Book Review

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by Angella Lee
Media Director
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Sublimity

The Neverending Quest for the Other Shore is a work of aesthetic sublimity in that the reader experiences simultaneous feelings of fear, astonishment, safety, and inspiration from witnessing a treacherous voyage across the Atlantic. Likewise, it is sublime to observe the agency in which the migrants workers faced a full range of consequences (including death) as a result of their choice to make such a voyage.

Enlightenment philosophers Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant theorized that something was aesthetically sublime if it produced simultaneous feelings of fear and astonishment alongside pleasure and safety. For example, one can experience a feeling of pleasure from looking at a gorgeous yet dangerous

waterfall from the safety of secure bridge. In The Neverending Quest for the Other Shore, the reader feels this type of sublime feeling as the author describes a treacherous expedition across the Atlantic using two storylines.

The first storyline (encompassing cantos 1 and 2) tells the story of the legendary 14th century Malian King, Abubakar II, and 2000 boats that sailed West and never returned. The second (encompassing canto 3) describes contemporary African migrants embarking on an equally dangerous voyage to reach European shores. Both stories are sublime since the reader can, from the safety of her or his position as reader, experience these dangerous feats without being existentially threatened. It is this freedom of choice, exercised by the King, his fleets, and the migrants' that is particularly sublime in this work of art and renders these actors as heroes worthy of an epic poem.

Three Cantos

Kandé's neo-epic poem follows the well-known genre of the epic poem, popular since ancient. Written in French with occasional alexandrines—or syllabic poetic meters containing 12 syllables—and translated into English as prose poetry with assonances, alliterations and occasional rhyme, The Neverending Quest for the Other Shore utilizes polyphonic narrators to tell a story in three cantos. The backdrop of the three cantos—or three major divisions—is the unforgiving Atlantic Ocean and the migrants who paddle against its power of their own volition in the quest to reach the shores of America and Europe.

First Canto

The first canto describes a linear narrative of the 14th century Malian King Abubakar II who, with 2000 boats, sailed west on the Atlantic towards the Americas only to have his entire fleet drown. Faced with the experience of one wave becoming many and a hurricane coming, the text features multiple characters speaking out against their certain fate of death.

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"Challenging the thunder a call is heard intermittently/It's useless to gather our words, cries the woman/Our medicines can do nothing against the hurricane/ And since the wind is unforgiving:/row astern and in good order."

This character displays an exercise of free will when choosing to continue to row as usual, even while facing certain death by drowning.

Another character offers a similar response to death: "To each his own manner of dying/ but the renown of the brave shall not end/ To each his fortunes/ but the pilgrimage shall not end for lack of pilgrims/ Keep rowing truer row harder now."

A final character, a noblewoman, utters a final call to choose to stay calm and accept death with honor: "In honor and in true nobility/ we lived let us die with talent/ Let our suffering bear witness/ to the excellence of our deed/ as well as to the splendor of our defeat."

The storyline of the first canto is one where African migrants set out on an exciting yet ambiguous boat voyage to reach the Americas. They face insurmountable waves and a hurricane, facing their death with dignity. The underlying attribute of those on the voyage is their agency—the exercising of their innate free will to choose to carry out an action, all the while accepting death as the ultimate consequence of their choice to take this adventure. This acceptance is what ultimately makes this socially mixed group of migrants heroes and what renders their story an aesthetic experience of the sublime.

Edmund Burke wrote, "The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror."

Reading about the mass drowning of the migrants is an aesthetic experience of the sublime pursuant to Burke's definition, as it causes the reader to

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feel astonishment mixed with horror that a king could lead a fleet of 2,000 innocent people on a massive expedition that resulted in a mass drowning. As an outside observer, Burke explains that there is also delight in reading about the experience, since we are in safe position to do.

Second Canto

The second canto describes multiple narratives in various spaces and timeframes. We learn about King Abubakar's motivations for his expedition, preparations for the voyage, problems during the trip such as a mutiny, and the successful landing in the Americas. From here, it splits into three possible outcomes: death, capture by the locals, and a battle between King Abubakar and the local king resulting in a an agreement to marry off their respective relatives in a parody of European royal customs.

This canto is a contrast to the first in that it explores different outcomes to the expedition. This canto is central to the theme, as it once again examines the characters' agency. All of the characters exercise their free will, whether it is Abubakar who starts the massive expedition, to the mutineers who attempt to overthrow Abubakar for leading them on an unsuccessful voyage, to Abubakar's sister who sacrifices herself to save her brother. The multitude of storylines in this single canto free choice, which is something that is in clear contrast to the traditional relationship that Africans had in the Atlantic slave trade.

Third Canto

The third canto tells—in less formal language than the first two cantos—the story of African migrants in contemporary times, who embarked under dangerous conditions to reach European shores, only to be intercepted by European authorities and incarcerated. The final scene shows a character by the name of Alassane, who escapes his fate by making the choice to dive into the water and swim to shore.

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The poem closes with the narrator observing that “Everyone gets his own chance/but all those with a bit of sense/envy that which has been given to him.”

The narrator in the last few lines lauds Alassane as a hero, because he exercised his free will to avoid being detained. Alassane demonstrates that even under conditions of subjugation, the actor still has the choice to escape suppression, even if it means risking his own death. It is precisely this dangerous exercise of free will that renders Alassane the ultimate protagonist and a sublime aesthetic experience for the reader.

The Neverending Quest for the Other Shore is ultimately a work about choice—an attribute that renders it a sublime aesthetic experience more so than the description of the terrifying events. Kandé utilizes her rich imagination and arsenal of literary devices to craft this story.

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