

## **Identities Shape-Shifted in the Crucible of the First World War: Tracing the Subversion of the Myth of Masculinity in Mulk Raj Anand's *Across the Black Waters* (1939)**

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### **Abstract**

The First World War is widely understood as a European war, resolved to the benefit of European empires. The war and its battlefields were global, however, and profoundly affected Asia and Africa. The First World War did not only decimate the Western civilization; to a great extent, this all-engulfing war enacted a fatal blow to the long-standing traditions of the West, such as the imperial ideal of heroic masculinity. This paper scrutinizes in detail the fall of heroic masculinity, especially the myth of a “martial race”, as a holdall narrative for the Indian soldier. In *Across the Black Waters* (1939), Mulk Raj Anand depicts as to how the First World War severely damaged the dominant ideas of masculinity and heroism for the sepoy recruited from the colony. The image of powerful, steady-nerved soldiers is displaced by that of shell-shocked, traumatized men in shambles who fail to exhibit unblemished control over their minds. They live in a maze of psychological vulnerability, and constantly discover themselves as rootless, betrayed and unheard in the society where they live. Many soldiers are depicted as inflicted with insanity and trauma; some of them cry silently or loudly, some of them urinate in their pants out of fear. Through these incidents, Anand orchestrates a strong voice of resistance against the hegemonic exploitative practices of the colonisers, who injected these heroic ideals of masculinity among the male populations of select geographies of British India so as to recruit more soldiers to the cause of empire. Moreover, Anand sketches how some Indian soldiers uphold a false and dangerous notion of masculinity, betrayed by which they, along with their fellow soldiers, face the most nightmarish consequences.

### **Keywords**

*Myth of Masculinity, Sepoy, First World War Soldiers from British India, The Imperial Military and the Colony, Trauma and Shellschock*