

BOOK REVIEW

RANGANATHAN MURALI. (TRANS.). 2022. THE FIRST WORLD WAR ADVENTURES OF NARIMAN KARKARIA: A MEMOIR. HARPER COLLINS, Pp. 230

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The First World War Adventures of Nariman Karkaria is a firecracker of a memoir. On its centenary, this fascinating book (originally titled *Rangbhumi par Rakhad*, 1922) has been translated from Gujarati into English by the keenly perceptive Murali Ranganathan, an independent scholar and researcher. It proves to be a gift to the historian and the academic alike because it is a Parsi man's rare first-hand account of travel, adventure, and soldiering on three fronts during the First World War.

Nariman Karkaria, a restless Parsi youth from Gujarat, whimsically decides to visit China at the age of sixteen and embarks on this incredible journey with barely fifty rupees in his pocket. After returning to India two years later, he revisits Peking (now Beijing) in 1914 from where he travels to London via Siberia, Russia, Finland, Sweden, and Norway. But this is just the beginning of his adventures. In London, he manages to enlist in the British Army as a private soldier in the 24th Middlesex Regiment. As a result, fate catapults him to three fronts in the battlefield – the Battle of the Somme on the Western Front, the Battle of Jerusalem on the Middle Eastern Front, and the Balkan Front – which he not only survives but also records on his return to India in May 1920. From 1920 to 1921, he chronicles his mind-boggling exotic experiences through serialised columns in a Gujarati newspaper which later become the source material for *Rangbhumi par Rakhad* (1922).

This conversational and episodic text is a kaleidoscope of contrasting images. It thrills and terrifies at the same time. If, at one moment, the buoyant and inviting narrative voice takes the readers on a guide-bookish tour through the streets and alleyways of China, in another moment, the reader suddenly finds herself in the riveting Battle of the Somme. This account along with “The Killing Fields of France” is the first description of a full-fledged battle scene in the memoir and it is quite a sensory experience: it is pervaded by the booming sounds of cannon, of soldiers dodging enemy shells, the digging of the trenches, the foul smell of gas which could only be filtered by stifling gas masks, and the sights of either corpses used for cover or soldiers grappling with their mortal combatants in addition to the acute shortage of food, water and medical aid. The entire memoir is interspersed with alternating scenes of war and tourism. The section devoted to the Middle Eastern Front elucidates grit and determination in the face of fierce enemy attacks and the spread of malarial fever. The chapters titled “Desert Battles” and “The Conquest of Jerusalem” provide sneak previews into defence tactics and martial gumption. The portion on the Balkan Front is a cursory account of Karkaria’s services under the 31st Casualty Clearing Station (CCS) which enabled him to tend to wounded soldiers without the license to practise medicine.

Certain sections of this book also prove to be quite informative for the layman. The chapter titled “I Become a Tommy” expounds on military hierarchisation and military routine and discipline. On the lighter side, for those who are inclined to recreation, the touristy narrator recounts his humorous experiences in foreign locations and provides the reader with information on budgeted travel-worthy places. His tips include the most affordable stays in expensive cities like London and the true art of drinking Turkish coffee. Moments like these in the text make it more relatable today despite the fact that it was written a century earlier. The breezy and chatty manner of the narrator adds to the appeal of this remarkable part travelogue, part war memoir.

This book is full of potential full-blown stories because instead of containing detailed description of his experiences, Karkaria provides multiple hastily written snippets of his sojourns across the three fronts. Even the translator, Murali Ranganathan, in his introduction has commented on the complete erasure of “individual personalities” as “a disconcerting aspect of the memoir” (p. xxi). Speed, usually a

beneficial factor in times of war, proves not to be such a useful quality when it comes to writing. It seems as if the narrator is in a haste to say everything at once. Not once does he stop to contemplate or philosophise except on a rare occasion when he visits the sombre tomb of Christ in Jerusalem. This is the only occasion in his long list of expeditions which leaves a lingering sense of profound sorrow in him. Karkaria's temperament on most occasions is otherwise rather detached, touristy, and observational. The following lines from the chapter titled "Constantinople" sum up his trajectory: "The strange customs of strange countries are bound to trip up the traveller, but one has to take it in one's stride" (p. 212). It is precisely his speed, tenacity and emotional distance from his surroundings which enable him to survive the Great War and simultaneously enjoy his rather topsy-turvy peregrinations.

In conclusion, one can't help but wonder whether this rare and rather captivating account of an Indian soldier who fought on the side of the British Army during the First World War will ever be adapted for cinema. Karkaria's story deserves to reach audiences far and wide. After all, it is a veritable account of a man who nurtured a contagious zest for life and who lived a colourful life.

Reviewer Bionote: *Enami Chopra is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Delhi College of Arts and Commerce, University of Delhi, and Research Scholar at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. She recently submitted her PhD thesis in which she studies the novels of E. M. Forster and examines a gradual shift in his authorial vision as he advances into his novelistic career. Her areas of interest include British Modernism and Indian Aesthetics.*