

NEW WORLD LITERATURE SERIES : 71

# MANY WORLDS OF MANOJ DAS



P. RAJA

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He is the author of 8 books :

The Stupid Guru and His Foolish Disciples (1981)

The Sun and the Stars (1982)

From Zero to Infinity (1987)

A Concise History of Pondicherry (1987)

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M.P. Pandit : A Peep into His Past (1993)

Pondicherry University has honoured him with a **Literary Award** for the year 1987.

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*Gratefully*  
*Dedicated to my Teachers*

**Prof. N. Santhalingam**

**&**

**Prof. R. Venugopalan Nair**

**Under whom I had the privilege of studying  
English language and Literature**

## Preface

As an avid reader of Indian writing in English I love to read fiction whether it comes in the garb of a storyette or a novel. There was a time when I spent much of my leisure hours in reading the works of the celebrated trio – R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. The works of Manohar Malgonkar, Nayantara Sahgal, Kamala Markandeya and Arun Joshi also attracted me. But what appealed to me more than all other forms of fiction was the short story and the various techniques adapted by these writers in telling the stories. My craving for reading more short stories by Indo-Anglian writers was on the rise. Hence the search for more short story writers began in various libraries. On one occasion I came across a first volume of short stories by one who at that time was yet to become popular.

The title of the book was *"A Song for Sunday" and Other Stories*. Manoj Das was its author. At first I read the stories for the sheer enjoyment they provided. But soon I realized that they carried something more than they showed on the surface. The second reading unravelled to me the fact that the short stories of Manoj Das apart from entertaining the readers with a lot of comic situations also showed how thin is the line that divides life and death, sanity and insanity, love and hatred, and above all the human and the inhuman.

Search for Manoj Das's other volumes of short stories in English began. His short stories appealed to me more than the works of the other Indo-Anglian fictionists primarily for their psychological profundities.

As I wanted to sound the skill with which Manoj Das handles his wide variety of themes in order to portray the multi-faceted life and quite confidently brings out the thin differences between the incongruent abstract subjects an attempt was made to trace the secondary sources on Manoj Das's English short stories. But the material available was next to nothing. A sort of disappointment in this regard led me to take up the present study which I hope, would be considered a pioneering work in the evaluation of a significant writer of our time.

This search involved several fields of study. Although the range of perspective widened, I found that there are certain



prominent fields under which the short stories of Manoj Das can be classified and studied. But all such classifications have a common base – the dominant element in Manoj Das's stories which is probing the human psyche.

There are many who have helped in the process of completing this study. Foremost among them is Dr. M.S. Nagarajan, Professor and Head of the Department of English, University of Madras, who has been my guide in the pursuit of this study. He has helped me with an intimate involvement, abiding interest and understanding of the many problems that I faced, in bringing this research to fruition. I thank him most sincerely for all his help.

I am indebted to Dr. P. Marudanayagam, Professor and Head of the Department of English, Pondicherry University, for his constant encouragement and support that he so willingly and spontaneously gave at every stage to enable me to pursue this research.

I am thankful to Mr. Debranjana, Chief Librarian of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram General Library, Pondicherry for unhesitatingly lending me all the books and even some of the rare magazines I needed. I am thankful also to my cousin K. Palani Raja for all his timely help. I would remain ungrateful if I fail to acknowledge the help rendered by my bosom friend R. Marimouthou who was always ready to withdraw for me from his bank balance.

Finally to my affectionate wife Periyanyaki – partner, helpmate, companion, guardian of my study and staunch supporter, without whose help... I thank you.

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P. Raja

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## Chronology

- 1934 Manoj Das born on Feb. 27 in the seashore village, Sankhari in the Northern part of district Balasore of Orissa.
- 1942 A devastating cyclone followed by a terrible famine woke the seven year old Manoj to questions like: "What is it that sustains man through travails and torments of life? Is it the dream of happiness? Can man ever be happy in the true sense of the term?"
- 1948 Begins contributing to periodicals.
- 1949 Publication of the first volume of poems in Oriya *Satabdira Artanada*, followed by a second *Biplavi Fakirmohan* (both by N.U. Press, Orissa) when Manoj was in class IX.
- 1950 Edits *Diganta*, a cultural periodical devoted to creative writing.
- 1951 Matriculates from Balasore Zilla School. *Samudra Kshudha* (N.U. Press) the first collection of short stories in Oriya published.
- 1952-54 Student leader; President of Balasore College Union; Vice-President of the State Students Federation; goes over to Puri College.
- 1953 *Jibanara Swada* a collection of Oriya short stories published by Nabayug Granthalaya.
- 1954 Begins contributing to English periodicals. *Bishakanyara Kahani*, a collection of short stories and *Padadhwani* a collection of poems both in Oriya published by Puri Publishers and Nabayug Granthalaya, respectively.
- 1955 Graduates from Puri college, admitted to L.L.B. course at Cuttack, jailed for political inflammatory speeches.
- 1956 Participates in Afro-Asian Students Conference at Bandung, Indonesia; President of Law College Union, Utkal University.
- 1957 Admission to M.A. in Ravenshaw College; General Secretary of the State Students Federation. Publication of *Indonesia Anubhuti*, a travelogue, (Janasakthi Pusthakalaya) and *Nandavatir Majhi*, a collection of poems (Dasarathi Pusthakalaya) both in Oriya.

- 1959 Lecturer in English, Christ College, Cuttack. Marries Pratijna Devi of the erstwhile Raj family of Kujang, whose parents were well-known freedom fighters. Revives *Diganta* as a regular monthly.
- 1961 *Aranyaka* (Friends Publishers) fourth collection of short stories in Oriya published.
- 1963 Joins Sri Aurobindo Ashram at Pondicherry. Teaches English Literature at Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education.
- 1965 Receives Orissa Sahitya Akademi Award for short stories.
- 1966 Publication of *Sesha Vasantara Chitthi* (collection of short stories) and *Upanibesha* (collection of poems) both in Oriya published by Vidyapuri and Jagannath Rath respectively.
- 1967 Publication of the first collection of short stories in English - *A Song for Sunday and Other Stories* (Higginbothams).
- 1967-68 Edits *World Union*.
- 1968-70 Weekly column in *Thought*.
- 1969 Publication of *Short Stories of Manoj Das* (Triveni Publishers).
- 1970 *Temples of India* (India Book House) and *Stories of Light and Delight* (National Book Trust) both for children published.
- 1971 Prajatantra Visuv Milan Award for short stories. Visits U.K.; research in the archives in London and Edinburgh. Publication of short stories in Oriya *Manoj Dasanka Katha O Kahani* (Friends Publishers).
- 1972 Sahitya Akademi Award for short stories. *Sri Aurobindo in the First Decade of the Century* (Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust), the result of Manoj's research in England, and *Sri Aurobindo* (Sahitya Akademi) under the 'Makers of Indian Literature' series published.
- 1973 Publication of *Dura Durrantar* (Grantha Mandir), a travelogue in Oriya, and *Books Forever* (National Book Trust).
- 1974 *Lakshmir Abhisara*, short stories in Oriya published by Grantha Mandir.



- 1975 *The Crocodile's Lady and Other Stories* (Sterling), *Rivers of India* (India Book House) and *Abu Purusha* (Grantha Mandir) published.
- 1977 *Dhumvara Diganta* (Grantha Mandir) short stories in Oriya published.
- 1978 Publication of *Fables and Fantasies for Adults* by Orient paperbacks.
- 1979 Publication of *Man Who Lifted the Mountain and Other Stories* by Spectre Press, England.
- 1980 Sarala Award. *The Vengeance and Other Stories*, published by Sterling.
- 1981 *A Bride Inside the Casket and Other Stories*, a collection of stories for children published by Times Books International, Singapore. Writes an occasional column "On the Tides of Time" in *Times of India*.
- 1981-85 Author-Consultant to the Ministry of Education, Govt. of Singapore. Visits the Republic twice a year for taking classes to the teachers under Ethical Studies Programme.
- 1983 Publication of the tenth collection of short stories in Oriya *Manoj Panchavimsati* (Grantha Mandir).
- 1983-89 Weekly column "The Banyan Tree" in *The Hindustan Times*, a largely circulated daily from Delhi.
- 1984 *The Hindu Reader*, an introductory volume to Hinduism, published by Federal Publications, Singapore. NCERT, Delhi publishes, *Brave Boys of the Past*, a graded supplementary reader in English.
- 1985 An international edition of *A Bride Inside the Casket and Other Stories* published by W.H. Allen, London.
- 1985-89 Edits *The Heritage*, a cultural monthly from Chandamama Group of Publications, Madras.
- 1986 Publication of *The Submerged Valley and Other Stories* (Batstone Books), and *Kete Diganta*, volumes I and II, a collection of essays (Grantha Mandir). Visuv Grand Award.
- 1987 Simultaneous Publication of *Cyclones* Manoj's first novel, by Sterling (Delhi), O.U.P. (U.K) and Facet (U.S.A.). *Vinna Manisha* a collection of short stories in Oriya published by Friends Publishers.
- 1989 Receives for a second time Orissa Sahitya Akademi Award, a rare case, for *Kete Diganta*. Publication of *The*



- Dusky Horizon and Other Stories*, the eighth collection of short stories in English (B.R. Publishing Corporation) and *Bulldozers*, short stories in Oriya (Chaturanga Prakashani).
- 1990 Publication of *Bulldozers and Fables and Fantasies for Adults*, the ninth collection of short stories in English (B.R. Publishing Corporation).
- 1991 *A Tiger at Twilight*, the second novel, published by Penguin India. Begins a fortnightly column in *The Hindu*.
- 1992 Made a Trustee of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry.

## List of Abbreviations

BFFA	:	Bulldozers and Fables & Fantasies for Adults
C	:	Cyclones
CL	:	The Crocodile's Lady
DHOS	:	The Dusky Horizon and Other Stories
FFA	:	Fables and Fantasies for Adults
MWLM	:	Man Who Lifted the Mountain and Other Fantasies
SSMD	:	Short Stories of Manoj Das
SSOS	:	A Song for Sunday and Other Stories
SVOS	:	The Submerged Valley and Other Stories
TT	:	A Tiger at Twilight
VOS	:	The Vengeance and Other Stories

## Manoj Das: An Introduction

Ever since the consolidation of British power at the end of the famous Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 English education took rapid strides and the climate was very conducive for a new flowering of the creative Indian genius, although Indians had, in a small way, begun already to learn English under a few institutions sponsored by the East India Company. The spread of English education had resulted in the importation of Western ideas and techniques. Needless to say that it made Indians familiar with the Western short story. Before the 19th century came to an end, the short story captivated the attention of Indian readers, and there was a fusion of the best in our past with the best in Europe's present.

The short story has been one of the most popular forms of literature produced in India during the last hundred years. The earliest short story collections by Indian writers in English appeared in London in 1885: *Realities of Indian Life: Stories Collected From the Criminal Reports of India* by Soshee Chunder Dutt and Sourindra Mohan Tagore (Naik: *The Indian English Short Story: A Representative Anthology*, 13). Following the introduction of printing and the gradual extension of literacy in the land, a considerable number of periodicals arose and thereby paved the way for the growth of the short story.

The short story form seems to be peculiarly suited to the mirroring of Indian life since the writer of it can choose any one part of life and deal with it with the attention, care and mastery which it requires. The brevity of the short story, the comparatively less taxing demand it makes on the time of the reader and the possibility of its including all aspects of life and society have made the short story popular among our readers of fiction.

The Indian English short story is a successfully established art by now which is fast developing with justifiable confidence and pride. As a matter of fact, the Indian English short story is in no way inferior to the short story of any other country. That the Indian English short stories can stand comparison with the best



continental short stories is enough evidence not only of their thematic and technical maturity but also of the confidence with which the English language is being handled.

It was only during the mid-sixties, to be exact in 1967, Manoj Das's first collection of short stories *A Song for Sunday and Other Stories* appeared. Many were the writers who had read and encouraged him. One among them was the doyen of letters, Shri K.P.S. Menon. "Praising my stories," acknowledged Manoj Das in an interview given to the magazine (1975-76) brought out by the Jawaharlal Nehru Institute of Postgraduate Medical Education and Research (JIPMER), Pondicherry, "Mr. Menon commented, 'My old collector, J.C. Molony, used to say that even the best of Indians writing in English reminds him of a man who plays the piano with a stick instead of with his fingers. But no one will think so about your stories'" (79).

Since then Manoj Das has eight collections of short stories and two novels. And that led him to the rank of established Indo-Anglian writers.

Familiar to the readers of Oriya and Indo-Anglian literatures, Manoj Das is one among the few gifted writers of India who can wield the pen both in his mother tongue and in English with equal ease. Years ago, Dr. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar in his *Indian Writing in English* described him as the first writer from Orissa to publish a collection of short stories in English. His status in Oriya literature is high. In 1960, when the premier Oriya monthly *Dagora* conducted an opinion poll to decide who had made the greatest contribution to post-Independence Oriya literature, among the veterans voted – like Gopinath Mohanty, Surendra Mohanty and Sochi Routray – was Manoj Das, then in his mid-twenties.

Manoj Das's short stories are internationally acclaimed, published in noted magazines and anthologies in the West and praised by distinguished writers like Graham Greene, H.R.F. Keating and A. Russell. *Newsart* of New York applauded Manoj Das as one of the foremost of the new generation of Indian writers. *Imprint* of India put it in this way: "There are only a few good storytellers left in the world today. One of them is Manoj Das" (Jan. 1976: n.p.).

A zealous Marxist and a fiery student-leader in his college days, Manoj Das made his audience spell-bound by his oratorical skill. He took a keen part in the Afro-Asian Students Conference

at Bandung in 1956. He was a rebel who courted jail with a smile. But first and foremost he was a writer. While his first book in his mother-tongue, Oriya, saw publication when he was barely 14, when 15 he launched *Diganta* (a journal of progressive revolutionary writing) which grew in course of years to be a leading magazine of culture and ideas in Oriya.

After teaching in a college at Cuttack for four years, this Marxist turned Spiritualist joined Sri Aurobindo Ashram in 1963, where he serves Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education as a Professor of English literature. Apart from his basic creative writing, which is fiction, Manoj Das's contribution to children's literature is considerable. One of his books belonging to this genre, *Stories of Light and Delight* (National Book Trust, India), is a best-seller in all its editions in all the major languages of India. It is one of his stories that represents India in UNESCO's *Asian Folktales*.

Manoj Das's non-fiction works include *Sri Aurobindo*, a literary monograph in Sahitya Akademi's 'Makers of Indian Literature' series and *Sri Aurobindo in the First Decade of the Century*, an account of some of the little known episodes in India's Freedom Movement, culled by the author from the archives of London and Edinburgh, published by Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, Pondicherry (1972).

Creative writing apart, his contribution to India's major journals are much appreciated. His regular column in *The Hindustan Times*, called "The Banyan Tree" (now discontinued), was a highly popular feature. He edited *The Heritage* (1985-89) which has been acknowledged as India's most prestigious English monthly.

Manoj Das is recognised as an able interpreter of Indian literature and culture. He was invited by the Government of the Republic of Singapore to help them in their Moral and Ethical Studies Project. He visited the Island-nation several times during 1982-1985, delivering series of systematic lectures to their teachers and writing two text books for their school system which is supervised by the Cambridge University. His work was appreciated by the Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore in their Parliament. \*

He is an optimist who believes in a transformed future of mankind and his writings and talks exude his faith. Manoj Das has published about 20 books in Oriya and nearly the same



number of books in English. Through his creative writing he has brought about a new awareness about the sweetness and serenity that pervades life in general and the rural Indian life in particular.

Manoj Das has been a crusader against the invasion of India's intellectual climate by decadent values. He has not only been a "social critic of the first order", but also, what is more important, he has stressed the divinity and psychic splendour inherent in man, through his creative writings. There may be many social critics, whose voices, may be thunderous, but leaving any lasting impact is a different matter. We believe that Manoj Das achieves this purpose because he drives home his point through his literary art.

There are some Indian writers writing in English whose works sell well in the West, so far as the popular market is concerned. But when the serious academic world in the West looks for a fine specimen of Indian short stories from the present generation of Indian writers in English, not unoften its choice falls on the writings of Manoj Das.

The late Martha Foley, who edited the annual collection of the best American short stories for many years, included, in perhaps what was her last catalogues of outstanding stories selected by her, five short stories by an Indian author. The list was for the year 1975 and all the five stories which were published during the year in some of the most prestigious magazines and anthologies of the U.S.A. were by Manoj Das. To cite a few more examples *Confrontation*, a volume brought out by the Long Island University (1983), is an anthology of the representative writings of Brooklyn, vis-a-vis the representative writings of the current world. The only story from Asia to find a place in the compilation is Manoj Das's "Lakshmi's Adventure", a typical Indian story with a mystic touch. Similarly, the international Number of *New Orleans Review* (Loyola University 1979) chooses only one story from Asia and that is Manoj Das's "A Bridge in the Moonlit Night". A third example is *Hemisphere Annual* (1982-83), published by the Australian Government Publishing Service for the Commonwealth Department of Education presents only one piece of short story and that is Manoj Das's "The Submerged Valley".

Manoj Das is one of those few writers who can express in simple language issues of considerable importance while entertaining us: while making us laugh or cry, happy or sad. His



targets are often the pompous politicians and pretentious pundits. As a social critic he uses the short story form to depict the passions and foibles of man as they surface in different circumstances. As one who understands human psychology Manoj Das makes some very observant comments, achieving this in a sympathetic way. The reader also develops insights into several typical Indian situations, a process in which the author helps him unobtrusively and unprejudiciously.

The short stories of Manoj Das, mostly in humorous frames, comment on varied aspects of life. He has stories with hardcore realism, stories of psychological import, satires in the garb of folktales as well as man's encounter with supra or infra human elements.

A poet at heart Manoj Das combines the old art of storytelling with modern ideas and techniques. A Manoj Das story might contain fantasy, humour, nostalgia, satire and irony all at once. The method he adapts goes back to the oral tradition. It would be more appropriate to call Manoj Das a teller of stories than a writer of stories. Young and old are charmed by his style, for, besides an extensive knowledge of adult human nature he shows a convincing study of the psychology of children and adolescents.

Many found in him a significant story teller who while giving an authentic portrayal of the Indian scene, presents his characters in an entirely credible frame. His ability to stimulate in his readers the age-old urge to enjoy a story, is a major factor in his popularity. These are tributes of quality which merit recognition. Dr. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, the doyen of Indo-Anglian literary criticism, brackets Manoj Das as a writer of short stories with Tagore and Premchand. A British poet and critic, A. Russell, while reviewing *The Vengeance and Other Stories*, admits, "There is little doubt that Manoj Das is a great story-teller of the sub-continent and he has too few peers, no matter what yardstick is applied to measure his ability as an artist... He shows how powerfully all artifices of story telling can be used to write a story in realist genre without any attempt at being faithful to the photographic details of facts. His world has the fullness of human psyche, with its dreams and fantasies, its awe and wonder, the height of sublimity can be courted by the depth of the fictive. He proves that the reality is richer than what realists conceived it to be" (*Poetry Times* 12.2, 1987:135).

## From Realism to Sublime

### A. Indian Sensibility

"I thought born in a village, born just before independence and hence living through the transition at an impressionable age, I could present through English a chunk of genuine India. Well, right or wrong, one is entitled to one's faith in oneself," said Manoj Das in an interview given to *The Times of India* (May 18, 1980).

India, of course, is like the proverbial elephant experienced by half a dozen blind seekers, one feeling its tail and describing it as a rope, another passing his hand on its flank and describing it as a soft mountain and yet another hugging one of its legs and giving it out as a pillar, Manoj Das admits. But like the elephant who has certain characteristics that are different from those of a tiger or of a monkey he believes that India has her specific characteristics too and an Indian writer, when guided by his spontaneous inspiration, is bound to breathe the Indian spirit into his writing.

Manoj is an admirer of T.S. Eliot's theory on 'Tradition and Individual Talent'. According to him the meeting point of these two elements is as subtle and submerged as the meeting point of the horizon at the ocean's blue with the sky's. He says in the same interview cited above, "when an Indian writer is naturally Indian, his Indianness is hardly pronounced, but what becomes grotesquely pronounced is when an Indian writer makes a conscious effort to highlight his Indianness or does the opposite— tries to consciously cultivate a stance that should appear dazzlingly different from the traditional writing".

In the earlier stories of Manoj Das one can observe an undertone of typical Indian mysticism pervading the theme, but never showing in the contours of the plot, invariably allowing the reader a range of possibilities from which to formulate his impression and conclusion. An example is "Sita's Marriage". Through an amusing but totally credible chain of events a little girl named Sita leads herself to believe that she had been married



to Rama. Her loving parents laugh at her hallucination. Juxtaposed with her silent drama of dreams is a drum-beating drama of real marriage – that of a wealthy neighbour's daughter, Vasanti. When the news of Vasanti's suicide reaches them, Sita's stare seems to put this challenging question to her parents: which marriage was real – hers or Vasanti's?

But the story ends a few lines thereafter – in what seems to be a matter-of-fact reporting by an unsuspecting narrator – to the effect that he had just received the news of Sita's death after a few days of suffering from fever at a time when her parents were trying to marry her off.

Any day can be the day of death for any one and no extraordinary disease or situation is necessary for that. But Sita's quiet death assumes a significance in the context of the mystic faith that certain souls dedicated to the Divine would decide to depart when their inner life is threatened by external circumstances.

Another example of Manoj Das's earlier stories where mysticism and plain mystery urged in a twilight zone is "Farewell to a Ghost".

But mystery and mysticism do not exhaust the scope of Indian sensibility in Manoj Das's stories, a different aspect of which is revealed by "Mystery of the Missing Cap". The early post-Independence India is the setting. An honourable minister on his visit to a village loses his cap. His host announces in a public meeting that the cap had been stolen by an ardent devotee of the minister who desired to treasure it as a memento. All are happy. "The way the things are moving, ha, ha! I'm afraid, ha, ha! people would start snatching away my clothes, ha, ha! and ha, ha! I may have to go about, ha, ha! naked. I don't mind, ha, ha! That's the price of love, ha, ha!" (CL 31) muses the minister in ecstasy.

But the climax comes when the thief, who is none other than a half-tamed monkey, springs up before the minister and in a show of affability returns the cap.

While the climax itself was stunning enough, again the last few lines of the story leave the reader in a reflection: the minister and his ambitious host both soon drifted away from politics. "I strongly feel that it was this episode of the cap that changed the course of their lives," (CL 33) says the narrator.

The reasons for this have been strewn over the story unobtrusively. The host, an honest villager who had perhaps never spoken a lie, was obliged to speak one before thousands.



He had nursed an ambition to become a legislator, but his ambition did not survive the shock. Similarly the shock of disillusionment proved too much for the minister.

The story is a socio-psychological comment on the clash between the traditional values and the demands of the franchise-based politics, in the lives of some people. It reminds us of "The Only American From Our Village" by Arun Joshi, a contemporary of Manoj Das. In Arun Joshi's short story, Dr. Khanna who has become a celebrity as a professor at an American University, has ignored his father, an "old fool" dreaming of receiving an air ticket from his worthy son for a trip to the States. But the ticket never comes. He dies a frustrated man. Years later the professor visits his native place along with his American wife and learns all about his father's last days from an old man. Back in the States he shows signs of slight mental derangement. His father, in a bit of anguish over his son's behaviour, had discarded his shoes and had his feet scorched by hot sands. Dr. Khanna begins to stare at his own feet and keeps doing so for hours at a stretch.

There is nothing common between the two plots, yet a subtle knowledge links them. Prof. Khanna's *Swadharma* and *Samskara* have not died down despite his Westernisation, just as in the "Mystery of the Missing Cap" the demands of a new pattern of politics have not been able to alter the inner mind of Moharana. In an interview given to the *Sun Times* (April 4, 1989) Manoj Das said, "Our liberation from the prevailing gloom does not depend on any alternative 'system', but in exercising our potential capacity to rise above our propensity for hypocrisy and fear of our own conscience which makes us cowards before ourselves". A story like "Mystery of the Missing Cap" portrays on one hand a funny, farcical situation that can arise when a good man forgets, his *swadharma* and takes recourse to a lie. In his tears and the tears of the Minister (whose ego had been temporarily inflated) and in the fact that both the characters were soon forgotten politically, we see the signs of their redemption.

Very few stories in Modern Indo-Anglian fiction have so successfully tackled this subtle theme as these two stories of Manoj Das and Arun Joshi respectively. The penance of Khanna in Arun Joshi's story goes like this: "To a psychiatrist Dr. Khanna has confided that he has periods of great burning in his feet. He has further indicated that he thinks he has been cursed. Dr. Khanna's output of research since he came back has been zero.

He has generally come to be known as the man who does nothing but stare at his feet".

In the "Mystery of the Missing Cap": "Shri Moharana's political endeavour is not known to have gone any farther. And it is strange that the Hon'ble Minister, Babu Virkishore, who was willing to be robbed of his clothes was soon forgotten in politics. I have a strong feeling that it was this episode of the cap that changed the courses of their lives" (SVOS 77).

While these few examples give us a clue to our appreciation of Manoj Das's later fiction, we find his canvas suddenly enlarging to embrace a number of forces at play in a setting of transition, again typically Indian, in *A Tiger at Twilight*.

The physical backdrop this time is not an average village, but a valley. "With an extensive forest to its west and a river to its east, its location was enchanting. A rocky road meandered through a myriad barren rocks and tribal villages for fifty kilometres or so, linking our valley, Nijanpur, with the headquarters of the district, Samargarh" (TT 2).

The place had been the summer resort of the Raja of Samargarh. Their attraction for the place was chiefly due to the situation of an ancient deity in a corner of the valley to whom generations of their ancestors sacrificed a son each, and later, at least a commoner's son adopted for the purpose. The last Raja of Samargarh left for some unknown destination after the merger of feudatory states within the union of India.

The story opens after a storm: "For three long days and nights our lonely little valley was tossed by a violent gale that seemed to threaten its very existence. The frequent claps of thunder that echoed in the surrounding hills, seemed to be playing hide and seek; sometimes they made such a terrible noise that I plugged my ears and shut my eyes and imagined myself trapped in a desolate and dreary wasteland, its last blade of grass licked away by thunderbolts. At relatively sober times, the rumbling of the thunder was like the anxious cries of a brood of lion-cubs lost in the hills, yearning for its mother" (TT 1).

At last when sunlight breaks out late afternoon, the sun looking "so weak as if one could just blow it out", the narrator discovers two important things having taken place during those uncanny days: A man-eater had dared into the valley and the Raja of Samargarh was back there after twenty years.



An absorbing and event-packed drama develops on these two intertwined events. The Raja is out to kill the tiger – which is found to be a tigress – but in the process he demolishes the political career of a gentleman who had been in the days of the Raj, vociferous against the system. But the Raja's reappearance brings a lot of strange developments in its trail. He has with him Heera who, "was the subject of many a rumour, some juicy and some fearfully weird" (TT 3)

Who was she?

"Our Raja's father, on a visit abroad, had acquired a mistress who had just ceased to be a European nobleman's consort. The Raja, if he was in a good mood, said that he had married her. The truth remained a mystery. However, she remained in the Raja's bungalow in a distant city and was never seen at Samargarh. Heera, born to her in undue haste, was declared to be the old Raja's daughter, though nobody took her official genesis seriously.

"After the old Raja passed away, it became evident that Heera was exercising an ever greater influence on his son and heir, older than her by ten years" (TT 3).

Heera is an enigmatic influence on the prince (now Raja) even now and what is more, she keeps the Raja's only child, a daughter (the Rani is no more) under her spell, convincing her that she would live but to her care.

Soon to be drawn into the circle of her spell is an orthodox pundit who undergoes a metamorphosis under the delusion that she loves him. It is a pathetic situation and at last jolted off his delusion, he tarries behind the Raja's old villa to return her gifts to Heera when the man-eater grabs him.

The narrator, the scion of a bankrupt feudal family, has many reasons to fear and hate Heera. But he could not have anticipated the situation into which she – and himself too – were thrown. He had just climbed to examine a *machan* on which the Raja and himself were to wait at night for the man-eater. Heera happens to come to the spot:

I do not know how long I sat sealed in a state of vacuity. I woke up with a terrific jolt. It must have taken me a second or two to realise that what disturbed my peace was a shrill human cry. But I could not trace its origin instantly. Perhaps my sudden shock, together with the dusk, blinded me for



another second. Then I discerned the figure of Heera, standing alone, petrified and staring at something in a dazed manner.

I followed her gaze and saw a giant beast facing her - perhaps it was the tigress we awaited. They seemed transfixed by each other.

I forced my gun into position. The man-eater roared and Heera gave a blood-curdling shriek - simultaneously. The shuddering impact of the sound shook me and I was sucked into a state that will ever defy my attempt at describing it. It must have been a combination of utter bafflement and stupefaction - though it could not have lasted more than a lightning movement - and in that time I could not distinguish between Heera and the beast. Looking at Heera I wondered if she was not the tigress and looking at the tigress I wondered if she was not Heera.

It was dreadful; the sensation was simply maddening. I felt like dashing my head against the tree. I thought I wept blood. But I could not know the human from the beast.

I do not trust the accuracy of my vision or my memory of that moment, but I think I saw them springing on each other with equal frenzy and fury. At once my power of discrimination was restored. I shot, aiming at the beast, before I fell into a dead faint (TT 119).

The Raja who believes that he had discovered a buried treasure in a steel trunk finds it to contain a human skeleton. "It could have been the remains of a rebel punished by an ancestor of the Raja, or the remains of a country lass who had inspired the passions of a prince but had endangered his honour... The victim had wreaked its vengeance on the last of the Rajas" (TT 125).

The story may be the only document in Indian English fiction of an aspect of Indian life in transition. Hailing from Orissa which had more than twenty feudal states of an exclusive kind, some of them marked by the sort of places described in the work, the author evidently had an intimate knowledge of them. He says in the introductory note to the novel which appeared in

a slightly abridged version in the inaugural issue of *The Heritage* (Jan. 1985), a cultural monthly he edited:

There are times and times. Sometimes even a century appears to have meant so little in terms of change. Sometimes a decade might change a tradition or a habit or an attitude that had prevailed for centuries.

The typical Indian feudal world has vanished. The contours of their settings too have rapidly changed. Many readers may find the characters, situations and the settings of "A Tiger at Twilight" strange.

But they are not fictitious.

Of course, in no work of fiction, the factual realism is the sole realism.

It will be obvious to any reader that the author has transcended factual realism. One feels in the narration the author's deeper understandings of, or faith in, different levels of karma, the play of occult forces in human life and the knowledge or unpredictable developments confronting and baffling us. But all this will perhaps not fall into line but for the author's faith in the role of a transcendent element in life. The novelette ends on a subtle and sweet note of hope, on a touch of grace as if, when the Raja's daughter, Balika, the silent character in the work, believed to be a paralytic, walks into a sunny meadow. "Balika was in a light blue sari. In my heart, frozen by the recent events, her image shone like a bluish flame. I felt a delightful thaw set in" (TT 132) says the narrator.

Manoj Das may be a prolific writer when it comes to his features (his weekly column "The Banyan Tree", now discontinued, was a favourite with the academic section of the readership of the *Hindustan Times*) and his editorials and articles in the *Heritage*, but now he does not write more than two or three stories in a year. *A Tiger at Twilight* is undoubtedly his most important contribution during the period in focus. But we will be doing injustice to his short stories of the period unless we make mention of at least one of them, "The Submerged Valley".

The story is a good example of character portrayal. We meet an assortment of people visiting a rock and a temple. Once the centre of a village, but since submerged in a dam and temporarily



visible as the water level goes down in summer. Among them is Abolkara (literally, disobedient), a half crazy egotist who claims that he had been always there, in a mysterious way. Soon all the visitors leave in their boats as the water-level begins to rise. The narrator's father, an engineer, had a tough time in persuading Abolkara to leave. He fails and returns with his family in his motorboat to the bungalow on the bank and goes over to attend a meeting.

The narrator, his younger sister (both children) and their mother are pensive when, at midnight, the engineer comes home with a guest, none other than Abolkara. At midnight he had sailed all alone to fetch the lone visitor on the rock, only the tip of which still remained above the water.

While in Abolkara we meet an unforgettable crackpot pampered by loving villagers, in the engineer we see a stern man on the surface revealing his tender inner self, at the end, through a subdued dialogue between his two children: "Father is wonderful, isn't he?" she whispered to me. "Fool, how long you take to realise things that are obvious!" I quipped and, imitating father's stern style, said "Little one, will you now go to bed?" (SVOS 11).

The mother too, throughout silent, has a sweet impact on the reader. Brief descriptions at the right place achieve this. For example, on their way to the rock, the narrator observes: "And mother – she sat absorbed in her thoughts, her cheek resting on her hand. The clouds, the sombre lake, and her deep eyes meant one serene experience for me" (SVOS 6).

By the time one has finished reading the story, one is reminded of Yudhisthira's statement before Dharma that mother was greater than the earth and father greater than heavens. And this happens without word of a didactic nature uttered by the author.

With precision Manoj Das creates the authentic rural atmosphere. In "The Submerged Valley", where the atmosphere contributes to the effect of the story to the maximum, we find an excellent fusion of the environment and the character in the inaugural passage:

We became conscious of our village the day our headmaster asked the students of class three to write an essay on the topic.



So far we had taken the village for granted – like our breathing or our mother's love. But there after the elements that made the village – the trees, the pools, the Shiva temple and the hillock adjacent to it – had begun to look significant.

Our village had several other aspects to it. A lame crow perched on a crumbling stone-arch of the temple and it cawed on in an abnormal and ominous tone. Nobody ever dared to disturb it. A certain member of the Harijan community looked all white because of congenital vitiligo. His fond grand-parents had christened him Sahib. From some mysterious source he had secured a cork topee the white men in India used. He visited the weekly market sporting the topee and invoked in the throng something of the awe that was due to the real Sahibs.

The trees that stood in front of our school were as human to us as the wandering bull of Lord Shiva. One of the trees looked as if it knelt down in meditation. Two more were never tired of chattering between them. If the teacher had scolded or thrashed us, they seemed to be sympathising with us. At the approach of the vacation they seemed to be talking of the many sweet moments that were in store for us.

Last but not the least, there was an insane woman who lived on the hillock behind the temple. She had for her pets a mad dog and a mad cat. Whatever be the standard applied to measure the states of mind of the woman and her dog, it was intriguing how our people had become so sure of the lunacy of the cat. But before I was of age, all the three had died. The woman had left behind a son, crazy and no less arrogant. He chose a house a day and planted himself in its courtyards, refusing to budge until fed to his content. Somehow he had learnt to claim that jackals and ravens talked to him. His incoherent speech and enigmatic hints added a pinch of weirdness to his personality. And that was to his profit (SVOS 1-2).

Only some aspects of the Indian sensibility in the fiction of Manoj Das has been presented so far.

While his technique of handling the Indian idiom in English can establish an immediate rapport with the Indian reader who finds in it a certain familiarity, it gives an added flavour for the non-Indian reader. This observation is particularly applicable to his stories, which, for their primary plot, is dependent on some of the ancient tales, but of course the author handles them with a different intention. Even in his non-satirical and realistic stories, we find the statements concerning places and characters quite non-involved and straight which perhaps is the result of the influence of the popular Sanskrit classics – as the author himself admits: "The heritage of Indian fiction – the great yarn-spinners of yore like Vishnu Sarma and Somadeva – constitute the influence of which I am conscious" (*The Times of India*, May 18, 1980). As the *Statesman* (June 2, 1989) observed, his stories leave a refreshing impression on the mind of the reader because of the "indisputable power Das has over the English language. It is, indeed, his forte and instead of using the familiar, imported phrases and idioms, he plays about with the language, picking words and using them in fresh connotation to build imagery suitable to the Indian background".

Some of the stories of Manoj Das included in *Fables and Fantasies for Adults* were continuation of the fables of the *Panchatantra* in a satirical vein, to focus on the labyrinths of human mind in the light of psychology and politics as they have since grown. But the influence of the story-tellers of India has spread into the fibres of his stories, occasionally perceptible but generally imperceptible.

His collection "*The Submerged Valley*" and *Other Stories* is noted for a happy combination of two elements. The Indian realism embracing the imagery and idiom through which the situation or characters come out best and the appeal of the stories which easily transcends any frame of geography or time.

The greatest gift he seems to have imbibed from the tradition is the subtle and natural art of mingling natural with supernatural and men with animals. Just as the supernatural suggestions in his stories (like the ghost in "Farewell to a Ghost") can always be explained away in physical terms, so also the conduct of the animals appears realistic, except, of course, in fantasies where he intends to be allegorical or didactic.

Let us examine the shortest story in the collection "Bhola Grandpa and the Tiger" – the portrait of a rustic who has a knack



for forgetting things. One evening in the forests of Sundarbans he finds himself face to face with a tiger. Grandpa swiftly climbs a banyan tree and the tiger took position under it. The night passed. Early in the morning grandpa climbed down the tree and went to a nearby hamlet and asked a tribal for a little fire to light his *bidi*.

"What is your secret, Sir, that you walked past that hungry beast and it just gasped at you and did nothing else?" (SVOS 16) asked the bewildered tribal.

Only then did Grandpa realize that he had forgotten all about the tiger. He looked and saw the beast "stretching its limbs and yawning and preparing to leave" (SVOS 16) in utter disgust. Half a century later when grandpa died at ninety-five the most original lament came from his wife: "The old man must have forgotten to breathe" (SVOS 16).

The forgetful grandpa while calmly walking by the tiger, must have proved too perplexing to the beast to let it act. But the tiger here instantly becomes a descendant of tigers of Indian folklore – never characteristically cruel or violent, always liable to be outwitted. The charm in the situation in this story is, grandpa has outwitted it unwittingly.

Manoj Das's process of humanizing the non-human extends to nature, not in the pantheistic sense, but again in keeping with the innocent folk way of taking the presence of life in the elements of nature for granted. Here is an example from his "Friends and Strangers": "From the tree-tops a gust of absolutely naughty breeze swooped down under Pramath's head and rumbled and rummaged his well-groomed hair. And there were lesser flurries around to smuggle away into the bushes half of the words from his answer (SVOS 110).

This attitude of an innate affection for aspects of nature finds a different expression in another story entitled "The Love Letter" when the setting is a town and the protagonist who views the object has a sophisticated mind: "Over that cosy little town in the Northern valley the moon looked like a municipal property – as though all that was necessary to shift it to another place or switch it off was a resolution passed by the city-fathers" (SVOS 153).

One of the techniques of the ancients that Manoj Das employs is knitting a story into a story. In "The Tree" we thus read the undying legend of a king who had tried to cut down the



primeval tree and consequently going to be destroyed himself. The other good old technique concerns the beginning of a story. Each story has a direct beginning, related to the main thrust of the story, almost like *Asti Godavari teere visala shalmali taru* of the *Panchatantra*. It is remarkable that not even one of his stories begins on a note which betrays a conscious effort at creating novelty. No story of his so far has opened with a dialogue, the only exception being "Statue Breakers are Coming". It seems he avoids any deliberate effort to hook the reader's attention with some kind of dramatic beginning. Many of his stories begin with a comment on space or time that matters. For example:

"Miles and miles of marshland and sandy tracks; but nothing could disturb the calm quest of Dr. Batstone, the distinguished sociologist from the West" (SVOS 17).

"Bhola grandpa and his wife lived at the Western end of our village" (SVOS 12).

"That April a highly exaggerated spring had burst upon our valley. In and around our small town most of the trees had overdone themselves in burgeoning and, consequently, looked dumbfounded" (SVOS 28).

"It was on moonlit nights that the deserted villa looked particularly fascinating" (SVOS 78).

"In a provincial town of the third decade of this century dogs still barked at motor cars and spectators sat for hours gaping at silent movies and signs of love were quite different from what they became later" (SVOS 114).

Stories in which a particular character is of supreme importance, the beginnings refer to thoughts or actions of the characters which establish their states of mind. "At times the moon appeared so big and so close to Asnok's balcony that he thought he could hello it and even reach it in a few bounds and shake hands with it" (SVOS 37). Here the mind of an old man who spends his time between amnesia and nostalgia or innocent day dreaming and dozing, finds a suitable introduction.

A similar introduction apparently amusing but helping the reader a great deal in appreciating the developments that follow, is:

It had been a fond habit with Mukund, the teacher of history and sometimes of geography, to offer his smiles to the tall, the burly and the brawny, in the way of greeting them. He did not do it just as a safety measure, weak and lean though he was. "These stalwarts roaming up and down the earth could cause a fat lot of trouble to the already harassed humanity if they so pleased. But how innocently they move about! Don't they deserve a show of gratitude?" This was his thought. In fact he thought on behalf of humanity (SVOS 90).

Even though such beginnings steer clear of deliberate efforts to arouse suspense, it cannot be said that they do not arouse sufficient interest. In a very subtle way, the expectation or curiosity is aroused in the reader and this the author achieves while making the beginning an integral part of the theme.

A truly creative writer absorbs the influence of those for whom he has loving respect – *Shraddha* – in such a way that the influence does not become obvious. To the discerning reader it comes like a vast backdrop. The reader feels that the author's credibility rests on a strong foundation. Often brief observations by the author, made at the right place, build up this trust in the reader. Numerous such observations remain scattered in the short stories of Manoj Das, convincing the reader of his thorough comprehension of the situations and characters he is projecting. Here is an example from "The Tree":

Right from the time the season was on the brink of the monsoon the village elders had begun to look grave. The sinister cloud formation on the mountains several miles away, and a wide ring of uncanny aura around the moon had informed them that there were terrible days ahead (SVOS 46).

Here is another from "Farewell to a Ghost". In a meeting of the villagers on a painful topic a certain view expressed by an elder has brought a spell of silence. "Then a lizard tick-ticked and two or three people muttered, 'True, true'" (SVOS 85). In yet another story "The Crocodile's Lady", a sahib goes out with the narrator to interview an old lady, at night. "I led the way with a torch. The professor stumbled twice, first against the mildly protesting dog and then against a tortoise out for a nocturnal meander" (CL 41). An hour or two (and a few pages in the story)



later, they are returning to their lodge. Although many may not absorb the small change in the situation, it is an example of faithfulness to realism on the author's part: "We walked silently. The professor stumbled against the same dog which did not protest any more and perhaps the same tortoise now on its way back to the river" (CL 45).

While native imagery is a marked trait in his stories, he is extremely cautious in using the Indian idiom, style of speech or proverb in their translation. He uses it only in dialogues and only if it is indispensable to reveal the character. Here is a typical example from "The Crocodile's Lady":

'Will you believe, Sahib, he was my cousin, my very own father's own maternal uncle's own son-in-law's own nephew? And hadn't I done everything for him from sharing my own pillow with him to doing half the shopping for the marriage? Yet who does not know that when he died - this treacherous brother-in-law - of all the millions and billions of people of my village - his ghost chose to harass me? Who does not know that for a whole year, till his annual *Shraddha* fully satisfied him - and for your information I was obliged to share half the expenses - I never stepped out of my house at night even at the most acute call of nature? Who does not know about all this?

'No, Sahib, you are, after all, a foreigner. You are not familiar with the ghosts of this land. You should not trust them. If they get a chance they twist the necks of even those occultists who can tame them.

'It cannot of course be said that there are no good-natured ghosts. As a boy I saw the illustrious Mahatma Languly Baba. Yes, I saw with these very eyes. Will you kindly, Baboo, explain to the Sahib that the Baba was stark naked? I saw him when he was 300 years old.

Isn't the history of his birth and life most amazing? There was once plague in the land and the Mahatma's mother was believed to have died and so was thrown on the burial ground as people had no patience to burn or bury with so much dying everyday. And what happened? The Mahatma was born there and howled for one full day and one full



night till he was picked up by a couple of vagrants. Tell me, who protected the Mahatma for twenty four hours? Jackals and dogs and vultures and ravens, all were there, but all sat twelve yards away, watching the Mahatma in silent awe. They could not come near him. Tell me who threw an invisible cordon around the infant Mahatma?"

One of our prominent villagers threw this question like a challenge to the wide world while inching near the professor, and promptly provided the answer himself, 'Evidently a committee of enlightened ghosts. Did Languly Baba ever care to talk to human beings or did he care to wear clothes? No, never! If at all he talked, it was with the invisibles around him.

'And, Sahib, isn't the question of believing in God or not quite absurd? Is God a money-lender or pawn-broker that the question of trust could arise?...' (CL 36-38).

In the same story, the narrator uses the phrase 'seven seas' – a typical Indian fairytale idiom to denote remoteness only when he is talking to the old lady: "Look, Granny, here is a sahib, not a native baboo, mind you, but a genuine sahib who has come from beyond the seven seas" (42).

We conclude with a few comments by Dick Batstone, the editor and publisher of Manoj Das's *"The Submerged Valley"* and *Other Stories* from his introduction:

Manoj Das has been compared, as a short story writer, to Hardy, Saki and O. Henry. This is misleading; he is like no one but Manoj Das. Indeed it would be a serious defect if he wrote like an Englishman or an American.

As Srinivasa Iyengar, the historian of Indo-Anglian writing has said, for an Indian writer to succeed in English: "What is written has to be recognisably Indian to the Indian reader, and recognisably English to the English reader". One of the delights of Manoj Das's writing is that he has not been trained to write like Charles Lamb or George Eliot, but writes a spontaneous English quite free from imported literary idioms. And he writes as an Indian indeed, with a wholly Indian view of things, from an Indian background.

...One of the intriguing qualities of his English writing is the lack of clichés – the totally unexpected use of words and their collocation, arising perhaps from the exact and fresh description of his visual imagining of Indian situations and agents, of a kind that an English writer would not have. See, for example, what he says about the Sundarbans in "Bhola Grandpa and the Tiger".

Powerfully he moulds language and form to serve the needs of his tale, for primarily Manoj Das is a storyteller, a yarn-spinner, and he knows, may be from his experience with children, how to hold one's attention, never digressing, and never tiring one with too much description – just giving one enough to help one picture the scene of the action, as, for example, in the vivid evocation of the villa in "Farewell to a Ghost", or the hut lived in by the crocodile's lady (vii-viii).

## **B. Psychic Growth**

India became free. It took to a Western pattern of democracy. While there is no gainsaying the fact that it is a sound ideology, it must also be admitted that the Indians were hardly ready to adjust themselves to the pattern.

Over the vast country thousands of leaders must emerge. Each one of them must impress upon the people that he and he alone was eligible to lead them.

Perhaps in no other short story in Indo-Anglian literature has this peculiar demand of the situation been so artistically and convincingly portrayed as in Manoj Das's "Mystery of the Missing Cap":

As is well-known, the ancient land of India has had four major castes since time immemorial. But during the days immediately preceding independence a new caste was emerging all over the country – that of patriots. The 15th of August 1947 gave a big boost to their growth. In almost every village, besides the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras, a couple of patriots came into being (SVOS 66-67).

This was the climate in which Shri Moharana, a happy villager was fired with the ambition to become an M.L.A. His well-wishers planned to launch him to politics through a



reception given to the Hon'ble Minister of Fishery and Fine Arts. To put it in the words of the narrator:

In those days, a minister's daily life was largely made up of speech-making at public receptions... Shri Moharana's huge ancestral cane chair was laid with a linen cover, upon which the best village seamstress had laced a pair of herons with two big fish in their beaks. For a fortnight everyday the children of the lower primary school devoted the afternoon to the practice of the welcome song. Among the many strange phenomena wrought by the great spirit of the time was the composition of this song: for the composer, the head-pundit of the school, had lived sixty-seven years without any poetic activity. The refrain of the song still raises echoes in me. Its literal translations would be: 'O mighty minister, tell us, do tell us, How do you nurse this long and broad universe! (SVOS 68-69).

Things seemed to go smoothly until it was found that the visiting minister's white cap was missing. A crisis dawned in that remote village. "Mysterious, mysterious!" repeated the Public Relations Officer. "I fear, it may have devastating effects on the politics of our country," (SVOS 72) he prophesied.

The child who knew the mystery of the missing cap passed it on to Shri Moharana, in confidence. But Shri Moharana could not divulge the bare fact. He told the agitated minister that a noble soul, an ardent admirer of the minister, had taken the cap away to retain it as a sacred memento and, in return, had donated one hundred and one rupees for the minister's charity fund. It was announced in the mammoth public meeting to prolonged applause. But just before the minister's departure, the crude truth revealed. The cap had been stolen by a half domesticated monkey, who most genially restored it to its owner.

Shri Moharana's political ambition did not go any farther. The minister too was forgotten soon. "I strongly feel that it was the episode of the cap that changed the course of their lives," (SVOS 77) concludes the narrator who, as a child, was a witness to the incident.

Shri Moharana had never spoken a lie. But when, under a compelling situation, he had to depart from his truthfulness, he had to do so before several thousand people. His nature could not stand this unexpected demand. The best he could do was to



refrain from proceeding any farther in politics, if he were to remain close to his *Swadharma*. Similar demands, no doubt, would have obliged many others, the more ambitious ones, to smoothen their *Swadharma* and continue in politics.

The minister, who for a while lived in the fool's paradise of his growing popularity, received the shock of his life. But he too, as a living soul, must have grown within through this episode of disillusionment.

Disillusionment, indeed, is a cardinal force in the stories of Manoj Das. But his handling of this element is original and purposeful. Through disillusionment his characters grow. An example is "A Night in the Life of a Mayor".

The Mayor is quite proud of his achievement in life. He laughs at his old professor, who (also a member of the corporation council) is upset over a stray cow chewing up his grand daughter's psychology note-books.

The same evening the mayor was having a dip in the river at a lonely spot leaving his trouser and his shirt on the bank. In the water he was obliged to take off his underwear too and it slipped off his hand. Imagine his predicament when, crawling ashore, he finds the notorious cow moving away, his half-eaten clothes still clinging to its mouth.

His open car on the bank soon rouses suspicion in some passing officers. The police arrive. The naked mayor lets himself be drifted away resting on a small canoe. He had not been alone for a long time. Under the starry sky he has a dialogue with himself. At dawn a little girl comes to his rescue by sacrificing her soiled frock for him and then, upon learning that he was a 'big man', by fetching a towel for him.

Back in his town, the first thing the mayor does is to apologise to his professor. He had realized to what helplessness one could be reduced any moment. "I believe, I earned my adulthood last night," (DHOS 62) he says.

Manoj Das evidently believes in the continuity of life. The psychic growth one experiences in life can perhaps go with him to his next incarnation. In some of his characters we see this point of growth arriving at the last moment. In "Birds at Twilight" Kumar Tukan Roy, an illegitimate son of a Raja Sahib and a bachelor, has been accustomed to leading a care-free life. Even when times have changed with the fall of the feudal system, he

has apparently not changed. He shoots down birds and there is a friend to cook them for him.

One evening, as he is about to pull his trigger, the bird aimed at flies away. Instead of feeling disappointed, Roy runs pacing with its flight along the valley, propelled by a queer sort of joy. He soon finds it great fun to make covey after covey of birds fly.

At night he frees the solitary tiger, the last member of a small zoo, the late Raja Sahib has founded. In a bid to teach the reluctant tiger how to run, he runs along with it, giving it a lead till both enter the forest.

They are followed by a party of officials who think that Roy was being chased by the tiger. The two found locked together and the tiger is shot down, but Roy too, is no more – though without a scratch on his body.

The thrill Roy was experiencing at the flight of birds was only a sign of his soul's readiness to fly into a new horizon; through making the tiger test its freedom. Such poignant moments in life – and the changes they mean – are strictly personal. Others, however sympathetic, are not likely to understand them just as the officials fail to understand why Roy died.

How one grows almost mad when this touch of freedom comes, is the theme of "The Kite".

Kunja is a prisoner, but a most obedient one. A master kite-flyer in his childhood, he grows nostalgic at the sight of a kite hanging on a tree-top, while being led with the fellow-prisoners from one place to another. In his mind the process of recollecting the days gone by are gathering momentum when suddenly a gust of wind releases the suspended kite and it is swept towards the horizon.

Kunja reaches the sea. The kite perhaps has set over it. He jumps over the waves. "He was beginning to fly, he felt" (CL 119).

The police jeep stopped at the brink of the water. Two perplexed fishermen pointed their fingers showing the direction the prisoner had gone.

There were clouds and lightnings in the horizon. The narrator observes: "Suddenly the jailor and the superintendent of police began to feel small for no reason whatever. As though the lightning and the thunder and the laughter of the wind and the



sea's roar were the kith and kin of Kunja who gave them the slip – they felt" (CL 119).

The community's failure to appreciate the subtle workings of an individual consciousness is shown most pointedly in an unforgettable story "Lakshmi's Adventure".

A little girl creeps into a shrine and pours out her problems before the deity. The problems range from if God cannot hear prayers properly unless they are sent up through microphones, to her grappling with arithmetic. Engrossed, she feels as if the deity too is talking to her and asking her to take away a pair of bananas offered to him.

As the little one is leaving with the bananas, the priest who was lying asleep wakes up. He gives her a chase taking her to be a thief. Others join in the chase. The terrified girl, in a daze, enters a pond. Her father wades his way through the crowd and leads her away, after the two bananas are recovered by the authorities.

Down with a fever, the girl dies. Her death is interpreted by the people as the consequence of her stealing from their deity, whereas the truth is quite different. Her soul has left the body because of too unworthy an environment.

But the priest is shown to be realizing his error at raising a hasty scare. He mumbles: "God! Next time let this sinner be born without a tongue!" (DHOS 77).

The flashes of soul are not always revealed through such radical turns in the lives of the characters. There can be sublime moments, gestures, and dreams that bear the stamp of something more in man than the mind. In "A Letter From the Last Spring", we meet another little girl, who not knowing that her mother is dead is awaiting her promised letter. As she keeps standing on her balcony for hours on end everyday, looking for the postman, a retired man regards her regularly. Thinking that the old man, too was waiting in vain for a letter from his mother, the little one sends as a gift the only letter she had ever received from her mother, to the old man – a noble gesture that can come only from a motherly sympathy welling out the child's innermost being.

A subtle communication between two souls is the theme of "The Brothers". The elder brother had fought for the country's freedom. Once a rising star in politics, he finds himself lost in the whirlpool of corruption. The younger brother, under their father's prudent advice, has pursued a career and has become a success in life. Spending a number of years abroad the younger



brother returns home to find the elder brother almost given up by all for an impossible mental case.

Suddenly the younger brother receives a slap. When a boy he had been threatened with this consequence if he smoked again – and the elder brother had found him smoking now. The elder brother, of course, realizes the folly of his action and breaks down. But the slap has worked. The younger brother has forgotten all the subsequent developments. He sees the bare loving soul of his helpless and hopelessly idealist brother. The two brothers understand each other.

Manoj Das's stories have many aspects, as his range is very wide. But the most noteworthy trait of his works is his powerful penetration into the subtle realities beneath the surface realities. He achieves this penetration with ease, without making the reader conscious of the depth to which he is leading him. This is where lies his art.

### C. Transcendence

A great trait of the heritage of Indian literature has been the transcendent quality inherent in the characters. They may be thrown into a whirlpool of crises; they may be found to be intricately involved in a mundane situation, but the triumph or defeat on the surface is not the last word in their destiny. The Pandavas do not 'arrive' at their destination with their victory in the Mahabharata war. Their journey continues as they undertake the arduous travel through the Himalayas. In Ilango Adigal's *Silapathigaram* Kannaki does not rest satisfied with avenging her husband's death; she takes to the life of a mystic and finally transcends not only her human qualities but also her human limitations.

This truth of transcendence accounts for the spirit of several short stories of Manoj Das – marking a progress from realism to the sublime, reminding us of Longfellow's "The Light of Stars": "Know how sublime a thing it is/ To suffer and be strong".

The touch of the sublime in the stories comes not in any set form, or following a specific pattern. It comes according to the logic of the development of the story. Let us return to "Lakshmi's Adventure". The priest who raises the alarm and leads the chase of the little girl, has acted according to his ordinary nature and habit; but he has realized his folly. Such however are the circumstances, that he can do precious little to undo the tragedy.

He can only atone for it in his own silent suffering and in his resolve to be a better man when reborn.

It is a tragedy because Lakshmi does not survive the shock. But her death when viewed in keeping with the writer's concept of death, is nothing but a doorway into a worthier environment. "The material or physical causes of death are not its sole or its true cause; its inmost reason is the spiritual necessity for the evolution of a new being" (*The Life Divine* 822) says Sri Aurobindo, the master in whose vision of reality Manoj Das reposes his faith (*Amrita Bazar Patrika*, April 29, 1989).

Vilas Singh, the chief character in the short story "The Vengeance" wants to put an end to the life of Bahadur who snatched not only his Sumati but also his savings of a decade. But Bahadur had given him the final slip, bringing his five-year-old enterprise to a futile end. When he reaches home, he sees his newborn son. He is aghast at discovering the child bearing the delicate miniature of the wound he had once inflicted on Bahadur. Hidamba Baba's words have come true. How radically the values and passions change when our vision is not confined to one life, but goes beyond it! Who is an enemy and who is a friend? Vilas will now dote on the very 'person' on whom he eagerly wanted to wreak vengeance.

Roy Sahib, at the end of the story titled "Trespassers" has learnt his lesson. There was a time when he drove away the narrator (as a boy) and reprimanded him for trespassing into his mansion. But now he plays with the narrator's son. Sahib's sons who once took orders from their father now take them from their wives. At his old age, Roy Sahib needs company. This idea is well expressed in the last two lines of the story: "Roy Sahib's glittering denture rested on the table. And without that, he looked beautiful" (VOS 56). His is a sublime progress from rudeness to loving indulgence. Likewise, in "Miss Moberley's Targets", Miss Moberley – a failure in her loves – remembers all her lovers by naming her dogs after them. Disappointed in life, she finds consolation with her aged friends. In the end she begins to see a guardian in everyone. Sadhu Baba of "The Murderer" was once known as Dabu Sahukar, the reputed moneylender and litigant. Thirty years after his supposed death at the hands of Binu, an orphan and an honest man in the service of Dabu who employed him for realizing his dues from his debtors. It took little or no time for the villagers to identify him. The news spread at



lightning speed. Sadhu Baba's presence had spread a festive spirit over the area. Hundreds came to have a look at him. And on the day of Baba's departure, the much dreaded murderer Binu also came. After releasing his feet from Binu's clutch with great care, Sadhu Baba said to the crowd: "Who says Binu had not killed me?" (VOS 8) Of course, we know that the celebrated murderer never did it. But the granny at the end of the story informs her grandchildren thus: "Binu had of course beheaded Dabu Sahukar. It was the grace of the ascetic that joined his body and head together and gave him life – a new life" (VOS 8). Her words give a meaning to the question asked by Sadhu Baba. It is: the evil genius in him had been killed and he had been given a new life. The reputation of a murderer attached to Binu only symbolized his death – which was a regeneration.

The capacity for transcendence, a moment which alone can bring one the taste of the sublime, remains hidden in man. It may come out to the surface sometimes through the destruction of the very idea or object to which one is deeply attached. Man may cling to his pet fancy, sure that he will suffer when deprived of it, but his experience may be quite different when the thing is really lost.

"The Statue Breakers are Coming" seems to be a clear example of this truth. Yameshwar Gupta, a retired politician, fears that his own statue which he had got erected through his admirers when in power, may be destroyed by some anarchists who were out to demolish the memory of the old guard. Several statues had been bombed by them. Gupta desperately tries to alert the authorities, but nobody seems to take it seriously. One night Gupta himself goes out to survey his statue. To his excitement he finds some dubious characters moving about the statue. He is sure that they intend to destroy it. A member of the gang climbs the statue, obviously to survey something else. Gupta is disillusioned when he sees the gang about to leave the place without even making a scratch on his statue. He challenges them to answer what right they had to use the statue as a mere pedestal. The gang is nervous; while fleeing it hurls a bomb at the statue, shattering it in the process.

We don't find Gupta a frustrated man as a result. Along with the statue is gone his egoistic fondness for fame; the destruction of the statue – a day realistic incident – suddenly becomes symbolic of his transcendence and the sublime in him emerging



to the forefront. And the narrator of the story comments: "The next morning and the days that followed saw Guptaji unusually bright. He breathes contentment. 'Life without a statue is just wonderful!' He reminds himself at times. He spends his time visiting old friends and laughs a lot" (DHOS 97).

Comic or tragic experiences at the physical plane often produce some effect at another level. Death of Lily in "Dusky Horizon" does not simply occur as a tragedy. The memory inspires the sublime in all the three characters involved. One becomes a writer, another a sage and the last one realizes with a bang that the memory of Lily should have left an impact on his life and he sheds tears under the impression that it had not. But in his shedding tears we feel the touch of the sublime.

The experience of the sublime is a strictly inner process and no external facility can earn it for anybody.

But the external factor came to add to the process. "A Crack of Thunder" demonstrates this fact. The Zamindar is bent upon violating the modesty of a dumb girl who is blissfully ignorant of his motive. Suddenly the Zamindar's motherless little son appears on the scene. He finds in her a wonderful model for Goddess Durga and he puts on a crown on her head and begins drawing her picture. A moment comes when the Zamindar is bewildered at looking at her, for she suddenly creates in his mind the illusion of being a deity! Unconsciously he folds his hands. It is a moment of revelation for him of the truth that there is the mother hidden in every women, as well as of the truth that even the villain has the capacity in him to recognise it.

While reading Manoj Das's stories, one tends to agree with Thomas Paine's observation on the sublime and the ridiculous: "The sublime and the ridiculous are often so nearly related that it is difficult to class them separately. One step above the sublime makes the ridiculous; and one step above the ridiculous makes the sublime again" (*The Age of Reason*, 2:73).

What the late K.P.S. Menon wrote to Manoj Das way back in 1967, after reading *A Song for Sunday and Other Stories*, Manoj Das's first collection of stories in English, was similar:

August 27, 1967

Palat House,  
Ottapalam,  
Kerala.

My Dear Manoj,

I read - and re-read - your stories and enjoyed them immensely. I do not know if "enjoyed" is the right word. Beneath the bubbling gaiety of even the happier stories there is an undertone of sadness, so characteristic of Indian life. One reflects how thin is the partition between joy and sorrow, sanity and madness, adolescence and adulthood, dream and reality. But reflection is an aftermath; one simply enjoys the stories and, so on re-reading them one feels that there is more in them than meets the eye.

My old collector, J.C. Molony, used to say that even the best of Indians writing in English reminds him of a man who plays the piano with a stick instead of with his fingers. But no one will think so about your stories.

With kind regards,

Yours sincerely,

(Sd.) K.P.S. Menon.

## Relationships

### A. Human Relationships

We are born into a society, not into a vacuum. The moment we are born, we immediately become one of a group of people and we establish a kind of relationship with the others in the society. This association with our fellow beings lasts for the rest of our lives. It also determines our success or failure with them in work or play.

A family has many angles. The birth of a child makes a perfect triangle and marks a realignment of functions and duties. The husband becomes a father, and the wife a mother. The excitement with which parents view their newborn baby is of course an expression of their love for her or him; but it also shows their awareness, conscious or unconscious, that the future of this small, helpless individual depends on their wisdom as well as on her or his own endowment.

Marriage is not regarded as finally consummated unless and until a child is born. "Historically and evolutionally," observes Dr. Joseph Tenenbaum, "motherhood precedes marriage. In the whole kingdom of nature, procreation is the most outstanding fact, the greatest mystery, the holiest sacrament. It is a basic biological function, while marriage is an institution based on social convention" (*The Riddle of Woman* 270).

There are not many stories by Manoj Das in which the family relationship among the characters is the theme or the plot. However, one relationship that projects itself, though in flashes, but with a sustained prominence, is the relationship between the mother and the child, or, to be more specific, the mother as seen by the child.

"The Third Person" is the story where the institution of motherhood can be said to be the theme. Along a long road is situated a solitary inn. One rainy night a couple take shelter there. The innkeeper has fixed a certain amount as rent for the two persons. But by the time the day breaks out, the two have become three – the woman having given birth to a male child.



The mean innkeeper is piqued at being deprived of the rent for the third person. A funny situation suddenly assumes a different character with the proud mother appearing in the scene. Her change from an ordinary woman to a mother – the new status and authority she has acquired – changes the whole situation. The new mother, with the child in her arms ready to board a bullock-cart, steps in and asks her husband to pay for the third person who, she claims, has his dignity as a man, "Give him the full rent for the baby. Why should my child remain indebted to such a fellow from his very birth? He has his own dignity!" (SSMD 65) she asserts. She goes out triumphant, her husband basking in her glory following her – reducing the innkeeper with his profit to the state of the utterly vanquished. Motherhood is deep concentrated love.

The next story, also belonging to an earlier stage to which "The Third Person" belongs, is "The substitute for the Sitar" in which the mother is prominent. Living with her husband in a frontier town where the young mother begins to play the sitar for some change in her monotonous life, she unexpectedly finds a rival in her little daughter. About the reaction of the daughter to the arrival of the sitar, the narrator comments: "Meena, who at first had looked quite pleased with the novel look of the instrument, developed a furious jealousy towards it for the unexpected treatment it had received from her mother. Her mother's attention and embrace were exclusively hers and to her there was no scope for any compromise regarding this" (SSMD 106). The enfant-terrible would dive into her lap as soon as she would take the musical instrument in her arms. Crisis comes one day when the mother grows a little adamant and continues to play the sitar despite the child's vehement claim to her attention and the child disappears! Frantic search yields no result. The desolate landscape, the steep rocky slopes give rise to many misgivings, but the child is discovered lying inside the case meant for the sitar, waiting to jump into her weeping mother's anxious arms.

The events are recollected by the nostalgic father years later, when he receives the news of his bright daughter receiving laurels as a sitar-player. By then the young artiste's mother is no more, but it becomes obvious that the daughter's talents have flourished only on the mother's sacrifice of her own pleasure in playing the sitar.

Discussing love in his book *The Riddle of Woman*, Dr. Joseph Tenenbaum writes: "All love is based on the sadistic-masochistic, pleasure-pain principle, and mother love, more than anything else, approaches this principle. The urge to punish a child for petty infractions is said to be stronger in the mother than in the father. Her holy patience with the child's demands on her time and physical strength, the intense pleasure of suffering for the sake of the child, have an uncanny admixture of unholy masochism" (275).

The sacrifices and silent absorption of shocks by the mother lies as a backdrop in several other stories of Manoj Das. The backdrop sometimes prominent and sometimes faint "but always deep in its effect like the warbling of the sea, be it loud or mild, which always speaks of vastness and a grandeur" as Manoj Das wrote to this author in his letter dated May 20, 1988 conveying the impression an Indian mother or the institution of motherhood had indelibly left in his mind.

The story with the mother as a prominent backdrop – but nothing more than a backdrop – is "Lakshmi's Adventure". Here the little Lakshmi who has sneaked into the deity's presence taking advantage of the priest's midday slumber, begins narrating to the deity her experiences of men and mice. Once she is tempted to buy a frock exhibited in a shop and both her parents are about to set out in order to buy it for her, when the money-lender arrives and obliges them to part with the amount they were to spend on the frock. Lakshmi reports to the deity:

I told mummy, I had no desire really to buy a frock from the bazaar. All that I wanted was to make a frock out of a torn but beautiful saree which I had seen lying useless in her trunk for a long time!

You can certainly guess, God, that I lied to mummy. I had in fact seen a beautiful frock displayed at the window of a shop in a bazaar which I would have loved to put on.

Mummy sat down to make a frock out of her old saree that very evening. She tried her best to hide her tears from me. Only once before had I seen mummy weeping. That was when papa was sick and the man with the *lathi* banged on our door. Mummy opened the door and told him that papa was away and would return after a week. After the money-



lender left, I whispered my surprise to her: 'Mummy, didn't you tell me that it was wrong to tell a lie?' Mummy answered, 'It is wrong. I am unfortunate that the circumstances compelled me to utter a lie.' She then took me into her lap and said, 'But you will grow up to a much better woman. You will not tell a lie under any circumstances'.

But, God, I saw mummy, after a while, weeping secretly. And I should tell you what I realized then? My mummy might have uttered a lie, but she was never a liar. All the rest in the world may be liars, but not my mummy. She is above all (CL 51-52).

Lakshmi's casual report perhaps says a lot more about the author's vision of the mother seen through a child than a full story devoted to the theme could have said.

The institution of motherhood receives yet another tribute at another plane, in a situation that is moderately farcical, but charged with suspense in the story titled "The Concubine". In a small town the erstwhile capital of a small feudatory state now abolished, a former prince aspires to get elected to the state legislature. Some progressive young men who propose to launch a local news magazine and are also determined to fight the vestiges of feudalism, are ready to confront the prince. But the shy prince hardly appears in public. However, a woman of the palace, a concubine of his late father, is canvassing for him among the women voters. They are meeting at a grove. The progressive men appear there unexpectedly. They had resolved to embarrass the woman by exposing her character before her audience. And after passing through some anxious moments, their leader succeeds in pronouncing, in response to her affectionate observation that they were too young to recognize her, that she was a concubine of the late Raja.

The result is unexpected. She wipes her tears and asks her attendant to entertain the boys to luddoos. Her personality is dominated by the consciousness of a mother:

Sati Devi wiped her eyes and said again, 'I thought you children of yesterday won't know me at all. The fact is, I rarely come out of the palace. But I should tell you, while dying, the Rani had told me entreatingly, 'Sati, take care of my son!' That is why I am out. I go from village to village

asking the women to vote for the boy. If the Raja were alive, he would have fleeced me alive. But let us not speak of that demon. The boy, however, is as innocent as a calf" (CL 166).

The satire in the situation on those who recognize only the superficial aspects of a woman's personality and ignore the dominant element in her character is subtle, but unmistakable.

"A Letter From the Last Spring" is a story entirely built around a child's longing for her mother though that again cannot be said to be the theme of the story. The child waits for a letter from her mother who, she believes, is in a sanatorium whereas really she is no more. As the child waits for the postman leaning from her balcony, an old man observes her from the opposite terrace. One day, to his great surprise, the old man finds a letter sent to him by the child. It was the only letter the child has received from her mother. Thinking that the old man too longed for a letter from his mother, the child had decided to surrender her most precious property to him! Thus has the little girl played the mother to the old man.

Presence of this element of the mother in different women characters, even in a female child, is a significant trait in Manoj Das's stories. It is this quality that impresses us in the child we meet in "A Night in the Life of a Mayor" who provides a towel to the naked mayor.

The finest aspect of the institution of the mother in Indian life and literature has thus pervaded the stories of Manoj Das even though he does not exclusively devote a story to the theme. His stories that have references to mother remind us of the Chilean poet Gabriela Mistra's lyrical poems devoted to the theme of motherhood.

The relationship between two brothers is the plot of the story "The Brothers". The idealist elder brother who had joined the freedom struggle is at a loss in a changing situation when he finds many using the goodwill of patriotism to promote their careers. The younger brother was quite pragmatic and in his legitimate pursuance of a decent career he has lived as a doctor in the West for a long time. He returns to India, to find his elder brother looked down upon by all as a mental case. While he is wondering whether to lead his brother to any asylum or not, he receives a slap on his cheek – a slap that has remained suspended for years. In his childhood he had been once caught smoking



stealthily. The elder brother had spared him of a slap in lieu of his promise never to smoke again. But he was now smoking.

Soon the elder brother realizes his blunder. He weeps. In that poignant situation the highly sophisticated younger brother sees himself only as a kid. He too weeps. What is more, he suddenly wakes up to the truth that his elder brother was not mad after all. "Brother", he says at the end, "you must accompany me to my place of work. I shall earn. You will use my earning for the needy. I have no desire to hoard. Once the period of my contract with the hospital is over, we shall be back here and you will lead me into the villages. My services shall be at your disposal" (VOS 34).

A clash between idealism and pragmatism is also the theme of "The Old Man and the Camel". The old father, a revolutionary of the olden days, who does not approve of the new politics is an embarrassment to his son, a politician who has become a minister. The old man had an unfulfilled desire from his school days and that was to see camels. One day when the old man is determined to interfere in an affair which it is for his son to tackle, he is lured away by his grandson who announces of the arrival of a caravan of camels outside the town. The little one has done so at his father's behest, bribed with a slab of chocolate. When the old man discovers this, he is more sorry for the deception to which the next generation is subjected than for the deception to which he has been subjected. The child repents and the grandfather and the grandson became united in a "brotherhood of sorrow", to use a term from H.G. Wells.

The complexity of relationship, of human bondage, outside the family is deftly portrayed in stories like "The Dusky Hour" and "He Who Rode the Tiger". In the former, Auntie Roopwati, a leading lady in the freedom struggle who later is shunned by her compatriots for her sharp tongue, claims that in her youth, all the prominent figures of today had fallen in love with her at one time or another. But when she claims that even Chinmoy Babu – the loftiest figure in state politics – too had once showed signs of loving her by trying to caress her in darkness, people take her to be crazy. Her claim grows louder as Chinmoy Babu climbs higher in his career. A defunct politician, Dhani Chowdhury, comes temporarily to limelight through a confession that in fact it was he who had ventured at caressing Roopwati and not Chinmoy Babu!

The gossips gather momentum because of an election, but Roopwati suddenly dies. When the election is over and Chinmoy Babu's victory is certain and is quiet, the narrator sees, by chance, Chinmoy Babu in a situation which makes him wonder, "Was the confession of the ex-treasurer, Dhani Chowdhury, true?" (SVOS 124).

In "He Who Rode the Tiger", the relationship between a father (the foolish king) and the son (the shy but enlightened prince) assumes an allegorical significance. A tiger has got accidentally trapped. Many are the aspirants to ride it. But, of course, it is ultimately the king's privilege to do so. Unfortunately he is too fat for the occasion. Hence he summons his son and orders him to ride the beast on his behalf. The reluctant son is obliged to obey him and the tiger's ties are snapped. The beast walks away. It is too late when the king thinks of his son's return. Only his blood-stained clothes are found.

The allegory is in a new generation bearing the burden of the sins of an older generation – in this case a futile love for vanity.

In Manoj Das's portrayal of human relationship, generally the positive elements like love, and trust dominate over other traits barring a few of them, like the aforesaid one which is more a fantasy than a realistic story. But the portrayal takes an ironical turn in "The Vengeance". The hero who is yearning to take revenge on his enemy and has spent much time and energy pursuing him, suddenly finds the enemy dead. He is disappointed. Even the enemy's death seems to him like the enemy's triumph over him through a trick. Then he is back home, soothed at the news that a son is born to him. But there awaits the greatest shock for him – for he has reasons to believe that the new born child was none other than a reincarnation of his enemy.

But even in this story, the message given in a negative process, is quite eloquent by implication. One can never truly avenge oneself for one's enemy cannot only give one the slip through death, but also can stage a comeback in a totally unexpected manner – putting one to an utterly helpless state. Vilas Singh is deprived of his vengeance by a trick of destiny. Hence empathy and understanding are the basis of relationship, not hatred and passion for revenge.



The impact of human relationship is vividly and deeply portrayed in his novelette "The Dusky Horizon". In fact, the factor of human relationship can be described as the very theme of this work of fiction. A charming little girl, Lily, born and brought up in a town by her progressive parents and grandparents, visits her ancestral village with her grandfather. (By then she had lost her parents).

The village urchins have their leader in Hatu, an ambitious little tyrant. He and his two lieutenants find in the smart bespectacled, well-dressed Lily an unexpected challenge to their way of life and their authority. The trio decides to humiliate her, not realizing that their "envy is a kind of praise" as John Gay put it. But, with her superior intelligence, courage and above all her charitable disposition, Lily soon physically captures one of them and then captivates all.

Now, Lily is their philosopher and they are her friends and guides.

In a rapid exchange of ideas and experiences, the three friends wake up to the wonders of Lily's enlightened world while Lily is enchanted by the mysteries of the village - the ghosts who frequent some lonely corners of the village at night and the wooded hill that looks like a peacock.

Lily's company thrills the three rustic boys and, proud to act as her guides, they lead her to the Peacock Hill. Tragedy strikes the party as a storm breaks out and the boys get separated from Lily. They climb down the hill with difficulty and are back home. Late in the night a search party discovers Lily - lying dead in a gorge.

This outline will hardly convey the tragic grip of the story, for equally poignant incidents mark the past of the grandfather who survives Lily. But looked from the angle of relationship that has been built by between the trio and Lily, the story can be said to have begun with Lily's death, for their brief relationship has, consciously or unconsciously, greatly influenced the future course of the trio's life. Each has chosen his own way, but in their old age it is found that Lily continued to live in them and to mould their destiny. They have tried to recreate her or keep her alive because they have never been able to shake off their share in her march into the jaws of death.

This moving novelette which has many shades of significance in it, shows that the effect of relationship is a highly

relative experience. A relationship spread over years may not mean much whereas one lasting a brief hour may alter the course of one's life. This relativity becomes vivid in "The Bridge in the Moonlit Night". A romantic relationship between the young college teacher Ashok and one of his students, a shy young lady has been forgotten by all concerned but one – the one who has been the courier of the young lady's only letter to the anxious Ashok but who had torn the letter to shreds and thrown into the river. After over half a century the affair suddenly surges up in their memory and culminates in a dramatic finale.

In the world of Manoj Das's short stories, the relationship between characters is not confined to human beings. "Of Man and Monkey" is a story showing the development of a fond relationship between a circus clown and a monkey. That, of course, is one of the writer's rare incursions beyond the human sphere of characters. What is more important is the element of transcendence hidden in the formal relationships – elevating them or tending to elevate them to a higher plane.

#### B. Relationship with Death

"What is the greatest wonder in the world?" asked the Yaksha in the *Mahabharata*. And Yudhishtira replied: "Everyday men see creatures depart to Yama's abode and yet those who remain seek to live forever. This verily is the greatest wonder." Therein lies the mystery of death.

One of the Greek legends – the Riddle of the Sphinx – contains in it the mystery of death and a great message too.

A frightful monster, the Sphinx was a strange creature shaped like a winged lion, but with the breast and face of a woman, the paws of a dog and a serpent for its tail. Beside a meadow and atop a hill it lay in wait for the wayfarers along the roads to the city and whoever it saw it put a riddle to, telling them if they could answer it, it would let them go.

"What creature," the Sphinx asked the wayfarers, "goes on four feet in the morning, on two as the day grows, and on three in the evening?"

No one could answer the riddle of the Sphinx, and the horrible creature devoured man after man.

It was after a long time, Oedipus, the hero of great courage and wisdom, in his lonely wanderings, happened to pass that way. "Man," answered he, as the Sphinx threw its riddle at him.



"In childhood," he continued, "they creep on hands and feet; in adulthood they walk erect; in old age they help themselves with a staff." It was the right answer. The Sphinx, inexplicably, but most fortunately, killed itself, by plunging headlong into the ravines from the mountain on which it stood.

Interpreting the legend in his *Mystery of Death* (the summary of a series of his talks in Bombay in 1983 and published as a booklet) Manoj Das observes: "The symbolism is unmistakable. The Sphinx, as is obvious from its very composition, is unreal and it represents death. The irony is, the answer itself does not know itself. The day man knows himself, death ceases to be real" (23).

Perhaps that was the reason why Socrates like the Upanishadic Seers said: "Know Thyself". Perhaps that was the reason why he drank the cup of hemlock with a brightened face and a smile lingering on his lips. Once we know what life is we will know what death is.

What then is death?

To put it in simple language, death is the final withdrawal of consciousness from its outermost form, the physical body.

Poets and philosophers have said that death is nothing bad, death is nothing evil, it is just restful - a great rest, like sleep. James S. Perkins, a well known authority on reincarnation and occult sciences, writes thus while comparing death with sleep:

Dying is very much the same experience as going to sleep, which everyone does during some portion of the twenty four hour daily cycle. No healthy person is rendered uneasy or fearful by this routine demand. If our attitude toward going to sleep were analogous to the common superstitions about dying, there would be endless added fears and occasions for grief. Happily everyone is quite certain that he will wake up tomorrow morning. Is it not significant that one of the joys of life is that of becoming physically unconscious at regular intervals? We greet sleep amiably because of the anticipated renewal of strength and vitality. Sleep refreshes us, returning to a state of well-being and eager interest in what is happening in the world about us and to us. It would be only reasonable to view death and rebirth as a largest cycle of refreshment and renewal. This would be the normal outlook if man's instinctive "Soul Knowledge" about this matter were permitted to govern his

attitudes, rather than the fears and the beliefs that are instilled in him as a result of life's circumstances (*Through Death to Rebirth* 54-55).

Therefore to say that the immortal soul which has come forth from the highest heaven into incarnation in the three lower worlds of matter, i.e. consciousness - to labour and create in matter to experience its impacts, to endure and to struggle for mastery for force and form, retires homewards for refreshment will be no exaggeration. The focal centre of the Self is there, not here. The earth is the "bourne" from which every traveller returns to his native land, the realm of the soul.

Sri Aurobindo has given us an admirable definition of death in his epic poem *Savitri*:

Although Death walks beside us on life's road,  
a dim bystander at the body's start.  
And a last judgement on man's futile works.  
Other is the riddle of its ambiguous face:  
Death is a stair, a door, a stumbling stride.  
The soul must take to cross from birth to birth,  
A grey defeat pregnant with victory,  
A whip to lash us towards our deathless state (600-601).

Many other thinkers too, among them Plato, Kant, Tolstoy, believe that the human soul is not a brief player, condemned to say one brief line upon the stage of time and then make a final exit. The Divine playwright surely could not have written his drama so poorly - prepared all the resplendent scenery of the earth as a prelude to the appearance of the hero - Man - only to permit him the stammering sentence of a brief moment of time - this life - and then make both him and the drama of existence ludicrous by eternal silence. Say the thinkers, this earth is but the prologue and many a rich act has been prepared for man in other worlds.

Whether one agrees or disagrees with these speculative arguments on behalf of life beyond the grave, one should always remember that there are other forms of immortality besides personal survival. Joshua Loth Liebman, the rabbi of Temple



Israel, Boston, and one of the leading preachers in America in his enlightening discussion on immortality writes thus:

Man perhaps displays his most remarkable and his most unselfish genius when he turns from the thought of individual immortality of the human race, when he transfers his allegiance from his own small ego to mankind as a whole. Man at that moment transcends himself; his own life becomes significant as one link in the magnetic chain of humanity. The more we concentrate upon the immortality of mankind, strangely enough, the richer becomes our own individual life. As we link ourselves to all the heroes and sages and martyrs, to all the poets and thinkers of every race and clime, we become a part of a great and moving drama. We find along the road of the ages so many good companions. It is the miracle of our intellect that we are enable to leap over space and ignore time and link ourselves in imagination with all the master builders of civilization and culture everywhere. We share, then, in the immortality of mankind as a whole as we come to identify ourselves with the wisest thoughts, the noblest ideals, the richest music of the centuries...

Most of us, however, have the infinitely greater privilege (which we take too much for granted) of moulding the spiritual and destiny of the generations that come after us. Men and women whom we influence by the example of our lives, the children who are touched by the flame of our spirits – it is in them that we live on and find our eternal significance (*Peace of Mind* 130-131).

Manoj Das, a believer in life beyond life, tackles the theme of man's relationship with death in his short stories in different ways.

One truth that emerges from the varied ways in which death is treated by him is, though death on a physical phenomenon is the same, it does not mean the same thing for all. Death serves chiefly four purposes in the short stories of Manoj Das. They are: a) Death as the need of the soul; b) Death resulting from an acute demand by the vital passions; c) Death utilised to reveal the characters of those alive; and d) Death as symbolic of an era or tradition.

Manoj Das is a believer in the mystic purpose of death. If the soul of the individual does not find the environment around its bodily existence quite conducive to its fruitful living or experience it will leave the body under some pretext. The most natural illustration of this theory is "Sita's Marriage". As a little girl, when Sita hardly understood the distinction between dreams and reality, in her innocence she has married Lord Rama. She might have grown up as a normal girl – within the social milieu of her father, a college teacher, but her inner psychic being seems to have remained fixed in her childhood commitment. Read in this light, the deceptive simplicity and matter-of-fact meaning of the concluding sentence of the story became significant: "Today I received the most unfortunate news that after a slight attack of fever, our sweet little Sita has passed away" (SSMD 123).

For the narrator who had seen Sita as a child, she is "little". But what is meant is, she remains the child she was so far as her innocence and transparent faith were concerned. And the small paragraph preceding the last line puts forth the cause of her death: "after a slight attack of fever". Her father was arranging for her marriage though she was showing her unwillingness for it. There was nothing unusual in her father trying to get her married; neither was there anything unusual in her feeling reluctant to give her consent to it, but what was unusual was her soul. It could not have thrived in an ordinary worldly condition. Hence death comes to her rescue.

All the souls in need of a speedy evolution or change of physical environment and choosing death as a means for achieving this result are not as lucky as Sita. In "Lakshmi's Adventure" we meet almost Sita's twin in Lakshmi – yet another little girl who believes that she is talking to the deity and in a state of complete obliviousness of the reality, believes that the deity has offered her a couple of bananas, is next moment face to face with the brutal reality of men and mice, of facts and judgement. God's little friend inside the ducky shrine, she is a thief outside it – in the scorching light; a prolific talker alone before God, she is struck dumb under the focus of the eyes of worldly prudence which feels scandalised over her audacity.

The shock has been a decisive factor for her soul. "After silently suffering for three days, she died" (CL 54). Indeed she had to bear her suffering silently. She had taken the deity into



confidence; she could not have taken any human being into confidence; she could not have explained the nature of her predicament to anybody.

While her soul has fled in search of a more conducive environment it has given a boost to the evolution of another person, the priest, who had been the first person to call her thief. He has realized the danger of talking without realizing the import of the word.

Death comes to Kumar T. Roy of "Birds in the Twilight" an illegitimate son of a famous Raja, once reckless but grown sober over the years, in an unexpected, but natural way. He lived a lonely life, shooting down birds and taking care of a caged tiger, the last inmate of a small zoo in the palace now deserted. His only friend was Giloo, another forlorn person.

All of a sudden he gets a thrill of freedom – when some birds escape his own gun and fly away. He runs keeping pace with them, not to take aim at them any more, but as if in a bid to belong to them!

The urge remains strong in him and one night hiding from Giloo, he sets the tiger free. Since the tiger has forgotten to run, he had to run to set an example to it. Both reach the forest, but meanwhile the tiger following him has been noticed by some well-meaning people who interpret the scene as the tiger chasing him. They follow both.

In the forest the tired Roy sprawls embracing his dear pet. The rescuers reach the spot soon.

At last they were caught under the jeep's headlights. Instantly there were a couple of booming shots. The tiger was staring at the jeep. In the next moment it lowered its head slowly to rest on Roy's chest.

"The scoundrel has finished Mr. Roy. After chasing him all the way, at last it pounced upon him here."

"Let us see. He might still be alive".

"No. Both are dead".

"But isn't it strange that Mr. Roy seems to be without a scratch! How did he die?"

"Might be of a heart-failure due to fear".

"Pity! Giloo will weep a lot. Both were so dear to him"  
(CL 64-65).

Needless to say that Roy's death has nothing to do with the causes attributed to it by his well-wishers. The physical cause may be exhaustion, but we have to know what was happening to him when he lay sprawled in order to get a clue to the inner cause of his death: "And in his vision were flying hundreds of birds - blue, white - of many a hue. The hundreds became thousands. They were scattering into ever-expanding heights and horizons like silver arrows and golden bullets. Roy, his eyes still closed, recognised them as the vibrations of the freedom that electrified him - freedom vast and vaster still" (CL 64).

Death for him was a synonym for freedom. He transcended a certain physical form, a certain environment at a moment when his whole being was crying for freedom, that could be the emotional symptom of a psychic need. Freedom is a yearning of the soul in bondage to Nature.

Just as the circumstances in which the souls leave the bodies are different in "Sita's Marriage" and "Lakshmi's Adventure", though the need for such an action in both the cases is the same, so also are the circumstances in which Roy's soul leaves his body are different from the circumstances in which Kunja's soul leaves his body in the next story of this category, "The Kite", though the latter's death too comes as a result of his soul's yearning for freedom.

Kunja was a great kite-flier in his boyhood in his village. Events have landed him in jail when he was young. Years have rolled by. One day, while being led to work under police escort, he sees a kite entangled in the top of a tree. Hours later, while returning to jail, he sees the same kite still stuck to the top of the desolate tree.

A sudden gust freed the kite from the tree-top. It began to drift across a weird sky half red with an invisible sun and half dark with clouds. Kunja started running, defying the surprised pedestrians, the shriek of the havildar and the chaos of the traffic.

His eyes were in the sky. The kite was tending to fall down - a slow and heart rending fall.



Kunja, as though, was determined to forestall that fall. He ran with a vengeance. If the kite would merge in the horizon, he too would follow suit. The kite and himself – they were the only truths. The rest meant nothing to him.

Behind him came a surge of voices – of concern and anger and surprise – and frequent whistling.

Railroads separated the town from the country. Kunja crossed the rails escaping an express train by a hair-breadth, throwing his pursuers into a hapless detention (SVOS 65).

At last when the police closes in on him, he is near the fog-covered sea into which the kite has disappeared. He too enters the sea.

The police jeep stopped at the brink of the water. Two perplexed fishermen pointed their fingers into the sea – into the mysteries of the vast fog and the grandeur of the roars. The young superintendent of Police raised his gun.

"If shoot you must, Sir, then please point the barrel upward," mumbled the havildar, pleadingly.

There were flashes of lightning in the horizon. Thunder-claps followed. The sea began to appear dark and dangerous.

Suddenly the jailor and the Superintendent of Police began to feel small, for no reason whatever. As though the lightning, the thunder, the laughter of the wind and the sea's roar were the kith and kin of Kunja who gave them the slip (SVOS 66).

While for Kunja, the kite has been the invitation into freedom, what has come to him is death, but a death with a difference. It is neither a suicide nor an accident. It can be said as an immersion in infinity, again a relax into freedom. It was a violent circumstance for all the onlookers, but a sublime experience for Kunja.

"The Vengeance" is the story to exemplify the kind of death, necessitated by the unsatiated vital passion, in this case the passion for vengeance. The narrator follows the track of Vilas Singh who is seeking to take revenge on Bahadur. By the time

the reader meets Bahadur, he has become a corpse. In the maddening anguish of Vilas Singh is to be read a great irony. That Bahadur is already dead, killed by a disease, is no satisfaction to him. He should have been the author of his death, not a disease! An occultist answers him that Bahadur will be reborn and Vilas Singh will recognize him through a certain sign. Bahadur indeed is reborn – but as Vilas Singh's son, Vilas Singh recognizes him all right, but to what avail? Only to suffer yet another phase of anguish.

What Vilas Singh did not know was his spirit of vengeance was brewing vengeance in Bahadur's heart too. And, through the means of death, the latter stole a march on the former. A certain working of *Karma*, unforeseen and terrible, has been brought home in this story in an intensely dramatic manner.

But in the other story "The Bridge in the Moonlit Night" under this category in relation to death we see the play of passion at another level. Unfortunately sweet, though unexpected, is that play. Ashok, in his eighties, suddenly learns that the girl whom he loved in his twenties and to whom he had written several letters, had at last written a reply to him, a warm response to his love, but the bearer of the letter, Sudhir, envious of him, tore it to pieces and let the pieces fly away from a bridge.

"Fly away? Let us go and look for it!" Ashok made an effort to get up.

"After sixty years?" Sudhir laughed nervously.

Ashok fell back into his chair.

"Ashok Bhai, I must confess that the letter flew away only after I had read it and torn it to shreds. In fact, I let the shreds fly into the rolling flood of the monsoon. I can still see them flying away like butterflies and disappearing under the bridge" (SVOS 43).

The repentant sinner, Sudhir, blabbers on, little knowing that Ashok had become quiet forever. He knows it when, minutes later a friend of theirs, Mahindra, arrives.

"Ashok Babu, if I am still capable of walking quite fast and even climbing, it is entirely due to the inspiration I draw from your example. Now tell me, Ashok Babu, how on earth



could you reach home so soon? I saw you from the other side of the dismantled bridge. I called out to you. It appeared you were too engrossed in looking for something on the dry bed of the river to respond to my call. I just took a turn to avoid trudging through the debris and came over to his side. Alas! You were gone. You will overtake a hurricane, Ashok Babu. Who will believe that you are older than I?" Mahindra observed, still panting.

"But Ashok Bhai hasn't been out all this evening! You must have seen someone else," said Sudhir.

"Ha! Can I ever mistake someone else for Ashok Babu? And in this bright moonlight? Well, Ashok Babu, you couldn't but have reached here only seconds before me. Isn't that so?"

Mahindra waited for a minute for Ashok to reply and then observed, "Surely, he has fallen asleep!"

"But he never sleeps so deep at this hour, Ashok Bhai, do you hear?" Sudhir called.

"Ashok Babu" Mahindra joined in.

"Ashok Bhai" Sudhir called louder and gave a shake to his old professor and friend. Next moment he screamed out, "Who is there? Phone up the doctor, quick! Where is the switch for the light, Mahindra? O God, I forget everything!" (SVOS 44-45).

Ashok has died in the grip of a sudden nostalgia. Could a part of his being, what mystics term as the vital being, suddenly appear under the bridge, looking for the scraps, before realizing the futility of such an operation and dissolving?

Prominent among the stories in which death of a person reveals flashes of the characters of the living is "The Love Letter". A young lady, some sort of a genius at art, dies. Gautam, a scholar doing research on her life says that he had discovered a love letter written by her, but undelivered to the addressee who too is unknown. One after another, a musician, a professor and at last the elderly scion of a feudal house in which the young lady had lived, come forward to demand the letter, each of them sure that

he had been the departed lady's object of love. Only the readers know at the end – after the drunken scion had reduced to ashes a scrap of useless paper under the impression that that was the alleged love letter, that no such letter had ever been found by Gautam, the researcher.

Gautam took these ashes in his slightly shaking hands. For a moment he forgot that they were the ashes of an irrelevant scrap of paper. He even forgot that he never discovered any love letter. It was a weird inspiration that had led him to whisper the colourful lie to a group of pals in the restaurant. Possessed by a strange urge he intended throwing a hint at his listeners on a more congenial occasion that Gita had addressed the letter to none other than himself.

Of course, before long he had begun feeling ashamed of his craziness.

"Thank God, it is over" he muttered to himself as he offered the ashes to the moonlight and breeze outside the window (SVOS 159).

If the revelation of the characters in this story has a deliberate farcical quality about it, it is quite sombre in the story "The Dusky Hour". Roopwati had been progressive enough to join the freedom struggle when in her small provincial town "modernity meant a newly wed lady sharing a hand-pulled rickshaw with her husband, her rouged face fully revealed to the amazed public" (VOS 63).

If she was a sensation in her youth and a source of inspiration for many, in her old age she was avoided by her co-workers most of whom had occupied important positions in the society and the government for she was bitter against everybody and most vociferous in her criticism.

However, she was kind to only one person, Chinmoy Babu, a highly respected leader who had been forgotten by many, but who surfaced when the ruling party was in a crisis.

As Chinmoy Babu began to rise in power, Roopwati caused much embarrassment to all sensitive people by claiming that once upon a time he too had tried to woo her, like many other budding young men of the time. In fact, she claimed, that once in



a meeting, as lights went out, Chinmoy Babu's hand had tried to grab hers, very slowly: This, of course, could hardly be a scandal to affect the election prospect of Chinmoy Babu, but even this much was contradicted by one Dhani Chowdhury, whom authorities had condemned to oblivion for long. He confessed that the audacious hand to grab that of Roopwati was his and not Chinmoy Babu's.

The remarkable force and flow with which Dhani Chowdhury poured out his confession gave me the impression that he was *not* as remorseful as he declared he was, and that a secret sense of pride enlivened his narration. He was willing to donate a photograph of his *should* Chinmoy Babu's election committee choose to *print it on* leaflets carrying his confession and distribute them by the thousands.

But, before the election committee had taken a decision on the offer and before we had any time to ascertain Aunty's reaction to the confession, she was down with high fever. The diagnosis that it was pneumonia came only hours before she died (SVOS 122).

Chinmoy Babu's election ran smoothly. His victory was assured when he left his constituency for the town. Then comes the revelation to the narrator, a journalist who was the leader's personal lieutenant, when they were driving.

It was evening – a cloudy and cool one – by the time we reached the lake. The breeze was going erratic. I was dozing.

"Will you please halt for a while? I wish to have a stroll in solitude. The last few days have been so suffocating" Chinmoy Babu muttered out from the back seat.

I appreciated his desire and let him go out alone and resumed dozing. But, after fifteen minutes, when I noticed dark clouds closing in on the patch of sky over the lake and anticipated a shower. I went out of the car to call him back.

There were only three or four men scattered around the lake and I did not see Chinmoy Babu among them. I climbed the embankment and looked into the cremation ground stretching down it.

I located him near the ruins of the temple. He had gathered a bunch of flowers and was pruning them. I was going to call out to him, but stopped.

He advanced towards the pile of ashes that had been Aunt's pyre. He knelt down prayerfully and placed his bouquet on the pile.

He sat quietly for a long time and wiped his eyes again and again. Then it began to drizzle. When he was about to get up, I took a swift turn and reached the car in a few rapid strides.

It rained soon after Chinmoy Babu got into the car. We drove on, silently. The hissing trees along the road looked like phantoms whisking us away.

But the silence of that dusky hour had brewed a disturbing question in my mind. Was the confession of the ex-treasurer Dhani Chowdhury true? (SVOS 123-124).

The story in which death, while visiting an individual also symbolises the end of an era and a tradition – in this case the tradition of feudalism – is "The Owl". The young Zamindar, on a visit to a kachahri of his father's in a village away from his home, unwittingly shoots at an owl in a temple. The villagers believe that he shall die as a consequence of his action. It is a lucid situation with the collective expectation of the young man's death and his own fear ultimately bringing about his death.

The palanquin that had come from his home to take him away, carries his dead body.

It was a spacious palanquin although the coloured pictures of fairies dallying with flowers drawn on its planks had considerably faded out. During the time of the dead Zamindar's grandfather, the founder of the dynasty, the palanquin was rumoured to have seen its glorious days with strings of pearls hanging down from its roof like bunches of grapes. People who saw coloured glass beads decorating it until two years ago found no difficulty in accepting the legend as true.



The old maid ran behind the palanquin, sobbing. The doctor followed her, riding his bicycle whenever possible, otherwise dragging it through the sands, gasping and swearing (SVOS 151).

But then the owl had not died. Its hooting reassured the villagers that something permanent was there beneath all that was passing.

Death is not the central theme in any of the short stories of Manoj Das. But whenever it occurs, it has a far reaching significance.

## Transition

### A. Faces of Transition

Almost every Indo-Anglian fictionist is fascinated by the colonial rule, pre-partition and partition days in India. This has led to a great deal of literature. This genre is termed as "Raj" and "transition" literature. In her discussion on such a genre, Meenakshi Mukherjee in her scholarly work *The Twice Born Fiction* writes:

Just as the essential predicament of the nineteenth century American novelist was a sense of isolation, the essential condition of the twentieth century Indian novelist, until recent years, was his involvement and concern – involvement with the changing national scene, concern for the destiny of the country. The independence movement in India was not merely a political struggle, but an all-pervasive emotional experience of all Indians in the nineteen-twenties and thirties. No Indian writer, writing in those decades or writing about them, could avoid reflecting this upsurge in his work. Thus many of the English novels written in India in the present century also deal with this national experience, either directly as theme or indirectly as significant public background to a personal narrative. This was an experience that was national in nature. It traversed boundaries of language and community and, since Indo-Anglian novels aim at a pan-Indian readership, this unifying experience has served to establish Indo-Anglian writing as an integral part of Indian literature (34).

The transitional period – that is, the passage of India from colonial rule to independence – and the socio-economic political complexities it created offer a wide range of situations. It witnessed also the crumbling of the old feudal system and gave a big push to urbanisation. How society and the people reacted and how these changes came about is imaginatively depicted in many of the stories of Manoj Das. Change of fortune wrought by time besides the general transformation in living conditions



offers a fruitful theme for humorous and satirical treatment. Elections in the new democracy and the rise to power of all sorts of men attract the pen of this short story writer. Even his happier stories have an undercurrent of sadness, so characteristic of Indian life. His portrayal of the tragic and comic aspects of human life is candid.

What has been the biggest loss to India during the recent years?... Let me share with you the answer I would readily give. The biggest loss has been the destruction of Indian village.

The village is neither dead nor in a coma. It has just been driven crazy. Its harmony, serenity and beauty have disappeared or is fast disappearing giving way to bizarre life style marked by ecological ruination and exploitation of caste sentiments by politicians, intrusion by commercial enterprises - ranging from arbitrary establishment of factories to opening up of liquor shops. Let it be emphasised that the extension of technology and new amenities to the village (including electricity) are not at fault. That was necessary and the village has got it as a matter of its right. It is the demoniac hunger for false prosperity and lack of respect for the rural grace, along with an inability to see the consequences of certain kinds of developmental activities on the part of the entrepreneurs, planners as well as the villagers themselves (at least some of them) that have brought about the sad state of affairs.

If the village has lost, who has gained? Is it the city? The answer, unfortunately, is "No". Someone described Los Angeles as seventeen suburbs in search of a city. In the Indian context, we will not be very far from the truth if we describe any of our major cities (New Delhi exc.uding) as seventeen hundred slums in search of a city...

The above passage, a part of the editorial Mr. Manoj Das wrote for the January 1989 number of *The Heritage* devoted to the 350th Anniversary of the city of Madras, contains an important clue to our appreciating the theme of transition in several of his stories. Evidently he is anguished over the end of the age-old Indian village. But what is the village he has in mind the loss of

which he bemoans? Description of anything in his stories is strictly limited to the need of the central theme of the story, only to the extent that it can be an aid to the effectiveness of the story. It is never copious. Even then the village he had seen in his childhood, the village he had felt and lived, appears as moving glimpses in a number of his stories, particularly in the longest of his short stories "The Dusky Horizon":

Although I passed all my days since my early youth in cities where darkness meant only light switched off, I had never forgotten the grandeur of rural dark, awfully alive like a surging flood throbbing with impulses and emotions of its own and which, in my childhood, used to assume its most impressive and terrifying stance on the Peacock Hill.

From time to time, when the moon lolled on the hill the tall trees atop it looked like a solemn committee of supernatural beings in session, with the moon's future and several other equally important issues on their agenda.

I had heard, right from the age I was able to make out the meaning of words, that an ogre dwelt in the thicker part of the forest on the Peacock Hill. Although no one ever told me much about him, I knew that thunder was his mother-tongue and that his breakfast often included a naughty little fellow like me (DHOS 1-2).

This description of the village, steeped in awe and wonder, finds a complementary description which is amusing, in "The Submerged Valley".

We became conscious of our village the day our headmaster asked the students of class three to write an essay on the topic.

So far we had taken the village for granted - like our breathing or our mother's love. But thereafter the elements that made the village - the trees, the pools, the Shiva temple and the hillock adjacent to it - had begun to look significant.

Our village has several other aspects to it. A lame crow perched on a crumbling stone-arch of the temple and it cawed on in an abnormal and ominous tone. Nobody ever



dared to disturb it. A certain member of the Harijan community looked all white because of the congenital vitiligo. His fond grand-parents had christened him Sahib. From some mysterious source he had secured the cork topee the white men in India used. He visited the weekly market sporting the topee and invoked in the throng something of the awe that was due to the real Sahibs.

The trees that stood in front of our school were as human to us as the wandering bull of Lord Shiva. One of the trees looked as if it knelt down in meditation. Two more were never tired of chattering between them. If the teacher had scolded or thrashed us, they seemed to be sympathising with us. At the approach of the vacation they seemed to be talking of the many sweet moments that were in store for us.

Last but not the least, there was an insane woman who lived on the hillock behind the temple. She had for her pets a mad dog and a mad cat. Whatever be the standard applied to measure the state of mind of the woman and her dog, it was intriguing how our people had become so sure of the lunacy of the cat. But before I was of age, all the three died. The woman had left behind a son, crazy and no less arrogant. He chose a house a day and planted himself in its courtyard, refusing to budge until fed to his content. Somehow he had learnt to claim that jackals and ravens talked to him. His incoherent speech and enigmatic hints added a pinch of weirdness to his personality. And that was to his profit (SVOS 1-2).

Such was the village Manoj Das obviously loved. It is not surprising that the disappearance of this will cause him pain. But, in his creative writing, he does not sit in judgement over the issue as he does in his editorial. He portrays the change that has come over the village not as a protest against it, but because the story demands such a portrayal. The picture is portrayed with sympathy when the change is inevitable – when the villagers themselves are not the agents of the change but are just carried away by it. Humour enlivens such a picture of change, as we witness it in "The Dusky Horizon":

The world had taken great leaps forward since the time of Jagabandhu's revolutionary romance half a century ago, and their impact on our village was obvious. For example, some well-to-do villagers and their families had made exploratory trips to the town and had returned with beautifully boarded family photographs which they hung in company of the colourful portraits of gods and goddesses and of King George the Sixth. One bespectacled gentleman subscribed to a weekly and carried a bundle of the periodical wherever he went.

To top it all, a post office and a government dispensary had been opened in a village notorious for its modernity, only three miles away from ours. Several gentlemen of the surrounding villages who had no cause whatever to expect a letter, made it a practice to pay occasional visits to the post office and to exchange courtesies with the postmaster, thus keeping pace with the times.

At the dispensary, not only did those running high temperatures press the thermometer under their armpit and thereby transfer their surplus heat into it, but also others with pains from a cut or a boil pleaded with the doctor's assistant to be treated with the magic glass-stick. They found great relief when obliged (DHOS 6).

But his observation becomes pointed implying irritation and protest when he feels that the villagers themselves have a direct or indirect role in sacrificing their rural world to the titillation of the bazaar-culture. In the short story "The Crocodile's Lady", Dr. Batstone, the sociologist from the West, visits the narrator's village crossing "miles and miles of marshland and sandy tracks. After fifty miles the jeep had to be abandoned in favour of a bullock cart and when the cart got stuck in mud we had to plod on to reach our village" (SVOS 17).

But this situation has changed and through this apparent statement of fact, the author's attitude to the change can be felt. "This was before the Indian villages were reduced to distorted miniatures of bazaars with huge red triangles to glorify family planning, politicians preaching patriotism and bill-boards informing the villagers of the virtues of small savings and



cigarettes, and loud speakers blarring from the community centres\* (SVOS 17).

As we have seen earlier, Manoj Das records an era of transition in India in three fronts: its passage from a colony into a free country; the passing of feudalism (the zamindari system in particular) and the metamorphosis of some villages into hick towns. All these three transitions are vividly portrayed in his novel *Cyclones*, hardly a better summary of which can be made than the one done by Prof. Shiv K. Kumar in the course of a review of the novel:

Ingeniously patterned around the earthshaking cyclone that ravages the village of Kusumpur, it also symbolises the traumatic psychic agonies of Sudhir Chowdhury, the adopted son of a decadent feudal landlord. As the village is drawn into the momentous events preceding Indian Independence – communal riots, political chicanery, greed and lust – Sudhir Chowdhury awakens to a new consciousness of his own destiny. As he moves from Reena, the emancipated woman of an affluent family, to Lily – and finally to Geeta, the daughter of a rival feudal family, he asks himself: is there any stable frame of reference amidst this ceaseless flux? What is more real – communion with human beings, most of whom are creatures of dissimulation and pretence, or with cosmic nature that counsels peace in its inscrutable language? "Even the forest beside the meadow, a castle built of darkness, seemed willing to embrace his tiny body in a show of affection..." In fact, *Cyclones* appears to be a novel steeped in a poetic vision, leaning heavily on metaphors and similes. "... a lush green parrot with eyes like two drops of dew drying up", or "the birds as the emissaries of clouds".

The novel might have been titled "The Death of the River" because as technology invades the khaya, making it a base for industry, iron creeps into the souls of the villagers who now clamour for higher wages, forsaking peace for violence, love for hatred.

*Cyclones* is indeed a testimony to the novelist's sensitive imagination, moral perception and literary skill (*The Hindustan Times* 14 Feb. 1989).

Transitions of one kind or another are a regular phenomenon in the life of different nations. But the transition in the recent history of India was definitely of far-reaching consequences. The British colonial period might have lasted only about two centuries, but the feudal system had existed for much longer period. The bewilderment among the villagers caused by the system's collapse has been well-captured by Manoj Das in his stories like "The Owl" in which while the death of the young zamindar symbolises the death of the system, the minds of the villagers who, even though unaware of the coming radical change, are already caught up in the spirit of change. They are capable of questioning the Zamindar's action. And the action in question is quite unusual. He is believed to have shot down the owl which is an inextricable part of the old village temple. The combined power of the expectation of the villagers that none can survive such a grotesque sacrilege and the young zamindar's fear which is emanating from his belief in superstitions, brings about his death. Only then is it found that the owl had not died, after all! Does the owl symbolize the age-old faith of the villagers which continues despite the changes to which the mortals are subjected? The answer seems to be in the affirmation.

It is interesting to observe how the characters of Manoj Das are reacting to the challenges of transition. In "A Time for a Style" a decadent feudal lord who enjoyed some special privilege in a saloon managed by his former personal barber's son, is one day humiliated by the young man when the old barber is away. Long ago, in his youth, the landlord has once tried to look fashionable with long hair. His father had not let him do that. Now when the old barber who has perhaps guessed what might have happened to the Zamindar during his absence goes to his master and offers his services, the zamindar informs him that he had decided to go stylish once again, after decades, and grow long hair.

The barber understood. He too had retired from his son's 'New London Saloon', unable to cope with the modern ways. Both sat in silence. 'They surveyed each other from time to time. And in their looks they strangely resembled each other, as though they had been twins' (SSMD 23).

It will not be out of place here to quote a couple of paragraphs from Manoj Das's article "Orissa" which he did for the Annual '76 issue of *The Illustrated Weekly of India* that was published under a general title *The India You Do Not Know*:



The face of Orissa is changing, as a whole slowly, but abruptly at places. Sometimes the sudden metamorphosis of a place which once had an age-old rhythm of lifestyle peculiar to itself gives a jolt to the mind when revisited. That is what Paradip did to me. It was a village, almost an island, with the sea and a dense forest on one side, the estuary of the Mahanadi on another and one of its offshoots embracing it on the other two sides.

When I had first visited in 1954, events supernatural were looked upon as most natural and the villagers heard mysterious incantations and the sound of conchshells from the interior of the ancient forest. Less than a decade later the entire forest had disappeared, multi-storeyed buildings blinded the horizon, trees looked stupefied, smeared with thick dust continuously sprayed by roaring trucks. The pretty little branch of the Mahanadi that girdled the village had been choked to death (54).

Manoj Das's faith in man's inner self and its ultimate sublime destiny finds its convincing expression in his novel *Cyclones* where, at the end the hero transcends all his anguish caused by his good old village changing into a bazaar and many of the innocent villagers trying to be clever. In his short story "The Naked", the last loyal official of a princely household, Bhanu Singh, finds himself in a strange predicament. He is instructed by the Rajmata living in the city to receive a group of nudists in an abandoned palace of his former masters in a lonely place – and in his naivety he believes that he has to go naked in order to discharge his commission faithfully. He faces a crisis; he goes through a period of terrible helplessness until he discovers the nearest deity robbed of His clothes! "Naked was the infinite sky above his head and naked the sea beside him. The Lord too was naked. How does he care any more? Let the naked lot arrive. He will receive them without the slightest shilly-shally, throwing his clothes to the wind" (DHOS 139). That the programme is cancelled is a different matter.

The end of the feudal era has cast its shadow on a variety of people dependent on the system. Among them is Kumar T. Roy, whose transcendence we have already discussed. The different shades of transition projected by Manoj Das in his stories, however, are not an end by themselves. Using the problems and

predicaments created by them, the author explores some hidden or higher plane of human consciousness.

One of the biggest events in recent Indian history is the abolition of princely states. The Rajas and the Maharajas had played their unique roles in the past, but with the change of time they had become anachronistic. The British government was responsible for their protection. Even much of the administration of their states was carried on by agents and officials appointed by the British. Wealth and authority, minus responsibility, had made many of the princes playboyish, lazy, whimsical and non-productive. When their principalities were gone, they could not easily reconcile themselves with the changing situation. Many of them behaved in a bizarre way during that historic phase of India's transition from feudalism to popular democracy. The characters of princes caught the attention of some of our leading Indo-Anglian fictionists like Mulk Raj Anand and Mahohar Malgonkar. A reading of Diwan Jarmani Dass's two famous works *Maharaja* and *Maharani* is bound to set off shock waves through the spine of the reader for the books are nothing but naked exposures of the pageantry, debauchery and intrigue in the princely houses of Rajas, Maharajas, Nawabs, Nizams and Jams by a former Diwan who served the princely houses of Kapurthala and Patiala as Minister, winning laurels in India and abroad for his meritorious work.

Condition of the princes caught up in the vortex of change did not escape Manoj Das's imagination either. His home state, Orissa, had twenty and odd *Rajyas* apart from many smaller ones which were officially recognised only as zamindars. The plight and idiosyncracies of these small *Rajyas* inspired in him pity and curiosity more than anything else. This attitude comes out in his childhood recollections that appeared in June 1974 issue of *Imprint*:

And there were hundreds of little *rajyas* even till the other day. In private talk the Lilliputian potentates loved to translate the word *rajyas* into 'kingdom', but the British would not permit them to use that publicly or officially. It was 'State' or 'estate' and they were rulers or chiefs, not kings.

The fabulous accounts of the more famous are well-known. Their magnificent courts and concubines, fantastic



extravagances and preposterous whims, legendary generosity and savage sports, have been the fond themes of many writers Indian and Western. But overshadowed by this dazzling row of Indian princes, a few of them ruled over domains larger than some Western countries, was a world of little rajas seldom known or discussed beyond their own small spheres. It was they who constituted the typical Indian feudality, not the big ones on whose mode of life Western sophistication had been so prominently embossed. Many of his tribe lived in the remote interiors of the mountainous lands abounding in forests, commanding limitless authority over their tribal subjects. Their sway was so far-reaching that I knew a man, who, more than a century after his forefathers had forfeited their *rajya*, visited their tribal hamlets from time to time and collected 'taxes' in kind and lived rather comfortably, till the English collector of the district, on one of his rare visits into the forests, ran into him by chance. The 'raja' was then leading a small procession of his 'subjects', who carried to his 'palace' a variety of taxes: fowls, goats, fruit and fuel. Thenceforth the poor 'raja' was prohibited from entering the forest.

The first time I saw a real ruling raja of this category was a few years before Independence. His palace was a double-storeyed house at the foot of a hill. His moustache appeared to have been dyed in gold. While he strolled in front of his palace, a servant with a profound show of humility held a huge embroidered and bejewelled umbrella. It was his regal privilege to enjoy whenever he walked out of the palace. He looked faithful to the pictures of the rajas we saw in story books. I saw the same raja a few years later, after the feudatory system had been abolished. He had come to the town for some medical treatment and was resting for a while on our veranda. There was no umbrella and he looked his own ghost. I learnt that the loss of *rajya* and excessive drinking were killing him. He died a few weeks later.

In my childhood I used to see another little raja. He also enjoyed an umbrella but, what is more, in broad daylight his attendant carried about a torch of impressive size...

During the early phase of my elder brother's lecturership in a college, a paunchy, middle-aged raja used to visit us. He was almost illiterate. But he would speak only English with people who understood the language; with those who did not, he would first speak in English and would then hurry to translate the speech in his mother tongue.

One day he confided to my brother the sweet, secret desire of his heart. He wanted to pick up an 'extra rani' from one of those college educated girls. Could my brother help him?

Unfortunately my brother could not. Twenty years later this raja had become a relative of mine. One evening he came to invite us to his house. He was describing the magnificent situation of his 'fort': "When clouds gather on the hills, I enjoy the sight to my heart's content through my window.

"Only the other day, as soon as the clouds gathered, a pair of peacocks began to dance on the hill. I enjoyed that very much!"

"Raja Saheb, you are a real lover of beauty." One of us complimented him. Raja Saheb enthusiastically continued, "I immediately picked up my gun and fired. Both the peacocks at once came rolling down, down to the brink of the window!"

The last I met him was in a hotel. In a tattered shirt he walked up to me and requested me to include his name in the complimentary mailing list of a magazine which I then edited. "So, you read magazines, Raja Saheb!" I showed surprise and happiness. He blushed and said, "It is not for me, you see. It is for the kids of my village. They have formed a club and they have made me their life-long president."

Raja Saheb died soon thereafter. Legends galore had grown around these dynasties. They were mostly tales of bravery. Some were true, some were imaginary. In the



popular mind the little Indian raja was often a symbol of adventure and nobleness (89-91).

With this attitude in the background he creates his novel *A Tiger At Twilight*. The story contrasts well with Mulk Raj Anand's *Private Life of an Indian Prince*. In Anand's novel Maharaj Ashore Kumar of Shampur tries to proclaim himself the ruler of an independent kingdom with the departure of the British. The raja in Manoj Das's novel is shy and gentle, representing a totally different variety of the princely class. He quietly slips away from his erstwhile territory. Years later he returns to his state, not to what was once its capital, but to a lonely resort. Even then his presence becomes a force to reckon with. His support to an opportunistic candidate in the election results in the defeat of the truly patriotic candidate who had built his political base through many years of hard labour. The common man's devotion to his former ruler is deep.

The menace caused by a man-eater, its unexpected encounter with the Raja's step-sister and the death of both, a strange passion the conservative teacher develops for the lady (discussed earlier) – all show glimpses of a world that was in the process of fading out, but the fiction forcefully leaves the record of the pains and surprises the vital transition causes in the characters involved.

#### B. A Synthesis of National and Universal Ethos

We have seen that the three transitions Manoj Das saw or experienced at an impressionable age have left a far-reaching effect on his fiction. In the portrayal of such scenes, he has been faithful to the peculiarities of the national situation. The action of the characters in his stories in a given situation or their reaction to the situation are typically Indian, but at the same time sensitive readers anywhere in the world cannot miss the appeal inherent in the story. Let us take the example of "The Concubine". The backdrop of the story is not only a small Indian town but one that had been a 'capital' of a small principality. The town has only one hand press and now some ambitious young men are anxious to use this machine of great potentiality to announce the glory of the little town to the wide world by publishing a newsmagazine. Let us see how the flavour of the situation tastes from a sample passage:

As the post-Independence Nijanpur had marked an encouraging growth in the number of goats along with the population of the goat-eaters the affluent and patriotic butcher had shifted his business to a spacious house and had allowed the ambitious youths of the town to use the old one for their proposed cultural revolution (DHOS 99).

The magazine they propose to bring out must be progressive in its ideology and it must wage a war against the vestiges of feudalism. General elections are approaching. The prince, the son of the last ruling Raja now no more, is a candidate. One afternoon a concubine of his father is addressing a meeting of the womenfolk, seeking their votes for the prince. The progressives suddenly appear on the scene and expose the lady as the Raja's concubine. They are sure that she would feel humiliated. That would be a saucy news-item for the inaugural issue of the paper. But the situation takes a different turn. The lady, when 'exposed' feels delighted that the boys of a different generation have been able to recognize her! Tears in her eyes, she fondles them and distributes sweets to them. She who has no guilty-conscience in her, does not see anything awkward in the manner in which the youths address her. She had promised to the Rani, in the latter's deathbed, to take care of the prince. She is doing her duty. It is the 'mother' in her that dominates her thoughts, not the 'concubine' that she once had been. By the time the reader comes to the end of the story, what pleasantly surprises him and amuses him is the innocence of the concubine, a quality that has obliged the youngmen who went to confront her give up their arrogance. Something good and tender has been stirred in their hearts. They are embarrassed; at the same time they feel relieved. While taking leave of the lady, "duly bowing to her, we felt that the late noon had suddenly become tender and pleasant" (DHOS 104). The effect of the encounter was even deeper. They decided to launch a cultural magazine instead of a news fortnightly. "And that very evening they unanimously accepted the name I proposed for the magazine, 'The Monthly Jasmine'" (DHOS 105).

The triumph of the humane over hostilities based on ideals and petty principles in this story brings to our mind Pearl S. Buck's famous short story "The Enemy". At a time when Japan and America are at war with each other, a wounded American, a prisoner of War, who has escaped, happens to take shelter in the



house of a young Japanese doctor. His patriotism tells him to put an end to the enemy's life. But ultimately he sees to the dangerous guest's safe departure. The concluding part of the story reads thus:

He (the doctor) stood for a moment on the veranda gazing out to the sea from whence the young man had come that other night. And into his mind, although without reason, there came other white faces he had known... He remembered his old teacher of anatomy, who had been so insistent on mercy with the knife, and then he remembered the face of his fat and slatternly landlady (*Far and Near: Stories of China, Japan and America* 21).

In other words, the American was no longer just an American in the doctor's mind. He was also a benefactor, a teacher.

In 1983, the Long Island University brought out a volume containing some significant modern stories written by the authors of Brooklyn, side by side with a bunch of contemporary stories from other parts of the world. Significantly the story they chose from Asia was Manoj Das's quite often anthologised short story 'Lakshmi's Adventure', a story set in a typical Indian situation. One day,

When the summer noon descended on the suburban hamlet like a medieval school teacher and put the trees and houses and the tea-stall under a spell of fright and when even the indefatigable pedlar of ever-hot groundnuts kept quiet, Lakshmi stole out of her house and peeped into the temple from the shadow of the *Krishnachuira* tree (*DHOS* 73).

All the happenings in the story can be possible only in the backdrops chosen for the story, but if the story was chosen for an anthology of a specialized nature, by some Western scholars, it was because the soul of the story outshines its physical contours.

If man's capability to understand his fellow man is real, no less real is his inability to understand his fellow man. Both the truths are ingredients in Manoj Das's stories. In 'The Brothers', the two brothers have not seen each other for years and both have belonged almost to two different 'cultures'. By the time they meet, the elder brother is practically insane - or that is how the

people around him see him. But through a moving sequence of events the two brothers suddenly became sole supporters of each other. Or let us take a story like "Sunset over the Valley". A kind of hoodlum whom an accident made disabled and who sits on the bank of a lake and begs from picnickers, suddenly springs to life one day and rescues a young lady from being crushed by a rushing truck at the middle of the road. In fact, he lives a life parallel to his helpless paralytic existence, a life where he is a hero who loves a young damsel and dreams of saving her from the clutches of a demon. He does not know when he had identified a young lady visiting the lake with the lady of his dream. If James Thurber's "Secret Lives of Walter Mitty" is a memorable short story amusing us with the way of wistful dreams, "Sunset Over the Valley" shows us something more of the elements of unforeseen or secret strength lying dormant in our consciousness.

The characters in these stories cannot but strike the chord in the heart of any reader irrespective of the reader's nationality, because they highlight basic human qualities or lack of them. "Quest of Sunderdas" is another short story which a busy city-dweller anywhere in the world will appreciate. It has a simple plot. Sunderdas seeks happiness through wealth. He leaves his obscure village and flits between a couple of Western cities for years until he is tired and seeks some moments of true happiness. He approaches a travel agency that offers him an exclusive chance to enjoy their latest innovation in inspiring true happiness. He is despatched to a house in a village. The lady escorting him on his behalf says.

'It is time I give you a brief outline of this scheme. It should be a thrill for you to know that you are in a genuine Indian village. No Sir, not a make-believe one! This earthen house was once owned by a real villager. We have not altered it in any way. Our agency has acquired only half a dozen such houses in different nooks of this vast country. The government is reluctant to let us have more at the moment. Of course we have acquired a few similar houses in South America, Africa and Formosa too. Now, Sir, you must forget your air-conditioned mansion, your telephone, TV, radio, newspapers, as well as your attendants. Nobody on your staff knows your address. Hence no call from any area



of your business empire is likely to disturb your peace.. Even though we will be at your beck and call, we will remain invisible – confined to that small bungalow yonder built for us.'

The lady smiled and resumed, 'I hope it will rain and you'll have the thrill of living under a real leaking thatch, enjoy the true touch of a peasant's residence. There is a pond behind the house. You can bathe and catch fish. There is a small orchard with riped fruits guarded with care for you to pluck them personally. Is it not wonderful, Sir? Our boss is remarkable for his high adventures in ultra modern ideas. Here are oil lanterns and earthen lamps. A village maid will come to cook for you. Of course we have your favourite menu with us and we will be ready to supply the food you are accustomed to should you prefer that. What will you have now, Sir? Tea or coffee?' She paused (DHOS 71).

Imagine Sunderdas's amazement when he realizes that it is his own home – which he had discarded years ago. The plot development and the technique through which credibility is imparted to this strange coincidence are worthy of a separate study. But even when we take the coincidence to be strange, the message the story imparts does not lose its validity. One feels that the author has deliberately built up the coincidence, fully aware that it is strange to shock the readers – to make them realise the age-old truth in our own time that true happiness is not to be expected outside oneself.

Some of Manoj Das's stories marked by their universal ethos are tragic. Among them are "The Kite", the story of a boy who gets lost in the process of chasing a kite, "The Bridge in the Moonlit Night", the story of an octogenarian who dies at the moment when he learns that a love affair of his in his young days had not gone unrequited after all, and his long short story "The Dusky Horizon", the story of the revolution a little girl brought about in the lives of three boys. But the tragic elements in them bring a sense of fulfilment. They are "an affirmation of faith in life" as Joseph Wood Krutch observes in his essay "The Tragic Fallacy" in regard to some of the great tragedies, in the following passage:

...every real tragedy, however tremendous it may be is an affirmation of faith in life, a declaration that even if God is not in his Heaven then at least Man is in his world.

We accept gladly the outward defeats which it describes for the sake of the inward victories which it reveals. Juliet died, but not before she had shown how great and resplendent a thing love could be; Othello plunged the dagger into his own breast, but not before he had revealed that greatness of soul which makes his death seem unimportant. Had he died in the instant when he struck the blow, had he perished still believing that the world was as completely black as he saw it before the innocence of Desdmona was revealed to him, then, for him at least, the world would have been merely damnable, but Shakespeare, kept him alive long enough to allow him to learn his error, and hence to die, not in despair, but in the full acceptance of the tragic reconciliation to life. Perhaps it would be pleasanter if men could believe what the child is taught - that the good are happy and that things turn out as they should - but it is far more important to be able to believe, as Shakespeare did, that however much things in the outward world may go awry, man has, nevertheless, splendors of his own and that, in a word, Love and Honor and Glory are not words but realities (Wilbur Scott, *Five Approaches of Criticism* 135).

There is ample proof in the short stories of Manoj Das to affirm the writer's profound awareness of the truly tragic in life.



## Craftsmanship

### A. Fusion of Vision and Technique

In the field of short story if we remember Anton Tchekov, Guy de Maupassant and Katherine Mansfield is it not because their stories, long after they have been forgotten, linger as an experience? Such a distillation of a story into an experience becomes possible when there has been a total fusion of the author's technique with his vision.

This fusion is one of the primary achievements of Manoj Das. Perhaps this is the reason why many doyens of letters have praised the craft of Manoj Das by writing either directly to him or to his publisher.

Graham Greene, after reading *"The Submerged Valley"* and *Other Stories* that perhaps represents the best stories of Manoj Das till 1986, wrote to its publisher Mr. Batstone of United Kingdom: "I have now read the stories of Manoj Das with very great pleasure. He will certainly take a place on my shelves beside the stories of Narayan. I imagine Orissa is far from Malgudi, but there is the same quality in his stories with perhaps an added mystery" (Letter dated December 22, 1986).

As can be seen from the stories in his nine collections, the writer covers a wide range. There are stories where the natural and the supernatural mix, realistic stories where animals are made to play a vital role, satires on the contemporary life in a frame of realism or a fairytale frame. In fact he refuses to confine himself to a single theme or tone in any of his stories. He reserves the right to digress, make his own comments on the theme or character before he chooses to go on with his narrative. This method lends a freedom to the author to move on from pathos to burlesque, from irony to simple moralizing.

In "A Trip into the Jungle", one of the earlier stories of Manoj Das, we encounter a group of so-called ultra-modern sophisticated men and women who go for hunting and intend to combine it with the fun of a picnic. They reach their destination – a deserted bungalow inside the jungle. After a round of light refreshment and drink, they prepare to go out for hunting.

Shyamal, the chauffeur, refuses to accompany them. Mrs. Mity too stays back while the rest go hunting. Left alone with Shyamal, Mrs. Mity takes all efforts to offer herself to him. Very soon, she felt humiliated and doubly challenged. When Mr. Mity and others return to the bungalow, Mrs. Mity brings a false charge of attempted molestation against Shyamal. The driver is beaten black and blue till he swoons away. They then light a fire and get drunk. They drag out the boar they had killed and throw it into the fire and eat half-roasted slices from it. They sing and dance in their drunken ecstasy.

Early in the morning, the hunting crew leaves the bungalow without the driver Shyamal. They dare not go into the room where the unconscious driver was thrown in after a good beating, for fear of seeing the boar instead of Shyamal. Not that it could even happen like that, but the guilt in them now manifests as a sudden fear and almost paralyses them.

The story is a satire upon the so-called sophisticated society where even votaries of permissive sex like Mrs. Mity at their middle age remain desperate hunters of new thrill. Viewed from another angle, the story intended to shock the reader at its final dramatic twist, may appear to some as a kind of horror story. The reader is left with a bitter taste in his mouth, which he might find difficult to get over..

"A Trip into the Jungle" is an example of an unexpected ending which O. Henry had used with facility to surprise the readers if not to shock them. However improbable the climax of this story may appear, Manoj Das developed the story organically, the situations growing out of characters and giving rise to events.

"The Princess and the Storyteller", a much anthologised short story is, technically speaking, a tale of olden days. The theme of the story can be conveniently divided into two parts: 1. What the storyteller did to the king, to the princess and to her maids of honour, and 2. How the storyteller narrates the incidents organically and the reaction of the listeners. No sensible reader of his stories will doubt the fact that Manoj Das is particularly in love with plots that have a tinge of fantasy in them. It is because his mastery lies in telling a story, and in doing so he makes it believable for his readers.

When a company of three men (the would-be listeners) after a surfeit of wine search for a way to cheer their spirits, the story-



teller, "a One - eyed Oaf" appears. He is commissioned to tell them a tale - "A tale which will stir the romance in our souls and yet at the same time, afford some amusement" (MWLM 19). This purposeful introduction by the author creates a subtle suspense before the story actually commences. The reader remains amused and expectant.

When the storyteller begins to regale the drinking listeners with an "extraordinary narrative", the reader is suddenly taken to an unknown king of an unknown kingdom who had trouble in getting his only daughter married. No suitor can properly act according to the wishes of the most beautiful princess. Oh, what awful wishes! One suitor is demanded to gorge himself on cockroaches for a full fortnight. The other suitor is asked to laugh for an entire night "in the presence of a panel of judges, comprising the kingdom's most owl-faced women and goat-eyed men" (MWLM 19). The very wishes, the attempt of the suitors to fulfil them and their failure are dealt with in a humorous way, that takes away the pungent absurdity of the situation. Manoj Das is an adept in making the absurd believable at a certain plane.

Then we move on to the real drama that happens to the story-teller or the story-teller builds. The first question is put to him by the princess with a pinch of sarcasm but the storyteller is able to answer it through his sheer wit. The answer is grossly illogical but it takes the reader a full minute to realise it. But on a second thought the reader takes it as fairly tolerable. In any case, the milieu of the story demands a willing suspension of disbelief.

Furious at the first defeat, the princess goes on with her second question. The second order is fantastic, and the reader waits with his fingers crossed for he or she is not quite sure of how this one-eyed story-teller is going to carry a mountain on his head for a mile. The hero of the story manages to win the second round too.

The third order of narrating a dozen unheard of tales is equally challenging and yet the story-teller emerges victorious to the great chagrin of the princess and her maids of honour in spite of their conspiracy to hoodwink him. The one-eyed story-teller has won and the princess has become his "ordinary, humble wife, spinning, cooking and washing." The listeners are shocked with the information on the marriage of the story-teller with the princess, perhaps because they themselves have lost the chance. At the end there is not a whisper about the creditability of the

story-teller until his "puckered lid fluttered open to reveal a gleaming eye" to the great surprise of the listeners in the story and to the readers as well. The readers were hardly prepared for such a surprise and like the listeners they also say "What a dangerous man the story-teller is!"

That the author should have dedicated this story to "those unknown yarn-spinners of yore threads from whom have been spun into this stuff" is significant. The story contains elements of ancient folktales - and through the dedication, the author emphasises the unbroken continuity in the art of story-telling that runs through the ages. The listeners confusing the story-teller to be the real hero of this story is another point to be noted. Perhaps Manoj Das wishes to stress the power of the art of story-telling - when the listeners tend to forget the borderline dividing the fiction and the fact.

Often he begins the stories with "Once upon a time, not long ago, a certain king..." a technique made immensely popular by fable-makers and grandmothers. But this as we soon come to realise is merely a literary subterfuge. Manoj Das being creator of many modern fables and fantasies appears to have perfected a creative technique peculiarly responsive to the various levels of readership. His short stories are a delight for the lazy reader seeking merely to while away the time in the over-crowded railway carriage. For the more discriminating readership the same stories contain a penetrating satire which exposes the vulgar values we have somehow come to cherish over the ages. The world of fantasy, however, only helps the author capture the modern man's dilemma more vividly and more sympathetically. Each new situation reveals a new artistic insight.

How true are the words of Geeta Doctor who while reviewing Manoj Das's sixth collection of short stories, *"The Vengeance" and Other Stories* wrote:

Manoj Das is a story-teller in the old tradition. There is about him the comfort of a grandmother's lap, the spell of Scheherazade's cliff hangers, the touch of a wandering minstrel who with a few notes of an ancient instrument takes you back into time, or even just the shared joy of sitting around a campfire listening to yarns that flame and flicker with the wind until the next morning, when all that is left behind is a pile of ashes.... His style has the light deft



touch of an experienced fisherman who can throw his line into any water and be sure of coming up with a catch (*Indian Express*, July 12, 1981).

Anatoli Kim, one of the widely read prose writers in the USSR today, remarked: "All literature grew out of oral tales. The main thing is that a short story should be clear, despite its oddness or the peculiarities of its form, or its social and religious context. In the transparent clarity of a good short story is concealed a great school of morality which reveals the depths of the human soul. A short story need not be fashionable or beautiful, frightening or complicated...it must be fascinating in its simplicity and wisdom..." (*Sputnik*, October 1987, 126).

Manoj Das's stories seem to be the best example of Anatoli Kim's idea of a short story. His stories abound in reflections on the meaning of life, the nature of goodness and the stability of the moral laws that people are obliged to follow.

Each short story of Manoj Das has a distinct plane of execution. It is not easy, while being true to the laws of each plane – the atmosphere, characterisation and narration demanded by it – to achieve a creditability that would be entirely convincing.

To illustrate this observation, one of the stories of Manoj Das that comes to mind immediately is "The Crocodile's Lady". The mingling of the natural and the supernatural has been admirably handled in it. A village girl is supposed to have been dragged away by a crocodile. She returns some years later. A crocodile is seen climbing the embankment and is killed. A strange story evolves; the lost girl has been metamorphosed into a crocodile and had married her abductor – a very conscientious crocodile who, coming to look for her got killed.

The story must have been a joint invention of the villagers and the girl. But as years pass, the girl begins to believe the story to be entirely true and so do the villagers. It might appear unusual that the writer who never allows for missing links in his stories does not tell us what really have happened to the girl during her absence in the village. But the omission, here, is undoubtedly deliberate. The thrust of the story is in the woman – now extremely old – living an enchanted life under the impact of her own invention and such is the power of the sincerity underlying her belief that at least for a moment she can make

professor Batstone, the Sociologist from the city of skyscrapers, suspend his disbelief! Much of the success of this story goes to the preparations made for the professor's momentary loss of his rational self. Every shred of what appears to be a simple description of the village and the villagers is a factor contributing to a weird atmosphere of innocent faith which ultimately proves powerful enough to swallow the professor. "The Crocodile's Lady", observes Ragini Ramachandra, "reveals the finest elements in the art of story-telling. There is a beautiful blending of myth and reality in this story calling for "willing suspension of disbelief" (*The Literary Criterion*, Vol. xxii, No.2, 66).

Manoj Das can, at times, be unexpectedly severe if the vision demands it. "The Last I Heard of Them" is the story of seven old men, prosperous in life, now out for "a short cut to God" at their old age. A mystic vagabond leads them to Hidamba Baba. They forget their original quest and are lured by miracles. Despite Hidamba's disgust they prevail upon him to give them the magic water that would, when put in the eyes, show them those they look at in the nude. They enter a posh hotel where a ball is about to begin and they treat their eyes to the magic water. "It is true". They see those dancing couples in the nude. But soon something unexpected happens. A chaos. One of the seven old seekers dies in his chair. Two swoon away. The rest howl and run about till they are captured.

Well, greedy for a longer duration of their queer sight, they had treated their eyes with the water a second time. "When they opened their eyes they saw people not only without their clothes, but also without their flesh. So, a hundred skeletons were dancing around them. They hurried out to the street. But there too skeletons selling newspapers, and then skeletons coming to capture them..." (CL 186).

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". What strikes us most in many of Manoj Das's stories is the unexpected turn an event or a chain of events takes. Often the sudden, unexpected turn of an event flashes through our mind like lightning leaving behind a wealth of reflection.



The best specimens of the other category of stories where the supernatural is employed are "The Man Who Lifted the Mountain" and "The Last I Heard of Them". Both can be termed as new parables and the satires involved in them are equally true for all times. In both, the theme is greed and its consequence; in one greed for power and in the other greed for getting most out of a boon. In the former humility soon gives way to arrogance; in the latter some seeking or curiosity for possible higher values of life soon give way to the old lust in the old lot!

Hence Manoj Das's use of the supernatural not only serves as an indispensable part of the theme of the story but also as a means for driving home some message. "Although wonder and awe or terror, the primary responses to mystery are the customary effects of the supernatural there is also the pleasant escape of fantasy, as in *Midsummer Night's Dream*" (*Dictionary of World Literary Terms*). We see that Manoj Das created all these effects from "wonder" to "pleasant escape" in his stories that deal with supernature. The effect of the supernatural elements lingers in the mind of the reader. He enjoys the supernatural fantasy all right, but that is more an escape into the fairytale world. He knows that the writer is demanding of him only a temporary willing suspension of disbelief – till he has hit upon the purpose of the story.

One sometimes feels that ghosts have a special fascination for Manoj Das. Many of his stories centre around a ghost or ghosts. But Manoj Das has a special technique of his own in handling them. To bring in a touch of the supernatural without a touch of awe is the special quality of the ghost stories of Manoj Das.

#### B. The Absence of Ghosts in the Ghost Stories

Few psychologists will dispute the fact that the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, especially the fear of the unknown. We may boast that we are the children of a materialistic age. Yet we cannot hide the fact that we also happen to be the grandchildren of an earlier age when superstitions held sway, when ghosts frequently haunted houses, when sorcerers had control over the creatures of the underworld, and when margosa leaves and mantras were used as ghostbusters. No amount of rationalisation, reform or Freudian analysis can quite annul the thrill of the strange noises in a moonlit night, or the

sight of a lonely palmyra tree with a tuft of hair hammered to its trunk or a dilapidated house exposed by lightning.

Despite the amazing advances science has made today the elements still carry for most of us the diabolical creatures that people Dante's *Inferno*. And however much our reason denies their existence, we just love to read about them. With this foundation, no one need wonder at the existence of a literature of cosmic fear. This genre demands from the reader certain detachment from everyday life.

The shortest short story, according to Jepson, ever known to the world of fiction is a ghost story. It consists of only two sentences: "I don't believe in ghosts," said the gentleman to his fellow-traveller in the railway carriage. "Oh, don't you?" said the other and vanished." It creates a sense of awe in the reader for the ghost is present there in the story though the other character is not quite aware of the same. Only after its disappearance he would have shivered for having met the ghost face to face. The ghost is both absent and present. In its presence we feel the absence and in its absence we feel the presence for the shock is bound to linger in the reader even after the ghost had left for its haunting place.

Hence ghost stories can be classified for the sake of convenience under three groups:

1. Stories in which ghosts are both absent and present as we have seen in the shortest short story.

2. Stories in which ghosts are present i.e., where they are explicit. The best example is Henry James' "The Turn of the Screw", a superbly wrought, absorbing tale in which ghosts of Peter Quint (the master's valet) and Miss Jessel (former governess of Miles and Flora) show their weird faces now and again to the governess of the charming precocious children Miles and Flora, and whose diary recounts the strange experience of the children, and adults of the country estate with the ghosts. Such stories are written, as Henry James himself puts it, "to catch those not easily caught".

3. Stories in which ghosts are absent i.e., neither the characters nor the readers meet the ghost. In stories that fall under this group the role of the spirit is constructed in such a fashion that one may believe in them or explain them away rationally. W. W. Jacob's well known short story "The Monkey's Paw" (later dramatised by Louis N. Parker) is a good example. It



tells the story of Mr and Mrs White who receive from Sergeant-Major Morris a little monkey's paw, mummified. It had a spell put on it by an old fakir so that three separate men could have three wishes from it. The Sergeant-Major instructs him to hold it up in his right hand and wish aloud. But he does not fail to warn him of the consequences. Old Mr White wishes for two hundred pounds. The next day the amount comes in but only at the expense of their only son's life. He was caught in the machinery and torn to shreds. The amount is only a compensation for his life. Ten days later, Mrs White forces her husband to take the monkey's paw and wish their boy alive again which he does reluctantly. From this part of the story to its end we hear knocks and knocks and knocks. The father is unwilling to open the door for he is sure that if at all his son comes back he would come in a gruesome form. The mother wants to open the door for her dead child. But old Mr White holds her. The climax of the story reads thus:

There was another knock, and another. The old woman with a sudden wrench broke free and ran from the room. Her husband followed to the landing, and called after her appealingly as she hurried downstairs. He heard the chain rattle back and the bottom bolt drawn slowly and stiffly from the socket. Then the old woman's voice, strained and panting.

'The bolt' she cried, loudly, 'Come down. I can't reach it.'

But her husband was on his knees groping wildly on the floor in search of the paw. If he could only find it before the thing outside got in. A perfect fusilade of knocks reverberated through the house, and he heard the scraping of a chair as his wife put it down in the passage against the door. He heard the creaking of the bolt as it came slowly back, and at the same moment he found the monkey's paw, and frantically breathed his third and last wish.

The knocking ceased suddenly, although the echoes of it were still in the house. He heard the chain drawn back, and the door opened. A cold wind rushed up the staircase, and a long loud wail of disappointment and misery from his wife gave him courage to run down to her side, and then to the

gate beyond. The street lamp flickering opposite shone on a quiet deserted road (Deborah Shine, ed., *Ghost Stories* 301).

Since fear is the emotion primarily to be excited by a ghost story, "The Monkey's Paw" is certainly a ghost story. But where is the ghost? The 'thing' referred to here may also be taken for the wind. And the money that comes in may pass for a mere coincidence.

In none of the ghost stories of Manoj Das does one meet the ghost. Yet he makes the reader feel that the "absent" is as important as the "present". Perhaps there lies his quest for identity.

Discussing such a technique, James Mitchie in his introduction to *The Bodley Head Book of Longer Short Stories* observes: "These ghost-stories leave behind them more enduring and less definable reverberations – a sense of weather, the feel of a place, the memory of a gesture, the mystery, not to be shaken off, of a personality (even the narrator himself), quite apart from the mere fact of what actually happens. Indeed, what fails to happen may turn out to be the important thing" (8).

One of the earliest ghost stories of Manoj Das is "Farewell to a Ghost". The deserted house once constructed by the Fringhee Indigo planters has been the abode of a century-old girl's spirit. The villagers have looked upon her as an unfortunate daughter of theirs and have never failed to offer her share of food, on festive occasions, of course, with a warning that she was expected to behave. But the authorities now propose to demolish the house. Where will the ghost go? After prolonged discussion the villagers commission an exorcist to do the needful. The women weep, when, one rainy morning, the exorcist leads the ghost to a solitary tree in the meadow. At the end the narrator (it is the first person account by a boy) sees the tree when it was crumbling down, struck by lightning.

No character in the story sees the ghost, nor is the reader made to see it. The story simply shows the way of human affection, the emotional rest man finds in an agency beyond his little physical world.

The story makes a meaningful comparison with Tagore's short story "Hungry Stones". The haunted house is common to both, and like the narrator in "Farewell to a Ghost", the narrator



in "Hungry Stones" also feels a great pull towards the haunted house. But in the latter, the narrator can see much:

Sometimes in the evening, while arraying myself carefully as a prince of the blood-royal before a large mirror, with a candle burning on either side, I would see a sudden reflection of the Persian beauty by the side of my own. A swift turn of her neck, a quick eager glance of intense passion and pain glowing in her large dark eyes, just a suspicion of speech on her dainty red lips, her figure, fair and slim, crowned with youth like a blossoming creeper, quickly uplifted in her graceful tilting gait, a dazzling flash of pain and craving and ecstasy, a smile and a glance and a blaze of jewels and silk, and she melted away (*Hungry Stones and Other Stories* 17).

In "Farewell to a Ghost", everything about the ghost's presence and appearance, are presumed. But behind the presumption remains the logic of the collective faith of the village folk. The two stories have several elements common between them. Yet they belong to two different categories. Tagore has taken the precaution of presenting the experience with the ghost through such a narrator (whom the original narrator meets by chance during a railway journey) whose story can be dismissed by the listener, as, in fact, the first narrator does at the conclusion of the story when he says "The man evidently took us for fools and imposed upon us out of fun. The story is pure fabrication from start to finish" (*Hungry Stones and Other Stories* 25). He is contradicted by another listener, a theosophist. The author thus leaves the story to be either dismissed as "imposed fun" or to be accepted by the individual reader, the original narrator representing the sceptic and the theosophist representing the credulous. But there is nothing to be dismissed in the events the narrator presents in "Farewell to a Ghost", whether one believes in the invisible ghost or not.

If human affection is the dominant factor in "Farewell to a Ghost" what is dominant in "Friends and Strangers" is the atmosphere. It is interesting to note that in an earlier publication the story was entitled "The Mad Breeze and the Weird Moonlight". Perhaps Manoj Das had a conflict in his mind as to which of the two elements in the story should be highlighted – the supremacy of the atmosphere or the message that the screen

between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the friend and the stranger, is extremely thin. The second element must have weighed more to him.

Nevertheless, it is the lurid atmosphere in the author's favourite location, the "small town in the northern valley" wrought by moonlight "that came down on the lush outskirts of the town" giving "the feeling of being quite palpable, as if one could net a kerchief-full of it and pocket it for future use" and the erratic breeze which "smuggled away into the bushes half of the words" from one's talk, which is responsible for the drama in the story. Tirthankar and Shivabrata, relaxing on a high rock, see their third friend, Pramath, walking past along the narrow road far below them. The two friends have just come to their native town for holiday and they are happy to see that Pramath too had arrived. They called out to him. But Pramath says that he saw old Mrs. Wilson as usual seated in front of her house and that reminded him of her request for a shawl and he must hand it over to her. The two friends knew – what Pramath did not know – that Mrs. Wilson was no more. Whom then did Pramath see? They had the creeps. Who would not in that atmosphere?

"Two hyenas fought and howled somewhere behind the bushes on the lake. Domestic dogs of the suburbs moaned at the unfortunate strife."

"And the moon slipped into a cloud.

"A cloud in autumn!" one of the friends murmured and both at once saw something weird in the phenomenon" (SVOS 112).

A little later, going to Pramath's house, they learn to their horror that a telegram had brought the news of Pramath's death in an accident. Whom then did the two friends see? Mrs. Wilson whom Pramath saw was unreal. Soon looking at each other, each had felt the other to be unreal – as unreal as Pramath. "At night when the moon looks wild and the breeze goes mad, the two friends, if they are in town, keep to their rooms and peep out through their windows looking perfectly bewildered" (SVOS 113).

The whole situation can be explained in terms of illusion. The two friends were expecting Pramath. They were also



expecting Pramath's arrival any moment. They knew that old Mrs. Wilson had asked Pramath for a gift of shawl. They must have been anxious to inform Pramath that Mrs. Wilson was no more. With these ideas fixed in their minds, it can be assumed that they saw someone else walking with a bundle and took him to be Pramath. Thereafter, as the writer explains through "at least one wiseman", the passer-by "must have spoken something quite different from what the two friends heard. Once they had made the mistake, the moonlight did the mischief; it showed the stranger as Pramath. The rest of the mischief was done by the wild breeze that made them hear words which they imagined they would hear" (SVOS 113).

In Synge's *Riders to the Sea* there is a report of a drowned man walking – but it is brought by a man who seems vulnerable to such visions. But the very suggestion of an apparition is enough in that play as an aid to the general atmosphere of apprehension and melancholy. In Manoj Das's "Friends and Strangers" suggestions themselves are the body of the story.

Manoj Das is evidently of the opinion that experiences gathered in the childhood go a long way in moulding one's attitude to life or philosophy of life. In his "The Dusky Horizon", we see how an encounter between three village boys and a girl from the town, which began as a confrontation but became a friendship, and the girl's subsequent death, has influenced the lives of all the three boys. One of them, Navin, has become a writer. Perhaps the assertion by the girl that he was destined to be a writer has played no mean role in this. The second boy, Hatu, has become a kind of hermit and is atoning for the role he has unwittingly performed in the girl's death. The third boy, who is the narrator of the story, tells Navin when the two meet in their ripe old age: "Hatu is doing penance in his own way. You paid your tribute to Lily by recreating her as the charming heroine of your fairytale. But what about me?" Then, to his own great surprise, he breaks down. "Only if I could weep like you! It is not so easy at seventy, you know!" says Navin.

Thus we see in the narrator the impact of the childhood incident had remained alive at some deep subconscious level and it comes out through his eagerness to locate the author of the fairytale and at last through his tears.

The faith of the author in the power of the memories which are embedded in the subconscious, mixed with his faith in the

existence of consciousness independent of the body, makes "The Bridge in the Moonlit Night" a memorable story. A brilliant college teacher, the young Ashok loved Meena, a student of his, and had sent several letters to her through her cousin, Sudhir. He received no reply. Decades pass. Ashok and Sudhir are both old and are friends. One day Sudhir confesses to Ashok that Meena had at last responded to Ashok's entreatments and had agreed to meet him on the bridge on the river.

'How do you say so, Sudhir, I never received any letter from her!' Ashok asserted in a trembling voice.

'How could you have received the letter, Ashok Bhai?' Sudhir faltered and tried to clear his choking throat. 'Did it not fly away, while I was crossing the bridge, in a sudden gust of wind?'

'Fly away? Let us go and look for it!' Ashok made an effort to get up.

'After sixty years?' Sudhir laughed nervously. Ashok fell back into his chair.

'Ashok Bhai, I must confess that the letter flew away only after I had read it and torn it to shreds. In fact, I let the shreds fly into the rolling flood of the monsoon. I can still see them flying away like butterflies and disappearing under the bridge.'

Ashok kept quiet (SVOS 43).

Sudhir rambles on, least suspecting that Ashok has quietly passed away, still seated in his armchair. A third friend, Mahindra, happens to arrive on the scene. In the dim light of the morn, he had seen Ashok under the bridge and is surprised that Ashok could return home so fast.

'But Ashok Bhai hasn't been out at all this evening! You must have seen someone else,' said Sudhir.

'Ha! Can I ever mistake someone else for Ashok Babu? And in this bright moonlight? Well, Ashok Babu, you couldn't but have reached here only seconds before me! Isn't that so?'



Mahindra waited for a minute for Ashok to reply and then observed, 'Surely, he has fallen asleep!'

'But he never sleeps so deep at this hour! Ashok'.

'Bhai, do you hear?' Sudhir called.

'Ashok Babu!' Mahindra joined in.

'Ashok Bhai!' Sudhir called louder and gave a shake to his old professor and friend. Next moment he screamed out, 'Who is there? Phone up the doctor, quick! Where is the switch for the light, Mahindra? O God, I forget everything!' (SVOS 45).

The author suggests that the subconscious desire to receive a letter from Meena was so strong in Ashok that Ashok's spirit has at once departed to the riverbed under the bridge in search of it. Mahindra sees the spirit still possessing the contours of Ashok. But the author is never explicit about it. He never asserts that what Mahindra saw was Ashok's ghost. He has earlier established that Ashok was in the habit of enjoying his evening walk on the old familiar bridge. There is nothing surprising in Mahindra expecting to find Ashok there. Moonlight is not the sure guide to identify someone at a distance. The reader can, if he so pleases, interpret the situation as Mahindra's hallucination. But that is what the creative force, the *elan vital* of the story would not allow him to do.

A supernatural suggestion of this kind is to be seen in an earlier story of Manoj Das, entitled "Evenings at Nijanpur".

A spinster almost worships the photograph of her lover who appears to have died, but she believes that he would one day come back. At the end of the day she returns to her lonely lodge and talks to the picture. A young visitor to the neighbourhood spies upon this strange conduct of the lady from his host's rooftop and one day, while she is not at home, manages to reach her apartment. He looked at the picture with great curiosity but soon "had the queer feeling that it was not he who stared at the picture, but rather the picture that stared at him" (SSMD 79). He keeps sitting there more or less hypnotised. Then the lady arrives. An unexpected drama is enacted. For the lady it is the return of

her lover. She is in a state of delirium. She pours out her woes – the ordeal of having waited for him all these years.

And what would the intruder, Vikram, do? "Looking for a moment at the picture in his hand, he felt a shiver, for the picture appeared to have suddenly sprung to life and to have become eager to express something and, since that was not possible, it was as though passing its personality to Vikram so that it could express itself through him"(SSMD 79).

Soon Vikram spoke. Later he must have felt to take her away. The lady fainted perhaps out of ecstasy, wonder and fear. But the dead lover's picture in Vikram's hand was as though directing him to do something unexpected. "He had stood up and was feeling the drive of an hitherto unknown vigour in her arms. He advanced towards the lady"(SSMD 80).

What was he going to do? Was he going to lift her? Could it be something still more fearful he was going to do – say kill her? The crisis, however, is resolved by Vikram's host shouting for him from the next home and Vikram coming to his senses and descending the stairs.

The suggestion is, Vikram had been temporarily possessed by the jealous lover's spirit. But his condition could also be seen from another angle, a purely psychological one. The lady's absolute faith that he was her lover, created a kind of condition in him when he believed that he was that; one's subconscious desire to become the object of such intense love cannot be ruled out.

Both the stories are interactions between the natural world and the twilight world of the supernatural.

### C. Humane Humour

In an interview given to this author Manoj Das confessed:

Believe me, I was hardly aware of the element of humour in my writing until I read what reviewers had to say about it. Whatever be the element – RASA – humour or pathos, I have employed it only when a situation or a character has warranted it... The only art behind it (Natural humour), if we should call it art, is the author's all round involvement in the situation he is depicting. Should I explain what I mean by an all round involvement? Perhaps in times to come I shall hit upon a more appropriate phrase. Often a question is asked



whether the writer should stand detached from his characters or be engrossed in them? The answer is, there is a condition which includes both these conditions. The writer ought to be so much involved in his story that he can feel all his characters, all his situations fully. It is being subjective in the sense that he can be really objective. The creative writer's objectivity is not a scientist's, not a passer-by's, not a witness's objectivity. His is subjective objectivity... (*The Hitavada*, June 15, 1980).

One remembers what Mr. K.P.S. Menon had said on reading Manoj Das's stories. "Bubbling Gaiety" indeed is the phrase that can describe many situations in the stories of Manoj Das, although as Mr. Menon so rightly points out there is always more in them than meets the eye.

One wonders if there is another Indo-Anglian short story where an animal had such an impact on contemporary politics as in "The Mystery of the Missing Cap" (discussed earlier). While the plot is highly interesting – an authentic recreation of the late forties – the concluding lines are significant. Both the minister and the would-be politician were forgotten in politics. Says the narrator, a child, "I strongly feel that it was this episode of the cap that changed the course of their lives" (CL 33). Both the characters are good-natured, but rather naive. They could not cope with the demands of the new politics. The minister was disillusioned about his own sacredness, the would-be-politician received an instant blow for his lie. Perhaps they were good souls, after all. In this connection Ragini Ramachandra observes:

"The Mystery of the Missing Cap" is an admirable exposition of rustic naivete that could deify an ordinary minister who visits their village. The author exploits all the inherent potentialities of a highly ludicrous situation that his characters find themselves in. A sample of his irony, superbly brought out, is his delineation of the 'Honourable Minister of Fisheries and Fine Arts' (the portfolio itself serving as a butt of ridicule!) who spoke on one occasion for "two and a half hours" drinking a glass of milk in between and the credulous villagers who believed that it was the Minister's "life's mission" to serve the people through "fish and fine arts". Mr. Das's humour, like his irony, is gentle but

purposeful and enlivening (*The Literary Criterion*, Vol. xxii, No. 2, 66).

But the real significance of the story rests in its psychological element: the writer's deep insight into the mysterious working of the human psyche characterises it. The writer does not however 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.

"Tragedy", a representative short story of Manoj Das, is a comical but realistic treatment of the way a mass reacts to a particular situation. The average male (or female) is fond of "copying" other persons: he imitates anybody whom he thinks his superior in certain respects, however superficial that superiority may be. In this story the writer speaks of the predicament of a theatrical group who were staging a serious tragedy before the assemblage of the would-be cultured blue-stockings ladies. These lady-spectators had among them a veritable sun around whom all the others revolved like planets. On seeing something ludicrous, this 'sun' starts laughing when the drama was heading towards denouement – when, in fact, sighs and tears were invited as an encouraging response – and soon the entire auditorium was one peal of uncontrollable laughter, thus tolling the bell for the play. Of course, the story is more than a mere presentation of mass-psychology: it is also a reflection on the living relationship between the audience and a theatrical performance.

At times Manoj Das's world glitters with satire which is not plain anger but a generous irony. For example, "Story of a Strange Last Journey". It is set in a far-from-real world; it is akin to that of Aesop's fables and Kipling's tales. Jackal Senior is the commissioner of the forest. There are donkeys and also three distinguished wild buffaloes, the Director of the House of Hyena, the Secretary General of the Grand Circles of the Owls, Madame President of All Luvurva Union of spotted Deer, the Chairman of the Federation of Non-poisonous Snakes, the Honorary Treasurer of Genre of Tigers, the Private Secretary (who is not under the surveillance of plainclothed Foxes) to the late president of the Luvurva (forest). Needless to say that Manoj Das through this



journey into a jungle offers an interesting commentary on the human or rather, social situation prevailing in current times.

In "A Song for Sunday" Manoj Das tells us how Mr. Lenka, a humble stenographer in the district collectorate turns mad while trying to tease a crazy woman whom he happens to meet on his way to the office. By turn of events he finally ends up in a mental home himself. In this story the protagonist's downward march recalls to our mind O'Neill's *Emperor Jones* though the hero here is innocent and harmless. 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 one might be suffering from no flaw.

Manoj Das seems to have a good knowledge of human nature. He explores many facets of human character and the results of his explorations, are succinctly set forth in striking prose. Though he is ready to laugh at human foibles and shortcomings, he always brings considerable sympathy to the task. Sunshine and sorrow flit through his stories, sorrow being balanced with joy, melancholy with laughter. Trenchant satire and vibrant life characterise his stories.

When we attempt to trace the reasons for the commendable popularity of Manoj Das's short stories, we hit upon two reasons. If one reason is that despite their fairytale like form they suddenly surprise us with a message that is of great relevance to our time, the other reason is the element of a chaste, dignified humour that marks his stories. Needless to say, it is only this aspect of literature – humour – that appeals universally to the moods of the readers. And Manoj Das amply charges his stories with this. In fact, his stories are always embellished with an original humour, subtle undertones and sparkling new metaphors.

One of his best from this point of view is "Sharma and the Wonderful Lump", serialised in *The Illustrated Weekly of India*. Reviewing the collection *Fables and Fantasies for Adults* that carries this story, L.N. Gupta remarked: "It is one of the most barbed, and yet the gentle, satire on some ludicrous and absurd aspects of modern civilisation as it is developing in U.S.A. Manoj Das as if by a magic wand, has made it totally relevant to the Indian situation. This reviewer within his limited knowledge can say

that it is perhaps the finest satire on modern civilization or to be more precise, on Indo-American relations published in the last decade..." (*The Hitavada*, January 28, 1979).

"Sharma and the Wonderful Lump" is the story of one Mr. Sharma, a dutiful clerk at the Rooplal Textiles, who has a growth on his head, diagnosed to be "True or Neoplastic tumour". Under the auspices of his employer he is admitted into a posh private clinic in the United States to have the crown of flesh liquidated by a surgeon. But to his amazement, he finds that the very *aboo* (Sharma likes his tumour to be known by that native name), his brethren in India did not care two hoots for, is hugged and applauded as a medical wonder by the Americans. Like Aladin in the *Arabian Nights*, who does miracles with the help of his wonderful lump, Sharma postponing the operation, is out to exploit the promises held out by his wonderful lump. He becomes a celebrity almost overnight, after appearing in a TV programme. Money floods in. Since money and fame are formidable forces, Sharma, in his innocence, drifts to questionable paths for the sake of more and more bucks. Consequently he is on the verge of losing Miss Marilyn, his caretaker in the clinic who later becomes his true friend, and under unavoidable circumstances is obliged to leave America for his own land. Back with his mother, Sharma who once had little faith in the healing powers of the Gurus, now submits his precious *aboo* to his mother's Guru, who makes it vanish like a block of ice.

Every situation in the novelette is tinged with humour and satire, but what makes them irresistibly effective is the native goodness of Sharma and a remarkable laugh at the society, but he does as though without the slightest sign of a sardonic smile on his own face.

He gives us clues to make out for ourselves the ways and means by which the society thrives on a pack of false values, and pinpoints how an innocent individual can be reduced to a scapegoat. One party of vested interest after another uses Sharma and his tumour for its own profit. They are not just characters but types – types of exploiters we encounter in our day-to-day life. The America of the story is the symbol of the whole strange world of ours. There is hardly a character which is villainous. All are the victims of a cross-current of automatic occurrences – set to motion by men who have forgotten the true goal of life. But the innate goodness inherent in man has not forgotten the man.



Even those who kidnap Sharma for a political end, shed tears with him. While no character is positively bad, there are characters that are positively good like Marilyn, the conscious-incarnate, and Sharma's mother. Dr. Hardstone, the surgeon, instead of liquidating the "medical wonder" on the head of his "significant patient" tempts, like Satan of *Paradise Regained*, Sharma to accept the offer of a TV network that proposes to feature the patient for his lump, in their programme which will fetch him five thousand dollars. Dr. Hardstone cajoles Sharma only with the personal motive of earning a similar sum and the fame as the discoverer of what becomes known as "Hardstone's Tumour" (in the fashion of Halley's comet) and he succeeds in his attempt. What a wonderful set of values we have come to worship!

Once Sharma has become a celebrity, the newspapers pounce on him for their own end, under the pretext of "enlightening the masses". A mass-circulation weekly, *Holocaust*, takes a photograph of Sharma with an abominable background of the bare-breasted Miss Chichi leaning over his head, to suit the already framed caption "The Top Against the Topless". Though Sharma mumbles out his protest, Mrs. Younghusband, the reporter of *Holocaust*, silences him with her cool statistical logic – which is of yet another value: "...if we print your picture with Miss Chichi in this fashion, all our readers will read the feature I shall write. They cannot do otherwise. But if we print your lone picture, only sixty per cent of our readers would care to glance at the article below it. These are the conclusions drawn from careful readership surveys...."(FFA 31).

Thus the readership is not spared the butt-end of ridicule for their share in making the potboiler publication what they are.

The focus is then directed, after covering the makers and the public patrons of the publications, to those who condescend to become their content!

The angry Miss Marilyn chides Sharma for allowing himself to be snapped for a sensation vendor, posing with a slut: "...this irresponsible and irreverent paper has not only reduced you to a clown through this picture but also put a sackful of nonsense into your mouth: your *aboo* contains occult powers! You have grown it with a great deal of secret discipline and practice of Voodoo" (FFA 33).

By and by the demand for the *aboo*-man soars sky high. There was a time when Sharma used to keep himself hidden from the world as much as possible and had even thought of committing suicide because of the repulsive lump. What could be more significant than the fact that the very lump had now made him world-famous! When greeted as the pride of his country, Sharma intones softly and sadly: "Oh India *Sujalam, sufalam, malayajashitalam* – although the *aboo* which made me great was formed on thy soil and under thy sky – thy children failed and failed miserably, to give it its due..." (FFA 53).

And when W.W. Sanitarywalla from the Indian Embassy in America calls on Sharma to inform him that his movements in that country might have serious repercussions on Indo-American relations, Sharma is hurt and annoyed: "It's clear that not only did India refuse to recognise me, but also the Indian government is on tenterhooks the moment I am recognised abroad..." (FFA 52).

Is the author making fun of India that fails to recognise the talents and coolly leaves them at the mercy of the foreigners to be evaluated? Perhaps there is more to it in his motive than meets the eye. The element of satire here is double-edged, pointed at the highbrows who pride in selling their talents abroad as well.

There comes M/s Eagle Hats, who plan a "lasting career" for Sharma by stationing him at the entrance of their main showroom. Sharma is expected to raise his hat and bow from time to time as customers enter the hall, carrying on his neck a heart-shaped board, reading "The Hat with a Heart, the Eagle Hat; the Eagle Hat protects the world famous *aboo*!" All great firms to run business smoothly make use of big names to lure the customers, thanks to their study of mass psychology.

Portraying different kinds of exploiters, Manoj Das comes finally to politicians. Baldbreast in America and Rooplal in India wish to make use of the *aboo* to lure more votes, the former by giving a huge sum to Sharma and the latter by his bossy stance. The comment now is on the strange values that circulate in the world's richest democracy on one hand and the largest on the other. The *aboo* is the common factor for beguiling the voters in both the countries.

What does the *aboo* in this context symbolise? Money? Irrelevant fascinations? Both and the sum-total of much more-falsehood, in one word. An opportune exercise in this falsehood ultimately crowns Sharma with a political success. He is elected to



his State Assembly. And there follows a typical Indian scene: "...Political instability threatened the fate of the infant ministry before it has any time to induct new blood. A number of legislatures crossed the floor and then half of them returned to threshold of the parent party saying that they had put their signatures to the document of defection after taking some drink which, innocent as they were, they had assumed to be coloured soda-water. Sharma who had been elected an independent candidate, was yet to choose a party when the ministry collapsed and the assembly was declared dissolved" (FFA 62).

A by-election is announced. Sharma's supporters confide to him that his *aboo* might not cast the same spell it cast the first time as some people had begun to find it rather anachronistic! Sharma, applying the ordinary logic, wishes his *aboo* to become twice its size in order to cultivate a new wave of awe around it. But the *aboo* disappears all of a sudden. Sharma is disheartened, but his mother is delighted. In the disappearance of the *aboo*, she dreams of a future benefit of the gigantic *aboo* of darkness and arrogance.

From a natural plane the writer suddenly takes us – without giving us any jolt – to a supernatural plane when the *aboo* disappears through the intervention of a mystic power. The allegory lies perhaps in the author's vision of a transition to a better future that a spiritual awakening alone can bring.

While this author was interviewing Manoj Das on behalf of a daily (*The Hitavada* June 15, 1980) he had said, "I always remember what Jonathan Swift said: 'Satire is a sort of glass wherein beholders generally discover everyone's face but their own.' But I never forget to try to behold my own face in that mirror."

This seems to be the secret of Manoj Das's satire being effective without being offending.

Probably Manoj Das has realised that continued involvement in tragedies does no good to anyone. One needs humour to sustain oneself in all struggles without actually giving them up. If R.K. Narayan gives us only a half an inch long smile by providing us a comic glimpse of the ludicrous aspects of life (without involving himself in it) Manoj Das has developed a comic vision of human frailty which provides us a bellyful of laughter. The effect is that an understanding reader tends to become tolerant to his tormentor without giving up his battle against him.

Jonathan Swift, a favourite of Manoj Das, in his epistle to Mr. Delany, dated October 10, 1718 wrote: "Humour is odd, grotesque and wild/only by affectation spoiled; It is never by invention got/Men have it when they know it not."

Long before Wodehouse built an invincible house of humour for humour's sake in the realm of gold, Herbert Read in his *Lectures in English Literature* spoke of "the happy compound of pathos and playfulness which we style by the untranslatable term humour\*."

The range of the short stories of Manoj Das is wide and it contains purely realistic stories of men and mice apart, a rich variety of fantasies, fairy tale-like allegories and satires. They abound in humour and wit. But in his novel *Cyclones*, humour meets the reader in such an unobtrusive manner that later we realize that we enjoyed it in the Swiftian sense – when we knew it not. Employment of humour in *Cyclones* also brings to our mind Read's classical analysis of it – that it is the happy compound of pathos and playfulness – though may be of something more too.

In order to appreciate the art with which the element of humour has been handled in *Cyclones*, we have to remember its theme as well as a brief outline of its plot. The backdrop of the story is a remote village. A couple of years preceding the country achieving freedom along with her partition constitute the time.

But it will be wrong to describe this novel as one based on the aforesaid events. They only serve as the physical contours of this remarkable work. What the reader receives is a series of knocks on his consciousness – some sweet, some surprising and some rude. The sum total of the effect is, he emerges enriched by a new awareness of human potentiality, of a wider range alone which life can be lived and, above all else, of the law of transcendence that governs our life, enabling us absorb shocks of experience and to grow with them.

It is the protagonist of the novel, Sudhir Chowdhury, who leads us to this kind of awakening. We meet him as the scion of the ruined feudal family of Nijanpur, though his birth remains shrouded in mystery for a long time. He is called from his romantic college life when the bankrupt landlord who has adopted him suddenly disappears in a dramatic but entirely credible situation. That is when the first man in the village who gets drunk at the newly cropped up colony of outsiders building a wartime jetty on the outskirts of the village, approaches the



hapless landlord to offer him a half-bottle of whisky and desires to become his chum!

The young Sudhir though fresh from the town, begins to love the naive villagers, after a terrible cyclone leaves them in the lurch. He is dreaming of a peaceful, settled life when communal riots rock the 'city' (reference is obviously to Calcutta) and its echo disturbs the peace of Nijanpur and Lalgram, two neighbourly villages dominated by Hindus and Muslims respectively.

A series of interesting events oblige Sudhir to abscond for a considerable length of time and to spend a period in jail during which he meets a number of characters, constituting a shockingly different yet entirely convincing bunch, giving us an absorbing variety.

Time may move at its own pace, but events in India move very fast during that eventful period of the country's history and by the time Sudhir is back in his village, it is metamorphosed into a hick town. His last action in the novel is dramatic; it has to be read in the novel, in order to be properly appreciated in keeping with its denouement and it is likely to cast a spell on the reader, a combined effect of the empathy, bewilderment and tension it creates, though all culminating on a grand note of peace in the protagonist's heart - a peace that can come only through a sublime process of transcendence.

There are a number of situations in the novel remarkable for their individual charm: the old eccentric Roy who announces his unilateral decision that the one who can kill the man-eating crocodile in the river should be deemed fit to contest the limited franchise election of 1947 and is himself carried away by the crocodile in a moonlit night, the fight between two angry bulls who fall into the landlord's pond notorious for its fathomless mire and sink as the helpless villagers look on and weep and so on and so forth.

The title *Cyclones* is significant. There is the vivid description of a physical cyclone; there is the political turmoil sweeping the country which is another kind of cyclone and there is the cyclone raging in Sudhir's mind.

"A great novel can combine in itself all the breadth and sweep of an epic, the tension of a drama, the emotional drive of a lyric and the intellectuality of an objective essay" wrote a

distinguished Indian scholar, the late Professor Taraknath Sen. *Cyclones* fulfils these conditions incredibly well.

The theme and the plot outline of the novel is grim. From the second one-third of the work tension begins to grow and hold the reader in its grip till the release comes at the end. But only a very careful reader – or a critical mind – will detect the subtle role humour is playing in keeping the narration sweet and lively. On the outskirts of the village, Kusumpur, on the seashore, some war-time activities are going on and a small colony of officials has sprung up. How do the villagers, rarely exposed to the world beyond the shy river flowing by their habitation react to this unexpected development? "It was rumoured that the outsider's eyes betrayed unbridled lust the moment they fell on a woman. This was confirmed when one summer evening a fellow strayed into the village and mistook a short-statured veiled grandmother for a shy girl – that is how the elders interpreted it – and was bold enough to make as romantic an overture as saying, "will you take me home, girlie, for I am thirsty?"(C 2).

It was a pity if the villagers read an allegorical meaning in the stranger's thirst; it was no less a pity for the stranger, particularly if he had a sinful motive, to mistake a granny to be a girlie. But the irony is in the situation proper over which nobody has any control.

Humour in the guise of an irony remains threaded in the whole texture of the first chapter. Rajni, the vagabond who has explored the colony of the outsiders, returns to the village drunk, but with half a bottle of alcohol which he must offer to the scion of the feudal house, Mr. Chowdhury. Rajni's subconscious, his great desire to be considered an equal to Chowdhury, comes out through his incoherent blabbering. While it stuns the villagers (who have never seen a drunken man before and on the other hand who nurture a silent reverence for the elderly Chowdhury),<sup>4</sup> it amuses the reader. But the irony of the situation culminates in pathos when it is found that Chowdhury has clean disappeared from the house in order to avoid the embarrassment.

What happened to Chowdhury? His traditional rival, Roy of Lalgram, kills a crocodile and salvages a gold ring from its stomach which he declares to be Chowdhury's. But Chowdhury's manager, Brindavan, and servant, Jay who could have identified it, refuse so much as to glance at it. "Roy bagged a turtle and mistook it for a crocodile", is their final pronouncement on Roy's



claim. If Brindavan and Jay are trying to take revenge on Roy in their rustic way, the officer-in-charge of the police station is absolutely confident of his government's wisdom in the steps it is taking to forestall a Japanese invasion:

'It is good that the cyclone played havoc in this area', the officer observed cryptically. 'I don't understand you'.

The officer lowered his voice. 'How can you? Is this not top secret? But you are a gentleman and so am I. Perhaps I can confide a thing or two in you. A Japanese invasion on our land seems imminent. The coast along the forest near Kusumpur could prove most suitable for the enemy to land, our Inspector Sahib disclosed to me. In fact, we are planning to get hold of all country-boats and destroy them so that the enemy cannot use the riverway. We have already done something more too. Come and see for yourself!'

The officer hobbled into a dusty room, signing to Sudhir to follow him. Four or five bicycles lay heaped on the floor, their tyres deflated.

We have made them immobile, completely, ha, ha! And look here for still more.

• The officer drew Sudhir's attention to four or five rickety torchlights.

'We ordered the Chowkidars and Duffadars to collect these too, lest the Japanese should use them to find their way,' he explained.

Shaking Sudhir by the arm, the officer whispered in confidence, 'within our jurisdiction we are doing our best to forestall any enemy design.' The officer bit a hair of his moustache and spat it out.

'But how could the cyclone have been so helpful?'

'Ha, ha! you are puzzled, eh? Didn't I say that these matters were not so easy to comprehend as your textbooks? You see, if the Japanese arrive now, they will hardly get any

food or shelter. How can they operate? Ha, ha! We did our best, Providence in his prudence did his! (C 32-33).

How unceremoniously can a well-planned function be spoilt by a totally unforeseen factor! The cyclone-hit area is visited by a sophisticated relief party. A meeting is arranged. The villagers listen to the speakers with rapt attention. But when the most revolutionary speaker in the team, Shyam, begins to speak, behind him, unknown to him, appears a lunatic.

First he made faces. Then delighted and inspired by the speaker's histrionics, he began to dance. While Shyam raised his voice, scale by scale, to its highest in an effort to wake the dormant conscience of his listeners and to transform them into rebels, the audience looked more and more amused. Shyam knew nothing of the performance going on behind him. Perplexed, he made frantic efforts at driving his point home. It was also a trying time for Sudhir who was moved with pity for Shyam but was helpless. The head-pundit sneaked away from the audience and tried to entice the lunatic away by offering a banana. The result was that the lunatic ended the silent phase of his act began to laugh and scream.

Shyam gave a start and stopped, leaving a political analogy incomplete and looked back over his shoulder. He sat down as if under the burden of a world of disgust. The audience gave out an enthusiastic applause. 'For whom is the applause meant - for Shyam or for the lunatic or for the head-pundit?' Rena softly asked Sudhir.

'I think for the entire performance, but I doubt if the applauders themselves would know' (C 42).

While a situation appears humorous to the reader, the author is only portraying a typical character. A villager narrates a complete story in his bid to find out whether his listener knows it or not:

'You want me to believe that you know nothing about the ancient Chowdhury who, by reciting a secret *mantra*, could change himself into a tiger - though he did so only occasionally - whose wife - she was innocent as a babe but you know how stupidly whimsical women can be - of



course not the *Mensalibs* of the towns but our women folk – insisted one night that her husband turn into a tiger for her to see the fun? Didn't Chowdhury try his best to impress upon her that it was sinful to perform the miracle just for fun – that it was done only with the particular purpose of propitiating the goddess of the tigers! Do you mean to say that the world does not know how the woman wept over her husband's refusal? Didn't he at last agree to fulfil her desire? But didn't she get terror-stricken at her charming husband changing into a huge tiger and didn't she, in her nervous stammer, fail to complete the hymn? Could she sprinkle the holy water properly either? Didn't the poor Chowdhury-tiger roar and howl in great anguish till the household, nay, the neighbourhood was awake? Wasn't he obliged to smash the window and escape into the forest? Didn't he for several years thereafter dwell in the cave yonder till a kind hermit – God bless the great soul – cured him of his tigerhood? Didn't Chowdhury himself then turn into a hermit and leave for the Himalayas? Do you want me to believe, Babu, that you didn't know all this? 'Now we know', said Suján (C 49-50).

Humour always subdued, remains so diluted in the 31 chapters of the novel that it is not possible to sift it from the serious elements. Nevertheless, one feels its presence and one can observe how it helps in the unfoldment of a character and delineation successfully how humour can be an intrinsic aspect of realism, even when the level of the realism is quite high and the message the work conveys is profound.

Manoj Das's stories reveal his technical mastery of the storyteller's art in bringing most adroitly all the threads together so that the plots are carried forward with speed, suspense and vividness along with the imaginative probing into the human soul. Mere imagination is not so interesting and heart-touching. Facts plus powerful imaginations create fiction. If worked out in a lively and artistic form, it can become a mirror of the society concerned reflecting its clear picture, with inherent contradictions as well as promises. This forms the basis of the short stories of Manoj Das. Psychology, imagination and sensibility, as reflected, while depicting any event, leave a lot for

the readers with insight to ponder over. In a fitting tribute to Manoj Das, *Bhavan's Journal* commended:

Here is a writer truly Indian in his vision and wisdom and truly universal in his appeal. With a genuine combination of wit and compassion on one hand and an insight and the capacity to reveal on the other hand, the author brings each character to a throbbing life – whether it is of an innocent child or of an intriguing politician – and makes each situation unerringly natural and yet significant. If his range is vast, his style is original; there is an aristocracy in his English – a trait which evolves only out of a deep involvement with the spirit of the language, which is rare" (Jan. 25, 1970).



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