

## **THE BRUTAL GAME: STUDYING THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION IN SELECT “AFGHANISTAN WAR” POEMS OF ALEX COCKERS**

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**Abstract:**

Sporadic war poems written before the WW1 belonged mainly to the type what we may call ‘a new kind of heroic poetry ‘because it glorified war and the arms, and sang of the battlefield and the heroism displayed by the soldiers. In fact, the changes in modern warfare tactics and strategies introduced in the World War I dismantled the heroic ideas about the wars in the twentieth century. The title of the first poem “The Brutal Game” becomes an ironical inter textuality of the term “The Great Game” which was coined by Captain Arthur Colony (1807-42) to describe the Anglo-Russian wars involving Afghanistan. In fact, Alex Cockers assessment of the US invasion of Afghanistan as an “unjust war” can be supported by Noam Chomsky’s critique of US war on terror in Afghanistan: “Wanton killing of innocent civilians is terrorism, not a war against terrorism” (Chomsky, 76). In fact, Alex Cockers visualises the future of war in Afghanistan when he says: “This war will not end/The stakes are far too high/ A few friends are gone already/ How many more will die?” (“Last Stand”). And that is why the USA has recently started negotiations with the Taliban through the initial 16-day talks in Doha, Qatar, as Reuters reported on March 12, 2019 (*Eric Knecht*). The politically sponsored media version of the war situation is contrary to the reality that has made his eyes “stretched wide open.” The pangs and sufferings that the soldier-poet has seen in the war have entered into the “dark land” beneath the lair of his consciousness.

**Keywords:** representation, study, politics etc

Narrating war in European literature dates back to Homer’s *The Iliad* that influenced even the British war poets associated with the First World War. As the Oxford scholar Colin William Macleod remarks in his “Introduction” to Homer: *Iliad Book XXIV*, “What war represents for Homer is humanity under duress and in the face of death”(8). However, the poetic representation of Afghanistan as a battleground for British soldiers dates back to Rudyard Kipling’s poems like “That day” and “The Soldier” recounting the Anglo-Afghan

wars of the period of the Victorian high imperialism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. After the two waves of British war poetry centering upon the WW1 and WW2 in the twentieth century, the early decades of the twenty first century is witnessing the third wave of British war poetry representing the British participation in wars led by the USA in Iraq and Afghanistan. Alex Cockers, whose poetry is focused in this paper, is one of the British war poets belonging to the Afghanistan War Poetry group. The fundamental contextual difference between the WW1 and WW2 war poetry on the one hand, and the Afghanistan War Poetry on the other hand, is that, while the former is Eurocentric, the latter is oriental. Therefore, it is interesting to study Alex Cockers as a war poet to find out his similarities and dissimilarities with the 20<sup>th</sup> century Eurocentric war poets on the one side, and the 19<sup>th</sup> century Oriental poets like Rudyard Kipling on the other.

Sporadic war poems written before the WW1 belonged mainly to the type what we may call 'a new kind of heroic poetry' because it glorified war and the arms, and sang of the battlefield and the heroism displayed by the soldiers. Though this heroic strain influenced war poets like Rupert Brooke in the initial years of WW1, soon the heroic illusions disappeared from the minds of the soldier poets like Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, who witnessed the horrors of war in the battle field. A century later the same strain of the second group of the WW1 war poets is found in the verses of Alex Cockers and most of other war poets of this time.

In fact, the changes in modern warfare tactics and strategies introduced in the World War I dismantled the heroic ideals about the wars in the twentieth century. The inventions of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) including dreadnoughts, tanks, airplanes, chemical weapons, etc. And their first-time use in the WW1, utterly changed the nature of casualties of war affecting not only the soldiers involved, but also the innocent civilians including children, women and the old. Another aspect of this modern warfare is its subversive impact on the environment increasing the eco-critical concerns of its stakeholders. After the World War II and the US experiment of atom bombs on Japan, war has become a nightmare in the global consciousness as reflected in the literature of the postmodern era. Apart from other postmodern concerns, terrorism and its global network as a partner of global war is found with the 9/11 terrorist attack on the USA in the first year of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that resulted into the USA-led war in Afghanistan. The Afghanistan War Poetry including the poems of Alex Cockers are the result of this reality and realization.

In this respect, it is to be noted that Davis Roberts who is the editor of *The War Poetry Website* has published the page entitled "Afghanistan War Poetry" that includes twenty two poems recently composed by some British soldiers and associated persons who were involved in the USA-led war on terror in Afghanistan. They are Alex Cockers, Robert Kiely, Chris, Phil Williams, Mark Quince, Robert Dens more, John Bailey, Hannah Carpenter, Sgt Andy McFarlane, John Hawk head, Martin Harris, James T Clark, and James

Figel. David Roberts has given the foremost position and space to Alex Cockers among them. He was born in 1985 and he served as a Royal Marines Commando from 2005- 2009. During this period of time, he stayed for 14 months in Helmand province of Afghanistan and worked on Operation Herrick five and seven there. The foreign land in an adverse situation generated many thoughts and feelings that he could not share with others and so he took poetry as the only means to unburden his chest, as he remembers:

Under the stars; in the desert, rhymes would manifest in my head. I would write them down, construct them into poems and somehow I felt better for getting it off my chest. (Quoted in "Afghanistan War Poetry" in *The War Poetry Website*)

Alex Cockers expressed his intimate experiences thereof in such poems like "The Brutal Game," "Last Stand," "Bad Dreams," "Tom," "Morals.....two for a pound," and "Mortal Combat."

The title of the first poem "The Brutal Game" becomes an ironical intertextuality of the term "The Great Game" which was coined by Captain Arthur Colony (1807-42) to describe the Anglo-Russian wars involving Afghanistan. The term "The Great Game" was popularized by Rudyard Kipling through his novel *Kim* (1901) and was academically used first by H.W.C. Davis in his 1926 lecture/book *The Great Game in Asia (1800-1844)* (Yapp 180). The term became more popular after the 1979 Soviet-Afghan war. While the missionary ideology of the British colonialism worked behind the 19<sup>th</sup> century Anglo-Russian Great Game, and Victorian idealization of "war" was implied in the use of the word "great" (i.e. "grand") in the phrase "the Great Game," Alex Cockers's anti-romantic approach is suggested in the title "The Brutal Game."

This poem suggests that it is difficult to write poetry in the battlefield. Sitting in the camp, Cockers tries to ink verses for the readers so that they can relate their own experiences to the thoughts and feelings experienced by a soldier in the battlefield. He expresses his difficulty in writing and relating to his personal experiences in a foreign land where life and death hang in a balance:

It's hard to relate  
 To my personal circumstances  
 I'm out here in Afghanistan now  
 Taking my chances.

The soldier-poet is perturbed with the problem of poetic articulation of the tough-time experiences lived "day by day" and the problem of communication to the readers who have no such intimate, real-life experiences:

You won't understand it

Until you've lived it day by day. ("The Brutal Game")

The last stanza uncovers the British soldier's observation of the misery that prevails in a war-torn land like Afghanistan: the "poverty-stricken people with medieval ways." The poet being a foreigner finds it difficult to distinguish who among those Afghan people are peace-mongers and who are the trouble-making Taliban fighters. Alex Cockers' description of the Afghans as "poverty-stricken people with medieval ways" who "will take you life without a thought" bears his humane empathy for the Afghan people, but at the same time, an Orientalist view about them is evoked here. Rudyard Kipling a century ago expressed a similar view about the Afghans in his poem "That Day" in *Barrack-Room Ballads and Other Poems*: "But, Christ! along the line o' flight they cut us up like sheep" (Kipling, *Poems* 440). In another poem entitled "The Young British Soldier" (1890) collected in the same anthology, Kipling portrays a savage image of the Afghan women:

When you're wounded and left on Afghanistan's plains,  
 And the women come out to cut up what remains,  
 Jest roll to your rifle and blow out your brains  
 And go to your gawd like a soldier...  
 So-oldier of the Queen. (Kipling, *Poems* 924-25)

But, unlike Kipling, Alex Cockers does not idealize war by exhorting the soldier to fight and go to his God "like a soldier."

The post-9/11 war between the international forces assisting the Afghan Government on the one hand and the power-mongering Taliban forces on the other hand, is blatantly identified by the poet as the "brutal game":

And now we're all the same  
 Each playing our part in this brutal game.

These words remind us of Wilfred Owens's poem "Strange Meeting" in which the two rival soldiers, in their post-mortem state, reveal "the pity of war": "I am the enemy you killed, my friend .../Let us sleep now...." (*Owen* 2).

Alex Cockers elaborates on the brutality of this game in the poem "Last Stand." The poet describes the fierceness of the war suggesting that, the international forces fighting for the Afghan Government have sieged some towns from the Taliban, but some towns have been lost to them. Though a number of towns have been regained at the cost of many lives, the poet fears:

This war will not end  
 The stakes are far too high  
 A few friends are gone already  
 How many more will die? ("Last Stand")

Alex Cockers portrays this brutal war with a great ecological sensitivity that makes his verse more poignant and realistic. He describes the Afghan deserts in Helmand provinces

the “tragic barren land” (“Last Stand”). Its environment becomes adverse and unaccustomed for him. He has passed “many hot days” and “many moons” in the sands there. He now hopes to never come back after his departure from this desert. His war poems divulges not only his ecological awareness of the physical environment of Afghanistan including its urban landscape, but also his concerns of the biological environment in danger under the duress of the war:

Towns have been taken  
 Towns have been lost  
 Towns have been taken back again  
 How many lives has it cost? (“Last Stand”)

Another dimension that makes his poems arresting is the psychological reality revealed in simple words. In fact, he is on the verge of losing his mind in this brutal game. The traumatic experiences that he has faced, wreaks havoc upon him:

I hope I never come back ...  
 I don't want to fight this war anymore  
 My sanity won't last. (“Last Stand”)

Nightmares are often associated with the victims of trauma. The PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) symptoms that Alex Cockers wants to externalize become the obvious theme of his poem “Bad Dreams”:

He's probably not ok  
 He's probably not all right  
 He's probably in a dark place  
 Whether it's day or night. (“Bad Dreams”)

In fact, “a dark place” that the poet refers to is not only a place of danger, it is also metaphorically his own traumatized “psyche” darkened by the dust of the desert and the smoke of a complicit war. He complains to his motherland that her political authority has sent her “lad” away “to fight in a war he doesn't understand.” He scathingly reveals the ironical reality of the ongoing complicity of the media and the political authorities:

Governments and Media  
 With their pack of lies  
 Will never tell the truth  
 But try to convince you otherwise.

The politically sponsored media version of the war situation is contrary to the reality that has made his eyes “stretched wide open.” The pangs and sufferings that the soldier-poet has seen in the war have entered into the “dark land” beneath the lair of his consciousness. He confesses that the war trauma has affected him so much that he finds it difficult to suppress the “images of memories” imprinted on his mind, and which flares up now and then into the upper lair of his consciousness. Thus “Bad Dreams” explores not only the physical journey of a troop into an adverse foreign land, but also a psychological journey from innocence to experience. In fact, as shown in the analysis of the previous poem, the

ecological and psychological elements are intertwined in Cocker's treatment of war. In "Bad Dreams" too, while addressing probably to his parent(s) or rather to his motherland, Alex Cockers complains that he has been sent to a "dark place" i.e. Afghanistan with a devastated infrastructure because of the three-decade wars. It is noticeable that Alex Cockers contrasts the cold and cosy environment of his homeland (i.e. England) with the foreign hot land (i.e. Afghanistan).

When you send a lad away  
 To a foreign hot land  
 To fight in a war he doesn't understand. ("Bad Dreams")

The hot desert of Afghanistan has transformed him physically as he describes "When he comes back/ He brings more than just a tan." The image of "a tan" is figuratively the metaphor of the psychological scars; for, the "brutal game" in the Afghan land has psychologically transformed him so much that "The boy they knew before/ Is what they'll never find" ("Bad Dreams").

The "images of memories" "imprinted on his mind that Alex Cockers refers to in the poem "Bad Dreams," are exemplified in his next poem "Tom." Tom was his childhood friend. Both of them grew up together, studied in the same school, joined the army as commandos together and went apart until they "met again in the desert" to have "a laugh and a chat" together. But, unfortunately Tom became the victim of the brutal game. Though initially the poet tried to deny the radio news of his death, on return to the base camp an hour later, a soldier named Drapes "with a tear in his eyes" confirmed the death. This poem becomes a sad war memorial for Tom:

I'll remember Tom forever  
 And raise a glass in his name  
 A soldier to the death  
 We cry and cry again.

In the poem with the enigmatic title "Morals.....two for a pound," Alex Cockers expresses his prick of conscience for the things he has done in the battlefield "under a hot sun." He feels "slightly unclean" for his deed in the war-torn land of Afghanistan. The poet is critical of the media-fed British public who do not understand the Afghanistan situation. The poet becomes more vocal to put forward his clear opinion that "an unjust war" was going on in Afghanistan in the name of war on terror. But being a paid soldier under the British authority, he has no personal choice but to put his life in danger in the name of "peace" pretending "that everything is fine." The title becomes ironical satire on the hypocritical morals that guide our action for the sake of monetary gain. However, in spite of these pretensions, a moral conscience is found in the core of the poem – the soldier-poet's consciousness of "man killing fellow man." The engagement of "two" in war – the killer and the killed – becomes the dirty thing that makes the poet "unclean." Thus, Alex Cockers' poems make an approach to Afghanistan war, which is different from the colonialist and imperialist approach of Rudyard Kipling as reflected in the latter's poems like "The

Soldier.” The USA-led war in Iraq in the pretext of Saddam Husain’s storage of weapons of mass destruction and the post-9/11 war on terror in Afghanistan, have a neo-colonialist undercurrent, as it is a war indirectly to thwart the influence of Russia and China in this geo-strategically important country i.e. Afghanistan. Yet, Alex Cockers does not support the Governmental policy, which makes him very different from Kipling, when Cockers says in “Bad Dreams,” “Governments and Media / With their pack of lies / Will never tell the truth / But try to convince you otherwise.”

Kipling once praised the USA invasion of the Philippine Islands in his 1999 poem entitled “The White Man’s Burden: The United States and The Philippine Islands.” Kipling’s racist phrase the “White Man’s burden” has become a euphemism for oriental’s and imperialism. Kipling, in this poem describes the non-west people as “fluttered folk and wild,” “half devil and half child.” Kipling, thus, justifies the action of sending the white soldiers to the Orient to civilize these peoples:

Take up the White Man’s burden  
 In patience to abide  
 To veil the threat of terror  
 And check the show of pride.

As Zarena Aslami explained in her article “The Second Anglo-Afghan War, or The Return of the Uninvited,” Rudyard Kipling’s racist notion of the Afghan character is found in his portrayal of Amir Abdur Rahman in “The Amir’s Homily” published in *Life’s Handicap* (1891):

To the Afghan neither life, property, law, nor kingship are sacred when his own lusts prompt him to rebel. He is a thief by instinct, a murderer by heredity and training, and frankly and bestially immoral by all three. None the less he has his own crooked notions of honor, and his character is fascinating to study. (287)

Alex Cocker’s view of the Afghans as a people with medieval ways who can take one’s “life without a thought,” may have Kipling’s Orientals flavour. But his anti-romantic and humanistic attitude to war with such a “poverty-stricken” people dissociates him from the Orientals tradition and associates him with the tradition of Wilfred Owen. In his portrayal of war as fatal to both the warring groups: “A place where every day/ Man kills fellow man” (“Morals ....two for a pound”).

The title of the poem “Morals ....two for a pound” suggests a lot of things what Alex Cockers cannot openly tell. The poets draws our attention to some “morals” or messages. The second part of the title “... two for a pound” may have an inter-textual reference to the popular joke-stories with the news headline “Arte chokes **two for a pond**” In these stories a contract-killer named Arte kills the hirer’s wife (and also the witness of this crime) only for a pound with a belief that the life-insurance money after that wife’s death would be offered to the killer, as one version of the story is found in *The Gazette*, Issue 20, April 2001 of the

Eton Manor(<https://www.eton-manor.com/attachments/article/65/2001...>). Apparently, the soldier-poet “being paid tuppence” has put his “life on the line,” but, the morals are plural. The political allegory, I think, that underlies this title and the poem as a whole is the USA’s war against the Taliban Government of Afghanistan to kill the Al-Qaeda supreme Osama-bin-Laden. Previously, the USA unjustly led the 2003 war on Saddam Hossain’s Government in Iraq in the pretext of the presence of the Weapons of Mass Destruction which was later on found false and for which the British Prime Minister Tony Blair was blamed the for his unholy alliance with the USA in this war. The British public inquiry report known as the “Chilcot Report” proved it, as *The Guardian* reports on July 6, 2017. Similarly, according to Alex Cockers, the British Government and its supporting media have misled the British people “with their pack of lies” about the war in Afghanistan:

The British public don’t understand

A place where every day

Man kills fellow man.

Is it right to fight

In an unjust war? (“Morals.....two for a pound”)

This theme of war as “the Brutal Game” and the pity of war is elaborated and exemplified in the last poem entitled “Mortal Combat.” It describes how the poet-soldier while doing his duty as a paid soldier gets a shot and then retaliates. As a war poem, “Mortal Combat” is superb and significant in many ways. While the first poem entitled “The Brutal Game” that stresses on the brutality of the action i.e. fighting between two men or sides; “Mortal Combat,” as the title signifies, focuses on the fatality of the game or combat with all its psychological and philosophical implications. The soldier here is wounded: “Now my whole body/ Becomes awash with fear/ It’s been a while/Since I’ve been shot at/ But the memories and feelings/ Come flooding back.” As a professional soldier, he requires a “heightened state of alertness” for this game: “I dare to put my head up/ Peering over the side/My eyes dart desperately/ Searching, trying to find.” Amidst the explosions in the war, the soldier have to “flinch back down again “with his heartbeats in his ears and when he spots the opponent “running through the sparse trees, “his single aimed shot makes “you” (i.e. the opponent) drop to his knees. This poem reveals the horrors of the brutal game leading to its fatality/mortality. The poet seems to have inter-textually taken the title from the popular video game “Mortal Kombat” developed by Midway Games’ Chicago in 1992 (*Fahs*). The horror-fantasy that the game implicates has been faced in reality by the soldier-poet in war situation. In a complex way, Alex cockers hints at the “deadly alliance” led by the United States in the name of “war on terror” in the soil of Afghanistan.

In fine, Alex Cockers’s war poems represent Afghanistan and its people as caught in an orientalist network of war led by the West. In countering the orientalist version of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Afghanistan as politically represented by the western leaders and their media,

Alex Cockers' poems becomes the aesthetic as well as intellectual representation of a moral conscience of the present times that the leading postcolonial theorist Edward Said spoke of:

The Intellectual is an individual endowed with a faculty for representing ... a message ... to a public ... to confront orthodoxy and dogma ..., and whose raison de'tre is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug.(Said, 11).

In fact, Alex Cockers assessment of the US invasion of Afghanistan as an "unjust war" can be supported by Noam Chomsky's critique of US war on terror in Afghanistan: "Wanton killing of innocent civilians is terrorism, not a war against terrorism" (Chomsky, 76). In fact, Alex Cockers visualizes the future of war in Afghanistan when he says: "This war will not end/The stakes are far too high/ A few friends are gone already/ How many more will die?"("Last Stand"). And that is why the USA has recently started negotiations with the Taliban through the initial 16-day talks in Doha, Qatar, as Reuters reported on March 12, 2019 (*Eric Knecht*).

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