

War and Magic Realism in David Diop's *At Night All Blood is Black***Dr Sawant Singh Manto**Asst. Prof in English
Khalsa College Amritsar**Abstract**

War creates illusion. It is often seen that imaginary expectations are build up in the minds of general public and soldiers to gain support and drive them into unsettling situations. There is no victors or vanquished in wars. Wars are simple destructive mechanisms. Diop's award winning novel shows a war situation during the first world war when colonial powers took the innocent slave nations to wars in which they had no role to play. They were made scapegoats to fight wars for their masters. The effect of wars on them can be easily seen in the story where the protagonist loses everything including the peace of his mind to please his masters. The illusion of war makes them fight and kill and turn into monsters and 'demms'. Therefore the futility of fighting wars continues to the present days killing many innocent souls on both sides.

Keywords: War, illusion, magic realism, heroism, delusion

War is the father of all and the king of all. It is we poor mortals who are war's unhappy children, and its subjects.

Heraclitus of Ephesus

War is an act of violence intended to compel our opponents to fulfil our will says Carl Von Clausewitz in his canonical work *On War*. It is act by which a country or a state compels a person or a country to submit to its norms. It is often said that there are two motives of war instinctive hostility and hostile intentions. But these are not the only reasons for leading the countries to war. There have been absurd reasons like a football match led to war between Honduras and El Salvador in July 1969.

Yet there is a whole lot more than political ambitions, hostile relations, which have led countries to war. But more important than fighting war is the will of people involved in war. It can be said that the general population may be more than willing to actively participate in war. But the question arises is the willingness of population ever taken into account. The patriotic feelings of a nation may be ignited to make the motive more judicious. War is never a pastime. It is a serious means for a serious object. But it always has a political condition, political motive and is a political act. But the paradox is that war continues to create illusion in the minds of soldiers, civilians as well as leaders that greater good will come out of it. It is shown to be an act of cleaning the 'enemy' but they also lose their own population. Therefore the concept of war and its motives remain an enigma but the loss is immense beyond any repair.

David Diop is a French novelist who is a specialist in French and African literature. He is born to a French mother and a Senegal father. He spent most of his childhood in Senegal. He received fame and recognition after his second novel *At Night All Blood is Black* won 2021 International Booker Prize. The story was inspired by his great grand father who served the French Army during WW I. The trauma of being in the battlefield and watching his comrades fight and die made it so traumatic that he never said anything to his wife or to my mother about his experience. Therefore David showed interest in the intimacy with war. The French deployed over 1,35,000 African rifle men in WW1. Over 30,000 were killed. But the surprising part is that there is no reference to their plight during or after the war. They had become the 'stunned silence of soldiers. Diop himself claims "it's the war that's savage, not the soldiers".

At Night All Blood is Black is narrated by Alfa Ndiaye, who has enlisted in the French army in WWI to fight as a *Chocolat*, as recruits from the African colonies were called, alongside white French soldiers. His 'more-than-brother', Mademba Diop, joins him, and is mortally wounded during battle. Alfa, as a madman, takes readers on a vertiginous tour of war and home, swinging between reporting that feels at once accurate and delusional. His verbal tic, 'God's truth', asserts credibility for an unreliable narrator who is far from credible. According to Alfa, "each thing is a double"(Diop 67) a theme that is a through line of the book, beyond his relationship with his "more-than-brother" Mademba. Alfa's mother, the only daughter of an itinerant herder and Alfa's father's fourth and final wife, is "a source of joy and then of pain." (103) She comes to love his father as her opposite: "He was as old as

an immutable landscape, she was young like the changing sky.” (103). When Alfa is nine, his father urges her to go in search of her lost family. “We never abandon those who gave us life,” (101) she tells Alfa, then abandons him.

In the novel, Alfa Ndiaya is the main character, a soldier who is fighting a war, begins the novel with these words ‘ I know, I understand, I shouldn’t have done it ‘(3)

This shows the feeling of guilt within him of having fought a conflict with no results. He feels that no one will understand the kind of feeling he went through. “They won’t imagine what I have thought, what I have done . The depth to which the war drove me”. He refers to war as “ the honor of appearance”(4). He had been influenced by his more than brother’s opinion that they should fight for the ‘honour’ of their ‘motherland’. Even his commander filled him with such boasting “you , the choicest of Black Africa, are naturally , the bravest of the brave...”(14)

He has understood the real meaning and value of war. He comes to realize the futility of war. How war creates hollowness in the mind of its citizens and soldiers?

In this poem by Bob Dylan, an American poet and song writer, writes

And I couldn’t help but think,
through the thunder rolling and stink
That I was just a puppet in a play
And through the roar and smoke,
this string is finally broke
And a cannonball blew my eyes away”

This shows how people are befooled into believing that everything is happening in the world for a just cause. Man cannot think about fighting for an unjust cause. They will never fight for such a cause. Therefore they are made to believe that they have fought for a just cause. When in reality there is no just or unjust cause. All people are fighting for a cause which they never really understand.

The illusion war creates in the minds of the people and soldier alike. They are made to believe that they are part of a higher glory. Alfa after his ordeal keeps on reminding that those voices should not be heard which “ command us not to be human.”(11) Wilfred Owens , a poet, who fought and died during world war 1 described the real situation in these lines

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
 To children ardent for some desperate glory,
 The old Lie:
Dulce et decorum est Pro patria mori.
 (‘it is sweet and fitting to die for one’s country’)
 Wilfred Owen’s ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’

The same kind of glory was enshrined in the mind of Alfa when he enrolled in the war. He was fighting for glory, honor, justice and brotherhood. It was when he lost his dear friend, his ‘more than brother’ Mademba Diop. He now realises that he had lost his dear brother to an idea which does not really matter at all. The war mongers do not want people to think. “ I had become their totem”(17) War had created in him feelings of “ panicked fear of death, of savagery, of rape, of cannibalism”(19). He began to feel that cannibalism had begun to grow within him. He had lost his dear one and the last moments had a special way “I lie down next to him, I turn his face towards mine and I watch him die a little, then I slit his throat , cleanly, humanly...”(21)

Though Alfa claims to write that he slit the throat of his dear ‘more than brother’, in reality he could not do so. War creates illusion in the mind of those participating in it. Alfa belonged to one of the poorest parts of the world where people find it difficult to make ends meet. The colonial powers took control of these regions. They enrolled the young men to fight for their ‘just’ causes. Sometimes these wars were fought to ‘civilize’ the population of their own countries. Other times, the wars were to fight for ‘greater good’ of humanity. The war always was for a cause. It was difficult for the ‘uncivilized’ soldiers and citizens to say ‘no ‘to these ‘civilizing missions’. The irony was that these wars had no real motive for the natives. They were made to believe that they were on the right side of justice fighting for right cause. But this illusion did not remain for long on the battlefield. Alfa faces the challenge to his freedom by his act of savagery after the death of Mademba. Alfa claims “ They make us believe that I have freedom to think whatever I want to think but people don’t want me to think(15)”. Therefore this shows how war creates illusion of fight for freedom, honour and dignity for the soldiers. But they are mere tools.

The writer does show that there is still some humanness present in the soldiers. This shows that war not only creates bitterness but also brotherhood among the various races. People from diverse background overcome their differences of race, caste, class etc to be together in happiness and sadness. One of the friend that Alfa make in his sojourn is Jean Baptiste, a Frenchman among the chocolates'. Alfa introduces him as the only white friend in the trench.(52)The bonds grows stronger and stronger with both sharing tobacco, Bread and Laughter. Baptiste had stolen the first severed hand from Alfa. But Alfa did not say any word to him. He saw him as a friend. He was the only one to console him after the death of his closest friend. The coming of a perfumed letter changes the chemistry between the two. The letter turns out to be a provocateur (56) for Jean Baptiste. He makes crude gestures towards enemy soldiers thinking that this would distract them. But this provocation added insult to injury. He was killed by an enemy sniper.

Diop makes the comparison between the difference in attitude of the commanders and the soldiers. The commanders are more concerned about saving their pensions than the safety of their soldiers. There are two incidents in the novel which point to the attitude of the commanders. The first was a small rebellion by a group of soldiers. They decided to disobey the commander's orders because they had lost faith in him. " ... we don't want to obey your whistle of death..."(70). At first it seemed that a large number of deserters had joined the ranks. But only seven came out in the end. The commander ordered them to be tied behind their backs and make them face the enemies. He also told them that he would write to the authorities and the families how they had deserted their country. " nothing for your wives, nothing for your families"(71). This shows how the commanders had a free hand to take any kind of action against the deserters in the war.

The commander is shown to be "a small man with matching black eyes drowning in continuous rage"(75). For Alfa he is "devourer of souls"(75). He would do anything to go to war, to "make love to war"(75). He saw Alfa as a challenge to his authority. He had already got the deserters killed to create fear among the other soldiers. But Alfa bringing enemy hands was an act of defiance to his powers. The captain wanted their savagery but it must be obedience with savagery. The acts of defiance by Alfa were met with quick warnings and reprimand by the officer. The captain sent his message through his messenger. "the captain says that you need to rest. The captain says that you are really very very brave but also very

very tired” (47). The captain wanted to get Alfa court martialled. He just wanted the evidence of the ‘seven hands’. But Alfa was too smart for the captain and his soldiers. He never let them get a hold of his possessions. Alfa called them his prized possessions but they were also the reason for his post war conditions. The war had created a void in his body and mind. It was not only with him but most of the soldiers in a war.

David Diop has created those images in his writing to show how war creates permanent scars in the mind of its soldiers. He has shown the battlefield to be “a field sowed with thousands of tiny metallic seeds... that produces no harvest”(42). The soldiers seem to fight for the honor and bravery which continuously feeds in them a sense to die for their country. But Diop shows that war reduces these men to “madness of rage, madness of pain” and turns them into “furious madmen”(47)

Diop shows that soldiers are fighting from their respective positions in their lands yet there is a commonness between the two. There were many things which were common between the soldiers on both the sides. “They too had lost friends, more than brothers. They too wept inside for their dead”(52) Alfa had started killing enemy soldiers after the death of his dear friend. He begins a macabre ritual: every night he sneaks across enemy lines to find and murder a blue-eyed German soldier, and every night he returns to base, unharmed, with the German’s severed hand. “I came back with an enemy rifle and he hand that carried it, gripped it, cleaned it, greased it...”(16). The inhumanness which war creates in the soldiers is shown through the character of Alfa. The trophies of war were not medals or goods for him. It was the hands of the enemy soldiers which had been brutally ripped off by him. “they were my hands... I know the provenance of each one... their nails turned black after I separated them from their arms...(49). Even his fellow soldiers began to fear this new demeanour of Alfa. He had transformed from a brave, righteous, just soldier to a sorcerer, a devourer of people’s inside, a demm (35). He himself began to compare himself to animal forms like “mamba snake”(62)to show how animal instincts had overpowered him. His transformation is complete with these words “God’s truth, I became untouchable”(32).

Diop writes with a deceptively nuanced style. Alfa’s thoughts seem at first to be offered without filter, nearly stream-of-consciousness, with details given and repeated at will. This is a novel that revels in opposition and duality, that urges readers to search for that

crucial, thin crack of light that lies between our often-polarizing understanding of the world. The novelist also uses the elements of magic realism in this novel. Magic realism is considered not a fantasy or a fairy tale. It presents a realistic view of world while adding magical elements blurring the lines between fantasy and reality. It has an exceptional style where magical or supernatural phenomenon is presented in the real world. It is as much rooted to the realistic life as any other narrative work. It is generally characterized by two contrasting and conflicting perspectives. On the one hand it is based on rational view of reality. On the other side it also accepts the supernatural or prosaic reality. It is set in normal, modern world with the authentic description of human society. It does present a paradox of union of opposites. According to Angel Flores, magical realism involves the fusion of the real and the fantastic, or as he claims, “an amalgamation of realism and fantasy.” (Flores 112)

In this novel too, David Diop uses these elements which point to magic realism in the work. Magical realism portrays fantastical events in an otherwise realistic tone. It brings fables, folk tales, and myths into contemporary social relevance. The characters in the novel are shown to have many magical powers within them. The main character Alfa believes himself to be “I allow myself the unthinkable”(4). After the death of his dear friend, he began to change. He could not kill his ‘more than brother’ to death. But after his death, he claimed “I am now free to listen ... to ... obey the voices that command us not to be human”(11). War had transformed him into a savage. “My stench is the stench of death” (30). He had become “soldier sorcerer”(33). His fellow soldiers, who were friendly with him began to fear him. He had become “a devourer of people’s insides, a demm”(35). Therefore Alfa had transformed into a devil that fought against the enemy single handily and killed them. Alfa is also a narcissist who boasts about his beautiful body. He also thinks himself to be an Adonis who can get any girl attracted. He does get intimate with Fary Thiam, the daughter of the village headman, Mademoiselle Francois, the daughter of Dr Francois, the Doctor at the Rear and another unknown women. But he shows himself to possess this quality of attracting any woman.

The death of his more than brother also turns him into a ‘demm’. But he does not seem to lose his friend to death. In a kind of magical event, the story ends with these words “because I didn’t want to be left alone in the middle of nowhere, in a land without a name.

God's truth I swear to you now, whenever I think of us, he is me and I am him". Who speaks these words is not clear but it adds a sense of magical mystery to the story.

The real world seems to mingle with the world of the unreal in this story. There are many instances where the world of the real collides with the unreal. The meeting of the brothers Alfa and Mademba seems to be an unreal situation. Alfa in the Rear seems to have forgotten the difference between the real and the unreal.

"Where am I? It feels like I have returned from far away. Who am I? I don't know anymore. Shadows surround me, I can't see anything" (127). He further seems to experience an unnatural experience when he says "I swear to you, it's pleasant to leave nothingness. I swear to you that I was there without being there."(128). Therefore the world of Alfa after the war is a world which is delusional to him. He has become both 'life and death'.

Another technique used by the author in the work is to deliberately withholding of information and explanations about the disconcerting fictitious world. In the story too, the death of Mademba is shown at the beginning with holding back of information about the earlier life of the two friends. The story of his earlier life is revealed through the three paintings by Alfa in the Rear. The first is about his mother, the second Mademba and the third is the seven hands which he had dismembered in the war. In fact the whole life of Alfa can be summed up in these three pictures.

The life of Alfa is a mystery from the beginning to the end of the story. As it moves from the battlefields of Europe to the Mental asylum bed in the Rear, it seems to unfold before the reader a person who is a very emotional being at the beginning. He continuously looks at the long winding 'brush' on which he last saw his mother travel out of his sight. He has a special bond with Mademba who becomes 'more than brother' for him. He also enlists in the army to show his physical strength. His prized possession is his body which he feels can attract any woman to him. It happens to as the most beautiful women in the village falls for his him.

But the same Alfa in the end has become an enigma who does not remember his name or where he came from. He has lost sense of pleasure even when a body tries to warm him up in bed. He seems to laugh and smile but the smile and laughter are inside him. Outside he seems to be lifeless being who has lost his senses and body. So the war has transformed Alfa into something on which he seems to have lost control. It is only at the end of the novel that

Mademba or a sense of him is still alive in Alfa. It can be a memory of him which makes Alfa remember his past.

The writer does try to show the life of the marginalized beings who live in the remote regions of the world. No body seems to care for these people who fought wars in alien lands for their alien masters without any sense of remorse. They were duty bound to the cause that was not their own. Alfa becomes a demonic god for his regiment. At first he is admired for his actions but later on he becomes a threat to both his comrades and his masters. They see in him a monster who is possessed with some satanic cult like existence. Even his superiors do not approve of his actions and want him court martialled for his actions. He is sent back to the Rear where he needs to be 'purified of head'(94). He needs to be purified in the body and the head.

David Diop uses the technique of stream of consciousness to keep the story move back and forth. The story of Alfa and his dead friend Mademba is told from his death to their life in their village during earlier years. Then the story takes a turn with Alfa fighting a physical and mental battle with his enemies and his demons. He can no longer have control over is self. He looses his sense of time and becomes a monster for himself and the society.

Thus Diop shows how man kind lost its precious sanctity to live peacefully after the world war I. The great war proved to the world that war was never a strict matter of victory or defeat. It was all shapeless, agonizing and immeasurable destructiveness. Writers like Earnest Hemingway (*A Farewell to Arms*) and John Dos Passos (*Three Soldiers*) began to uncover the absurdity and dehumanizing effect of war. Henry James wrote in an article in the New York Times in 1915 that war had " used up words: they had weakened, they had deteriorated like motor car tyres"(whalan 19)

It is writers like David Diop who brings up the case of the unknown soldiers to life through their works. The colonial times were hard times especially for the natives who had to suffer at the hands of the colonial rulers. The colonials treated the natives to harsh physical and mental abuse. They enrolled large number of natives from their colonies to work as slaves and soldiers during the Great Wars. But the plight of such 'foreign' soldiers were never made public. Diop is one of the few writers who has brought the plight of Senegal soldiers through his work. It is a psychological spiral tale showing the brutal side war. He makes use of diary writing and epistolary style to present the story. The story resonates,

repeats and then returns to tell the specific event in the life of the narrator. He turns into a neurotic being who performs nonsensical rituals after the death of his more than brother. Shadows of death continue to haunt him and his memory turns into delusional state where he does not remember the present or the past. The effect that war creates in his mind is beyond words or actions. “ there is no body...I sense myself living...I sense flesh, bathed in red blood...(128).

These lines by the poet Carol Ann Duffy shows how world is fooled into fighting another war upon war upon war.

...Not the war to end all wars; death's birthing place;
the earth nursing its ticking metal eggs,
hatching new carnage...

Works Cited

- Bowers, Maggie Ann (ed). *Magic(al) Realism*. London New York : Routledge. 2024.
- Clausewitz, Carl Von. *On War*. New Delhi: Peacock Books, 2024.
- Diop, David. *At Night All Blood is Black*. (trans) Anna Moschovakis. London: Puskin Press, 2018.
- Duffy, Carol Anne. “ *The Wound In Time*”. Web: <https://talbragar.net/2018/11/04/the-wound-in-time-carol-anne-duffy/>
- Dylan, Bob.” John Brown” Live at Town Hall, New York, NY - April 1963.web : https://BobDylan.lnk.to/ss_followYD
- Flores, Angel.” *Magic Realism in Spanish American Fiction*” Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press. (1955) (1995). 109-117.
- Hemingway, Ernest. *A Farewell to Arms*. London: Penguin Books, 1994.
- Holland, Travis. “*Book review*”. Fiction writers review, Nov12,2020.web.
- Owens, Wilfred. ‘*Dulce et Decorum Est*’. Poems. London: Viking Press, 1921.
- Passos, John Dos. *Three Soldiers*. New Delhi: Zinc Read Publishers, 2023.