
MULKRAJ ANAND'S ACROSS THE BLACK WATERS : AN EXPLORATION OF INDIAN SOLDIERS' CONTRIBUTION IN THE GREAT WAR

Naseem Choudhary

Ph.D Scholar, Department of English, Central University of Jammu, Jammu

ABSTRACT

The paper analyses Mulkraj Anand's novel *Across the Black Waters* (1940), a touching account of the contribution of the Indian army in the Great War. It is an important novel as it acquaints us with the brutal atmosphere of the Great War and with the meticulous hardships of Indian soldiers. Much has been written by western authors about their respective soldiers' contribution and sacrifices. However, the Indian soldiers' contribution has remained by and large ignored as the western literature and history have not accorded adequate account of the sufferings of the Indian soldiers. The paper therefore, throws light on the Indian soldiers and warriors who laid down their lives in the great havoc of 1914 with special reference to the novel. *Across the Black Waters* with its continental background, is a illustration of Lal Singh (the protagonist) and his companions' experiences of fighting against Germans in France during W.W.I and concludes with Lal Singh becoming a German prisoner of war— a war which was not his own nor for his peoples' cause but a 'tragic absurdity'. The first and only fictional account of the use of Indian troops in WWI, the story raised the ethical question of the deployment of Indian troops in a British war. The paper also focuses on the role and contribution of India in the war as portrayed in *Across the Black Waters*. It rationally describes the sufferings, brutalities, pain, agony, miseries and hardships that the Indian sepoy actually underwent on the battle field as recorded in the novel. The World War I prepared thousands of Indian soldiers to die for a country which they were not the citizens of.

Key Words: War, Battle Field, Brutality, Death, Horror.

INTRODUCTION

WWI was fought from 1914 to 1918, in which Great Britain, France, Russia, Belgium, Italy, Japan, the United States and other allies defeated Germany, Austria—Hungary, Turkey and Bulgaria. Of all the colonies of the British, French and German empires, the contribution of undivided India (comprising present-day India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Burma and Sri-Lanka) in terms of manpower remains the highest: a total of one and a half million men, including soldiers and non-soldiers, were recruited into the British Indian Army. India joined the war as a part of British Empire.

What impelled the Indians in large number to join the British Army in their fight against Germans in the foreign land are their helplessness and their quest to save their debt-ridden families and their lands from being auctioned and the promise of land as reward for their service in the Great War. They joined the British Army in hope of getting freedom from the Britishers. They joined the British Army as a response to the 'sarcar salt' they have eaten, displaying their loyalty to the 'Sahibs'. But their hopes were all shattered in the alien land as they were exploited there and even harassed at the highest order to the extent of death. They gained nothing for their contribution but only loss in every respect—loss of property, material and even precious lives.

Mulk Raj Anand is a prolific writer of the Indian Writings in English. He is known for his realistic and sympathetic portrayal of the downtrodden section of the Indian society. He gained prominence among his readers with his debut novel *Untouchable* (1935). *Untouchable* is a harsh reality of the Indian caste system that still prevails in our so called modern society. This book was highly appreciated and he was hailed as India's

Charles Dickens. Anand is a receipt of the civilian honour of the *Padma Bhushan* award. His novel *Across the Black Waters* (1940) holds a unique place not only among his own novels but in the entire gamut of Indian Writings in English. It has the distinction of being the only Indian English novel that chooses the First World War setting.

The novel recounts the experiences of an Indian regiment brought hurriedly to France in 1914. Set in the battle field of France it opens with the protagonist Lal Singh known as Lalu along with his brigade disembarking at Marseilles to fight in Flanders, and concludes with his becoming a German prisoner of war. The entire action of the novel takes place in Europe and Lal Singh and his companions are revealed in actual action. The novel runs like a sort of an elaborate running commentary of the four years war. These Indian sepoys are mostly peasants who went across the seas—the black waters just to clear their debts and get their homes and lands free from mortgages. They are forced to fight into the war. They do not have any emotional involvement in the war because the war is not their own nor for their peoples' cause but is rather a 'tragic absurdity'. The war prepared innocent Indian sepoys in large numbers to die for a country which they are not the citizens of.

Saros Cowasjee a critic observes, "the preservation of their own land, or a grant of piece of land for bravery by the Sarkar is what these peasants fight for" (*Freedoms* 111). The novel is remarkable for its responsive handling of the characters that come from modest backgrounds. This is probably because the author, MulkRaj Anand himself is the son of a soldier, where in an interview Anand says:

The roots of this story are in my childhood days. My father was a subedar in the Dogra regiment. As a boy, I have seen hundreds of men go off to Europe from my town and surrounding villages but only a handful returned. I have had close glimpses of the two giant wars fought in my generation. (Interview)

Thus, the description by Anand of different phases of war, of hazardous life of the Indian soldiers, their great contribution and sufferings made this novel an awesome realistic work of art. Anand has created all the horrors, fear, losses, effects of war, brutality of war and powerlessness of the Indian sepoys in the novel to give a realistic picture of the WWI to the readers.

The most important principle of Anand's humanism that finds an elaborate magnification in *Across the Black Waters* is the ruthless condemnation of war which is only a dignified name for cruelty and cold blooded violence. The saddest part of the tragedy of Indian soldiers during the Great War is that their movements are kept a secret; they do not have any information of the exact plan or location of the battle field except that they are going to "Vilayat"; and they do not even know why they are fighting and against whom they are fighting and fighting for what purpose. They are forever in the cruel grips of the feeling of ambiguity and the fear of the unknown. They are denied knowledge of their destinations even. All they do is to hang on to a guess or a gossip. Anand writes in the course of the novel that, "no one asked where the war was? or why it was being fought? and how it happened that they were going there? For there had been no answer to such queries in the past and now they took it for granted. (69)

All they know is that it is fated upon them by the God for their past misdeeds. Sepoy Dhyhan Singh known as Daddy Dhanoo in the novel tells his companions to "Obey the orders of the 'Sarkar' and of 'God' who made us servants of the 'Sarkar' for our past 'karmas'- the misdeeds." (92). Further adding to it he says:

If we are true to the salt of the sarkar we can win glory and honor and save the day. We must advance. So, boys, get ready, for we are about to attack the enemy. 'Obedience' and 'duty' are with 'God' and the highest 'Dharma' is with 'Obedience' to the 'Sarcar' whose salt one has eaten. We shall consider the Sahibs- the Britishers as an incarnation of God. (93)



The soldiers are assailed by all kinds of uncertainties since war itself is not clearly defined by any but merely unclearly described as 'the final reality or destination'. Most of the soldiers are not even properly trained for the war. Most of them like the protagonist, Lalu started practicing marksmanship straight on the battlefield and familiarize themselves to all the brutalities that are obligatory of a soldier.

The character Uncle Kirpu in the novel is a kind hearted old man, who seems to recapitulate Anand's utter contempt for war when he tactfully says, ". . . I wonder why they are killing each other and making a graveyard of this land" to which Lalu adds "Guns are not going to offer a solution, even the soldiers in the battle field knows this." (178)

To Lal Singh war indicate nothing but a holocaust of men, beasts and homes and often wonders why the war is being fought at all.

. . . he could not believe that ordinary men and women of good sense, and the governments of France, English and Germany, which were saner and wiser than the ordinary people over whom they ruled, could be engaged in a war in which men were being wounded and houses shattered. (83)

The soldiers have to lead a horrible and terrible life on the battlefield. Their job is to wait for orders from the "Sahibs" and to obey their orders and follow them and their instructions. The instructions more often than not, mean death to them. They know that Yama-the God of death is chasing them all the time. But they dare not disobey the 'Sarkar' lest they shall meet with most horrible deaths like that of the sepoy, Hanumant Singh met with. He is shot down at close range for declining the order to march into the jaws of death because he has fever that time. Subedar Suchet Singh shot him dead for giving him an excuse for not marching into the battlefeild. The officers do not bother to explain the orders to the soldiers. Uncle Kirpu says to Lalu, "The Sarkar is like a bitch, son. It barks its orders and does not explain." (92)

Getting irritated from the very casual attitude of the Sarkar towards Indian sepoy, the soldiers ask themselves that why should they fight "this bitch of a war" (101) in an unknown land for a "dirty sarkar" which ask them to risk their lives but don't bother to tell them for what purpose. The soldiers are not in a position to understand the 'cause of war' (to save the civilization).

Mulkraj Anand describes Lalu's reaction as he get his first taste of battle avers:

He would have to kill if he did not get killed first....Anyhow, whether he killed or did not kill he would have to go there where the enemy was... Involuntarily he trembled. Then he tried to remember the tactics of bayonet fighting, like a schoolboy recalling his lessons just before entering the examination room. And like the frightened schoolboy, he felt he had forgotten, and the dread loomed before his eyes, occupying the hollow of his body which shook against his will. (119)

By the very nature of their poor positions, the common Indian soldiers suffer a lot at the hands of their immediate superiors who are both the Britishers as well as the Indian sepoy of higher rank. Lalu often get beleaguered by Lance-Corporal Lok Nath a coarse and brutal officer. Lok Nath is jealous of the fact that Lalu has a smattering of English, is intelligent and responsive and has won the favour of Captain Owen. He leaves no opportunity to single out on the young man, and the only language he employs in dealing with all the soldiers below his rank in general is the language of the choicest abuse.

Subah Singh, son of Subedar Major Arbej Singh used to often torture the lowly soldiers. He gets promotion to Jemdar from a common soldier. Immediately after getting promotion he starts lording it over all, but over Lalu in particular, detaining him for exhaustion in duty. Major Peacock and many other western officers also used to torture the lowly by pushing them very easily into the jaws of death. Anand's condemnation of



cruelty could be found clearly detailed in the novel. War means violence and cruelty, and the soldiers are compelled to carry out them and the result is utter savagery:

Now you must show them some of your savagery... you must charge the enemy without fear with your bayonets, wherever you find him and hit him in a vital spot. Aim at the heart, remember the belly or the testicles of the enemy. If he has the advantage in attack, swiftly fell him with a blow from the butt end of your rifle and trample upon him and drive the bayonet deep into the body and draw it out so that he bleeds and dies. (127)

No one can question the lessons of cruelty being imposed on the soldiers. It is impossible to ignore the brutality implied. Lalu- a sensitive mature man finds himself gradually maturing into a sheer beast, capable of brutal unkindness. When he kills the first enemy a German soldier, he has no regret and guilt left in him and his heart. Not only Lalu but all the soldiers are living examples of the cruel effects of war.

. . . with instantaneous resolution, the boy stopped low like a lion on the prowl and charged him with his bayonet, fixing him with such force that the butt of the rifle resounded him back on his chest. The man gnashed his teeth and groaned as he fell. Lalu groped for his victim, to finish him, murmuring: weep and wail . . . rape—mother! (162)

The soldiers are mute subalterns in this case waiting for their expected fates. The sepoys are powerless, incapable of offering anything other than mute resistance to the British system. We find many tragic deaths in the novel of humble men like Uncle Kirpu, Dhanno, Lachman, Kharku etc. The war in the novel does not produce heroes; it kills good men who might have lived anonymous lives in their own country. Lalu wants to live but seeing his companions die before his very eyes he is soaked in sorrow. The Indian innocent soldiers suffer a lot during the war. They commit suicide (Uncle Kirpu), get killed by their own army officers against the charges of disobedience (Hanumant Singh) and suffer most by the bullets of the enemy- the German Army (e.g Dhanno).

Anand criticizes war through the description of the miseries and sufferings that the soldiers actually undergo on the battle field. Lachman Singh dies fighting for the British Sarkar. Exclaimed Kirpa Ram "Havildar Lachman Singh is dead" (213). Old Kirpu's reaction to the news that Lachman Singh is to receive the posthumous award of the Indian Order of Merit is, "A life pension addressed to Havildar Lachman Singh, Village- Pool of Blood, Tehsil- Purgatory, District- Hell—, Wah, don't speak of it." (214)

Uncle Kirpu is so much tortured and defamed by his senior officers— Subah Singh and Lok Nath that he feels compelled to commit suicide. Lalu is rendered spell bound and shocked as he reads the notice:

Regimental Orders
69th Rifles

Lance- Naik Kirpa Ram of Number 2 company committed suicide last night at 2.30 a.m while he was detained in the guard room for insubordination to a superior officer on duty. (214)

Sepoy Kharku, Daddy Dhanno and many more are killed by the Germans. Lalu describes the pathetic scene of Dhanno's death as:

...the swollen dead face of Daddy Dhanno floating in the water, while the rest of his body was submerged with the weight of his equipment... his big bulging eyes looked up with the widened stare of a horrible and lonely death...From the half-open mouth of the old man it seemed that he had screamed or shouted for help before his voice was strangled by death. (216)

Lalu further adds to it saying "Perhaps there were other dead bodies which lay drowned farther ahead and it would be more difficult than ever to sleep a dreamless night near these 'open graves of the dead'. (216)



Anand achieved this end, that the war is a brutalizing and a destructive force where in an interview about the novel he states that "War is the greatest plague that can affect humanity. It destroys not only states and families but also international harmony and world peace."

CONCLUSION

Across the Black Waters is a significant novel in the history of India as well as the world, as it acquaints us with the ferocious atmosphere of the Great War and the rigorous hardships of the Indian soldiers and their exploitation by the Britishers. It focuses attention on the Indian situation, the conditions under which the peasants have joined the army and how such a situation is exploited by the English for their own benefit. It depicts the sufferings and agony of the Indian sepoys dragged into the unknown alien land for war. Towards the end of the novel Lalu questions the English rule of India, as he discovers in the horrors of the war that Indian and English goals are not and even can never be the same. The sepoys are mostly peasants expelled from their lands who find themselves in the battlefield land where the front is live with the exchange of gunfire and criticism, and the ground littered with the dead bodies of the dead and the dying. Thus, our great Indian sepoys, contributed very much in WWI even at the cost of their lives.

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