



ISSN 2278 – 0211 (Online)

Moby Dick as an Epic and Captain Ahab as an Epical Hero

Mariya Aslam

PhD Scholar, Department of English, University of Jammu, Jammu and Kashmir, India

Abstract:

Moby Dick is not an epic in a strict sense but it has many qualities of an epic. Its elevated theme written in an elevated style raises it above the level of an ordinary novel. In few pages, Melville has proved that how to transform a common man from daily walks of life to a legend. It is not the extraordinary birth that creates great heroes but great deeds of common men. Ahab although suffers a terrible defeat at the hands of Moby Dick but still his undefeated will could be seen till his last breath which makes him a true hero.

What is an epic? If we travel back to ancient times and turn out the golden pages of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, or the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, we can make out that an epic is a long narrative in verse, written in an elevated style about an elevated theme, about a hero of unbelievable stature, who is either god, demigod or at least protected by a god and takes up a journey to fight against evil. It involves supernatural forces and action and adventure is on a large scale. *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville has generally been regarded as a book having several qualities of an epic. Although it cannot be called as an epic in strict sense because all the great epics have been written in verse and *Moby Dick* is in prose.

Captain Ahab is not of any grand stature nor is he any god or demigod, in fact many scholars call him antichrist and atheist as he says "Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me" (127). He is a man who "looked like a man cut away from the stake, when the fire has overrunningly wasted all the limbs without consuming them, or taking away one particle from their compacted aged robustness...." (118) Ahab's high broad form, we are told, is made up of solid bronze and is shaped in an unalterable mould. Although Ahab is a common American man yet nothing about him is ordinary, when Melville describes his little ivory stool, he attributes to it a quality of grandeur. It becomes the symbol of great power and royalty.

How could one look at Ahab then, seated on that tripod of bones, without bethinking him of the royalty it symbolized? For Khan of the plank, and king of the sea, and great lord of leviathans was Ahab (123).

Ahab is a character of gigantic proportions and reminds us of such men as Achilles and Odysseus. Certainly, he is not as powerful as Satan of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, but he is far above the general heroes of fiction or of real life. He is quite strong willed which can be noted in his conversation, "Oh, hard! that to fire others, the match itself must needs be wasting! What I've dared, I've willed; and what I've willed, I'll do!" (161) His goal remains unchanged even when he knows he would die in the quest and says, "Towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale; to the last I grapple with thee; from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee" (532).

Melville has raised an ordinary man to the status of a great hero. He shows that how heroes arise from mighty human being, who instead of choosing paths, make them. Although the hero of an epic generally emerges triumph, the protagonist here suffers a terrible defeat at the end and dies. But despite his final defeat. Ahab does have the caliber of a true hero.

An epic is usually about a long journey. *Odyssey* undertook a long journey lasting eighteen years. The *Pequod* set out on a voyage which was expected to last for three years and was supposed to sail from Nantucket and pass through Atlantic, across the equator into the Indian Ocean, and then entering through the straits of *Sunder* into the fishing grounds of the Pacific Ocean. The *Pequod* braved all kind of weather and passed through various regions but finally destroyed by *Moby Dick*. Quest of hero includes adventures and fight is between good and evil. For our hero *Moby Dick* is "not a whale, he's the devil himself!" (408) It is comparable to the *Golden Fleece*, which in ancient mythology, was guarded by a fierce dragon. *Moby Dick* acquired its name for the exceptional ferocity and enormous strength. This enormous creature snatched away one of the legs of Captain Ahab. It not only personifies outrageous strength but also an inscrutable malice. For Ahab, white whale is wholly evil and killing this leviathan means vanquishing evil in the world. All through the novel, his mission remains undaunted. Even when he hears that white whale had killed a

chief mate, snatched one arm of Captain Boomer, and killed five members of a ship called Delight, he does not stop pursuing the white whale. When Moby Dick is seen in Pacific Ocean, terrific chase begins and three chapters are dedicated to detail every picture of the chase. Only a person of unsurpassed sea knowledge can provide such a vivid picture of the hunt.

Ancient epics were dominated by a sense of fate and profound with prophecies. In *Moby Dick*, we come across many omens and portents which seem to indicate the intervention of fate in human affairs. Supernatural powers seem to play part. Even name of characters Elijah, Ahab reminds us of the warnings of prophet and the fate of the king. When Ishmael enters the Spouter Inn, he sees the painting of a whaling ship wrecked by enormous whale and name of owner of that inn is Peter Coffin. Gabriel declares that Moby Dick is an incarnation of God and hunting him would amount to blasphemy. All the omens signified that Pequod would suffer destruction at the hand of Moby Dick.

Humor plays an important role in epic as it acts as a stress buster. In *Moby Dick*, Ahab himself sometimes behave and speak like the humorous, shrewd and boastful frontiersman, mystical Yankee peddlers who figured in the oral tradition and on the popular stages in Melville's time. Some critics call *Moby Dick* a domestic epic in which we see the celebration of the ideals of brotherhood and equality on one hand and of individualism on the other. The novel has many qualities of an epic, it has a martial atmosphere and is associated with savage and homely materials retaining to the universal myths of mankind and describes the symbolic wanderings of the hero. In the figure of Ahab, Melville makes us accept the common old man, who when admits "I am, proud as a Greek god" also admits "and yet standing debtor to this blockhead for a bone to stand on!" as a heroic figure of Prometheus proportions. (443)

References

1. Bonnefoy, Yves. *Greek and Egyptian Mythologies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992. Print.
2. Fagles, Robert, and Bernard Knox. *The Iliad*. New York, N.Y., U.S.A.: Viking, 1990. Print.
3. Lattimore, Richmond Alexander. *The Odyssey of Homer*. New York: Harper & Row, 1967. Print.
4. Melville, Herman. *Moby Dick*. New Delhi: Ramji Lal, 2007. Print.
5. Melville, Herman. *Moby Dick*. Santa Fe: El Cid Editor, 2009. Print.
6. Rajagopalachari, C.. *Ramayana*. [6th ed. Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1968. Print.
7. Rajagopalachari, Chakravarti. *Mahabharata*. 6th ed. Chaupatty, Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1958. Print