

# BEYOND A RIVER'S LAMENT

## Cry, River, Cry

(writers.ink)

AUTHOR: SYED WALIUULLAH

REVIEWED BY SHAHID ALAM

SO many writers in the field of literature (particularly poetry) from any country have associated (or tried to) nature with human emotion that it would be superfluous to single out most literary works for special treatment for having made just such a link. *Cry, River, Cry* by Syed Waliullah contains this attribute in abundance, but there is more, much more. *Cry, River, Cry* has been translated from the original Bangla novel *Kando Nadi Kando* (first published in 1968) by Osman Jamil. Waliullah, of course, is probably best known for his first novel, *Lal Shalu* (1948), which he himself had translated into English as *Tree Without Roots* (1967), but has been generally appreciated by readers of his other, if small in number, Bangla literary output (including short stories and plays). As the old adage goes, something gets lost in the translation, and those who have, or will have, read both the Bangla and English versions of *Cry, River, Cry* may find that something has, but will also likely agree that, on the whole, Osman Jamil has done a competent job.

The story of *Cry, River, Cry* is simple enough, although, some of the chapters appear to be disjointed in terms of the progression of the other chapters, causing the reader to pause and go back to find some missing link or to make sense of what he/she is reading. The novel begins with an unnamed narrator, a cousin of one of the principal protagonists of the story, Muhammad Mustafa, observing a fellow passenger on a river steamer observing other passengers of the third-class deck. At this point we are introduced to two narrators: the cousin, and the person he was observing, Tabarak Bhuiyan, who "was about forty, his hair grey above the ears. His skin had probably been fair once but had now been burnt dark in the sun. Yet there was in his face an air of youthful amicability." Such vivid imagery of people and places occur throughout the book, adding to its quality. The curious thing about the two narratives is that, as Bhuiyan is telling a story about an outlying district town called Kumurdanga, some of its inhabitants, Chandbaranghat, a steamer stoppage station, and the river Bakal, the unnamed narrator believes that he is narrating the story of Mustafa. Yet, till the end, Bhuiya never mentions Mustafa's name, but through juxtaposing his narrative and the story told by the unnamed narrator, we get the tale. The dual narration has, on occa-

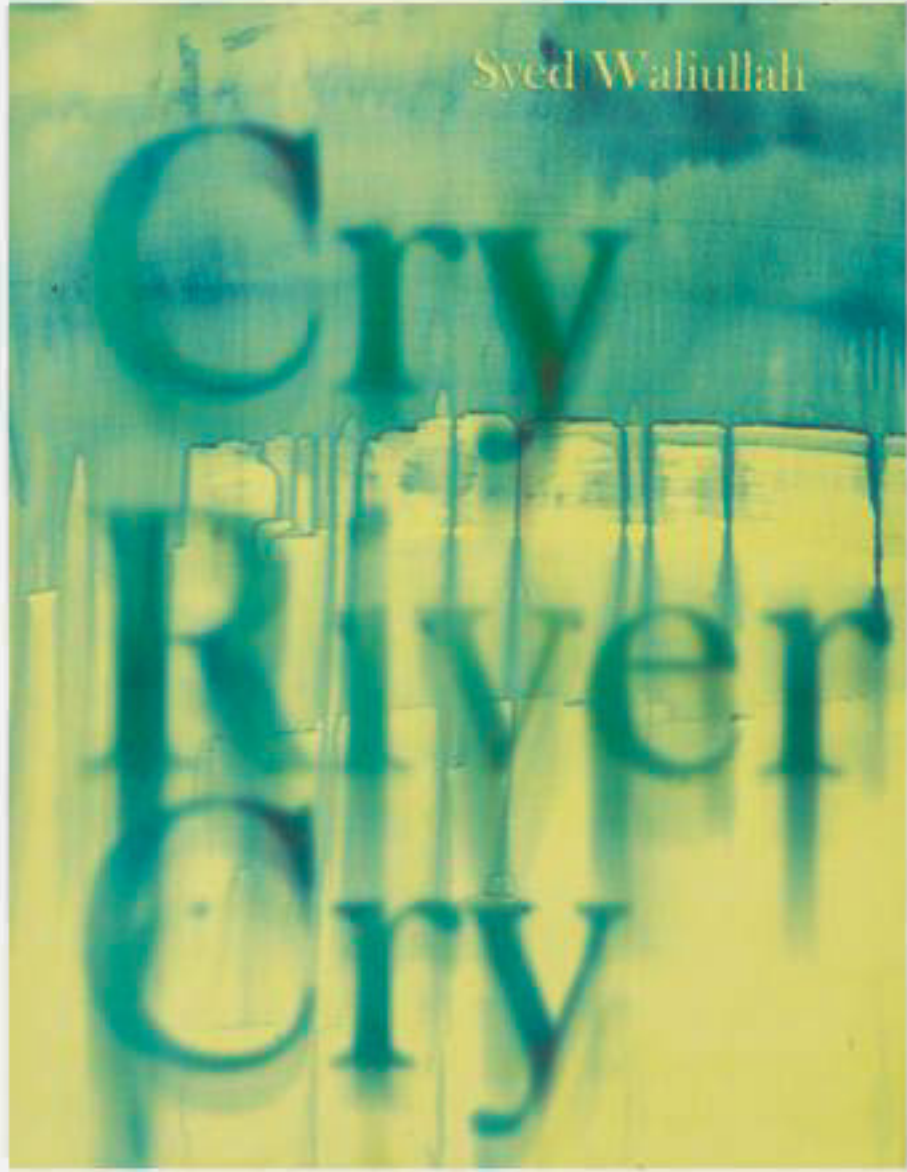
sion, led to certain chapters possibly being considered by some readers as being incoherent in terms of the other chapters, till the final two are read.

The story revolves around several characters, prominent among whom are Mustafa and fifteen-year old Khodija, both of whom eventually commit suicide, the girl ostensibly for having been jilted by the young magistrate Mustafa, who later took his own life primarily based on a guilt trip that he was somehow responsible for her death (although he never recalled ever having expressed any romantic feelings for her to her or anyone else). These, and other mishaps to people and places, including the shutting down of the steamer service of Kumurdanga are mystically tied to the moribund river Bakal, which was getting shallow, and one day became inaccessible to the steamer. Waliullah suggests a mystic explanation for the river's condition, tying it to a supposed malediction that Kumurdanga was bearing: "Surely the town could take pride in its courts, a small hospital, even a minor school for girls, but it was deprived of the mysterious benediction which kept a place alive and assured its progress...." The novel contains heavy doses of prose depicting nature in the metaphysical sense and how people's lives are tied to, and affected by it.

The imagery crafted by the author to depict nature and its connection to humans is vivid as he segues from the opening lines spoken by Bhuiyan to the river's flow: "...the current of words had turned into the flow of a river, a flow which murmured on but neither raised angry waves nor rushed furiously, a stream that flowed over unknown fields and habitations, up hills and down valleys." And, in another such portrayal, he ruminates, wondering at the river's magic and its hold on the human psyche: "Perhaps such a river never dies. So when the great river of one's childhood gradually becomes narrower and turns into a small tributary, no contradiction is noticed between the two rivers." The novel comes up with a depiction of not only nature and its mystical attachment to mankind, but also superstition and the falling back on religion during times of crises by people in general.

From the day the steamer ghat was dismantled, various people of the town, beginning with Sakina Khatun, were hear-

ing an eerie cry emanating from seemingly all around them. And what was the townspeople's reaction when it had gone on for some time, with the last straw being reached with the revelation that the deeply conservative Zainab Khatun had heard it too in the middle of the night and had started walking towards the river (like a siren enticing victims towards it)? "Now truly frightened, the *mullahs* delayed no more. They arranged for the *azan* to be given from various parts of the town so it could reach the ear of everyone in town. They also arranged for a *milad*, sacrifices and food offerings. One night they arranged a special prayer until late night. Believing that taking part in it would stop



the cry, many people gathered in the mosque." Waliullah delves deep into the average human's primal fears to find an explanation for man's taking recourse to superstition to clear up apparently incomprehensible phenomena: "Perhaps, against all reason, a hope remains concealed in man's heart that one day he will see or hear something supernatural." Such resort to superstition is manifested in the townspeople throwing their valuable possessions in the river as if to appease the river god and save them from the catastrophe staring them in the face from the dying river. The author looks at such behaviour from a very pragmatic outlook through the words of one of the narrators: "The already poor became even poorer as their valuable and valueless objects, neces-

sary and unnecessary, found refuge in the dying river forever, meaninglessly."

The mystical undertone prevails strongly all through the novel. By this time the reader has probably realized that the eerie sound heard or imagined is that of the wind sweeping across the dying river (although the author never tells it this way), and that it is symbolic of the moribund waterway's dying wail. The townspeople crave for the return of its health and even the senior judge of the town court declares, "If the river gets well, everything will return." They had slowly come to the realization of the reality: that not only had the Bakal river become unfit for the steamer, but it was also dying. The mystical bond existing between the river and the townspeople is further explored when the people realized that although they had used the river to their heart's content, feared it in flood and storm, but they had never loved it. Waliullah takes this point to a higher plane: "Perhaps the townsfolk hadn't felt any love for the river, but the thought of its death disturbed them because it reminded them of their own mortality. The river was dying like a human being."

The author has a number of observations on human nature. "Human beings fear hell, fear ghosts and robbers, disease and physical pain, death, poverty, unsatisfied hunger," he remarks. "They are afraid because they cannot understand why they are afraid, and, most of all, they are afraid why they cannot find a reason." Furthermore, "...when hope reaches a certain level, human beings hardly care for right or reason." These are profound thoughts deserving of cogitation over at least some time. There are also these reflections on religion and its practice. Having noticed that, although people observed the various religious rituals, "...there was in everything a sort of skepticism, an ever-wakeful fear. It was as if they feared not God but His creation, not hell but this mortal life! Is it possible for one who fears this transient life to have peace of mind? And can those who have no peace in their souls conduct their personal, familial or social lives with intelligence and right conscientiousness?" *Cry, River, Cry* is an important novel that explores issues of human belief systems, values, and character beyond the boundaries of the story of a dying river and a town by which it flows.

The reviewer is an educationist and actor.

# A PIPER OF PEACE

Melodies of Hieroglyphs

AUTHOR: GAZI ABDULLA-HEL BAQUI

REVIEWED BY DR. FAKRUL ALAM

POETS have always been eloquent about peace. Homer's Iliad centers on the Trojan War, but there can be little doubt that it is the Greek poet's pacifist conscience that has moved him to highlight the way war brings out the worst in us and to stress the importance of self-control, temperance, and love. In "Locksley Hall" Tennyson writes about the time when "war-drums throb'd no longer" and "the battle-flags were furl'd/In the parliament of man, the Federation of the World" And in the poetic prose of the New Testament, we come across this benediction: "Blessed are the peace-makers."

It is easy to see then why Gazi Abdulla-hel Baqui is attracted often to the theme of peace in his poems: he is a poet given to composing paeans about the blessings peace can bestow on mankind. Indeed more than ever, we need tranquility on this earth, for it is easy to see how immersed in violence we all are and how global conflicts continue to erupt with increasing frequency. Baqui is therefore to be commended for the attention he has lavished on peace in so many of his poems.

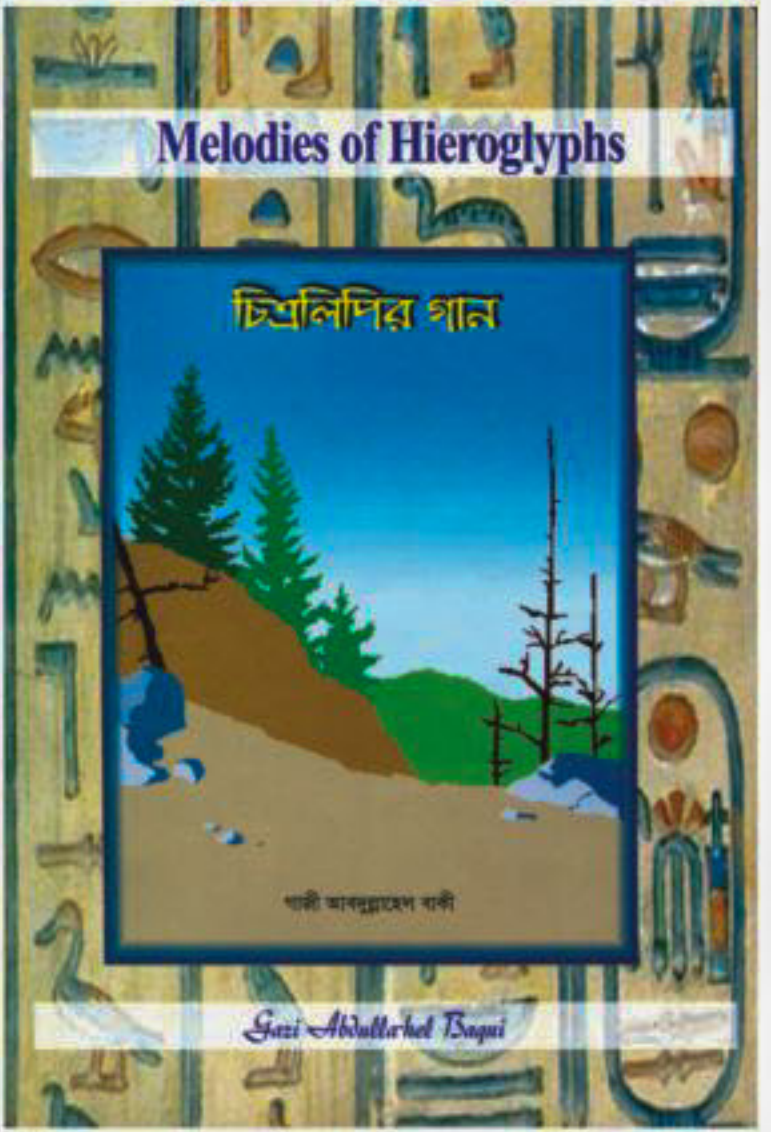
Indefatigable in his effort to spread happiness on earth, Baqui is especially rhapsodic about peace in the poem "Smile of Peace". But he knows that peace is the most fragile of things and thus in "Peace Lost and Regained" he expresses his anguish at its loss and urges us to throw "all armaments in seas" and re-equip ourselves

with it to save the glories of human civilization such as the Pyramids, the Tajmahal, and the Statue of Liberty. More often than not, however, he prefers to be an optimist and sing the beauties of peace and welcome it back. Adapting Keats's immortal line for his laudable cause, Baqui writes "Peace is Truth, Truth Peace, that is all!"

Even a cursory reading of Baqui's verse will reveal to us his dedication to humanity. He is moved by peace but he is also distressed by the sufferings of humanity as in the poem "Who Cares?" Even the thought of tea being sipped makes him think of harmony and the way the "divine beverage" "inculcates in all a sense of humanity"!

Who can then take exception to Gazi Abdulla-hel Baqui's verse? I certainly am amazed by his predilection for poetry and impressed by his enthusiasm for peace. I wish him all success as a man and as a poet.

The reviewer is Professor, Department of English, University of Dhaka.



SHABDAGHAR

(A monthly Magazine of Culture and Literature)

EDITOR: MOHIT KAMAL

(PUBLISHER: MAHFUZA AKHTER, AGAMI PRINTING & PUBLISHING CO.)

REVIEWED BY SOHEL RANA

SHABDAGHAR, amonthly magazine of culture and literature centers on the glorious treasures of Bangla art, culture and literature. It is edited by Dr. Mohit Kamal, a renowned psychiatrist andpopular Litterateur who is mostly known for his psychological novels. He has managed to compile the literary works of prominent writers from home and abroad in this magazine. Added to this, he has introduced the readers with some distinct concepts by his inquisitive and subtle insights. The sub-title of the magazine has been named *Suddha Sabder Nandonik Griha* (Aesthetic Home of Pure Sound) which is a new addition to the world's Art of Sound. Excellent combination of cultural and literary write-ups and other related issues make it exceptional from other monthlies. The editor tries to intersperse those works which mainly depict the society, culture, tradition, values, literature, folklores of Bengalis' eternal and traditional life. He always attempts to give diversity to different editions highlighting different subjects. It generally covers these topics: Supplements, Article, Flashback, Memoirs, Conversations, Travelogue, Poetry, Story, Commemoration, A centennial tributes, Serial publication: Novel (Translated), Music Reviews, Book Reviews, World Literature, Little mag, Special Article, Cover Story, Feature writing, Award News, Unpublished work, About book, Page for Teenager etc. The advisors panels of this magazine consist of notable figures: Belal Chowdhury, Sirshendu Mukhopaddhya, Anowara Syed Haque, Mohit-ul-Alam, Kamal Chowdhury and Harishankar Jaldash. Inspired by the spirit of liberation war, SHABDAGHAR primarily galvanises its readers to uphold Bengali national identity and indigenous values. Pottery: *In Life, Literature and Tradition*, *March of Liberation and Freedom*, *Cultural Variety and Joy of festivals* etc. are the topics of different editions which indicate how much these are synonymous with the Bengali life and culture.

The distinguished figures like Nirmalendu Gun, Hasan Hafizur Rahman, Hari Sangkar Jaldas, NasrinJahan, Mahfuzul Hasib Chowdhury, Syed Manjoorul Islam, Fatematuzzohora, Rezwana Chowdhury Banna, Sudhir Chokrobarty, Mahbubul Haque, Sumonto Aslam and others frequently contribute to this monthly and their regular contributions have gradually metamorphosed it into a unique volume and help it secure a different entity.

The reviewer is a major in English Literature and part time reviewer.

CLASSICS CORNER

THE HORROR! THE HORROR!

## THE HORROR! THE HORROR!

### Heart of Darkness

AUTHOR: JOSEPH CONRAD

REVIEWED BY: SUJAN CHAKRABORTY SURJO

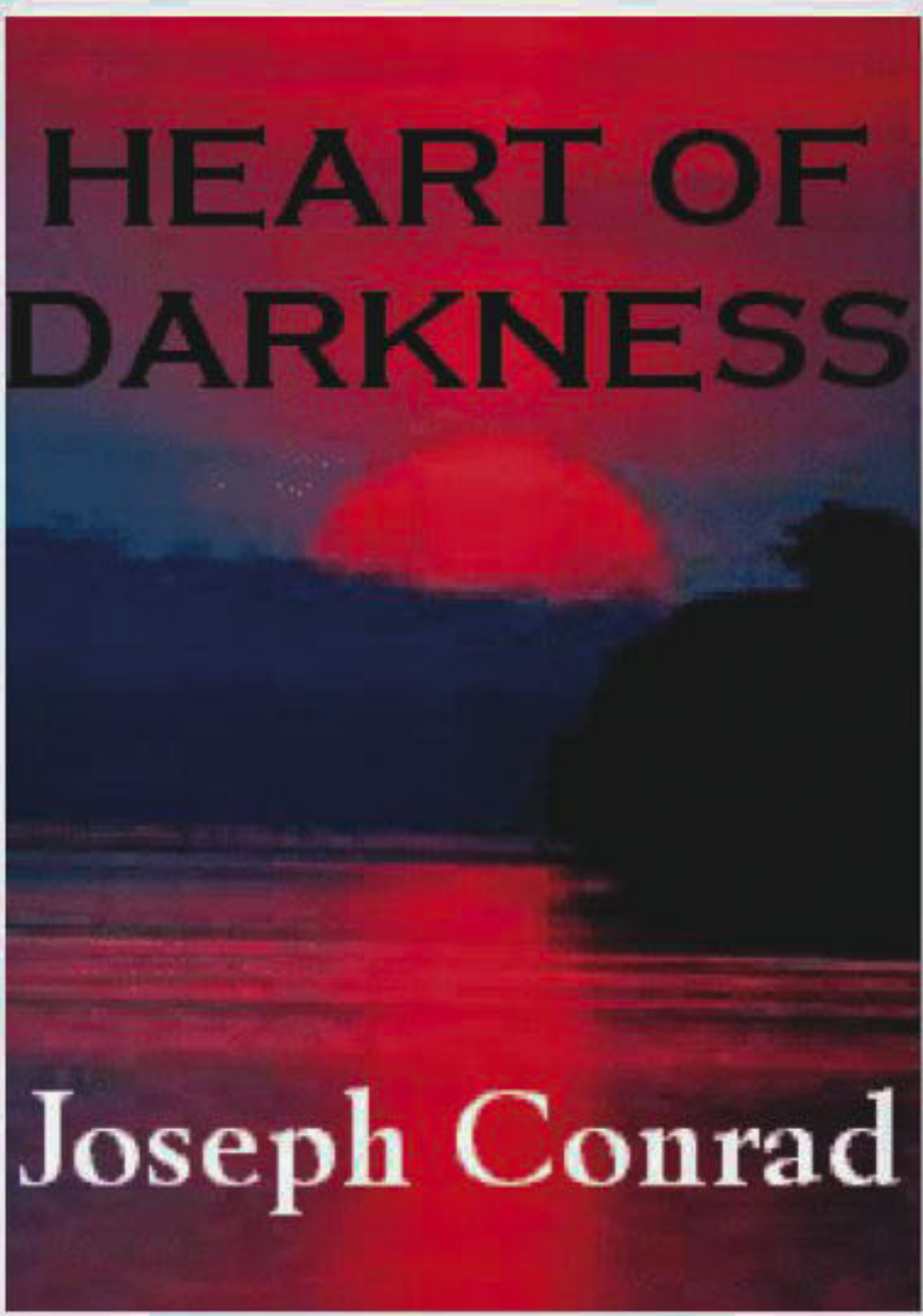
IN 1975, when Chinua Achebe accused Joseph Conrad as a 'bloody racist' and harshly deprecated the image of Africa as portrayed in the latter's magnum opus 'Heart of Darkness', the litany of the controversies around the book got a little longer. The novel had been already subject to various and often quite starkly conflicting interpretations; the tirade provided by Achebe only exposed a new one.

It is the most fascinating truth about the book that it is capable of giving two of its readers completely two discrete understanding. The language used by Conrad, instead of being English, emanates a strange feeling that it is not quite English, or more than it. The language, or should I say the words and sentences that make up the language, is creepy, cryptic, and suggestive to the extent that no definite conclusion can be driven regarding the author's original intentions. Added to that, the complexity of the language sometimes hinders the reader to extricate even a singular meaning underneath the hard shell of words. Hence, though it is only a hundred page novella, it takes much more time than a hundred page novella should take. Being alert is a constant vocation for any reader of 'Heart of Darkness', for a momentary collapse in attention could result in a total bewilderment about what is happening in the book.

This minimum effort of constantly guarding your attention should invariably result in an unparalleled reading experience. There have been not many novels such interesting, breath-taking yet haunting in the history of fiction. At least I had not encountered any as confounding as 'Heart of Darkness' in my reading life. There is more than one moment of epiphanies in the novel when your soul feels like finding a long sought truth shrouded in a vague mystery. It is true that the book is suggestive of so many meanings; however, none of them is delineated in a simple and direct phrase.

Take Achebe's interpretation into consideration. The examples of so called racist portrayal of the Africans as dark uncivilized non-humans can be found in many parts of the book. But

this portrayal can be viewed as the customary view of the then Europeans towards Africans. Also, it cannot be denied that one of the central motivations of the book is to expose the dehumanizing aspect of colonialism. To do so, an attitude akin to Marlow's should have been necessary. However, it can also be argued in the line that Marlow almost represented Conrad as the novel is mainly a retelling of a personal experience Conrad had ten years earlier than



writing the book. Thus the conclusion follows, Conrad himself was quite patronizing towards Africans. I for myself would not accuse Conrad of racism for two reasons. One, the contents, tone, or words of a fiction should never be attributed to the author's personality. Second, the time this fiction was written should be taken into consideration while judging its author. The modern abhorrent attitude towards racism was not quite what it is like today.

Racism was still prevalent, and scarcely protested. Authors should be judged within their own time, not within posterity. Judged in his own time standards, even if we hold for the argument's sake that Conrad wrote what he believed, he may get vindicated.

Another deeper mystery that remains unsolved is about the darkness the book so often alludes to. What is this darkness after all? The darkness of the human heart? Or, the darkness of the silent ghastly Nature that induces a human to expose his own concealed darkness? The gruesome fall of Kurtz cannot be wholly attributed to his egomaniac nature. Had not there been the dark Africa with its formidable rows of skyrocketing trees and phantasmagorical silence, Kurtz might have not felt the urge to capitulate to the calling of evil. Interestingly, the darkness does not perish in Africa. On the very last passage of the book, the Thames, the river of the civilized world, is also referred to as "the heart of an immense darkness". The darkness is everywhere then! Only here, on the brink of finishing the novel, we discover the culminating epiphany, the whole point of those four horrific words uttered by Kurtz on his deathbed, "The horror! The horror!" The entire novel then seems like a horror tale about darkness, about nature, about life, about the whole existence of being.

Awed we have to become after seeing such a little book containing so much power, so many facets of humanity! A reader has to feel reassured about the saying that appearances do not tell you everything. You have to go through an elaborate process to partially comprehend this little book, as I am very doubtful whether the novel can be fully comprehended by a human soul.

Even after the read, the horror will keep haunting you for a time. This is a book not to be vaporized in the pool of oblivion; rather, this is a book from which the fragile memory of us humans cannot escape.

The darkness, the horror, keeps coming back.

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