



# Retrospective Narrative and Post Traumatic Behavior Change in David Diop's *At Night All Blood is Black*

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## Abstract :

The Research Article emphasizes the retrospective nature of narration used in the novel, "At Night All Blood is Black" written by David Diop. Also, it analyses the Behavioral change of the major protagonist of the novel, Alfa Ndiaye after the post traumatic death of his friend, Mademba Diop. The novel is so far analyzed with regard to various concepts like polemic nature between French and German and war traumas. However, the retrospective narrative methodology found in the text is not widely acknowledged. Thus, The Retrospective narrative methodology and behavioral change after post trauma of the protagonist is brought to light by analyzing the various incidents with regard to the novel.

Keywords: Retrospective narrative, Post trauma, Behavior Change.

David Diop is a renowned Contemporary French Novelist. He is the winner of the 2021 International Booker Prize along with his translator, Anna Moschovakis. His second French work, *Frère d'âme*, translated as "At Night all the Blood is Black" by Anna Moschovakis won him the International Booker Prize. The novel speaks about the war experiences of Senegalese Tirailleurs against the German army and the brutality faced by them.

The novel portrays the life of the major protagonist, Alfa Ndiaye, in the first person narrative.

"I, Alfa Ndiaye, son of the old, old man, I understand, I shouldn't have." (Diop 3)

Retrospective narrative refers to the type of narration wherein the narrator speaks about the part of his/her life which has happened in the past. The story which is being narrated by the character does not happen in the present or in the future but has already happened in the past of his/her life. A retrospective narrative used by the narrator maybe subjective as the readers are only provided with the narrator's point of view. The novel, *At night all blood is black* follows the First person retrospective narrative. The following are the incidents from the novel which prove the retrospective nature of narration.

Initially, the novel begins with the protagonist, Alfa Ndiaye regretting his action of not killing his friend and more than a brother, Mademba Diop when he was dying in the war. Mademba requested and begged his friend, Alfa to kill him as he was suffering terribly with pain from the wounds of the war. He cried to Alfa and begged him to finish him off. But Alfa was not ready to kill him then but later regrets after Mademba's death. The following are the words of Alfa after he realises his action of not killing Mademba as a serious mistake. The lines are in the nature of first-person retrospective narrative.

“Ah, Mademba! How I've regretted not killing you on the morning of the battle, while you were still asking me nicely, as a friend, with a smile in your voice!” (Diop 6)

Mademba was already dead when the narrator Alfa was speaking these lines. He thinks about his past actions of not killing his friend and this becomes a first-person retrospective narration.

Alfa doesn't limit his memories to the death of Mademba Diop alone but also, he narrates about various other incidents that he has witnessed in the trench. He speaks about Jean Baptiste, another close friend next to Mademba. It was only Jean who supported Alfa while others didn't. Jean encouraged Alfa and also made fun at the severed hand that Alfa brought back to the trench. The liveliness and the happiness that Jean showered over the trench soon lost into absolute silence and pallidness after his death. Jean Baptiste provoked the enemies by using the severed hand that was brought by Alfa. His provoking was reasoned by Alfa that Jean wanted to attract the enemies so that he could die that day. Alfa further says a perfumed letter to be the reason for his need to die. The readers are brought to know about Jean Baptiste by the retrospective narrative of Alfa.

“And that idiot Jean Baptiste, who'd made it clear that he wanted to die at any cost, did all he could to facilitate the task” (Diop 58)

The followed narration by Alfa says his point of view of Jean's death and the readers are tuned according to the perception of Alfa which is highly subjective in nature.

In the due course of the novel, the character Fary Thiam is introduced by Alfa when he speaks about his sensual pleasure. Alfa speaks about the night before his departure to the war when Fary took him to the little forest of Ebony trees. The narrator gives a vivid picture depiction of that night. Fary was the first one to have given sexual pleasure to the narrator and he considers it as gift that Fary gave him before he headed towards the war. Alfa reasons again from his point of view that Fary did that as she might have believed that she could never see him again in their life or that Alfa should know the feeling to be a man which Fary believed would have come from their sexual pleasure. The readers would never know the real reason that Fary thought to have believed but they are driven towards the point of view given by Alfa. The incidents that Alfa witnessed in his Gandiol village before going to the war is again relived to the readers through his retrospective narrative. He says about the all nightery that they planned in Mademba's house and the way Fary chose him over Mademba. There could have happened many memorable incidents with Alfa's various adult aged friends but he chose only the moments with Fary to be narrated to the readers. As that evening was impactful in his life only because of Fary and so the need for Alfa to centre on Fary could be easily understood by the readers.

“We had lived sixteen years and we all wanted Fary Thiam, though she wasn't the most beautiful. And Fary Thiam chose me from among everyone” (Diop 91)

The above quoted lines of Alfa shows his elated state when Fary chose him over the other guys of Gandiol especially Mademba. Though the incident has happened in the past, when Alfa narrates that part of his life, he brings life to the words with his feelings. It is a retrospective narrative.

The greatest evidence that the text follows a retrospective narrative is the part of the text where Alfa speaks about his family members in Gandiol. The part of narration that Alfa gives on his mother, Penndo and his father is very detailed. He starts with his grandfather, a Fula Shepherd who used to walk his herd across the fields of his father. The hospitality given by Alfa's father made Yoro Ba to marry off his daughter, Penndo to Alfa's father. Yoro Ba and his five sons always visited Gandiol every year. But after seven years of Penndo's marriage and six years after Alfa's birth, the Fula herd stopped returning to Gandiol. This made Penndo miserable and restless over not knowing the state of her family. When Alfa was at the age of nine,

his father told Penndo to leave to look for Yoro Ba. Alfa's father decided to let Penndo leave as he was afraid that she would die due to her despairs. The young Alfa is at peak of mixed emotions when his mother decides to leave him to search for Yoro Ba. The following lines describes the feeling of Alfa as his mother left him.

“One Evening, not long before her departure, Penndo Ba, my mother, took me in her my arms. She said to me, in her musical language, Fulfulde, which I no longer understand, that I was a big boy, that I should be able to listen to her reasons. She needed to know what had happened to my grandfather, to my uncles and their herd. We never abandon those who gave us life. Once she knew, she would return: she would never abandon the one she had given life. God's truth, my mother's words both helped me and hurt me. She held me in her arms and she said nothing more.” (Diop 101)

The above quoted lines of Alfa shows the pain that he underwent when his mother chose to leave him to search for his father. He seems to understand the reason but struggles to be separated from his mother. Later, Alfa says his mother was not reported of being seen beyond the village of Mboyo. He was then told that his mother would have been kidnapped by the Moorish horseman as their slaves. The readers are able to know about the past life of Alfa and the way his father and mother were a part of his childhood life through his retrospective narration. Hence the text follows the first person retrospective narrative.

The post traumatic behavior change is evident in David Diop's “At night all the blood is black” through the character, Alfa Ndiaye .

Human's mind can be affected by various traumatic factors. The death of Mademba Diop in the novel, “At Night all the blood is black” affects the mind and behaviour of his friend, Alfa Ndiaye. The stress he undergoes after Mademba's death could be very well seen reflected in his behaviour. In addition to the death of Mademba, Alfa also suffers from the guilt that he didn't kill Mademba when he was being begged to do so by Mademba himself. This guilty nature engulfing his mental state can be seen through the following narration made by Alfa himself.

“So here we are. Since I decided to think for myself, not to forbid myself any subject, I have come to understand that it wasn't the blue-eyed enemy from the other side who killed Mademba. It's me. I know, I

understand why I didn't kill Mademba Diop when he begged me to. 'You cant kill a man twice,' a very, very quiet voice in my mind must have murmured to me." (Diop 42)

His mind thinks a lot of reasons to blame himself for his friend's death. He soon believes that the humiliation that he did on the day of war calling Mademba not brave by his totem is the reason for Mademba's death. If Alfa didn't have insinuated Mademba, he wouldn't have gone to the war ferociously to prove his bravery and then die in the hands of his enemy. These thoughts which are all a result of post-traumatic stress makes him believe that he is a murderer.

After the death of Mademba, Alfa's behaviour completely changes. He no longer felt to be humane and the post-traumatic stress that he underwent which was further added with the guilt he carried of not having killed Mademba when he was begging him to, made him go out of his logical mind. Every evening, Alfa went to the enemy trench and killed a soldier inhumanly and brought back a hand to his trench as a token of victory. When he attacked the soldiers, he would kill them before they could beg for their death instead of the Torment they were afflicted with. This action of him killing the enemies before they could beg for their death gave him a relief that he was acting out of humanity.

"Then I pull back a little and I think about Mademba Diop. And each time I hear him in my head begging me to slit his throat and I think that I was inhuman enough to let him beg me three times. What I didn't do for my friend I can do for my enemy. Out of humanity." (Diop 20)

The action of severing the enemy hand soon became Alfa's natural habit and he started to repeat the terrible mistake again and again until his commander sent him to Rear to take rest out of combatant land. He was seen as a devour of death and his actions also proved to be out of humanity and insane. He even didn't want to get rid of the severed hands and tried to preserve them. Alfa before the death of Mademba was more logical and normal but that completely changed after his witnessing of Mademba's death. Therefore, the retrospective narrative and the post traumatic behaviour change can be very well seen in the novel "At night all the blood is black" by David Diop through the protagonist, Alfa Ndiaye.

## References

Diop, David. *At Night All Blood is Black*. Translated by Anna Moschovakis. Pushkin Press, 2021.