

## **Mikhail Sholokhov's *Tales from Don*: An Authentic Representation of the Life of Don Cossacks in the Aftermath of Russian Revolution**

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### **Abstract**

The Russian revolution (also known as Bolshevik revolution) which took place in October 1917 marked a historical epoch not only in the history of Russia but also in the history of World. It was under the able guidance of leaders like Vladimir Illich Lenin that for the first time rule of the proletariat was established. Now the power came in the hands of common people who have earlier been living in wretched condition. Mikhail Sholokhov is one of those Soviet writers whose works are written in the backdrop of Russian Revolution. The present paper aims to analyze the stories written by Sholokhov included in *Tales from Don* for the aptness, concreteness and artistic perfection with which they address the issues of their times. They minutely deconstruct the myriad dimensions of the havoc that the people of Don region had to endure due to the Bolshevik Revolution, the Civil War that followed it and during the initial years of establishment of the Soviet rule. These stories try to capture the unrest, the uncertainties and drastic changes that the revolution had brought in the lives of people from an essentially humanistic perspective. The stories which we shall be discussing here are 'The Herdsman', 'The Birthmark', 'The Colt', 'The Bastard', 'Azure Steppe' and 'Foreign Blood'.

**Keywords:** *Bolshevik Revolution, Russian Civil War, Don Cossacks, Social Realism, Socialist Hero, Humanism.*

Mikhail Sholokhov, a noble laureate, is one of the best fiction writers in the world. He was born in 1905 in a lower middle class peasant family in the district of *Vaishanskaya*. Sholokhov joined the Communists in 1920 and served in a food supply detachment which was working to collect the extra crops. Those troops had to fight against the rich *kulaks*, who relying on the support of armed goons, were hiding their crops in an effort to starve out and destabilize the newly established Soviet Republic. Sholokhov's personal experience in the food supply

detachment unit got manifested through his stories. He began his fictional career with *Tales from Don* (1926) at a tender age of twenty which strive to capture the existence of Don Cossacks during the most fateful decades of history of their nation. Almost all his fictional works including his monumental novels *And Quite Flows the Don* and *Virgin Soil Upturned* are rooted in the soil of his native Don region. It is the region around Don river, apparently known as the land of Cossacks. Those half warriors –half peasants have different culture, customary notions of dignity and valor which make them different. As Sholokhov himself admits in his autobiography, the establishment of Soviet power in Don region was a painful process. Cossacks, a martial community, religiously orthodox and rigidly conservative, due to their ignorance, misconceptions or confusions initially opposed the Soviet rule. Majority of the Cossacks zealously fought against it and it was only after a lot of bloodshed that they accepted the Soviet rule. Thus, the revolution shooked the lives of people down to the very roots dividing families and setting brothers, sons and fathers against each other. Sholokhov himself witnessed the anti-revolution revolt which emerged immediately after the October revolution (1917) in the Don region. On one hand, there were rich kulaks (landlords) being led by the white guards (some elite officers of the military of Tzar) and on the other hand was the newly established Soviet regime. In these stories, Sholokhov transmits the drama of class struggle through poignant situations which are woven around a struggle between two completely opposite forces, between the people of the newly emerging world of Socialism and those who cling to the past- the kulaks and the White guards. This class struggle is visibly present throughout these stories which strive to expose the changes which the revolution had brought in the lives of people.

In *The Herdsman*, after revolution Gregory a poor orphan and a young communist returns to his native village. He is appointed as the herdsman of the collective farm irrespective of the fact that the rich *kulaks* (landlords) openly oppose his appointment .They say, “He is one of those young Communists, the bloody atheist .He would not pray while taking care of the cattle.”(22)Gregory understands that the change in the power structure is only limited to the cities but in the villages most of the chairmen are still rich kulaks. He wishes to bring the light of knowledge and new thinking to his village. He is well aware of the fact that only education can pave the way to empowerment of the proletariat. That’s why he dreams about going to the city school. He tells his sister Duniya:

“We have to get education so that we could be able to rule our republic. In the cities, the power lies in the hands of the Proletariat but in the villages, the most of the presidents are still the rich upper class landlords.”(22)

The rich landlords, still trying to overrule the changes that the revolution had promised to bring, did some unjust division of land among the people. The ironsmith Tikhon tells Gregory about the appointment of new president who is the son-in-law of a rich landlord:

Our lives are the wretched ones.....They do everything to serve their own interest. Yesterday, the land was divided but as soon as some poor fellow would get a good piece of land, the land would be re-divided .I think in no time the rich would again overpower us. Son, they have seized all the good land and left us only the sandy one. (27)

Agitated over this injustice, Gregory writes to the newspaper and party office in the city to complain against the unjust division of land by the rich kulaks who still dominate the village administration .In return, Gregory is brutally murdered by them. Towards the end, we see Duniya moving through the endless Steppe towards the city school so that she can get education as her brother desired to. The story glorifies Gregory who sacrificed his life while fighting against injustice whereas it fills us with contempt for the kulaks who appear an embodiment of corruption, superstitions, ignorance and an age which has gone and done with.

*The Bastard* tells the story of eight years old Mishka, an eight year old brat mischievous and fun loving who toward the end of the story acts like a brave mature man. He met his father Foma Korshunov, a poor farmer and a soldier who fought for the Bolsheviks, after four long years of war. Foma is being elected as the president of the village *Soviet* (administrative body) .Young Mishka is being insulted and humiliated time and again by the children of rich families of the village who hate him for being a Bolshevik's son .But Mishka does not pay any heed to them and relishes to hear the stories of war and especially their leader, Lenin. Foma tells his son how they fought against the Bourgeoisies and seized power from them:

And son, it happened the same way. We took control over the land and the factories and shooed away the rich and bourgeois. When you grow up ,don't forget that your father was a soldier and fought for the Communes for four long years .Someday ,I would die and so would Lenin ,But the things we fought for would stay .Would you fight for the soviet when you grow up?(80)

Being inspired by the heroic tales his father told him, Mishka even starts dreaming about joining the Red army. One day, he chased a troop of soldiers who marched through their village. Those troops of Red army were going to fight against the rebels and bandits who were active in those areas. The very next day one such group of bandits attacked Mishka's village. They burnt the village soviet and attacked the village. His father Foma Korshunov along with a few other men of the village died while fighting against them. The villagers decide to send for help to the troop of Red army which crossed their village a day ago and must be nearby. For this purpose they choose Mishka who rides on the horse back in the pitch dark night in lonely steppe to call the Red soldiers for help. He reached the other village and conveyed the message, "There

are bandits in the village. They killed my daddy and burnt down the Soviet. And grandad says for you to come as soon as you can.”(108)

In *The Colt*, Trofim, a soldier in the Red army who is fighting against the kulaks in the Don region dies while saving his drowning colt as it reminds him of his children:

As he took the first step he stumbled upon and fell down. A hot thing pierced his chest from the right side that hit his back.....Lying on the sand, Trofim was dying... a blood soaked foam brought a smile on his lips ,the lips which had not kissed their children since five long years.(68)

In *Azure Steppe*, grandad Zakhar tells the tragic tale of his pitiable life as a coachman of a rich landlord .He tells that before revolution he used to live a wretched life. He worked for a rich landlord Tomilin whereas his wife used to work as a housemaid. The landlord was a cold hearted callous fellow who used to sexually exploit the maid servants including his wife:

He used to make passes at my wife. She was one of the maids and she would come running into the servant quarters with her blouse all torn... and I see that her breasts were all scratched and bitten.(117)

Then came the revolution and his grandsons Semyon and Anikei were amongst the people who seized the land of the landlord Tomilin who had ran away from his estate. After few days the landlord returned with armed men to take revenge upon them. They arrested many people along with Anikei and Semyon. Grandad Zakhar went to seek forgiveness for them and requested his grandsons to go and seek forgiveness too but in vain. Anikei refused plainly saying:

Go and tell your master that grandad Zakhar crawled on his knees all his life and so did his son but his grandsons don't want to do it anymore....we've come to our senses and we won't go! You go and crawl!(40)

They were shot dead by the landlord along with thirty two other people. It was only Anikei who survived but lost both his legs.

*The Birthmark* is a strange tale of chance and fate reflecting how the revolution divided families and made fathers, sons, brothers, friends fight against each other. In this story, an *ataman* (leader) of the Cossack's troop while fighting against the Red army unknowingly kills his own son who is now a young squadron commander in the Red army. He could only recognize his dead son by the birthmark on his ankle while trying to take off the latter's shoes. He cried, “Son!...my Nikolai! My own flesh and blood! Speak! Just one word! How? ...Why?.”(26) Guilt stricken and shocked by the horror of what he has done, the ataman shoots himself in the mouth

and dies near his only child. The story not only throws ample light on the blood game which continued during the civil war but also presents the irony of fate and the harsh tragic vision of life which though unknowingly has brought kinsfolk against each other.

*Foreign Blood* is a beautiful story about the profoundest of human emotions (love and brotherhood) which are so strong that they can overcome even bitter hatred. It tells the story of an old farmer Gavrilla and his wife who lost their only son Petro (a soldier in the white bands) in a battle against the Red army. This news breaks the old couple apart. One day a group of three young communists arrive at their house to collect the surplus crop for the collective farm. Soon after a group of bandits appear from nowhere and attacked them. Two of the communists are killed whereas one of them though mortally injured, survived. Gavrilla and his wife move heaven and earth to save his life. The boy survives and the old couple start loving him as their own son. They want him to stay back with them but when the boy is called by his friends of the foundry where he used to work in before revolution, the couple bid him farewell with a heavy heart, still hoping that he would return to them one day.

These stories have documented a very significant period in the Russian history. These stories not only throw ample light upon the wretched life of the poor people before revolution but also tell how the people of different classes responded to the revolution. The common poor and lowly Cossacks supported it while the rich kulaks were against it.

The protagonists of these stories represent the people who bore hardships of the civil war and sacrificed for the establishment of a new system of governance, the people who were amongst the first ones to plough in the fields of collective farms. They are common but valorous people who suffer and fight and are even ready to sacrifice their lives. Gregory (*The Herdsman*), Foma Korshunov (*The Bastard*), Timofim (*The Colt*) died but remained committed to their principles. While portraying these characters, Sholokhov in a way redefines the concept of 'socialist hero' and breaks down the romanticized image of revolution where the heroes emerge out victorious without much harm to themselves.

Above all, the strength of Sholokhov's stories lies in their humanistic appeal. No doubt, bloodshed, war, class struggle, conflicts, contradictions are there but these stories always end on a positive note. Duniya marches towards the city to fulfill her brother's dream (*The Herdsman*), Trofim (*The Colt*) sacrifices his life to save a young colt from drowning, old Gavrilla who had lost his only son to the Bolsheviks, not only saved a young Communist but also showered his paternal affection upon him (*The Foreign Blood*). These stories seem to remind us that whatever happens we should never lose hope in the goodness of human heart.

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