



Fanaticism Versus Secularism: A Study of Mulk Raj Anand's Novel *Death of a Hero*

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55248/gengpi.4.823.50304>

ABSTRACT

Death of a Hero published in 1964 is a short novel of Mulk Raj Anand. Here, Anand does not talk about marginalization of protagonist on the basis of caste or class unlike his previous novels. Anand takes up a historical event of Indo-Pak conflict vis-à-vis invasion of Kashmir as a backdrop of the novel. The novel depicts the story of Maqbool Sherwani who once was a real life person and had sacrificed his life for the cause of freedom of Kashmir. Whenever historical event is fictionalized, the story often gets slight transformations and variations. Anand has availed poetic license in introducing some changes in the main story of Maqbool Sherwani. Anand while dramatizing the event has mitigated the severity of atrocities. From the various sources it becomes clear that Maqbool Sherwani was a nineteen years civilian. In 1947, after partition, when Pakistani army comprising tribesmen i. e. *Kabalis* attacked Kashmir, he played very vital role in saving Srinagar. The novel shows Anand's stance on fanaticism and offers secularism and humanism as the only way to tackle the problem of religious fanaticism.

Keywords: Mulk Raj Anand, fanaticism, secularism, humanism, Kashmir, Maqbook Shrewani

Anand dramatizes a tragic historical event in the novel *Death of a Hero*. Maqbool, the protagonist, is a victim of communal violence perpetrated during India – Pakistan confrontation during post partition days. He is presented as a martyr for political cause. When the Pakistani tribesmen attack Kashmir, he makes desperate efforts to convince people to show resistance for the freedom of Kashmir but he fails to convince the Pro-Pakistani fanatics. He comes to Baramula to rally people but unfortunately he is caught by Pakistani raiders and is shot dead. They hang his dead body to a wooden pole and write the word 'kafir' (traitor) on his shirt with his blood. In the conflict between Kashmir and religion, he chooses freedom of Kashmir. He says: "It is a question of principles. Do we believe in Kashmir first, or religion first?" His humanitarian love and pity for the people of Kashmir remains unsupported and unheard by his co-religionists. Anand upholds liberty and secularism as more valuable things rather than religious fanaticism. He vehemently opposes this religious fanaticism which is the greatest impediment in communal harmony.

Maqbool Sherwani, the hero of the novel, is shown as an activist and supporter of National Conference in Kashmir. He is a poet and a political agitator as well. When the novel opens, we see Maqbool returning from Srinagar to Baramula in the wake of Pakistani raider's attack on Kashmir. Three days ago when he came to know about invasion, he fled to Srinagar. But the leaders of National Conference sent him back to Baramula, to rally the people and to unite them for the struggle for freedom. He has a mission which he conveys to the people.

We must fight against the violent destroyers of life—with violence. There is such a thing as goodness and honesty—as there is evil and lies! We are not, like the Pakistanis, exhorting people to go and slaughter! We are innocent enough. And we have been attacked. We have to fight against—the invasion...Against the tribesmen—ours is the human response of pity for those whom they have despoiled!... (*Death of a Hero* 137)

Though Maqbool has been named as a hero, Anand presents him as a common man having weaknesses inherent to any average human being. As a matter of fact, Anand's heroes in major novels are the lowly and the lost—the marginalized. They are from dirt and the dust having no superhuman aberration in attributes or endowed with heroic qualities in strictest sense of the term. Maqbool is just the same. Like other human beings, he feels the possibility of his own death as he is going to Baramula where the tribesmen, the Pakistani raiders have already occupied the town and causing bloodshed, violence and loot.

Khurshid Anwar declares: "And, if even now you repent and realize that you were born a muslim and not a *kafir*, we will forgive you..." (151). Shah in the role of a public prosecutor hurls different questions and seeks to know his activities in the past three days. Both of them repeatedly ask him to accept that he is a 'traitor'. Maqbool knows that it is useless to say anything before the prejudiced and the fanatic pro-Pakistanis. Anand describes Maqbool's feelings:

'Truth has no voice,' he began by chewing the words in the bitter froth in his mouth to himself so that his lips did not open and no voice could be heard. 'Only lies flourish for a while... I have no face. I have no speech. I cannot move you... This land, which gave birth to me, this land which is like a poem

to me—how shall I explain my love for it to you’ From out of its valleys their has been for centuries the anguish of torture...And we were trying to emerge from the oppression to liberate our mother, because we know each aching caress... And you have come and fouled her and wounded her ! How could any of us stand by and not protest against your cruelty... All invaders behave like that. And I can understand and forgive the mercenaries. But I cannot forgive your treachery—Ahmed Shah. Do you not feel the human response of pity for the weak? (155)

A close analysis of the novel shows that his decision to go to Baramula is not because of the order of his leaders; rather it is a self chosen path by him. He listens to his conscience and acts accordingly. He is poles apart from his coreligionist Ahmad Shah who fails to understand the concept of brotherhood and secularism. The fanatic raiders are far away from Maqbool’s humanistic love and pity when he says: “Strange but this is my philosophy of life—that I love people” (164).

Religious fanaticism versus Secularism

The major concern that Anand has expressed through the novel *Death of a Hero* is about religious fanaticism. Maqbool Sherwani becomes a symbol of secularism. The novel shows how religious fanaticism can shatter peaceful life of the people, their freedom and happiness. Fanaticism deprives people of their right of life. The fanatic people often impose their own thoughts on others and compel them to feel and see life from their perspective. Secular and humanistic ideology as enshrined in the character of Maqbool Sherwani is a possible solution to counter the religious fanaticism. Fanaticism poses great danger to life and the people like Maqbool become victim of their ideology. Maqbool’s sacrifice for the cause of freedom and his unconditional love for people in Kashmir are undoubtedly commendable. His genuine and selfless efforts for saving the state and martyrdom are exceptionable in the contemporary context of civilians facing cross border infiltration of the militants spreading anarchy in the Kashmir valley today.

In both of the short novels—*Lament on Death* and *Death of a Hero*, the protagonists suffer at the hands of external forces. Nur in *Lament* becomes a victim of the educational system; whereas Maqbool falls prey to the ideology of religious fanaticism. Both, Nur and Maqbool long for freedom. Nur, heavily buried under pressures of his father’s expectations, wishes to get freedom to live life. His craving is for personal freedom whereas Maqbool’s struggle for freedom is aimed at higher cause—freedom of the state from the Pakistani raiders.

Anand has written this novel to remember the historical hero Maqbool Sherwani. Since the novel is titled as an ‘Epitaph’ for Maqbool Sherwani, the obvious purpose of Anand is to present Maqbool as a hero with his heroic exploits. So the novel does not have any propagandist ideas to propose. But the novel does not sufficiently build and develop the character of Maqbool as a hero. With the exception of scenes showing Maqbool’s confrontation with the Pakistani army leader Khurshid Anwar and Shah, the subsequent escape and capture ending with the trial, the novel does not show the hero acting in heroic way. The major part of the novel shows Maqbool’s passivity through traveling at various places escaping from being caught and meeting the people as a part of his strategy in preparing the people for resistance. His valor and fearlessness for death is expressed only after captivity since he doesn’t submit to the raiders and nor he accepts the charges against him as ‘a kafir’. Otherwise, he is continually in fear of being caught and punished. Feeling fear in a situation when the enemy is spread at all places is normal.

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). But on the whole, the novel lacks the artistic impact which Anand has successfully created in his preceding novels. It may be because of the short length of the novel which brings limitations to the novelist in the systematic development of narrative. Commenting on the novel, M. K. Naik says:

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).

Anand’s novels are suffused with his ideology of humanism. His humanism is devoid of inclination to any religious sentiments and it is reflected in the character of Maqbool. When all others accept brutality and killings as fate, Maqbool believes in human efforts to counter the conflict. Anand infuses his protagonists and the savior characters with the humanistic ideas. Maqbool too believes in humanism. He loves the broken and innocent people. He is moved by their pathetic plights during the struggle with the raiders. Maqbool narrates through his experience: “All the way to Srinagar I was obsessed by thought of writing a poem on the terrors of death. But when I got there, I saw so much life that my fears fell away from me. It is a question of faith, of belief in ourselves and in the struggle...And that we can hope to be free...” (*Death of Hero* 138).

Anand has often criticized the institutionalized religion in his novels. He does not portray his characters supporting any religion. Rather his characters show humanistic beliefs as Anand does. In *Death of hero* also, he exposes hypocrisy in the religion. The Pakistani raiders are pseudo-religionists and fanatic too. On one hand, they pray to *Allah* and on the other hand, they exercise brutality in killing and looting the people. Ahmed Shah’s plea to establish a central muslim state is baseless. A person rejecting their ideology is a traitor for them. Though Maqbool is a former friend of Ahmed Shah, the latter alone brings brutality to Maqbool. Maqbool is declared as ‘kafir’ owing to his resistance to the raiders. They call the invasion as liberation movement of Kashmir. To the fanatic, killing the innocent civilians becomes ‘a holy war’ as the raiders call it. “To them it was ‘jehad’, a holy war in which all the defenders and their friends were infidels who must be destroyed. There was something terrible about this single mindedness which drove people to the extremes of brutality without a stirring of their consciences...” (146-147).

Maqbool Sherwani: As a man and hero

Anand's portrayal of Maqbool Sherwani as a man and as a hero is authentic. Maqbool has poetic spirit and sensibility. Nature appeals to his senses. Like Keats, 'a thing of beauty is a joy for ever' for him. Anand describes his love for the nature. 'The world of nature engulfed his ardent young poet's spirit. His fondness for the lush vegetation and flowers of Kashmir had always been the nostalgia of a man living with poor souls, heightening produced by the lovely gardens and falling waters as an escape from his own burning heart' (72). Having love and pity for the people, he does not have shrewdness and self centeredness. Because of such attitude Mehmdoo calls him 'a useless unpractical fellow'. Maqbool accepts it knowing the truth that he cannot stop himself loving people and feeling pity for them. Maqbool is truthful in his ways. Very candidly and open heartedly he confesses: "If I am to confess the truth, I also ran away. And it needed some persuasion to bring me back" (76). But he has boundless love for his country and his land and the people.

Undoubtedly, Maqbool's determination to fight for the freedom of Kashmir is praiseworthy. When the people are cowed down, murdered and looted, one generally resorts to one's safety and adjusts with the situation. The people in Baramula continually feel the tremor and fear of being killed. Maqbool too feels that fear but he gathers moral strength which comes from his purpose of the mission. When Muratib confesses that he is a coward and cannot resist the marauders due to fear, Maqbool tells him: "We are all liable to fear to grip our souls, we become cowardly. And each one of us is capable of this in a situation like one we are in..." (110).

Even in the state of hopelessness, Maqbool shows valor and courage that make him a hero. When most of the people accept the pathetic situation as a part of their fate and destiny, he stands firmly for the freedom of Kashmir. When Rahati suggest him not to go further, he refuses: "No, I must go... I have chosen my path" (95). Resistance against injustice and oppression was in his blood. During the Maharaja Hari Singh's rule, he was known as 'a notorious rebel against the Maharaja's rule'.

Though he feels boundless love and pity for the oppressed lot, he has a weakness too. Due to his excessive love and faith on the people, he cannot judge the character of people. He does not have ability to analyze people's inner desires and ambitions. Since he believes in the good and goodness of the people in general, he fails to judge the lawyer Ahmed Shah. He couldn't think that one day Shah whom he made president of National Conference of Baramula branch, will be a traitor and join hands with the Pakistani forces. P. K. Singh points out another drawback in Maqbool's character. 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).

Though the novel presents a conflict between two countries—Pro-Pakistani versus Pro-Indian, religion is the undercurrent of the conflict. The Pakistani raiders attack with an objective of accession of Kashmir on the plea that majority of population of Kashmir is Muslim. They are least bothered about the feeling of the Kashmiris whether they would like to be with India or Pakistan. In this forceful encroachment whoever defends for Kashmir or shows allegiance to Indian government, is supposed to be traitor and their enemy. If he is Hindu, he has to face his obvious and unavoidable fate and Muslim will have to face their charge of being a traitor. No one cares for the feeling of brotherhood; nor do one feels pity and affection for the people who suffer irrespective of the religion either Hindu or Muslim. It is Maqbool Sherwani who exhibits boundless love for the people, love for humanity and out of pity for those suffering lot he risks his life and tries to unite people and to awaken people's conscience for the liberty of Kashmir from the barbarians. He becomes a symbol of Anand's philosophy of humanism.

The novel shows parallelism to *The Big Heart* in the context of theme of individual versus group. Ananta in *The Big Heart* faces victimization from his own *thathiar* brothers. Maqbool also does not get support from his own fellowmen though he suffers at the hands of raiders. Both of them lose their lives for the welfare of the society. Ananta fails to convince his community about the importance of machine. Similarly Maqbool also is unable to convince his fellowmen about prioritization of freedom of Kashmir against religion. Both of them fight single handedly against social evils and lose their lives in the interest of others. Both the protagonists are put to death by the people who are fellowmen and having close association. Ananta is killed by Ralia in a state of fury whereas in Maqbool's case Ahmed Shah's provocation and brutality plays vital role. Most of the heroes in Anand's novels are portrayed as marginalized and passive. Bakha, Munoo, Gangu, Noor do not protest against the exploitation and injustice. It is only Gauri in *The Old Woman and the Cow*; Ananta in *The Big Heart* and Maqbool who show retaliation and resistance. Maqbool's heroism is unparallel to previous protagonists. K. N. Sinha observes: "While the heroism of Bakha, Bhikhu, Lal Singh or Gauri is tinged with inward darkness which struggles to externalize itself in action, that of Maqbool Sherwani has the glow and radiance of unrepressed joy" (Mulik Raj Anand 76).

The novel received mixed responses from the critics. S. A. Khan does not hold favorable opinion about the novel. Khan observes:

The characters, placed in a peculiar circumstance, seem to slip out of the hands of the novelist. There is neither a perfect interaction between the character and the incident nor the development of a vision so as to be all encompassing. The incidents are merely contrived and the background of the post-partition days does not enliven neither the character nor the perspectives of the novel. (*The Novel of Commitment* 102)

Commenting on the artistic impact of the novel, Naik remarks: 'This document is far from adding anything artistically significant to action or character appears to be an excrescence' (*Mulk Raj Anand* 109). Naik's evaluation that the novel lacks action requisite to an artistic work is agreeable but it is hard to agree that characters are 'excrescence'. The portrayal of major characters like Maqbool, Ahmed Shah and Muratib Ali is authentic. It is true that Anand couldn't develop minor characters much artistically due lack of space in the narrative owing to the short length of the novel. Riemenschneider has high appreciation for the novel saying that 'the novel is the most satisfying artistic achievement' (*An Ideal of Man* 18). About the novel, K. N. Sinha says 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). P. K. Singh believes that the novel is 'a poetic expression of Anand's view of heroism' (*Anand and Dalits* 100).

Conclusion

The novel *Death of a Hero* brings out the message of communal harmony that becomes clear through the story itself. The novel also addresses the issue of religious fanaticism and violence ensuing due to it and underlines the need of brotherhood and secularism for national integration. The novel also marks the need of humanistic feeling and love towards fellowmen as a prerequisite for enjoying and maintaining peace, happiness and freedom of the nation as well as individuals. Humanism and heroism of the protagonist become more significant in the novel rather than the historical context which the novel unfolds. Since the novel is a dramatic adaptation of a historical event, it inherently brings artistic limitations to the novelist's imaginative ability and skills confining limitations of time and space to the author. During articulating the historical event, the writer has to face the task of maintaining equilibrium to the past which naturally curtails full flight of artist's imaginative ability.

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