



K's Silent Defiance in *Life & Time of Michael K* from the Perspective of Kant's Conception of Freedom

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Abstract

The book *Life & Time of Michael K* is Coetzee's great work, and won the Booker Prize. *Life & Time of Michael K* describes Michael K's miserable fate in South Africa amid a civil war, but he faces suffering bravely through his silent defiance. Most studies, however, have focused on K's silent defiance from post-colonial theory, Sartre's existentialism, and Foucault's theories of discipline and punishment, which overlooks the philosophical value of K's silent defiance. To address this gap, this paper, under the guidance of Kant's philosophical concept of freedom, explores how K makes silent defiance. A conclusion is reached that K gains freedom in a turbulent society through silent defiance from three aspects: making escape choices, keeping away from interpersonal relationships, and obtaining solace in nature.

Subject Areas

Literature

Keywords

Life & Time of Michael K, Michael K, The Transcendental Freedom, The Practical Freedom, The Sense of Freedom, Silent Defiance

1. Introduction

J. M. Coetzee (1940-now) is an outstanding South African novelist. Since his first publication of *Dusklands* in 1974, he has moved closer to creating a work in which he openly criticizes the inequities of white rule and apartheid in South Africa. His book *Life & Time of Michael K*, set in South Africa, is his masterpiece, which won the Booker Prize. *Life & Time of Michael K* concerns the protagonist Michael K

beset by circumstances he can neither comprehend nor control in South Africa amid a civil war, and what he can do is to face the dilemma defiantly in a silent way: escaping, ignoring interpersonal relationships, and obtaining solace in nature.

Michael K is born with a harelip-wearing simpleton with a gaping left nostril. The novel starts with K quitting his work and bringing his bedridden mother, Anna, back to her home. Because of Anna's passing, the plan fails, but K is on his own. On the journey, he is caught several times by authorities restricting his freedom, encounters different people, and enjoys nature to pursue his dream of freedom.

There will be five parts to this paper. The first part is introduction which mainly introduces the author, background of the novel, and the main content of the novel. The literature review is the second part. It summarizes pertinent domestic and international research on *Life & Time of Michael K*. Following the review of the literature, a research gap regarding K's silent defiance is revealed. The theoretical framework makes up the third part. It explains Kant's concept of freedom from three perspectives that are used throughout the study: the transcendental freedom, the practical freedom, and the sense of freedom. The fourth part is the main part, which clarifies K's real-world predicament and his three strategies for silent defiance based on Kant's idea of freedom. In the first, K's escape choices are presented in the context of the transcendental freedom. The second presents K's solitary happiness with the practical freedom. K's refreshment from nature is revealed in the third from the standpoint of the sense of freedom. Finally, this paper concludes that even amid limitations, the hero in the novel can use his free will to overcome every challenge.

2. Literature Review

Both domestically and internationally, the hero K in *Life & Time of Michael K* has been receiving a lot of attention. Studies on ethnicity, post-colonialism, transcendentalism, symbolic nature, narrative skills, existentialism, politics, and others have been undertaken by a large number of researchers. This paper aims to research K's silent defiance with the analysis of his escape choices, relations with other people, and nature solace with the help of Kant's philosophical concept of freedom.

2.1. Current Research on K's Defiance in *Life & Time of Michael K*

Numerous research on K's defiance has been conducted all across the world. Although K's life is filled with shame, K is upright and compassionate to fight against his unfair fate [1]. Similarly, it examines K's defiance through his life experiences: K makes a lifelong effort to overcome the limitations imposed by the government and desires soul freedom [2]. Subsequently, K's contradiction of his love of the farm, his discontent about racial segregation, and his unclear self-identity highlights the suffering he feels and his defiance of homelessness [3]. Furthermore, a large number of researchers use postcolonial theory, Sartre's existentialism, and

Foucault's theories of discipline and punishment to conduct comparable studies in their master theses on K's silent resistance [4]-[7]. There are also other studies done on the topic overseas. According to O'Connell, K is a strong man with going through many adversities [8]. Because of his eventual aversion to interacting with his social and political milieu, Narasimha hails K as an anti-hero [9].

2.2. Current Research on *Life & Time of Michael K* from a Philosophical

Perspective

From the standpoint of Confucian philosophy, the void is made up by a Chinese scholar Jin Huamei.

From Confucian philosophy, Jin uses three facets of Confucian tradition to illustrate K's filial piety, seclusion, and harmony between nature and man [10]. Jin also makes use of Confucian ecological philosophy to explain why nature, as shown in *Life & Time of Michael K*, is a vital component of the human moral community and offers helpful conceptual tools for resolving humanity's growing existential crisis [11]. However, Jin emphasizes the relationship between man and nature and ignores the value of K's defiance itself.

2.3. Research Gap

Based on the information above, we discover the resemblance in K's defiance is immensely remarkable. Some Chinese studies have analyzed the work from a philosophical perspective. However, research focus on K's defiance from a philosophical perspective is rare. Therefore, with the analysis of his escape choices, relations with other people, and nature solace, this paper aims to study K's silent defiance with the help of Kant's philosophical concept of freedom.

3. The Theory of Kant's Conception of Freedom

This paper employs Kant's concept of freedom to analyze K's silent defiance in his escape choices, interpersonal relationships, and nature solace.

Freedom is one of the main themes of Kant's philosophy. The word "freedom" emerged initially in his early writings in the 1750s, where he shows an absolute value of freedom and is motivated to pursue freedom [12]. By the 1760s, Kant emphasized the importance of moral relations to others in his writing "disinterested feeling of concern for others" is "nobler than the self-interested one" [13]. However, being influenced by others is a negative freedom form as he noted that if his future is determined by others, it is "misery" [14]. In Demenchonok's work, it can be seen that Kant also sees a "positive conception of freedom" as the free ability to choose and the law giving ability of oneself. Kant develops the concept of freedom in his mature works in the 1780s. In *Groundwork on the Metaphysics of Morals*, he proposed three formulations of the categorical imperative, which further distinguish heteronomy and autonomy, and deeply explain the freedom of will and the principle of humanity [15].

Because Kant's original concept of freedom is fragmented, it leaves later scholars ample research room. This paper applies the Chinese scholar Deng Xiaomang's interpretation of Kant's conception of freedom. Deng divides Kant's conception of freedom into three levels: "the transcendental freedom", "the practical freedom" and "the sense of freedom" [16]. "The transcendental freedom" is the idea of freedom, which is influenced by one's emotional impulses or self-motivation. The former is negative transcendental freedom and the latter is positive transcendental freedom. "The practical freedom" includes "the general practical freedom" and "the pure practical reason freedom". In Deng's words, "the general practical freedom" is arbitrary and intermittent, and depends on sensibility, so it is not real freedom. In contrast, "the pure practical reason freedom", in morality or obligation form, is consistently reasonable in logic so that it can reach absolute freedom. "The sense of freedom" is the symbol or ontology of freedom noumenon, such as property rights, the freedom of speech, etc. [16].

4. K's Silent Defiance

Although K is on the margin of a turbulent society because of his race and appearance, he gains freedom through his silent defiance. This paper, under the guidance of Kant's concepts of freedom (*i.e.* "the transcendental freedom", "the practical freedom" and "the sense of freedom"), explores how K makes silent defiance by making escape choices, keeping away interpersonal reaction, and enjoy nature solace.

4.1. Escape Choices

K's escape choices experience negative and positive transcendental freedom. According to Deng, negative transcendental freedom depends on emotional impulses while positive transcendental freedom depends on one's motivation [16]. When illness disturbs Anne's normal life, Anne desires to come back to her hometown Prince Albert. To achieve Anne's last dream, K quits his job and tries his best to find Prince Albert. Unfortunately, Anne dies on the journey. K has nothing to do and continues to search for Prince Albert. In the process, K makes silent defiance to pursue freedom by making escape choices several times, and his escape choices transit from negative transcendental freedom to positive transcendental freedom. At the beginning of the journey by himself, he is lost in his mind and hangs around in the street. When he encounters a road barricade and the policeman's interrogation, he realizes that he has to reach her mother's dream of Prince Albert and he responds to the policeman "[F]rom Prince Albert. I am going home to Prince Albert" [17]. His response shows that he makes this choice for Prince Albert for his mother not for himself. After being released from a forced labor gang, he reacts to a stranger man's question "I don't want to stop, I'm going to Prince Albert and it's a long way" [17], and later K leaves the man's home heading to Prince Albert. When arriving at Prince Albert, he escapes again, but this time, his escape is not because of his mother but self-esteem as the book describes

“The words, whatever they stood for, accusation, threat, reprimand, seemed to K to smother him” [17]. The third time, when he escapes from Jakkalsdrif where he is caught doing heavy labor because being there against his will as K says: “I don’t want to work. Why do I have to work? This isn’t a jail” [17], and “I don’t want to be in a camp, that’s all” [17]. K’s inner world also shows his hope to escape here: “he no longer found it so strange to think of the camp as a place where people were deposited to be forgotten” [17]. Later, being seized in a camp, K refuses to eat anything in a silent defiant way. As the doctor says: “Michaels should never have come to this camp. [...] It was a mistake” [17]. Some days later, K escapes from the camp. Finally, K finds his mother’s flat and is full of expectations for the future when he meets another vagrant:

They could share a bed tonight, it had been done before; in the morning, at first light, they could go out searching the back streets for an abandoned barrow; and if they were lucky the two of them could be spinning along the high road by ten o’clock, remembering to stop on the way to buy seeds and one or two other things, avoiding Stellenbosch perhaps, which seemed to be a place of ill luck [17].

It can be seen that K’s escape choices are one way of silent defiance and his first choice is influenced by his mother and the other choices are made for himself. Therefore, K’s escape choices embody the two aspects of transcendental freedom. K’s first escape from a stranger’s house is to achieve Anne’s last wish to go back to her hometown, which is negative transcendental freedom. After burying Anne’s bone ashes on the Visagie farm in Prince Albert, K starts to make choices for himself. He escapes from a young deserter for unfair treatment, and rehabilitation camps twice for dislike, which is positive transcendental freedom. As Deng puts it, there are two kinds of transcendental freedom and they are necessary for practical freedom [16]. K’s idea for making his mother’s dream come true and self-consciousness is the premise that he could make escape choices bravely and survive in the unrest social environment.

4.2. Interpersonal Relationships

The change of K’s attitude toward interpersonal relationship presents the change from general practice freedom to pure practice reason freedom. General practice freedom and pure practical reason freedom are two components of practical freedom. The former is at a sensitive level, and the latter is at a reasonable level [16]. K is born with a harelip and black skin, so in interpersonal interactions from his early age, he is in subordinate status. In such a situation, he often feels lonely and anxious. When he meets the doctor in a camp clinic, he realizes that being in solitude is real freedom. The change in K’s attitudes toward interpersonal relationships witnesses K’s practical freedom change. When K is a child, his mother Anne cannot stand others’ laughter and whisper about K’s harelip, so “[Anne] kept [K] away from other children” [17], which makes K “[L]earn to be quiet” [17] and generates K’s solitary personality. Additionally, when K is in job positions, he is

bullied as described that “both his jobs had given him a measure of solitariness [17]. Quitting his job, he has no personal interaction besides Anne. After Anne’s death, K has several interpersonal relationships and his attitude towards personal relationships alters in a camp clinic. He meets Robert in Jakkalsdrif after escaping from Visagie. With Robert, K is not subordinate anymore as in Visagie. Robert considers K as his friend and cares for K as Robert says “Before you break your back, my friend [...] So don’t kill yourself. Go and take a pee. You’ve been in hospital, you’re not well” [17]. In daily life, “[Robert] offered K one of his sandwiches and stretched out beside him in the shade of a tree” [17]. Robert’s kindness touches K’s heart and K begins to think about that “What am I to him [?]” [17]. Although their friendship is good, K cannot feel relaxed in the relationship as the book describes “he found it hard to relax with Robert and his family around the fire where the eyes of the children were continually upon him” [17]. In the following journey, he is arranged in a camp clinic to receive treatment. In the clinic, K enjoys himself and starts to ignore relationships with others as the text notes “[K] is like a stone, a pebble that, having lain around quietly minding its own business since the dawn of time [...]. A hard little stone, barely aware of its surroundings, enveloped in itself and its interior life” [17]. Although Noël says to K “Give yourself some substance, man, otherwise you are going to slide through life absolutely unnoticed” [17], K remains silent. Different from previous silence, K feels relief in his silence this time and the doctor praises K:

I alone see you as neither a soft case for a soft camp nor a hard case for a hard camp but a human soul above and beneath classification, a soul blessedly untouched by doctrine, untouched by history, a soul stirring its wings within that stiff sarcophagus, murmuring behind that clownish mask. You are precious, Michaels, in your way; you are the last of your kind, a creature left over from an earlier age, like the coelacanth or the last man to speak Yaqui [17].

K’s silent defiance in interpersonal relations has a turn-point in the camp clinic when he becomes reasonable and realizes that his silence in interpersonal relationships is not negative but a positive way to pursue freedom. Hence, the change in K’s interpersonal relationships sees his change from sensibility to reason. Before meeting Robert, K often meets unfair interpersonal interactions and chooses to keep silent. Although Robert gives K warmth and makes K think about the meaning of friendship, K still cannot feel easy and finally leaves Robert away. K does not know the meaning of being in solitude and just feels discomfort in personal interaction. His silence is generated from his sensibility, which is general practice freedom and is not real freedom. Later, he becomes reasonable in facing interpersonal relationships and knows the importance of being alone, which is pure practice reason freedom and absolute freedom. At first, in interpersonal relationships, K is immersed in sensible emotion, and feeling alone is his habitus, which cannot be called true freedom. Until K creates a good relationship with himself, he finds interpersonal relationships are not so valuable and only being solitary is real freedom.

4.3. Nature Solace

K's silent defiance is embodied in his solitude in nature, which presents "the sense of freedom". "The sense of freedom" refers to the symbol or analogy of freedom instead of man's freedom noumenon [16]. After Anne's death, K struggles with endless escapes and tries to eliminate annoyed interpersonal interaction. Under such a situation, nature, as solace curing his soul, becomes a symbol or analogy of freedom. Initially, K does not perceive the charm of nature, and he sees nature as a source of food. Later, he feels the beauty of nature and thinks that living in nature alone is a way to keep away from the outside world as described: "He lived by the rising and setting of the sun, in a pocket outside time. Cape Town and the war and his passage to the farm slipped further and further into forgetfulness" [17]. After K escapes from the Visagie boy, he cures himself on the farm: "[K] told himself, he would forget the boy and remember only the farm" [17]. Although in the camp clinic, K cannot touch nature in person, he harbors his pumpkin seeds:

When he was brought in, he had a brown paper packet which he put away under his pillow. Now he has taken to holding the packet against his chest. I asked him whether it contained his mutino, he said, and showed me dried pumpkin seeds [17].

In the process of escaping from the hospital, K is in bad health, but he gains refreshment from nature:

At peace, on familiar ground, grateful for the warmth of the day, K sighed and slowly let his head sag sideways. Whether he slept or not he did not know; but when he opened his eyes he was well enough again to go on [17].

Nature is not the noumenon of freedom, but in K's mind, it has become the symbol of freedom and his silent defiance way to gain civil liberties. "The sense of freedom" emphasizes the function of substitute of freedom noumenon. In the novel, K, in the turbulent society, gains solace, and freedom in nature. Although he encounters unfair treatment and physical problems, nature is a reason to keep alive. Being solitary in nature and keeping thinking about nature is one of K's silent defiance to gain freedom.

5. Conclusions

This paper adopts three levels in Kant's conception of freedom to examine the protagonist Michael K's silent defiance in gaining freedom. In detail, in analyzing K's silent defiance, K's escape choices are studied under the first level "the transcendental freedom", and it is found that K's escape choices change from negative transcendental freedom to positive transcendental freedom, which embodies the process of K's self-awareness awakening in the age of turbulence. The second level "the practical freedom" is adopted to explore K's interpersonal relationships, which witnesses K's change from sensibility to rationality and presents the value of being solitary in pursuing freedom. Finally, K's harmonious relationship with nature is researched combined with the third level "the sense of freedom". In this part, K

obtaining freedom, happiness, and solace in nature is discussed.

K is born with physical handicaps and black skin, and both of the appearance drawbacks hurt K. Worse than his inborn disadvantages, his mother Anne's death brings K a heavy blow. Additionally, the unrest social background forces K to bear many unfair and inhumane treatments. However, in fighting against the suffering silently, K's self-consciousness awakes gradually and he realizes that making escape choices is for self-esteem not others, being solitary is a way to keep inner peace, and having a close relationship with nature is an approach to get solace in the turbulent era. Finally, due to his free will, K lives a happy life.

By analyzing K's escape choices, interpersonal relationships, and nature solace, this paper discloses K's silent defiance and journey to know himself better and to gain freedom. Still, this paper enlightens marginalized people in unrest society to live and pursue happiness and freedom bravely.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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