

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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An Old Waltz: Of Myth, War, and Masculinity

After the official outbreak of the First World War (1914-1919), a new branch of literature was highlighted, having been authored by writers across different locations; among them, some writings aimed to justify and romanticise the war, while some others rigorously attempted to depict the surge of hollowness and destruction in the trail of any war, the latter being labelled as anti-war texts. Mulk Raj Anand's *Across the Black Waters* (1939) is the only novel of its period which documents the involvement of the Indian sepoy in the First World War but does not delineate the valour of the iron youth of India. Rather it depicts their destruction and disorientation since they are cut off from their homes and find themselves dispossessed of any meaning in the circumstances unleashed. S. A. Khan contends that this novel gives an “incisive analysis of the tense, fear-ridden, and war-torn world” in Europe from the perspective of the imperial sepoy (47). This novel differs to a great extent from other post-War novels composed during the early twentieth century because of the repositioning of the subalterns in a speaking position. *Across the Black Waters* offers a critique of the Western representation of the War since Western history and narratives mainly set aside the tremendous contribution and sacrifice of the Indian soldiers.

Men and resources were marshalled on an astonishing scale from the British empire. The empire's biggest contribution was by India. It included “3.7 million tonnes of supplies, over 10,000 nurses, 1,70,000 animals, 146m pounds of Indian revenue, and political support” (Joshi 6). The Indian Army, the largest volunteer force, also comprised the biggest non-British component of the British fighting forces. It provided 1.1 million troops to serve overseas, of which over 74000 were killed and 80000 were held prisoner: “These forces not only protected the northwest of India, but also buttressed British garrisons in Egypt, Singapore and China, as well as contributing to seminal battles of the Western Front, such as the Somme and Neuve Chapelle” (Joshi 6). The Indians who fought for the British empire earned a staggering 13,000 gallantry medals in the process. To remind the readers of the involvement and sacrifice of the Indians is the foremost concern of Anand, as history is partial and a cunning craft of elusions in the hands of historiographers — it is mostly written in favour of the colonisers, and therefore, in the words of Santanu Das, is “distressingly Eurocentric” (“Sepoys, Sahibs” 62). One of the most crucial means to counter the dominance of western historiographies is to challenge the myth of masculinity, namely, “martial race” ideology, which was an essential criterion for recruiting Indian soldiers for the empire wars, including the First World War. This paper exposes the myth of Indian masculinity fabricated by the colonisers; and later, it also highlights the ways in which Anand offers a powerful critique and eventually, subverts the all-pervasive hegemonic myth of masculinity, and its mutant imperial myth of “martial races” in India.

Before probing further into the discussion, it is necessary to elaborate the concept of “myth” and its importance in, and after, the First World War. Myth could be read as a kind of ISA¹ (Ideological State Apparatus), which aims to control people not by force, but by persuasion so that people tend to believe that they have not been manipulated and exploited, while being nudged to the role of mannequins of the powers-that-be. Myth could also be read as a crucial manifestation of power because power, as Foucault reflects, depends on “the degree of rationalization”, and likewise, myth aims to rationalize, and through myths, existing power structures are “elaborated, transformed [and] organized” (223). Myth aims to perpetuate hegemonic power, and makes uncanny exploitation more acceptable, even legitimate for the public. Myths are used publicly to unite people, and since myths, as Todman contends, are “distortion or amplification of certain aspects of reality” (xiii), they are much effective in providing salve and solutions to the public, and consequently, through myths, representations of war become more mythologised, and thereby, highly political.

Anand’s *Across the Black Waters* deals with several war-myths; among them, masculinity is one of the most effective myths through which Indian soldiers had been controlled ideologically. Masculinity is mainly a socio-cultural construct generally linked with stoicism, power, excessive display of courage and heroism, and strong psychological resilience, among many others. Different manifestations of masculinity can bolster prevalent power structures by perpetuating social hierarchies, and to a greater extent, aim to normalize and strengthen gender-based inequalities and discriminations against women or any subaltern group. The myth of hegemonic masculinity refers to a practice that legitimises and perpetuates men’s dominant position in a society and justifies the subordination of the women, and other marginalized groups. This myth endorses the virtues of combat where soldiers are, says Scott Denham, “fighting purely for the joy of fighting” (119). During the First World War, the army and the government made use of the masculine identity of the heroic soldier and its hegemonic status. While elaborating the concept of myth and recruitment, Richard Connell cogently expounds that “the figure of the hero is central to [the] Western cultural imagery of masculinity and armies have freely drawn on this imagery for purposes of recruitment” (213).

“Martial race” ideology is the imperial mutant of the myth of hegemonic masculinity in India which refers to “the belief that some groups of men are biologically and culturally predisposed to the arts of war” (Streets 1). However, Indian masculinity has been discussed and studied less extensively than the corresponding European template. Despite that, many scholars and critics like Heather Streets, Heike Liebau, George MacMunn and others have worked extensively on notions of Indian masculinity and heroism, as cultivated during the age of empire. According to this hegemonic myth, certain ethnic, religious, caste or social groups were regarded as loyal and suited for military service; and thus, these groups were deemed superior to the other groups. Like other socially and culturally fabricated myths, this myth of Indian masculinity is a socio-political and cultural ascription constructed by the colonizers so that they could legitimise and perpetuate their domination in the Indian

¹ In Althusser’s term, ideological state apparatus refers to the institutions that disseminate the ideology of the class in power and authority by ensuring that the lower classes are in a state of false consciousness. ISA controls the mass by consent, not by force. Consequently, most of the resistance against capitalism is very masterfully liquidated by institutions like school, media, religion, family, politics among many others. Hence, ISA normalizes and perpetuates pre-existent inequalities (“Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus” pp. 193-227.)

subcontinent post 1857. “Martial race” ideology was crucial in recruiting sepoys for the First World War. The momentous impact of this hegemonic myth can be gaged in that the regional composition of the Indian Army had been altered staggeringly at the time when the First World War broke out. As David Omissi observes: “While, in 1862, only 28 percent of the recruits for the Indian Infantry battalions came from the Punjab and the North West Frontier Provinces, this number rose to 57 percent in 1914. The number of recruits from Madras decreased from 40 percent in 1862 to 11 percent in 1914.” (10).

The above extract shows how the Indian people’s consent is, in an exact sense, a kind of “manufactured consent”² because of the hegemonic myth of the “martial race”. This myth cultivates the fossil template of a superior soldier prone to war and violence, the sepoys subscribe to the myth, and ultimately, domination and exploitation are perpetuated by colonial rulers over the Indians. “Martial race”, the hegemonic myth of masculinity, is primarily based on some staple grounds. As expounded by Heather Streets, the “[m]artial race soldiers were not just ‘raced’; however: they also, significantly, came to be ‘gendered’ as ideally masculine” (10), and thus, discipline, loyalty, and fighting heroically and efficiently are the foremost preconditions. The soldiers who had been labeled as “martial race” soldiers were expected to display awe-inspiring courage; and cowardice, among them, was viewed as a sort of taboo. Streets contends: “[s]oldiers [are] expected to dissociate themselves from so-called feminine traits such as cowardliness and [are] encouraged to behave with reckless courage; to endure severe physical hardships and to kill when ordered” (10). Therefore, this myth of masculinity evoked extreme and irrational heroism while streaks associated with femininity and the females, such as softness, weakness, vulnerability, and fear were ideologically glossed over. “Martial race” ideology became a discourse that results in a masculinised, stylised, orientalist vision of the regions which produced the warriors for the “martial race”. This masculinized vision was uncritically accepted by outsiders like the British public, and sometimes by the people from these “martial race” regions themselves.

The Waltz in Wreck and the post-colony: A Study of Mulk Raj Anand’s Take on the Sepoys

From the very onset of the novel, Anand attempts to show that the sepoys who had crossed the black waters to fight their colonisers’ war are very much influenced by this heroic myth. The sepoys, along with the protagonist of the novel, Lalu, are hungry for war, and for the hollow parade of so-called masculinist heroism. They do not want rest and relaxation, rather, violence and face-to-face battles are their avowed coveted fare. When the Company of Lalu is resting in Orleans, Daddy Dhanoo, who is considered as the most steady-nerved soldier of the division, loses his patience completely in the absence of war. He exclaims with disgust: “I can’t understand this sansar! Where is the war! ...When does the train start?” (56). Lalu, who had never been into Europe, also becomes

²The concept is found in Gramsci and Althusserian Marxism, in which the dominant class sustains its hegemony through engineering assent so that a system is created in which citizens become willing and obedient, consenting, and unquestioning, obeying certain principles and paradigms. The phrase has been quoted from the title *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (1988) by Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman.

“too enthusiastic about the adventure” (10). Similarly, other sepoys cherish a similar complacent view of their own identity. Lok Nath says:

The Germans, the Sahibs say, fear us. They think we are all Gurkhas with Kukhries in our mouths, savages who will creep up to them, take them by surprise and kill them. And the Sarkar is treating you as shock troops for that reason. Now you show them some of their savagery. All brave men like hand to hand fighting. And I have always tried to instill in you the fact that as brave sepoys, you must charge the enemy without fear, with your bayonets, wherever you find him! Hit him in vital spot. (116)

Furthermore, there are myriad instances in the novel through which one can easily understand how the hegemonic myth of masculinity heavily shrouded the views and visions of the sepoys. On the first day on the front, Lalu, without cowering away, “become[s] chock-full of anger and impatience, and the fear in him [is] smothered. He feels like a monster who [will] annihilate everything on his way” (147). C.J. George believes that at the time of the battle, Lalu, as he brushes away all of his fears, is heavily “intoxicated with a passion for violence” (92). Even though Lalu is seen terrified on several occasions, the essential hegemonic qualities of the “martial race” emerge in him before his going to the battlefield — the open maw of death.

The novel also presents the other “martial race”, the Sikhs, adorned with many heroic epithets to ignite the heroic ideology ingrained among themselves which remind us of the Homeric stock epithets in *The Iliad*, such as “son of Leto of the lovely locks” or “swift-footed Achilles”. This novel is also full of such epithets. When Lalu faints, his fellow comrades, in order to boost his morale, call him a lion. Kirpu also represents their company to Owen Sahib as brave lions. When Daddy Dhanoo wraps himself in a blanket and gets himself prepared for war, the narrative voice describes him “like a great big black Himalayan bear” (97). Havildar Lachman Singh is portrayed as “an angry bull” (117), and the other time the lion image is significantly used is when the demise of Lachman Singh is eulogized by Kirpu:

Obe, he was a lion ... He was a wonder, son – Havildar Lachman Singh! The lion has gone and now the jackals will reign.... But he died a hero, son, a hero. Neither his hand nor his heart was defiled by cowardice. Suchet Singh says that when the enemy burst in upon him in the traverse, he fought single-handed and killed five Germans before his bayonet failed. And then, as if the lion was not to be daunted, he picked up a broken bayonet and continued an unequal combat against three of the enemy until he collapsed. (142)

Through these images of the lion, Anand shows how the hegemonic myth of masculinity was heavily ingrained among the sepoys.

However, Anand does not only illustrate the hegemonic operations perpetrated by the heroic myth of masculinity among the sepoys. In covert and overt ways, he aspires to unearth the fallacy of the heroic myth which, in a true sense, is exorbitantly futile in coping with the horrors of technological

war. In place of portraying an atmosphere of heroic romance, Anand very masterfully invokes the “overheated figures of nightmares and calls upon the whole frenzied machinery of Gothic romance” (Fussell 213). These soldiers, as they lost their faith and glorious heroic ideals, were trapped in the excruciating web of nihilism where, if I may quote Nietzsche, “everything lacks meaning” (7). This novel thus does not reaffirm the soldiers’ courage and masculinity, but morphs into a critique of those values, unraveled as the values of violation. In facing the horrendous war, the sepoys lose their vivacity and courage, and they become, as Axel Madsen accurately describes, “disoriented, wandering and directionless” (3). Anand takes his standpoint against the popular myth of heroism in *Across the Black Waters*. The heroic “martial race” myth has been, very skillfully, subverted by Anand, and through this, he aims to expose the insidious practices of the colonisers to recruit more soldiers ideologically from across the colonies. This novel does not consider war to be an elimination of weakness. Unlike Ernst Junger, writer of *Storm of Steel* (1920), Anand never propagated that the war germinates a better man emerged from the storm of steel and provided an opportunity for self-realization and self-improvement. Anand’s sepoys are also “steeled”, but by the horrific experience of war, theirs is a quest for survival, not for self-improvement. The experience of a soldier and his combat in the novel is focused on what they have lost — not only their health and peace, but most precisely, their heroic masculine ideals. By subverting the myth of masculinity, Anand portrays these “emasculated” soldiers who, in the words of Eric Maria Remarque, “suddenly blush scarlet and [their] face [have] a look of embarrassment” (43) for they have known the audacity of the myths perpetuated around war. The war-beaten soldiers are presented as if they lacked iron nerve and frequently urinated under terrible fear.

Moreover, Indian soldiers, as depicted by Anand, are heavily traumatized and surely shellshocked. Sepoys, especially the Sikhs from the Punjab region, before the advent of the First World War, considered themselves biologically and psychologically superior to others, but postwar neurosis was totally unexpected and shocking to them. Shellshock, therefore, was a terrible blow to their heroic notion of masculinity. A good number of soldiers were emotionally and psychologically disturbed, and this disturbance mainly caused shellshock. Fiona Reid defines shellshock as “war’s emblematic psychiatric disorder” (8). Presently, shellshock is considered as “post-traumatic stress disorder” (Leese 10). Moreover, men suffering from shell-shock experienced guilt, shame, trauma and fear, and consequently, shellshock undermined the very notion of heroic masculinity. According to Showalter, “the image of the shell-shocked soldier, who was thought of as emotionally incapacitated, provided an outstanding contrast to the figure of the heroic soldier and masculine ideals of the period” (169). Showalter describes shellshock as “male hysteria” and compares it to the female hysteria of Victorian England. The binary of male and female is subverted by the war-scar of shellshock. She observes that the First World War precipitated a crisis of masculinity whereby the Victorian ideals of masculinity were severely challenged.

At that time, during or after the First World War in India, no soldiers were officially diagnosed as shellshocked because shellshock was considered to be a blow to the “martial race” ideology which was vital for recruiting sepoys. Though Anand never explicitly refers to shellshock, multiple passages in *Across the Black Waters* depict Indian soldiers suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder during

the war. Anand considers shellshock as part of the anti-colonial discourse that, very purposefully, undermines the myth of hegemonic masculinity. Set in contrast to the presentation of certain sects of Indians, such as the Punjabis and Gurkhas, as warlike, heroic, and extremely powerful, Santanu Das rightly observes that many of the sepoys experienced diverse emotions like “separation, segregation, loneliness [of] industrial warfare” (“India, Sepoy” 399). These emotions are a deviation from “martial race” ideology as the sepoys are supposed to be fierce, brave, loyal, and ready to die. When they landed in France, they were too enthusiastic to fight but later, when they faced the grim realities on the front, they become, in the words of Reid, “too traumatized to fight” (1). Though Lalu is never clinically diagnosed as affected by shell-shock, he experiences some of the most crucial and visible symptoms of shell-shock which he does not reveal to his fellow comrades for fear of being betrayed by the ideology of “martial race”. That ideology does not permit any sepoy to talk about weak nerves.

Through the death and disfigured body of Daddy Dhanoo, Anand wants to show that Lalu, and even Kirpu the experienced sepoy, are heavily shell-shocked. When Dhanoo is not found in the trenches for several days, Lalu cannot sleep because of deep agitation and superstitious fear. At night, he is “crazed by dark thoughts which crumbled like agitated phantoms in his head and swirled before his sleep-weighed eyes” (122). When the corpse of Dhanoo is discovered in mundane and yet horrific circumstances, Lalu’s heart aches with a horrible dread, and he thinks that “it would be more difficult than ever to sleep a dreamless night near these open graves of the dead” (127). He mistakes the face of Dhanoo for a ghost: “[a]ready Dhanoo looked like the ghost of himself as it would visit the dreams of his friends, distorted and frightening, yet pathetic” (127). He tries to forget that dreadful vision but cannot forget the bloodless visage of Dhanoo covered in mud and blood. Dodman’s statement supports this view. Lalu attempts to enlist all of his musculature to arm himself against the invading thoughts of Daddy Dhanoo’s ghost, but to no avail. The memory of his lost friend bleeds into the memories of other fallen sepoys, entangling Lalu in a web of traumatic associations and freefall amidst the terrifying battleground circumstances (165).

Moreover, several days later, when on duty, Lalu is also haunted by the fear of Dhanoo’s spirit. He thinks that “the ghost of the corpse, become[s] the spirit of Dhanoo, [is] pursuing him” in the front (140). These characters are suffering from, as Peter Leese aptly contends, “sweaty hallucinations and nightmares” (3). Not only Lalu but also Kirpu become dreadfully distressed because of the demise of good and heroic souls in an unheroic manner. The horrors and bloodsheds of war shake the steady-nerved Kirpu more intensively than it does Lalu. He is also emotionally disrupted by the demise of Dhanoo and his sleep is frequently disturbed by frightful nightmares. Kirpu’s broken mental state can be understood better with reference to Lachman Singh’s glorious, yet tragic demise. While describing the death of Lachman Singh to Lalu, Kirpu “beat[s] his forehead with his hand and burst out crying” in a frenzied manner (142). Crying, especially by a powerful and heroic soldier like Kirpu, does not correspond to the ideology of “martial race”, and therefore, these symptoms are clear and distinct markers of shellshocked sepoys on the Western Front. Anand observes:

Lalu contemplated the face of his comrade, a brave, lively, mischievous face at the worst of times, now old with wrinkles of grief. The boy had never imagined that the wise, cynical Uncle Kirpu would break down in the face of anything. He stared at him embarrassed and full of tenderness. He could not bear to see the old man crying like a child when he himself felt curiously detached. (142-143)

Kirpu's shellshock is also clearly illustrated at the eleventh hour of his life. Lok Nath, an egoist and vile army officer gets his undue promotion, and he demonstrates his naked display of absolute power over Kirpu but the latter pays no heed to the former's parodic show. Being excessively enraged, Lok Nath tears the stripes off Kirpu and decides to detain him in the guard room for insubordination. Kirpu meets the highest humiliation of his life since he is bullied by a worthless officer who is half his age. Out of shame, this old man of experience and knowledge commits suicide. Chanan Singh describes the event thus: "Kirpu got hold of a sentry's loaded rifle in his cell and, adjusting the barrel and into his mouth, let off the trigger, and blew his brains out" (208). His despair pushes him over the brink, and he takes his own life. This suicide is a heavy blow to Lala and his heroic ideals since he has never imagined that a man like Kirpu is capable of such an act of alleged dishonour in the martial code. Consequently, Lala becomes broken, and such emotional disturbance emerging out of the war mangles his dreams of heroism; and the death of his masculine ideals, to a great extent, is the exact cause of his shellshock.

Lala at the war front is frequently visited by horrendous nightmares mostly because of the deaths of his fellow comrades, and such dreadful visions, according to Dodman, "plague his waking hours and sleep" (170). His nightmares are not confined to the corpse of Dhanoo alone, but the nightmares bring before him the horrendous image of Goddess Kali "with a naked coal black body, with eyes that glistened like burning stars and with a tongue that scattered sparks of fire, a sword in one of her hands and rifle in the other" (151). He also sees in his dreams "rampaging hordes of demons, headed by Yama, the God of Death, with fencing stick and a shield in his hands..." (151). He recalls his mother's description of hell in a state of half-sleep. Hence, a supernatural world of Hindu hell is made to co-exist with the actual physical world of the battles at Flanders. Anand integrates a mythopoeic motif with a basic naturalistic motif; the real and the supernatural world seem to segue into each other. The nightmares prove that Lala is shellshocked.

Again, because of the ideology of the "martial race", Lala and the other sepoys try their best to hide their traumatised mental state. Before reaching the front, Lala loses his sense because of a hospital train. He has never come across such trains before, and due to the obnoxious odor of blood and medicine, he falls down losing control over his sense. Fainting, according to the staples of heroic masculinity, is a feminine quality, and this so-called inglorious act of Lala has "undermined both male authority and traditional sex roles" (Reid 21). When Lala comes to his senses, he feels exceedingly "angry and ashamed for his weakness" because his traumatic disorder has been brought to light through this act (65). When the dead body of Dhanoo is found, Lala presses "his lips tight, and ground his teeth lest he should lose his grip on himself, lest he should be seized by the grotesque terrors of the night in broad

daylight, lest his imagination should burst into the demented murmurs of mad despair” (128). Lalu demonstrates these symptoms of shellshock unconsciously since he has no intention of being regarded as a coward by the other sepoy. This incident demonstrates how the Indian soldiers did not want to reveal their shock, and Anand’s delineation of these incidents is a challenge to Western historiography since the dominant traditions of historicizing in the West promotes martial identity of the Indian soldiers from certain “loyal” regions post 1857, for the sake of recruitment and sacrifice for the sake of empire.

Anand also shows in this novel that masculinist ideals disrupt any possibility of relationships across cultures or any other gradient of difference, including gender for that matter. The characters who refrain themselves from showing excessive masculinity, though on a limited scale, can engage in a cross-cultural relationship. Lalu befriends Marie, a French girl, and while forging a friendship with the French damsel, he very carefully brushes aside his so-called masculine identity. In return, Marie also develops a certain degree of feelings towards Lalu. Despite being sexually unconsumated, Lalu’s relation with Marie brings some positive changes in him, and of course, Lalu’s friendship carries a vital flair, ultimately resulting in empathy and understanding though he feels monumentally “confused”, his “blood swirling through him in waves of warmth that seemed to rise like smoke of frustration to his head and blind him” (178).

Seeing Lalu forming a friendship with Marie, a carnal officer like Subha attempts to approach Marie since he sees her “as a means of reestablishing his masculinity” (Nayar 60). According to Frantz Fanon, such characters simply wish to “go to bed with a white woman” because, by doing so they, though inwardly, “wish to be white” (6). Since Subha is not able to get an opportunity to meet the French girl, he asks Lalu to bring Marie out on some excuse so that he can take her to a field. Lalu retorts that he must have asked Babu Khusi Ram for permission. This simple incident of refusal infuriates Subha, and he leaves the place in great anger. Subha is depicted as a vicious man completely governed by his irrational will, and heavily loaded with false and baseless masculine ideals, and accordingly, he becomes a “slave to his nature, his emotions and sexual drives” (Garland 777). For such a perilous display of masculinity, eventually, Subha fails to make love neither with Marie nor with the harlots in the brothels; he fails to form any friendly and fruitful relationship with the French girls as well. Likewise, his masculine ideals engender superabundant jealousy and push his fellow male Indians into a sea of terrifying troubles.

Across the Black Waters thus poignantly illustrates the hollowness of the hegemonic masculinity of the idealized heroic soldier and renders the death of the heroic myth. This novel seems to acknowledge the masculinist ideals and actively incorporates them at the beginning but, at long last renounces these ideals as Lalu and his fellow sepoy grow into exact opposites of a traditional hero whose glowing heroic ideals are frequently called into question by the anxieties and persistent fears of the sepoy. Therefore, in facing “the ruthless destruction of man by man with machine” (Mohan 96), the sepoy, at the cost of the demise of their long-cherished masculinist ideals, lose their faith in everything; and to them, existence becomes, in the words of T.Z. Lavine, “purposeless, meaningless, shapeless and contingent” (344). These morally defeated sepoy come to realize the futility of believing in a traditional template of masculinity; and in the long run, they experience, like Sartre’s protagonist

in the *Nausea* (1938), the “irrationality of experience with a sense of fear and nausea” (Qtd. in Lavine 345). The consequent subversion of masculinity allows for a more inclusive, complex, and diversified vision of what it means to be a man, which has significant ramifications and impact on both the individual and society, at the war front, and beyond. As we continue to ponder deep and struggle with questions of masculinity, gender relations and gender asymmetries in our societies – one of the core debates of our times – Anand’s text on Indian sepoy deployed to fight for empire at the war fronts of Europe during the First World War continues to remain indispensable.

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