Open Access Library Journal
2024, Volume 11, e12031
ISSN Online: 2333-9721
ISSN Print: 2333-9705

Michael K's Survival Predicaments: An Existential Interpretation of *Life and Times of Michael K*

Yuechen Zhou

School of Foreign Languages, Yunnan University, Kunming, China
Email: zhou.yuechen@qq.com

How to cite this paper: Zhou, Y.C. (2024) Michael K's Survival Predicaments: An Existential Interpretation of *Life and Times of Michael K*. *Open Access Library Journal*, **11**: e12031.
https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1112031

Received: July 30, 2024
Accepted: August 19, 2024
Published: August 22, 2024

Copyright © 2024 by author(s) and Open Access Library Inc.
This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).
http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/
Open Access

Abstract

John Maxwell Coetzee, recipient of the 2003 Nobel Prize in Literature, stands as the first author to win the Booker Prize twice. One of his representative works, *Life and Times of Michael K*, narrates the journey of a solitary gardener struggling to survive in a South African town ravaged by war and apartheid. With assistance of existential theory, this thesis aims to examine the Michael K's survival predicaments and pursuit of freedom in terms of absurdity, alienation, and freedom of choice in *Life and Times of Michael K*. The novel reflects Coetzee's contemplation on the absurdity and contingency of the South African, the alienation and predicaments of characters, and Michael K's choice of the freedom. Aligned with Sartre's existentialism, which emphasizes free choice and the quest for meaning in a seemingly meaningless world, this paper analyzes existential themes in *Life and Times of Michael K* from three aspects. A conclusion is reached that although Michael K lives in adversity, he does not succumb to it but instead courageously takes action and defies his fate. This study not only provides a comprehensive evaluation of *Life and Times of Michael K* but also deeply understands Coetzee's reflection on the survival conditions of ordinary people.

Subject Areas

Literature

Keywords

Life and Times of Michael K, John Maxwell Coetzee, Sartrean Existentialism, Absurdity, Alienation, Free Will

1. Introduction

John Maxwell Coetzee is a renowned South African novelist, essayist, and trans-

lator. He has won the Booker Prize for Fiction twice, firstly in 1983 for his novel *Life and Times of Michael K* and again in 1999 for *Disgrace*, making him the first author to win the award consecutively. Additionally, he was honored with the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2003. Coetzee's novel *Life and Times of Michael K* garnered significant attention upon its publication due to its rich allegorical content. Set against the backdrop of a war-torn South Africa, a period characterized by severe racial segregation, political unrest, and widespread violence, the novel takes place during a fictional civil war, which amplifies existing societal fractures and heightens the struggles of marginalized individuals. Michael K, the protagonist, embarks on a journey from the city to the countryside to fulfill his ailing mother's wish to return to her rural birthplace. As he traverses this war-torn landscape, Michael K encounters numerous obstacles, including military checkpoints, labor camps, and the constant threat of starvation. Through Michael K's solitary and arduous journey, Coetzee delves into themes of resilience, the quest for autonomy, and the search for meaning in an indifferent and often hostile world. The themes of loneliness, alienation, and absurdity depicted in the novel resonate with existentialist ideas.

The thesis aims to analyze the survival conditions of Michael K under apartheid in South Africa in J.M. Coetzee's novel *Life and Times of Michael K* using key concepts of Sartre's existentialism, examining how he navigates through suffering and alienation by exercising freedom of choice and assuming responsibility to reclaim their true selves. The thesis analyzes three aspects of absurdity: the external world of war, the social environment of racial segregation, and Michael K's internal experience of hunger. It then delves into Michael K's self-alienation and the alienation of his interpersonal relationships in such a repressive society. Finally, it examines Michael K's three choices from the perspective of his free will, that is, escape from the camps, refusal of charity, and hunger strike, along with the choices he makes and the costs he incurs throughout this process.

The thesis consists of an introduction, literature review, theoretical framework, a main body of three parts and a conclusion. The introduction provides a brief overview of J.M. Coetzee and his novel *Life and Times of Michael K*, while also explaining the research basis and significance of the paper. Literature review presents the current research on Coetzee's novel *Life and Times of Michael K* both domestically and internationally. Theoretical framework offers a brief introduction to the development of existentialism and the main tenets of Sartre's existentialism, including concepts such as "absurdity", "alienation" and "free choice". Part one, two, and three constitute the main body of the thesis. Part one analyzes the three major existential challenges faced by Michael K: endless war, apartheid in South Africa, and hunger. Part two deals with self and interpersonal relation from the perspective of alienation. Part three explores how Michael K comes to understand the value and meaning of life.

At the end of the thesis, a conclusion is reached that although Michael K lives in adversity, he does not succumb to it but instead courageously takes action and

defies his fate. Through an existential interpretation of *Life and Times of Michael K*, it becomes apparent that people universally face adversity, and only through proactive action and the willingness to assume responsibility can they transcend their circumstances and achieve genuine existence.

2. Literature Review

In the novel *Life and Times of Michael K*, Coetzee expresses his deep concern for the people at the bottom of the apartheid period in South Africa. Due to the extensive and profound nature of Coetzee's novels, scholars have utilized various literary criticism methods to analyze his works. This section will present the previous studies in terms of research at home and abroad.

2.1. Research Abroad

Foreign research on *Life and Times of Michael K* started earlier. The perspectives of those researches mainly include post-colonialism, ecological criticism, allegory stylistics, power relationships.

Considering Coetzee's background and South Africa's distinctive history, many scholars have shown interest in the post-colonial elements present in this book. Cody Mullins [1] uses the post-colonial theory of Homi Baba and Edward Said to analyze the post-colonial "others" conquered by imperial oppressive weapons. They can only use silence as a weapon to oppose the control of colonial and apartheid systems. Likewise, Arnd Bohm [2] believes the causes and effects of k's silence and evasion in the novel from the perspective of freedom of speech and discourse power. Elham Naeej [3] analyzes the colonial model of marginal figures and focused on the economy of male identity in the post-colonial context.

Since 2010, more scholars have analyzed the book in the way of ecocriticism. For instance, in 2012, Neimneh S and Muhaidat F believe that Coetzee's ecological view is politically related and his ethical and political vision is not limited to human beings [4]. Similarly, the relationship between the main characters in the book and the physical environment is shown and the racial discrimination faced by black people is discuss the atmosphere during apartheid [5].

Some other critical approaches are adopted by scholars to study this novel, such as psychoanalysis, narrative and so on. Mike Marais [6] believes that Michael K and other characters use negative labor as a way of resistance. Duncan McColl Chesney [7] adopts the ethical theory and expounded Michael K's silence to lead to the gap between politics and personal moral responsibility. Whereas Turner Christina [8] takes Coetzee's two novels *Life and Times of Michael K* and Foe and some related archives as research texts to explore how Coetzee uses intertextuality to position herself as a white free writer in South African society.

2.2. Research at Home

Research on J. M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K* has only been ongoing for less than 20 years in China. After Coetzee won the Nobel Prize for literature

in 2003, Chinese scholars began to take an interest in him. Domestic research on *Life and Times of Michael K* has mainly focused on post-colonialism, ecocriticism, narratology, power relations, and spatial narration.

Yin Rui [9] believes that the silent landscape echoes the inner trauma of the protagonist Michael K. The scenery finally becomes Michael K's spiritual shelter and dream home in an imaginative way. Taking Coetzee's novels and literary reviews as the research object, Li Zhen [10] uses the methods of text analysis and comparative literature parallel research to explore the natural and ecological elements contained in Coetzee's works, and analyzes Coetzee's personalized perspectives and views on natural ecology and social ecology. Similarly, Jiang Hui [11] analyzes the narrative of *Life and Times of Michael K* to summarize the rewriting of traditional narrative models in post-colonial writing.

The research of Cai and Lu [12] on the space narrative believes that the novel expresses the realistic space of Michael K's life, the construction of dream space and the perspective space of "I" as a doctor through the presentation of images in the text. Whereas some studies start from Chinese traditional thoughts, such as employing the three basic concepts of Confucian culture to interpret the filial piety, seclusion thought, and the concept of the unity of heaven and man embodied in the behavior of the protagonist Michael K, and excavate the deep ethical value and practical significance contained in the text [13].

2.3. Research Gap

After reviewing the research status quo of J.M. Coetzee's Life and Times of Michael K, the following conclusions can be drawn.

Foreign researches on Coetzee's novel are relatively comprehensive, while domestic researches on Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K* start relatively late. Topics are discussed from a variety of perspectives, such as post-colonialism, ecocriticism, narratology, allegorical stylistics. However, there has been less reflection on "existentialism" in Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K*. Therefore, this thesis aims to analyze the survival conditions of Michael K under apartheid in South Africa by using key concepts of Sartre' s existentialism.

3. Theoretical Framework

Sartre's existentialism focuses on the human situation and prioritizes the human beings' existence. In 1938, Sartre published his novel *Nausea*, which presents the basic categories of existence, including essence, absurdity, nothingness, time, and contingency. Since *Life and Times of Michael K* deals with human survival dilemma and free choice, it is possible and worthwhile to analyze this novel from an existentialist perspective. The following are some of the major ideas in Sartre's existentialism as the theoretical framework of this thesis.

3.1. Absurdity

"The world is absurd" is the key point emphasized in Sartre' existentialism phi-

losophy. This notion is intricately linked to Sartre's view of human existence as Being-for-itself, which means "being what it is not and not being what it is" [14]. *Being and Nothingness* is a key work in which Sartre expounds his philosophy of existence and otherness. Sartre believes that human existence is not a stationary being but nothingness. Nothingness enters the world through human existence, and nothingness is the inverse of being. Because man is both a Being-for-itself and nothingness, he proceeds to deny himself during the temporal dimension, reconstructing himself and make his own essence. As a result, man's existence comes before his essence.

In essence, the world is meaningless and absurd. It is due to its contingency that the world seems absurd. The notion of the absurd refers to a world without any real purpose other than the one people give it. People choose and act to create their own meaning in life, not by virtue of a supreme creator defining their lives. Because of the absurdity of the world, anything can happen to anyone at any point in time. People have no right to choose what they want or what they don't want. They are thrown accidentally into the absurd universe and have to bear with what's surrounding them. Man is a kind of hopeless, incidental creature.

3.2. Alienation

Alienation is expressed in Sartre's conception "Hell is other people", which means that if the relationship with others is distorted and destroyed, hell is others [15]. Others take over a person's world and regard him as a mere object with subjectivity. However, nobody wants to be seen as an object, they all desire to be the subject. Alienation therefore arises along with this conflict. Man who is alienated often feels that his life is controlled by other things, for instance, chance, destiny or something supernatural, and not by himself. He leads a pointless life and refuses to take on any societal obligations or responsibilities.

Existentialists believe that when there is conflict between people, alienation and self-alienation are bound to occur. The existence of one person is a threat to the freedom of another, which intensifies the relationship between people. Alienation is divided into interpersonal alienation and self-alienation. Self-alienation is also known as self-estrangement, for Sartre, one is inauthentic when one is isolated from oneself, and one becomes inauthentic in coexisting with others in an alienated world. Sartre believes that the basic cause of alienation is material scarcity.

3.3. Freedom of Choice

The essence of existentialism is the principle of freedom of choice. People have their own freedom in this world, according to Sartre, in terms of what to do and how to act in various situations. People cannot explain their acts by following a certain or specific human nature if existence precedes essence. All this is to say, people have the freedom to make their own decisions. The essence of this freedom, according to Sartre, is the ability to choose one's own nature and human freedom is a form of absolute freedom that surpasses all other freedoms. People

have an unalienable right to enjoy their liberty.

What is more important is that Sartre recognizes the objectivity of the external world. His freedom is equated with some sort of positive action. Making a free choice is the only way to improve a miserable life, yet it has no bearing on the consequence. All people have is the right to choose, and giving away that right is also a form of free choice. According to Sartre, people's fate is not determined by God, but rather produced by their own decisions. Emphasizing the subjectivity and power of self-consciousness, Sartre believes that human beings should not be bound by the absurd.

4. Absurdity in Life and Times of Michael K

Life and Times of Michael K sets in South Africa, which is a desolate country after the outbreak of the civil war, depicts the struggles of a humble man who suffer from hunger and tries to survive in a society plagued by cruelty and apartheid. The world, as defined by Sartre, is one filled with contingency, where "human reality participates in the universal contingency of being and thereby in what we may call absurdity" [14]. The absurdity of the world therefore is rendered by absolute contingency, *i.e.*, on-going war, apartheid, and hunger that all show the absurdity of the world.

4.1. On-Going War

The novel follows Michael K's journey as he struggles to survive in a South African society fraught with war, where he has become a victim of circumstances beyond his control. The absurdity of his situation is not determined by Michael K himself but by the unexpected events and contingencies of the world into which he was born. In the 1980s, social unrest and conflict in South Africa escalated to unprecedented levels, a reality reflected in the novel's opening line: "War is the father of all and king of all. Some he shows as gods, others as men. Some he makes slaves, and others free" [16]. This quote serves as a stark portrayal of the era, highlighting how the arbitrary nature of war determines the fates of individuals. In this chaotic world, innocent people are involuntarily drawn into the conflict. The population lives in a state of constant panic and fear, illustrating the absurdity of a world where the ordinary person has little control over their destiny. So, it is conceivable that a small person like Michael K will be the next victim of the cruelty and ruthlessness of the annals of history.

To escape the war, people desert their orchards and homes, epitomizing the existential contingency of life. Through Michael K's eyes, the novel portrays the desolation and depression that the colonial war wrought upon Cape Town, a city symbolic of the larger South African society. The shattered remains of the Visagie farm, once a dream of Michael's, now stand as a testament to the absurdity of existence. "He followed the perimeter fence all the way around the farm without meeting any living sign of neighbors" [16], illustrating the nothingness that war leaves in its wake. The disappearance of farming under the ethnic war's

shadow underscores the existential crisis faced by those who depend on the land for their livelihood, suffering mental trauma that lingers amidst the ruins of their former lives.

4.2. Apartheid

In the novel, the protagonists Michael K and Anna K encounter all kinds of discrimination and injustice, stemming from the apartheid system, which exemplifies the existential condition of Being-for-itself and nothingness. Michael K and his mother can only shrink in the humid and narrow air-conditioning room under the stairs. There is no electricity or ventilation there, and the air is often mouldy [16]. In stark contrast, the white owners, the Buhrmanns, reside in a five-room apartment with a sea view overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. This disparity in living conditions under apartheid underscores the absurdity of a world where social norms are built on injustice and dehumanization.

The influence of apartheid is further evident in the Pass laws, which require colored people to carry a variety of permits at all times, such as residence, job search, relocation, and travel permits. The complexity and arbitrariness of these permits illustrate the contingency of the world and the lack of meaning in such regulations. Michael K's inability to obtain the permit becomes a significant obstacle, preventing him and his mother from returning to their hometown. "You can't travel outside the Peninsula without a permit. Go to the checkpoint and show them your permit and your papers" [16]. The permit system, under apartheid, functions as a tool of control and oppression, akin to a "cold yoke" around the necks of colored South Africans.

The novel reflects the existentialist view that the absurdity and contingency of the apartheid system are manifest in the lives of Michael K and Anna K. The stark contrasts in living conditions and the oppressive permit system demonstrate the world's meaninglessness and absurdity, where individuals are thrown into circumstances beyond their control.

4.3. Hunger

In the novel, Michael K's frequent encounters with hunger underscore the absurdity and contingency of his existence. In his infancy, he often cries with hunger because his hare lip could not suck his mother's nipple, symbolizing the inherent vulnerability and lack of control in human existence. As a child, his hunger drives him to animal-like behaviors, such as stealing food and scavenging for scraps, reducing his humanity to a basic struggle for survival. Michael K's hunger persists into adulthood, shaping his actions. "He stood and ate, taking bites of good flesh here and there, chewing as quickly as a rabbit, his eyes vacant" [16]. This state of existence, where the pursuit of food becomes the primary motivator, reflects the notion of Being-for-itself, where individuals are constantly thrown into situations beyond their control and must confront the nothingness that underlies the existence.

At the farm, the skinny K's pursuit of sheep for sustenance is an illustration of the absurdity of his mental situation. This desperate chase for sustenance, driven by the fundamental need, exemplifies how human behavior is twisted by the harsh realities of a world. Despite he hates to behave like a "barbarian", Michael K's actions are a direct result of the absurd circumstances. In addition to Michael K, hunger is the existential state of most people. The whole city is like a "sea of hungry mouths" [16]. A large number of people in the camp sacrifice their freedom and work hard for just a piece of food. Forced by the crave for survival, human behavior is gradually distorted and evolved into an animal behavior. This collective hunger further highlights the contingency of the world, where the pursuit of basic needs overshadows the search for freedom. Sartre asserts that "The being of human reality is suffering" [14] is vividly illustrated by the characters' experiences, as they navigate a world that is both meaningless and absurd.

5. Alienation in *Life and Times of Michael K*

Alienation, a central concept in Sartre's existentialism, refers to a state of social disconnection marked by low integration, shared values, and heightened isolation. It can manifest as active isolation by individuals or passive alienation by those who disregard an individual. Alienation leads to chaotic, discordant lives. In the novel, Michael K experiences alienation in three dimensions: the distance between the self and the authentic self, between the self and others, and between the self and nature.

5.1. Self-Alienation

Michael K's alienation is partly caused by his loneliness, which stems from his low social status, unhappy childhood experience in Huis Norenius School, broken family relations, and discrimination caused by appearance defects. Michael K in the novel is deeply haunted by loneliness. Michael K, born with physical and mental disabilities, has occupied a marginalized social position from the outset. Raised solely by his mother, he is often taken to her cleaning jobs as a child. "Because their smiles and whispers hurt her, she kept it away from other children. Year after year Michael K sat on a blanket watching his mother polish other people's floors, learning to be quiet" [16]. Due to his disfigurement and slow mental development, Michael K is sent to Huis Norenius. There, he spends the rest of his childhood among other afflicted children. The stark social hierarchy and the unseen injury exerted by the masters keep him silent. After graduation, subject to the legal constraints at that time, Michael K's employment options are limited to humble jobs like gardener and toilet night watchman, which naturally make him lack of communication opportunities. Michael K's prolonged experience of self-alienation and loneliness shape him into a withdrawn, eccentric individual, accustomed to indifference and low social status.

Michael K's alienation is also caused by the indifferent social environment.

People's values and moralities are collapsing as a result of living in a world full of hypocrisy, instability, and irrationality. In such circumstances, the entire society is filled with emptiness, selfishness, and suffering due to a lack of spiritual concern. Loneliness and indifferent relationships lead to Michael K's self-alienation. On the one hand, it makes him be isolated from the world, on the other hand, Michael K no longer believes people should care for each other. On the way to Prince Albert city, a kind and strange man invites Michael K home for dinner. Michael K shares the cold reception he encountered on his journey. The man expresses his belief that people should help each other, but Michael K remains unconvinced. In a world marked by indifference and absurdity, Michael K's struggle with authenticity is a reflection of his existential crisis, as he navigates a world that does not align with his own sense of what is meaningful and real, and he is destined to experience alienation.

5.2. Interpersonal Relation

Although Michael K faces self-alienation due to his own internal struggles, the indifferent outside world and his interpersonal relations further contribute to his inner loneliness. The world then is full of war, violence, and death. Living in such world, people are threatened by all kinds of dangers and mentally stressed, often becoming irrational and alienated. This links back to the theme of self-alienation and extends to interpersonal alienation. According to existentialists, one cannot live an isolated life, and interaction with various people is inevitable and essential. In the novel, Michael K experiences alienation in his interactions with others. For example, when he goes to the police station to inquire about the permit, the female police officer responds aggressively: "Don't waste my time. I am telling you for the last time, if the permit is granted the permit will come! Don't you see all these people waiting" Don't you understand? Are you an idiot?" [16]. The police officer acts indifferently and mechanically, illustrating the impersonal nature of their interaction. Living in such a chaotic city, Anna and Michael K can only huddle in the basement "like mice" all day.

Another instance of alienation occurs when Michael K's mother falls ill after reaching Stellenbosch. When Michael K discovers she has stopped breathing, he hurried to call a nurse to help. However, the nurse takes his mother's pulse briefly and then returns to her work, ignoring Michael K's pleas for assistance. She coldly replies that there are many other patients in the hospital waiting for care, and she has no time for Michael K's mother. Indifference has become the norm. This inherent danger of alienation in one's relationship with others arises from the fact that when individuals are consumed by the struggle to overcome scarcity and satisfy their own needs, they become alienated from themselves and from others. Consequently, interpersonal conflicts escalate.

5.3. Humans and Animals

In the face of harsh living conditions, humanity's struggle for survival often

leads to the deprivation of animal freedom. Coetzee employs rich animal images and metaphors to illustrate the brutal environment wrought by colonial exploitation, reflecting the shared suffering of both animals and humans under oppressive regimes. There are many descriptions of animal slaughter in the novel. Michael K, although living like an animal in subjugation, also played the role of persecutor in the context of the war. At the visagies farm, he comes to the harsh realization that to survive, he must capture, kill, and consume the long-haired, big-nosed animals, or their ilk [16]. The novel vividly portrays Michael K's act of killing sheep, a task he once finds unimaginable. In that moment, he becomes a savage wielding a knife. It is precisely the scarcity of food caused by war that strips human beings of emotions such as compassion and sympathy, reducing animals to mere appendages and resources to be exploited at will.

However, the war is another factor that transforms Michael K into an alienated barbarian, with reluctance he still becomes a barbarian holding a butcher's knife to kill animals. He becomes a victim, like the small, defenseless animals that have been targeted by colonizers and those in power. In turn, he himself becomes vulnerable, like those animals unable to resist, and is subjected to destruction by the same forces. This parallel highlights the cruelty of colonial war and apartheid, underscoring the dehumanizing and brutal nature of such systems. Coetzee's portrayal serves as a stark reminder that humans are intricately connected to other forms of life in nature. However, the degradation of this relationship not only inflicts suffering on animals but also reflects the broader dehumanization and brutality within society. Through the use of animal imagery, Coetzee emphasizes the importance of humans striving to maintain a harmonious relationship not only with animals but also with other human beings. When this relationship is fractured, humans risk isolation and helplessness.

6. Freedom of choice in *Life and Times of Michael K*

Although people struggle in an absurd world, the alienated soul seems to have no redemption. However, existentialism offers a way out. Sartre proposes that "Man is free to choose," a key aspect of his theory [15]. Everyone, especially those in danger, should take responsibility for their own lives. In the novel, faced with contempt, indifference and various threats, Michael K actively fights for his freedom in three main ways: escaping from camp, rejecting charity and becoming a caretaker of the land. Despite the bleak atmosphere and cold social interactions, Michael K can still decide who he truly want to be.

6.1. Escape from Camps

Although Michael K is physically weak, he is indomitable against fate and power in his own way. He proves the meaning of his life through his actions, his resistance is manifested in three escapes. The first escape is from the control of the farm owner's grandson. The grandson wants to control Michael K, asking him to work and buy things for him with threats: "I'm not the one who pays you, I can't

put you off the farm just like that. But we have to work together, otherwise." [16] Realizing the man wants to turn him into a servant, Michael K immediately leaves, even after all the effort he took to find the farm after his mother's death. On the way to buy things, Michael K initially follows orders but later gives up. He even tosses away the grandson's money rather than saving it, because saving it would mean he couldn't entirely get rid of him. This demonstrates Michael K's deep yearning for freedom and his refusal to be enslaved by others.

The labor camp, representing state authority and power, is the site of his second and third escapes. On the surface, it provides help for the homeless, beggars, the unemployed, but in reality, it deprives individuals of their freedom of choice. Jakkalsdrif camp has a set of rules that strip individuals of self-choice and force them to work. Sartre posits that hell arises from absurd circumstances like concentration camps and famously states, "hell is other people", revealing conflicts and confrontation among people in such horrible places [15]. In the camp, Michael K becomes restless and negative, understanding that to avoid control and subjugation, he must take action. He eventually escapes. When Michael K is sent to the camp for the second time, in Kenilworth, he resisted in the unique way of silence and hunger strike. He reflects that there are various camps for people of different identities in this world [16]. Society is divided into camps that act like a net of power, covering everyone in it. Michael K persisted in fleeing, courageously pursuing a free life.

6.2. Refusal of Charity

Michael K's pursuit of freedom is also reflected in his refusal of charity. To him, accepting other's charity means losing of freedom. Michael K's refusal of people's charity is shown in his experience in the camps. Michael K tries to escape the camp twice, recognizing the true nature of the camp's "charity." The so-called charity imposed by the empire on the weak is just a form of false benevolence. This can be exemplified by an imperial soldier's words, "You have no appreciation for anything! When you don't have a place to reside, who builds houses for you? When you're shivering from the cold, who brings you tents and blankets? Who looks after you?" [16]. Food in the camp is a false charity to Michael K, accepting it means yielding to the regime. Michael K understands that the essence of charity is the transformation of the human will into conquest. His refusal to eat the food given by camps highlights his status as an individual with his own consciousness.

In the last camp, the camp doctor, representing the white colonists, imposes his "charity" on Michael K. The medical officer tried his best to rescue K so that he can rejoin the camp life and continue to shout slogans and salute the national flag. This hypocritical style reflected the mentality of white colonial parents and their self-righteous sense of mission, *i.e.*, believing that colonized people need to be rescued and supervised. The colonists establish their identity by otherizing those they claim to help. The medical officer encourages Michael K to speak and

tell his story with "goodwill". Michael K, however, insists on not responding to the "good intentions" of the medical officer and stubbornly keeps silent [16]. Where there is power, there is resistance. Opposing charity is a form of resistance to power, and resisting power is pursuing freedom. Michael K gains his freedom through his own choices.

6.3. Bread of Freedom

In the novel, Michael K establishes a deep connection with the land, which he considers his spiritual "bread". One reason for his deep love for the land is that gardening is his identity, and he derives happiness from planting. When asked about his life experience, Michael K always responds: "I am a gardener" [16]. When he first arrives at the farm, everything is in ruins. Michael K rebuilds the farm with his hands, shovels the soil, reclaims wasteland to plant corn and pumpkins, and repairs the water pump. In Michael K's unsophisticated mind, he hates the life of being driven and monitored and thought he is not in the war, which is incomprehensible in the eyes of the white medical officer. Despite his belief in an insurmountable gap in his story, the identity of a gardener remains a core truth for Michael K, bringing him joy and peace.

Michael K's second motivation is to avoid war and seek freedom outside colonial power. He feels protected by the earth and is not afraid even when darkness comes. He thought the earth could protect him. He returns to the farm because he believes he can live freely there. When he arrives at the abandoned farm, he cultivates a piece of land to grow pumpkins. Free from the oppressive war and social discipline, Michael K finds inner freedom. It could be said that Michael K, the gardener, cultivates not only the farm, but the free-living space outside the colonial power. In this sense, farming has also become his way of resisting racial power. Although he is almost half-starved, he still flees from the camps where have enough food and clothing, to grow his crops, choosing to eat "free bread". Despite his hardships, he never gives up on his gardening dreams.

7. Conclusions

Life and Times of Michael K explores humanity's plight and their responses to it. Sartre's existentialism addresses human existence and how to escape predicaments, aligning with the essence of Coetzee's works. This thesis analyzes the dilemmas faced by the protagonists in *Life and Times of Michael K* face and their responses.

Living in a world full of absurdity, the protagonist suffers greatly. War destroys lives and homelands, apartheid oppresses non-whites, and hunger threatens survival. Interpersonal relationships are strained, violence and conflicts are rampant, and people are indifferent to each other. Michael K suffers self-alienation and isolation, and the human-animal relationship is destroyed as animals become objects of capture.

Existentialism stresses people's freedom of choice and respects individuality.

People can cope with adversity through their choices and behaviors. In the novel, Michael K fights for freedom by escaping camps, rejecting charity, and becoming a caretaker of the land. Through existential interpretation, it is evident that making positive choices, taking action, and bearing responsibility are ways to overcome difficulties and realize life's value and meaning.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Professor Zou for your invaluable guidance and support throughout the process of writing this thesis. Your profound knowledge, insightful feedback, and unwavering encouragement have been instrumental in shaping the direction and depth of my research. I am particularly grateful for the time you have dedicated to reviewing my work, which has significantly contributed to its improvement.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

References

[1] Mullins, C.C. (2009) Silence as Insubordination: Friday and Michael K's Wordless Weapon, a Post-Colonial Approach to J. M. Coetzee's Foe and Life and Times of Michael K. Master's Thesis, Marshall University.

[2] Bohm, A. (2000). Coercion to Speak in J. M. Coetzee's Life & Times of Michael K. *International Fiction Review*, **27**, No. 1.

[3] Naeej, E. (2017) Iterative Mimicry as Writing Back: Role Reversion in Coetzee's Foe, Disgrace and Life and Times of Michael K. *Journal of Language Horizons*, **1**, 39-51.

[4] Neimneh, S. and Muhaidat, F. (2012) The Ecological Thought of J.M. Coetzee: The Case of Life and Times of Michael K. *Studies in Literature and Language*, **4**, 12-19.

[5] Lijcklama à Nijeholt, J.L. (2014) Eco-Criticism in *The Life and Times of Michael K* and *The Conservationist*. MA Thesis, Utrecht University, Netherlands.

[6] Marais, M. (2001) Literature and the Labour of Negation: J.M. Coetzee's Life and Times of Michael K. *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, **36**, 107-125. https://doi.org/10.1177/002198940103600108

[7] Chesny, D.M. (2007) Toward an Ethics of Silence: Michael K.. *Criticism*, **49**, 307-325. https://doi.org/10.1353/crt.0.0036

[8] Turner, C. (2013) J.M. Coetzee's Occluded Intertextuality: Reading Text, Inter Text and the Archive in Life & Times of Michael K and Foe. Master's Thesis, The University of British Columbia.

[9] 尹锐. 沉默与逃避——论《迈克尔·K 的生活和时代》中的风景[J]. 东北大学学报(社会科学版), 2011, 13(4): 372-376.

[10] 李臻. 论库切创作中的生态意识[D]: [博士学位论文]. 天津: 天津师范大学, 2015.

[11] 蒋晖. "耻"的哀悼: 大屠杀叙事与后殖民写作的伦理转向——从《迈克尔·K 的生活和时代》说起[J]. 上海师范大学学报(哲学社会科学版), 2021, 50(2): 74-83.

[12] 蔡圣勤, 芦婷. 论《迈克尔·K 的生活和时代》中的空间叙事[J]. 山东外语教学, 2018, 39(2): 78-87.

[13] 金怀梅. 儒家思想视域下的《迈克尔·K 的生活和时代》解读[J]. 江南大学学报(人文社会科学版), 2020, 19(4): 117-122, 128.

[14] Sartre, J.P. (1993). Being and Nothingness. Washington Square Press.

[15] Sartre, J.P. (2007) Existentialism Is a Humanism. Yale University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv15vwkgx

[16] Coetzee, J.M. (1983) Life and Times of Michael K. Vintage.