

DAVID DIOP'S *AT NIGHT ALL BLOOD IS BLACK*: A NOVEL THAT MAKES ONE CRY AND THINK

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At Night All Blood is Black (2018) is the second novel of David Diop, a French novelist who is born in Paris and raised in Senegal. This novel was first published in French as *Frère d'ame* in 2018. Later it was translated by Anna Moschovakis and published in 2020. Its translation got the 2021 International Booker Prize.

At Night All Blood is Black presents the bitter experiences of Senegalese Tirailleurs—Alfa Ndiaye and Mademba Diop who have gone in the battlefield fighting for France against Germany. The novel begins with the epigraph which contains three quotes that are:

1. "We embraced each other by our names." (Montaigne, "Of Friendship")
2. "Who thinks, betrays." (Pascal Quignard, *Mourir de penser*)
3. "I am two simultaneous voices, one long, the other short." (Cheikh Hamidou Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure*)

These three quotes in the Epigraph clearly reveal the nature of the novel. The reader is mentally prepared that he is going to read a novel which is an engrossing story of personality ruptures and ambiguities. The novel begins with the words "... I KNOW, I UNDERSTAND, I shouldn't have done it." and ends with "whenever I think of us, he is me and I am him." It begins with the feeling of regret and ends with the realization of oneness with human beings. It engages the reader with its first-person narration. "I, Alfa Ndiaye, son of the old, old man, I understand, I shouldn't have. God's truth, now I know."

The novel is set against the First World War background. With its 25 chapters, the novel shares the experiences of the protagonist Alfa Ndiaye (20 years old), a Senegalese who fights for France against Germany. He follows the order and does what he is commanded to do as a part of duty. But his perception of duty changes the moment he loses his more-than-brother, Mademba Diop in the war. As Mademba Diop is badly injured, he requests Alfa to slit his throat. Alfa does not kill him as he thinks to save the human life as a part of duty. Diop dies in great pain with his eyes full of tears. Alfa brings back to the trench holding him in his arms. This changes his way of life, his thinking and his perception. He realizes that he should relieve his friend Mademba from pain and suffering by slitting his head. He asks for

forgiveness and regrets saying: “Ah Mademba Diop! Only after you were gone did I finally begin to think. Only with your death, at dusk, did I know, did I understand that I would no longer listen to the voice of duty, the voice that commands, the voice that leads the way. But it was too late.” His duty was not in killing as he is instructed but it was in killing and save him from pain, misery, and suffering. Life becomes death and death becomes life. Perception changes according to circumstances and situations. This is the double vision in which he realizes that “he is both death and life.” “I am the creator and the destroyer. I am double.” With time he realizes that he is Mademba and Mademba is Alfa. This oneness towards human beings is realized in the end of the novel. In between lies the story of Alfa who experiences the moments of being a hero to being a soldier sorcerer.

The soldier does not think. He obeys what he is commanded. The moment he thinks he is different and becomes a danger to the authority. It applies in the case of Alfa who fights brutally, kills the enemies, and returns to the trench after bringing the enemy’s rifle along with the hand. The other soldiers welcome him like a hero and consider him courageous and strong. What the commander wants is temporary madness—madness to fight, madness which removes fear from the mind offering the courage to face the enemy.

Alfa begins to think. He was inhuman when he obeyed “duty’s voice”. Whenever he thinks of Mademba Diop, he hears him in his head. He hears his request which he made for slitting his throat. Now he realizes that he was inhuman as he did not relieve him out of his sufferings and pain. He takes a decision that what he could not do for his friend, he will do for his enemy as a part of humanity. “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 three times. What I didn’t do for my friend I can do for my enemy. Out of humanity.” That is why he kills enemy. He has this kind of psychological obsession. He goes to the enemy’s trench. He turns the enemy’s face towards his face and watches him die and then he slits his throat out of humanity and feels that all blood is black in the bright moonlight. “I turn his face towards mine and I watch him die a little, then I slit his throat, cleanly, humanly. At night, all blood is black.” He becomes a legend with the first three hands. When he returns with the fourth hand from “No Man’s Land”, his trench-mates who are his war brothers are afraid of him. They (Chocolat and the Toubabas) consider him strange. His strangeness is changed into madness resulting in witchcraft. He is tagged as “soldier’s sorcerer.” He becomes a taboo. He says: “Up to the third hand I was a war hero, beginning with the fourth I became a dangerous madman, a bloodthirsty savage. God’s truth, that’s how things go, that’s how the world is: each is double.” The reality is that he is not the killer. He is not a demon. Rather the captain is a demon. For the captain, life is not life. It is war. He loves war and puts soldier’s lives in danger. “The captain is a devourer of souls. I know, I understand.” This is the reality that he realizes. No one wants war. It is the strangeness of the colonizers who for their selfish end put the lives of others in danger.

He recalls the time when he mocked at Mademba’s totem peacock. He now realizes that he killed Mademba Diop with words. The captain also feels a kind of fear within. He asks Alfa to take rest as he does not like his permanent madness which is dangerous. The captain asks for the seven hands which he does not tell where they are. After Mademba, he loses Jean Baptiste who is his only real white friend. He recalls the time when he was with Fary Thiam who became his without caring for the honour of the family. He cannot forget

Mademba who becomes a kind of lover to him. He admits that Mademba was not weak rather he was braver than him. He went to the battlefield in spite of being weak. Only to have broad chest and arms does not make one strong. He now praises Mademba and clearly admits his own weakness in spite of being strong in body.

As advised, he meets the Doctor Francois who tries to understand and read Alfa's mind with the help of drawings which Alfa draws. Drawing is nothing, it is simply to bring life on paper with the play of "shadow and light". He draws the drawing of the head of his mother whom he loved and who was kidnapped by the moors from the north. He makes the second drawing of Mademba and the third drawing of seven hands. As he draws the seven hands, he feels that he is now not in possession of seven hands. The Doctor begins the process of washing the filth of war from his head. He gets the sense of seeing everything clearly. He is not afraid of the unknown. He experiences what he feels. He does not know who he is. He shares what he feels. Thus he has the seed of becoming a follower of empiricism. He says: "For the moment I am only what my body feels. My body is trying to speak through mouth. I do not know who I am, but I think I know what my body would say about me." Further he realizes: "I am night and day. I am innocent and guilty. I am the beginning and the end. I am the creator and the destroyer. I am double."

The perception on translation is also in the novel. Translation is not as simple as it seems to be. It is trading—trading of one sentence for another. "To translate is to distance oneself from God's truth, which, as everyone knows or believes, is single." In the end, Alfa shares a story of the prince who marries the fickle daughter of a vain king. Finally, realization of oneness completes the story of Alfa who admits philosophically in the end: "God's truth, I swear to you that now, whenever I think of us, he is me and I am him."

The novel makes an engrossing reading for the reader who is tempted to read it in one sitting. It offers multiple meanings and can be studied from various angles. It presents a beautiful feast of sociology, philosophy, politics, psychology, and above all postcolonialism. Meanings changes at every step. What is duty at one time becomes the cause of inhumanity and what is inhumanity becomes the cause of humanity.

Regarding technical aspects of the novel, it has the sexual imagery. For instance "our trench looked to me like the slightly parted lips of an immense woman's sex." The novel has "God's Truth" as refrain. "More-than-brother" for Mademba appears many times in the novel. The language is straight, simple and replete with poetic touches. For instance: "I slid like a snake along the side of the trench. I was covered with mud from head to toe. I was like the mamba snake that takes on the color of the earth on which it slithers." Philosophical sentences like "I believe I understand that what's written on high is only a copy of what man writes here below" are scattered in the novel.

Regarding title, it is apt and appropriate. When it is night, the blood whether it is of friend or enemy seems to be black. Blood does not differentiate. In the light, it may be red but at night it is black. This is the change of perception. Everything has double vision. Alfa also declares: "I am double." He is creator as well as destroyer. The other side should also be taken into consideration. He is not a devourer of soul. He simply does what he is ordered. The real culprit is the person who orders. The person who has the evil intention of ruling the

mind of the people is the real culprit. Raising voice is the real victory. Alfa becomes the real hero as he starts thinking which makes him different from others who do not think but follow the commander. Indeed, the novel *At Night All Blood Is Black* which presents the naked truth of war also reveals the humanitarian attitude. This is what makes the novel worth reading to the extent that it makes the reader cry and think.

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