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## ЗНАЧЕНИЕ СТРАДАНИЙ В КНИГЕ БАРБАРЫ КИНГСОЛВЕР «БИБЛИЯ ЯДОВИТОГО ЛЕСА»

**Аннотация.** В опубликованном в 1998 году романе-бестселлере Барбары Кингсолвер «Библия ядовитого леса» повествуется об американской миссионерской семье Прайсиз, которая переезжает в деревню Киланга в Бельгийском Конго в 1959 году. Цель статьи – сосредоточиться на значении страданий в романе, одной из его главных тем. В работе предлагается детальный анализ многоплановой концептуализации страданий в тексте, и предпринимается попытка прояснить, какие актуальные философские заключения формируются в представлении читателя.

**Ключевые слова:** страдания, боль, «Библия ядовитого леса», память.

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## THE MEANING OF SUFFERING IN BARBARA KINGSOLVER'S THE POISONWOOD BIBLE

**Abstract:** Published in 1998, Barbara Kingsolver's bestselling novel *The Poisonwood Bible* depicts a story of the Prices, an American missionary family who move to the village of Kilanga in the Belgian Congo in 1959. The aim of the paper is to focus on the meaning of suffering in the novel which is one of its major concerns. The paper offers a detailed analysis of the multi-faceted conceptualization of suffering in the text and attempts to clarify how it generates relevant philosophical consequences for the reader's life-world.

**Key words:** suffering, pain, *The Poisonwood Bible*, memory.

Suffering belongs to the most complex and contradictory concepts upon which our understanding of the human condition, values, needs and desires is based. As I hope to reveal in my analysis of Kingsolver's novel *The Poisonwood Bible* described by John Leonard as "a magnificent fiction and a ferocious bill of indictment" [4, p. 28], the experience of suffering is diverse, and to perceive it exclusively through the dark and negative glens is a mistake. Suffering is never black-and-white. Its nature is paradoxical and it often represents a ground upon which the simultaneity of opposites, such as good and evil, pain and joy or beauty and ugliness, takes place. Its discourse leads to further inquiries and motivates to learn and understand more about individual stories of pain, their contexts and meanings.

The many themes of *The Poisonwood Bible* which are directly connected with the concept of suffering include the failure of marriage, disintegration of family and relationships; death and dying; the constraints of rigid religious beliefs; as well as 'the poisonous' influence of the colonial countries (or the Western world *per se*) on Africa. As Sophie Croisy points out, "Kingsolver's Georgian family leaves the American segregated South at the end of the 1950s for an African country on the verge of political tragedy, the Congo, and becomes exposed to other forms of knowledge, other definitions of happiness and suffering" [1, p. 225]. The understanding of suffering in the novel is culture-bound; while the Westerners try to find its causes and attempt to examine its roots, the Africans approach it differently and "Instead of lapsing into despair, they are grateful for the daily blessings nature provides and accepting of the suffering and hardships that come with being a part of that natural world" [5, p. 101].

*The Poisonwood Bible* is narrated by five distinct voices which present five alternate visions of the same story. We read the internal monologue of the wife of the Baptist preacher Nathan Price, Orleana, whose narrative takes place 20 years after the Congo mission and it is from the very beginning marked by her long-term loneliness of bereavement and feelings of guilt and responsibility over the death of her beloved daughter Ruth May: "Lord knows after thirty years I still crave your forgiveness, but who are *you*? A small burial mound in the middle of Nathan's garden, where vines and flowers have long since unrolled to feed insects and children. Is that what you are? Are you still my own flesh and blood, my last-born, or

are you now the flesh of Africa?" [3, p. 437]. Orlanna's marriage was not a happy one and she frequently alludes to herself as to the victim of her husband's oppression and dominance: "Swallowed by Nathan's mission, body and soul. Occupied as if by a foreign power. I still appeared to be myself from the outside, I'm sure, just as he still looked like the same boy who'd gone off to war. But now every cell of me was married to Nathan's plan. His magnificent *will*" [3, p. 226]. Later, she confesses: "I was lodged in the heart of darkness, so thoroughly bent to the shape of marriage I could hardly see any other way to stand. Like Methuselah I cowered beside my cage, and though my soul hankered after the mountain, I found, like Methuselah, I had no wings" [3, p. 228]. Orlanna's discourse of suffering is heavily influenced by the colonial rhetoric with its concepts of the colonizer and the colonized. She clearly expresses the loss of freedom and the loss of identity due to her husband's orchestrated dominance and violence. Besides that, her suffering is closely related to her husband's undervaluing of women and his diminished ability to develop any intimate connections with her.

Orlanna's monologue is supplemented by the stories of her daughters: the beautiful and pragmatic Rachel, the twins Adah and Leah and the youngest Ruth May. Kingsolver's narrative method thus creates complex psychological dynamics which empowers those whose voices in the real life were silenced. By contrast, the voice of the father who became an instrument of torture for the family remains unheard.

All individual stories of girls (and later women) in the novel are very deep and sincere testimonies of suffering and pain. What the family went through in the Congo marked their lives forever, the fact admitted by all three surviving sisters in their narratives as adults. As Leah summarizes: "But we've all ended up giving up body and soul to Africa, one way or the other. (...) Each of us got our heart buried in six feet of African dirt; we are all co-conspirators here. I mean, all of us, not just my family. So what do you do now? You get to find your own way to dig out a heart and shake it off and hold it up to the light again" [3, p. 537].

The Price family represents what has become a typical trope in postcolonial fiction, well expressed by Robert Hampson in his Introduction to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: "instead of bringing light into darkness as it claims, the 'civilizing' mission actually uncovers the 'darkness' at its own heart" [2, p. xi]. While we hear Nathan's voice mediated by his wife and daughters, their shared suffering, anxiety and fear of the father offer a clear-cut portrait of the man who cannot handle his own conscience. Nathan changed radically after an ultimate failure and shameful experience of being the only survivor "on the Death March from Bataan" [3, p. 224] in the 2WW. Orlanna's narrative demonstrates how the couple became increasingly estranged and how Nathan's experience in the war created a vast space between them. By justifying his behaviour by faith and the Bible, he becomes the person whose ideals turn into idols. He is a delusional man who considers himself chosen by God and according to him everything that happens must be part of God's will. As Orlanna explains: "Nathan believed one thing above all else: that the Lord notices righteousness, and rewards it. My husband would accept no other possibility. So if we suffered in our little house on the peanut plain of Bethlehem, it was proof that one of us had committed a failure of virtue. I understood the failure to be mine" [3, p. 227].

With the benefit of hindsight, the mission was just an inevitable step in the decay and eventual disintegration of the family. Nathan is a sinister, repulsive and dangerous man, unable to be intimately engaged with other human beings and constantly obsessed with the success of his Christian calling. He exerts immense power over his family, uses physical and psychic torture and turns their home into the place of infinite cruelty and potential violence. He is the Old Testament figure who "often says he views himself as the captain of a sinking mess of female minds" [3, p. 42]. It is tragic how emotionally absent and blind Nathan is to the changes around and within him: "He noticed the children less and less. (...) Their individual laughter he couldn't recognize, nor their anguish. He never saw how Adah chose her own exile; how Rachel was dying for the normal life of slumber parties and record albums she was missing. And poor Leah. Leah followed him like an underpaid waitress hoping for the tip. It broke my heart. I sent her away from him on every pretense I knew. It did no good" [3, p. 111]. Although he is proud of his superior knowledge of the Bible, Nathan's deeds are very distant from the message of peace and love that Christ preached. As Rachel admits, "Father would sooner watch us all perish one by one than listen to anybody but himself" [3, p. 193]. He filled the vacuum left by love of the family with the Bible, the act which seems illogical, yet it aptly demonstrates Nathan's emotional emptiness as a result of the 'wound' he never recovered from since the war. The problem is he cannot acknowledge his pain; he cannot admit to grief and failure and therefore turns into a de-humanized being without feelings. Eventually, he is the main cause of suffering and pain in the novel.

Family's mission in the Congo is mainly the project of the father to foster his narcissism. It is as if he attempted to construct there a compensatory universe to the one in which he failed: "He meant personally to save more souls than had perished on the road from Bataan, I think, and all other paths ever walked by the blight of mankind" [3, p. 226]. William F. Purcell observes how "In the process Price and his

religion become stinging metaphors for an equally inept and arrogant American foreign policy driven by a similar patronizing, self-righteous zeal and xenophobic loathing of competing political and socioeconomic ideologies" [5, p. 94].

Nathan's confident rhetoric does not seem challenged by anything. However, it changes abruptly when his youngest daughter Ruth May dies. Leah describes how "For once he had no words to instruct our minds and improve our souls, no parable that would turn Ruth May's death by snakebite into a lesson on the Glory of God. My Father, whose strong hands always seized whatever came along and molded it to his will, seemed unable to grasp what had happened" [3, p. 419]. It is an excruciatingly intense moment when Nathan suffers ultimate disturbance in the fabric of his reality and his self-protective isolation is suddenly disturbed. Although Ruth May's death exposes his vulnerability, he soon recovers and walls himself in the self-protective amnesia and remains emotionally inaccessible. It persists even after his family's departure and we never learn whether Nathan ever admitted to his failure as a father and to the sin of vain pride he commits by his stubborn attitude which puts the family in danger. The death of Ruth May is a turning point of the narrative and a major event which transforms the family. In case of Orleanna, for instance, "The guilt she feels for the death of her daughter opens her eyes once and for all to the absurdity of her husband's quest and of the cultural assumptions he hammered into her, which leads her to redefine entirely her status as a southern Christian woman – a process made visible through her recurrent interventions in the text" [1, p. 228].

Of all children, it is Leah who suffers the strongest disenchantment of her father's status. At the beginning, she is undoubtedly most attracted to him. She confesses: "I vowed to work hard for His favor, surpassing all others in my devotion to turning the soil for God's great glory" [3, p. 44]. She is convinced of the strength of his character and the sense of purpose in life in which suffering plays a significant role: "This is what I most admire about Father: no matter how bad things might get, he eventually will find the grace to compose himself. Some people find him overly stern and frightening, but that is only because he was gifted with such keen judgment and purity of heart. He has been singled out for a trial of life, as Jesus was. Being always the first to spot flaws and transgressions, it falls upon Father to deliver penance. Yet he is always ready to acknowledge the potential salvation that resides in a sinner's heart. I know that someday, when I've grown large enough in the Holy Spirit, I will have his wholehearted approval" [3, p. 48]. It is evident, however, that Leah's growing skepticism has a lot to do with her father's failure to understand and interpret social interactions, his ignorance of pain and emotional reality of other human beings. According to Sophie Croisy, "Leah realizes, in the midst of political turmoil shortly after the Congo's independence from Belgium, that Nathan's Christianising mission in the Congo is more of a personal challenge undertaken by the preacher than a genuine desire to help a distressed Kilanga community" [1, p. 231]. Leah's increasing doubts relate to all spheres of life, social, political as well as spiritual. She asks: "If his decision to keep us here in the Congo wasn't right, then what else might he be wrong about? It has opened up in my heart a sickening world of doubts and possibilities, where before I had only faith in my father and love for the Lord. Without that rock of certainty underfoot, the Congo is a fearsome place to have to sink or swim" [3, p. 275]. It is painful for her to realize the truth about her father and to dispel a myth of his superiority, yet it is a crucial step in the process of her growing up and seeing the world without illusions.

Undoubtedly, Adah is a character whose suffering plays a major role in the way how the reader perceives otherness and cultural differences in the novel. The complexity of her past – she suffered from hemiplegia from birth – makes her experience of the Congo different from other family members. "When she arrives in the Congo, she can relate to the inhabitants of Kilanga because their black body is the obvious sign of their denigration and their oppression in a white colonial country, just like her crippled body was in America" [1, p. 229]. Her suffering brings her closer to the native population faster than others. On the other hand, her later "physical recovery, however, does not change Adah's vision of the world though it does change her status. She continues to look at it from the point of view of the crippled, the outsider, the different, which enables her to remain very much conscious of her own limits and the limitations of the culture she was born into" [1, p. 230]. Her voice is often typical of bitterness and distance and frequently she either victimizes or martyrizes herself: "I have always been the one who sacrificed life and limb and half a brain to save the other half. My habit is to drag myself imperiously through a world that owes me unpayable debts. I have long relied on the comforts of martyrdom" [3, p. 464]. Adah is the only daughter who unhesitatingly comments on the father's troubled past: "The conditions of his discharge were technically honorable, but unofficially they were: Cowardice, Guilt, and Disgrace. The Reverend the sole survivor in a company of dead men who have marched along beside him all his life since then. No wonder he could not flee from the same jungle twice" [3, p. 468].

Adah's also articulates one of the most sensitive questions concerning human suffering and faith, specifically, how would all-loving God allow innocent beings to suffer and die: "Would Our Lord be such a hit-or-miss kind of Saviour as that? Would he really condemn some children to eternal suffering just for

the accident of a heathen birth, and reward others for a privilege they did nothing to earn?" [3, p. 196]. The question becomes still more urgent when she makes it intimately personal: "This is what I carried out of the Congo on my crooked little back. In our seventeen months in Kilanga, thirty-one children died, including Ruth May. Why not Adah? I can think of no answer that exonerates me" [3, p. 468]. It is very difficult to answer such questions, even more so, if one's personal experience evidences to the unfairness and often absurd and unexpected turns in the life. Adah feels that Christianity as she knows it cannot provide her with the sufficient answers and therefore represents a weak support in man's anxieties: "It crosses my mind that I may need a religion. Although Mother has one now, and she still suffers. I believe she talks to Ruth May more or less constantly, begging forgiveness when no one is around. Leah has one: her religion *is* the suffering. Rachel doesn't, and she is plainly the happiest of us all. Though it could be argued that she is, herself, her own brand of goddess" [3, p. 499].

As universal human experience, suffering cannot be removed from man's life. Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* suggests that although its experience is unpleasant and uncomfortable, its meaning is justified by one's testimony, by sharing one's life story which may provide shelter and inner reconciliation for others. Kingsolver's characters express radical scepticism about rigid and blind faith and they show that there is no substitute for love and affection. In characters' grief-stricken lives separation and exposure, closeness and distance as well as intimacy and estrangement are entangled in a way which proves that the female world of illusion and emotion (represented by the Price women) is of a much higher value than the male world of the supposed truth (represented by Nathan Price). Although, at the end, we may conceive of several different life-philosophies concerning suffering as represented by the characters, the one which stands markedly apart is spoken by Orleana in her address to Ruth May: "My little beast, my eyes, my favorite stolen egg. Listen. To live is to be marked. To live is to change, to acquire the words of a story, and that is the only celebration we mortals really know. In perfect stillness, frankly, I've only found sorrow" [3, p. 438]. This is the philosophy which Kingsolver pronounces in her novel *Flight Behavior* as well: "Nothing stays the same, life is defined by a state of flux" [6, p.307]. To live also means to suffer, yet the significance of suffering is always revealed in the complexity of its context and through the testimonies of the individual stories of those who are in pain.

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### Acknowledgment

This work was supported by a grant of the project VEGA 1/0426/17 Ikonizácia utrpenia a jeho zmyslu v slovesnom, umeleckom a kultúrnom obraze I (Intersemiotická, interdisciplinárna a medzikultúrna rekognoskácia).

УДК 82-95

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### ПУШКИН И НАБОКОВ

**Аннотация.** Выполненный Владимиром Набоковым перевод «Евгения Онегина» А.С. Пушкина вызвал неоднозначную реакцию с момента публикации в 1965 году. В. Набоков, будучи неудовлетворенным