



The Ecological Thought of J. M. Coetzee: The Case of *Life and Times of Michael K*

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Received 12 October 2011; accepted 25 January 2012.

Abstract

This paper argues that J. M. Coetzee's 1983 novel *Life and Times of Michael K* is informed by a rich and early ecological vision that has not been adequately considered so far. It argues that Coetzee demonstrates an interest in all living organisms and pays attention to their environment and interaction. It is argued that Coetzee's ethico-political vision is not limited to humans and that minor forms of life like plants and animals are as significant as human life on earth. The result is that the "non-human other" is never ignored in Coetzee, which testifies to the importance of a broad philosophical vision that acknowledges rather than subsumes difference. This paper, hence, makes a connection between Coetzee's ecological vision and his ethico-political attention to otherness. The result is what we can call Coetzee's "ecological postcolonialism." In addition, our argument explores and defends an often underplayed theme in Coetzee's fiction, namely that of gardening. While some recent Coetzee scholarship has acknowledged the significant presence of animals in his fiction, that of vegetation remains by far underplayed. In Coetzee's vision, plants and landscapes are unduly ignored and exploited in times of political strife, which accounts for Coetzee's ecocritical—and by implication political—relevance. In other words, Coetzee's ecological vision—we seek to prove—is still richly political as an in-veigh against various forms of injustice, including but not limited to apartheid.

Key words: Coetzee; Fiction; Ecology; *Life and Times of Michael K*; Postcolonialism; Ethics; Politics; Ecocriticism

Shadi Neimneh, Fatima Muhaidat (2012). The Ecological Thought of J. M. Coetzee: The Case of *Life and Times of Michael K*. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 4(1), 12-19. Available from: URL: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/j.sll.1923156320120401.1700>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.sll.1923156320120401.1700>

INTRODUCTION

The recent global interest in environmental topics has made "eco" themes essential to the interpretation of modern literature. Ecology is broadly the study of the interaction between the environment and its organisms while ecocriticism is the application of ecological themes to the study of literature. With the publication of J. M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* in 1999, critics began to focus on the issue of animal rights in his fiction. And when he published *Disgrace* in 1999 and *Elizabeth Costello* in 2003, the theme of animals became a strong critical thread in his post-apartheid fictions. For example, Ron Randall (2007)—in a study focusing on *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello*—argues that Coetzee's writing opens and extends "the ethical bounds of human community, by envisioning animals as fellow beings deserving the consideration and protection that more typically are accorded only to the human being" (p.209). Although Randall presents Coetzee's vision as one highlighting the relationships between human beings and "the non-human world" (p.210), his point that the animal question in Coetzee allows him to work at the "intersection between sociopolitical and ecological concerns, to elaborate an ecologically oriented ethics that sharpens the critique of modern political regimes that dominate and exploit fellow beings both human and non-human" (p.210) is central to the ethico-political conception of this essay because we use ecology to emphasize an ethically motivated politics in Coetzee's apartheid fiction. To cite another example, Louis Tremain (2003) points out that Coetzee "generally represents animals as

creatures that suffer humanly inflicted captivity, pain, or death, sometimes resentfully but more often abjectly” (p.589). However, such an argument needs to be considered in the light of ethics and politics to fully explore the notions of suffering and pain Tremain posits. Actually, only few critics have tackled the rich ecological insights of Coetzee’s early apartheid fictions like *Life and Times of Michael K* (hereafter abbreviated as *LTMK*) and the overlap between ecology and politics. Ecology is presented in this article as one of the novel’s overriding concerns. I argue that the novel demonstrates a triangular relationship between K, animals, and plants that, when understood in the relevant context of South African history and politics, yields rich political insights. The interrelationship between history, politics, and ecology makes the novel a critique of the domination of species and the earth and a piece of committed ecocriticism. Such an assumption is based on the belief that Western culture has often subsumed people of color and women into the category of the non-human other, that of animals and nature, and simultaneously dominated nature in its imperialistic endeavor.

While some critics have subsumed the novel’s ecology under its postcolonialism, we seek to reverse this pattern of thinking by assigning ecology some agency of its own and then with relation to postcolonialism. Just as eco-feminism seeks to empower forms of life beyond androcentric interests and forms by assigning agency “not only to everyone who is human but also to the various nonhuman ‘actors’ who share the world with us” (Murphy, 1997, p.51), what we might call “eco-postcolonialism” is capable of challenging forms of domination and oppression. After all, what Murphy states of eco-feminist theory can be said about postcolonial theory and racial differences: “Thereby, it is helping to envision a future that provides for the possibility of a more natured culture in which biotic differences and gender differences are celebrated in their diversity and heterarchy rather than used as justification for domination, exploitation, and extinction” (p.57). Similarly, an ecocriticism inflected by postcolonial notions rejects forms of essentialism and othering. Actually, the interrelationship between ecocriticism and feminism or postcolonialism is justified by the inseparability between human beings, be they men/women or oppressors/oppressed, and their environment in the form of real-life circumstances shaping their experiences. A cultural critic like Lawrence Buell in *The Environmental Imagination* (1995, p.7-8) has rightly highlighted the inseparability between natural history and human history in true environmental and ecological literature, this literature’s interest in the nonhuman other, and its ethical thrust in the form of our responsibility for the environment (William Slaymaker, 2001, p.130). It is our contention in this essay that the novel’s ecological content is a commentary on the political rather than an evasion from it. In other words, we find in the novel’s ecology some good postcolonial

relevance, which is what we call the novel’s “ecological postcolonialism.”

In her famous review of *LTMK*, Nadine Gordimer (1984), criticizing Coetzee’s allegorical approach in the early fictions as evasive and ahistorical, does actually point out what is for us a significant aspect of Coetzee’s politically and ethically committed fiction, namely his interest in gardening or in the “idea of gardening” as she titles her review. While K in her judgment is a passive hero, one of those “who ignore history, not make it,” her critique of the novel can be the very grounds for justifying it. She argues that the novel posits “the earth, not in the cosmic but the plain dirt sense”—i.e. the idea of gardening—as an avenue of escape from political turmoil and thus survival. In her own words, “Beyond all creeds and moralities, this work of art asserts, there is only one: to keep the earth alive, and only one salvation, the survival that comes from her.” Gordimer rejects K’s rejection of politics in favor of his vocation as a gardener. She sees in K’s dedication to gardening a rejection of political action or active participation in the ongoing war. Coetzee, nevertheless, underscores the damage that is done to our relation to the natural world in times of political pressure. Our indifference and hostility to each other are echoed in another form of ingratitude to mother nature and its creatures. In other words, Coetzee uses the natural to reflect on the political, which is why his ecocriticism should not be eclipsed by what Gordimer sees as his abortive political vision. K’s rejection of enjoining bad politics is itself a strong political statement in favor of natural harmony and political order. It is a simplification of matters to see in K’s attachment to the land an escape from politics. Attending nature, we contend, is an attempt to counter the strained politics of the country Coetzee depicts in the novel, i.e. a critique of bad politics and not an escape from it. Put succinctly, Sally-Ann Murray (2006) concisely argues that Coetzee situates gardening “as a social *problematic*” with all the complications this might have (emphasis original, p.46). Problematising the novel’s ecology (in particular ecology’s relation to politics) rather than naively accepting it is, therefore, what we try to accomplish in this essay.

1. ECOLOGY AND / OR POSTCOLONIALISM?

Gordimer’s model of interpretation is not the only inadequate one. Critics who argue for an engagement between postcolonial thinking and ecology like Anthony Vital (2008) tend to subordinate the novel’s ecology to a “postcolonial suspicion of the nation state” and thus argue for “a materialist apprehension of discourse” (p.87). Vital therefore supports “postcolonial ecocriticism” (p.91), thus privileging the novel’s postcolonial logic over its ecocriticism. Like Gordimer, Vital does not establish an adequate con-

nection between ecology and postcolonialism. But ecology in the novel does not have to be subordinated to the camps, oppressive institutions, and discursive formations of power that foster the novel's postcolonial relevance. Vital, almost approaching Gordimer's limited position on the novel, points out that the novel "devalues" nature as a "site of resistance or historical transformation" (p.99). But what happens if we propose as an alternative to Vital's negative assessment of the novel's ecology an "ecocritical postcolonialism" or an "ecological postcolonialism"? In other words, what happens if we intentionally privilege ecocriticism or ecology as the first term in the compound without losing the thematic association between ecology on the one hand and ethicopolitics on the other? Coetzee's belief in the enduring power of nature and its diverse life forms is a strong political statement that works as a rejection of corrupt politics and unjust, dehumanizing systems. Simultaneously, it is a bleak political vision that sees in nature rather than in people a potential avenue of escape or reform. Coetzee's vision is also an integrationist one that links humans to their surroundings. Just as political oppression dehumanizes people, it further relegates and exploits animals and plants.

Josephine Donovan (2004) rightly argues that K "develops a benign, respectful relationship to the natural world." She defends Coetzee from accusations of political quietism by concluding that he is "acutely aware of the realities of creatural suffering and addresses attendant ethical issues forthrightly." Donovan's statement is vital for it counters the apathy and humiliation of political oppression with a form of meaningful relationship to the world of nature and its creatures. If political quietism rejects violence and suffering but does not offer a valid alternative, Coetzee's attention to nature and its minor forms of life serves as a questioning of the very existence of political disquiet. Differently put, Coetzee utilizes ecology to serve postcolonial trajectories without robbing it of its environmental focus. What remains for us to accomplish in this essay is to shed more light on the relationship between ecology and politics—specifically apartheid politics—with specific textual references to *LTMK*.

2. LIFE AND TIMES OF MICHAEL K: ECOLOGY AND POLITICS

The novel's ecological thrust is clear right from the start. Michael K is a natural gardener. He works for "the Parks and Gardens division of the municipal services of the City of Cape Town as Gardener, grade 3 (b)" (4). He does become a grade I gardener (4); however, K is also an oppressed other because of the segregated racial politics of the country. As indicated by the plain letter of his name and his occupation, he is one of the poor and unprivileged in South Africa. As one of the disenfranchised, he seeks

to escape all forms of oppressive authority. The mapped parks of Cape Town contrast with the expansion of nature in the Karoo mountains he flees to. To avoid the civil war ripping South Africa, K takes his mother to the quiet countryside in Prince Albert. En route, he and his mother sleep under the elements. They once settle down for the night in the bush "on a bed of leaves" (25) and endure the dripping rain. The landscape that is mapped/stratified by police checkpoints asking for travel permits is simultaneously a haven for escape from Cape Town to the Karoo. The farm in the country of the Karoo where K's mother was born opens a new life for him. He lives in the veld and tends the seeds he plants and eats from what the earth produces. In such cases, nature is not simply a passive alternative to the realm of political action but rather a questioning of the moral foundations of the crooked apartheid politics. It highlights the drawbacks of political disquiet. After all, the idealistic world of nature is not always remote from the reach of violence and destruction as the novel demonstrates. And it is not that the novel's elaborate references to nature cannot or should not be appreciated on their own, but we can always assign political significance to them if we read them against the novel's background of apartheid years in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

A simple gardener and his sick mother Anna K move to a farm in Prince Albert, fleeing from a future South Africa torn by civil war where "the careless violence, the packed buses, the food queues, arrogant shopkeepers, thieves and beggars, sirens in the night, the curfew, the cold and wet" spoil people's lives to return to the countryside where "if she was going to die, she would at least die under blue skies" (p.8). Such a life—which is a dramatization of life conditions under apartheid and the emergency years of increased violence in the years following the novel's publication—is the opposite of the freedom country life can provide. The contrasting images of freedom and imprisonment highlight the divisions and limitations of stratified political systems like apartheid. K takes his mother from Sea Point to the Karoo country to flee the war and to recover her health (p.18, 31). The attachment they begin to have for the curative earth and natural elements begins this way as they leave to the country, when K realizes that "In this half-world of straggling roots and damp earth and subtle rotten smells no site seemed more sheltered from the elements than any other" (p.24). They begin to use leaves as beds and eat cold food and sleep outside in the bushes under the rain or in alleys. Hence, nature, in this sense, is a redemptive landscape, a safe haven from bad politics. The juxtaposition between the world of nature and that of turbulent politics consistently highlights the negative impact of the latter one. Fleeing the world of militant politics, rather than a passive escape, is a tacit rejection of being implicated in such politics or abiding by its terms. While the above quote from the novel relates to vegetation, we consider animals in the next

section and plants in a separate section immediately after it. Since both animals and plants are equally important to understanding the novel's ecology, the ordering of the sections is not an issue.

2.1 Coetzee's Ecology and Animals

In *LTMK*, animals are often treated metaphorically to figure conditions of humiliation/dehumanization. Since K and his mother are members of an oppressed, impoverished class—he as a simple gardener and she as a domestic working for other people—it is no wonder that Coetzee uses animal imagery to figure their lack of privilege and their internalized sense of inferiority. Apartheid, we should remember, was a policy of social and economic discrimination. K's mother, living in a small room meant for air-conditioning equipment and under the stairs, feels "like a toad under a stone" living in such a place (p.9). During the looting and violence their neighbourhood witnesses, K and his mother "huddled quiet as mice in their room beneath the stairs" (p.12). When his mother gets very sick and they stop at a hospital in Stellenbosch, K once steals the tea belonging to his mother and another patient in the room, "gulping it down like a guilty dog while the orderly's back was turned" (p.30). While still loitering at the hospital, he sleeps in a cage with soiled linen "curled up like a cat" (p.32). He chews some apples from a field "as quickly as a rabbit" (p.39). Up in the mountains, he thinks of himself as a "termite boring its way through a rock" (p.66). The use of animals in such analogies indicates the loss of basic human rights during apartheid years including the right to a decent dwelling, decent income, and decent meals. Again, the juxtaposition of animal imagery against the political background of the novel is an indication of how human beings are forced to live and act like animals under oppressive political systems.

This symbolic use of animals with relation to human rights and the realm of politics is not unique to *LTMK*, though. Lucy in *Disgrace* in a conversation with her father metaphorically uses animals to refer to her humiliating situation of disgrace and degradation after being gang-raped by black men. When her father describes her decision to start from ground level and lose all her privileges by saying "Like a dog," she retorts positively "Yes, like a dog" (p.205). For Lucy and her white father, the loss of land and physical humiliation are dehumanizing, reducing one to the status of animals. In *LTMK*, K thinks of himself in similar terms. Animals figure the ramifications of political injustice whereby the oppression of the black majority in South Africa during the apartheid years gets countered in the post-apartheid years by a reverse kind of (emotional and physical) violence on whites. Animals act as a trope for the harsh treatment we inflict on each other and the internalized guilt associated with the injustices of apartheid. It is no wonder, then, that Costello makes the infamous analogy in Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* between the victims of the Holocaust in Nazi Germany and animals in

slaughterhouses to suggest political degradation as well as the loss of animal rights.

Aside from the metaphorical use of animals to figure political conditions, animals literally suffer the pain and confinement we inflict on them. When K passes a truckload of sheep in a convoy, he sees that they are "packed so tight that some stood on their hind legs" (p.36). Such a description shows an ecological sense on Coetzee's part and is significant as is, yet it is also evocative of the cramped conditions of black African homelands. Among all animals populating Coetzee's fiction, dogs in particular have a significant presence. In this novel, they do not fare better than they do elsewhere in Coetzee's fiction. They emerge as police dogs (p.40, 90) at checkpoints, watch/deterrent dogs behind fences (p.49), or police search dogs (p.124). They are used to aid in the oppression of people and the establishment of social strata. The sparrows and dove K kills with his catapult for the Visagie grandson are described in pathetic terms: "K held up the four dead birds, their feet together in a tangle of claws. There was a pearl of blood at the beak of one of the sparrows" (p.63). He brings down a turtle-dove and roasts it (p.46) and broils one night for supper a pair of bushdoves (p.61). On another occasion, he finds wild goats at the farm in Prince Albert and instinctively chases them with his knife, possessed by the "urgency of hunger" (p.55). He catches one near the dam and drowns it under the mud, hurling "the whole weight of his body upon it" (p.53) and pressing through until he "could feel the goat's hindquarters heaving beneath him; it bleated again and again in terror; its body jerked in spasms" (p.53). It suddenly comes to his mind that "these snorting long-haired beasts, or creatures like them, would have to be caught, killed, cut up and eaten if he hoped to live" (p.52). He is later repelled by the animal's ugliness, by its "matted hair" (p.55). The lesson he learns from this experience is "not to kill such large animals" (p.57), which triggers K's interest in what we call "minor forms of life." The point that should be highlighted here is that animal suffering in this novel becomes particularly significant once understood as part of a chain in which humans inflict pain on each other and on other creatures as well, especially in times of political distress. Readers interested in the animal question might find in such descriptions a plea for a more humane treatment of animals or a plea for vegetarianism, but readers interested in ecological postcolonialism find in this hierarchical violence inflicted on helpless animals a potential critique of dominant power structures.

Away from the civil war of Cape Town, K dominantly lives on minor forms of life. He lives on birds or lizards that he hunts (p.59, 65) or nibbles at mountain roots or ant grubs (p.68). In such descriptions, animals are the object of human violence. They are mainly treated with apathy on our part when we do not pause to question the violence we inflict on them. In times of political tension, people

get busy tending other things, probably more important things than animals. Even flies have a presence in K's life. After an attempt to clean the carcass of the goat, flies bother him by following him (p.56) and later they noisily buzz in the kitchen and pantry of the farmhouse (p.57). In the earth around his fire pit in the mountains, minor forms of life thrive, "a multifarious insect life drawn by the benign, continuous warmth" (p.115). In the silence of the mountains, he pays attention to the "scurrying of insects" around him (p.66), the buzz of flies (p.66-67), and the twitter of birds in the trees (p.69). Because K gets to escape from the political tension of Cape Town, he also gets to pay attention to such forms of life others are ignorant of. By underscoring such insignificant life patterns, Coetzee actually takes our attention away from what we typically focus on in a conventional apartheid novel, i.e. political activism, and directs it toward the domain of otherness.

On the other hand, animals literally get consumed as food despite of politics. K reasons with his mother that animals and vegetarian foods continue to be consumed by people and regardless of turbulent politics. Moreover, he significantly affirms that animals and plants are not aware that a war is going on (p.16). He realizes that the grass does not stop to grow and that leaves do not stop to fall in parks because of the ongoing war (p.67). In such passages, nature is not only counter to war but what makes war an odd exception, an abnormality that halts political strife. By linking ecology and the war effort, or rather by dissociating ecology and war, Coetzee is relegating the latter as the transitory and asserting nature as the enduring, generative force.

Animals as a subordinate form of life are associated with a weighty postcolonial and philosophical term like "otherness." In Jacques Derrida's essay "The Animal That Therefore I Am" (2002), the radical otherness of animals is foregrounded. He recounts an encounter with a cat in his bathroom as an encounter with otherness and speaks of the "wholly other that they call animal" (emphasis original, p.380). Seen naked by the cat, he is regarded from the singular viewpoint of the "absolute other" (p.380). The fact that we impose this otherness on animals is clear in Derrida's assertion that the animal is an "appellation," a word we have allowed ourselves to give to "another living creature" (p.392). The othering of nature and its creatures in times of political conflict is not uncommon. Trees get burned, animals get killed by machine guns, and many perish because of the destruction of their natural habitats and food resources. K's thoughts about the abundance of food grown by the earth are just one side of the picture. War actually kills a multiplicity of life forms and inhibits/deforms others. It often begins by rejecting the otherness of the other and ends by an attempt to subsume otherness into sameness. The diversity and vibrancy of animal life demand recognition from us by drawing attention to the

otherness and inferiority of animal life.

Attention to minor forms of life like animals and plants gives Coetzee's writings an ethical dimension. Elizabeth Costello in Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* emerges as an ecological thinker inveighing against the prevalent animal abuse in the meat industry and lab experiments (p.53-4). She argues for an empathetic identification with animals, a relation based on shared suffering, on being alive, rather than one that privileges humans by virtue of reason or thinking. As Harold Fromm (2000) puts it, Costello "wants to extend the range of personhood (in varying degrees) to include animals and is militantly opposed to a Cartesian cogito that favors rational consciousness over animal sentience" (p.340). Animals for Costello are full of life and are representatives of an undeniable embodied being. She advocates a form of sympathetic imagination that would allow one to think oneself into the being of an Other, i.e. to physically identify/imagine the suffering of animals. She opposes degrading animals on grounds of their incapacity to think. David Lurie in *Disgrace* grows more sympathetic towards animals, mainly crippled and unwanted dogs put to death in a special clinic and then incinerated. He also shows some ecological awareness in his concern for the animals to be slaughtered for food. Costello and Lurie enact K's early attention to otherness. While *LTMK* presents in K an ecologically conscious man attentive to the singular otherness of the environment, the later fictions offer reasoned, self-conscious, and sometimes sustained ecological arguments.

2.2 Coetzee's Ecology and Plants

As for plants and the earth, they enhance the ecological value of the novel and its ethicopolitical force. Leaves provide a bed for K while wind and rain make his life more difficult (p.38). K sleeps and hides in natural shelters like river-beds (p.49) and caves in the mountains (p.65). Because of the ongoing war, some fields are fenced by barbed-wire and show marks of neglect as evidenced by an overgrowth of grass and weeds (p.39). In a cleared patch, K finds some vegetables and begins to pull some carrots from the earth. "It is God's earth, he thought, I am not a thief" (p.39). This defying logic counters the mapping and ownership imposed on the land under apartheid. It also resists the poverty and deprivation inherent in apartheid conditions and forced on the nonwhite majority. K once eats crushed mealies and bonemeal; he finds in eating this feed a way of relating to the earth, thinking: "At last I am living off the land" (p.46). He hopes that his cremated mother will be "more at peace now that she was nearer her natal earth" (p.57). After clearing a patch of land in the field near the farmhouse, he distributes his mother's ashes "over the earth, afterwards turning the earth over spadeful by spadeful" (59), an act described as the real beginning of his life as a "cultivator" (p.59). He plants pumpkin and melon seeds and mealies by the dam, what he considers later when they begin to grow as his

children (p.101). It is insightful that while some filial and social relations among people become strained in times of political conflict as a result of loss, apathy, or separation, other forms of attachment can be meaningful. Again, the novel's ecology shows the limitations of corrupt, unjust politics. Attachment to the earth becomes particularly more meaningful to K than the realm of violent politics because the latter is an odd imposition on the serenity of the natural world. By spreading his mother's ashes over the land, K achieves a symbolic unity with the earth. Being an orphan with a father who died long ago, K makes the earth his surrogate mother. As a result, Coetzee can be interpreted as delivering political and ethical messages through the ecological orientation of the novel.

Neglect, exploitation or destruction are examples of environmental damage the novel highlights by way of discrediting bad politics. Captured for not having a permit, K is driven in a train to the railway yards along with other strangers. "They passed mile after mile of bare and neglected vineyards circled over by cows" (p.41). The land is fenced, and K wonders if "there were not forgotten corners and angles and corridors between the fences, land that belonged to no one yet" (p.47). Under apartheid, land was mapped, demarcated, manipulated, and surveyed. Whites appropriated most of South Africa's lands and wealth at the expense of the black majority. K finds a special pleasure in tending the seeds he has planted near the dam, a pleasure in making "this deserted farm bloom" (p.59) and watering his plants (p.59, 60). "It is because I am a gardener," K thinks, "because that is my nature" (p.59). There is actually a bond of filial love, "a cord of tenderness" (p.66), between him and the patch of land he planted and deserted because of an intruder, an army deserter identified in the novel as the Visagie son. K thinks that "one could cut a cord like that only so many times before it would not grow again" (p.66). This meaningful, solid attachment to the land is the opposite of the strained, stratified human relations damaged in the politics of the country. It is what highlights the former with relation to the latter by way of a suggestive juxtaposition. While corrupt politics appropriates the land and manipulates it, K's role as a gardener is emancipatory. Rather than dissociating the natural from the political, Coetzee seems to be negotiating their overlap and interdependence, which is why a fair assessment of his work should look to the eco-critical as a starting point for the political rather than as its adversary. Coetzee uses the ecological content of his work to deliver political statements which put the political in a disfavor.

The details of the novel continue to discredit the realities of life under apartheid like permits, reserves, and camps. Under "pass" laws, nonwhites were required to carry identification papers and travel permits. K is once picked up by the police for not having a permit and sent to a medical facility and then taken to a fenced resettlement

camp, Jakkalsdrif, in the bare veld (p.73) and with many tents "evenly spaced over the camp terrain, and seven huts besides the bathhouse and latrines" (p.75). The cramped camp life makes him feel insignificant, like an "ant that does not know where its hole is" (p.83). The labor camp is described as an impenetrable landscape, a "stone-hard veld" (p.95). One farmer K works for during his stay in the labor camp commends K's fencing ability and tells him that "'There will always be a need for good fencers in this country, no matter what'" (p.95). As K flees the camp and sees fences everywhere around him—a clear image of political stratification and social divisions—he finds it difficult to "imagine himself spending his life driving stakes into the ground, erecting fences, dividing up the land" (p.97). K opposes such negative forms of relating to the land necessitated by the political situation in the county. Under apartheid, nonwhites were forced to relocate out of the urban areas reserved for whites and live in townships and rural reservations. We should remember that the word "apartheid" itself means separateness, i.e. separating the races from each other. Such a separation was mainly achieved over the land and its natural resources to the deprivation of nonwhites. Therefore, the novel's ecological thrust is consistently political in overtones.

While human attachments like fatherhood and motherhood are difficult to imagine in a world full of violence and strife like K's, the novel posits an alternative in the abiding earth. The filial bond between parents and children gets easily broken because of difficult circumstances and social barriers. Therefore, it is no wonder that K finds fatherhood a strange idea in this camp area that is "the heart of the country" (p.104). Coetzee offers a critique of the enforced divisions of segregationist regimes and the environmental damage they induce. K "thought of the camp in Jakkalsdrif, of parents bringing up children behind the wire, their own children and the children of cousins and second cousins, on earth stamped so tight by the passage of their footsteps day after day, baked so hard by the sun, that nothing would ever grow there again" (p.104). Such an example shows how nature is abused in times of turbulent politics. It also shows the overlap between nature and politics. Political unrest deforms human relations and negatively affects the earth. The shackles of apartheid, and political oppression in general, halt healthy human relations and constrict the land. In contrast, meaningful relations are ascribed to the earth and its produce. K finds special pleasure in eating the food he grows (p.113). He thinks of the two melons as two sisters and the pumpkins as brothers (p.113). Later, the ripe melons are described as "two children" (p.118). He eats them relishing their sweetness and pondering "*the bounty of the earth*" (p.118, emphasis original). This immediately brings to mind the shortage of food and poverty contingent on political unrest. K is picked up by the police from the Karoo veld and taken in a poor physical condition to a rehabilitation

facility attached to a camp, Kenilworth. The medic asks him about his mother and K answers that “‘She makes the plants grow’” (p.130). K’s mother, in her death, nurtures the earth that nurtures plants. Again, this healthy growth is the opposite of the consumption, waste, and loss related to war.

After some mountain revolutionaries come to the farmhouse and stop by the dam for water and food, K ponders joining them as they leave. Before he leaves the burrow he hides in, he knows why he should not do so: “because enough men had gone off to war saying the time for gardening was when the war was over; whereas there must be men to stay behind and keep gardening alive, or at least the idea of gardening; because once that cord was broken, the earth would grow hard and forget her children. That was why” (p.109). Coetzee voices through K a political statement in the form of a critique of our neglect of nature, which is as bad as instrumentalizing it. K’s decision not to join militant politics has been problematic for some critics like Gordimer. However, K’s rejection of engagement in bad politics is in itself a meaningful response to political injustice. It is a questioning of why bad politics should exist in the first place, of why we blindly do an injustice to ourselves and our surroundings in times of war. Minor forms of life are ignored in times of war and people are detached from their relatedness to the earth. When the mountain revolutionaries arrive, they flood K’s field and their donkeys crop his vines. The pump is later destroyed by the soldiers when they discover K and the area is damaged by explosions (p.124-5). The soldiers blow up the pump so that they cut supplies from the revolutionaries, which highlights the environmental damage resulting from the exploitation and mismanagement of land and natural resources. Neither the revolutionaries nor the soldiers seem to be leading a life after K’s heart. Militancy is undermined in K’s rationale for not joining the revolutionaries as a herd mentality followed by most people.

The impossibility of a utopian life in nature is proved by the intrusion of politics upon the serenity of K’s stay in the country and his constant fear of being discovered. K’s idyllic stay in the country is also a dehumanized existence reduced to this bare level by political unrest. K thinks: “What a pity that to live in times like these a man must be ready to live like a beast. A man who wants to live cannot live in a house with lights in the windows. He must live in a hole and hide by day. A man must live so that he leaves no trace of his living” (p.99). A reading like Gordimer’s does not pay attention to K’s dilemma in such a quote. The novel uses animal imagery to figure the dehumanization and loss of rights rampant during war, and thus to disfavor a civil war of the sort the novel describes. The war effort acts by withholding people’s basic needs and forcing them to resort to nature for protection. During his stay in the mountains, K has no idea of the passage of time and becomes gradually more of an instinctive creature relying

on smell and taste (p.115). Upon his return to the farmhouse, he plants pumpkin and melon seeds and waits for food from the earth to grow to regain his appetite (p.101). In the meantime, he returns to eating insects like ants. “Or he would peel the bark from dead trees looking for beetle-grubs; or knock grasshoppers out of the air with his jacket, tear off their heads and legs and wings, and pound their bodies to a pulp which he dried in the sun” (p.102). K’s rejection of political oppression finds an equivalent in his growing anorexic rejection of manufactured or mass-produced food, food produced by a culture that embraces war. As opposed to the seriousness and magnitude we typically assign to war, Coetzee directs our attention to minor and sustaining forms of life as significant and meaningful as any other form of life. Moreover, Coetzee elaborates the inseparability between minor forms of life sustaining K like animals and plants.

Toward the end of the novel, the police take K to be an insurgent supplying revolutionaries with food. The medical officer at the rehabilitation camp tells him that he should go back to his gardening after the war (p.135). The medic, at a moment of frustration, describes K as a “rudimentary man” and a “genuine little man of earth” (p.161). When K returns to Sea Point and flees this new camp, he still carries with him some seeds (p.177) and regrets not having taken with him different sorts of seeds to the Karoo veld (p.182). He imagines himself back in the country on the farm tending an old man needing water by bringing up water from the bottom of the earth (p.184). The last image in the novel is not about a war doomed to end but rather about the enduring earth. As a free spirit maladjusted to politics, K embodies a plain rejection of the complexities of political oppression.

CONCLUSION

In Coetzee’s novel *LTMK*, the associations between ecology and postcolonialism are politically significant. The ecological import in the novel serves ethicopolitical ends. Coetzee’s ecology is not an empty praise of nature or a romanticized account of it oblivious of South African politics. Animals and plants can always be interpreted in politically relevant terms and equally understood in the light of the novel’s times. Coetzee’s vision registers an increasing affinity with the animal world and the inseparability of all forms of life: humans, animals, and plants. For Lucy, in a conversation with her father about animals in *Disgrace*, the life we share with animals is the only one with no higher realm (p.74). After a transformation of some kind, her father feels sympathy for the lot of animals, for their lack of privilege in his country, a post-apartheid South Africa. He thinks of buying some sheep to be slaughtered by a neighbor for a party to spare them their tragic end (p.126). When the deed is done, he is still disturbed by their sad fate. He thinks: “Should he mourn? Is it proper

to mourn the death of beings who do not practise mourning among themselves? Looking into his heart, he can find only a vague sadness” (p.127). In a sense, David enacts the notion of “sympathetic identification” with animals Costello proposes in a later work, *Elizabeth Costello*. The novel ends with his increasing sensitivity to the suffering of dogs put to death in a local clinic. Lucy’s gang rape by three black men is significantly accompanied by shooting her dogs. Once again, the violence we do to each other as human beings is inseparable from the violence we inflict on animals and the environment in a politically strained setting. Tense human relations in the aftermath of the apartheid regime are mirrored by other forms of ecological violence of the sort we find in an apartheid novel like *LTMK*.

What Randall calls “sentient being” as embodied life (p.220) is the opposite of a rational mode of being that volarizes reason at the expense of the body. Coetzee shows an appreciation for all embodied forms of life and a humanist position on suffering. He offers a complex intervention about the nature of agency, lack of political power, and differing political agendas in the context of South Africa. A good critical stance on his fiction acknowledges the difficulty of Coetzee’s ethicopolitical vision rather than dismisses his work as evasive, lacking in political relevance to the apartheid politics of the novel’s times. Moreover, a critical commentary on *LTMK* informed by politics should underscore the novel’s critique of various forms of domination of other human beings and nonhuman others. Coetzee critiques bad politics way of suggestive analogy, by placing it side by side with the ecology of animals, plants, and landscapes.

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