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The Independent Writer

“Let the hawk perch, let the eagle perch, and if one tells the other not to perch, may his wing break.” ~ Igbo Proverb

A feud broke out in the neighbourhood, and my family was forced to deal with the aftermath. Initially we didn't intervene—the quarrelling couple frightened us, and secondly, their problems weren't our concern. But my aunt couldn't take it. Their roars got in the way of her sleep. She was the first to put words to the tensions rapidly escalating outside our window – first scattered throughout the week, then reoccurring on a daily basis—as “senseless chaos.” The noises came from a house three blocks away, a shouting match between husband and wife whose marriage we'd always thought was perfect.

Almost a year had passed since my aunt left her matrimonial home to come and stay with us. That day, charging out of the house and straight into the ‘conflict zone,’ we knew that she'd gone to share her wisdom: that they needed to take a break. But after some time, she re-entered the house in tears. She refused to speak with anyone, even my mother. Days later I learned the reason for this: the woman my aunt had set out to ‘save’ with her well-meaning advice rebuffed her. The wife quipped that if my aunt had been true to her vows, and actually cared about her marriage, she would have never left her husband. That, unlike my aunt, she didn't expect marriage to be easy—that is, perfect.

I was 14 then. Over the years, I've used this incident as a sieve through which to think about social values, helping me to distinguish realism from idealism, truth from propaganda, and observe the world. Who are we to judge our neighbours? The wife's defence of her marriage made me recognize the need to put a question mark on those immediate impulses that urge us to correct others and demonstrate our superiority, especially when my aunt's utopia—a perfect marriage—was thrown in her face as a fantasy.

Utopia and dystopia, similarly, propose their own suspect fantasies—one through positive example, and the second through its negation. This makes me wonder: is it right to expect writers to be philosophers and prophets, telling us how to live our lives? Or does this expectation actually limit the writer's artistic freedom, and stop them from seeing reality?

Art that replicates falsely ‘enlightened’ ideals, in my view, might unintentionally achieve the opposite: savage exploitation. We saw what happened in Congo Free State, when King Leopold II of Belgium butchered roughly 10 million people in the attempt to seize land and steal resources, which, according to Adam Hochschild in his controversial book *King Leopold's Ghost*, are now estimated at roughly \$1 billion dollars. We also mustn't forget Joseph Conrad, that Polish-British author writing from imperialism's outposts, who portrayed the ‘Africans’ as savages, and denied them the human complexity of his fellow Europeans. In *Heart of Darkness* (1899), he describes Leopold's Congolese as “fine fellows -- cannibals --in their place,” and perpetuates Europe's degrading view of ‘Africans.’

Conrad, by normalizing the colonisers' savagery as salvation from the ‘apparent’ darkness of Africa, serves as an example of what happens when an author writes according to mass sentiments and ideals, rather than critically reflecting on the diverse and complicated reality before him. Today, historians like Adam Hochschild have shown us the twisted ideas underlying Conrad's work. He argues that invading another people's land is not civilized, but rather more savage than the ‘darkness’ the colonisers claimed to fight.

Regrettably, we are here today because of Europe's pursuit of a vision of utopia. This is why a writer should remain independent in his writing—non-judgmental, sensitive, and critical of popular belief—and not, like Conrad, replicate existing injustices through the pursuit of utopic 'ideals' or 'truths' buried in the misguided psychology of mainstream cultures.