

POETRY

HOMAGE TO A PUBLISHER

(To the memory of Mohiuddin Bhai*)

KAISER HAQ

A book may look like a house or a coffin
But a maker of books cannot be contained between ordinary covers.
Between the Muses' minions, stodgy academics,
Smarmy marketing men and discount-hungry retailers
He waves a baton to conduct a chorus
That threatens to collapse any moment into cacophony,
Yet keeps the show going,
Plays on the dialectic of recto and verso, dwells
On the aesthetics of fonts, the sensuous texture of paper
And when a book is carried in from the bindery
Like a new-born baby, his name
Is on the title-page, true,
But to see him in all his glory
We need to look at things in a Platonic light –
Where the air is rich with heavenly scents,
In the Book of Books he stands
illuminated under "Acknowledgments."

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*Mohiuddin Ahmed, d. 22 June 2021, was founder and Managing Director of University Press Ltd. (UPL).



To Love A Country

Pastiche inspired by "Mother Country" by Richard Blanco

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TAPTI SEN

To love a country as if you've lost one
Is to feel the freezing sun on your body
Form icicles on your cheeks as you train your feet
To dance hopscotch on rough asphalt;
Too harsh- they say, the air aching with the
Scent of magnolias that curl around your toes,
It's not your fault, you think, you were raised to play war-
Those old games of kabaddi and ful tukka when Ma
Tackled you to the ground, caking your dress in mud,
And there you lay, until she pulled you up,
bangles clinking with each movement, to teach you how to fight.

To love a country as if you've lost one
Is to sound out foreign syllables on your tongue,
Go home to saffron-scented rooms where
Every sundown, the smell of incense burns your nose,
To taste the sweet juice of the mango your uncle
Smuggled in through customs- as reparations, he laughed-
To recite poems to yourself through paved empty streets,
Breathing in the scent of cherry blossoms and suburbia,
To let the tulsi leaf sit on your tongue, bitterness slowly seeping in
As your mother braids your hair with stolen flowers and
Tells you why you must marry.

To love a country as if you've lost one
Is to trace the alphabet along the cool metal of a lamp post,
Watching the smooth bare legs of the woman in front of you as
Your mother wraps her scarf tightly around your body,
Casting you a warning gaze- when the light turns green,
She saunters towards you, amber in the cooling sun,
Your eyes meet- and there's a moment
Where you know her- tired, homesick, missing her dog,
You feel that she knows you too, and your fingers brush as
She passes by, your mother pulling you into her body.
To love a country is this: you learn to live in a world
Where the winters are white, summers are yellow,
And monsoon never comes- you watch the leaves wilt from
Your bedroom window and wonder why the cicadas chirp
Through the night, you think of democracy and freedom and feel it



Sink into your bones like an anchor you never knew existed
You follow the pines until they lead you into a shady grove,
Where you lie on dew-stained grass, settle among foreign reeds
And wonder if you can forgive yourself.

Born and raised in Dhaka, Tapti is currently a senior at Milton Academy in Massachusetts, USA.

MUSINGS

Experiencing Conrad's Lands and Understanding His Tales

MAHMUD HUSSAIN

I have had the opportunity of living for some time in Conrad's fictional places, namely Democratic Republic of Congo (Congo) and Malaysia's eastern province Sarawak's adjoining country in Borneo Island, Brunei Darussalam. In Congo, I worked as a peace keeper and in Brunei, as a diplomat. Though Brunei hid in Conrad's novel *Lord Jim* as a surreptitious land, it was, in fact, the centre of British influence in Malay Archipelago. But it came as a surprise to me as I failed to discover in either of the two countries a single reader who read *Heart of Darkness* or *Lord Jim*. Joseph Conrad was an unfamiliar name to them even if they were well-read.

Conrad was of Polish origin and learned English not till he was in his early twenties. To me, more significant

witnessed Congo and its society from close quarters. The society of Congo is very different from European society and is divided into tribes, and even in the 21st century, its social moorings are imprisoned in the archaic tradition of pre-historic institutions. During peace negotiations, I often found that it was simple for Africans to indulge in the spirit of internecine conflict. The choice of being rational was an anathema to an African, and he rejoiced in being irrational because it was married to his tribal ethos of historicity, chivalry and group dynamics. So, for a French, or a Belgian, or an English, the task of "civilizing" a black African might have seemed like a universal duty. Conrad must have failed in his duty; otherwise he would not have given his short novel

jungles that shrouded the mystery of its anthropomorphic character away from his sight. Where the light of the sun was never allowed to penetrate, the only solace left underneath the canopy of thick overarching foliage was one of apathy and fear. When I visited Congo two decades ago, it was more than a century after Conrad made his own journey into what he described as the mysterious uncharted womb of a barbaric land. Our base was located at Bunia, the capital of Ituri province. As a pilot, I had to fly to distant places and often my heart dried up in fear.

Congo is sixteen times the size of Bangladesh. The infinite expanse of impenetrable dark shadow of forests covering the ground reminded me of Hades. There was no patch of

English rendering of the Malay word *Tuan* meaning Lord. Jim is a character modelled after James Brookes, the first White Rajah of Sarawak province of Malay Archipelago. The story goes back to the later part of the first half of the 19th century when the British established their rule in the Malay Peninsula. It is with Brunei that Jim's links are connected. At one time, the Sultanate of Brunei constituted the vast territory of Borneo, a chunk of Sulawesi and bits of the Philippines. Internal factions, conflicts and wars reduced such a huge sovereign land to present-day Brunei Darussalam. History says it was all because of James Brookes, the first British resident in Sarawak with full sovereign powers of a ruler extracted from the authority of the Sultan of Brunei in favour of protecting the latter's crown. While Malays look upon James Brookes as an infidel who took their land away, Conrad invests him with the character of a righteous Englishman bound by both fate and duty to honour the principles of a civilized life.

In real life, Brookes developed a very close, cordial and affectionate relationship with the Crown Prince Muda Hashem who was entrusted into his care and physical protection by the Sultan himself. In one of the palace intrigues, Sultan's own relatives were involved with some foreign scoundrels in dispossessing him of the throne. It was Brookes and his army that saved him from being assassinated. But due to Brookes' miscalculation, the Crown prince was later murdered by the Sultan's enemies. Brookes was repentant, and agonized over his folly. It is in this juncture of history that Conrad breaks himself off from the truth and makes his story a virtual recapitulation of personal figment. I think it is in this exceptional divorce from real life events that makes Conrad's novel so captivating and morally disturbing yet uplifting. Real James Brookes, upon retirement, leaves Malay Peninsula and settles down in England with a lot of wealth extracted from his stay in Borneo. The imaginary James Brookes, *nee* Lord Jim, gives himself up to the Sultan and hands himself a pistol to the Sultan who shot him to avenge his son's death. Conrad has revolutionized Jim into a much more dignified, ethereal and honorable man of the western civilization. This imposition of superman upon the structure of an ordinary English gentleman was Conrad's ploy to show the readers the virtues of a civilized life.

An Englishman ought not to be afraid of death if it falls in the path of conviction.

Lord Jim might upset a reader if read against the background of Borneo's scenic beauty. While Congo presents the gorgeousness of a dark nature, Borneo offers the splendours of a crystalline and pristine nature. Much of its landscape soothes the nerves with profound repose in tranquility. Brunei gave me a different kind of feeling than Congo. But it would be amiss if we failed to recognize that during Brooks' time, much of Borneo was fractured by internal strife and deadly murders. Head-hunting was one of the common practices among the indigenous people. Again Conrad made Lord Jim the peacemaker by instilling the norms of civilization among the Asians.

I have enjoyed my stay in Congo and Brunei as much as I enjoyed my reading of *Lord Jim* and *Heart of Darkness*. Christopher Marlow, the narrator was present at both places; and like him, I have tried to understand the mind of Joseph Conrad in an impersonal way. Creating characters like Jim and Kurtz are difficult propositions because it is through the portrayal of their characters that the superiority of a race or nation is anticipated. Reading Conrad, one must not forget that the virtues of an individual may seem at times hard to comprehend because they pit against the social norms and customs of a different society belonging to other continent and place. Conrad's stories have a historical setting, and when he wrote his tales, he might well not have been induced by any sort of racial preferences and prejudices. He was a peregrinator, and his characters were mirrored against the backdrop of an experience that was real, poignant and tragic-comic. I am certain that he personally never took upon himself the task of chastising the East through his novels for creating a universal civilization. Had it been so, his western characters in the *Chance*, *Victory* or *Almayer's Folly* would not have followed into the footsteps of grief-ridden African and Asian males and females. No other novelist could make life so much meaningful and worth-chasing through its despair, anguish and misery. For me, Conrad was a master of elevating sorrow to the level of passionate ambition.

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than his being a writer was the fact that he was a sailor by choice. He learned seamanship and writing with the dedication and labors of a fanatic. He created a style in English fiction, inimitable and fascinating, that blended with his ardent weakness for both. His non-English sensibility in prose makes him appealing to readers who are baffled by the turbulent forces of nature and tragic setting of human fatality.

Conrad travelled to Congo at the turn of the nineteenth century when Europe's mission to civilize Africa was at the height of its missionary fanaticism. His maritime peregrinations had an evangelical purpose. Many contend that he was racist, and his literary mood was influenced by the European expansion of colonial conquests of the time. I would not so much deny the possibility of racist streak in his character, had I not

such a despairing title. But like any other European with a "spirit of high moral grounds," the project of colonialism was bound with the act of realizing the universal principles of European civilization. Conrad, as a writer, may have felt it necessary to do this in a language which was not his by birth but he did so with extraordinary panache. Does this refinement in Conrad's oeuvre make him a racist? I would not agree.

Why did Conrad name Congo "Heart of Darkness"? For someone used to bright sunny morning of European sky, Congo represented an infernal depth of human habitat. Conrad's Congo was a dark land but its darkness had a beauty of supreme lucidity gifted by nature. I assume Conrad's journey through its rivers to remotest places had kept his chances to witness the lustre and sheen of deep forests and

open field for an emergency landing. Nature appeared mysterious, esoteric and animalistic. Its equanimity was preserved in the immense vastness of forests, jungles and untamable lakes. In the morning, from the camp, one could see the rising steepness of mountains covered with gray trees reaching up to the ocean of a blue sky bewitched by its own somberness and sorrow. Congo as a country was sunk in grief as its moments were pregnant with internal conflicts and deaths. Conrad's agility lay in giving life to Congo's quiet and undisturbed nature through words, sentences, expressions, imageries and symbols, a permanent place of reading in history. I felt that *Heart of Darkness* claims a place in the study of human civilizations.

The story of *Lord Jim* is even more enticing from point of its truth-like historical antecedent. Lord is an