

## Habitus and Productive Shame in Life & Times of Michael K: Embodied Ethics and the Postcolonial Subject

S. Kumaran Arul Devarm<sup>1</sup>, Dr. S. Gunasekaran<sup>\*2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Anna University, University College of Engineering, Bharathidasan Institute of Technology Campus, Tiruchirappalli-620 024

<sup>\*2</sup>Assistant Professor (Selection Grade) & HoD, Department of English, Anna University, University College of Engineering, Bharathidasan Institute of Technology Campus, Tiruchirappalli- 620 024

**\*Corresponding Author:**

Dr. S. Gunasekaran

Email ID: [gunaboopesh@gmail.com](mailto:gunaboopesh@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the interplay of *habitus* and *productive shame* in J. M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* as a means of interrogating postcolonial identity and ethical subjectivity. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* and recent theories of affect and moral emotions, the study examines how the protagonist Michael K embodies an alternative ethical stance rooted not in resistance or rebellion but in stillness, silence, and bodily withdrawal. Rather than reading Michael K as a passive or defeated figure, the paper argues that his choices reflect an embodied ethical response to systemic violence and dehumanization. Using a close textual analysis of Coetzee's minimalist narrative style, the paper identifies moments where shame functions not as a debilitating emotion but as a generative force—disrupting social expectations, questioning institutional norms, and reconfiguring the subject's relation to space, labor, and autonomy. The analysis further reveals how Coetzee's sparse prose mirrors Michael K's physical fragility and spiritual resilience, constructing a politics of quiet refusal that transcends the binaries of colonizer and colonized, victim and hero. The results suggest that *Life & Times of Michael K* enacts a poetics of ethical minimalism, where the protagonist's apparent disengagement becomes a critique of performative resistance and a rethinking of what it means to be human in a broken world. This reading not only contributes to postcolonial literary criticism but also offers new directions for ethical inquiry in literature, foregrounding affect and embodiment as critical categories of analysis.

**Keywords:** Postcolonial Subjectivity, Productive Shame, Habitus, Embodied Ethics, J. M. Coetzee, *Life & Times of Michael K*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

J. M. Coetzee remains one of the most influential and critically acclaimed literary figures in contemporary world literature. His works are marked by a complex engagement with the themes of power, identity, silence, ethics, and postcolonial subjectivity. Born in South Africa and later a citizen of Australia, Coetzee's life and literature straddle multiple national, cultural, and political boundaries. Among his most powerful and enigmatic works is *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), a novel that continues to evoke rich scholarly discourse. The narrative, centered around the physically deformed and socially marginalized protagonist Michael K, engages with the aftermath of apartheid, war, and structural violence in South Africa. However, beyond its obvious socio-political readings, the novel provokes deeper ethical questions about the nature of agency, resistance, and the human condition in contexts of historical oppression.

This study proposes a fresh lens through which to read the novel: the intersection of Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* and recent theories of *productive shame* in the context of postcolonial subjectivity and embodied ethics. While much of Coetzee's fiction has been analyzed through the lens of postcolonial guilt, trauma, or resistance, this paper argues that *Life & Times of Michael K* offers an alternative model of ethical engagement, one rooted in minimalism, bodily retreat, and silence. This model challenges traditional paradigms of political agency and highlights the power of affective withdrawal as a form of ethical resistance.

The concept of *habitus*, introduced by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, refers to the deeply ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions that individuals acquire through their social and cultural environment. Habitus shapes the way individuals perceive the world and respond to it, often unconsciously. In *Life & Times of Michael K*, Michael's journey from Cape Town to the rural hinterlands, and his eventual withdrawal from all forms of societal and institutional life, represent a radical disruption of inherited habitus. Michael neither aligns himself with the state nor with any revolutionary group; instead, he embodies a subjectivity that refuses to participate in the normative structures of power, identity, and resistance. His silence, his refusal to speak unless necessary, and his physical retreat into nature become symbolic of a deeper ethical orientation that cannot be contained within traditional binaries of colonizer/colonized or oppressor/oppressed.

This ethical orientation, the paper contends, can be understood through the lens of *productive shame*, a term used to describe the transformative potential of shame when it is not internalized as personal failure but externalized as a critique of unjust systems. Silvan Tomkins, one of the early theorists of affect, emphasized that shame is not inherently negative; rather, it signals a disruption in the self's relationship with the world, a moment of ethical self-awareness. Sara Ahmed extends this idea by suggesting that shame can expose the norms that have been violated and thus create the possibility for change. In this context, Michael K's shame is not rooted in his deformity or social marginalization; it is rather an embodied awareness of the dissonance between his being and the world's expectations. His response is not to perform resistance but to withdraw, to exist outside the scripts of productivity, rebellion, or victimhood.

Coetzee's sparse and minimalist prose style in this novel mirrors Michael's own withdrawal. The narrative does not offer grand moments of epiphany or confrontation. Instead, it traces the quiet endurance of a man who seeks nothing but to cultivate a small garden and live in peace. As the narrator states, "He wanted to live in peace, grow pumpkins, and be left alone" (*Life & Times of Michael K*). This seemingly simple desire becomes a profound ethical stance in a world driven by violence, war, and ideological control. In fact, Michael's refusal to engage—to be recruited, labeled, or utilized—is in itself a radical form of agency. As Judith Butler notes in *Precarious Life* (2004), vulnerability and non-action can become powerful modes of ethical resistance in contexts where performative agency is co-opted by dominant discourses.

The novel has traditionally been read as an allegory of apartheid South Africa, with Michael K functioning as a Christ-like figure who endures suffering without complaint. However, this allegorical reading risks flattening the complexity of Michael's character and the radical nature of his choices. Rather than simply representing a passive victim or a moral exemplar, Michael K should be seen as a figure who embodies what Giorgio Agamben calls "bare life"—a life stripped of political recognition but also, paradoxically, free from political instrumentalization. In this sense, Michael K's rejection of food, speech, and institutional care becomes a form of reclaiming his subjectivity on his own terms.

Furthermore, this paper argues that Coetzee's treatment of shame and habitus in *Life & Times of Michael K* invites a reconsideration of postcolonial ethics. Postcolonial literature often celebrates voices of resistance, heroism, and narrative visibility. Coetzee, however, offers a counter-model: an ethics of invisibility, muteness, and embodied stillness. This does not mean that Michael K lacks agency; rather, his agency is not legible within the dominant codes of political action or discursive assertion. His refusal to narrate his trauma, to explain himself, or to take sides is a deliberate act of ethical autonomy.

Such a reading also challenges the expectations of the reader and the critic. In seeking meaning, development, or moral clarity, the reader may find Michael K frustratingly opaque. Yet this opacity is precisely what makes him ethically compelling. As Emmanuel Levinas argues, ethics begins not with understanding but with encountering the other in their unknowability. Michael K is such an "other" in Coetzee's text: a figure who resists categorization and calls into question the assumptions of literary humanism itself.

The broader implication of this reading is that *Life & Times of Michael K* offers a model of subjectivity and ethics that is deeply relevant in our current moment—a world marked by displacement, surveillance, institutional breakdown, and the commodification of resistance. Michael K's "non-performance" challenges the imperative to constantly articulate, assert, and produce. In doing so, he becomes a figure of quiet but radical critique.

This paper, therefore, seeks to bring together literary analysis, sociological theory, and affect studies to illuminate how Coetzee constructs a politics of withdrawal that is not nihilistic but ethically resonant. Through the lens of *habitus* and *productive shame*, we can better appreciate how *Life & Times of Michael K* disrupts the expectations of both postcolonial representation and literary form. In a world that valorizes noise, Coetzee's novel offers the profound political and ethical value of silence.

In the sections that follow, the paper will begin with a literature review on previous scholarly interpretations of Michael K, Coetzee's narrative style, and the roles of shame and habitus in literature. It will then outline the methodological framework that guides this reading, followed by an in-depth analysis of key scenes from the novel that exemplify the theoretical claims. The discussion will situate these findings within broader debates in postcolonial ethics and literary theory, and the conclusion will reflect on the relevance of Michael K's embodied withdrawal as a response to contemporary global crises.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent scholarship continues to engage deeply with *Life & Times of Michael K* as a work that transcends conventional postcolonial allegory. Among the most relevant and insightful studies is Sam Rye's 2025 article, which applies Pierre Bourdieu's sociological concept of *habitus* in conjunction with affect theory to examine Michael K's resistance to socio-political normativity. Rye argues that rather than being shaped solely by inherited social structures, Michael K demonstrates a profound ethical refusal of the normative behaviors and expectations assigned to him by a violent and bureaucratic world. His spatial withdrawal, silence, and embodied stillness are interpreted not as passivity but as a form of productive resistance. Rye's study offers one of the first comprehensive applications of *habitus* and *productive shame* to Coetzee's text, contributing significantly to postcolonial literary criticism.

David Attwell's work, although earlier (2019), remains foundational in interpreting Coetzee's ethics. In his chapter "Writing in, of, and around Shame: J.M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*," Attwell explores how the novel's sparse narrative form reflects the affective state of the protagonist. He pays particular attention to the way shame is inscribed in the physicality of Michael K—through his deformity, hunger, and silence. Attwell emphasizes how Coetzee's prose mirrors Michael K's somatic experience of shame and his refusal to conform to dominant political narratives. These insights have become essential to understanding Coetzee's ethical minimalism and his literary representation of vulnerability.

While Rye and Attwell focus on shame and habitus, other scholars have highlighted the aesthetic implications of Coetzee's minimalist narrative. The style itself becomes a vehicle for ethical contemplation. Critics argue that Coetzee's economy of language resists the excesses of ideological discourse and foregrounds the ethical weight of silence. This stylistic minimalism is interpreted in alignment with Emmanuel Levinas's theory of alterity, where ethical relation arises from the encounter with the unknowable other. In this sense, Michael K's opacity, his refusal to explain or justify himself, challenges the reader to engage with him ethically, rather than interpretatively.

Despite these valuable contributions, there remain gaps in recent Coetzee scholarship. First, while Rye effectively deploys Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, his analysis could be further enriched by more nuanced engagement with affect theory beyond the foundational ideas of Tomkins and Ahmed. Second, the broader implications of shame in postcolonial contexts—particularly as a counter to heroic resistance—have not been fully explored in relation to *Life & Times of Michael K*. Furthermore, while Attwell offers close reading of Michael K's embodiment, his framework is more descriptive than comparative or interdisciplinary. This presents an opportunity to extend the conversation by integrating theories from postcolonial ethics, sociology, and affect studies.

This study seeks to bridge these gaps by combining Bourdieu's sociology of habitus with Sara Ahmed's understanding of shame as a socially regulated affect. Ahmed argues that shame "exposes the failure to live up to a social ideal" and thereby reveals the very norms that govern social belonging. In this framework, shame becomes a critique of those norms, rather than a sign of internalized inferiority. Applying this to Michael K's character reveals that his shame is not a product of personal weakness but a refusal of the ideals imposed by militarism, productivity, and institutionalized care. His ethical withdrawal is thus a performative critique of the very systems that try to define him.

The literature also increasingly references Judith Butler's notion of performative ethics and vulnerability. Butler proposes that in contexts of systemic violence, ethical agency can manifest through the refusal to act in predictable ways. In *Precarious Life* (2004), she contends that vulnerability, when not recuperated into heroic narratives, can become a form of resistance. This perspective resonates with Coetzee's depiction of Michael K, whose quiet, embodied withdrawal from all sides of the political conflict represents a non-performative, but deeply ethical, stance. By not engaging in speech, protest, or self-narration, Michael K denies the discursive frameworks that seek to absorb and interpret him. His life becomes a silent but potent commentary on the limits of political legibility.

In addition to theoretical developments, recent scholarship has taken a broader comparative turn, seeking to place Michael K in dialogue with other figures in Coetzee's fiction. There is increasing interest in tracing a continuum from Michael K to later characters such as Elizabeth Costello and Lucy in *Disgrace*, who similarly embody resistance through withdrawal, ambiguity, and silence. These characters refuse closure, coherence, and the comfort of ethical certainty, instead occupying liminal positions that compel ethical reflection from the reader. This move toward an ethics of indeterminacy challenges earlier interpretations that viewed Michael K primarily through the lens of Christian allegory or symbolic martyrdom.

Overall, the current state of scholarship affirms that *Life & Times of Michael K* offers a profound meditation on subjectivity, ethics, and political withdrawal. Recent studies by Sam Rye and David Attwell have opened new avenues for interpreting the novel's complex affective and sociological dimensions. However, further integration of contemporary affect theory and interdisciplinary frameworks is necessary to fully grasp the implications of Coetzee's ethical minimalism. This paper builds upon these critical insights and seeks to contribute a nuanced understanding of Michael K as a figure of productive shame—one whose embodied refusal and ethical opacity redefine resistance in postcolonial literature.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative interpretive methodology grounded in close textual analysis and interdisciplinary theoretical application. The primary aim is to examine how J. M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* constructs an ethical framework through the protagonist's embodied refusal, using the dual conceptual lenses of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus and contemporary affect theory, particularly the notion of productive shame. Given that the central focus of the research is on character, affect, and narrative form, a qualitative and theoretical approach is most appropriate to unpack the subtleties embedded in Coetzee's minimalist prose and thematic design.

The analysis begins with the theoretical framework of *habitus*, a sociological construct developed by Pierre Bourdieu to describe the internalized dispositions, habits, and behaviors shaped by one's position within a social field. According to Bourdieu, habitus is formed through prolonged exposure to specific social structures and is reproduced through practice. It reflects not only how individuals perceive the world but also how they act within it, often unconsciously. In the context of *Life & Times of Michael K*, the application of this framework facilitates a deeper understanding of how Michael's disassociation from institutional norms—such as labor, militarization, healthcare, and even speech—constitutes a rupture in the expected reproduction of habitus. Michael K resists not only externally imposed social scripts but also the internalized norms that would otherwise structure his identity as a subject of the state. This makes habitus an ideal theoretical entry point into the ethical implications of his withdrawal.

Alongside habitus, the study engages with the affective turn in literary and cultural theory, focusing on the notion of productive shame. Shame has historically been treated as a negative, paralyzing emotion. However, recent theorists such as Silvan Tomkins, Sara Ahmed, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick have reconceptualized shame as an affect with political and ethical potential. Tomkins suggests that shame interrupts the self's engagement with the world, forcing a reconsideration of relational and normative frameworks. Ahmed extends this by arguing that shame does not just signify individual failure but exposes the social norms one has failed to live up to. In this light, shame becomes a means of critiquing those norms and the systems that produce them. Productive shame, therefore, refers to the capacity of shame to initiate reflection, transformation, and ethical awareness. In Coetzee's novel, Michael K's embodied responses—his silence, retreat from society, and refusal of care—are analyzed as manifestations of this productive form of shame.

This interdisciplinary approach is further supported by the ethical philosophy of Judith Butler, particularly her concept of performativity and vulnerability. Butler argues that agency is not limited to acts of resistance that are visible and performative; instead, vulnerability, silence, and non-participation can themselves be forms of ethical engagement. In *Precarious Life* and *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler discusses how ethical subjectivity arises not from autonomy or rational assertion but from the recognition of one's embeddedness in precarious social and relational networks. Applying this to Michael K allows for an interpretation of his behavior not as failure or weakness but as a mode of ethical agency grounded in his refusal to be legible within existing socio-political scripts.

In terms of method, the study relies on close textual analysis as its primary tool. Specific scenes are selected for their narrative, thematic, and affective density, such as Michael's departure from Cape Town, his experiences in the countryside, his time in the hospital, and his final act of cultivating a garden in solitude. These scenes are examined to reveal how the narrative constructs habitus and how Michael's actions signify a departure from its dictates. Particular attention is paid to Coetzee's minimalist style, narrative voice, and use of silence and repetition, which serve as formal corollaries to the thematic emphasis on withdrawal and ethical opacity.

The research also employs intertextual comparison within Coetzee's oeuvre. While the primary focus is on *Life & Times of Michael K*, brief references are made to *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello* to situate Michael K among Coetzee's broader ethical project. This comparative element is not meant to distract from the main analysis but to underscore recurring ethical strategies in Coetzee's fiction, particularly those involving characters who resist discursive performance and embrace ethical ambiguity.

To avoid the pitfalls of over-determination or reductive allegory, the methodology prioritizes ambiguity and polysemy as interpretive values. Coetzee's fiction often resists fixed meaning, and this study honors that resistance by acknowledging multiple possible readings while focusing on the interpretive frame that reveals the novel's affective and ethical dimensions. The analysis does not seek to impose a singular theoretical model but rather uses theory as a lens through which to elucidate the complexities of Michael K's subjectivity and Coetzee's narrative ethics.

Moreover, this study engages with the sociopolitical context of South Africa during the late apartheid period as an informing backdrop to Michael K's world, but it does not reduce the character or narrative to a mere allegory of historical conditions. Instead, it explores how the novel transcends its immediate context to raise universal questions about dignity, agency, and the ethics of living in a world marked by violence and control. This methodological orientation enables the research to remain attentive to both the specificities of South African history and the transhistorical ethical questions posed by the novel.



Given that the research is literary-critical and theoretical, no empirical or quantitative data is collected. Instead, the study draws on peer-reviewed journal articles, monographs, and edited collections from the fields of postcolonial studies, affect theory, sociology, and literary ethics. These secondary sources are used to support the primary analysis of the text, and all sources are cited according to the APA 7th edition referencing style or the required journal format.

In sum, the methodology of this study is qualitative, interpretive, and interdisciplinary. It combines close reading of Coetzee's novel with theoretical frameworks from Bourdieu, Ahmed, Tomkins, and Butler to explore how habitus and productive shame intersect in the construction of postcolonial subjectivity. Through this approach, the research aims to contribute to ongoing debates in Coetzee scholarship and to broader discussions in literary theory, ethics, and affect studies. By foregrounding Michael K's embodied ethics of refusal, the study offers a fresh perspective on the novel's engagement with power, resistance, and the politics of silence.

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of *Life & Times of Michael K* reveals a profound interplay between narrative form, character construction, and ethical thematics, with particular emphasis on the protagonist's embodied resistance to normative structures. Through the theoretical lenses of habitus and productive shame, Michael K's actions—or inactions—emerge not as apolitical passivity but as a radical ethical critique of social systems that demand legibility, productivity, and conformity. The results of this interpretive analysis are drawn from key scenes in the novel that foreground Michael's interactions with labor, space, speech, care, and institutional power, demonstrating how his quiet refusal to participate in dominant structures constitutes a potent form of ethical engagement.

One of the earliest indicators of Michael K's rejection of normative habitus appears in his departure from Cape Town with his ailing mother. Despite being shaped by a society that values employment, discipline, and obedience, Michael K chooses instead a journey defined by uncertainty, scarcity, and exposure. His decision to leave the city, a space marked by bureaucratic control and war, in favor of an undefined rural destination, represents a symbolic exit from the structured social field. As Bourdieu notes, habitus tends to reproduce itself through structured environments and expectations, but Michael's rejection of this social reproduction illustrates a unique disruption. "He was going to the country because he was tired of the city and its demands. He was tired of being watched" (Coetzee, *Life & Times of Michael K*). His choice is not heroic in the conventional sense; rather, it is an act of withdrawal that stems from a refusal to be interpolated into a role within the ideological apparatus.

Michael K's silence also functions as an affective and ethical device throughout the novel. In multiple instances, his reluctance or refusal to speak is misinterpreted as stupidity, muteness, or even subversion. However, his silence can be read through the lens of productive shame. Rather than attempting to justify himself to the authorities who arrest, detain, or question him, Michael withdraws from speech entirely, disrupting the performative expectation of self-narration and confessional discourse. This is especially clear in the scene where a medical officer attempts to interrogate him. Michael remains largely unresponsive, prompting the officer's frustration: "You are not a fool, you are not a simpleton. Why do you pretend to be one?" (Coetzee). The answer is never given—Michael refuses to participate in a discourse that would render him intelligible within the terms of power. In this refusal lies a powerful critique of systems that demand articulation as a prerequisite for recognition and care.

Michael's relationship to labor also exemplifies his disruption of habitus. Throughout the novel, labor is depicted as both a survival mechanism and a form of control. The camps, hospitals, and rehabilitation centers all use labor as a disciplinary tool, expecting inmates or patients to work in return for food and shelter. Michael K's refusal to work under coercion, contrasted with his voluntary cultivation of a garden in isolation, signals a redefinition of labor's purpose. As the narrator notes, "He dug in the hard earth because it gave him peace." This activity is not economically productive in the capitalist sense, nor is it coerced by external structures. It is, instead, a personal and ethical engagement with the world, rooted in care, self-sufficiency, and withdrawal from exploitation. His gardening becomes an aesthetic and ethical act, one that defies the norms of institutionalized productivity.

The hospital scenes further reinforce the theme of productive shame. When Michael K is taken in by a military hospital after being found nearly dead from malnutrition, he becomes the object of institutional care that is neither compassionate nor ethically neutral. The doctors and officials treat him as a specimen to be diagnosed, a body to be rehabilitated, and potentially, a subject to be reprogrammed. Michael's resistance takes the form of refusing food and speech, reducing himself to the barest biological presence. Giorgio Agamben's concept of "bare life" becomes relevant here: Michael K is reduced to a life that is no longer politically recognized, but this reduction is transformed into a site of resistance. His act of starving himself is not simply suicidal or depressive; rather, it is an assertion of control over his body, the only domain he still possesses. "If he did not want to eat, he would not eat; if he wanted to die, he would die. That was his last freedom" (Coetzee). This expression of agency through negation redefines what it means to act ethically in a dehumanizing world.

Coetzee's minimalist prose style reinforces these themes by refusing to dramatize Michael's decisions or provide psychological interiority that would render them easily comprehensible. The narrator does not speculate on Michael's inner

thoughts, nor does the text provide emotional cues to guide reader sympathy. Instead, the prose remains spare, detached, and observational. This formal choice parallels Michael's ethical stance: just as he refuses to speak or explain himself, the text refuses to interpret him on the reader's behalf. In doing so, Coetzee enacts what Sara Ahmed calls "a politics of discomfort," where the reader is denied emotional clarity or resolution and must instead confront the opacity of the protagonist. This discomfort is ethically productive—it mirrors the affective dissonance of shame and forces readers to reevaluate their assumptions about recognition, understanding, and agency.

The culmination of Michael K's ethical withdrawal occurs in the novel's final pages, when he returns to Cape Town and occupies a derelict room, content to live off what little he can grow. He does not seek revenge, reconciliation, or redemption. Instead, he envisions a small garden as a space of autonomy and peace. "A garden with a tap, a patch of earth, and a packet of seeds. That was all he asked of life" (Coetzee). This modest vision, in stark contrast to the grand political narratives that dominate the novel's background, offers a profound ethical alternative. It suggests that dignity and resistance can reside in simplicity, care, and self-limitation.

This ending challenges dominant tropes in postcolonial literature that emphasize voice, resistance, and visibility. Michael K's trajectory proposes an ethics of invisibility, silence, and refusal. He does not become a symbol for the oppressed or a mouthpiece for ideology. Instead, he remains illegible, unknowable, and ethically self-sufficient. Judith Butler's insights on performativity help elucidate this position: ethical subjectivity, Butler argues, need not conform to recognizable scripts. In fact, by deviating from these scripts—by not "doing" what is expected of him—Michael K asserts an agency that is both powerful and subversive.

Importantly, the analysis also reveals how Coetzee uses Michael K to problematize the very act of reading and interpretation. The reader, like the officials in the novel, seeks to understand, categorize, and render Michael's actions meaningful within familiar frameworks. Yet the novel resists this impulse at every turn. As Emmanuel Levinas suggests, ethics begins not with comprehension but with the recognition of the other's irreducibility. Michael K embodies this irreducibility. He cannot be "solved" or explained; he must be encountered. In this way, the novel transforms the act of reading into an ethical exercise, inviting the reader to dwell in uncertainty and resist the desire for interpretive closure.

Through this analysis, it becomes evident that Michael K's behavior cannot be reduced to pathology, cowardice, or martyrdom. His choices are informed by a deep awareness of the oppressive structures around him and a conscious decision to exit those structures not through rebellion but through ethical withdrawal. This mode of being is especially resonant in contemporary contexts where resistance is often commodified, and agency is equated with visibility and performance. Michael K challenges these assumptions, demonstrating that silence, refusal, and invisibility can also be powerful forms of political and ethical action.

Ultimately, the results and discussion of this study suggest that *Life & Times of Michael K* is a novel that reimagines the very foundations of subjectivity and resistance. By foregrounding a character who lives at the margins of speech, power, and recognition, Coetzee invites readers to consider the ethical possibilities that lie in affective discomfort, embodied refusal, and the quiet dignity of tending a garden amidst ruins. Michael K does not offer solutions or manifestos; he offers an invitation to think differently about what it means to live ethically in a broken world.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study has explored the intricate ethical and affective dimensions of J. M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*, focusing on how the protagonist's embodied withdrawal from society challenges conventional understandings of resistance, subjectivity, and agency. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus and contemporary affect theories, particularly the notion of productive shame, the analysis has shown that Michael K's actions—his silence, retreat, and refusal to conform—constitute a radical ethical stance that defies legibility within dominant socio-political frameworks. Rather than portraying resistance through dramatic revolt or articulated political agendas, Coetzee presents a subject who engages with power structures through negation, minimalism, and opacity. This approach redefines resistance not as visibility or vocality, but as the right to disappear, to remain uncooperative, and to live ethically on one's own terms.

The novel reveals how shame, often considered a debilitating emotion, can become a site of ethical awakening and refusal. Michael K's productive shame arises from his awareness of the dissonance between his being and the expectations of the world around him. By not conforming, not speaking, and not participating in systems that dehumanize, he exposes the violence inherent in such systems and reclaims his agency. His journey from the urban center to rural isolation, and his eventual choice to live a life of self-sufficiency through gardening, highlights a deep commitment to autonomy and dignity. The novel suggests that the cultivation of a single pumpkin can carry more ethical weight than participation in the spectacle of institutional power or ideological resistance.

Coetzee's minimalist narrative style further reinforces this ethical orientation. The sparse prose mirrors Michael K's own refusal to elaborate or justify his existence. The text avoids grand narrative arcs, emotional climaxes, or ideological resolution. Instead, it offers a steady, quiet rhythm that invites the reader into a space of contemplation and ethical reflection. This formal minimalism demands patience and attentiveness from the reader, positioning reading itself as an

ethical act. The lack of authorial interpretation and psychological exposition forces the audience to encounter Michael K as an opaque other, resisting the urge to categorize or interpret him within familiar tropes. In this way, Coetzee creates a literature of encounter rather than explanation.

The implications of this study extend beyond literary analysis. In a world increasingly saturated with noise, performance, and demands for constant visibility, Michael K's retreat into silence and solitude offers a counter-model of ethical existence. His refusal to be co-opted by any system—whether that of the state, the resistance, or even the narrative voice—serves as a reminder that ethical subjectivity can emerge from stillness, ambiguity, and care. The garden he cultivates becomes a metaphor for a different kind of world-making, one rooted in necessity, humility, and quiet resilience. This redefinition of agency is especially relevant in contemporary global contexts marked by surveillance, forced migration, ecological collapse, and ideological polarization. Michael K reminds us that sometimes, the most radical thing one can do is to care for a small patch of earth and ask nothing of the world in return.

Furthermore, this study contributes to a growing body of Coetzee scholarship that seeks to move beyond allegorical or political readings and into the terrain of ethics, affect, and form. By foregrounding habitus and shame as interpretive frameworks, the analysis opens new pathways for understanding how literature can engage with the body, emotion, and social structure in ways that resist reduction. It also underscores the importance of attending to formal qualities—style, silence, pacing—as integral to a text's ethical architecture. Coetzee's fiction does not dictate how one should live but rather stages ethical dilemmas in their most stripped-down form, inviting the reader to wrestle with them in all their discomfort and ambiguity.

In conclusion, *Life & Times of Michael K* offers a profound meditation on the ethics of withdrawal, the power of silence, and the dignity of refusal. Through Michael K, Coetzee articulates a form of agency that does not rely on speech, recognition, or heroic action but is grounded in the body, in stillness, and in the careful cultivation of life on the margins. This study has demonstrated that such a form of agency is not only coherent but also deeply political in its resistance to co-optation and control. In Michael K's modest life, readers are invited to consider new possibilities for ethical being—possibilities that are as quiet as they are revolutionary. The novel leaves us with an image of a man, a garden, and a packet of seeds—an image that, in its simplicity, carries the weight of an entire ethical vision.

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