

# **The Struggle between Secularism and Religious Conflicts in Mulk Raj Anand's *Death of A Hero***

**Dr Shamala. M. Ratnakar**

Senior Professor Dept of English, Karnataka University, Dharwad 580003, Karnataka

## **ABSTRACT**

**The paper deals Maqbool as a sufferer for political reason, refuse to accept Pakistani invaders and their tribal partners in Kashmir. The novel depicts as a nationalistic figure that tries to agitation his fellow Kashmiris against the attackers but eventually faces death at their hands. The novel reveals the 1947 conflict in Kashmir, particularly the Pakistani tribal incursions subsequent the partition of India. The paper explores themes of secularism versus secularism, the religious fanaticism influences of communal conflict on persons and humanity, and the surrender of a hero for better grounds.**

**Keywords: patriotism, political, conflict, fanaticism, humanism, secularism, religious and extremism**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Death of a Hero (1963) is the third novel of the phase under review. This novel, too, shows the novelist's declining faith and interest in revolutionary social philosophy which one finds in his earlier novels. Once again there is emphasis on the change of heart as the most effective panacea of social change and the flourishing of the values of peace, tranquility, mutual understanding and brotherhood. This, however, does not mean that Anand has become oblivious to the dialectical nature of the social system in which the have-nots greater emphasis on the symbolic aspect of the character. Death of a Hero is a poetic expression of Anand's view of heroism. It manifests a tendency to embody two conflicting strains: the first is its emphasis on such qualities as rebellious spirit, dedication, love of fellowmen and a capacity of revolutionary action and intense suffering; and the second, its apprehension of the hero's human failings, his inner struggles and vacillations, his sense of guilt, doubts and regrets, self questioning and self-confrontations.

Maqbool Sherwani, a young Kashmiri poet, has many characteristics found in the major character. If The Road is the story of social martyrdom of a group of village untouchables, Death of a Hero is woven round the political martyrdom of a young man, Maqbool Serwani. Both the novels touch moral questions, indicating their serious implications in society. In both the novels the human situation is seen in moral terms. The protagonists

are pitted against a system, which thrives on injustice and exploitation, instead of carrying on a crusade of action against the system, the protagonists of these novels believe in arousing the moral conscience of the perpetrators of injustice and exploitation. They are motivated by their belief that action produces immediate results, but these consequences are not lasting whereas effects based on moral transformation; though time-taking have permanence. Love, generosity, accommodativeness and tolerance have the capacity to cleanse the human heart and drive away evil permanently.

The novel is the story of Maqbool Sherwani who flees to Srinagar to consult the leaders of National Conference Volunteer Corps. He then hurries back Srinagar to his hometown Baramula in order to raise the moral of the people caught in the grip terror caused by Pakistani aggression.

Ah he enters Baramula, he witnesses the savage atrocities perpetrated by the invaders. Soon he comes to know that Baramula is completely in the grip of the Pakistanis, and that they are filling trucks with loot. From Murtab Ali he comes to know about another shocking thing that most of his trusted friends like Lawyer Ahmed Shah have already joined the pro-Pakistanis. Later, when he goes to the house of another friend, Ghulam Jilani, he sees him sitting with Ahmed Shah and Khursid Anwar, an officer of the invading army. After leaving Jilani's house, he finally manages to reach his own home with the help of Ibil, the women servant of Jilani.

But on his return home, he is very soon surrounded by the enemy forces. Though he tries to escape, his captors manage to capture him. Later, he is imprisoned by the invaders, and ultimately shot dead in cold blood after ridiculous summary trial. Thus, the story of the novel reveals the novelist's keen desire to show evils that religious fanaticism can cause. Anand, a great champion of humanity, liberty and secularism, however, shows his faith in the religion of love and humanity through this novel. C.J. George's description of "Death of Hero" as a novel written in memory of Maqbool Sherwani, a missionary of humanism who willingly accepted martyrdom for his beliefs, is appropriate because it highlights the author's strong admiration for Sherwani's dedication to his cause and his portrayal of his death as a

heroic act, likely fueled by the author's own faith in the principles Sherwani championed" (web)

In fact, the story of the novel shows that Sherwani is an embodiment of Anand's humanism. Though he lacks the character of a revolutionist hero he shows signs of sublime heroism by way of expressing his nationalistic urges and protest against the poverty. He is equally dedicated in his struggle against religious fanaticism. And this is who he is not prepared to accept the sectarian viewpoint as regards the action of the raiders. It is because of his strong conviction that he stands up firmly against Ahmad Shah and Khurshid Anwar, and goes to the extent of challenging them, and is finally captured by the invaders. He chooses his martyrdom himself because of his unflinching faith in the integrity and freedom of his country. As a humanist of Anand's creation, he expresses that view that it is only through suffering and struggle that human beings move on to mental maturity. P K Singh remarks: "However, the fact remains that seen in the tradition of fictional heroes of social realism Sherwani's character has many drawbacks. Sherwani is an inveterate romanticist valuing his personal feeling much more than the ground realities of the situation" (Anand and Dalits, 102)

However, the fact remains that seen in the tradition of the fictional heroes of social realism Sherwani's character has many drawbacks. Sherwani is an inveterate romanticist valuing his personal feeling much more than the ground-realities the situation. He fails to have a realistic appraisal of the situation confronting him and then due to his conflicting feelings he is not able to carry his mission to its logical end. The fact that he is a poet, lost in his beautiful fancies, becomes a stumbling block in his correct reading of the conditions prevailing at the moment. His peculiar state of mind is brought out in the very beginning of the novel and what follows falls in an expected pattern:

He recalled that he had gone through so many emotions during the last three days: "the feeling of weakness during the flight from his little hometown after the Pakistani raiders had occupied, the fear that he might not get to Srinagar, the elation of being in that odd room with the others in Amira Kadal, the shock of finding out that those who had begun this sudden invasion, with loot, as soon they arrived in the villages were the so called 'Muslim brethren', the utter frustration of the confusion which prevailed in the city: then the mixed exaltation and fear of being chosen to go back to Baramula to rally the people; and underneath it all, the complete innocence about what would happen to him if the tribesmen were already there.... But there was, below the surface, a feeling he did not wish to acknowledge the sense of chivalry against tribalism the genuine human response of pity" ( *Death of a Hero*, 17)

Though he is instructed to fight against the invaders with full strength, he shows his uneasiness very often. He appears in a fix as to how he should set about his work. He does not feel himself capable enough to perform the revolutionary role of organizing people's resistance against the invaders. Thus, there exists from the very beginning of the novel, a great gap between his actual capacity and the role he is supposed to play at that point of time. M. K. Naik commented: "The entire action is rooted in a set of real historical incidents which constitutes its framework and by its very nature; this framework needs a great deal of elaboration in terms of historical perspective, situation and character. Deprived of this elaboration the narrative was bound to appear sketchy and superficial and covered in a miasma of vagueness" (Mulk Raj Anand 106).

On the one hand, he shows signs of weaknesses and mental uneasiness and on the other, Maqbool fails to convince Mahmood regarding the urgency of taking part in the fight against the Pakistani aggressors. Now Maqbool realizes his failure in performing his duty in the desired way. Instead of being able to convince Mahmood whom he meets first, he becomes possessed with the sense of his failure. His going to Baramula proves to be a futile exercise, as he cannot rally the people for the cause. He sits silently with bent head seriousness. Like a defeatist, he shows himself to be utterly ill equipped for his mission, even before reaching Baramula. After reaching Baramula too, Maqbool continues to show his characteristic weaknesses. He is all the time worried about the risk of being caught and is confronted also by inner doubts. Different questions come to his mind due to his growing fear. This aspect of his character divulges that he does not deserve to be called a revolutionary hero in a true sense. It is more so because he is especially deputed to Baramula to perform a great task for a great cause. But he is overwhelmed by indecision, fear and psychological numbness.

A shiver went down his spine as he realized that he might walk straight into the arms of a Pakistani sentry or be picked off by a bullet from one of the hawk-eyed ones. And, again, his body and mind were in the grip of the crisis, which had occupied him before he had dozed off in the haystack: Did one grow up just to be ready to be shot? What did it all mean? Where was Allah Mian? These were questions arising from fear. He sensed the tremors inside himself" ( *Death of a Hero* 37 )

Thus, Maqbool is a split character. On the one hand he displays a strong will to fight the invaders, but on the other he realizes that somehow he is not equal to the task which may involve even death. He pins his hope on Nehru and is convinced that ultimately Nehru will send the Indian army to foil the attempts of the invaders. Meanwhile, his own state of mind is in a flux, causing him to remain suspended between alternative choices.

“Should I ask Rathi’s permission to take his cycle away or should I not? He mumbled to himself in order to avoid being jumpy and to fill the vacancy in his mind, which was in danger of being occupied by instinctive dreads. But he did not resolve the question, though he went on repeating it like a wordless incantation” (*Death of a Hero*, 39)

It is due to his failure in overcoming his wavering temperament that Maqbool remains incapable of acquiring heroic dimensions of a character. M. K. Naik aptly remarks: “One gets the impression that he is more of a passive victim than an active, more acted against than Maqbool to come to life as a character. In his militant atheism, his secularism, his tendency towards self-pity and his love of poetry, we find glimpses of Anand’s earlier protagonists like Lalu and Ananta, but it can’t best be said that Maqbool reminds us of a recurrent type. He hardly develops an individuality of his own, rising above the family resemblance to the type, as Lalu and Ananta surely do” (M.K. Naik, 56)

Every time the Maqbool decides to undertake some important actions, the hidden weaknesses of his character block his way. He cannot set himself free from questions like the existence of God or the role of fate. While moving towards his home, he continues to face many tormenting questions crossing his mind. It is due to this characteristic weakness that he cannot stick to his convictions firmly for long. He shows this weakness while meeting Murtaib Ali who was gradually leaning towards Pakistan. In reply to Murtaib’s reasons for taking part in the struggle against the invaders, Maqbool tells him that he, too has mother and sister, but immediately he regrets it. He can neither convince himself nor others about the validity of a particular action or decision:

“My mother and wife have been weeping since yesterday”, Muratib said furtively turning his eyes away from Maqbool. “And I owe a responsibility to them, brother, which I must put before everything else—”  
“I too have as mother, a sister, and a father” he answered. But again, after he had said these words, he regretted that he had been so gauche and childish, putting his own ego, moth-eaten by fears, against his friend’s separateness” (*Death of a Hero*, 91)

After leaving Murtaib’s house, he heads to the mansion of Ghulam Jilani, but the sense of defeat does not leave him. He comes out of Ghulam Jailani’s house with a feeling that whatever may be the risk, the urge for freedom should not be suppressed. He is encouraged to continue his fight by Begum Mehtab Jitani whom Maqbool regards as his mother. But soon after he shows nervousness and makes a desperate attempt to escape from his captors. Though he knows that less privileged people like him have the easier choice to make for

freedom struggle, he, at times, entertains the fear of a rich and elite person. Self-sacrifice which every noble mission always involves is something which Maqbool is never able to recognize:

“A stranger illness was in his soul. Then panic. His heart drummed. And in front of him he could see the hazards of treading on the tin gutter into which the wooden root ended. Ten yards of it, before he could reach the first flat roof, of the house of the carpenter Akbar. He took the chance.

Crashing of old tin bending under his feet.... Crackling of dead leaves.... And crunch-crunch of the wooden supports” (*Death of a Hero* 101)

The plight and mental agony of Maqbool in the course of his escape from the invaders further shows his lack of revolutionary zeal and enthusiasm:

Allah! Where was Allah? Why was he always against the innocents? There would be no salvation unless religion of fate went by the board and the soul became alive?.... Noor’s face was like a crumpled flower before his forehead—as she lay helpless!... and his mother’s drawn face, uglier by fear... at the back of his head. But his father’s face did not appear? Anyhow, how could God punish them so?” (*Death of a Hero*, 122)

Thus, it is clear that though Maqbool’s commitment to the freedom of his country is prompted by his conscience, he, at the same time, shows many frailties and failures which make him a bundle of opposite qualities like being active and passive simultaneously. Finally, Maqbool is captured by the aggressors. Before being shot dead, he is dragged and treated badly. But, in spite of his inherent weaknesses, he faces the death calmly in the end. Later, his letter written to his sister reveals his enormous love for poetry. He frankly tells his sister that he is essentially a poet. Though the circumstances cast him in a different mould, he rankly admits being a man of poetry rather than any radical spirit needed for any meaningful and successful revolution. K. N. Sinha commented that ‘Death of a Hero is truly an epic of modern India covering events which are fresh in national memory. But the novel’s real thrust lies in an intensively poetic, if also sad, appeal which gives it the status of a tragedy’ (Mulk Raj Anand 80).

The letter says: I know that you have always thought of me as somewhat of a hero, Noor. Always there was a light in your big eyes, which said so. But, today, I want to write and tell you, so that you can tell everyone that I have never been anything but an aspirant to poetry. All my dreams will remain unfulfilled, because I am going of face death. But here, in our country, the most splendid deeds have been done by people, not because they were great in spirit, but because they could

not suffer the tyrant's yoke, and learnt to obey their consciences" ( Anand)<sup>39</sup>

This is an honest self-revelation and this last confession confers a dignity on his character, and also makes him so different from a revolutionary character. "The essence of the novel lies in the concluding part of the novel. The letter to Noor shows Maqbool's poetic and sensitive mind with humanitarian concern for others. 'The letter expresses Maqbool's unfulfilled dreams as well as his strong commitment to the cause of nation" (Vijayshree 73)

Maqbool does fail as a hero, especially if we compare him with Lal Singh and Ananta. But Lal Singh and Ananta were created in different historical conditions and were called upon different roles. Maqbool, on the other hand, faces a new situation, a situation for which he is not equipped. If we admire him then it is for his transparent honesty. In fact, his whole life is a story of failures but these failures are as much due to the circumstances as to his own weaknesses. He was a born poet, but situation trapped him for a different role. He abhors religious fanaticism and the cult of violence. True, he fails as a man of action and thus disqualifies himself for the status of a conventional hero. But his commitment to certain moral values remains undimmed till the very end. To be fair to him, we must apply very different cannon of heroism to assess Maqbool's character. C.J. George puts the whole thing in the proper perspective when he says: "As asserted by the title of the novel, Maqbool Sherwani is a hero. But his heroism is quite different from the Emperor Napoleon or Alexander the Great. His heroism is founded on moral courage and love of humanity practiced by Jesus Christ, Mahatma Gandhi, Mohammed or Joan of Arc. The heroism born out of moral courage and love of humanity is infinitely superior to the heroism carried out by arms and ammunition" (web )

Comparing Maqbool with Jesus and Gandhi is odious and underserved, but there is some truth in the fact that Maqbool fails because he is carried away, rather unnecessarily, by emotions, which are, however, unexceptionable, Maqbool is an idealist, only he does not properly manage his idealism and fails to combine it with action when needed. His death shocks but one does not experience any tremors in the heavens when he is shot. True, he meets a violent but underserved death, which makes the sensitive reader sad. Anand has not been able to invest Maqbool with qualities, which go in the making of a hero, as we know it. He is good, honest, sincere and thoughtful but these mental energies are simply wasted by his indecisiveness, his habit of conjuring unreal fears, and his continuously wavering mind. Anand does not probe such a mind adequately. In fact, far from adding anything significant to his reputation as a novelist, *Death of Hero*, unmistakably signals Anand's declining

creativity. The process of this failing had begun after the completion of *The Village Trilogy*, but one had always expected that Anand would redeem things later.

## CONCLUSION

*Death of a Hero* has themes, which had enormous possibilities of action. But this opportunity is woefully missed. The theme pertains to events relatively fresh in the Indian mind and could have been developed with more artistic control and imagination. Even Maqbool's character is not developed in any details; he remains a static figure, though slightly enigmatic. The so-called poetic intensity, which some critics have noticed and praised, is never intense enough to grip the attention of the reader. The only positive message, which the novel gives, is that all talk of revolutionary change is wishful and divorced from reality. What matters in the long history of the evolution of human society is the cultivation of humanistic values, which alone can redeem, if at all, the aberrant human experiences and that self-sacrifice will have a cleansing effect on a tyrant's heart. The novelist raises his voice against every kind of insularity and implicitly denounces jingoistic nationalism and religious fanaticism.

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