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Cost in tears of the cup that cheers



Germaine Greer

TEN YEARS ago, in Addis Ababa, I was given an unforgettable cup of coffee. The person who made it for me was an Eritrean whom I shall call Joseph. He supported his family of 12 children by working as a fixer for international aid agencies and any one else who would pay him, and by charming the wits out of rich foreign ladies so that they would then send him trifling amounts of hard currency on a regular basis. He and his wife and all the children lived — that is to say, squatted — in what seemed to be a corner of a half-built warehouse on a piece of derelict land surrounded by smelly workshops and small factories.

In one room the children were either tucked up in an assortment of makeshift beds, which were packed away in the day-time, or patiently working away at their homework, their tattered exercise books balanced on their knees. The kitchen was a passageway open to the elements at one end. Everything, though astonishingly battered and shabby, was spotless. Despite their precarious circumstances and Joseph's necessary infidelities, his wife seemed effortlessly in control. Her name was Paradise. However it is not the house or the people that I remember most vividly. It is the shock of the coffee.

Ethiopia is the home of coffee, which grows wild on the hills of Harerge. Coffee is the key to Ethiopian life, not just in the coffee-growing provinces but throughout the old empire. When I asked Tigrayans who had been resettled in the southwest about the most harrowing aspect of their journey in the unpressurised hold of an Antonov, all they would say was that they had not been able to take their morning cup of coffee before departure. In the famine shelters the old ladies kept their bags of green coffee beans tucked away under their flowing cotton garments, together with a few crumbs of incense. In the midst of misery they kept their mid-morning Kaffee-Klatsch and their optimism and their sanity.

JOSEPH showed me the green beans he was going to roast for me on the minute charcoal fire he had got going in a brazier made out of a ghee tin. There were no more than 20, a single layer of beans in the hollow of his palm. Seeing as there are supposed to be 43 beans in every cup of Nescafe, I resigned myself to a pretty feeble brew. I reckoned he was making do, because in Addis there was no coffee cheaper than 16 birr a kilo, a fortune for the likes of Joseph.

He threw a pinch of incense on the charcoal, and juggled the beans on a slotted spoon until they turned the same clear warm brown as his skin; then he ground them in a small mortar, tipped them into a chipped enamel jug, poured on boiling water and decanted the infusion into white-glazed earthenware cups, no bigger than egg-cups. I sipped and was astounded. The liquid in my mouth was nothing like the bit-

ter stuff we drink so much of. It was so fragrant that I seemed to breathe it more than drink it. Vital spirits rushed to heart and brain. We all began to talk earnestly and eloquently about the kinds of things that most people hardly dare to think about, sitting with our knees almost touching around the rusty ghee tin while the thin fume of scented smoke hovered over us.

At the port of Assab, because Ethiopia needed hard currency, this same precious substance was selling for a few US cents a kilo, to be indistinguishably submerged in the world crop of coffee that goes to be roasted to blackness and burnt and boiled and brewed into powder or granules. The only people who are prepared to pay what coffee is worth and treat it accordingly are the Ethiopians themselves. What I drank in that kitchen 10 years ago was every bit as good a drink as champagne, but the world economic situation is such that we pay for coffee and treat it as if it was, and ultimately reduce it to — garbage. Coffee is a labour intensive crop; each bean must be picked, carried, spread, turned, by a human hand. Forty-three beans can only get into every cup and that cup be worth no more than a few pence, because the workers in the coffee plantations are inhumanly treated. Great profits are made out of coffee, but the poor soul who must pick it, picks it to stay alive in poverty and pain.

THE iron law of the free market, which we call free because we are on top of it, is that what poor people produce is worthless. Any value it has is added to it by us. We spend millions to advertise as aphrodisiac the rubbish we have made of coffee and still we pay only pennies for it and insist on swilling it every few hours.

Champagne is only fizzy white wine but we would not dream of drinking it five or six times a day and do not complain at having to pay £3 or £4 or more for a glass of it. We are actually paying more than what it costs in human terms to produce this luxury, but we would abandon coffee and tea if the price moved even a fraction towards what each really costs.

When tea was first drunk in England it was a costly delicacy; people kept it in precious caddies under lock and key and drank it only in company, surrounding the business with a good deal of precious impedimenta and ceremony. Now we are told this country "runs on tea"; the tea it runs on is rubbish compared to the tea that the Japanese treat with such respect; the process that has produced tea-swilling is parallel to the process that debased coffee. Both are the products of colonialism; the availability of cheap tea and coffee depends upon the persistence and intensification of oppression of the south by the north.

A letter from the Tea Council tells me that tea is the way that most British people maintain their necessary fluid intake, which is to say that tea is the way British people get to drink enough water. And for this a tied labour force of barefoot women spent their toilsome lives plucking two leaves and a bud, two leaves and a bud, living in hovels without light or running water. We might as well get our necessary fluid intake by quaffing human tears. How strange it is that we are more likely to mount a protest against the inhumanity of using chimps to advertise tea than we are to organise tours of the tea-gardens so that people can see for themselves the misery that has filled the cup that cheers.

FAX

From Germaine Greer
Fax No. 0799 530623

To John Cunningham
The Guardian

Fax No. 071 239 9935

Date 5 Feb 1994

No. of Pages, including this one 4



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