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## A CRITICAL STUDY OF DAVID DIOP'S 'AT NIGHT ALL BLOOD IS BLACK'

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**Abstract:** 'At Night All Blood Is Black' is a novel by French author David Diop, translated into English by Anna Moschovakis that won the 2021 International Booker Prize. The novel is set during World War I, which depicts the unheard tales of the Senegalese tirailleurs fighting for France. It is a heart-wrenching story of friendship, family, and the terrors of war. Alfa Ndiaye and his "more than brother" Mademba Diop are Senegalese tirailleurs who are fighting for France. This research paper critically analyses the novel so as to plunge deep into the psychological realms of Alfa Ndiaye's personality. It showcases that how the war itself has had bitter consequences on the people and then witnessing the death of someone was so dreadful. The novel exhibits the very efforts of the Senegalese soldiers who performed their duty in the war out of the madness and therefore this research paper is an effort to highlight the hardships, and the bloodiest nights of the war.

**Keywords-** Friendship, Family, Terrors of war, Senegalese tirailleurs, Wrenches, Severed

'At Night All Blood Is Black' is a novel by French author David Diop, translated into English by Anna Moschovakis that won the 2021 International Booker Prize. The novel is set during World War I, which depicts the unheard tales of the Senegalese tirailleurs fighting for France. It is a heart-wrenching story of friendship, family, and the terrors of war.

Alfa Ndiaye and his "more than brother" Mademba Diop are Senegalese tirailleurs who are fighting for France. The first chapter opens with the protagonist, Alfa Ndiaye who is regretting not listening to his friend Mademba Diop who asked him to spare the agony by killing him at once, while he was at the last stage of his life. "Three times he asked me to finish him off, three times I refused." (Diop ch.1) and this denying of Ndiaye was the reason that he became what he didn't want to be. The witnessing of Mademba's death has made Alfa a completely different personality which is quite impeccably explored throughout the chapters of the novel.

The readers are compelled to plunge deep into the psychological realms of Alfa Ndiaye's personality. The war itself has had bitter consequences on the people and then witnessing the death of someone who is so dreadful. The novel exhibits the very efforts of the Senegalese soldiers who performed their duty in the war out of the madness. Alfa Ndiaye thinks that "I shouldn't have let you suffer like an old solitary lion, eaten alive by hyenas, its insides turned out." He regrets his decision which he took because he was thinking about his parents and God whom he has to answer for his deeds. The repetition of phrases like "God's truth", "I know, I understand" makes the text look more realistic and also provides us with an insight into the very nature of language spoken by a Senegalese, Alpha Ndiaye who emerges as a personality of his mindset, who thinks and builds his perspective no matter what. He is capable of reminding his readers about the intensity of burden that he has been confronting all along. He smiles at people, and they smile back, this is the incongruity of war and Alpha says that these people know nothing about what Alpha is thinking about them or what all he has been suffering since his friend's death.

Moreover, at certain points, the novel uncovers the unpleasant reality of the war where women were taken as mere objects. In the phrase “Seen from a distance, our trench looked to me like the slightly parted lips of an immense woman’s sex” (Diop ch.2) where trench symbolizes the sex organs of women as alluded to by Alfa who has been thinking in his way by deciphering things differently. Although the novel is not just about war, it is also about the friendship, family, and the guilty conscience of the protagonist that runs throughout the novel. The description of the Mademba’s death is so agonizing and the diction used to depict the subtleties make it look more realistic to experience. As Alfa Ndiaye says, “I walked for a long time through the fissures in the earth, carrying Mademba, heavy like a sleeping child, in my arms.” (Diop ch.2) it touches the very embodiment of the novel.

The death of Mademba Diop has made Alfa Ndiaye so stubborn that he no longer wants to listen to anyone. He says, “I was now free to listen no longer, to no longer obey the voices that command us not to be human when we must.” (Diop ch.2). There are a lot of thoughts that have been revealed in the next few chapters of the novel about Alfa, unequivocally we come to know about his unconscious mind and what all he has constrained himself to think about. His perspective about Captain Armand makes us realize the reality of Captain’s personality and the reality of the war where these soldiers were propelled to such an extent, that they can embrace the death, fighting like it is a competition, which is the actual irony reflected in the novel. Alfa Ndiaye says, that “I understand the true meaning of the captain’s words.” when he said:

You, the Chocolats of black Africa, are naturally the bravest of the brave. France admires you and is grateful... so they love to sprint onto the battlefield to be beautifully massacred while screaming like madmen, regulation rifle in the left hand and a savage machete in the right (Diop ch.3).

But for Alfa Ndiaye who became a savage intentionally, seek for absolution and satisfaction for himself, by executing a horrific rite. Every night, he would cross enemy lines into "no man's land" to find and murder a blue-eyed German soldier in the same way that his friend had died, and he would return to the trench with the German's severed hand. He says:

I slash the backs of his knees. He just crumples. So, I disarm him, then I gag him. I tie his hands behind his back...I turn his face toward mine and I watch him die a little, then I slit his throat, cleanly, humanely. At night, all blood is black (Diop ch.3).

The above phrase exposes Alfa's savage killing of those soldiers to recreate Mademba Diop's death. The novel's central subject is also exposed, and it perfectly encapsulates the idea that no matter what race, gender, or religion you belong to, blood will always remain black in the granite sky. The black blood also symbolizes the cruelty of war, the gloom, immobility, and lifelessness that accompany it.

As the novel progresses, we experience that Alfa Ndiaye’s demeanour alter, and the way people started spreading rumors about him. At first, the trench mates used to look at Alfa’s killing of the soldiers with admiration as Alfa says, “They saved food for me, they saved bits of tobacco.” But later after the fourth severed hand, the rumors started spreading that Alpha Ndiaye is “a sorcerer, a devourer of people’s insides, a dëmm.” After the seventh severed hand, they all had enough, and they were afraid of Alpha. Even Captain Armand was afraid because of the severed hands, and he says to Alfa:

Go rest for a month at the Rear and return refreshed and ready for combat. But you have to promise me that when you get back, you’ll stop mutilating the enemy, understood? You will content yourself with killing them, not mutilating them. The civilities of war forbid it (Diop ch.13).

Though he has not shown explicitly, his actions justify his thought process as if he has become insane at his friend’s death, he even forces himself to believe that Mademba died because he mocked his totem and ugliness and he exclaims “It’s because of totems, because of our joking relationship and because of me, that Mademba Diop was disemboweled by a half-dead, blue-eyed enemy on that day.” He is so guilty from inside that he does not know what he can just do, to correct it. In the next few chapters, we find Alfa much more collective, and contemplative as he recounts about his past life when he reaches the recuperating center as was sent by Captain Armand. His perspective and thoughts, as well as his family background, are revealed as the narrative moves from conscious to subconscious. In the rear, the daughter of Doctor Francois was attracted towards Alfa as he says, “with her matching blue eyes that she found me very handsome from top to bottom.” Alfa knew that he is handsome as he says:

God’s truth, I know I’m handsome, everyone’s eyes tell me so. Blue eyes and black ones, women’s eyes and men’s. Fary Thiam’s eyes told me so, as did those of all the women of Grandiol, whatever their age (Diop ch.15).

Here we learn about Alfa Ndiaye’s physical appearance, which he takes pride in, and his connection with Fary Thiam the daughter of Abdou Thiam, the chief of Grandiol.

The recuperating center in the novel symbolizes holy water that can cure everything including the sins and burdens. Alpha Ndiaye talks about Doctor Francois who was looking after these soldiers, he says, "His piercing, matching blue eyes are scrutinizing us in order to save our minds. I know, I understand that our drawings are there to help him wash our minds clean of the filth of war." (Diop ch.16)

Alfa Ndiaye who didn't know French drew few things on paper and each of these drawings symbolizes the very burden in his mind and his thought process. Moreover, with each of the drawings, he escapes into his past and recounts the events in their entirety. The first drawing that Alfa made was of his beautiful mother Penndo Ba who was the third wife of Alfa's father. We are then informed that how she went to look for her family and was kidnapped as Alfa says, "Surely Badara and Penndo had both been kidnapped, just outside Mboyo, by a dozen Moorish horsemen, the traces of whom villagers had noticed on the riverbanks." (Diop ch.16).

We then come to know that the second drawing that was made for Doctor François was a portrait of Mademba whom he refers to as "my friend, my more than brother" and he reveals that "This drawing was less beautiful. Not because it was less successful, but because Mademba was ugly." (Diop ch.17). Through each of these phrases, we dive deep into the relation and bond of friendship between Alpha and Mademba. The core of these phrases indicates Alfa's honesty, since he has shared his genuine feelings about others, particularly about his friend and family. The third drawing that Alfa made was of the seven severed hands, he says:

I drew them so that I could see them, the way they were when I cut them off... God's truth, I even took care to draw each hair on their backs, their black nails, the more or less successful cuts across their wrists (Diop ch.20).

These minute details add life to the text. Alfa gets rid of those seven hands that were like a burden on his mind and he says:

My seven hands were fury, were vengeance, were the madness of war. I no longer wanted to see the fury and the madness of war, the same way my captain could no longer tolerate seeing my seven hands in the trench. So, one evening I decided to bury them (Diop ch.20).

These drawings suggest the release of all the burdens that Alfa was holding to himself he says, "to cleanse the insides of my head with big buckets of mystical water, I drew my seven hands." By drawing the seven hands it seems that Alfa has confessed his sins as he further says, "My seven hands spoke, they confessed all to my judges. God's truth, I know, I understand that my drawings denounced me." (Diop ch.20).

It won't be wrong to say that David Diop has successfully portrayed Alfa Ndiaye with all intensity as the protagonist himself reveals in the speeches about his true self, his insanity, his perception of war, his guilt and a kind of revenge and then trying to rehabilitate life all this leads us to experience his journey. However, the ending of the novel is quite ambiguous with multiple threads leading to questions for which one must restart reading the novel. As we come across a whole new narrative with a completely different voice as if Mademba Diop has taken rebirth and has entered the body of Alfa Ndiaye with his soul as David Diop writes "God's truth, I swear to you that now, whenever I think of us, he is me and I am him." (Diop ch.25).

We come across many questions like, Has Alfa Ndiaye lost his conscience? Or has he really become the devourer of the soul? When he says, "God's truth, I thrust into her womb as if to disembowel her. God's truth, I tasted blood in my mouth, all of a sudden. God's truth, I didn't understand why." (Diop ch.22).

All this gives rise to multiple questions, we also think at once that is Mademba Diop still alive? This is the brilliance of David Diop's narrative technique who has left no stones unturned in exploring the horrors of the war with scenes of boyhood in the Senegalese countryside and suggesting the readers with viewpoints of the protagonist. At the end of the novel, we come across a different narrative in a state of mental and physical confusion about existence. This ambiguity itself suggests the intensity of disruption in the mind of the soldiers during the war.

Furthermore, the final section of the novel can be interpreted differently as it suggests multiple meanings and one of them is that Alpha who narrates the story of the lion-sorcerer is imagining himself to be dead as per the story and Mademba Diop saved the fickle princess and is thereby here with Mademoiselle Francois. The sorcerer's tale collides with reality, and we end up questioning that whether Alfa has lost his conscience or if he is giving Mademba a chance to experience the beautiful body of the women. Twice at the end, we find the sex scene which is quite ambiguous, first from Alfa Ndiaye's perspective and the second time from the perspective of Mademba Diop.

Altogether David Diop has skillfully entrusted the character of Alfa Ndiaye with all the horrors and miseries of war. The novel immerses us in the condition of the Senegalese tirailleurs fighting for France and their relative treatment in those trenches. The death of millions of soldiers during the war justifies the very title of the novel. The black color of the blood also symbolizes the forgotten sacrifices of the soldiers throughout history, they are not as fresh as the red color of the blood which David Diop has attempted to resurrect in the novel. We experience the journey of Alfa Ndiaye from losing his friend to becoming a “devourer of the soul” as the trench-mates said. The translation of the novel by Anna Moschovakis has been successful as she renders Alfa’s strangeness to the English language. In the final section of the novel, the translation itself comes in the center as Anna Moschovakis writes:

To translate is never simple. To translate is to betray at the borders, it’s to cheat, it’s to trade one sentence for another. To translate is one of the only human activities in which one is required to lie about the details to convey the truth at large (Diop ch.24).

Here we question ourselves about who and what is being translated, probably one interpretation suggests that Alfa Ndiaye fainted out after drawing those seven hands and now as he wakes up, he couldn’t recall anything, and he is murmuring in his half-sleep few things in Senegal which is being translated by some translator as it is written:

The translator hesitated, intimidated by the angry, worried looks being shot his way. He cleared his throat and answered the uniforms in a small, nearly inaudible voice:

“He said that he is both death and life.” (Diop ch.24).

This also suggests how the white man translates and interpret the tales of the unheard Senegalese soldiers and thereby interpreting the image of horror and war according to them. Even though the ending is mystical and transcendental still it encourages the reader to reflect about the bloody war in human history whose ramifications have yet to dissipate. The novel is extraordinary as it has the quality of rendering its readers to experience the bloodiest night in which ‘all blood is black’.

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