Excursion to Continental Graveyard: A Reading of Anand’s *Across the Black Waters* * 
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Excepting Raja Rao’s *The Serpent and the Rope*, *Across the Black Waters* by Mulk Raj Anand is perhaps the only Indian English novel to have a continental setting. But whereas Raja Rao’s narrative—which is set partly in France—deals mostly with metaphysical issues, Anand’s novel concerns itself with a social and political world, and, it has the distinction of being the only Indian English novel that chooses the First World War setting.

My paper attempts an appreciation of the significance of such a setting in terms of the images and symbols that Anand employs.

But before proceeding with an actual analysis of the work, I feel it is relevant to briefly contrast Anand’s work with an Anglo-Indian novel which has a similar locale: John Master’s *The Ravi Lancers*. This novel, like *Across the Black Waters*, is set in Flanders during World War I.

In both novels Indian soldiers fight for the King-Emperor on the Western War Front. The Indian contingent of the British army in *The Ravi Lancers* is a cavalry unit belonging to an Indian Prince. Its central character Maj Krishna Ram is an Indian prince—turned military officer. His dream is to win a

promotion as Brigadier General. By way of contrast, one notes that in *Across the Black Waters*, imperial England’s steady infantry is drawn from the humblest regions of Indian society—a society that is frankly agrarian. The Sepoys here are mostly peasants evicted from their lands. Lalu, the protagonist, is a peasant-turned-soldier hailing from a poverty-stricken family and his chief ambition is to earn a ‘piece of land’ as reward for his service in the war. He is India’s ‘Everyman’ (to use Alastair Niven’s description) whereas John Master’s Krishna Ram is an officer in charge of cavalry unit, educated in English and his Indianness is mostly limited to his name.

What distinguishes Anand from John Masters is the former’s insight into the nature of the army that the King-Emperor has raised to nourish a war. Anand focuses attention on the Indian situation; the conditions under which the peasants have joined the army and how such a situation is exploited by the English.

The fact that the English—a blatantly Colonizer-culture—is found on the side of the colonized enables Anand to expose the dark side of Europe’s humanism as well as the incorrect identification of colonization with colonizing mission. Anand’s novel informs in uncertain terms that Indian peasants are made victims in the War to “save the cause of civilisation.”¹ We must note that it is on the European Mainland that the pretensions of a civilization based on colonial exploitation are exposed. For the Indians, the War Front lies across the seas and this particular selection of landscape has important implications. The English take the colonial infantry to the penultimate point of the border; ‘to the open jaws of Death’ in an attempt urge the retreat of a vastly superior German force. It is a hand-to-hand bayonet fighting that the humble soldiers are asked to engage in. Thus are we made to take cognisance of a shocking paradox: the colonial power encourages the Indian sepoys to prove the inherent ‘savagery’ of the Gurkhas against Germans, while at home (in India), it preaches the ‘peace’ and ‘love.’

By making a farmer-cum-soldier as the protagonist of *Across the Black Waters*, Anand dextrously extends the colonial
atmosphere to the European mainland to make the ‘peasant’ and the ‘village’ dominate the action of the novel much more than ‘war’ and ‘Europe.’ The concern of the author is not so much the ‘sword’ as the ‘sickle.’ It is in order to save an agrarian culture that the farmers from the remote corners of the Indian subcontinent travel to the far end of the European continent.

The novel’s setting, viewed from the Indian angle, gains further significance. That was the period of intense Nationalist activity and Gandhi had emerged on Indian political horizon. With the coming of Gandhi the independence movement had gained considerable momentum—such momentum that India was eager not merely for political freedom, but social and economic freedom. At this very time, India was asked to fight on the side of the colonizer. Confronted by such a dilemma India, guided by a humanist spirit, made its moral choice admirably. What Mulk Raj Anand says elsewhere applies to the soldiers in Across the Black Waters as well:

All of us were united, wherever we were with thousands of others in the faith that we could defend the world heritage from the attacks of Germany, Italy and Japan as well as the reactionaries of our own countries...that we could help to achieve political and economic freedom for all and change our environment and ourselves in the process of this struggle.²

Such a socialistic impulse is central to an understanding of Across the Black Waters. At home (i.e. India) the young rustic protagonist had regarded the Europeans as “aloof self-assured, God like”³ people. But when he is in Europe he realises that the whites too are people susceptible to sorrow and suffering and capable of finer human emotions like love, compassion and kindness. Not only the English and the French but even the Germans appear to Lalu as human as Indians. This becomes explicity evident in the episode in which the English and the German soldiers exchange Christmas greetings and distribute cakes at the No-mans-land. The voyage across the waters to the European land enables the protagonist to have a vision of universal brotherhood, and in the course of the
journey he understands that the ‘suffering humanity’ is one. Now he can understand fully his officer’s saying “All the rules, the theorems, all the ideas—everything has been shattered in this war, buried in the mud.”

The rustic consciousness of the young hero is made to perceive with great clarity a profoundly human truth: the common soldiers—be they Indian, French or German—shared a common fate. Thus in Anand’s novel the army is made to mirror not so much a nation as a ‘class’ of exploited human beings. Spilling a drop of blood of any nationality amounts to shedding the blood of the whole human race.

The factor that particularly helps Anand in placing the War in the right perspective is the agrarian, colonial background of the protagonist. Lalu is a representative peasant boy who pursues like a number of other Indian peasants, a desperate and sterile quest across the waters. What prompts Lalu and the host of fanners from the remote Indian villages to turn soldiers in a war that does not concern them, and in a geography unknown to them is their poverty. Famine, drought, money-lenders and heavy taxation by the government—these compel the humble folks to flee from their villages. To protect their lands from being auctioned and to save their families from starvation, disease and death, the lads join the army:

For when they first joined the army, these legionaries did so because, as the second, third or fourth sons of a peasant family overburdened with debt, they had to go and earn a little ready cash to pay off the interest on the mortgage of the few acres of land, the only thing which stood between the family and its fate.... Besides the soldier pledged to fight the battle of the King-Emperor, brought the necessary prestige to keep the policeman at bay and to bail out brothers, fathers and uncles who were arrested for non-payment of rent or debt.

The peasants are separated from their natural inheritance, i.e., land and village. The King-Emperor’s War has thus caused the migration, displacement and alienation of the subjects. As Saros Cowasjee observes, “The preservation of their own land,
or a grant of piece of land for bravery by the Sarkar is what these peasants fight for.”

Anand’s novel records the fate of such people: the soldiers return to their homes with the promised gifts as yet unrealized, and to discover that their families have perished either because of famine or epidemic. Lalu’s ambition was to reclaim the strip of his land that had been mortgaged: “When I come back, I shall ask the Karnal Sahib to order the bania to give back our mortgages, and to get the landlord to return the lands he has seized from us as a reward for fighting in this war”—he had expressed his hope in letter from the front to his mother. But on his return he finds his family destroyed, his mother and father dead, his brother turned a ‘mystic Sadhu’ and his house and lands auctioned.

In Lalu’s tragedy lies the tragedy of the Indian village and Anand dramatizes a poignant truth: to dispossess any one of land is to deny him an identity. It is in this light that the reader is made to understand the soldier’s desperate task to save his land at the cost of his life. Thus viewed, the image of ‘Joan of Arc’ (‘Girl Jarnel’ or Girl general as Lalu calls her) becomes particularly relevant. He is fascinated by the gigantic statue of Joan he sees at Orleans. It is important to note that the simple peasant lad from India can esteem Joan of Arc through the image of the Queen of Jhansi; who had fought the English to assert the rights of her people: “And the maid seemed to become a heroine like the Rani of Jhansi. Lalu felt the blood coursing in his veins with the ambition to follow her on the path of glory.”

Lalu’s own life in a way is an enactment of Joan’s. Joan, a village girl, daughter of an agriculturist, was a patriot and liberating force. Commanded by extraordinary visions she held the sword and drove the English colonizer out of France. But she was betrayed and burnt alive on false charges. Lalu, similarly, the peasant boy fights in the War to liberate his family and village from the monstrous forces of exploitation. And like Joan, he too is betrayed. Instead of securing a piece of land as he had dreamt all along, Lalu becomes a suspect since he had been a German captive.
A writer with social vision, Anand through employing myths translates the vigour of the past into vividness of the present. Anand renders European in terms of Indian myths. The mythical method in the novel serves to powerfully delineate the predicament of the contemporary world. Such a method is helpful to connect the past with the present. Besides, the Indian consciousness is ridden with myths, rites and rituals. Myth is a natural inheritance for an Indian, and experience or observation becomes perceptible to him mainly within the frame of inherited myth. It is but natural for Lalu to arrange all his European experience in terms of Indian myths and mythical figures, such as Yama and Kali. These images help him to register continental realities.

Before joining the army, he had imagined Europe or Vilayat as a veritable heaven. But as the Indian legionaries march through Marseilles, Orleans and Flanders to the warfront, Lalu’s Vilayat turns out to be the Indian hell. The colour of the sky resembles the colour of the roof of hell. The trenches corroborate too well the descriptions of the Hindu hell. The sepoys are compelled to remain in the dugouts which are filled with muddy water due to incessant rains. The sepoys, isolated from one another, live in ‘subterranean darkness.’ Plagued by insects and lice and cold and hunger the sepoys trail through mud and marshes. And they are constantly exposed to the shelling of bombs. They are, in effect, transported to the netherworld:

They had already come through the long and weary trail and were now in the stage of waiting in this vast, timeless universe for their doom to fulfil itself as if they had been suddenly transplanted into the world of their ancestors where men struggled against the elements of Gods and Destiny.9

The entire battlefield changes into a vast graveyard: a Netherworld populated by ‘unhoused ghosts’ and ruled by Yama, the God of Death. The soldiers from thousands of miles away suffer and die in a battle that has neither purpose nor meaning for them. Through one of Lalu’s nightmares Anand captures the exact picture of the battlefield:
The village was festering with the dirty water which had been let loose by the demons to smother the fire, but in the foreground a great battle was raging between the hosts of Kali and the Sepoys. And a multitude of dead was piling up, with contorted legs, blue nails, folded arms, bulging eyes and frothing angry mouths, men whose pain racked faces spread a trembling dread and sorrow.  

The traditional belief that crossing the sea is a sin appears to find justification, as Lalu recalls his mother’s description of different hells that sinners have to pass through:

the bell where beings are cut, wounded and bruised by Yama and his hosts; the hell where reborn beings are struck down with blazing weapons, severed into pieces and left to rot in the mud and the slime; the hot and the cold hells; the hell where the sinners are crushed like Sesum seeds; and the hell where they have to swim through oceanic expanses of dirty drains.

The protagonist’s earlier romantic pictures of Europe as ‘some heaven’ has now actual experience of the hell that Europe is.

Anand’s technical use of the image of the Graveyard and the Greenland is crucial to the meaning of the novel. In the cause of civilisation the European continent converts itself into an enormous graveyard.

The English transplant the peasants of the Indian sub-continent to the European war-front. These farmers had neither known what shellfire or high explosives were; they called war planes ‘steel birds’; and had only been taught bayonet-fighting. But, ironically they are asked to face the strangest weaponry. And, this increases the ‘hellish’ effect of Europe. The Sepoys—separated and secluded—wander lonely in the underground of trenches. The smell of the burning flesh, the grey sky, darkness and the loneliness repeatedly emphasize the graveyard atmosphere. And the Indian soldiers “isolated and apart they sat thus, these ghosts from another warmer
world transplanted into this creeping wet cold autumnal world of Franceville.”

The image of the graveyard is extensively used in the novel. Every soldier feels threatened by a ghostly existence. For example, Daddy Dhanoo, a father-figure to Lalu, had always insisted on the ceremonial rites on his body. In fact, his objection to coming to this war was that he might not receive the ceremonial rites. But when he dies in the drains with no ceremonial rites, Lalu suffers from a terrible sense of guilt for not having been able to offer the last rites on Dhanoo’s body. After all he was regarded as an adopted son by Dhanoo. Lalu moans in his dream:

and yet the ghost of the corpse, became the spirit of Dhanoo, was pursuing him, for to his crazed brain it seemed as if the old man was following him about, chastising him, the adopted son, to offer the last rites on his body. 

Lalu loses all his companions one by one and becomes lonely. Their ghosts mingle with Yama’s hordes and demand the lives of those who are alive. Thus, the dreamland of Lalu turns into a cemetery populated by malignant spirits.

But Anand does not allow his narrative to lose itself in a cemetery-world. Lalu is allowed a more healthy dream:

And then she (Kali) shook the bells on her feet so that a great annihilation began, loud blares of trumpets, the banging of gongs, the drumming of drums. And the mud houses began to fall, the towers of huge buildings collapsed, the earth cracked and only a window remained through which a greenland came into view.

Anand delicately balances the image of the green land against the image of the graveyard. The tender vision of a green land is but the farmer’s village. The French Farm-house by the brook where Lalu had rested contained a hope of life. The death harboring Front line war is contrasted with the life-giving countryside of France. The village milieu in France enables Lalu to envision a hope for his village. His hopes of reforming his village, getting his family out of debt and of
increasing the yield of their land, takes a more definite shape. Lalu's vague "idealism and desire to change his country, which were evident in The Village, find a concrete basis in reality when he sees a French farm for the first time, notices the method of cultivation, the resulting prosperity."\(^{15}\)

Lalu thinks that by adopting machines he could save his family from the exploitative system. The letter that Lalu writes from billets is his passionate account of France:

This country is full of precious things such as machine ploughs, steel implements, sheep, pigs, cons, chickens... The Francis [Sic] of Franceville and the Flamands of Flanders are wonderful cultivators. They plough five times as much land in a day with tractor machine as we do in ten days with a wooden scratcher.... The reason why these people are happier is because they do not borrow money from moneylenders, but from the bank at very low interest.\(^{16}\)

The sight of a clean, green, prosperous French farm appeals immensely to Lalu. The French farmers' love of their land and livestock, their openness and friendliness greatly instruct him and there establishes a bond of friendship between him and the French. Lalu can hope that his own village in India would testify to the reality of the greenland whose vision he had in a French village.

One could say that by setting his novel in the European Continent Anand ensures the Indianness of his work, and poses the problems of the colonized people more sharply on the Colonizer's Mainland.

**REFERENCES**

5. *Black Waters*, 205-06.


