The Outsider and the ‘Other’ in Life & Times of Michael K
A Postcolonial Reading

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Abstract

This essay discusses the roles of the outsider and the ‘other’ in the novel *Life & Times of Michael K*, published in 1983, by J.M. Coetzee through a postcolonial reading with perspectives borrowed from narrative analysis. The protagonist Michael K is an ‘other’ in the eyes of the other characters in the novel and this perception is further enhanced by the narrative situation. In addition to being the ‘other’, and thereby deprived of power, Michael K transforms himself into an outsider. This essay claims that by being the outsider the protagonist Michael K becomes empowered.
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Key words: Coetzee, Michael K, outsider, ‘other’, postcolonialism, narrative identity, power
1. Introduction

The ‘other’ is a term used by postcolonial theorists and it is a status that is provided by a “dominant subjectivity” to someone or something that is unknown and “extraneous” and also perceived as the “opposite” of the authority (Boehmer 21). According to Encyclopedia of Feminist Literary Theory the ‘other’ can also be seen as what is feared, and what can be conquered (216). John McLeod claims that definitions of identity is “defined in relation to something else” (74), and in postcolonial theory ‘otherness’ represents something that is seen as “exotic or immoral” (Barry 187) which might be e.g. representations of non-Europeans. These representations will be further discussed later on. However, I understand the concept of the outsider as different from the ‘other’, because an outsider’s status is not necessarily conferred upon him or her from elsewhere. This essay discusses the roles of the outsider and the ‘other’ in the novel Life & Times of Michael K by J.M. Coetzee through a postcolonial reading with added perspectives borrowed from narrative analysis. The claim of this essay is that by becoming an outsider the protagonist Michael K is empowered.

Michael K is a man in his early thirties living in a city in South Africa, and the political situation in the country in the novel is that of civil war and oppression. Michael is one of the people facing this oppression. He has a disfigurement, a hare lip, and his mind is considered to be slow and he has therefore lived away from his mother, Anna K, since he was a child. Despite this Michael is closely tied to his mother and he feels a responsibility towards her. When Anna becomes ill, Michael and his mother leave the city where they live, in order to seek up the place where she used to live as a child. During their journey Michael’s mother dies but nevertheless, Michael continues the journey, now with his mother’s ashes. He finds a lonely place where he settles down and becomes more and more isolated from the outside world. However, his solitude is constantly interrupted by other people who force him back to
civilization. As a consequence of his disfigurement, his social status, and his possible racial
inferiority Michael can be perceived as an ‘other’ both in the eyes of the other characters, the
narrators and the reader. Through his avoidance of other people and unwillingness to
participate in society Michael might be said to transform himself into an outsider in addition
to being an ‘other’.

The choice of combining the postcolonial perspective with narrative analysis is due to
the fact that they are intertwined in the novel since they both bring forth the aspect of power
relations. Being an outsider may empower Michael, however, his ‘otherness’ might be what
deprives him of power to some extent since he wants to break away from society and is
reluctantly brought back. The reasons to use the postcolonial perspective for the analysis are
that even though race is not explicitly mentioned, the story is enacted in South Africa with its
history of apartheid regime, and Michael K is distinctly inferior to other people of the society
in the novel which can strengthen the perception of him as the ‘other’. Furthermore, Michael
is not telling his own story but is being represented by two different narrators, and this
representation can be seen as a parallel to how colonized people were represented by the
colonizers. Since the idea of representation is also applicable to narrative, e.g. how the
characters are represented by the narrator, this is also the reason to use the perspective of
narrative identity.

Postcolonialism brings up the issues of agency, change and constancy e.g. through the
concept of *diaspora* which is also associated with narrative identity, a perspective developed
by Paul Ricoeur. Michael K is consistently exposed to the whims of others since he is trying
to break away from society but is reluctantly brought back. However, it is also possible to see
him as an inverted colonizer. Even though he wants a piece of land where he can cultivate his
seeds, and finds it, he never claims any land, but is always interrupted by others who make
him move, or who remove him. This uncertain status of his might be said to further complicate the idea of the outsider and the ‘other’.

Michael can be considered to be the ‘other’ in the society he lives but he may also be considered to be the ‘other’ through the narrative situation in the novel since he is not the narrator of the story but he is being represented by different narrators. The first and the third parts of the novel are told by an omniscient narrator while the second part is told by a first person narrator, a medical officer (a doctor) who is treating Michael in a re-education camp. The narrative situations, together with the considerations of the outsider and the ‘other’, bring forth the question of power relations in the different parts of the novel. The doctor, in the second part, is only telling his point of view which separates the narrative ‘I’ from the ‘other’ and thus it is possible to look at how the sense of power relations differs in the different parts of the novel. The doctor’s ignorance of Michael and his failed efforts to receive information about Michael might be something that enhances Michael’s ‘otherness’ further. Transforming himself into an outsider might be Michal’s strategy of coping with his ‘otherness’.

The analysis of this essay will mainly be based on the perspective of postcolonialism but will also contain analysis based on narrative identity, and therefore it will be preceded by a presentation of the two perspectives. Both the presentation and the analysis will contain explanations of certain concepts that will be used, such as the outsider, the ‘other’ and diaspora. Diaspora can refer to people who live together in a community with a feeling of solidarity (McLeod 207). Seemingly, Michael K is indifferent to this concept. In order to be able to establish the perception of the outsider and the ‘other’ the analysis will look at how Michael K is depicted through the different narrators; how he acts and what choices he makes but also how other characters in the novel act towards him and how they perceive him. The outsider is a character type frequently utilized in e.g. modernist and existentialist fiction such as Kafka’s *The Trial* or Camus’ *The Stranger*. However, I will not be specifically concerned
with the possible intertextual parallels. Since Michael K is represented through the narrative situation in the novel, the analysis will also look at this representation through the two different perspectives.
2. Postcolonialism and narrative identity

2.1 Postcolonialism

According to Peter Barry postcolonial criticism is concerned with cultural differences in literary texts (185). While liberal humanist critics claim great literature to have a “timeless and universal significance”, postcolonial critics undermine this universalism by claiming that this only serves to “disregard cultural, social, regional and national differences in experiences and outlook” (185). One way of defining the ‘other’ is to see it from an historical aspect. Historically the East has been marginalized as the ‘other’, and since universalism considered European, or Western, ideas to be obvious and therefore unquestioned, ideas from elsewhere received subordinate roles (Barry 186). However, postcolonial critics believe that perceived ‘otherness’ together with “marginality and plurality . . . can be seen as sources of energy and potential change” (192). Seemingly, this link between ‘otherness’, energy and change is missing in the protagonist of *Life & Times of Michael K*. According to Edward Said one way for the West to approach the East was through Orientalism, which is the term for a western idea of the Orient and how the West traditionally has tried to dominate, reconstruct and to have power over the Orient (Said 3). This relationship can also be seen in *Life & Times of Michael K*. The other characters are defining themselves as superior and therefore Michael is considered to be the ‘other’.

The process of ‘othering’ is the most basic and important part in colonization according to Elleke Boehmer (75). The term is alluding to something subordinate; Europe was expanding and therefore seen as superior, the colonized people were seen as lesser in 

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1 Parts of the following paragraphs have been taken from my exam paper “The perception of ‘the other’ in *Foe*: postcolonial and narrative identity perspectives”, Linnaeus University, Autumn 2011.
comparison: “less human, less civilized, as child or savage, wild man, animal, or headless man” (76). The difference between “the self” and the notion of what is “not self” (76) is the foundation of identity in many “cultural contexts”. Cultures always try to find an agreement with what is not known; this negotiation is “endemic” (76). This search for agreement can also be said to be valid "between peoples or subjectivities” that are not known “to one another, on the basis of convention” (76). A parallel to this agreement might be seen in the novel in the doctor’s efforts to receive information about Michael.

Some of the explanations to why the Europeans considered themselves superior during the Victorian era derive from “Enlightenment perceptions of rational man” (Boehmer 77). The European was considered to be “[m]aster of himself, in command of reason as well as of new technologies of measurement and quantification . . . he presumed the rest of the globe available for the operation of his intellect and curiosity” and the world was seen as “raw material” for the white man (77). According to Boehmer the “characterization of the European was asserted in relation to an opposite, a ‘rest’ of the world, an other” which could be “woman, slave, servant or beast” (77). Furthermore, during colonization this other also became the colonized, “a category of representation which subsumed within itself those other significations of difference” (77). Said criticized the Western depiction of the East as a weak ‘other’ and since its depiction of the East was constructed and thus, false, it made powers between the West and the East unequal (Richards 18). Through Orientalism the support for “colonial domination” was maintained, it “supported global colonial hegemony” (18).
2.2 Narrative identity

Ricoeur claims that in order to identify an “individual or a community” the questions “Who did this?”, “Who is the agent, the author?” have to be answered (246). According to Patrick Crowley “Ricoeur uses the interrelationship between time, narrative and human identity” which makes it possible “to construct an ethical notion of narrative identity that privileges agency” (1). Ricoeur also argues that answering the question “Who?” means that “a story of a life” (246) can be told. “The story told tells about the action of the “who”” (246). Thus, “the identity of this who . . . itself must be a narrative identity” (246). In Life and Times of Michael K the protagonist is unwilling to tell his story to the doctor and therefore, the action of Michael cannot be told in that part of the novel. As a consequence, Michael’s narrative identity is not shown in that particular part.

Ricoeur has developed a concept where narrative identity can answer the question of how an identity can signify both change and constancy (Crowley 1). In order to do this Ricoeur divides identity into two parts, idem and ipse. Crowley explains idem as being the aspect of identity that will not change over time but stays the same throughout a lifetime, e.g. gender, eye colour; a formal identity which is abstract (Ricoeur 246). Ipse is “self-same” (246), a narrative identity, and according to Laura Castor ipse is “the core of a person’s character as expressed over time, including desires, beliefs, and habitual ways of facing conflict and adversity in everyday life” (142). Crowley believes that within this category change can happen “within a recognizable entity” (1-2). The narrative identity, which forms “self-constancy” (Ricoeur 246), the ability to stay the same, can comprise “change”, variability, within a person’s life-time. As a result a person can emerge as both “a reader and a writer of its own life” (246). When applied to the novel, Michael K does not seem to have
either desires or beliefs and he does not seem to develop, or change. Seemingly, he does not seem to want to tell his own story.

Moreover, according to Kim Atkins identity can be seen as a practical matter, where the “practical identity” concerns how people value themselves, that they find their lives worth living, and their actions “worth undertaking” (1). Atkins claims that asking oneself the questions of “who I am” and “how I should live” means “self-narrative” (2), meaning a life-interpretation where other people are included in that life. This life has a past and a present and it is possible to see a future and in the power of this life a person “makes sense” of him- or herself and the world he or she lives in (2). Furthermore, Atkins agrees with Ricoeur that an ethical aim, namely “the desire to live well, with, and for others in just institutions” (Atkins 3), is a condition for narrative identity. According to Atkins the idea of a unified life is an idea of “the good life” (3). If Michael has a desire to live well, his starvation which begins in the mountains contradicts this. Also, he does not wish to live with other people and the society he lives in is not just to him. As earlier stated “desires, beliefs, and habitual ways of facing conflict and adversity in everyday life” (Castor 142) belong to the ipse category. Michael’s self-narrative does not exist, which becomes evident through the doctor’s narration. As a result of his striving for solitude and lack of agenda, this agency does not signify both change and constancy, but merely constancy. It is difficult for the doctor in part two to acknowledge agency to Michael since he is not telling anything about what he has been doing on the farm and in the mountains. Therefore, it is impossible for the doctor to get his questions about Michael answered. Seemingly, Michael avoids conflicts, and does not have an agenda, neither does he change nor develop. His idem, those things that does not change, is the same, and so is his ipse, those things that a person usually develops. Michael’s refusal to tell his story to the doctor implies that Michael cannot be related to agency in that part of the novel. Neither the doctor nor the reader can answer the question of “who?”
3. The outsider, the ‘other’ and power relations

3.1 Michael K – the outsider

After Michael’s mother has died he is determined to bury his mother’s ashes on the grounds of her childhood home and therefore he walks to what he believes is the right place. He settles down on the seemingly abandoned farm and starts to set up a life there. Another person arrives, the Visagie grandson, who tries to make Michael into a servant, and this is something Michael reflects upon when he walks up into the mountains after leaving the farm (Coetzee 65-66). The fact that Michael runs away when this becomes obvious to him might indicate that he wants to, and tries to be in charge of his own life. Even though Michael is running away in reaction the action supports the idea of Michael as an outsider. The scene where Michael arrives at the work camp Jakkalsdriff also depicts him as an outsider that is fleeing society and who does not want to be around other people: “I needed more warning, I should have been told I was going to be sent back amongst people” (74). This is also connected to the matter of diaspora which will be discussed later on. In both these scenes other people affect Michael’s situation and therefore he can be said to be deprived of his power to some extent. However, the aforementioned scene where he runs away into the mountains might be a strategy to cope with the ‘otherness’. Because of his mother’s death and since he avoids other people Michael’s identity as an outsider becomes enhanced.

The idea of Michael as an outsider is further reinforced by the doctor’s achievements to make Michael tell his story in the second part of the novel. According to Michaela Canepari-Labib the interest the doctor shows Michael makes him “withdraw into himself more and more” (32) which results in Michael’s escape. The outsider might be considered to be a strategic position for being both inside and outside, or moving between positions.
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(Wessels 64-65). A person who is both an outsider and an insider in the terms of culture is termed “liminal *personae*” (Wessels 65), which means a person positioned on the threshold. However, Michael’s empowerment appears to be more consistent the more of an outsider he is and therefore he does not seem to be a part of society. Being the outsider Michael wishes to live in solitude, but is brought back to society as the ‘other’.

On another occasion he is caught by guards when he is out in the streets of Prince Albert. He is taken to the work camp Jakkalsdrif which is not considered a prison, but he has to work for food and he is not free to go; if he tries to escape he will be shot (Coetzee 70-85). Another man living in the camp considers it to be a place for unemployed who go “from farm to farm begging for work” (78) because they are homeless; he believes that life is better in the camp with comforts like beds, fireplaces than on the road without work or home. He even considers the guards that stand by the gate as protecting instead of threatening. Furthermore, he wonders why Michael does not believe the same: “Where do you come from that you don’t know these things?” (78). This line carries the notion that Michael is considered to be an outsider, without the knowledge that the other man considers to be common. This question can also imply that Michael does not just come from “somewhere”, but from “nowhere”, and thus, as an outsider he operates from a position from where he cannot be controlled.

Moreover, the assumption that Michael *should* “know these things” can be connected to the concept of *diaspora*. Historically, colonizers moved people from their home countries to other places by force which could be done through e.g. slavery (Wisker 26). McLeod refers to diaspora as when people who live together in communities in a country share cultural traditions such as “language, religion, custom or folklore” (207) which originate from the country they or their ancestors once left. These traditions are important to them to some extent; they have “some claim on their loyalty and emotions” (207). At the same time, McLeod believes that these diaspora communities also can lead to certain problems such as
“ghettoized” (208) people and a notion of alienation to the rest of the society (208). In the imagination of the diaspora, ‘home’ is a place of desire and myths (209). ‘Home’, as a concept, can help people to orient themselves in relation to the rest of the world, and is seen as a welcoming place which often includes other people similar to oneself (210).

Michael’s mother Anna has memories of happier times and she wants to return to the origin of these memories and therefore, her childhood home can be seen as a symbol of a diaspora. However, Michael has never experienced a happy home, being left by his mother as a child and brought up at Huis Norenius. Since Michael does not want to belong to a community together with other people, but rather live in solitude this suggests that he does not want to belong to a diaspora which also strengthens the perception of him being an outsider. However, he seems to long for a happy home where his mother waits for him in the doorway “ready to welcome him home at the end of a long day” (Coetzee 9). Even though it seems as though it is only his mother he can consider living together with, this particular desire strengthens the understanding of Michael’s wish as a wish to belong to some kind of diaspora and not being an outsider.

Since Michael wants to live in solitude he transforms himself into an outsider. On one occasion the doctor refers to the war that is going on and that they have to hurry to get Michael’s story, his evidence, told, but Michael does not consider himself to be in the war which makes the doctor irritated, he believes that everyone is included in the war and the effects of it (Coetzee 138). Being the outsider Michael seems to have been able to avoid some of the experiences of war. In the Cape Michael worked alone and “[s]ometimes on Saturdays he failed to hear the boom of the noon gun” (Coetzee 4). However, there are other characters in the novel who wish to be left out of the war as well, the Visagie grandson (64), and the guard at Jakkalsdrif (86). In that sense Michael is an outsider among others. One difference is that the Visagie grandson has a strategy of how he can remain in hiding: “‘Soon they are not
going to have enough men, I’m telling you, they are not going to have enough men to track
down the men that are running away! . . . I just want to keep out of sight for a little while.
They will soon give up. . . . But I need your co-operation, Michael. You must help me” (64-
65). The guard also has a plan how to avoid the war: “. . . the day I get orders to go north I
walk out. They’ll never see me again. It’s not my war. Let them fight it, it’s their war” (86).
The guard does not consider the war to be his war and therefore, in that sense he too becomes
an outsider. However, the guard is an outsider with an agenda, since he has a conscious plan
of how to escape the war. The status of the outsider is one major difference between Michael
and the other two, since they belong to different social classes. Michael is inferior to the
Visagie grandson and the guard since he has to do what they tell him to do.

The lack of agenda can be seen in Michael’s starvation which is not an act of
deliberation, but of mere indifference, something that just happens. The notion of Michael as
agendaless might make him become interpreted as the ‘other’ which will be discussed in the
next section. However, Laura Wright claims that Michael can be seen as a “colonial subject
who attempts to escape through the body” (74) and his starvation can be seen as a flight from
war and people such as the persistent doctor who wishes Michael to talk to him. The
avoidance of other people and the starvation shows that the protagonist tries to escape his
‘otherness’ by being the outsider. However, Wright believes that the non-told story of
Michael of presumed suffering would provide people such as the doctor with “a way of
intellectualizing and therefore justifying their own positions of ambivalence” (74), being
defenders of an imperialism which should be seen as anachronistic. Therefore, Michael can
become the ‘other’ because of this untold story.

On one occasion Michael is caught by the police and forced to work at the railway and
while other prisoners do not seem to care Michael wants to be in control: “‘Where are they
taking us?’ he asked. The stranger looked him over and shrugged. ‘Why does it matter where
they are taking us’ he said. ‘There are only two places, up the line and down the line. That is the nature of trains’” (Coetzee 41).

Michael does not share the other prisoners’ acceptance of not knowing where they are going and therefore, he is an outsider. Another thing that can be said to enhance the idea of Michael being an outsider is his last name which implies a connection to Franz Kafka’s Joseph K, the protagonist of *The Trial*. According to Head the last name shared by the two protagonists suggests a joint “theme of alienation” (95). However, the names used to refer to Michael by the two different narrators in the novel can also be said to strengthen the perception of him as the ‘other’. The omniscient narrator refers to Michael as “K”, which is his last name, and not even a complete last name, but merely a letter. The doctor, who is the narrator of the second part, refers to Michael as Michaels, since that name wrongly has been noted at Jakkalsdrif. The doctor only calls him Michael once, when he tries to get his attention (Coetzee 138).

### 3.2 Michael K – the ‘other’

In the nineteenth century the previously delicately depicted differences between races were abandoned and instead became scientific proof of that ‘difference’ was related to race, hierarchy and evolution” (Hallam and Street 30). Nudity was viewed differently depending on whether if it was seen as European art or if naked Africans were depicted. For instance nudity depicted in European art was connected to beauty while naked Africans received “an inferior animal status” (30), which of course made them the ‘others’. Even if the novel does not deal with art or nudity, it deals with how people can be seen in the eyes of other people. Some people are more commonly viewed as inferior; Michael is clearly one of those. When Michael is arrested in Prince Albert the charge sheet shows “CM” (Coetzee 70) which stands for “coloured male” (Head 97). In *The Population Registration Act* from 1950 the coloureds are
defined as people who are not white or natives (Hammett 249). During the apartheid regime the coloureds were considered inferior to the white population but superior to the black people (Hammett 249). On the road to Prince Albert he is stopped by a soldier who takes the money Anna has left him after her death, and the only money Michael gets to keep is tip given by the soldier (Coetzee 37-38). This action also strengthens the notion of Michael as an ‘other’. One example of how Michael is aware of the fact that he belongs to a group which is considered to be the ‘other’ is when he reflects upon Jakkalsdrif as a “place where people were deposited to be forgotten” (94).

Furthermore, Michael has a hare lip, which means that he stands out from the rest through his appearance. When the soldiers discover him in the mountains they clearly see him as the ‘other’: “‘See if he’s got a tongue. See if he is such an idiot as he looks’” (122). The same soldiers call him “monkey” (123); they see him as a creature who does not reach the standard of a human being. Therefore, how other characters view Michael because of his appearance together with the way in which his mind is considered as slow strengthen the notion of him as a perceived ‘other’. Also, he does not have any female friends because of his looks (Coetzee 4). He seems to be most at ease when he is alone which could mean that he transforms himself into the outsider in order to be able to cope with his ‘otherness’.

According to the doctor, who is the narrator of the second part, the reason why Michael is at the re-education camp is that they want information from him about the “Swartberg insurgent gang” (Coetzee 140-141) which they believe Michael to have had dealings with. However, to make Michael talk and thereby tell his own story clearly becomes important to the doctor: “‘Give yourself some substance, man, otherwise you are going to slide through life absolutely unnoticed . . . You want to live, don’t you? Well then, talk make your voice heard, tell your story! We are listening!’” (140). According to Canepari-Labib it is possible to maintain the difference that exists between the perceived superiors and the ‘other’
since they view the ‘other’ as “objects of... sympathy” (95). Therefore, the relationship between the superior doctor and Michael can imply that even though the doctor’s intention might be to decrease Michael’s ‘otherness’, it merely sustains the notion of Michael as an ‘other’ instead.

One definition of the ‘other’ is due to how the West perceived itself as superior because of its belief that the colonized peoples lacked “power, self-consciousness” and “ability to think and rule” (Boehmer 21). Therefore, the notion of Michael as the ‘other’ is enhanced since he does not have a conscious agenda, and since he neither grows nor develops from his experiences. He does not take charge of events in his life which is shown when Anna wants him to resign from work in order to be able to follow her to Prince Albert and get a new job there (8). He never seems to have doubted her choices which have affected him, such as leaving him at Huis Norenius when he was eight years old. She expects him to question her choice to leave Cape Town together with him, but he never does; since he trusts his mother he resigns from work and leaves Cape Town together with her (8-23). He does what she wants him to do and as a result, the perception of Michael as the ‘other’ is strengthened. He does not care about what happens to him and something that indicates this is when he is considering both his future and his past: “He did not know what was going to happen. The story of his life had never been an interesting one; there had usually been someone to tell him what to do next; now there was no one, and the best thing seemed to be to wait” (Coetzee 67). Another example of his lack of agenda and development is that he is not a successful colonizer at the farm even though he has worked as “Gardener, grade I” (4) in Cape Town where he managed to be promoted from “grade 3(b)”, even though this was a slow development.

Michael’s hare lip makes him different from other people, and therefore he becomes an ‘other’. If he would have had an operation to correct his face, his looks would have
changed. Castor claims that *idem* is everything that makes “it possible to recognize a person over time, for example in a passport photograph” (142), which would include a person’s face. Therefore, in case of an operation, for Michael *idem* would not be wholly applicable to appearance. A doctor tells Michael that he can have his mouth corrected but does not offer to help him (Coetzee 72). Thus, in this sense Michael can therefore remain the ‘other’ in the eyes of other people. Michael does not ask about the operation himself; he does not seem to have considered the option to have an operation, which reinforces the notion of Michael as not having an agenda, or desires. If viewing Michael as deprived of power, his indifference to an operation strengthens the notion of him as an ‘other’.

However, Michael is aware of how he is perceived which is shown in the last part of the novel where he states that: “I was mute and stupid in the beginning, I will be mute and stupid at the end. There is nothing to be ashamed of in being simple” (Coetzee 182). He knows that he is an ‘other’ in the eyes of other people and he has no desire or agenda to change this. It could also be that he cannot change himself, this is who he is, and he accepts it. Since he believes that he does not have to be ashamed of himself, he becomes empowered.

### 3.3 Power relations

This essay will bring up a few examples of power relations from the novel, in order to be able to look at how the representation of Michael K is affecting the power relations of the story, and thereby the perception of the outsider and the ‘other’. The first one is when he has left the farm for the mountains and he is agonized over how he possibly can save the plants:

> He thought of the pumpkin leaves pushing through the earth. Tomorrow will be their last day, he thought: the day after that they will wilt, and the day after that they will die, while I am out here in the mountains. Perhaps if I started at sunrise and ran all day I would not be too late to save them, them and the other
seeds that are going to die underground, though they do not know it, that are never going to see the light of day. (Coetzee 65)

Here he is not in control of the pumpkin seeds. However, this is an also an example of Michael without an agenda. He runs away from the farm and afterwards he thinks about the plants he has left. Even though he considers what can be done about the plants, it is not a strategic plan since it is unlikely that he will manage to run for a whole day, and even if he would, he does not know if he will be able to save the plants. Since he has run away, he can be consider deprived of power and also an ‘other’ in relation to the Visagie grandson, who is the one he has run away from. On the other hand, since he runs away instead of staying and being the ‘other’, it might be said to empower him. One suggestion of how Michael can be said to have developed, and thereby gained power is how he has turned what used to be a punishment at Huis Norenius around and instead finds it “an avenue of reverie” (68). He and the other children had to hold their hands on their heads, and they had to press their lips tightly together and keep their eyes closed. He now uses this as a method to empty his mind.

As stated earlier the Visagie grandson, who is on the run from the war, tries to make Michael into a servant (Coetzee 65). This man does not view Michael as an equal but as inferior; he says to Michael that he cannot send Michael away since he does not pay Michael’s wages which makes it sound as if that was the case, he would have done so (64). On one occasion he claims that he sees Michael as a person: “‘Michael, I am speaking to you as one human being to another’” (64). The fact that he has to state this might imply that the relationship between him and Michael is a matter of power. He tries to show Michael that he does not see him as something else but human. The question is why Michael should be seen as something else. It could imply that he regards Michael as someone who belongs to a group of people that normally is regarded as inferior, and unequal. Furthermore, the guards at Jakkalsdrif view Michael and the rest of the people who are enclosured as inferior to them.
However, on one occasion one of the guards shares his food with Michael. Michael also answers a question the guard has about Michael’s mouth. The guard does not require an answer, he is “just curious” (86) and earlier the same day they have talked about football. These scenes are examples of more equal power relations in the novel, which also can be found in their mutual conviction about their participation in the war; they want to avoid it. As a consequence, both the perception of Michael as an outsider and the perception of him as an ‘other’ are enhanced in these specific scenes.

Further examples of power relations in the novel are those between Michael and the narrators. The question is if the different narrators can be said to be in charge over Michael through the narrative, and influence the perception of Michael as the ‘other’. At first sight Michael lacks power of the narrative situation since he does not tell his own story. According to Derek Attridge the narrative situation can contribute to the perception of Michael as the ‘other’ by using phrases like “he thought” which makes the reader aware of standing “outside Michael K’s consciousness” (74): “He thought of the pumpkin leaves pushing through the earth. Tomorrow will be their last day, he thought: the day after that they will die, while I am out here in the mountains” (Coetzee 65). Even though the reader gains knowledge of Michael’s thoughts and feelings, they do not become part of the reader has his or her own ideas (Attridge 74). In the parts where the narrator is omniscient Michael can be said to lack power over the narrative; since it is not up to him what to reveal. However, the narrative also makes it possible to see that Michael chooses to be an outsider and how other people perceive him has an ‘other’. Because of the lack of access to Michael’s thoughts in the part where the doctor is the narrator Michael becomes an outsider. He does not tell his story, and therefore neither the narrator nor the reader is let inside of his mind, he is an ‘outsider’ that neither the narrator nor the reader knows. Therefore, being the outsider empowers Michael; he is in charge of his story. It is not the case that he is not allowed to tell his own story, but rather that
he does not want to. The doctor wants Michael to tell his story, in order for him to find out the accurate one. However, Michael seems to be indifferent of this power he gains as the outsider. If viewing Michael as the ‘other’ and also as colonised, this is the reverse relationship if compared to Orientalism, where the colonizers did not want to know the true story of the Eastern people; they preferred their own idea of the Orient, the ‘other’. However, since Michael is considered to be the ‘other’ he does not want to tell his story to the doctor since his story probably would be abused and thus, if it had not been for the other, omniscient narrator, there would not have been a story about Michael. In that sense the power is with the narrators. On the other hand, through Michael’s refusal to tell his story and by Michael being the outsider, the superior, both as a character and as the narrator, is deprived of his power and Michael, the outsider, becomes empowered.

Other power relations might be found in the society of the novel. Canepari-Labib believes that the novel, through the protagonist and his deformity, questions “the metaphysics of presence” (55), and this criticism refers back to Derrida who claimed it to be the foundation of Western philosophy. Traditionally, words such as “man”, “Western”, “civilised” have had more favoured positions than the opposites “woman”, “non-Western” and ”barbarian” (55). Having more positive connotations the former words have referred to “presence” while the latter words have been connected to definitions which refer to “absence” (55). These power relations confirm Said’s ideas of the East, the non-European, as the ‘other’ further. Even though the racial issue in the novel is not clearly marked, there are certain examples of it, besides the “CM” in Michael’s charge sheet. According to Canepari-Labib there are certain power relations in the novel between the white authorities of South Africa and the black population. These are referred to by “the civil war”, “the curfew”, “the permits people need from the police”, “the re-education-camps”, “the check-points”, “the guerrillas and their attacks” (98-99). However, as earlier stated, Michael does not belong to the black population,
he is coloured and therefore, he does not belong to the most inferior category of people in the society of the novel. Since Michael seems to be anxious to avoid any dealings with other people, he can be seen as inferior. On the other hand, considering that as an outsider, he wishes to decide for himself how to act and to live his life it suggests that he sets up the rules of power relations himself. As a result, these relations are not that of superior – inferior but more equal.
4. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to discuss the roles of the outsider and the ‘other’ in the novel *Life & Times of Michael K* through a postcolonial reading with added perspectives borrowed from narrative identity. The purpose was also to look at how the representation of Michael K is affecting the power relations of the story, and thereby the perception of the outsider and ‘the other’, and if the different narrators can be said to be in power over Michael and the narrative, and influence the perception of Michael as the outsider and the ‘other.

Looking at the notion of Michael as the outsider, there are certain aspects which can be said to strengthen this idea. For instance, in the Cape he works alone; he is avoiding society and other people as much as possible; and he does not want to be involved in the war. As earlier stated Michael avoidance of other people has the consequence that he does not belong to a diaspora, which also is related to the notion of ‘home’. Furthermore, the withdrawal of Michael into himself when the doctor tries to make him talk also supports the idea of Michael as the outsider.

The idea of Michael as an ‘other’ is enhanced by other people’s reactions to his appearance; he has a hare lip, is registered as “coloured male” (Head 97), and is called “monkey” (Coetzee 123). As the ‘other’ he is perceived as inferior. Also, Michael does not have major success as a colonizer, his pumpkin seeds need more attention that he can give them, and when they have grown he has to leave them, involuntary. He is deprived of power since his actions are constantly interrupted by other people.

The narrative identity and the ethical aim “to live well, with and for others in just institutions” (Atkins 3) do not seem to apply to Michael. The *ipse* category with its “desires, beliefs” (Castor 142) and how to face conflict and misfortune habitually do not apply to
Michael either. He does not want to be with other people which also means that he cannot answer the questions of “Who am I?” or “How I should live?” since he does not have a life-interpretation which includes other people. Neither does he seem to make sense of himself and the world he lives in. His self-narrative does not exist; he refuses to tell his own story. Furthermore, Michael seems to avoid conflicts, and does not have an agenda, neither does he change nor develop. His *idem*, his formal identity and those things that do not change, is the same, and so is his *ipse*, his narrative identity, and those things that a person usually develops. This means that he cannot be the reader and the writer of his own life, according to Ricoeur. The agency of Michael does not signify change and constancy, but merely constancy.

Power situations in the narrative situation of the novel can be said to both be to Michael’s advantage and also to his disadvantage. He is not the narrator of his own story; he is represented by other narrators throughout the book. Since he does not want to tell his story and since one of the narrators is omniscient, which means that it is not for Michael to decide what to reveal, this suggests that Michael lacks power over the narrative. The representation in the second part also supports the idea that Michael lacks influence on the narrative. However, since it is a first person narrator in this part, Michael decides for himself what to reveal, which is not much, and thus, he can be said to be in power over the narrative instead. There are characters in the novel that clearly consider Michael to be the ‘other’. This perception is maintained through the narrative situation. However, in the narrative situation of the second part Michael can be said to gain of power; he becomes empowered by being the outsider. Through different events and because of his actions in the first and the second part, he can be defined as the outsider. Even though he is seen as inferior, which strengthens the idea of him as the ‘other’, he chooses solitude instead of living in a community with equals. He knows that he is considered different, “mute and stupid” (Coetzee 182), and he has no desire to change but he accepts his ‘otherness’.
Michael’s ‘otherness’ is due to the values of society, other people’s actions and the narrative situation, and his otherness’ deprives him of power. In addition to being an ‘other’ Michael transforms himself into an outsider and this analysis shows that by being the outsider Michael becomes empowered. By being an outsider Michael affects the power relations in the novel.
5. Works cited


