

## **Mikhail Sholokhov's *The Fate of a Man*: A Saga of Irreparable Loss and Unmatchable Valor**

**Malika Mand**

Assistant professor  
Department of English  
Khalsa College Garhdiwala (Punjab)

### **Abstract**

*Second World war, in its size and in its consequences, was the bloodiest war of the human history which had smeared almost half of the Europe in blood. Being intoxicated with their easy victories in France, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Romania and Austria in June, 1942 the Nazi forces attacked Soviet Union with around two thirty armed divisions. At that time Fascism was at its prime and the factories of whole Western Europe were making arms for Germany. Those were really difficult times for Soviet people. The enemy had already captured a large area of their country, besieged Leningrad and was marching towards their capital Moscow. Soviet soldiers were fighting not only against the German army but also against the armies of five puppet nations as well.*

*The war came to an end with the defeat of Fascism and the enslaved European nations were being liberated. At that time friends as well as foes came to know about the strength of Soviet common man who had stood up to fight for his motherland. The present paper aims to analyze the story 'The Fate of a Man' by Mikhail Sholokhov from the perspective of New Historicism which provides a glimpse of the horrors of the war and the concentration camps through the story of Andrei Sokolov (an ordinary lorry driver) whose tragic tale of irreparable loss and terrible grief is still imbibed with faith in the goodness of human heart and in life itself.*

**Keywords:** *Second World War, The Great Patriotic War, Genocide, Nazi Germany, Concentration Camps*

Mikhail Sholokhov born in 1905 in a middle class family of Veshenskaya of the Don region, grew up in the turmoil of civil war (which emerged due to the anti Bolshevik revolt of the pro-Tsar White bands immediately after the October Revolution). In 1920's he joined the communists and worked in a food supply detachment unit which also chased the white bands. He began his fictional career with a slender volume of short stories entitled *Tales from the Don (Daskie Rossakazy)* in 1926. After that came his great epic novels, *And Quiet Flows the Don* and *Virgin Soil Upturned* which portrayed the life of Don Cossacks in the most fateful decades of Soviet Russia.

During the Second World War when the Nazi's attacked his motherland, he joined 'Pravda' as a war correspondent. In his novella, *They Fought For Their Country* and short story *The Fate of a Man*, he described the burden that befell upon his people due to the Nazi invasion. Sholokhov chose the rank and file soldiers of the soviet army as the heroes of his works, tried to present the vitality of the valorous feats accomplished by the masses in the Great Patriotic War. As he admitted once

"I am interested in the lot of the ordinary people in the last war. Our soldiers fought like heroes in the days of the Great Patriotic War. The whole world knows of the Russian soldiers, their valor And their Suvorov qualities, but this war showed them in an entirely new light .That is my aim to show in a work the new qualities of the Soviet soldier".

Sholokhov presented war not only as a heroic feat of arms performed by the people but as a tremendous test of all the moral qualities of the soviet man. In this story *The Fate of a Man*, an impressive portrayal of the people's patriotism is combined with a movingly lyrical account of the fate of individuals in the general sea of troubles affecting the whole country. Sholokhov uses the 'tale within a tale' technique saying that he heard the tale while travelling with one of his friends to *Bukanovskaya* village. It's the early spring in the upper reaches of the don, the first spring after the war. It is here he meets a chance acquaintance, Andrei Sokolov, a former soldier who is travelling with his little son Vanya, for the first and last time tells his story to the author how he endured tortures and sufferings 'that would have broken many a man of weaker nature'. The two met in an isolated village where the narrator is waiting to ford a river. Sokolov's story can be divided into three parts, his life before war, service in the army, war and the concentration camps and the post war life. Born in 1900, he served in Red Army during the Civil War and lost his family in the famine of 1922. Afterwards, he started working as a driver and married Irena, an orphan but good tempered cheerful woman, whom he loved a lot. They lived in a small cottage near an aircraft factory with their three children, a son Anatoly and two daughters.

The war began and Andrei joined the army where he served as a truck driver .The second part of the story covers a longer period of time which includes the war, his capture and the hardships of the Concentration camp. The heroic theme of the story; the affirmation of valor and patriotism, comradeship and self-sacrifice as splendid human qualities appears in the story through Sokolov's character. The words where he says how a man should behave at the front, portray his character in new light "That's what a man's, for that's what you're a soldier for to put up with everything, to bear everything, if need be."(Sholokhov 17)

When the Germans were pressing forward during an attack Sokolov had to get through with a lorry -load of shells to one of the batteries in the front. He was ready to risk his life for the sake of his comrades

"Can you get through, Sokolov"? asks the commander of our company .He need never have asked .Was I going to sit there twiddling my thumbs while my mates got killed ?"What are you talking about !"I told him I got to get through and that's that." (Sholokhov 18)

In May 1942, he was captured by the Germans who sent him westwards. The next morning, the Germans lined up the prisoners and shot one real Jew and three Russians with dark, curly hair dead. The prisoners were sent all the way to Poznan. Andrei was sent into the forest to dig graves. Taking advantage of the guard's laxity, Andrei ran away. After four days he was eventually tracked down by blood hounds. He was sent to work at different factories and mines throughout Germany. The German soldiers used to punch, kick and beat the prisoners with sticks, rifle butts and iron bars. Andrei ended up in a camp near Dresden, where the prisoners were set to work in a ston quarry. The work was so hard and the food rations so meager that it was really hard to survive. He remembers

“They beat you up just because you were a Russian, because you were still alive in the world, just because you worked for them for them. And they beat you for giving them a wrong look, taking a wrong step....There weren't enough ovens in the whole of Germany, I reckon, for all of us to be shoved into.” (Sholokhov 28-29)

In those camps, they were given a hundred and fifty grams of bread made half of sawdust and a thin swill of wheat. The stint was four cubic meters per man, and for man, who could hardly keep body and soul together anyway. The kind of treatment they get there was horrible. The camp commandant Muller used to beat them up like animals. As Sokolov remembers

“He wore a leather glove and under the leather there was a strip of lead to protect his fingers. He'd walk down the line and bloody every other man's nose for him. ‘Inoculation against flue he used to call it.’”(Sholokhov 28)

One day, Andrei grumbled about the work and the camp commandant came to know about it from some informer. When he was summoned by the commandant he said good bye to his pals and to the stars also and began screwing up his courage, “to face the barrel of that pistol without flinching, like a soldier should, so the enemy wouldn't see how hard it'd be for him at last minute to part with this life, hard though it was.”(Sholokhov 33) The commandant announced that Sokolov would now have the honor of being shot by the latter. But first, he offered him a glass of schnapps and asked him to drink a toast to the triumph of German army. When Andrei refused politely, he again told him to drink a toast to his own death. This time he agreed, when the commandant offered him some bread, he refused politely

“I wanted to show the bastards that even though I was half dead with hunger I wasn't going to choke myself with the scraps they threw me, that I had my own, Russian dignity and pride. And that they hadn't turned me into an animal as they had wanted to.” (Sholokhov 34-35)

In this scene Sokolov appears as an embodiment of patriotism, courage and morality of all those who were still defending Stalingrad. His confrontation with the camp commandant carries a symbolic significance. As Russian critic Lev. Yakimenko observed, it was ‘the moment in Andrei Sokolov's life, when death passed him by and he only felt the cold breath of it’ coincides in time with one of the decisive struggles in the life of the Soviet people as a whole, the battle of Stalingrad. It is on this concrete historical foundation that the symbolic generalization rests .The

city on the Volga lied burning and in ruins and the camp commandant with his bunch of thugs was already celebrating victory. And here is a simple Russian soldier weakened by hunger, hard labor and brutal treatment behind the barked wires of a Nazi concentration camp. This scene symbolizes a moral duel and is full of significant socio historical undertones. Muller decided to humiliate the Russian soldier for one last time before killing him for daring to make free his tongue. But Sokolov's self-control and firmness saved him and the commandant spared his life. He escaped from the Germans in 1944 and even managed to bring a Nazi major with him to his side, as a prisoner. Andrei was sent to a hospital. He wrote letters to his wife telling her everything that happened. A few weeks later he received a letter from a neighbor telling that his family had died in the bombardment. This news shattered him, "Once I had a family, a home of my own, it had all taken years to build, it was all destroyed in flash, and I was left all alone. It must be a dream; I thought, this messed-up life of mine."(Sholokhov 45) Only his son Anatoly had survived who was graduated from artillery school and was now a captain commanding a battery.

After recovery, Andrei resumed service as a military truck driver and started dreaming about reunion with his son. Those dreams were shattered with the tragic news of his son's death which proves to be a death blow to his last hope, "I buried my last joy and hope in that foreign German soil, the battery fired a volley to send off their commander on his long journey and something seemed to snap inside me".(Sholokhov 45) Now heartbroken Andrei went to live with his friend in *Uryupinsk*. In a café, on the road he met Vanya, a dirty, scruffy child living on whatever food people gave him. Vanya told him that his father was killed at the front and his mother died when a bomb hit the train. Andrei suddenly decided to adopt Vanya and told him that he is his father. Vanya immediately believed him and they started to live happily. Now, they are going to live in some other area. The leaky boat finally arrives, the author bids farewell to his new acquaintance. The humanistic condemnation of war and Fascism is strengthened through the story of Vanya. The theme of injured, wretched childhood has long been one of the most tragically intense themes in the war literature. Sokolov speaks of the child with restrained grief when he tells the narrator how he had found Vanya, "such a little fellow and he'd already learned to sigh. Was that the thing for him to be doing?"(Sholokhov 46) Vaniya, a suffering orphan become a symbol of the whole generation of children who lost their parents, from whom the war stole away their innocence and childhood.

Andrei Sokolov's decision to adopt the child reveals the kindness in his heart. He has decided to return the joy of childhood to the little boy and shield him from pain and suffering. Indeed a heroic step as Lev Yakimenko points out, "for here was a man who had lost all, whom the war had left depleted, yet even in his terrible, soul-destroying loneliness he had managed to remain a human being."(35)The story ends on a tragic yet positive note where the narrator feels that life can endure anything and all that war brings with it can be overcome though it is going to be a difficult task. In the very beginning of the story we already came across the motif of '*a hard road*'. The description of the *hard road* prepares us for the hardships of Vaniya and Andrei Sokolov. They were going along the same hard road; moreover, they were going along it on foot. The *hard road* symbolizes the journey of human life.

Sholokhov ends the story on a stern note. Andrei Sokolov and Vanya are the two orphans who are joined by destiny amidst the hurricane of war. Their future is still uncertain but we believe that Andrei Sokolov will 'give all the strength of his generous soul to his adopted son and the boy will grow at his father's side into another man who can overcome any obstacle if his country calls upon him to do so'. The story ends on a lyrical note where the narrator feels sad for Vanya and Sokolov who revive our faith in humanity and goodness of human heart. We came to believe that the way out of Nazi racism and hatred is the path of human love that Sokolov follows. Instead of all the heroic feats he accomplished, the story remains a saga of this world, a story of extraordinary courage and faith of an ordinary man.

We can conclude that '*The Fate of a Man*' is one of the finest stories written about the Second World War. The two themes, the heroic and the tragic, the feat and the suffering intermingle throughout the story forming a polyphonic whole. It is not merely a condemnation of war which is over and done with. Rather it sounds as a passionate appeal to the whole world to stop for a moment and reflect on what war brings. The story revives our faith in the mobility, dynamism of life and in the goodness of human heart. Andrei Sokolov's life is a tale of irreparable losses. He has to bear soul crushing grief and has lost everything that was dear to him but he managed to save his kindness and sensitivity. His true valor reflects in his decision to adopt Vaniya, an orphan and a war victim. He decides to return the joy of childhood to the little boy and to shield him from the sufferings of the world. In famous critic Lev. Yakimenko's words, "It was in Andrei Sokolov's attitude towards Vaniya that humanism won its greatest victory, triumphing over the inhumanity of Fascism, over destruction and death itself." The man of the socialist world with his hope and faith proved stronger than war. He weathered the furious storm, and emerged from it victorious; it was this human, triumphant note that gave the story its essential heroic tone.

The '*Fate of a Man*' inspires us to have faith in life. Whatever happens in life but hope must not be lost. There is something in life which should be fought for, for which we should struggle, for which we should live, as Sokolov did. Because the beauty, dignity and grace of human existence lies in this spirit of fighting only.

### **Bibliography**

- Alexesayev, Seregey. *The History of Russia in Tales*. Moscow: Progress Publishers.1985.Print
- Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary Criticism and Cultural Theory*. Delhi: Viva Books.2010. Print.

- Sholokhov, Mikhael. *At the Bidding of the Heart*. Moscow: Progress Publishers. 1973. Print
- Slonim, Marc. *Soviet Russian Literature: Writers and Problems (1917-1977)* London: Oxford University Press. 1986. Print.
- Struve, Gleb. *Russian Literature under Lenin and Stalin. (1917-1953)*. Moscow: Progress Publishers. 1988. Print.
- Sholokhov, Mikhael, *The Fate of a Man*. Moscow : Progress Publishers,. 1978. Print.
- Yakimenko, Lev. *Sholokhov: A Critical Appreciation*. Moscow: Progress Publishers. 1973. Print.