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CORPORATE GREED AND THIRD WORLD GUINEA PIGS: JOHN LE CARRÉ'S
THE CONSTANT GARDENER

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ABSTRACT

The Constant Gardener by John le Carré is an unusual novel in many respects. Combining the suspense and thrill of the espionage novel for which le Carré is justly famous, it exhibits, perhaps for the first time, the author's deep-rooted humanism especially at the suffering of the less privileged living in the Third World countries among whom Africa ranks first. Though the novel could have easily slipped into some sort of sentimentality, le Carré has supported it with a mass of well-researched details which go to make up, with a great deal of authenticity, this narrative of exploitation and betrayal and blind profiteering from the sufferings of others. It lays bare the machinations and structures of monolithic corporations which manage to penetrate even such edifices like the WHO. The power of these global corporations transcend geographical boundaries and in today's world of commerce they wield a power greater than that of governments and even policies of governments are made manipulable by the nexus that exists between the politicians, bureaucrats and the businessmen. This is a novel especially relevant to any Third World country which is dependent on the largesse of the developed nations.

KEYWORDS: Pharmaceutical, corporate greed, TB, Third World, dypraxa

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Though Edward Said in his *Orientalism* and Frantz Fanon in his *The Wretched of the Earth* have discussed extensively the way the West has resorted to cultural and racial stereotyping of the East, it is not often an author from the First World writes with such insight and pain the unrestrained greed of the global corporations headquartered in the West. Sharply departing from the espionage thrillers that he has been writing with tremendous success, John le Carré has produced a novel of humanism which, in its meticulous details, comes frighteningly close to resembling the reality of contemporary imbalance in power equations.

The novel begins with a bang with the news Tessa Quayle's murder and the disappearance of Dr Arnold Bluhm, her escort, in a remote place called Lokichoggio, some distance away from Nairobi, the capital of Kenya. It is a deliberately committed crime as Rob, the detective from Scotland Yard, says:

“More like corporate murder, as we like to call it,” Rob explains. “Planned and executed by paid professionals at the behest of a person or persons unknown. Whoever tipped them off knew Tessa’s plans inside out.” (136)

Tessa is the young, charming wife of Justin Quayle, a midlevel functionary in the British High Commission. Tessa is devoted to the cause of improving the health of Africans, especially women, on whom the AIDS is taking an extraordinary toll, decimating the adult population and leaving many children orphans. Tessa and Justin had suffered a tragedy with the still birth of their son Garth.

Tessa teams up with Dr Arnold Bluhm, a doctor from Belgium, who is also deeply concerned with the efficacy of a particular drug called “dypraxa” manufactured by a Hanover-based MNC called KVH (Karel Vita Hudson) and distributed in Africa by Bell, Barker and Benjamin (known as ThreeBees) headed by Kenny Curtiss, an unscrupulous business magnate but one who keeps himself in the good books of the British Secret Service by offering them business intelligence. The Kenyan government lead by Moi is perceived to be “terminally corrupt.” (52)

Tessa, in a typical fashion, had insisted on having her baby delivered in a Nairobi hospital catering to all Kenyans. It was in this hospital she met Wanza, a child-mother, suffering from the effects of dypraxa, the drug promoted by the ThreeBees. This drug is manufactured on a massive scale to address the disease of TB sweeping the whole of Africa. The ThreeBees touts it as a wonder drug capable of reducing treatment time in a drastic manner. But the sudden death of Wanza and her baby and the immediate and mysterious disappearance of her body were the first indications that Tessa receives that all is not well with the drug. Tessa, besides being a sharp lawyer, also has a philanthropic side to her personality described by her husband in such term: “Those who watch suffering and do nothing about it, in her book, were little better than those who inflicted it. They were the bad Samaritans.” (153) More than the death of her own child, it is the deaths of Wanza and her baby which upset Tessa: “Those bastards killed Wanda, Justin! They killed her with their poison.” (159)

To a humanitarian and noble idealist like Tessa, the wanton death of Wanza is a provocation to research deeply about the other deaths and also the way the pharmaceutical industry of the West exploits the vulnerability of the Third World nations. She has prepared an exhaustive study of the havoc caused by the drug as Sandy, an infatuated senior diplomat, reveals later under pressure from Justin:

“Case histories. Thirty-seven of them. Chapter and verse. Names, addresses, treatment, place and date of burial. Same symptoms every time. Sleepiness, blindness, bleeding, liver collapse, bingo.”(442-43)

As for the ways by which the West exploits the poorer nations, Justin says:

“Aid to the Third World is exploitation under another name,” he resumes. “The beneficiaries are the countries that supply the money on interest, local African politicians and officials who pocket huge bribes, and the Western contractors and the arms suppliers who walk away with huge profits. The victims are the man in the street, the uprooted, the poor and the very poor. And the children who will have no future.”(166)

What is surprising is that the WHO (World Health Organisation) itself provides a convenient platform for such an exploitation to take place. Birgit, the Hanover-based investigative journalist, says:

Go to any WHO assembly – what do you see? ...“Lobbyists. PR people from the big pharmas. Dozens of them....And the Third World is not sophisticated. They have no money, they are not experienced. With diplomatic language and manoeuvring, the lobbyists can get behind them easy (316)

Those who have the guts to oppose this unbridled profiteering and unethical sales of drugs which are not even properly tested, are done away with the help of killer gangs as it happens to Tessa and Dr Arnold Bluhm. The researcher who was instrumental in the invention of the drug like Laura Emrich has her career wrecked and reputation ruined by a systematic campaign of disinformation by a cash-rich pharma industry.(319)

The journalist Birgit based in Hanover, Germany and who helped Tessa in researching the antecedents of the drugs finds her computer and discs stolen. Justin Quayle himself is killed by the contract killers eventually when he retraces the steps of his wife to uncover the evidence of malfeasance by these MNCs. Besides being

killed, Tessa's name is besmirched by sexually linking her with Arnold Bluhm who later turns out to be gay. (273)

In an email sent to Bluhm, Tessa clarifies the way the giant pharma companies exploit poorer nations:

The US pharma giants are trying to extend the life of their patents so that they can preserve their monopoly and charge what they damn well like and use the State Dept. to frighten the Third World out of manufacturing their own generic products at a fraction of the price of the branded version.(270)

The cash-rich corporates have at their command people from top to bottom. Bernard Pellegrin, a senior diplomat based in London, is one such high-level contact in cahoots with the pharma magnates. He not only wrongly accuses Arnold Bluhm of killing Tessa (202), he also warns Justin that his own life may be forfeit if he pursues the line of work done by his dead wife.

And if you're harbouring so-called confidential information you shouldn't have – in your head or anywhere else – it belongs to us, not you. Rougher world these days than the one we grew up in. Lot of mean chaps around with everything to go for and a lot to lose. Makes for bad manners. (203)

Likewise, another senior British diplomat based in Nairobi, Sandy Woodrow, has no qualms about burning the report painstakingly prepared by Tessa as instructed by Pellegrin because he is intent on advancing his own career rather than do anything about the cause of truth. This shows there is a triangular nexus between the bureaucrats (Pellegrin, Woodrow), captains of the industry (Kenny Curtiss) and politicians who line up their own pockets rather than serve the people (Moi and his cutthroat ministers). With such a powerful combine working against him, the common man finds the odds are heavily stacked against him.

These pharma firms systematically sabotage or destroy evidence with the help of computer hackers who plant viruses in the computers of Tessa and Arthur Hammond ("Ham," the cousin of Tessa who is also a lawyer) who find that the entire data in the hard disc wiped clean.

Given the big fish-swallow-small fish ethos of the corporate world which is in fact an accepted practice in the capitalist economy, the ThreeBees run by Kenny will eventually be taken over by KVH when the stocks of ThreeBees can be bought for peanuts after the discovery of the fatal side effects of dypraxa.

Ghita Pearson, an Anglo-Indian employee in British High Commission and a friend of Tessa says, in the interrogation conducted by the Scotland Yard detectives, that Africa has always been a receptacle for the unwanted, under trial drugs of the developed nations:

Everyone knows that Africa is the pharmaceutical dustbin of the world and ThreeBees is one of the main pharmaceutical distributors of products in Africa. (250)

Though it is too much to expect the pharma companies to work for the alleviation of African suffering purely out of humanitarian motives, to reduce the people of Africa to the level of guinea pigs on whom ill-tested drugs can be tried with impunity is too much to bear for any individual with an iota of conscience.

Quite contrary to expectations, it is not so much the sales of arms that fetches a huge proportion of profit to the West as the sales of pharmaceuticals, says Hammond:

"Name me the most secretive, duplicitous, mendacious, hypocritical bunch of corporate wide-boys it's been my dubious pleasure to encounter."

"Defence," Justin suggested disingenuously.

"Wrong. Pharmaceutical. Beats defence into a cocked hat."(181)

If it is assumed that Africa is the only continent where unethical pharmaceutical practices are carried out, then the reader is in for a surprise: corporate greed is no respecter of boundaries as Tessa makes it clear to Bluhm in one of her many emails:

You didn't believe me when I told you KVH were bad. I've checked. They're bad. Two years ago they were charged with polluting half Florida, where they have a huge "facility," and got off with a light caution. ... KVH performed a similar public service in India, where two hundred children in the region of Madras allegedly died of related causes. The Indian court case will be heard in about fifteen years, or longer if KVH continue to pay off the right people. (234)

Though the two principal actors in the drama, Tessa and Justin, are killed by contract killers, they still manage to secure some redemptive action from the British Government in whose fair play Tessa trusted. Justin hands over the incriminating papers to Arthur Hammond, Tessa's cousin, and asks him to hire a lawyer in the event of his untimely death.

Had this novel been written by a Third World author, perhaps it would be taken as propaganda. When it is by an acclaimed author from the West like John le Carré, it carries an extra punch because, even though there are unscrupulous Western corporations thriving on human misery, there are also writers who are the conscience keepers for the whole of humanity.

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