

*Sibusiso Hyacinth Madondo*

## **The Painted Bird : Jerzy Kosinski and the Mythopoetics of Dystopia**

### **ABSTRACT**

Jerzy Kosinski's novel is told from the point of view of an unnamed six year old wandering street urchin who inhabits an unnamed, hellish wonderland bristling with cheating, violence, malevolence, perversion and lies during the Second World War. The little boy's parents send him to live in the countryside in the hope that he will escape the ravages of war. Unfortunately, his life in the countryside becomes a nightmare as he is destined to undergo the harrowing experience on a daily basis of being bullied by the blue-eyed, blond village louts who speak the rural dialect. He is dark-haired and dark-eyed and speaks the educated dialect, consequently he is considered a "Gypsy or Jewish stray" during a time when these traits are virtually tantamount to a death sentence. For the rest of the Second World War he passes from hand to hand like Lazarillo de Tormes, being exposed to all kinds of vices and evils. Nonetheless, he learns to become a survivor and each time he experiences a run of misfortune, he finds ways to wriggle out of the predicament: he escapes from the captivity of a Nazi concentration camp; he survives after being thrown in a manure pit at the cost of losing the power of speech till the end of the novel when he suddenly feels the urge and rediscovers the ability to speak again.

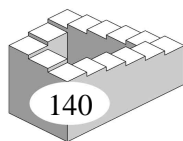
### **KEYWORDS**

Jerzy Kosinski; Holocaust; *Painted Bird*; Jewish Stray; Nazi; Concentration Camp; Wandering Jew; Dystopian Fiction; Aristophanes.

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Jerzy Kosinski's novel *The Painted Bird* is a wartime narrative combining the elements of dystopian fiction, the picaresque novel, satire and *Bildungsroman* told from the perspective of an unnamed six-year old wandering street urchin, who inhabits an unnamed, hellish wonderland bristling with cheating, violence, malevolence, perversion and lies during the Second World War<sup>1</sup>. The little boy's parents send him to live in the countryside, in the hope that he will escape the ravages of war. Unfortunately, his life in the countryside becomes a nightmare, as he is destined to undergo the harrowing experience, on a daily basis, of being bullied by the blond, blue-eyed village louts who speak the rural dialect. He is dark-haired and dark-eyed and speaks the educated dialect, and is consequently viewed as a "Gypsy or Jewish stray" at a time when these traits are virtually tantamount to a death sentence. For the rest of the Second World War, he lives from hand to mouth, like Lazarillo de Tormes, being exposed to all kinds of vices and evils. Nonetheless, he learns to become a survivor, and each time he experiences a period of misfortune, he finds ways to wriggle out of the predicament: he escapes from the captivity of a Nazi concentration camp and he survives after being thrown in a latrine pit, at the cost of losing the power of speech, until the end of the novel, when he suddenly



feels the urge and regains his ability to speak.

The title of *The Painted Bird* is very significant, as it evokes one of the episodes in the novel and constitutes its central themes, namely racial discrimination and hatred. In fact, the author states that the title was inspired by his memory of Aristophanes' play *The Birds*, in which animals are used to satirise society:

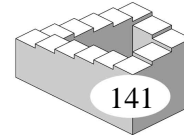
As I began to write, I recalled *The Birds*, the satirical play by Aristophanes. His protagonists, based on important citizens of ancient Athens, were made anonymous in an idyllic natural realm, "a land of easy and fair rest, where man can sleep safely and grow feathers." I was struck by the pertinence and universality of the setting Aristophanes had provided more than two millennia ago Aristophanes' symbolic use of birds, which allowed him to deal with actual events and characters without the restrictions which the writing of history imposes, seemed particularly appropriate as I associated it with a peasant custom I had witnessed during my childhood. One of the villagers' favourite entertainments was trapping birds, painting their feathers, then releasing them to rejoin their flock. As these brightly coloured creatures sought the safety of their fellows, the other birds, seeing them as threatening aliens, attacked and tore at the outcasts until they killed them. I decided I too would set my work in a mythic domain, in the timeless fictive present, unrestrained by geography or history. My novel would be called *The Painted Bird*<sup>2</sup>.

The episode of the painted bird is introduced in the fifth chapter of the book,

where it is used as a sadistic pastime by Lekh, the frustrated lover and bird catcher who adopts the hero during his peregrinations in the forests of no man's land. Lekh is frustrated by the fact that his frenzied lover, Stupid Ludmilla as she is known, does not visit him for trysting sessions as she is wont to do. During his bout of rage, Lekh decides to give vent to his frustrations by embarking on a cruel torture of birds, painting them in different colours and releasing them into air, where they are recognised and mutilated by their own:

Stupid Ludmilla did not return. Lekh, sulking and glum, removed one bird after another from the cages, painted them in still gaudier colors, and released them into the air to be killed by their kin. One day he trapped a large raven, whose wings he painted red, the breast green and the tail blue. When a flock of ravens appeared over our hut, Lekh freed the painted bird. As soon as it rejoined the flock a desperate battle began. The changeling was attacked from all sides. Black, red, green, blue feathers began to drop at our feet. The ravens flew amuck in the skies, and suddenly the painted raven plummeted to the fresh-plowed soil. It was still alive, opening its beak and vainly trying to move its wings. Its eyes had been pecked out, and fresh blood streamed over its painted feathers. It made yet another attempt to flutter up from the sticky earth, but its strength was gone<sup>3</sup>.

The scene can be directly linked to the hellish life of the boy who is narrating the story. He is discriminated against by his own compatriots because of his black hair, dark eyes and the city dialect that he speaks. Throughout the novel, this becomes a big issue for the peasants. Marta, who is the



first person to adopt him, is so paranoid about his black eyes and tells him that they are evil, after which she forbids him to look into her eyes or at the livestock, as she maintains that the boy's blighting eyes will drive diseases into her eyes and transmit pestilence or death to the domesticated animals. In order to avoid being reprimanded by Marta, the hero decides to walk "about the hut with [...] eyes closed, stumbling over furniture, overturning buckets, and trampling flower beds outside, knocking against everything like a moth blinded by sudden brightness."<sup>4</sup> In fact, it is on Marta's farm that the foreshadowing of the episode of the painted bird takes place, when the pigeon is snubbed by the chicken that he is trying to befriend and is eventually snatched by the hawk, an episode that symbolically represents the inhospitability of the world and its failure to tolerate the outsider:

Strange things happen in the farmyard. [...] One day when the pigeon was trying as usual to consort with the hens and the chicks, a small shape broke away from the clouds. The hens ran screaming toward the barn and the chicken coop, the black ball fell like a stone on the flock. Only the pigeon had no place to hide. Before he even had time to spread his wings, a powerful bird with a sharp hooked beak pinned him to the ground and struck at him. Marta came running out of the hut, carrying a stick, but the hawk flew off smoothly, carrying in its beak the limp body of the pigeon<sup>5</sup>.

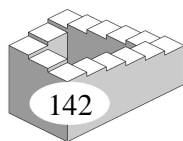
The boy's next adopter, Olga the Wise, as she is known in the village because of her knowledge of herbs, is of the same opinion as Marta that the hero's eyes have a blighting effect: "Olga declared, I could stare at other people and unknowingly cast a spell over them."<sup>6</sup> Evil eyes do not only

bewitch people but can also be used to remove a spell from those who are sick. For this reason, Olga used the boy to heal people by making him stare at her patients: "I must take care, while staring a people or animals or even grain, to keep my mind blank of anything other than the disease I was helping her to remove from them."<sup>7</sup> She further adds that the boy whom she calls the Black One is "possessed by an evil spirit which crouched in [him] like a mole deep in a burrow."<sup>8</sup> She also suspects him of being a vampire, and for this reason she administers a bitter elixir to him, which he has to take with a garlicked charcoal. Olga is not the only one who has bad suspicions about the boy – other peasants are also afraid of him and whenever they see him, they turn their gaze away and sign themselves. The boy believes everything that they tell him about his dark eyes and black hair, and therefore accepts that he is the source of evil in the society of blond people. He starts hating himself and losing his self-esteem. When he is handed over to the Nazi camps, he tries to bewitch the German officer by stirring at the officer's eyes with his "blighting eyes".

The only time that he feels proud about his appearance is when the Kalmuks invade the country, chasing the peasants away:

I looked at the horsemen with keen interest. They all had black oily hair which glistened in the sun. Almost blue-black, it was even darker than mine, as were also their eyes and their swarthy skins. They had large white teeth, high cheekbones, and wide faces that looked swollen.

For a moment, as I looked at them, I felt great pride and satisfaction. After all these proud horsemen were black-haired, black-eyes, and dark skinned. They differed from the people of the village as night and day. The arrival of



these dark Kalmuks drove the fair-haired village people almost insane with fear<sup>9</sup>.

The boy's excitement is short-lived and the paranoia of the peasants about his dark skin, black hair and dark eyes is soon proved to be the true outward symbol of his possession by an evil spirit. The drunken Kalmuks pillage the village, castrate men in full view of their wives, and in wild excitement gang-rape girls, women and men alike. All hell breaks loose and the whole scenery is reminiscent of the atavistic horrors evoked in Saxo Grammaticus' *History of the Danes*, when all of a sudden, Frode or Frotho and his friends find themselves without a war to wage and in order to allay their boredom, innocent citizens become the next easy targets to be skinned alive and innocent children are tossed up in the air, only to be caught with a sharp spear<sup>10</sup>. This also evokes the *Jacquerie* in Froissart's *Chronicles*, organised by brigands who terrorised the citizens, torturing knights, burning husbands and forcing their wives to eat their husbands' charred bodies, as well as raping women and damsels<sup>11</sup>.

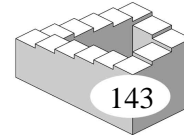
As for his black hair, the carpenter and his wife are certain that they will one day attract lightning. Every time there was thunder, the carpenter would chain the boy up and take him to the field to protect his farm from being struck by lightning. One afternoon, the carpenter was ill and did not bother to take the boy away from the farm. The barn was struck by lightning and the carpenter wanted to kill the boy, who had to defend himself by pushing him into a rat-infested bunker, where he was eaten alive by rodents.

As a *Bildungsroman*, it may be noted that the boy has learned vengeance, and in the subsequent incidents that are narrated, the author provides more narratives of vengeance, which is one of the major

themes of the novel<sup>12</sup>. The symbolism of the scene of the painted bird is not limited to the boy, but also applies to other characters such as Stupid Ludmilla and Lekh. Stupid Ludmilla is another painted bird and is directly linked to the painted bird, not only as the one who inspires Lekh to paint the birds, but because Lekh considers her to be his parti-coloured bird, despite her insatiable sexual appetite after undergoing the harrowing experience of being raped by a herd of drunken peasants and losing her mind as a result of having spurned the love of the son of the village psalmist, who is notorious for his ugliness:

No one man could satisfy her; yet she was Lekh's great love. He made up tender songs for her in which she figured as a strange colored bird flying to faraway worlds, free and quick, brighter and more beautiful than other creatures. To Lekh she seemed to belong to that pagan, primitive kingdom of birds and forests where everything was infinitely abundant, wild, blooming, and royal in its perpetual decay, death, and rebirth; illicit and clashing with the human world<sup>13</sup>.

She is condemned to roam the forest, seducing men and being hunted by women who are protective of their husbands and boyfriends. She is destined to undergo the same fate as the painted birds that perish at the hands of their own species. Although nobody knew about her lair and she could run as fast as a fierce animal, one day the women kept up with her, and one of them pushed a bottle inside her private part, kicked it and it broke, killing Stupid Ludmilla. Lekh, who tried to protect her, was not strong enough and he had to spit out several teeth after Stupid Ludmilla's ordeal. Lekh, like Ludmilla, is a fugitive living in the forest, trapping birds and selling raven



nests to farmers because his father wanted him to be a priest. In spite of his great knowledge of birds and their language, he enjoys violence and keeps on abusing them. When he is pecked by a stork, he decides to create almost the same scenario as that of the painted bird when he puts the egg of a goose among those of the stork, so that when they are hatched, there will be a gosling and the husband will suspect the female stork of cheating on him. Indeed, when the eggs are hatched, a great dispute arises and the husband wants to kill the gosling, but the female stork protects it:

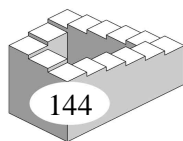
It would seem that this closed the matter and that matrimonial harmony would be restored. But when the time came for flying away, all the storks held a conference as usual. After debate it was decided that the hen was guilty of adultery and did not deserve to accompany the husband. Sentence as duly passed. Before the birds took off in their faultless formation, the faithless wife was attacked with beaks and wings. She fell down dead, close to the thatched house on which she had lived with her husband. Next to her body the peasants found an ugly gosling shedding bitter tears<sup>14</sup>.

Like the painted birds, the stork is the victim of its own family because of the gosling that she has not even produced. Lekh, who enjoys the sadistic violence, is overjoyed to witness such scenes, where animals or people of the same species turn on each other. He is skilled in fomenting discord and violence.

Kosinski is painting a picture of a society where violence, hatred and revenge are rampant. It is the kind of society where law and order seem to be banished and everyone behaves as they please. Unbridled sexuality, as shown through Stupid Ludmilla's

personality, is also one of the greatest vices to which the young boy is exposed in this society of perverts. Apart from witnessing the lubricious scenes of Lekh and Ludmilla, as well as the peasants and Ludmilla, he is also the witness to a flirtation between the miller's wife and the ploughman. The miller's wife would lift up her skirt and show her breasts to the ploughman, until the miller found out about this and invited the ploughman for an evening meal. Without even confronting or accusing him, he stood up and gouged out both his eyes. The narrator-boy also has the good fortune to witness the fabulous or rare phenomenon of *penis captivus* or vaginal headlock or *de cohesione in coitu*, which is referred to as a sticky situation in modern parlance. One Jewish girl tries to escape from the train bound for Auschwitz and is injured. A character by the name of Rainbow arrives and takes her to his dwelling, where he rapes her at night, only to discover that he cannot withdraw, since his member is locked, as in the case of dogs:

Rainbow renewed his efforts. He appealed loudly to the Virgin Mary for help. He panted and puffed. He made another big heave, trying to tear himself away from the girl. She screamed and started to hit the bewildered man's face with her fist, scratch him with her nails, bite his hands. Rainbow licked the blood off his lips, lifted himself on one arm, and dealt the girl a powerful blow with the other. Panic must have dimmed his brain, for he collapsed on top of her, biting her breasts, arms and neck. He hammered her thighs with his fists, then grabbed her flesh as if trying to tear it off. The girl screamed with a high-pitched steady cry that finally broke off when her throat dried up – and then it started to again. Rainbow



went on beating her until he was exhausted. [...]

Rainbow started crying for help. His shouts brought first a band of barking dogs, then some alarmed men with axes and knives. They opened the door of the barn and, uncomprehending, goggled at the couple on the floor. In a hoarse voice, Rainbow quickly explained the situation. They closed the door and, not letting anyone else enter, sent for a witch-midwife who knew about such things.

The old woman came and kneeled by the locked couple, and did something to them with the help of others. I could see nothing; I only heard the girl's last piercing shriek. Then there was silence and Rainbow's barn grew dark. At dawn I ran to the knothole. Sunshine was coming in through the slots between the boards, lighting up sparkling beams of grain dust. On the threshing floor, close to the wall a human shape lay stretched out flat, covered from head to foot with a horse blanket<sup>15</sup>.

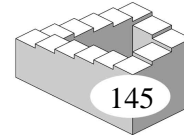
When Stupid Ludmilla comes looking for Lekh and does not find him, she forces the boy to sleep with her and he is saved by the peasants, who come and take turns enjoying themselves with Ludmilla. He experiences serious sexual perversion when he is adopted by the farmer called Makar, who lived with his son and daughter. While life on this farm is not as cruel as in the other places that he visits, the boy is introduced to romance by Ewka, the farmer's daughter, and enjoys life:

I also liked what followed next. Ewka sat on the bench holding me between her open legs, holding me between her open legs, hugging and caressing me, kissing me on my neck and face. Her dry heatherlike hair fell over my face

as I looked into her pale eyes and saw a scarlet blush spread from her face to her neck and shoulders. My hands and mouth revived again. Ewka began to tremble and breathe deeper, her mouth turned cold and her shaking hands pulled me to her body<sup>16</sup>.

Things seem relatively calm in Makar's place, where the boy experiences feminine tenderness for the first time after enduring so much hardship at the hands of those who are supposed to look after him. At first, he does not understand why Makar and his son are visiting the goats' quarters, until Ewka tells him that they are going to enjoy themselves. He discovers that Makar keeps rabbits and has his favourite females that he uses for sexual gratification. To the boy's amazement, Makar also allows the he-goat into his room and makes it sleep with his daughter Ewka. However, the most odious scene for the boy was when he discovered that the family was also involved in incest, as Makar also forces his daughter to sleep with his son. The boy's morale hits an all-time low and he experiences a sinking feeling: Something collapsed inside me. My thoughts fell apart and shattered into broken fragments like a smashed jug. I felt as empty as a fish bladder punctured again and again and sinking into deep, muddy waters<sup>17</sup>.

In conclusion, it should be noted that *The Painted Bird* portrays a world in which discrimination, violence, sexual perversion and lawlessness are the order of the day. It paints a dystopian universe, based on the author's experience in his homeland, where his own people rejected him because of the colour of his skin, hair and eyes, and when the Germans invaded, he asked himself whether: "they were determined to clear the world of all swarthy, dark-eyed long-nosed, black-haired people."<sup>18</sup> He is continually beaten up by the peasants, failing which



they unleashed their dogs to bite him. For him, the world is nothing but a living hell where he must worry about basic material needs such as food. Even Christians are not tolerant in this hellish world. When he drops the Missal during the Mass, they throw him in the latrine pit and this is how he loses his voice, only to recover it at the end of the novel.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> On the narrative techniques in Kosinski's novel see Krystyna Pendowska, "Jerzy Kosinski: A Literature of Contortions" in *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 11-14.

<sup>2</sup> Jerzy Kosinski, *The Painted Bird*, New York, Grove Press, 1965, p. xiii.

<sup>3</sup> Jerzy Kosinski, *op. cit.*, p. 51. See also Stanislav Kolář, "Animal Imagery in Kosinski's *The Painted Bird* and Spiegelman's *Maus*." According to the author, he took inspiration from Aristophanes' satirical play *The Birds* and also from the natural world. There is a rule that if a caged bird is painted in striking colors and released to freedom, it looks for a flock of the same species to rejoin. But it is not accepted by the flock and is eventually killed by its own species which considers it as strange intruder. This natural peculiarity enabled Kosinski to find a very exact metaphor for the narrator of his novel, a nameless uprooted Boy, who also turns out to be a hopeless outsider, rejected by the community. It soon becomes obvious that the protagonist of unclear origin shares the lot of the painted bird. He is trying to incorporate himself into society, but in vain due to his different appearance. There is no room for the dark-skinned boy speaking in urban dialect in the community of coarse, uneducated villagers who seem as if they are taken from Breughel's paintings. Hence he is brutalized for being different in every

village he comes to. For these primitive people, living in a world where life has no value and cruelty seems unlimited, he becomes an outlaw on the margins of society. {...} In this context the recurring image of the painted bird expresses the otherness of a stranger who does not belong. See also Michael Skau, Michael Carrol, Donald Cassidy, "Jerzy Kosinski's *The Painted Bird*: A Modern Bestiary", in *The Polish Review*, Vol. 27, No 3-4, 1982, p. 45.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 20.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 20.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 20.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 175-176.

<sup>10</sup> See Saxo Grammaticus, *The Danish History*, Translated by Oliver Elton, Book V, Part I, Online Medieval and Classical Library Release # 28 a. in <http://oma-cl.org/Danish-History/book5I.html>: "And so with Hanund, the daughter of the King of the Huns, for his wife, he passed three years in the most prosperous peace. But idleness brought wantonness among his courtiers, and peace begot lewdness, which they displayed in the most abominable crimes. For they would draw some men up in the air on ropes, and torment them, pushing their bodies as they hung, like a ball that is tossed; or they would put a kid's hide under the feet of others as they walked, and, by stealthily pulling a rope, trip their unwary steps on the slippery skill in their path; others they would strip of their clothes, and lash with sundry tortures of stripes; others they fastened to pegs, as with a noose, and punished with mock-hanging. They scorched off the beard and hair with tapers; of others they burned the hair of the groin with a brand. Only those maidens might marry whose chastity they had first deflowered. Strangers they battered with bones; others

they compelled to drunkenness with immoderate draughts, and made them burst. No man might give his daughter to wife unless he had first bought their favour and goodwill. None might contract any marriage without first purchasing their consent with a bribe. Moreover, they extended their abominable and abandoned lust not only to virgins, but to the multitude of matrons indiscriminately. Thus a twofold madness incited this mixture of wantonness and frenzy. Guests and strangers were proffered not shelter but revilings. All these maddening mockeries did this insolent and wanton crew devise, and thus under a boy-king freedom fostered licence. For nothing prolongs reckless sin like the procrastination of punishment and vengeance. This unbridled impudence of the soldiers ended by making the king detested, not only by foreigners, but even by his own people, for the Danes resented such an arrogant and cruel rule”.

<sup>11</sup> See *The Chronicles of Froissart in Lord Burner's Translation*, Selected, Edited and Introduced by Gillian and William Anderson, London, Fontwell, Centaur, Press, 1963, “Thus they gathered together without any other counsel, and without any armour saving with staves and knives and so went to the house of a knight dwelling thereby, and broke up his house and slew the knight and the lady and all his children, great and small, and burnt his house. And then they went to another castle, and took the knight thereof and bound him fast to a stake, and then violated his wife and daughter before his face and then slew the lady and his daughter and all his other children, and then slew the knight by great torment and burnt and beat down the castle. And so they did to divers other castles and good houses. And they multiplied so that they were a six thousand, and ever as they went forward they increased, for suchlike as they were fell

ever to them, so that every gentleman fled from them and took their wives and children with them, and fled ten or twenty leagues off to be in surety, and left their houses void and their goods therein. These mischievous people thus assembled without captain or armour, robbed, burnt and slew all gentlemen that they could lay hands on, and forced and ravished ladies and damosels, and did such shameful deeds that no human creature ought to think on any such, and he that did most mischief was most praised with them and greatest master. I dare not write the horrible deeds that they did to ladies and damosels: among other they slew a knight and after did put him on a broach and roasted him at the fire in the sight of the lady his wife and his children; and after the lady had been enforced and ravished with a ten or twelve, they made her perforce to eat of her husband, and after made her to die an evil death and all her children”, p.138. See also Jerome Linkowitz, *Literary Disruptions: The Making of A Post-Contemporary American Fiction*, Urbana, Chicago, London, University of Illinois Press, 1975, p. 88.

<sup>12</sup> On the theme of vengeance in the novel, see Norman Lavers, *Jerzy Kosinski*, Boston, Twayne Publishers, 1982, p. 45-48.

<sup>13</sup> Jerzy Kosinski, *op. cit.* p. 49.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 44.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 106-107.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 143.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 151.

<sup>18</sup> On the theme of silence and suffering see Sara R Horowitz, *Voicing the Void: Muteness and Memory in Holocaust Fiction*, Albany, State University of New York, 1997 and David Patterson, *The Shriek of Silence: A Phenomenology of the Holocaust Novel*, Lexington, University of Kentucky Press, 1992.