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Exploring veracity of trauma through individual memory in *Life and Times of Michael K* by J.M. Coetzee

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Abstract--The novel, *Life and Times of Michael K*, depicts the individual memory that is socially produced based on collective thoughts and the individuals' problematic situation in Africa. The protagonist in the novel brings out the unconscious traumatic

memories that can be replayed as horrifying simulations while he is detached from the repressed traumatic experience. However, memories of suffering are shaped by violence; trauma symptoms occur while the collective memory of the character's response to his traumatic past and present. This paper tries to explore the veracity of trauma throughout the individual's life which represents the never-ending struggles of individuals and subjugated societies to confront unconscious trauma. It depicts the process of natives returning to their innocence or pre-colonial condition to face the trauma. Eventually, it elaborates on how, disagreements go unresolved, and difficulties become inescapable. The exploration of the novel through Trauma and Individual memory highlights numerous areas of societal conflict.

Keywords---Trauma, Memory, Suffering, Individual Memory, Traumatic Memories.

Introduction

Memory studies have grown to be a wide and diversified field of study. The way the past gets reproduced in the present shapes the individuals' memory. All memories of an individual are concerned with exploiting the past to deepen involvement and social life by constructing or opposing traditions and establishing power structures. Victimization and suffering can be detected by recalling past struggles. This type of traumatic history has piqued the interest of memory studies, as seen by the ever-expanding literature on recollecting large-scale memories. Many of the works represent South Africa's continuous struggle to tackle apartheid's painful legacy, dealing with the country's violent history and offering intervention in the vast realm of postcolonial trauma studies. The history of colonialism is extensive and terrible. People from other countries began to create other territories in the natives' distant regions and due to this condition, the natives felt alienated in the new world. "Trauma is the disruption of the remembering process caused by an event or experience so at odds with our usual frameworks of remembering that it cannot be remembered in any conventional fashion" (Emily, and Michael, 2013, p.153).

The novel, *Life & Times of Michael K* takes place in the 1980s, amid the backdrop of South Africa's social and political upheaval. The protagonist, Michael K, is an average South African with a visible physical abnormality as a result of being afflicted with a harelip as well as being cognitively slow. "...indifferent memories of our childhood appear in our dreams with some degree of frequency..." (Freud, 2010, p.51). Michael K's abnormality shapes his isolation throughout the novel. He is not a superior power, as evidenced by the tyranny he endures as a result of apartheid. As symptoms of violent societal collapse, Coetzee depicts hospitals packed with victims of stabbings, beatings, and gunshot wounds. The city's transportation and infrastructure have deteriorated as a result of the repeated restrictions, and there are few buses on the road. Michael K sets off with his ailing mother to find the farm near Prince Albert where she was born and reared. In this period of political turmoil, they need permits to leave Cape Town. Michael

K applies, waits almost two months, and never receives them. He acquires a wheelbarrow from a store near his former workplace and converts it into a cart. After a failed attempt, he succeeds the second time by avoiding major roads and army convoys. On the way to Prince Albert, his mother's condition deteriorates, and she dies at a hospital in Stellenbosch. Carrying his mother's ashes, K ultimately arrives at an abandoned property in the Prince Albert region that resembles the location mentioned by his mother. He scatters his mother's ashes there and starts farming on a parcel of land.

Methodology

This paper is a qualitative study of the veracity of trauma through individual memory, highlighting the effects on the individuals in the novel *Life and Times of Michael K*. "Individual memory can be studied as an active socio-communicative practice of instituting and tying the meaning of the past to ongoing relevant social activities in talk and text" (Emily and Michael, 2013, p.197). The paper focuses to investigate and understand the plight of the individual through the philosophical framework of Memory and Trauma.

Exploration of Traumatic suffering

The Protagonist Michael K's recollections of farming are tarnished by government intrusion and institutionalization. Following the death of his mother, he is temporarily compelled to work on a railway labour gang. His first visit to the property is cut short when Visagie, the owner's grandson, arrives and attempts to transform Michael K into his servant. After escaping the farm, Michael K lives in a cave, staying hungry most of the time and subsisting on birds, insects, and edible flowers. "Our experiences of daily matters at hand are not disconnected from our ongoing sense of who and what we are over time" (Emily and Michael, 2013, p.46). After being captured by police, he is sent to the Jakkalsdrif camp, where the unemployed are held to create a labour pool. He flees from the camp and returns to the farm, where he grows pumpkins and melons and lives in a shelter he constructs himself. The authorities caught him once more and placed him in the Kenilworth camp. Trauma manifests itself as an unrepresented, fragmentary narration. Essentially, the person strives to get out of the past memories to avoid trauma but unconsciously ends with the traumatic experience. Sigmund Freud describes trauma as an incident that occurs before the individual can integrate it in time or space, returning to the event in flashbacks or nightmares in an attempt to transcend the experience. The pervasive trauma in society has had a significant impact on Michael K's mentality. Life has always been difficult for him, as indicated in the novel. Coetzee has used the journey narrative to highlight the impact of psychological emptiness on Michael K's survival.

Throughout Michael K's journey to the Karoo, the reader becomes one with the protagonist and empathises with the poor soul bewildered in the middle of a terrible world. Coetzee's characterization of Michael K transcends all preconceptions by going beyond any confirmation of portrayals in the anticipated and accepted patterns. Michael K's issues with life begin from the moment he is born. When the doctor takes Michael K out of his mother's womb, the first thing she sees is that he has a harelip. Despite telling his mother that such children

bring good fortune, Anna K was disappointed to meet him. As he journeys to the countryside from the turbulent metropolis of strife, Michael K feels at peace. He is someone who is unable to adjust to city life and customs but is always at ease with nature. "He was struck by the emptiness of the roads. There was such stillness that he could hear birdsong. He lay back in the thick grass and closed his eyes" (Coetzee, 2004, p.21).

The Violent incidents happening around him reflect his acute sensitivity. He is exceedingly uncomfortable in the city yet incredibly happy in solitude. When Michael K's individuality is breached, he flees society even deeper, towards the isolation and loneliness he seeks. He also understands that the ongoing battle has no bearing on his life; it is merely one of those undesirable disturbances in his life that would have interfered with how he would have chosen to conduct his life. This turn him out to a traumatised individual and he realises that he must only consume food farmed by himself while living in complete isolation in a cave in the mountains.

"Freud describes a weakening of the powerful idea as the splitting off of its load of affect or excitation and the redeployment of this excitation, either as a bodily symptom in hysteria or as an investment in an alternative set of obsessional ideas, associated by 'false connections' with the incompatible idea in obsessional neurosis" (John Fletcher, 2013, p.61).

During his time in Huis Norenius, he develops a propensity to isolate himself. When he is forced to leave the mountains due to malnutrition-related illness, he is abducted and imprisoned in the Jakkalsdrif camp. Michael K is suffocating in a labour pool. He feels claustrophobic in the camp and escapes at the first opportunity. He was ordered to repair fences in an agriculturalist's field after arriving at the camp. The farmer tells Michael K that he has an excellent feel for wires and should engage in fencing. On the other hand, Michael K finds it weird that he should spend his entire existence dividing property. "Psychologists have consequently approached memory as central to this joint mapping of the dimensions of experience" (Emily and Michael, 2013, p.46). Coetzee's setting for Michael K is so harsh that the only means of survival is to live a life less than humane. Michael K's mindset reveals that he can only survive by acting like an animal during the day and hiding in burrows. According to Freud an element of consciousness was produced that was excluded from the ego's thought-activity and kept, as it were, in storage. This severing does not, however, constitute a full instance of repression with its accompanying symptom formation, as Freud characterises the period between the trauma-related and ancillary scenes as follows: the time Michael K had carried around with his two sets of experiences which he remembered but did not understand, and from which he drew no assumptions.

The second part of the narrative is told by the medical officer at Kenilworth camp, where Michael K is held following his second detention. The medical officer initially believes Michael K does not eat because he wants to kill himself, but later realises that Michael K wants to live and eat on his own terms, with only food that he has produced himself. He is completely traumatised. Michael K's unwillingness to consume hospital food demonstrates his opposition to war and the people who

constantly instruct him to do their bidding, whether it's eating food or obeying commands. The only individual in the narrative who comes close to understanding and appreciating Michael is the medical officer. He also respects Michael K's basic human decency. The medical officer's thoughts are led to the question of his existence by acknowledging Michael K's individually distinct existence. Freud's affect trauma model claimed that hysterical patients' symptoms had a hidden psychological meaning associated with profound emotional trauma. Michel K suffers from a buried trauma from his youth, and despite enduring the horrors of apartheid, he is a hysterical trauma patient. "We must take it as a fact that in hysterical patients a part of their psychical activity is inaccessible to perception by the self-consciousness of the waking individual and that their mind is thus split" (Freud et al., 2001, p.228).

As an effect, the medical officer is the only character in the novel that comes close to capturing Michael K's trauma. Because of this, he never makes Michael K eat or do anything. He even lets him out of the hospital. In the shape of the medical officer, Coetzee has created an extremely sympathetic figure. Michael K is not from this world, which is filled with wicked people. He can relate to nature, insects, and worms, but owing to his abnormalities and hesitation, he finds it difficult to connect with humans.

Conclusion

The author through Michael K's portrayal specifies that no matter how traumatised the individual is, an individual cannot be disposed of his identity, and this is how the author arouses concern for this small, vulnerable individual. "When any violent or painful experience is labelled as traumatic, the distinctive features of trauma on one hand, and remembering on the other, are casually but definitely elided" (Emily and Michael, 2013, p.153). Although the reader does not relate with Michael K, he is filled with trauma, pity, and empathy for him. In the middle of prevalent darkness, misery, and ubiquitous bloodshed, Coetzee carves a cosmos for Michael K, whose basics are simple despite the existential chaos he endures. Michael K is refusing to surrender to the Medical Officer. He despises the camps and continues to leave them because he cannot stand rigidity. Michael K is a person who rarely speaks but has his own traumatic thoughts. He is able to withstand pressure from people who want him to follow their laws, and nothing can transform his traumatic thought. Michael K struggle as a result of the violence and overall disintegration of the socio-political order but so do Michael K's mother, Anna K, the medical officer, and Major Noel at the Kenilworth camp, even though the latter two are colonisers. "Memorialisation and witnessing related to political events and processes..." (Emily and Michael, 2013, p.153). Michael K's trauma is never halting since his state of being is characterised by the flux that is projected through his completely absurd attitude, so the majority of the severe occurrences in the novel appear trivial and inadequate. The veracity of Trauma by the individual memory of Michael K has been exposed to negotiate his way through the violence, upheaval, turbulence, and political unrest that surround him from the beginning to the end of the novel.

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