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THE STILL SAD STORY OF HUMANITY

A Study of Manoj Das' Short Stories*

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A human civilization gone wrong by our perverted ideals, an existence warped by anti-human forces—such is the plight of this tender, lovely world that Manoj Das describes. He communicates a vision of a world where innocence and aspirations are betrayed by life's cruel ironies. Yet, behind all these there is the awareness of a sensitive artist of the eternal throb of life. Behind all the ugly distortions of life there is always that tender desire of mankind to live.

Manoj Das conveys the poignancy of the human situation through humour. In his stories the comic always has a symbiotic relationship with the serious. Beneath the uproarious fun and laughter of his short stories, the helplessness of human predicament, the agony and eclipse of life are presented. A deep humanistic vision pervades throughout his works as a result of which his satire affects in an affectionate and sympathetic manner. Behind the facade of the comic lies the painful realization of man's loneliness and a lost world. This predicament is movingly illustrated in the story "The Princess and the story-teller." Bhatt and Shawoo, whose finer feelings have been blunted during their crimlnal career, suddenly find themselves exposed to the tender side of human existence in the act of the story-teller's sacrificing his eye for his beloved princess and the princess in turn offering herself to marry him. Later on, even though she story-teller confesses it to be only fiction, both Bhatt and Shawoo refuse to accept it as fiction as they have been suddenly led to a realm of tender values of life of which they were deprived earlier. Their stubborn refusal to accept it as a figment of imagination speaks of their yearning for life. Possibly for this reason Dr. Batstone, the man from the land of skyscrapers, believes in the "Crocodile's Lady." The tale of the Crocodile's Lady is a moving saga of love and sacrifice that transcends the questions of reality or fantasy, human or subhuman. From the suffocation of reason and science Dr. Batstone, for those few moments in India, could find liberation. This pathetic sense of human loss is movingly represented in "Farewell to a ghost." The ghost had become an innocent and indispensable part of the lives of the villagers. When the tree in which the ghost was forced to dwell was struck by lightning, it marked the death of innocence.

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* *The Crocodile's Lady*. Published by Sterling Publishers
Fables and Fantasies for Adults. Published by Orient Paperbacks

a theatrical performance. Mass-psychology is again treated in "The Story of Baba Chakradhari." But in this story the knife of satire is much sharper: the mass shown here is possessed with a mania. Unlike in "Tragedy", the mass in "The Story of Baba Chakradhari" is not a select audience: it is an assemblage of all the people of a small town. These people were assured of an astonishing fire-jumping feat which, on account of sudden deterioration of climatic conditions, the organisers were not able to present. The man hired to perfrom the feat himself was afraid: the wind was roaring furiously and to perform the feat would have been too hazardous. But the assembled crowd was hysterically demanding the show: people wanted to have the fun as they paid for it, no matter what the consequence. The chiefe organizer, anyhow, was bold enough to play a trick to appease the crowd; but the mass presented in the story, even at the end when it was frantically disintegrating, is a mob—and a very realistic mob it is.

The writer in two of his recent creations presented the curious ways by which a fiction is accepted by a whole mass of people as true and believed decade after decade. These stories are: "Farewell to a Ghost" and "The Crocodile's Lady." The fact that make-believe plays an important role in the lives of men is only too obvious to anybody who has some insight. Make-believe should not be taken as a synonym for self-deception. Make-believe can be healthy; self-deception is not. Self-deception is the vice against which Jane Austen had tirelessly waged her pen in novel after novel. It blights the growth of personality; sometimes even poisons the whole environment. On the otherhand, make-believe can be hygienic: it may enrich life, give significance to existence. In "Farewell to a Ghost" the writer has portrayed a village-folk who had unshaken belief in the existence of a spirit. The ghost supposed to be the spirit of a young girl of the same village, was accepted as one among them: in festive occasions she was offered sweets, food and drink though none had ever seen her. But the depth of their attachment to the "darling daughter" (as they affectionately referred the ghost) became known when, on compulsion, they bade her farewell. The ghost was only a fiction but they were moved by true pathos in bidding her farewell. In "The Crocodile's Lady" again the writer speaks of the fantasy-building capacity of the villagers. A girl, who suddenly disappeared from the village and was missing for a decade or so made an equally

sudden reappearance. Nobody knew about her life in the intervening period. But the villagers, with their creative fancy, had woven a very romantic story round this happening, liberally using elements from folk-stories and fables, to satisfy themselves. In neither story the writer is explicit about the healthy role that make-believe plays in the lives of men as Ibsen is in *The Wild-duck*. But in each story the writer had commented upon the fact that make-believe, which was accepted by whole groups of people until a few decades ago, had fast disappeared from our society. Growing advancement of scientific knowledge definitely has to account for this; but even a greater reason perhaps is the growing isolation of the individual. Make-believe now is confined to the individual and subtler in form.

The range of ideas that Manoj Das employs in his stories is wide—too wide. One of the recurrent themes in his stories is modern man's over-obsession with sensuality and sense-pursuits. Being "caught in the sensual music" the modern man forgets traditional values and ethical significance of life. What he incessantly pursues is a perennial titillation. A possible consequence of such an obsession is the subject matter of the story, "The Last I Heard of Them". Here he speaks of seven aged men who set out on a quest: they were in quest of a supernatural agency which could aid them in gratifying some primitive, rather perverse, cravings. Luckily (or unluckily for them) they found one such, miraculous ointment, and they were but too anxious to use it to see naked female bodies in a club. But they over-reached themselves: what they saw was a spectacle of skeletons pressing upon them from all sides, a sight dreadful enough to kill the most courageous. Same is the theme of another story, "A Trip into the Jungle", though the technique employed here is different. In "The Last I Heard of Them"—and in many other stories as well—the writer has used supernatural elements to bring home the central idea. But even while using supernatural elements Manoj Das gives a perfect "objective correlative" for the experiences communicated and the response is a "willing suspension of disbelief". In "A Trip into the Jungle", however, the writer employs a naturalistic technique. Here again he portrays a group of epicures who, in a strange picnic trip into the forest could have devoured (it remains a mystery) half-roasted human flesh under strong alcoholic influence. However improbable this climax of the story may appear, the writer has developed the story organically—one of the very striking features of Manoj Das'

writing is to develop each story organically—situations growing out of characters and giving rise to events; and the dialogues towards the end of the story are handled with immense care:

> Mrs. Mity's eyes were wild. She said, "But suppose inside that room you see the boar instead of Shyamal?"
> "But we roasted and ate up the boar last night, didn't we?"
> "But suppose you see the boar instead of Shyamal?"
> "But we ... didn't we? ... ate the boar!"
> "But suppose you see the boar instead of Shyamal?"
> There was silence for a long time. Then someone said,
> "But we can go to the kitchen garden. Much of the boar should be still there!"
> "For heaven's sake let us not!" shrieked both Mrs. Mity and Mrs. Chakodi. "If we see the remains not of the boar?"

The repetition of the same words again and again hammers the truth home and thus dialogue serves its function in a work of art.

What strikes us most in many of Manoj Das' stories is the unexpected turn an event or a chain of events takes. Often the sudden, unexpected turn of an event flashes on our mind like lightning leaving behind a wealth for reflection. In "Mystery of the Missing Cap" the writer speaks of a politician and his rural henchman, who suddenly changed the course of their lives due to an event, apparently quite trivial. The politician, who was a minister then, lost his cap while he was camping in a village. The cap was stolen from his bedroom by a domesticated monkey. The minister's henchman had cunningly invented a story to save the situation, even to elevate the minister with his account, for whom, it appears, he had been nursing immense contempt in his sub-conscious. But at the moment of the minister's departure the monkey itself appears with the cap and offers it back to the minister, thus shattering the fictitious account of the henchman. This event, by itself, is quite trivial: the monkey acted just like a monkey; but it contained the potentialities to change the lives of two professed politicians. The real significance of the story, no doubt, is the psychological element: the writer's deep insight into the mysterious workings of the human psyche characterizes it. The writer, however, doesn't offer any comments; he leaves us to reflect upon and his motive is obviously satirical. But a very striking quality of the story is the tender regard with which the writer held the characters even if the satirical intent

is obvious. The story, therefore, is funny as well as sad; satirical as well as melancholic. So is " A Song for Sunday ". In this story, the protagonist's " downward march " recalls O'Neil's *The Emperor Jones*, though the hero here is innocent and harmless. Mr. Lenka, a humble stenographer in the District Collectorate, wanted to enjoy a joke on Sunday; but the peculiar effect of the joke wrecked his sanity for a lifetime. We have heard of the tragic hero's " flaw " which enmeshes him with a chain of cause and effect until he pays the price of life; but Mr. Lenka's tragedy, though appears like a parody, reminds us of the realities that operate in the lives of men which can destroy one's life even though he might be suffering from no flaw. It is needless to say that we do witness such tragedies very often in real life.

In an interview published a few months ago Manoj Das revealed that he did not want to " preach " through his stories, that didacticism was not his concern. But he has written a bunch of stories — he still continues to do so — supposed to have occurred in a place known as " Luvurva hills " and these stories contradict this declaration of the writer. In these stories (rather fables) the writer has employed a technique which reminds us of Orwell's *Animal Farm* and the writer's interest in these works is certainly didactic. In fact, there can't be anything seriously wrong with literature which is didactic, provided the " message " conveyed grows out of the material rather than imposed upon it. But these stories of Manoj Das reveal the writer's over-preoccupation with ideas. These ideas, however, are not as effectively transmuted into aesthetic experiences as in his other stories. There is a marked artistic come-down in these stories and the writer of this essay believes that Manoj Das can't pursue this technique without seriously impairing his progress as an artist.

If Manoj Das is least at home with didactic stories, he is most at home with stories dealing with child psychology. Stories like " A Letter from the Last Spring " or " The Substitute for Sitar " are not possible unless a writer has the gift of " negative capability " or complete " de-personalization ". In " A Letter from the Last Spring " the writer portrays a motherless child Reena, and an aged Professor. Both gaze at the passers-by on the road, standing on the balconies of their respective apartments : Reena, eagerly expectant to receive a letter from her dead mother whom she thinks to be still alive, and the aged Professor mostly watches Reena, as he feels an inward kinship with her. The last part of

the story not only reveals the nobleness of Reena's heart: but also the way Reena, the young girl, viewed an aged man. Reena thought that the old man also expected a letter from his mother and so he was standing on the hotel verandah for hours and hours, watching the postman. To miss this psychological element in the heart of the story is to miss the real beauty of it.

In the very conception of most of the stories of Manoj Das there is an originality and a freshness which delight and appeal to the reader's mind. But his narrative technique is conventional: he follows the traditional beginning-middle-end structure in each of his stories. His style is certainly remarkable: it is characterized by an olympian serenity, a rare aristocracy. The writer doesn't embroider much. In fact, many of his stories are so little embroidered that they appear threadbare. He makes liberal use of irony and humour. A vein of quiet laughter runs through stories like "Mystery of the Missing Cap", "A Song for Sunday" etc. But beneath the bubbling gaiety there is an undercurrent of pathos. After reading many of his stories we remember Shelley's lines:

"Our sweetest songs are those
That tell of saddest thought."

To sum up: considering the range of ideas and style of writing, Manoj Das appears to be a writer of unusual gifts. His themes range from the most matter-of-fact happenings of everyday life to the events suggestive of supernatural. While considering his stories we recall the following words of Henry James:

"Experience is never limited ... it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider web of the finest silken threads, suspended in the chamber of consciousness and catching every air-borne in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind."