Place and the Politics of Space in J.M.Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K*

MAHDI TEIMOURI
Department of English
Khayyam University of Mashhad
The Islamic Republic of Iran
teymoori58@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to show how space is manipulated in order to create order and control over people in a totalitarian regime. Michael, the protagonist of the novel, problematises hegemonic and totalising perception of space by occupying a position that rejects either/or logic of modern thought. Not only does Michael pose a threat to the arrogation of space by apartheid but also problematises the appropriation and control of identity and meaning which in totalitarian regimes are closely connected to the control of social spaces. Michael, for the most part, remains impervious to spatial and semantic disambiguation by resorting to the politics of ambivalence and in-betweenness. Such positionality makes the novel a platform for the demonstration of postmodern identity politics which hinges on a resistance to epistemological disambiguation and dualistic structuring. The framework used here consists of applying the theories of thinkers whose ideas share a penchant for disrupting the binary divisions that have underlain our socio-political understanding in the modern era. The novel will be analysed in light of these ideas to establish its compatibility with such a kind of reading.

Keywords: in-betweenness; thirdspace; camp-mentality; state of exception; overwriting

INTRODUCTION

Life and Times of Michael K (henceforth *LTMK*) embraces issues that are closely connected to the idea of securing a material and metaphorical in-between position. Written in a recognisably dystopian style with an apocalyptic view, the novel depicts a South Africa afflicted with civil war, where the eponymous Michael K becomes a material and metaphorical entity that refuses to be semantically and spatially pinned down. He remains an iconoclastically ambivalent and an insubstantial presence indifferent to history, social divisions and spatial demarcations. Michael's elusiveness is the direct result of challenging the established categories by virtue of which control over space and identity (i.e. meaning) is maintained. Michael's penchant for spaces and identities outside the established binaries of "modern intellect" (Bauman 1998, p. 9) is problematic because it introduces a third alternative into the dichotomised perception of the world. His inscrutable character reflected in his mind-boggling comportment and decision poses a real challenge to the conception of the world that is steeped in the modernist logic of either/or and has been molded by its dualistic vision. My argument, below, will be focused on the way the novel brings into question the oppressive Manichean view of modernist mentality. To this end, I will draw on thinkers whose ideas run counter to the binarism of modernist thinking. These scholars are not necessarily postmodern thinkers, but their thoughts overlap significantly with notions such as in-betweenness and ambivalence which feature prominently in discussions on postmodern thought. Scholars such as Edward Soja (1993, 1996), Homi K. Bhabha (1994) and Paul Gilroy (2000) are of particular interest here as their views overlap significantly in the way they emphasise on the existence of fluidity and instability in the spatial and identitarian formations. In the first section I will present Soja's and Bhabha's formulation of 'thirdspace' as a modality which repudiates binaristic logic of modern intellect. This theoretical discussion will be followed by a more concrete one which revolves around the

concept of camp, camp-mentality and overwriting. This section paves the way for initiating a critical reading of the novel as it bears directly on the spatial manipulation. In this section I will draw on Giorgio Agamben (2000) and Gilroy (2000) to support my reading. This part constitutes the bulk of my argument. The final section preceding the conclusion, explores very briefly the connection between space and body. As I will argue and as it is demonstrated clearly in the novel, bodies and spatial control are undeniably connected as any forms of confinement and incarceration make it possible to impose certain constraints on the body. The gradually encroaching spatial reductionism harassing Michael forces him to live in denial of his body cutting down on his dependency on human community.

THIRDSPACE

According to Edward Soja and Barbara Hooper (1993) modernist identity politics as a critical movement was founded on the criticism of the neat binary oppositions, namely capital/labour, white/black, self/other, with a view to "denaturalising the origins of the binary ordering to reveal its social and spatial construction of difference as a means of producing and reproducing systematic patterns of domination, exploitation and subjection" (p. 182). For Soja and Hooper (1993) the weakness of the modernist identity movement was identified in its exclusive attention to competing with the privileged site within its oppressive binary structure irrespective of the fragmentation and plurality that existed within its politics. Subcategories such as race, ethnicity, and social class had little or no significance in the equation because a universal or transcendental identity politics sought to speak for all.

While modernist identity practices have created "competitive exclusivity that resists, even rejects seeing a real world populated by multiple subjects with many (often changeable) identities located in varying (and also changeable) subject positions" (Soja and Hooper 1993, p. 183), postmodernist identity politics encourages negotiation and formation of alliances among those who are subordinated and peripheralised. Such a radical postmodernism is resourced by politics of difference which "moves toward empowering a multiplicity of resistance" (Soja and Hooper 1993, p. 184). The zone that postmodernist identity practices invite us to step into is beyond the centrality of center or the marginality of the margin. It is the in-betweenness of a metaphorical and material spatiality which as Soja and Hooper (1993) argue is theorised by bell hooks and is described as a "simultaneously political and geographical act of *choosing marginality*" (p. 186; emphasis added). A conscious and deliberate opting for marginality generates the possibility for imagining an alternative spatiality where the choices are not limited to assimilation, imitation or the reclamation of the center but where the possibility of *becoming* and a radical openness pervade. This is what Soja and Hooper (1993) dub as a 'thirdspace' of political choice where a disintegration and disruption of the binary through "deconstruction and reconstitution" happens which "allows for radical openness, flexibility and multiplicity" (p. 195).

For Homi Bhabha hybridity is "the third space which enables other positions to emerge" (qtd. in Huddart 2006, p. 85). It is "where the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences" (Bhabha 1994, p. 218). Bhabha reconstructs, if not deconstructs, the concept of culture by defining it as the consequence of an ongoing hybridisation. In other words, hybridity is the in-built quality of culture which materialises through "translation and negotiation–the in-between space–that carries the burden of the meaning of culture" (Bhabha 1994, p. 38). There is a great deal of emphasis placed on openness and fluidity in both Bhabha's (1994) and Soja/Hooper's (1993) arguments here. However, I believe that what Bhabha (1994) mainly means by 'third space' is an alternative way of perceiving culture with the aim of disentangling it from essentialist

perceptions which were propagated by modernist totalising mentality. Soja/Hooper's (1993) 'thirdspace' drives a wedge between the either/or dichotomy so as to create a political agency that can be utilised in challenging the hegemonic ascendancy of the dominant culture. At any rate, both terms are demonstrably at variance with the rigidity and totalitarianism of modernist discourses.

There is a connection between space as a material and physical entity and space as a cultural and metaphorical presence. This is most explicitly reflected in the notion of nation-states as the most noticeable manifestation of the boundary-drawing and exclusionary ethos of modernist thought. In nation-states the convergence of the material and metaphorical spaces takes place. This means that the physical and geographical boundaries delineating the territory of a nation-state are likely to be viewed as hermetic spaces in which culture develops and identity is inscribed. In other words, identities owe their existence to their very located*ness* within the very enclosure which accords them distinct if not distinctive significance. Such enclosed spaces are discursive fields where signification is generated by welding the signified and the signifier together. Contrary to this conception, Bhabha (1994) and Soja/Hooper (1993) posit the fluidity and instability of cultural products and identities. Their ideas point to the continuous making and remaking of identities within the constricting borders of nation-states. It is in this light that 'thirdspace' and in-betweenness become interchangeable and coterminous as both imply the porousness and permeability of borders.

CAMP AND CAMP-MENTALITY

LTMK is a highly spatialised novel. The reticent protagonist of the story is usually on the move either of his own accord or out of necessity. Michael's displaced mode of existence accentuates the importance of space. The country is in a state of emergency making it susceptible to spatial and semantic forays of the insurgents, the vagrants and the homeless. Travelling between cities is restricted and requires state permits. To preempt further arbitrary wandering, curfews are enforced and camps are set up. For the government, which has declared the state of emergency, camp is a solution to the problem of the intractable dispersal of people. Besides the temporal impediments (such as curfews), the government has to impose spatial restrictions (check points, dilatory issuance of travel permits, and camps). The opening up of camps is the direct outcome of the strict enforcement of martial law and the state of exception as Giorgio Agamben (2000) has argued (p. 38). This has resulted in the partitioning of the country into towns and camps. As a space of exception, "the camp is a piece of territory that is placed outside the normal juridical order" because it is "a zone of indistinction between the outside and the inside, the exception and the rule, the licit and the illicit" (p. 40). For Agamben (2000), "the birth of the camp . . . marks in a decisive way the political space itself of modernity" (p. 42). As Agamben (2000) explains, modern nation-state is the convergence of "a determinate localisation (territory)" with "a determinate order (the state)" to inscribe "life (birth or nation" occasioned by the mediatory role of "automatic regulations" (ibid). When this political system undergoes "a period of permanent crisis . . . the state decides to undertake the management of the biological life of the nation directly as its own task" (ibid). This is exactly what is happening in the novel under discussion here. Even if the definition and the function of camp in the novel are not as extreme as Agamben has illustrated, following Paul Gilroy (2000), it can be argued that the very process of nation-building resembles the creation of camps. Gilroy (2000) argues that modern nation-states are sometimes analogous to camps for the reason that they are constituted on principles of strict homogeneity in terms of race, ethnicity or the construction of an illusory cultural identity (p.87). Such nation-states are the products of camp-mentality or camp thinking according to

which nation is an enclosed camp where collective solidarity is secured through a divisional line between the self and the other leading to the creation of a 'them/us' polarity. Commenting on the significance of diaspora as a mode of resistance to nation as camp, Gilroy (2000) argues for the in-between position that diaspora creates (p. 112). He also observes that "these in-between locations represent, not disability and inertia, but opportunities for greater insights into the opposed worlds that enclosed them" (p. 71). While camps become sites of stagnation and fixity where "culture as a process is arrested, petrified and sterile" (Gilroy 2000, p. 84), and borders are the limits for putting an end to dissemination of signification, the in-between becomes the locus for the entry of newness. The importance of these in-between spaces lies in their capacity for generating non-originary non-essentialist identities and meaning. As Bhabha explains such spaces "provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood . . . that initiate new signs of identity and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation" (1994, p. 1-2). In the following two sections, a critical reading of the novel will be presented based on the introductory discussion above.

SPATIAL MONOPOLISATION

In *LTMK* camps perform the functions that were discussed above. Apartheid is indeed a regime which is heavily dependent on segregation and is extremely influenced by camp-mentality. By setting up camps the regime displays its strict adherence to the policy of *apartness*. Under these circumstances, camps perform different tasks. A camp can be a site of oblivion, that is, "camp as a place where people were deposited to be forgotten" (Coetzee 1983, p.94). Camp can also be viewed as the antithesis of the town against which the town defines itself. The binary ordering of town/camp is informed by the Manichean perception of 'modern intellect' which is based on a specious system of prioritisation. In theory, the town is the privileged site, but in reality it is the town that needs the camp. Such a kind of ambivalence is the hypostasis of the dichotomy of the camp and the town: the latter wishes for the absent presence of the former. Robert, one of the inmates of the camp, explains this point to Michael:

> 'What they would really like—this is my opinion—is for the camp to be miles away in the middle of the Koup out of sight. Then we could come on tiptoe in the middle of the night like fairies and do their work, dig their gardens, wash their pots, and be gone in the morning leaving everything nice and clean'. (Coetzee 1983, p. 82)

And later referring to the town's concern about the sanitary conditions of the camps, he adds:

> 'But do you think they do it because they love us? Not a hope. They prefer it that we live because we look too terrible when we get sick and die. If we just grew thin and turned into paper and then into ash and floated away, they wouldn't give a stuff for us. They just don't want to get upset. They want to go to sleep feeling good'. (Coetzee 1983, p. 88)

The hypocritical attitude of the governing system is clearly demonstrated here. More important than the regulation and provision of workforce, camps are dumping grounds where the expendable and the redundant elements are deposited. Under the rule of instrumental rationality, the state seeking to preserve its sovereignty becomes what Bauman calls "the modern gardening state, viewing the society it rules as an object of designing, cultivating and weed-poisoning" (2008, p. 14). Thus, camps are the regulatory apparatuses that are indispensable to the preservation of power and order behind the justifying façade of welfare. In the eyes of the city-dwellers the camp is a place with "[n]o hygiene, no morals. A nest of vice, men and women all together" (Coetzee 1983, p. 82). The inmates of the camps are no longer considered citizens as their life is stripped down to a bare existence. The government's

inability or unwillingness to provide equitable distribution of wealth and welfare coupled with its determination to reorganise the state of affairs on a rational basis have led to the creation of camps where the so-called refuse of this social ordering is kept in check. Furthermore, the state's decision to relocate the homeless and the jobless in the camp is a preventive and precautionary measure aimed at stopping the discontented people from joining the insurgents by "disappearing into the mountains and then coming back one night to cut their fences and drive their stock away" (Coetzee 1983, p.80). The provision of security and cheap labor have also been mentioned by Foucault (2003) in his discussion about the creation of confinement: "cheap manpower in the periods of full employment and high salaries; and in periods of unemployment, reabsorption of the idle and social protection against agitation and uprisings" (p.47). However, the camp is not the same as a prison. Here is one of the inmates of the camp who explains that a camp is not a prison because it is a place

> [F]or people without jobs. It is for all the people who go around from farm to farm begging for work because they haven't got food, they haven't got a roof over their heads. They put all the people like that together in a camp so that they won't have to beg any more.   (Coetzee 1983, p. 78)

Similarly, Agamben (2000) argues that "camps . . . were not . . . as one might have believed . . . a transformation and a development of prison law; rather, they were born out of the state of exception and martial law" (p.38). Camp is the space where civil rights and liberties are traded for subsistence and bare necessities of life and where "naked life and political life, at least in determinate moments, enter a zone of absolute indeterminacy" (Agamben 2000, p.42). Unemployment and abject poverty have left some with no choice but to languish in camps. Nobody is willing to escape from the camp because, as one of the camp refugees explains, where could

> people with nowhere to go run away from the nice life we've got here? From soft beds like this and free wood and a man at the gate with a gun to stop the thieves from coming in the night to steal you money?.   (p. 78)

Such a situation is a direct consequence of Gilroy's earlier point about pervasiveness of camp-mentality. There are also some ethical implications which the implementation of such a repressive policy entails:

> [T]he unemployed person was . . . taken in charge, at the expense of the nation but at the cost of his individual liberty. Between him and society, an implicit system of obligation was established: he had the right to be fed, but he must accept the physical and moral constraint of confinement.   (Foucault 2003, p. 44-45)

The camp is the "materialisation of the state of exception" (Agamben 2000, p. 41) in which "the law is suspended" (Agamben 2000, p. 44). The relation between the law and the state of exception is similar to the relation between the town and the camp. In this equation the camp is an appendage to the town just as the state of exception is to the law. Yet the parasitic existence of the camp is not definitive in any sense because without the camp the town cannot exist. On the surface, the camp appeared to be "a nest of parasites hanging from the neat sunlit town, eating its substance, giving no nourishment back" (Coetzee 1983, p. 116). However to Michael, "thinking without passion . . . it was no longer obvious which was host and which parasite, camp or town" (Coetzee 1983, p.116). In a few remarkably deconstructive lines, Michael throws into question the rigid dualism that afflicts modern intellect:

> If the worm devoured the sheep, why did the sheep swallow the worm? What if there were millions, more millions than anyone knew, living in camps, living on alms, living off the land, living by guile, creeping away in corners to escape the times, too canny to

> put out flags and draw attention to themselves and be counted? What if the hosts were far outnumbered by the parasites, the parasites of idleness and the other secret parasites in the army and the police force and the schools and factories and offices, the parasites of the heart? Could the parasites then still be called parasites? Parasites too had flesh and substance; parasites too could be preyed upon. Perhaps in truth whether the camp was declared a parasite on the town or the town a parasite on the camp depended on no more than on who made his voice heard loudest. (ibid)

Coetzee reveals how binary orderings are only spurious constructs that evoke the existence of difference which ultimately lead to the creation of dichotomies. Just as the quotation above reveals, it is not the question of essence or any essentially inherent quality that makes one side privileged and the other, unprivileged. The distinction between them is determined by the factor "who made his voice heard loudest" (ibid), that is, who controls the discourse. Those who hold sway over discourse can arbitrarily dictate a regimen of truth. In *LTMK*, the guerrillas are those who strongly oppose this arbitrary imposition of truth seeking to subvert it. Their hideout is in the mountains. They are the enemies who are openly at war with the government. The fact is that the state is facing two challenges: (a) the guerillas who openly and knowingly defy the authority of the state, and (b) "the homeless people, the squatters . . . the beggars . . . the unemployed, the vagrants who sleep on the mountain" (Coetzee 1983, p. 88). The first group is obviously the enemy but the second group cannot be so readily categorised. The second group is indeed the surplus of the state gardening-policy which cannot be, in Bauman's words, incorporated into "the visualised perfect reality nor can be changed so that they do so" (2008, p. 66). Between the apolitical submissiveness of the camp inmates and the subversive assertiveness of the rebels, Michael chooses a different course of action. Neither residing in camp nor joining the guerrillas in the mountains Michael opts for the in-between space of the veld which is on the margins of the town. At this juncture, Michael inadvertently becomes a subversive presence ignoring the spatial demarcations of the state and the self-drawn territory of the rebels. In other words, he occupies a no-man's-land which is subject to military and insurgent forays. Because of his precarious position, he decides to go underground. Being neither a tramp nor an insurgent Michael does the only thing that he can do. He becomes a gardener, creating his own space and identity. The buffer zone that becomes the locus of his operation and existence conflates both space and identity. Michael's act of 'choosing marginality' is reminiscent of Hooks's argument noted previously by Soja and Hooper (1993). When he is offered two courses of action, namely to live in the camps or to join the guerrillas, he chooses to stay behind to carry out his self-assigned cultivating task. He explains why: "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" (Coetzee 1983, p. 109).

Interestingly, Michael's identity is embedded in this piece of land not only because he used to be a gardener but also for the very reason that the land has been scattered with the ashes of his mother. Perhaps that is why a deep respect develops between Michael and the land. His subterranean life in a crevice between two "low hills, like plump breasts" (Coetzee 1983, p. 100) reveals the depth of his ancestral attachment to the land as homeland. The perception of land as homeland precedes the state's demarcations and the implementation of camp-mentality. His wish to stay on the farm where his mother has been buried represents his desire for rejecting the state's monopoly on space. The state attempts at imposing the discourse of nationhood by excluding the other. Conversely, Michael wishes to interpolate this discourse by the narrative of homeland and a sense of ancestral belonging to the land which predates the colonial intervention:

> I want to live here, he thought: I want to live here forever, where my mother and my grandmother lived. It is as simple as that. 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.   (1983, p. 99)

Against the myth of nation*ness* and the appropriative behavior of the state, Michael sets the counter-discourse of homeland: a wish to revive or live the moment prior to what Sara Upstone calls the imposition of colonial "over-writing" (p. 6). Overwriting signifies the way colonial systems "attempt to obscure an existing diversity with order" (ibid). In this way, a new reality is written over the old one. However, according to Upstone, the total and permanent obliteration of the trace of the older reality is impossible because "such a trace is akin to the silences of a written text" which resurfaces and "exposes how unreal, how unachievable, is the order and the homogeneity that the colonial division of space projects" (ibid). This fact is clearly acknowledged by the medical officer through whose point of view the second section of novel is narrated. This section relates the account of Michael's sojourn at a rehabilitation center where he remains uncannily silent and adamantly refuses to eat anything. Michael's enigmatic life-story intrigues the medical officer who day by day becomes more and more obsessed with the mystery of Michael's non-compliance. Unlike Michael who seems to be painfully oblivious to what is happening around him, the medical officer is acutely observant of the momentous developments and the course history is about to take as it is "tending towards a moment of transfiguration in which pattern is born from chaos and history manifests itself in all its triumphant meaning" (Coetzee 1983, p. 158). Such a teleological view of history is undercut by Michael's ahistorical perspective. Michael's refusal to break his silence and relate his story together with his absolute inattentiveness to the historic gravity of the situation force the medical officer to make an impassioned plea to him to "yield and at last open [his] mouth" if he does not want to "perish in obscurity" (Coetzee 1983, p. 152). But Michael or Michaels (the name he is mistakenly given at the health center) does not give in. Instead, it is the medical officer who yields as his obsession with Michaels following his escape from the center reaches a climactic point. As if no more capable of contemplating the unfolding course of history, he begs Michael to show him to a place where he can stay away from the current situation:

> Though this is a large country, so large that you would think there would be space for everyone, what I have learned of life tells me that it is hard to keep out of the camps. Yet I am convinced there are areas that lie between the camps and belong to no camp, not even to the catchment areas of the camps--certain mountaintops, for example, certain islands in the middle of swamps, certain arid strips where human beings may not find it worth their while to live. I am looking for such a place in order to settle there, perhaps only till things improve, perhaps forever. I am not so foolish, however, as to imagine that I can rely on maps and roads to guide me. Therefore I have chosen you to show me the way.   (1983, p.162-3)

There are two points worth mentioning here as regards the medical officer's change of mind. Firstly, the medical officer's historical concerns give way to spatial ones. Secondly, his distrust of maps attests to the fact that maps have the potential for misrepresenting reality. Maps produced by the colonial state are primarily attempts aimed at creating order and authority. They are not reliable because they are projections of the order-making mentality of the colonial mind which strives to redefine and re-create reality based on its colonial intentions.

If in camp-nations, identity is petrified, as Gilroy (2000) claims (p. 252) and consequently, the process of signification is arrested, or in medical officers words, "the meaning" becomes "a term" (Coetzee 1983, p.166), then Michael's desire to go where he can keep out of camps implies the desire "to dwell in the beyond" (Bhabha 1994, p. 7) that is "to

move beyond modernist binary oppositions of race, gender and class into the multiplicity of *other* spaces that difference makes" (Soja 1996, p. 91).

Michael disrupts the enforced binary structuring of spatial reality by creating an in-between space which exposes the inadequacy if not the failure of the totalising classificatory system. The construction of camps is an attempt by the state to maintain its monopoly of power and authority by means of creating monitored spaces where state-administered identities are produced. The camps are spaces where the distribution of people and dissemination of identity is controlled. Bodies become signs on which signification, that is, identity is imposed. Outside the camp they lose their signification and are labeled as vagrants: creatures who are repelled like pests or parasites. Inside the camp they must build their substantiality. Camps are both discursive and ideological apparatuses that help the state to create identity and reality for those on the periphery.

BODY AND SPACE

As Michael's life-story shows, his itinerary displays different kinds of spatial manipulation which highlights the unbreakable bond between body and space. The relation between body and space is thus repeatedly implied in the text. Camp is "a place where people [are] deposited to be forgotten" and to be kept out of sight (Coetzee 1983, p. 94). The Visagie grandson of the farmhouse, which Michael believed to be "one of those islands without owner" (Coetzee 1983, p. 61), having appeared out of the blue, "had tried to turn him into a body-servant" (Coetzee 1983, p. 65). The health center to which Michael is committed is a place where the feeble bodies are nourished and restored back to health to be sent off "to labour battalions to carry water and dig latrines" (Coetzee 1983, p. 134). The hospital is similarly associated with the preservation of body and the proper disposal of it. For example, Michael's dead mother is cremated immediately after her death. Such a reductively instrumentalistic approach to body is apparent everywhere as different spaces make different demands on the body. The state strives to regulate the body through the appropriation of the space. It has created camps where bodies are required to literally earn their right for existence through toil and slave labor. The survival is contingent on the production of labor. In camps the freedom of movement is exchanged with the security of the body. Bodies are secure within camps as long as they prove productive for the cycle of labour. Once bodies lose their productivity, the utilitarian logic reduces them to ashes and obscurity. Michael is acutely aware of this fact:

> 'My mother worked all her life long,' he said. 'She scrubbed other people's floors, she cooked food for them, she washed their dishes. She washed their dirty clothes. She scrubbed the bath after them. She went on her knees and cleaned the toilet. But when she was old and sick they forgot her. They put her away out of sight. When she died they threw her in the fire. They gave me an old box of ash and told me, "Here is your mother, take her away, she is no good to us". (Coetzee 1983, p.136)

Michael particularly finds himself constantly on the receiving end of this reductivism. Throughout the story he is continually harassed by spatial intrusions. A holistic view of his journey reveals that Michael's control over space, from its urban to its nomadic form, is on the wane as he has to grapple with different menaces which, in the end, leave him with the space of his own body. In other words, the surrounding space progressively shrinks until it is limited to the contour of his body. In the end Michael seems to be clinging to the last form of spatiality i.e. his corporeality: his right to maintain the autonomy of his body against the encroachment of even charitable treatments: "I have become an object of charity, he thought. Everywhere I go there are people waiting to exercise their forms of charity on me" (p. 181)

because "I have escaped the camps; perhaps, if I lie low, I will escape the charity too" (p. 182).

The only way he can mitigate the intrusion is to reduce his bodily dependence on the state-regulated space. Perhaps that is why Michael reclaims the land in order to feed his own body. Michael gradually starts to view his body as separate from himself. The growing estrangement between him and his body continues to the degree that his body becomes autonomous enough to reject the food he was given in the rehabilitation center. By eliminating the needs of body he obtains a transitory independence and achieves self-sufficiency.

CONCLUSION

Michael's yearning for marginality surpasses the bipolarity of existing options. It is a third alternative: he is not a rebel or an inmate of a camp. His identity is neither the corollary of historicality nor sociality but linked to spatiality. His identity is indissociable from the site he "stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist" (hooks 1990, p. 151). Michael re-appropriates the land and his body by transforming them to sites that interfere with the utilitarian vision of the state. Maintaining connection to the land means keeping in touch with the terrain representing the nexus between Mother Nature, motherland, and his birth mother. It is to this place which he longs to return, albeit, enfeebled and enervated, he can only imagine being there at the end of the novel. Though it can be argued that Michael does not consciously accept marginality, it might be asserted that Michael, at least, problematises the favored orderings that restrict the political and social choices to distinctly well-defined categories. This clearly resonates with the medical officer's description of Michael as "a human soul above and beneath classification, a soul blessedly untouched by doctrine, untouched by history" (Coetzee 1983, p. 151).

The space that Michael has created is the space of postmodernity that allows for the inscription of difference in a mode beyond the existing categories stipulated in modernity: this space "is simultaneously central and marginal . . . a difficult and risky place on the edge, in-between" (Soja and Hooper 1993, p. 187). Such a space is analogous to Bauman's argument about the privileged quality of ambivalence which he characterises as "the no-man's or contested land: the under-or over-definition, the demon of ambiguity" (1998, p. 8). Understanding Michael requires disentangling oneself from the constrictions of modern thought that preclude the possibility of accepting difference and polysemy. Implicit in this view is the necessity of refraining from imposing meaning on the other. Michael's enigma disputes the unrelenting pursuit of knowledge promoted by 'modern intellect'. His incomprehensibility challenges and consequently exposes the intrinsic hegemony of this thought. The desire to impose meaning on the other is tantamount to the monopoly of history, meaning and space. Perhaps a suitable point of departure for further analysis of the novel would be to concentrate on the way Michael's difference makes him an object of attention and curiosity to those who arrogate to themselves the right to impose meaning on him.

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