



RESEARCH PAPER

**Beauty in Brutality: A Study of the Use of Imagery in David Diop's
*At Night All Blood is Black***

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ABSTRACT

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David Diop's novel *At Night All Blood is Black* tells the story of Alfa Ndiaye who is a Senegalese soldier fighting along with so many other black African soldiers like himself against the German troops in the Great War. The novel brings to surface the horrors of war. The writer has adopted a style for his novel that is deeply symbolic and poetic. The present study focuses on the effectiveness of the use of imagery in the novel. The study considers the imagery that is figurative in nature. Taking insights from Cuddon's (1994) discussion of imagery, the study tries to find out what are the sources of imagery in the novel. The study singles out the various types of images like the Visual, Olfactory, Tactile, Auditory, Gustatory, and Kinaesthetic, etc. The study finds out that the imagery is not merely decorative and that it serves to heighten the effect which the writer intends to create.

Introduction

The *At Night All Blood is Black* is the English translation of a French novel *Frère d'âme* by David Diop. The original title means 'soul brother'. The novel has been translated in English by Anna Moschovakis who is an American poet, translator and writer. The novel is the winner of the 2021 International Booker Prize along with several other international prizes and has been translated into many different languages of the world. Diop becomes the first French fiction writer as well as the first writer of African origin to get this honour. Diop's mother was from France and his father was a Senegalese. This duality is an important aspect of the central theme of the novel. The protagonist of the novel, Alfa Ndiaye says, "I am the wasp and the flower" (p. 137). About her girlfriend, he tells us, "Fary had eyes that were both doe and lioness" (p. 90). These two examples contain the key to the understanding of the novel:

the imagery of the animal world. The Great War turns the battlefield into a virtual jungle with most of the laws of jungle carried out for practical purposes.

Diop's French great-grandfather had served in World War I, but he never shared his experiences of the war with anyone. His silence served as a source of inspiration for Diop because he wanted to fill this gap of silence. The novel describes the experiences of the West African riflemen fighting for France (which was not their native land) against the Germans. Gail Collins (2021) writes, "In World War I the French government drafted around 200,000 soldiers from its colonies, including Senegal. These recruitments were not always voluntary". Diop wanted to give voice to the silent suffering of "more than 135,000 African rifleman on European battlefields, where at least 30,000 were killed" (Chrisafis, 2021). The sacrifices of these brave soldiers were never properly acknowledged in French history. The central character Ndiaye's mind serves as a parallel battle ground where diverse forces, psychological as well as cultural are engaged in a complex conflict. Diop has skilfully adopted the techniques of the stream of conscious and the interior monologue. His style is deeply poetic and, therefore, symbolic. Imagery has been deftly used to personify a landscape that is both mental and geographical.

Material and Methods

Literature implies the use of language in an artistic and innovative manner. Imagery may be regarded as one of the most fundamental and prominent elements of literary language to achieve this purpose. Highlighting the significance of imagery, Murfin and Ray (2003, pp. 209-212) write, "Imagery is a central component of almost all imaginative literature." They further write, "All symbols depend on images". Patrick Murray (1982, pp. 60-65) observes that "an image may be created by direct description as well as by means of simile and metaphor". For him, "The commonest single type of image is the visual one". He also observes that the most prominent quality of Shakespeare's finer plays and poetry is "the condensation and suggestiveness of the imagery". Murray differentiates between two types of imagery. 'Ornamental imagery' intends to create the "decorative effect", and, 'Organic imagery' is used "to do something more than merely invite admiration".

Barton and Hudson (1997, pp. 88-89) are of the opinion that the term imagery refers to "descriptions meant to appeal to the senses". Just like Murray, they also feel that the most common type of image is the visual one. For them, a pattern of imagery is developed to "associate a certain concept or quality with a character, setting, or action". They also suggest that imagery is used "to create texture and tone in writing". Abrams (1999, pp. 121-2) writes that the most important function of imagery is "to make poetry *concrete*". For him, there are three distinct uses of the term imagery. He writes that imagery denotes "all the objects and qualities of sense perception". Imagery, in this sense refers to "sense qualities" that are visual as well as "auditory, tactile (touch), thermal (heat and cold), olfactory (smell), gustatory (taste), and kinaesthetic (sensations of movements)." Secondly, the use of imagery signifies "specific descriptions of visible objects and scenes". And lastly, imagery, for Abrams, refers to figurative language.

For Peck and Coyle (2002, pp. 40-43), “. . . imagery covers every concrete object, action and feeling in a poem”. For them, images “ground the poem in a particular experience and context”. Peck and Coyle write that imagery is an element of poetry. Therefore, it “does on a small scale what poetry does as a whole”. They think that imagery is not merely “decorative ornament”. Mario Klarer (2004, p. 29) sees the term ‘image’ as an important as well as controversial term. He traces the word ‘image’ to its Latin source ‘imago’ meaning picture. That is why to Klarer, the word image suggests “. . . a predominantly visual component of a text which can, however, also include other sensory impressions”. According to Childs and Fowler (2006, p. 115), an image refers to “. . . any sensuous effect provoked by literary language”. This definition offers a very broad, or as Childs and Fowler put it themselves, loose meaning of the term. For them descriptive poetry flourished in the eighteenth century because imagination was seen as “a faculty for visualization” and literature, therefore, served as a medium for evoking visual responses in readers. For Childs and Fowler, New Criticism “. . . allows whole poems to be regarded as ‘images’”. Seen from this point of view, the whole play, *Macbeth*, for instance, “becomes one symbolic utterance, a ‘dramatic poem’ (or, of course, an ‘image’)” (p. 115).

The present study, along with taking insights from other commentators, draws particularly on the view of imagery as given by Cuddon (1994, pp. 442-4). The word imagery, writes Cuddon, is derived from the Latin which means ‘making of likeness’. For him, the term imagery implies “the use of language to represent objects, actions, feelings, thoughts, ideas, states of mind and any sensory or extra-sensory experiences”. Cuddon distinguishes between the ‘literal’, ‘perceptual’, and ‘conceptual’ imagery. The ‘Literal image’ does not involve the use of figures of speech. It “may or may not convey a visual image”. The ‘Perceptual image’ involves the use of figurative language. Cuddon cites a phrase as an example from Redgrove’s poem: “hedgerows file slowly”. The metaphorical use of the word ‘file’ makes it a ‘perceptual image’. The phrase “castle of God” is an example of ‘Conceptual imagery’. It may be difficult to visualise such a castle, but it may be possible to form an idea of it. Imagery, usually involves the use of figures of speech. But the use of figures of speech is not essential to it.

Cuddon quotes lines from Peter Redgrove’s poem ‘Lazarus and the Sea’ (cited in Cuddon, 1994, pp. 443-4) and then illustrates the types of images that are based on sense experiences. (i) A Visual image involves the use of the eye, and paints a mental picture. Example: “Standing out like roots in my tall grave”. (ii) An Olfactory image involves the sense of smell as in “I scented the antique moistures”. (iii) A Gustatory image excites our sense of taste: “They slopped in my mouth”. (iv) An Auditory image appeals to our sense of hearing: “The tide of my death came whispering”. (v) A Tactile image evokes the sense of touch: “. . . made the rough wood of my bed, (most dear), / Standing out like roots in my tall grave”. (vi) A Kinaesthetic image is related to the sense of physical motion and effort: “Quietened my jolting breath with a soft argument”. (vii) An Abstract image appeals to the intellect: “. . . But this calm dissolution / Came after my agreement to the necessity of it”. Cuddon observes that

an image may not be a pure thing. It can easily fit into more than one category. Commenting on the flexibility of images, Cuddon writes: “they overlap and intermingle and thus combine” (p. 444).

The novel, *At Night All Blood is Black* by David Diop, is a work of fiction that is rich in poetic implications. Although the themes of the novel are related to the issues of the violence of war, the existential crisis of certain individuals and the inner conflicts of the protagonist, the language used by the author is simultaneously simple on the surface and complex in its connotations. Diop has made a skilful use of imagery in his novel. The present study is an effort to conduct an analysis of the use of imagery in Diop’s novel. It has already been observed that imagery is a characteristic feature of all literary language whether used in poetry or fiction. It may, therefore, not be possible to analyse all types of imagery used by Diop in his novel in a short paper like the present one. The present study omits the ‘Literal image’ and focuses exclusively on the ‘Perceptual image’ as defined by Cuddon (1994). For the purpose of the present study, the following research questions have been framed:

- (i) What are the sources of imagery in Diop’s novel? From what fields of life has the imagery of *At Night all Blood is Black* been drawn?
- (ii) What types of imagery based on sense perception (for example, Visual, Olfactory, etc.) have been used by Diop in his novel?

The study will also try to find out the impact of the imagery on the major issues that have been dealt with in the novel. The study conducts a thorough examination of the text of the selected novel making use of the methods of close reading and textual analysis. The actual novel was written in the French language and it has been translated by Anna Moschovakis who is a poet herself and has authored an award - winning collection of poetry.

Discussion and Analysis

The Sources and the Types of Imagery

The Imagery of Warfare

Imagery in Diop’s selected text has been taken from diverse sources. The more frequently used fields of life include: warfare, slaughterhouse and butchery, fauna (animal world), the female body/anatomy/sex, farming, and water/river/ocean. The scene of the action is the active battlefield, therefore, it makes sense that the imagery should originate from this source. The following discussion is an analysis of the imagery of warfare in the novel:

Alfa Ndiaye, the protagonist and narrator of the story tells us, “it hit me brutally in the head, like a giant seed of war dropped from the metallic sky, the day Mademba Diop died” (p. 4). The sensuous imagery in this sentence is Kinaesthetic (“it hit me . . . dropped”) and Visual (“seed of war . . . the metallic sky”). The image of “a

giant seed of war” comes both from the fields of warfare and farming. This image creates a sense of huge destruction caused by war. The image of the ‘seed of war’ has been repeated on pages 34 and 109. David Diop, the novelist, is so much obsessed with the imagery of war that he uses it in a situation that is not related to war. The eyes of Ndiaye’s beloved, Fary are described as “earth-shattering tornado” (p. 90).

The trench is an essential part of the landscape of the battleground. This is how the writer portrays the trenches: “While the others hid in the gaping wounds in the earth we called trenches” (p. 4). The earth, in normal circumstances, is a source of peace and security for the dwellers on earth. But, during war this earth takes the shape of a wound and living in trenches is like fostering a growing wound. Here also the imagery is Kinaesthetic (“hid”) plus Visual (“the gaping wound”). The pain of dying Mademba is described in these terms: “I couldn’t cut the barbed wire of his suffering” (p. 5). The imagery, here, is Kinaesthetic (“cut”) and Visual (“barbed wire”). The imagery of “barbed wire” refers to the inability of the protagonist to put an end to the suffering of his dying friend by putting him to death. The ‘barbed wire’, here, is a symbol of human limitation, of the fundamental existentialist crisis, of our human choices, of what, as humans, we can do, and what we cannot do. It refers to the dangerous territory we are afraid of entering into. Commenting on the dilemma of the protagonist, Caroline Laurent (2021) writes, “Alfa Ndiaye becomes a symbol of the ambivalence of war and its destructive power”.

The Imagery of Slaughterhouse and Butchery

War is inevitably connected with violence and bloodshed. But David Diop takes war to a higher level of madness. He magnifies it in order to portray it in all its ugliness. Therefore, the imagery of slaughterhouse and butchery is to be found quite prominently in the novel. Here are some examples from the text:

David Diop depicts the condition of Mademba, Ndiaye’s more than brother, right after he has been hit by the enemy, “his guts in the air, his insides outside, like a sheep that has been ritually dismembered after the sacrifice” (p. 4). In fact, there is a lot that is shown to have been ‘dismembered’ in the novel: Ndiaye from Mademba, Mademba from his parents, Ndiaye from his beloved Fary, Ndiaye’s mother Penndo Ba from her husband, son, father and brothers. The battleground shows us scenes which are hardly to be seen at a slaughterhouse, “his right hand groping at the ground to gather his scattered guts, slimy as freshwater snakes” (p. 5). The imagery in this case is a combination of Kinaesthetic (‘groping’, ‘to gather’), Visual (‘scattered guts’, ‘snakes’), and Tactile (‘slimy’). The battlefield has been shown to be a place that witnesses even greater cruelty than a slaughterhouse does because it degrades both the killer and the killed. The killer turns into a madman and the killed into an animal that is killed for sport.

The Imagery of the Animal World

Many images in David Diop's novel come from the animal kingdom. The animals mentioned in the novel can be divided into two categories: the innocent and the predatory, or the weak and the more powerful. The sheep (p. 4, 5) and the lamb (p. 29) have been mentioned as sacrificial animals to be "ritually dismembered" (p. 4). They stand for those soldiers who are unfit for the action of war. Even an old lion is a weak creature and cannot defend himself. Mademba, after having been fatally wounded by the enemy, suffered "like an old solitary lion, eaten alive by hyenas" (p. 6). Though Mademba loses his life at the hands of the enemy, some respect is shown for him because he belongs to the protagonist's party. Later in the novel, however, Mademba's physical strength is mocked at when his chest is declared to be "narrow as a pigeon's" (p. 89). Mademba is compared to yet another bird: "Mademba was too frail, as light and delicate as a crowned crane" (p. 110). The spectacle of the killing of the mutinous soldiers is described in this way: "These four traitorous friends leapt one by one from the trench, flailing like chickens who have just been decapitated and keep running for a while" (p. 73). So, it is obvious that birds have been portrayed as a symbol of weakness and helplessness.

The guts of a dying man (Mademba) are an ugly thing, and therefore, compared to snakes (p. 5). When Alfa moved out of his trench in search of his enemy, he looked like a snake: "I slid like a snake along the side of the trench . . . I was like the mamba snake that takes on the colour of the earth on which it slithers" (p. 62). The lethal effect of biting words is emphasized in this fashion: "why my mind hatched words as sharp as a locust's bite" (p. 43). The imagery, here, is Kinaesthetic ('hatched') plus Tactile ('locust's bite'). Alfa sprinkled the severed enemy hands with salt and kept them in the oven under the warm ash until they "tanned and smoothed like camel leather" (p. 50). The two animals of entirely different nature have been combined into one: "Fary had eyes that were both doe and lioness" (p. 90). The impact of Ndiaye's mother's memory on his mind has been depicted in these words: "the memory of my mother had calcified the entire surface of my mind so it was hard like a tortoise's shell" (p. 109). The last chapter of the novel narrates the story of the 'lion-sorcerer' who married and enslaved the "fickle daughter of a vain king" (p. 140).

The Imagery of the Female Body/Sex

The imagery of the female body and sex has not been used in a decent manner. The protagonist and narrator, Alfa Ndiaye seems to have been a great fan of the womankind. He enjoyed his sensual experience with Fary, his beloved whom he liked very much: "Her voice was soft, like the lapping of the river against fishermen's canoes on quiet mornings. Fary's smile was the dawn, her ass round as dunes in the Lompoul desert" (p. 90). But, on the battlefield, the beauty of the female body and the attraction of her sexual organ change into something monstrous as well as evil. He seems to have travelled many centuries back into the Medieval age when woman was regarded as a fallen, sinful creature. It is the trench that is to be blamed. The trench is frequently seen as an "outsized female organ" (p. 10). Ndiaye tells us that their trench

looked to him like “the slightly parted lips of an immense woman’s sex” (p. 9). Even the enemy trench was open like the sexual organ of a huge woman (p. 62).

Later in the novel, ‘the rumour’ is personified into a shameless, evil woman. The secret of the blue eyed (German) enemy’s severed hands was no longer a secret. Alfa’s fellow soldiers were now quite aware of his savagery and madness about cutting off the hand of the enemy soldiers that he killed brutally during the fighting. He was now being feared as a sorcerer. And that is why he hated this rumour: “The rumour spread. It spread, and as it spread it shed its clothes and, eventually, its shame” (p. 33). The ‘rumour’, “half-naked, shameless, like a fallen woman” (p. 36), is condemned because she had seen the protagonist in the full nakedness of his brutality. The rumour is compared to a whore that gives herself to everybody quite cheaply: “the brazen rumour ended up with her legs spread, her ass in the air” (p. 33).

The Imagery of Farming and Water

Apart from the sources of imagery discussed above, the imagery is also drawn from some other sources, for example, from farming. The image of the ‘seed of war’ (p. 4, 34) has already been mentioned. Here is another instance of the use of imagery taken from the field of farming: “the vengeance demanded by my brain, furrowed by your tears, seeded by your cries” (p. 26). The sensuous aspects of the imagery here are taken from Kinaesthetic image (‘furrowed’, ‘seeded’), Tactile and Visual (‘tears’), and Auditory (‘cries’). Similarly, imagery is also taken from the field of water: “Fary Thiam smelled like incense and the green waters of the river” (p. 82). The images in this case are Kinaesthetic (‘smelled’), Olfactory (‘incense’), and Visual (‘green waters’). The imagery, here, as in most cases, is multiple rather than pure. There are references to fish also. The interior of Mademba’s belly had come out and “was sucking at the air like a freshly caught fish” (p. 27). Ndiaye dries the severed hands of his enemy German soldiers by applying salt to them in the same way as back home they dry fish to preserve (p. 50).

Conclusion

David Diop’s novel *At Night All Blood is Black*, though a relatively short text, consisting of less than 150 pages, is yet loaded with meaning. It encompasses the themes of the marginalization and othering of the West African low ranking soldiers (from Senegal) who were fighting to defend their colonial French masters against the German enemy, their portrayal as both the savage and the naive by their French masters, the horror and brutality of war, the inner conflicts of a complex mind, and the absurdity and meaninglessness of life for the people who are caught within the vortexes of life. The imagery of the battlefield, slaughterhouse, animal world, female body, farming, and water helps to paint the themes on a larger canvas. The imagery has not been imposed on the text rather it has been used judiciously as well as artistically. That is why the imagery in the novel is not merely decorative, it is functional. Most of the imagery used is concrete rather than abstract. Among the types of images that have been used more frequently are: Kinaesthetic, Visual, Tactile and

Auditory; and this is, of course, in keeping with the scene of the action, that is War. And finally, one great impact of the overall imagery used in Diop's novel is that: to a theme mainly related to the brutality of war, it imparts a sense of beauty.

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