



A Study of War-Trauma in David Diop's Novel

At Night All Blood is Black

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Abstract

Through close reading of *At Night All Blood is Black* - Anna Moschovakis' translation of David Diop's French novel *Frère d'âme*, this paper intends to critically engage with Diop's depiction of the psychological toll of the violence of war on Senegalese soldiers representing the imperial French army in WW1. French generals utilise the Senegalese tirailleurs' unmatched bravery, brute strength, unquestioning loyalty, and habit of mutilating the bodies of opponents to terrorise the Germans. But when, after witnessing the painful death of his "more than brother" Mademba in war, the narrator-protagonist Alfa determines to subvert his commanding officer's tactic of calculated calibration of African savagery, the result is a gradual loss of sanity, due to the combined effects of trauma and survivor guilt. Rather than depicting a simplistic heroic portrait, Diop puts emphasis on the vulnerability of the Senegalese youth, dragged into a European battle where he undergoes a trauma-induced transformation. The paper undertakes qualitative research in the form of textual criticism, employing a critical study of the novel to show how the novel addresses several aspects of trauma, madness, colonialism, and the history of colonial conscripts in WW1.

Keywords: Memory, Survivor guilt, Trauma, First World War, Tirailleurs Senegalais.

Introduction

David Diop (born 1966) is a French novelist as well as a professor of French at the University of Pau. His novel titled *Frère d'âme* (2018) won the Prix Goncourt des lycéens award in the year 2018. The French original was translated into English by Anna Moschovakis and published with the title *At Night All Blood is Black* in 2020. It won the International Booker Prize in 2021. Diop was born to a Senegalese father and a French mother. His maternal great-

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grandfather was a First World War veteran. However, he did not share much about his war experiences with his family members. In an interview, Diop stated that while reading letters written by French soldiers enlisted as infantrymen during the First World War, he came across poignant and emotional portrayals of life in the trenches. However, while studying letters written by the Senegalese riflemen better known as the 'tirailleurs senegalais', he only came across practical issues such as financial concerns. Diop wanted to delve into the psychological impact of the Great War on the African soldiers fighting for the French empire.

In the novel *At Night All Blood is Black*, Diop presents a stream-of-consciousness monologue by a young Senegalese man hailing from a village near Saint Louis. This man named Alfa Ndiaye, had enlisted in the tirailleurs senegalais together with his 'more-than-brother' Mademba Diop, to join the colonial French army in action at a European front against the German army. However, Mademba is killed in a gruesome manner by a wounded German soldier feigning death, who surprised and ripped open Mademba's abdomen with one slash of his bayonet. Alfa found Mademba lying bloodied, his guts leaking out through his gaping abdominal wound, writhing in indescribable pain. Mademba pleaded with Alfa thrice to slit his throat and relieve his pain. But Alfa out of humanity refused to kill his 'more than brother' in cold blood. Mademba thereafter slowly but gradually moves towards an agonising death. When Mademba finally succumbs, Alfa ties up the gaping wound with his own shirt and carries Mademba's dead body on his shoulder to the trench, in order to ensure that the martyred Mademba can be provided with a proper burial. His compatriots laud his bravery and sense of duty in the face of adversity and risk of death by enemy gunfire.

But this devastating loss of his 'more than friend' changes Alfa completely. As he himself says, he unlearnt the humanity that was implanted in his mind by his parents, family, community, and school. Having been freed from the shackles of morality and humanitarian ethics Alfa decides to avenge the death (by disembowelment at the hands of a German soldier feigning death on the battlefield) of his 'more-than-brother' Mademba Diop by crawling surreptitiously over to the no man's land, surprising and capturing unsuspecting, blue-eyed German soldiers one at a time, slitting open the backs of their knees, tying and gagging them, before disembowelling them every time the whistle for an attack is sounded. When the German soldier, writhing in pain begs Alfa to end his suffering, Alfa slits his throat. Once the German soldier has perished, he neatly cuts off the soldier's hand and brings it (with the rifle it held) back to the trench.

His comrades - both black and white, congratulate and celebrate his feats, offer him food and tobacco. They also help him clean himself. This continues till the third hand. When he brings

back his fourth hand, he notices the reaction of his comrades change abruptly-they do not come near him. He realises that the smiles with which they are greeting him are false smiles. Alfa also notices that they are carefully avoiding any contact with his utensils as well as other goods. They avoid either attracting his attention or earning his ire because the rumor that he is a soldier-sorcerer feeding on the insides of soldiers-enemy or comrade, begins gaining traction. Even so, whenever Colonel Armand whistles for attack, he goes out to battle, but returns hours after the retreat whistle has been sounded, bringing back more severed hands as grotesque trophies of war. He preserves following the technique used that Gandiol fisherfolk traditionally follow to preserve dried fish.

When he has seven severed hands, Colonel Armand informs him of his decision to send Alfa for a month's rest to the rear, apparently considering his exertion. At the rehabilitation centre, his stream-of-consciousness monologue informs us as though he is recuperating from the traumatic effects of war under the empathetic treatment and care offered by Dr. Francois and his daughter- nurse Mademoiselle Francois. However, in the penultimate chapter, we find that his mental sanity completely deserts him, when in a deeply disorienting monologue he informs that he has raped and murdered Mademoiselle Francois. In the final chapter, the psychological integrity of Alfa undergoes further deterioration, as his voice merges with that of his 'more-than-brother' Mademba Diop.

The Tirailleurs Senegalais: History

To address the crisis in military recruitment, Governor Louis Faidherbe of Senegal in 1857 created the first permanent units of black African soldiers and named them 'Tirailleurs Senegalais'-a volunteer professional army that attracted recruits by combining material and ideological incentives, notably the promise of taking spoils of war (Echenberg, 1991, p. 15). Towards the end of the 19th century, when slavery had been abolished, thereby making the 'rachat' (Echenberg, 1991, p. 17) system untenable, Tirailleurs were recruited chiefly through a combination of three methods - paying enlistment bonus to the former slave masters, incorporating prisoners-of-war and porters, and as career-choice.

At the beginning of the 20th century, when imperial France felt the need to sharply increase the size of its military, to fight wars not only in the colonies but in Europe as well, voices demanding the amalgamation of coloured races in the French army began gaining momentum. Most prominent among them was General Charles Mangin, who in his 1910 book *La Force Noire* (meaning the Black Force) advocated the quick and massive use of colonial troops, in the event

of a war in Europe. Mangin might have imbibed the idea from French diplomat, Orientalist cum novelist Eugene Melchior de Vogue, who believed that the French empire was in decline and must be revitalised through the employment of vigorous troops from the African colonies of France-an idea that he elaborated in his 1899 novel *Les Morts qui parlent* (Echenberg, 1991, p. 28).

Mangin identified French West Africa as France's prospective reservoir for the recruitment of soldiers to bolster its army, hailing the male youth of this area as born soldiers, who were yet unspoiled by the difficult work of farm or factory, unlike their European counterparts. Besides, Mangin pointed out that African races possessed a less-developed nervous system that made them more immune to pain sensation (Echenberg, 1991, p. 29).

European Stereotypes about African People

A connected idea is that of the African as 'grand enfant' or big child. Europeans propagated the idea that Africans were simple, innocent, and gullible as compared to Europeans. Contemporary European popular culture was flooded with imagery that portrayed Africans as childish, gentle, and warm-hearted. Such images reinforced stereotypes of inferiority and stressed the need for enlightened guidance, besides justifying the disregard towards Africans' mental capacities shown by their white superiors. African soldiers' ethic of hard work, dogged determination, and unquestioning loyalty to their masters were encompassed under the image of the grand enfant (Branach-Kallas, 2021, p. 5).

Another unrelated and almost antithetical idea was the concept of Africans being 'demon noire', i.e.-black demons, who disregarded their own lives on the battlefield and cruelly mutilated their enemies, flouting European conventions of war (Branach-Kallas 5). It was this gory image of French West African soldiers savagely hacking their enemies on the battlefield, which the French army propagated, especially when fighting against other European colonial armies such as the Germans (Branach-Kallas, 2021, p. 5). Stereotypes of savagery and violence were utilised to strike terror in the minds of military opponents (Branach-Kallas, 2021, p. 4). The strategy was put to use in the colonial wars of conquest, as well as the First World War (Echenberg, 1991,p. 32).

Survivor Guilt and Trauma

Alfa Ndiyaé begins the narrative in retrospect; Mademba Diop had been eviscerated by a German soldier pretending to be dead on the battlefield. Mademba died a slow and painful death, entreating the narrator Alfa to slit his throat and relieve him from the pain. Alfa, deeming

it inhuman, could not commit the act and had to watch his 'more than brother' slowly succumb to a long and agonising death. Looking back at this slow and painful process, Alfa holds himself responsible for prolonging Mademba's agony. He thinks that it would have been more humane to have killed Mademba upon his first request, thus relieving him of the agony. Moreover, he blames himself for the fact that on the fateful day, Mademba charged out of the trenches upon Colonel Armand's sounding the whistle for an attack, precisely because Alfa had taunted Mademba and his clan for having the proud peacock as a totem (Diop, 2020, p. 28). Alfa comes to the realization that Mademba had been pushed to the point of proving himself as a brave warrior, especially after the taunts of Alfa; sadly, he died a gruesome death the same day.

Alfa says that he has allowed himself to think and ponder over things, which he would not even have dared to, before his world and value-system were completely reduced to topsy-turvy by the painful death of his 'more-than-brother' (Diop, 2020, p. 8). Once Mademba breathes his last, Alfa gathers Mademba's guts spread out on the ground and ties him up with his shirt, and then carries him on his shoulders to the trench, in full view of the enemy. This act of heroism and camaraderie earns him the 'croix-de-guerre' (Diop, 2020, p. 12). But Alfa is so deep in trauma that the award means nothing to him, probably he does not even realize it at the moment. The brutal event of war gets condensed into the scene of Mademba's death and returns to Alfa continuously, in the form of a flashback. This "image of ultimate horror" (Lifton, 1996, p. 142) constitutes the core of his survivor guilt and endows him with a sense of mission, as is common with survivors of trauma (Herman, 1992, p. 41). Consequently Alfa plunges into a spree of disembowelling blue-eyed German soldiers. As these enemy soldiers lie writhing in pain, they request Alfa to put an end to their misery and Alfa obliges, believing it an act of atonement, for his previous inability to do so in the case of his "more than brother". His frenzied imagination finds in this repetitive activity a just repayment of his "permanent and unpayable" debt to the dead (Lifton, 1996, p. 145). Through the abundant portrayal of "dismembered and pulverized bodies" Diop "creates a macabre poetics of excess" (Branach-Kallas, 2021, p. 6) reflecting Alfa's profound trauma and his unwitting re-enactment of the stereotypes associated with savagery.

Playing the Savage

Notwithstanding the impact that the scene of Mademba's brutal death has on Alfa, it must be understood that his trauma also stems from the othering of African soldiers by their French superiors on the battlefield. Drawing on General Mangin's theories, Captain Armand hails the 'Chocolat soldiers' as a "force of nature" (Diop, 2020, p. 17)- a fact that has purportedly terrorized the enemy German camp. Utilising the enthusiasm among the African soldiers upon

hearing this, which is visible from their facial expressions, Captain Armand reassures them that France takes note and remains ever-indebted to the African soldiers for their unwavering commitment to the war effort (Diop, 2020, p. 14). Whereas African savagery was used on the one hand to justify the European colonisation of Africa and its civilising mission, a calibrated use of the same was celebrated by the French military captain. Alfa notes that this reassurance imbues his comrades with enthusiasm. Whenever Captain Armand sounds the whistle to attack, they “sprint on to the battlefield to be beautifully massacred while screaming like madmen, regulation rifle in the left hand and savage machete in the right” (Diop, 2020, p. 14).

But Alfa is unwilling to allow Captain Armand in particular and France in general to domesticate his potential for savagery, unlike his fellow African soldiers. Therefore, on Captain Armand’s sounding of the whistle for attack, he rushes out to battle like his comrades, but unlike them, he does not return even after the whistle for retreat is sounded. On the contrary, his real battle begins after the retreat; he stealthily attacks, disembowels, kills, and maims an unsuspecting German soldier every time, returning with his severed hand. Initially, Alfa’s French Captain as well as his African comrades celebrate his heroics. But soon, his comrades begin expressing their fear of him, believing him to be a soldier-sorcerer, a ‘demm’. Captain Armand, while announcing his decision to send Alfa for a month’s rest and recuperation, states that Alfa’s actions defy “the civilities of war” (Diop, 2020, p. 75).

Alfa shows remarkable maturity in seeing through the manipulative colonial tactics that label African soldiers as ‘grand enfant’. His decision to abstain from playing the savage at Captain Armand’s will is clearly an appropriation of colonial ideology, while resisting absorption in the same (Ashcroft, 2001, p.126). But by brutally killing and mutilating blue-eyed German soldiers, Alfa positions himself in the same stereotype, which is why not only the African comrades but also Captain Armand celebrates Alfa’s early heroics.

But as Alfa keeps flouting Captain Armand’s retreat signals, staying back to disembowel, kill, and maim more German soldiers, the African Alfa’s savage instinct goes out of European Armand’s control. Thus, the same Armand who had been happy to employ controlled savagery of his African soldiers against the Germans, decides to lay off Alfa from front duty citing his actions as breaching the code of “civilities of war”(Diop, 2020, p. 75). By transgressing the colonial expectation of savagery and choosing to play the savage at his own will, Alfa questions European civilisation and reveals its fallacy. However, the trauma that lay at the heart of this wilful role-play, brought about in the wake of a European war that expends African soldiers as cannon

fodder, is so profoundly traumatic that he cannot come out of its clutches. On the contrary, he sinks irretrievably into its mire and completely loses his sanity.

Being Identified as the ‘Demm’

The ‘demm’ or soldier-sorcerer refers to a “witch, sorcerer, or mysterious human” (Kilroy-Marac, 2019, pp. 77-79) who feeds on human souls or their vital energies. Trauma survivors, suffering from extreme depersonalisation, might face ostracization from society, feeling that they are treated as “monstrous, undesirable, and untouchable” by others. (Branach-Kallas, 2021, p. 9). In African culture, this translates into one’s identification with the ‘demm’. However, Alfa himself finds the actions of Captain Armand worthy of drawing a comparison with the figure of the ‘demm’: “The captain is a devourer of souls. I know, I understand that captain Armand was a demm who needed his wife, war, to survive, just the way she needed a husband like him to support her” (Diop, 2020, p. 75).

Conclusion

It must be stated that through the portrayal of his protagonist Alfa Ndiaye, Diop clearly refutes both the opposing claims regarding the African—he is neither the ‘grand enfant’ nor the ‘demon noire’. The European Armand who chalks out the boundaries of civility to the supposedly savage Alfa, is able to quell a mutiny in his regiment by offering the mutineers as cannon fodder. But the purported savage Alfa could not bring himself to finish off his more than brother when the latter was writhing in pain - which proves Alfa’s innate humanity. Alfa questions the foundational fallacy behind this logic which allows one to execute one’s own soldiers mercilessly, whereas mutilating opponent soldiers makes it an act of barbarism outside the realm of civility. Clearly, at this point, it seems that Alfa is able to raise this question because of his deeply rooted understanding of humanity and civilisation. His decision to defy Captain Armand’s orders and play the savage at his own will is proof of the same. But the very same action jeopardises his status and puts him back in the category of savage, by the no-less barbaric European Captain.

Diop avoids falling prey to another significant dichotomy—that of the good colonised vis-à-vis the bad coloniser. The actions of Alfa at the rehabilitation centre—namely the act of raping and strangulating to death the nurse Mademoiselle Francois under the delusion that she sexually desires him proves beyond a doubt how war has completely made a savage out of him, suppressing or erasing the humane qualities innate in him.

Diop's novel stands as an indictment of war itself, by poignantly portraying the complex transformation of a lively, sensitive African youth into a mindless agent and simultaneously victim of war, on whom deep-rooted trauma leaves behind an indelible imprint.

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