

ACROSS THE BLACK WATERS

Mulk Raj Anand

(1939)

Story

This novel, the second in a trilogy, continues the story of Lalu, a peasant from north India. At the end of the first book (*The Village*), Lalu has joined the British Indian army as a way of escaping a trumped-up charge of criminal assault by a landlord in his village. *Across the Black Waters* follows Lalu as he is sent to fight in Europe in 1914 against the Germans. The title refers to the belief by orthodox Hindus that the anyone who crossed the sea, travelling to Europe, South Africa or Australia, was thought to be polluted and would therefore be excommunicated from their (usually high) caste. Lalu is not high-caste, but the dangers he faces are no less dramatic: death and war. Written from the point of view of the Indian soldiers (commonly called 'sepoys'), this is the only Indian novel in English that takes the Great War as its subject. Indeed, it is one of the most affecting novels about war in any language.

When Lalu's ship arrives at Marseilles, he and his fellow Indian soldiers are excited and shout with joy. The soldiers are also heartened by the reception they get while marching through French towns and villages on the way to the front in northern France. Lalu's enthusiasm continues even when he first goes into the trenches, and he feels honoured to be fighting alongside the British 'Tommies.' Joy then turns to despair when, during their first assault on enemy lines, many soldiers are killed and wounded. Horrified at the death toll in this fictionalised version of the First Battle of Ypres (October-November 1914), Lalu and his comrades begin to question the purpose of the war. The German guns are superior to the British ones, and the British generals appear confused. Then the cold weather comes, many soldiers get frostbite and some actually freeze to death. The soldiers become so battle-hardened and emotionally numbed that they don't even complain when they are moved from one trench to another and fight another battle. Nothing, they think, could be worse than that first battle. Long sections of the book describe the conditions of war, living in a 'subterranean darkness' that is likened to Hindu mythic visions of the netherworld ruled by Yama, god of Death. Lice, rats and the bitter cold also make life miserable.

Lalu loses many of his comrades. An especially poignant death is that of Daddy Dhanoo, a sort of father figure to him. An even greater loss is the suicide of Kirpu, whom Lalu always addressed as 'uncle.' But the most disturbing incident is the summary execution of a terrified sepoy by his officer.

However, there is also some relief away from the battle front. One day, when his regiment is pulled back to a village behind the front lines, Lalu and his comrades go to a tavern to drink and pick up girls, but they quarrel among themselves, a brawl breaks out and they are forced to leave. Later, Lalu makes friends with a French girl, named Marie. Finally, there is also a brief moment of happiness when the soldiers on both sides declare an unofficial truce on Christmas Eve and climb out of the trenches to meet each other in no-man's-land, where they sing Christmas carols (a famous historical event). In the end, however, there is another terrible battle, in which Lalu is taken prisoner by the Germans.

Themes

War The most powerful element of this novel is its depiction of the horrors of the Great War as experienced by Lalu and the other Indian soldiers (sepoys). These men have been recruited to fight, but they have little, if any, conception of what this first mechanised war will be like. Many of them are mercenaries, like Lalu, who join the army out of financial need or sense of adventure, but they have never been in combat before nor have they ever travelled outside the country. Like the British soldiers, they are fed propaganda about the monstrous Germans and the noble cause of fighting for King and Country. As the author describes it, 'They wait, uncomprehending and still, ignorant of what awaited them in the murderous devices of the devil who controlled their destinies.' Soon they discover the realities of war, especially in the author's account of the famous First Battle of Ypres (autumn 1914), when more than two hundred thousand soldiers died. The relentless German bombardment is one thing, but there is also wet and freezing trenches, lice and rats. At one point Anand describes the intense artillery barrage and rifle fire 'like a rapid dysentery of lead.' At various points, the soldiers speak with the sarcasm of disillusionment. When one man is hit by rifle

fire, one man cries, 'Bravery! What bravery!' Then the same man is hit a second time and large pieces of flesh are torn away from both his body. When the injured man is recommended for a medal, Kirpu comments with seething sarcasm, 'Oh, yes, a medal. Let him wear it on his arse, now that he has nothing else to wear it on.' Some sepoy are shot for desertion or commit suicide. In these ways, the initial sense of adventure and commitment are smashed to pieces, just like the bodies scattered on the battle field. Finally, the soldiers are tormented by visions of Hindu gods and goddesses of death, wielding swords, garlanded with skulls and dripping with blood. In the end, the Hindu belief that crossing the black waters is dangerous is confirmed by the hellish conditions that the men endure.

Nationalism Rumbling beneath the guns of war in this novel is the theme of nationalism. It is noteworthy that the period of the Great War (1914-1918) coincided with a surge of anti-colonialism and nationalism in India, which had been growing stronger ever since the ill-conceived Partition of Bengal (1905). Gandhi returned to India from South Africa in 1915 to give moral impetus to the political struggle of nationalists, which was also boosted by the experiences of the troops in Europe, who not only saw that the British were vulnerable but also began to question the morality of the Empire. In addition, some Muslim soldiers were angered when Turkey joined the war and they found themselves fighting against the Caliph of Islam. Amid these swirling emotions and events, Anand presents a nuanced view of the soldiers' views about the British government for whom they are fighting. Just as in *The Village*, the first novel in this famous trilogy, some Indians express support 'King and Country', some are critical and some have no opinion at all. At the beginning of the campaign, in October 1914, there is little dissent among the Indian soldiers, but as the cold weather kicks in and comrades die, anger becomes political and some men support the growing nationalist movement back home. Hunkered down in wet and muddy trenches, the sepoy begin to grumble about 'fighting a war that is not ours.' At the same time, the Indian officers in the army, continually remind the sepoy that the '*sarkar* (government) is good.' The most explicit statement of this disillusionment comes half way into the story when a sepoy returns to the trenches after an unsuccessful attack on the German lines a few hundred feet away. 'Oh, I won't fight,' he declares. 'I will not fight for this dirty *sarkar*.' Again, however, when these same soldiers have to climb up the ladders and go over the parapet a few days later, they give each other heart by saying that they should 'prove true to the salt of the *sarkar*.' That is, they should do their duty because they are paid by government ('taking their salt'). In this way, the novel presents a kaleidoscope of opinions, some of which change through the course of the story. Although Anand could not have known this at the time, historical research on letters written by actual soldiers has shown that his novel accurately reflects the soldiers' views.

Cross-cultural encounters A third, more minor, theme is the cross-cultural experiences of the Indian soldiers in Europe. Many of these men had never been out of their region (the Punjab, or Madras or Bengal), let alone India. Most were also uneducated men with little experience of urban life. Suddenly, they are recruited into an organisation with thousands of British men, transported half way around the world and thrown into the towns and cities of northern France. At first, these naive sepoy are self-conscious about drinking in the same place as British men (called the '*sahibs*'). When the sepoy are staying in a French town, they go to a tavern, where they are first confused and then excited by the kissing they see around them. Then some of them begin to flirt with the women, who encourage their attention, and it seems that money will be exchanged for sex. But an argument among the soldiers themselves breaks out and the men are thrown out of the tavern. On another occasion, Lalu, the main character, makes friends with a French girl, but he is acutely embarrassed by the attention aroused when she takes his arm in public. Later on in the novel, when their camp has to be broken down and everything loaded into trucks, Lalu remarks on the transgression of Hindu taboos by the men working in the kitchen, who wear leather belts and boots while preparing and cooking food (touching leather or the dead part of any animal or human is considered polluting). The sepoy are also upset when a French woman walks into their kitchen, thereby polluting their food. In these myriad ways, the Indian soldiers have to negotiate their way through a maze of cross-cultural encounters.

Lalu (Awakened)

Character Lalu enters the novel as a young man, perhaps twenty-one or twenty-two years old, with a good, English-medium education. When the novel ends, only a year later, he is a much more mature and politically aware person. In that short time, he has been through a war in Europe, seen his friends killed and been taken prisoner by the Germans. Already, from the first novel in the trilogy (*The Village*), we know that Lalu has strong emotions. He is angry but confused about the disasters that have led to the loss of his family's land and to him being falsely accused of a criminal assault. Lalu goes to war thinking that when he returns, the greedy landlord who has seized his lands back home will return them 'as a reward for having fought in the war.' Although he is still to some extent controlled by his peasant upbringing, with its traditional values of loyalty and honour within close kin networks, his experiences in the army, fighting alongside British soldiers and against German soldiers, plus meeting French people and becoming friends with a French girl,

open up a new world to the naive young man. He gains a wider perspective on human nature and on the political realities of colonialism and nationalism. He cannot fully escape the religious-based traditions of his past, of course, and he sometimes struggles to reconcile those traditions with his new awareness. In the end, the character of Lalu, in the trenches and battle fields of northern France, stands out as one of the most complex figures in English-language fiction about the Great War.

Activities Lalu is a soldier, whose every hour is determined by army regulations and discipline. He wakes early, stands for roll-call and then goes through parade drills and training exercises, including what is called 'route-marches'. When marching across the French countryside, he likes to sing old songs with his comrades. Once he is in the trenches, the routine changes, and he is busy cleaning his gun or helping in the kitchen or repairing defences. In leisure time, he plays cards or tries to sleep. He also spends time cleaning his uniform, especially the puttees, grooming his long hair and adjusting his turban. Lalu also gets to know a French family during his stay in a village and is sometimes received by them as a guest for a meal.

Illustrative moments

Inquisitive Lalu serves as a vehicle for Anand to explore a typical Indian soldier's reaction to serving in the Great War in Europe. For this reason, Lalu is portrayed as an inquisitive person, who investigates the new experiences he has and the new feelings they provoke. The most telling example of this need to explore occurs when Lalu first sets foot on foreign soil, in Marseilles, on the French Riviera. As the author describes it, Lalu 'stamped his foot to see if the impact of the earth of France is any different to the feel of Hindustan. Curiously enough, the hard surface of the quay, under the shadow of giant ships and looming cranes and steel girders, seemed different somehow. It seemed new, unlike the crumbling dust of India.' Soon, however, his fellow soldier and friend, Uncle Kirpu, punctures Lalu's idea of difference by saying, 'This land is like all land; it came with birth and it will go down with death.' Nevertheless, Lalu persists with his exploration. Soon, he is inspecting the French officers and soldiers in the town and finds them 'strangely familiar and yet very different, with their sallow, yellow complexion.' Again, as Lalu walks through a small town, he compares its 'dirty, squalid buildings to those he had seen in the harbour at Karachi, where his ship had been moored.' As this early scene unfolds, Lalu 'is obsessed with something inside him, something that struggled to burst through all the restraints of the unfamiliar, the restraints of fear of the exalted life that the Europeans lived, something that he had only glimpsed through the hedges that surrounded their bungalows back in India.' Next, Lalu visits a cathedral and admires its massive construction, intricate architecture and skilfully executed stone sculptures. Again, he wonders what civilisation could have produced such sophisticated monuments and compares the cathedral with the ancient monuments he has only heard about back in India. By taking Lalu through the French town, almost like a tourist, the author is able to illustrate his innate inquisitiveness.

Traditional Lalu is presented as a man ready for the modern world. He has 'crossed the black waters' and is serving in the army in Europe, where everything is new. And yet, he remains a deeply traditional person who cannot escape the cultural conditioning of his peasant life in the Punjab. This traditionalism is illustrated in a distressing scene in which Daddy Dhanoo is found dead in a trench. The background is that Dhanoo, who is several years older, has become a father figure to Lalu. He has guided him through the first few weeks of their experiences in France, putting an emotional arm around his shoulder whenever the younger man feels confused or afraid. One morning, however, Lalu and others discover a body lying face down in one of the water-filled trenches. Lalu is horrified as he inspects the details of the corpse with 'its swollen dead face and the ghastly purplish parlour of his skin.' Lalu is unsure whether Dhanoo committed suicide or just died in the water, but a larger problem is what to do with the corpse. In Hindu tradition, a son is obligated to take responsibility and arrange a cremation of his father's corpse. Lalu, the de facto son of the dead man, is anguished about how to discharge this duty and perform the final rites for Dhanoo. Even if he could retrieve the body, there was not enough dry wood for a funeral pyre. And even if there were enough wood, the army would not allow him to 'waste' it on a dead soldier when there were more pressing needs, such as making fires for cooking and for warmth. Lalu's filial anxiety grows and grows until he has hallucinations, in which he sees Dhanoo as a ghost or wandering soul. This is in line with Hindu belief that if a body is not properly sent to the world of the dead, it will wander the earth and disturb the living. Lalu has become a soldier in the British Indian Army, and he is fighting the Germans in northern France, but he remains a Hindu haunted by his inability to perform the funeral rites for a man he has come to regard as his father.

Awakened If we look at the three books of this trilogy as a whole, we can see that this second book (*Across the Black Waters*) is the one in which Lalu gains a new perspective. In other words, it provides the catalyst for his transformation from peasant (in the first book) to political activist (in the third book). The beginnings of Lalu's awakening lie in the horrendous first battle that he fights on the Western Front. Lalu and his fellow Indian soldiers have only arrived in France a few weeks before they are thrust into one of the

bloodiest battles of the Great War, which was the First Battle of Ypres (autumn 1914). Lalu survives but is haunted by visions of the Hindu goddess Kali, a terrifying goddess who shakes her bells and wields her swords while blood drips from her mouth. When Lalu describes his visions to his commanding officer, Owen Sahib, the British man tells him that it is another 'Indian Mutiny' (echoing the horrors of the Mutiny by Indian troops in 1857-1858). But Lachman Singh, Lalu's Indian officer, tells him that it is 'the battle hymn of Hindustan' and that he should not be frightened. The nightmare thus represents a new understanding of the world for Lalu. He has been taken out of his familiar world and then traumatised by the horrors of war, which might have landed him in a psychiatric hospital, like the Great War poets Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen. Instead, Lalu's awakening on the battlefields of northern France grant him a new understanding of himself and a new vision of the world.

Kirpu (Outspoken)

Character Kirpu, an Indian soldier, is known as 'Uncle' Kirpu because of his advanced age and common sense. He forms a particularly strong relationship with Lalu, who treats him with respect and affection. As an orderly to the Subedar Major (the highest-ranking Indian officer), Kirpu is several steps above Lalu in the military pecking order, and he later receives a promotion. Many critics have compared Kirpu to Shakespeare's Falstaff, who is a fat, vain, mocking and cowardly career soldier. The comparison holds good for most of these character traits, except for the cowardice and vanity. Kirpu is certainly the voice that mocks the pretensions of the officers, both British and Indian. But he is more than that. Unlike Falstaff, Kirpu possesses real insight into people and situations around him, which enable him to offer advice to others, such as Lalu. One of Kirpu's endearing qualities is his wicked humour, which he uses to criticise the army and the war. He makes several scathing comments, for example, this description of the morning roll-call: 'The dogs must bark early in the morning to show their master that they have been keeping watch all night.' He is a 'salt of the earth' kind of character, who speaks his mind and peppers his comments with proverbs and slang. He is also a proud man. When he is arrested for insubordination to a superior officer (an offence which is left intentionally vague), we suspect some foul-play. Perhaps the military 'brass' are trying to silence this voice of criticism and dissent. He is so proud that, rather than submit to military law and undergo a court martial, he commits suicide while still in detention.

Activities Like all the Indian soldiers, Uncle Kirpu follows a strict military routine, although he often scoffs at the mindless discipline and the obeisance shown to officers. During leisure time, he likes to smoke cigarettes, especially the French ones on offer in the countryside. He also leads the others in singing songs from their homeland and in conducting their Hindu prayers on special occasions. Unlike some of his comrades, however, he avoids frequenting the cafes and taverns of the towns in which they are billeted during their march from Marseilles to Flanders.

Illustrative moments

Outspoken One prominent aspect of Kirpu's character is his critical view of the war that he and the others are fighting. Although he is generally a loyal, traditional peasant, with fatalistic views of life, what he witnesses on the battlefields of northern France turns him into a fierce critic of the war, the officers and the British government. This anti-war sentiment is clearly expressed during the First Battle of Ypres, which began in the middle of October 1914 and concluded at the end of November that year, resulting in the deaths of more than 50,000 British, Commonwealth and Indian soldiers. There is a brief lull after the first weeks of the battle, when a temporary truce allows the medics on both sides to collect the dead and treat the wounded. This is the moment when Kirpu is looking out over the no-man's land between the two lines of trenches and says, 'I don't know why they are killing each other and making a graveyard of this land.' One of the other Indian soldiers says something about shutting up and following orders. But Kirpu will not be silent and launches into a wider condemnation of the army: 'They [the officers] never explain what we are doing-- what we're fighting for. They just bark out orders and expect you to follow them. And to die.' Again, another soldier tells him to 'pipe down or else you'll get in trouble.' And Kirpu says, 'I'm not going to keep quiet. We soldiers are the donkeys who must bear all the burden of the army on our backs.' This is moment that reveals Kirpu's deep underlying morality. He has a minor position of authority (as an orderly to the Subedar Major, the highest-ranking Indian officer), and he later is rewarded for his bravery with a promotion. But none of that will prevent him from speaking his mind after observing the senseless slaughter of so many men.

Sardonic Even before his transformation into a critic of the war, Uncle Kirpu has displayed his sardonic humour. A good illustration of his wicked satirical voice occurs a little earlier, when the Indian soldiers are just settling into life in the trenches. Kirpu has just been promoted to Lance Naik, which is roughly equivalent to a corporal in the regular British army and entitles him to wear two chevrons (an inverted 'v') on his shoulder. At this moment, he makes a little speech to his fellow Indian soldiers, using his best imitation of a clipped British accent. He stands erect, flicks an imaginary speck of dust from his shoulder and shouts at them: 'A soldier must not question an order given by a superior. No, he must obey promptly and willingly, if possible by crawling before the officer or by tying the officer's shoelaces. For an officer is like the king, father

and mother, though he has no beard like Jarg Pancham ('George the King,' referring to George V).' The listening sepoy try hard to suppress a giggle, knowing that Kirpu is the last person to kow-tow to the British. Kirpu continues, with his mocking tone: 'If you are not still convinced of the importance of an officer's position, as issuing from the King's instructions, then you have only to look at me!' As he says this, Kirpu wears a wry smile, then scowls and begins to twist his moustache at the tips, impersonating the Subedar Major, whom they all dislike because of his pomposity. It is an outstanding performance, showcasing Kirpu's sardonic humour.

Brave Cynical and sardonic, Uncle Kirpu is also a brave person, in life and in battle. There are several examples of his courageous action on the battlefield, but the most powerful illustration occurs toward the end of the novel. The situation is that Kirpu has been reported for insubordination to another Indian officer. Immediately, he is arrested and locked up in a damp guard room, while the wheels of military justice slowly turn. Papers have to be filed and sent to command headquarters many miles away, where decisions are taken and then communicated back to the trenches. The reason for his arrest is kept deliberately vague, but we suspect that the charge has been trumped up in order to silence a man who is seen as a trouble-maker. A week or more passes before Lalu plucks up his own courage to go see his friend in detention. But when Lalu arrives at the room, he is told by an officer to read an official notice that is posted on the door of the room. It reads: 'Lance Naik Kirpu Ram committed suicide last night at 2:30 hours while he was detained in the guard room for insubordination to a superior officer.' It is a cold way to announce the death of one of the best-loved soldiers (and characters in the novel). Lalu and his friends ponder his reasons for taking his life and agree that it must have been Uncle Kirpu's final act of revenge on the system of military discipline that he detested and condemned for its immorality. As Lalu says, 'He was a brave man, brave in life and brave in death.'

Lok Nath (*Across the Black Waters*, Anand) Disciplined

Character Lok Nath, who is a Lance-Corporal, is introduced as a 'tall, lanky, tyrant.' In effect, he is the drill-sergeant for the raw Indian recruits and has the difficult task of transforming a group of peasants into battle-ready soldiers, all in a few weeks. He is hard-hearted, disciplined and sometimes cruel, but also somewhat vain and easy to take offence. However, and as the author makes clear as the novel progresses, he has the best interests of the army at heart. He is determined to make the unpromising raw material of peasants into disciplined, excellent soldiers because that is his job: as he comments, 'only good soldiers will win this war.' His relationship with Lalu's platoon is complicated by the fact that, having trained them, he is then transferred to another platoon (so that the Subedar Major could give his own son a promotion) and spends the rest of the book trying to settle old scores with Lalu and his comrades. He has several unpleasant character traits and is ultimately responsible for the death of one of the most beloved characters (Uncle Kirpu). Still, as readers we do not condemn him as much as we do the horrific conditions in which men fought the Great War.

Activities As an officer and drill-sergeant, Lok Nath follows an extremely strict routine, not only for himself but also for his recruits. When he speaks to the soldiers, he likes to draw himself up as high as possible, so that he might look down on them. When he trains the men, he is severe, often slapping anyone whom he thinks is slacking off. On several occasions, he charges into the sleeping quarters of the men and rouses them to ready themselves to repel a surprise attack. He has a curious habit of rubbing his Adam's apple, as if shining it so that it might stick out more prominently. He also likes to wave his hands about when speaking to the men, in imitation of the action he is urging them to take.

Illustrative moments

Disciplined Lok Nath is charged with instilling discipline into the rag-tag recruits that are given to him once the peasants disembark at Marseilles. Already his arrogant attitude has irritated Lalu and the others, who speak back to him in mocking tones. A good example of Lok Nath's commitment to military discipline comes shortly after the soldiers have reached French shores and are relaxing in a transport truck. One of the soldiers offers Lok Nath a cigarette, using his usual sarcastic voice and saying, 'After all, Lok Nath is an officer and we rarely have the pleasure of his company.' To his obvious baiting, Lok Nath replies without rancour, 'No, I will not have a cigarette. But you are right. Officers and men belong to one family. The army. The problem with Indian soldiers is that they lose all respect for their officers. I was trained by an English officer in a Gora (white man's) regiment, and I learned that all the officers treat their men as if they were their fathers and their mothers. And, at the same time, they all eat with the same knives and forks [something that food taboos among the Indian soldiers prevented] and the men respect their officers. They may look strange to you, but they know how to observe discipline. That was what surprised me. They all click their heels and salute as if they were machines.' Lok Nath goes on to explain that he was often slapped by his superior officer while in training, which is why he sometimes hits his own recruits. 'I don't do it for pleasure,' he adds, 'but for the good of the army. For discipline.' Lok Nath is a hard and unyielding officer, who is easy to dislike,

and yet he earns some respect for his commitment to the army.

Vindictive Lok Nath's adherence to army discipline is fanatical, and it sometimes makes him a vindictive person, eager to punish whoever dares to break the rules or to stand up to him. This side of his character is demonstrated in an important scene when Lok Nath enters the barn in the French countryside, which the troops are using as a temporary barracks. He comes into the sleeping quarters at midnight, 'having prowled around outside, on his zealous tour of inspection.' When he sees the men awake and talking, he cries, 'What has happened to this camp? Why are you all still talking?' Uncle Kirpu, one of the soldiers, makes a snide remark, and Lok Nath turns on him, 'Swine! It is not the first time I have heard you demoralising the regiment.' He works himself up into a frenzy and screams, 'Come with me. I will teach you a lesson.' The lesson is that Uncle Kirpu is reported to the commanding officer for insubordination, which results in Kirpu's detention in the guard house. A few days later, Kirpu commits suicide. This is not what Lok Nath would have wanted, but he was not willing to allow a regular soldier to speak back to him. He wanted to punish that man in order to get revenge for what was merely a flippant remark. The army is a tough profession, and Lok Nath embodies its values, for good and for ill.

Sadistic Lok Nath's thirst for punishment sometimes appears like sadism, a desire to hurt and harm others. Of course, he is a soldier and war means killing, but there are moments when the author hints at a blood-thirsty streak in his character. The best illustration of this characteristic occurs in the preparation to the first (disastrous) battle at Ypres. The men are crouching down in the trenches, waiting for the whistle that is the signal to charge up the make-shift ladders and charge across no-man's land toward the German lines and deadly artillery fire. Lok Nath speaks to them in his usual stern voice, detailing the route they are to take when they climb out of the trenches. 'The Germans think you are Gurkhas with knives who will sneak up on them and kill them. For that reason the *sarkar* [British government] is using you as shock troops. As savages. Now you will show them your savagery... You must charge the enemy without fear and strike with your bayonet wherever you find him. Remember, hit him in the soft spots. Aim at the heart, or the belly or the testicles. If he has the advantage, hit him with the butt end of your rifle and then drive your bayonet into his chest. And remember, you must draw it out slowly, so that he bleeds and dies.' Listening to these details of 'soft spots', the sepoys are themselves frightened rather than emboldened. Lok Nath anticipates this reaction and adds, 'You must not be afraid! You must kill and you must want to kill.' Lok Nath may appear to be a twisted, blood-thirsty man, but it is a tribute to the author's storytelling skill that we also understand that this man has been formed (and deformed) by the horrific conditions of war.