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The Search for Mr. Kurtz: In Joseph Conrad's – The Heart of Darkness

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ABSTRACT

This is a novel of delusions, anxiety, and suspense. The central theme is about Mr. Kurtz, the leader of an expedition to central Africa with dual purposes:

- (i) One was to discover and reap the profit in the trade of ivory
- (ii) The second was to suppress the savage customs and spread European civilization.

But the greed for wealth and ivory corrupted Kurtz. So that, to establish his authority and control the natives he resorted to murderers and even criminal cannibalism. The horror of human skeletons heads decorating the window of his house cannot be amusing. It shows the savagery of a monster with dead human sensibilities.

But he is highly respected and honored in England. It is said he could have been a successful politician. He is so eloquent that he draws a crowd. Marlowe, the narrator has a message for Kurtz from the company. But he finds Kurtz only in stories and anecdotes from his acquaintances. So the search for Kurtz is like searching for a needle in a haystack.



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The Central Theme is about Mr. Kurtz, the leader of an expedition of central Africa with dual purposes; (i) One was to discover and reap the profit in the trade of ivory and (ii) the second was to suppress the savage customs and spread European civilization. But the greed for wealth and ivory corrupted Kurtz. So that to establish his authority and control the natives he resorted to murderers and even criminal cannibalism. The horror of human skeletons' heads decorating the window of his house cannot be amusing. It shows the savagery of a monster with dead human sensibilities.

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Marlowe is obsessed with not betraying Kurtz's reputation. He cannot reveal the horror of Kurtz's criminality. He hides all. He must also lie even to his girlfriend that he died calling her name. No! He died crying: Horror! Horror!

But what creates the Joy for this novel is in the fluidity of the narrative.

The nostalgic lyricism of the syntax, the musical delicacy of the narrative and the sublime eloquence of the telling.

But before we delve into the delicious lyricism of Conrad's narrative, we must stop and reflect on other mysterious and enigmatic text in Giorgio Agamben's text: studies in poetics on the topic, *An Enigma of the Basque Woman*:

In the preface added to the second edition of *Il Ricordo Delle Basca* in 1963, Antonio Delfini defines his story as a pastiche that no one understands! He then warns his readers against the temptation of asking why a Basque Woman? Who is she? What does she mean?

And by borrowing a line from Delfini, we may also ask, Why Mr. Kurtz? Who is he? What does he mean? The question why Mr. Kurtz demands the explanation of Kurtz's character, his mission, his role as a leader of an exploration company, his administration, his relationship with his crew, the natives and the aura of fame that hangs over his name. And his relationship with his girlfriend! However, any information about Kurtz comes from anecdotes, gossips, friends or pilgrims who hung around; and the information was either positive or hostile depending on the time of the day.

The first information about Kurtz comes from the company's General Accountant, an impressive man with impeccable attire, while all around him were bundles of dirt, phantoms, the sick and groaning that were a distraction from his job. One day he remarked without lifting up his head:

In the interior you will not doubt what Mr. Kurtz! on my asking who Mr. Kurtz was, he said he was a first class agent; and seeing my disappointment at this information he added slowly, he is a very remarkable person. Further questions elicited from him was that Mr. Kurtz was at present in charge of a trading post, a very important one in the true ivory country, at a very bottom there. Sends in as much ivory, as all others put together.(p46)

A cursory scrutiny of the above page begins to spill, to trickle some information about Mr. Kurtz. First that he was a remarkable man in charge of an important trading post inland. Hardworking and even industrious because he sends more ivory than the others put together''. This testimony will bring

promotion with the powers that be. This raises the reader's curiosity and cravings to meet this man, Expectation, Anxiety, anticipation and perhaps hope? Rise!

As we sieve through the condensed narrative of these pages, like searching for a needle in a haystack, we are also trailing through the river bank in a boat looking for Mr. Kurtz. On this sojourn, we are led by a sensitive dialogue between Marlowe and the General Manager, two people who respect Mr. Kurtz very highly and therefore determined to keep the sanctity of his honor at all cost. Ready to cut corners, so as to avoid betrayals. But as we made through the condensed forest of these narrative, we ran into an instance of Conrad's bleeding humanity;

They were no colonialist, their administration was merely a squeeze, and nothing more I suspect. They were conquerors and for that you want only brute force, nothing to boast of. When you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others. They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. It was just a robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale and men going at it blind- as is very proper for those who tackle darkness. The conquest of the earth which mostly mean taking it away from those who have different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves is not pretty when you look into it too much, what redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it, not sentimental pretense, but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea of something when you can set up, and bow down before and offer sacrifice to.....(p.35)

A careful scrutiny of this passage will reveal some beatitudes about Conrad whether you like him or not by the scale of his representation of the white scavengers of Africa for wealth and slave. The first of these groups were the colonialist, white European Administrators who wanted to domesticate black Africans by the re-orientation of their culture, region and language. This form of erasure should turn the African into black and white aperson.

The second group of white brutality was the conquerors. These were a group of white explorers who raped, maimed and killed natives just for sport, because the innocent natives could not help themselves. And with apologies to Achebe, this is how Conrad narrates their stories: They were conquerors and for that you want only brute force, nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others. They grabbed what they get for the sake of what they got. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a large scale and man going at it blind as if very proper for those who tackle darkness. The conquest of the earth, which mostly means taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too long (p35).

From the above. Piece, we can feel Conrad's bleeding humanity, when he discovers the revolting practice of savage Racism practiced on innocent humans. At this point it would seem that even the renowned novelist, Achebe maybe inclined to give Conrad a reprieve for his practice of the novelist realism in his portrayal of the natives in the heart of darkness.

And Conrad a member of a racist company and by implication loyal to them seems to have an epiphany by hinting on the fact that we should be cognizant that perhaps there is a higher being that we should think about in our dealings with other humans:What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it, not a sentimental pretense, but an idea. An unselfish belief in the idea something you could set up and bow down before and offer sacrifices to (p35).

Somewhere in his mind Conrad may have brought himself to belief in the possibility of the existence of a supreme being with a higher sovereignty than wealth, and political power! But as we may wonder through a condensed forest of prose, we run smack into the somber and morbid display of despair, of sublime sadness in:

- (i) We two whites stood over him, and his lustrous and inquiring glance enveloped us both. I declare it looked as though he would presently
- (ii) Put us some questions in an understandable language; but he died without uttering a sound, without moving his limb, without twitching a muscle. Only in a very last moment, as though in response to some sign we could not see, to some whisper we could not hear, he frowned heavily and that frown gave him his black
- (iii) Death - masked and inconceivable somber, brooding and menacing his expression. The luster of enquiring glance faded swiftly into vacant glassiness.
- (iv) "He is dead," murmured the fellow immensely impressed. No doubt about it.(74)

In the sadness contained in that brooding, moody prose, word seems to become flesh and yet live amongst us as we struggle to cope with meaning. The nauseating spectacle of white men standing over dying innocent natives is so callous and frightening. Because those two white men are both representing symbols of Europe, of death, disaster, obstruction and aberrations in his native land. The ominous looming question that was never asked and answer never given must seem as dangerous as a demand that the dying native was making to God Almighty to destroy Europe to stop their reckless madness! The silent questions and answers are all muted between God and the dying native!

Perhaps the most revolting, and disgusting piece in this novel is the nonchalant and bland attitude to the death of the native simply as: "He is dead" no doubt, the fellow murmured immensely impressed." And this may be why the novelist Chinua Achebe called for censorship for this novel. But we reject censorship because it sounds as a universal statement. The problem with universal condemnation is that it suppresses dissident voices and by implication it provokes the master and servants syndrome. Let more people read this beautiful narrative lyricism and consume and make up their different judgments. Let us not forget the lessons from Rowland Barthes' *The death of the author* and Stanley Fish's *Is there a text in this class!* Two classics with memorable lessons! And yet sniffing through the pages, we witness Marlowe's great anxiety, expectation and yet disappointment if he could not meet Mr. Kurtz in person to shake hands with him:

Now I will never shake him by the hand, but now I will never hear him. The man himself was a voice. Not of course that I did not connect him with some sort of action. Haven't I been told in all of the tones of jealousy and admiration that he had collected, bartered swindled or stolen or more ivory than all the agents together...? we were too late, the gift was vanished by means of some spear, arrow and cub. I will never hear that chap speak after all – and my sorrow have a startling extravagance of emotion.....as I noticed in the howling sorrow of those savages in the bush. I couldn't have felt more of lonely desolation somehow, had I been robbed of a belief or have missed my destiny (p75)

But when we finally meet with Mr. Kurtz, he was making the most morbid and pathetic farewell to himself in:" I am lying here in the dark waiting for death." And this was like the Greek symbol in: I yearn to die.

As the search gets closer to finding Mr. Kurtz, we begin to smell the torrent and outpouring of literary rendition that comes close to the sublime: He was an impenetrable darkness I look at him as you peer down at a man who is lying at the bottom of a precipice where the sun never shines. But I have not

much time to give him, because I was helping the engine driver to take to pieces of the leaking cylinders.....one evening coming in with a candle, I was startled to hear him say a tremulously, "I am lying here waiting for death." The light was within the foot of his gaps. I force myself to murmur, "Oh nonsense! and stood over him as if transfixed." (p97).

The despairing look at the face of a dying man like a man "who is lying at the bottom of a precipice where the sun never shines" is quite frightening, but perhaps more deadly is Kurtz agonizing farewell to himself in: "I am lying here in the dark waiting for death"(p97).

And this begins to sound like the deadly craving of the Greek Sybil in – "I yearn to die."but nobody rains in showers of pathos than T.S. Eliot in: I grow old, I grow old. I shall wear the buttons of my trousers rolled. Shall I plait my hair behind, do I dare to eat a peach? I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon a beach. I have heard the mermaid singing each to each. I do not think they will sing to me. The love song of J.A. Pruffrock (p17).

Those sad, moody, lingering, nostalgic mooning of Eliot's Pruffrock are enough to crack weak nerves. But while Pruffrock was not dying Kurtz was waiting for death as if for a blind date. A date with destiny after all his fame at home in England and among the native community in the heart of darkness. He must have been wandering like after all his successes and even failures: "do I dare to eat a peach!....I have measured out my life with coffee spoons." That "what?" provokes Conrad to unleash his most beautiful prose even among the best novelists:

Anything approaching the change that came over his face I have seen before and hope never to see again. Oh, I wasn't touched. I was fascinated. It was as though a veil had been rent. I saw on that ivory face an expression of somber pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror, of an intense and hopeless despair. Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation and surrender during the supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision – he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath- "The horror! The horror!" (97)

And that whispering of horror was a prelude to his death that was later announced by the black messenger in his: Mistah Kurtz- he dead!

Conclusion:

We will end this essay with interrogative speculations: The search for Mr. Kurtz: what an end to a phantom. A phantom believed to be a universal genius. A genius who failed with all his ingenuity. An ingenuity to grasp power, wealth, fame. But he failed in all three because of man's deadly capacity for good and evil. But what gives a reader this mysterious pleasure/bliss in reading Conrad's – The Heart of Darkness?"

And here we have to turn to Rowland Barthes for a rendition of what constitutes a text of Pleasure/Bliss:

Pleasure/Bliss: Technologically, there will always be a vacillation – I stumble, I err. In any case, there will always be a margin of indecision, The distinction will not be a source of absolute classifications, the paradigm will falter, the meaning will be precarious, revocable, reversible, the discourse incomplete. (The pleasure of the text. P4). All those illusions are all pregnant in The Heart of Darkness.

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