Sharf 473), thereby cutting off the 'mental time travel' into past and future which is the basis of human identity-construction.

Loss of identity, Language and Rejection of Philosophy

The uniqueness of J.M. Coetzee as a novelist is his challenge to all philosophical positions when it comes to the deepest existential questions of human life. A recurrent pattern in both *Disgrace* and *Life and Times of Michael K* is Coetzee's projection of the mental world of an individual human being as product of language. In a deconstructive vein, Coetzee presents all human socio-cultural identities and the entire subjective mental world of a human being to be construction of language and hence not real. In *Disgrace* David Lurie discovers that his ideas concerning his position in contemporary South African society in context of race, gender and class is largely constructed through his scholarship in Romantic literature which has always bolstered the idea of a higher human self. In *Disgrace* David Lurie's personal humiliation, the anguish of his daughter Lucie after the horrific incident of sexual violation and mortal terror of the sick dogs about to be euthanized coalesce to create an epiphanic realization that the entire mental world of an individual human being is an illusion constructed through language while suffering of the physical body is the only reality. In *Life and Times of Michael K*, in a tone echoing Derridean deconstructive technique, the medical officer reads Michael K's life as an "allegory...of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up in a system without becoming a term in it" (*LTMK* 165). However, the uniqueness of Coetzee, as an author, is that he is not willing to settle for a mere deconstructive critique of philosophical doctrines. In fact, Coetzee's emphasis on the ultimate otherness of death, reflected through symbols of mortality like the ashes of protagonist's dead mother (36-37) in *Life and Times of Michael K*, acts as resistance against theoretical deconstruction. R.D. Panglinan in "Heidegger, Derrida and the Aporia of Death" presents death as the final limit of deconstruction as no deconstructive dynamic can be set up between the completely incommunicable realms of life and death (9). Coetzee's works reflect a ceaseless attempt to point to the ultimate silence that lies beyond language. This paradox of how to push language towards its own cessation is commented upon

by Coetzee in an essay within *Doubling the Point* where he asks whether language can really reach outside of itself (87). The emphasis on absolute cessation of language as the path to the deepest ontological truth is reflected in Michael K's unexplainable silence within the novel which resists all intellectual speculations and philosophizing. Michela Canepari-Labib rightly detects an apocalyptic tone in Coetzee's works, that is, premonition of an "intellectual holocaust" (Canepari-Labib 124) in the western world which would burn out the very language as the basis of exploitative power-structure between "I" and the "Other". The fact that Coetzee presents Michael K's death like silence as much more powerful and liberating than language is affirmed when the medical officer desperately laments that "he (Michael K) lives in dying more intensely than I in living" (*LTMK* 159). The fact that death of self and ego becomes a source of intensity compared to the conflict-ridden survival asserts the deep anti-intellectual thrust of Coetzee's works. *Life and Times of Michael K* with the protagonist being recurrently associated with "concentration of darkness" (*LTMK* 164) and "utter silence" (*LTMK* 164), is an example of what Mike Marais, in reference to philosopher Maurice Blanchot, regards as literature of negation or "the work of death in the world" (Marais 161) which "sympathizes with darkness" (Marais 161). Coetzee's anti-philosophical position can be connected to his interest in the idea of 'nothingness' in Samuel Beckett's works and this can be correlated with the notion of *sunyata* or emptiness in Buddhism, specially in Nagarjuna's *Madhyamika* school of Buddhism which is strongly anti-doctrinal. The *Madhyamika* school of Buddhism, in a close adherence to the Buddha's original teachings, presents nothingness or *sunyata* as the fundamental nature of entire existence and hence any attempt at conceptualization of the world is bound to be false. Robert H. Sharf mentions that classical Buddhist literature emphasizes on *nirodhasamapatti* – a condition in which both objects and conscious experience cease altogether (475). In fact, the highest state of Buddhist enlightenment *Nirvana* has a connotation of negation because the literal Sanskrit meaning of the term implies "blowing out" or "quenching" of the world.

Conclusion

Buddhism needs to be read in J.M. Coetzee's works not as an organized spiritual doctrine but as an ultimate negation of human mental world which is centred around the idea of an integrated self. The essential anti-doctrinal essence of Buddhism is reflected in the final advice of Goutam Buddha before his death (*parinirvana*), as stated by Anthony Lombardo in "Buddha's Last Dying Words", whereby the master forbids his core disciples to refute any external refuge and to be lamp unto oneself (para 5). J.M. Coetzee, inheriting the late modernist existentialist ethos, strongly puts forward the emptiness of human reason, language and idea of a higher self as the dying suffering body Coetzee shows to be the only truth. Now, question may arise whether Coetzee is falling back into the idea of physicalism/annihilationism – an idea which Buddhism, as the middle-path, strongly guards against along with the idea of an eternal self. Answer to this question will be that Coetzee's works, specially *Life and Times of Michael K*, ceaselessly explore the ultimate 'darkness' and 'silence' that lies beyond the desire for survival. The ultimate silence is, however, always the 'other' as there is no way to communicate that subjective state logically through language and the mind can know it only by surrendering to it. In Coetzee works, nevertheless, the characters who are in the path of abandoning their selves assume a prophetic presence, that is, become a living flame.

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