

**THE SPIRITUAL AND PSYCHIC ELEMENTS  
IN THE STORIES OF MANOJ DAS**

**THIS IS SUBMITTED TO  
THE UTKAL UNIVERSITY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
IN  
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# **DECLARATION**

I declare that this thesis entitled “The Spiritual and Psychic Elements in the Stories of Manoj Das” is a product of original research done by me and it has not been submitted to any other University/Institute for doctoral degree.

**(Sukanti Mohapatra)**

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## PREFACE

The short story has been one of the most popular forms of literature produced in India during the last hundred years. The short story form seems to be peculiarly suited to the mirroring of Indian life since its writer can choose any one part of life and deal with it with attention, care and mastery which it requires. The Indian English short story is a successfully established art-which is fast developing with justifiable confidence and pride.

Manoj Das is considered as one of the foremost of the new generation of Indian writers. He appeared in the Indian-English literary sky as a luminous star during the mid-sixties of the last century. He is one among the few gifted writers of India who writes both in Oriya, his mother tongue, and in English with equal ease and dexterity. His status, both in Oriya and English literature, is quite high.

The present dissertation makes a modest attempt to discuss many aspects of Manoj Das's creativity with more emphasis on the spiritual and psychic elements in his stories. The thesis comprises five chapters. The first chapter is 'Introduction', which also includes his 'Theme and Vision', Second Chapter is devoted to find out 'The Spiritual and Psychic Elements', the third one is 'Overtones and Suggestion', fourth chapter highlights his 'Language and Style' and the last and the fifth chapter is 'Conclusion'.

Born in 1934, in the picturesque surroundings of a remote village Sankhari, in northern Balasore of Orissa, Manoj Das has emerged as a great writer and thinker, a person who has excelled in every field of literature.

His English writings include fourteen volumes of collection of short stories, three novels, fourteen volumes of children's literature and other miscellaneous works. His 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. He has received many prestigious awards like 'Central Sahitya Akademi' award, 'Saraswati Samman' and also has the unique distinction of receiving "The Central Sahitya Akademic" Fellowship'

He is an Ashramite, an adept in the vision and philosophy of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother and a seeker who tries to explore 'Truth' hidden in the different realities of life. He is an optimist who believes in a transformed future of mankind and his writings exude his faith. Through his creative writings he has brought about a new awareness about the sweetness and serenity that pervades life in general and rural Indian life in particular.

Manoj Das has dealt with a number of themes. His themes range from the most matter of fact happenings of every day life to the events suggestive of supernatural. At the same time his stories are greatly influenced by Indian literature-mythology and folklore. As an Indian writer, he has never forgotten to reflect on the age old rich cultural and literary tradition of India. He always feels that there are certain truths that are found only in Indian culture and they should be presented to the entire world. That is why; in his stories he always tries to inculcate the theme of "Indianness", the most cherished aspect of his creative vision. Besides this, his stories also depict 'perversion of values', 'helplessness', 'disillusionment', 'transition' and 'transcendence'. These are the major themes of Manoj Das's writings.

His stories reflect his futuristic vision that man is an evolutionary being who despite all signs to the contrary proceeds towards a meaningful future. His vision is chiefly humanistic. He trusts in the basic goodness of every human being.



Manoj Das's uniqueness lies in the blending of spiritual and psychic elements in his stories. In his stories we find a deep probing into the psyche of his characters and an exposition of different possibilities of man's inner growth and progress. Spirituality, according to him 'is the science of consciousness.' It is something higher than the general understanding of the same. All that has helped man to grow in his consciousness has led him to aspire, to explore the *raison d'etre* of life is spirituality. Needless to say, it has nothing to do with dogma, creeds, rituals, superstitions, taboos and moral laws. It is an adventure in consciousness. It gives a new meaning to everything.

As literature is not a spiritual discourse, what we find in the fiction of Manoj Das is, in fact, the manifestation of the 'psychic' which is brought forward by the concerned character's spiritual aspirations-sometimes conscious and sometimes a preparation unknown to his outer mind. This manifestation opens up a higher possibility not only for the redemption and sublimation of the characters but also for the readers to elevate their consciousness to a higher perception of different elements of human nature.

The stories of Manoj Das are symbolic. There always runs a subtle meaning beneath the surface meaning. He uses symbols to project his vision. His stories are embodiments or crystallization of his ideas or themes as their precise meaning can't be said in any other way. His stories suggest some deeper meaning and realities. His use of supernatural elements, ghosts and miracles is in fact a 'device' for him to drive home something greater and more subtle.

So far as the craft of story-telling is concerned, Manoj Das is a master story-teller. With a genial 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 and makes each situation unerringly natural yet significant.

His range is vast, his style is original, and there is an aristocracy in his English-a trait which evolves out of a deep involvement with the spirit of the language.

Literature does not preach, it reveals. Tolstoy said that the highest purpose of art is to make people 'good' by choice. Manoj Das's stories and novels will certainly help people grow by choice.

**(Sukanti Mohapatra)**

## CHAPTER – I

### ***INTRODUCTION***

While working on this dissertation I have in my mind to explore many worlds of Manoj Das and to establish him as a unique writer from the point of view that he always envisions human life in spiritual and psychic lights.

Literature reflects life. Life is like a river which flows eternally. Though the genre of short story does not offer scope for portrayal of a full picture of life, still then, a few moments of a person's life may suggest the vastness that life is, its embedded paradoxes, the joys and sorrows which are not only opposites but very short-lived.

The Study of Manoj Das's stories will unfold many possibilities to have a glimpse into the life-eternal through some moments lived by his characters. A word, a gesture, a change of situation, or a deep probing into life may lead the commonest of his people to experience something greater-vaster than every day's mundane experience.

Such moments are attributed with a quality of understanding, an illumination in the depth of one's consciousness. Spirituality, after all, is the science of consciousness.

The stories of Das are not mere storyline or narratives nor they are mere accounts of human life as outwardly seen or felt rather his stories unfold a deeper and inner reality which shows man as a transcendental being, as someone whose life is a continual progress not a void in this universe.

When modern civilization is burdened with apparent anxiety, chaos, anarchy, degeneration of values and fanaticism, spirituality emerges as a sustaining hope for the humanity. Spirituality is a process of birth, growth and illumination of psychic consciousness that leads to the level of enlightenment . It is the most important experience in the life of an individual.

Manoj Das is an avowed optimist who believes in the 'creative evolution' of human consciousness. There is something great in each human being which can be felt by turning inward, by expanding the frontiers of one's awareness. Then through this 'Creative Evolution' as Sri Aurobindo terms it, man can become enlightened and can realize the enormous potentialities in him.

Spiritual and Psychics elements in the stories of Manoj Das is an inherent theme mixed with other themes as spirituality is there inherent in all human experience. This study aims at finding out these elements and their human implications.

The study is a search and research into the world of Manoj Das. The methodology adopted is chiefly collecting data; primary and secondary source materials for which I have visited different libraries, studied history of fiction in general, made a comparative study between Indian English stories and contemporary stories. Also I have been to Pondicherry to meet the writer personally, to have conversation with him about his vision of life and what he means by spirituality and man's predicament in present day world; I studied spiritual literature and works of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother at Sri Aurobindo Ashram Library. I collected the materials needed from various sources, utilized and organized them for the purpose as per the MLA guidelines.

This dissertation makes an elaborate study beginning from the development of Indian English short stories. The introductory chapter is divided into four sections. Section –I is the general introduction on the project, its aims and objectives etc. In the section-II there is the discussion on the growth of Indian English short stories and in Section-III a synoptic account of the background, the literary achievements of Manoj Das has been given. Section IV of this chapter deals with varieties of themes that Manoj Das deals with and all his themes leading to one goal-the reflection of his vision which is one with the futuristic vision of Sri Aurobindo.

Chapter II is the main body of this project in which I have discussed what spirituality is and how it is related to the stories of Manoj Das. The

'Psychic' which is the manifestation of 'Spirituality' in a being has found vivid elaboration in this chapter.

Chapter III is the 'Overtones and Suggestions. Here the symbolic suggestions leading to unfold the different realities of life and consciousness, and helping one to understand the spiritual and psychic aspects of Das's stories have found justification.

Chapter-IV shows how Manoj Das's language is a just medium to express his vision of life. His language and style are spontaneous and they naturally follow and suit his intention to express his feeling in the best manner.

The last chapter is a summing up with a conclusion. It demonstrates Das a master story-teller who has used his art to portray life as an ever-continuing process of growth and inner evolution.

All these above chapters are logically organized and as a whole they enunciate Das with his world and vision, the world of Manoj Das is an all-inclusive unique world presented with various shades and colours. It is a world of varieties of themes and his vision and above all his belief in the spiritual destiny of human beings.

Though numerous critical works have appeared on the different aspects of the fiction of Manoj Das, no dissertation has yet dealt with this particular element in his stories. Hence this thesis opens out new avenues for further research work. As a matter of fact, this dissertation will provide a basis to inspire the future scholars to do research on other subtle aspects of Manoj Das's fiction and to discover what is yet to be discovered.

## II

Story telling is born with the creation of human species on earth. The impulse to express human experience in narrative form is probably as old as human consciousness itself. All primitive cultures, down the ages have preserved themselves through their myths and legends. The story of the trials and tribulations of man, his adventures and aspirations, his progress and success are there in written forms through ancient literary works. India has a long and deep-rooted tradition of story telling. Starting from the Vedic era, this art has evolved through several Upanishads and Puranas and later on through the great epics Ramayan and Mahabharata. Besides these, there are varied folk tales well preserved in the Kathasarit Sagar (which is only a part of the Brihatkatha of Gunadhya), the Jatakas, the Panchatantra, and a number of other works. These myths, legends, fables, parables, and folk-lore constitute a greater part of the rich tradition of the story telling in India.

Indian short stories in English originated in the twentieth century “mostly as a by-product of Indian English fiction” (Dwivedi: 126). About the development of this genre A.N.Dwivedi has given some reasons:

As with other genres, so with the Indian short story in English, the beginnings were made under the influence of Britishers, who had given us not only a steady nation but also an international language. It is, therefore, in the fitness of things to speculate that the Indian short-story writer in English is an inheritor of British legacy bequeathed to him by such eminent practitioners as O’ Henry, John Galsworthy, Somerset Maugham, Rudyard Kipling, who themselves were greatly inspired by the French author, Maupassant” (128).

Shiv K. Kumar, an author and critic, also puts forth a similar view in his introduction to Contemporary Indian Short Stories in English:

The short story, written in the Indian languages, acquiring the form of a distinct literary genre, however emerged in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. It was mostly influenced by western writers, British or American. If, for instance, Bankimchandra Chatterjee could be said to have been influenced by Sir Walter Scott, Rabindranath Tagore could be found susceptible to the influences of his own favourite British writers. (1-8)



Yet, Indian short story writers both of Indian languages and English are indebted to the great masters of ancient Indian Classics. They have spontaneously derived their inspiration and motivation for writing short stories from Vyas, Valmiki, Somadev and Vishnusharma.

Indian English short stories have travelled a long way since the first publication of Kamala Sathianandan's Stories from Indian Christian life in 1898. Thereafter "some sporadic writings were done in this genre to arouse national consciousness, to effect social reforms, or to have moral and philosophical broodings" (Dwivedi 129).

The other pioneers in this field before Rabindranath Tagore are K.S.Venkataramani and K.Nagarajan. Venkataramani contributed two collections of short stories under the titles Paper Boats (1921) and Jatadharan and other Stories (1937). Nagarajan had a single volume called Cold Rice (1945). An important author of the early twentieth century was Rabindranath Tagore, the Noble laureate, who had published some good collection of short stories written in Bengali first and then translated into English by himself or through others. Some popular stories of Tagore are: "The Cabuliwallah", "Subha", "The Post Master" "The Child's Return", "The Home Coming", "The Babus of Nayanjore" and "The Castaway". In the views of K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, his short stories are the "most valuable by-products turned out by the great creative forge that was the Kavi Rabindra Nath Tagore, but their source of origin unmistakably stamps them with their distinguishing quality" (105).

In mid-thirties, three eminent novelists-turned short story writers appeared as three luminous stars in the Indo-Anglian literary sky. They are the distinguished triumvirate-Mulk Raj Anand, R.K.Narayan and Raja Rao. To describe their commitment to this genre of literature, Shiv K.Kumar writes:

If Tagore wrote as a folk story-teller, never refracting the psychology of his characters to suit a western audience, Mulk Raj Anand remained firmly committed to social reality, investing his 'Coolies' and untouchables with a vibrant humanity that he found lacking in the upper classes. As for Raja Rao, he shaped the English language to suit the Indian sensibility, investing it with a fluidity and suppleness that was foreign to it" (2).

Anand's concern is for the poor and the downtrodden. Moved by the social injustices, highbrow prejudices and universal human plight he has created many wide-ranging stories like "The Lost Child", "Birth", "The Cobbler and the Machine", "Boots", "The Story of an Anna". He has published seven collections of short stories.

R.K.Narayan occupies a prominent place in the history of Indian English fictions and short stories. He was exclusively committed to writing as he had not gone for any other profession. His stories though humorous in tone, deal with a gentle irony with the portrayal of various facets of human life. A.N.Dwivedi remarks that, "the sustaining power of a Narayan story is its unmixed comic sense and its pure delight in the art of living" (131). His story

collections are: Cyclone and Other Stories, Dodu and Other Stories , Malgudi Days , Lawley Road and Other Stories , and A Horse and Two Goats.

Though not so prolific a writer of short stories like his counterpart Ananda and Narayan, Raja Rao is also considered as a powerful writer for the development of this genre. He has three collections of short stories to his credit; The Cow of the Barricades and Other Stories and The Chessmaster and his Moves, The Policeman and the Rose. His stories are marked with Indian sensibility.

Among other short story writers whose contributions have brought the Indian English short stories a prestigious position are Manjeri S. Isvaran, K.A.Abbas, Bhabani Bhattacharya and Khushwant Singh. Yet, a master storyteller, solely dedicated to the art and craft of writing (telling!) short stories had to appear in the scene in mid-sixties. Undoubtedly he is the famous bi-lingual writer, Manoj Das.

Manoj Das rightfully belongs to this long tradition of story tellings. K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar has truly said; "A country that includes among its literary classics a collection like Katha-Sarit-Sagar (' The Ocean of Stories') can never fail to cultivate the 'short story' as a perennially fresh and fascinating art form. In our own times, Masters like Tagore, Premchand, Masti, Mulk Raj Anand and Vaikom Muhammad Basheer have made their mark as exemplars of the art. And Manoj Das is of the same class" (Hindu 15).

### III

Sankhari, a remote village of Balasore district was very quiet and charming when Manoj Das was born on the twenty seventh of February, 1934. His village was then having an idyllic setting; a beautiful landscape like the finest art of a self-merged artist. In front of his house there was an extended meadow surrounded by a number of palm trees, many bushes of varieties of berries; and sand hills, beyond which was the vast stretches of blue sea. Two natural ancient lakes, one abounding in red lotuses and the other in white ones created a fairy-tale world for little Manoj, a writer in the making. Everything was unbelievably silent in those days. It is not quite strange that he listened to the call of Nature with rapt attention when he was just a small child. In one colourful afternoon a rainbow caught his sight and he felt the urge to touch its two ends. Soon he was after it, running and running when suddenly rainbow disappeared making him cry out of desperation and fear. These impressions of childhood days remain firm in his consciousness. Those days of his life were spent amidst beautiful nature and innocent people who exude 'a spontaneous heart-warming good will' (Times of India 20). What made that dreamy boy take to his pen is perhaps a different story. While narrating that background to an interviewer he says:

I was born in a typical Indian village and grew up through an avalanche of rapid experiences, memorable ones-like a great cyclone, a terrible famine, our ancient household and treasures of my ancestors

being looted by bandits not once but twice before my blinking eyes, reducing us to penury. These experiences must have aroused a long range of emotions in me. Loving and innocent rural characters of the day, noble even in their distress, left an indelible impression on me- (Mother India 272).

Various events like these make writing as spontaneous for him as his breathing. Writing always fascinates him and he feels a natural urge to write (odyssey2), he says in one of his interviews. He started giving vent to his deep emotions through poetry which he wrote in his mother tongue, Oriya. Simultaneously he started writing short stories also. His first collection of short stories in Oriya Samudrara Kshudha was published in 1951. Readers' response was more for his short stories than for his poems.

Writing apart, Manoj Das had been involved in a series of activities right from his high school days. During his search for a greater vision of human-kind, he found himself caught in the political vortex of the fifties. He believed in the basic truth "all men are equal" on which Marxism is based. So he became a zealous Marxist, a fiery orator and an unchallenged student leader. He was barely fifteen when he became the editor of Diganta (a journal of both literary and revolutionary writing) which saw its first publication in 1950. After sometime its publication stopped, though Manoj Das published it later with a greater change from Cuttack in 1959, when he was a lecturer in English

in Christ College. Diganta under his able editorship, turned into a leading magazine of culture and ideas in Oriya.

Manoj Das's college life had started from Fakir Mohan College, Balasore. While he was a student of third year Arts, he defeated a candidate of the senior class in the Student's Union election of the college and became the president of the Union. He completed his B.A. from S.C.S. college, Puri. During this period, two collections of short stories Jibanara Swada (1953) and Bisakanyar Kahani (1954) in Oriya were published.

Manoj Das came to study Law at Madusudan Law College, Cuttack. In the very first year he was elected the President of the University Law College Union (uncontested for the first time in the history of that college). He left the Law College before completing his course as he did not like to be a lawyer who literally eats lie and thinks lie. He did his M.A. in English at the famous Ravenshaw College and joined Christ College as a lecturer in English.

As a revolutionary student leader he had spent a term in jail and also participated in the Afro-Asian Students Conference at Bandung in 1956. His lyrics, tuned and sung by himself, resounded in numerous throats of the youth of the time in Orissa and galvanized the spirit of the thousands.

But, never did his political involvements dampen or hinder his zeal for writing; rather in the silence of his heart he was more attuned and responsive to his creative urge and quest for the meaning of life. He asserts

that concern for the suffering humanity had led him to Marxism and it was again the same concern which led him to spirituality. He is convinced that no ideal can deliver the desired goods as long as the human consciousness remains in the state in which it is today. This conviction led him to study different philosophies, religious and mystic doctrines and finally he found the truth he was searching for in Sri Aurobindo. He joined the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in 1963. Thereafter, Pondicherry became his home. He has been teaching English literature at the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education since then.

Manoj Das had already established himself as a writer of great repute in Oriya before he switched on to writing in English. As he relates: Sometime in 1950 someone brought to him a passage about Indian rural atmosphere, the rural people and their psychology. It was written by an Indian and published abroad. What Manoj Das reads makes him feel very embarrassed, as it was so purely an arbitrary distortion of reality. So it was a kind of protest which urged him to write about Indian villages, to bring the true picture to a wider readership (Times of India 20).

English, being the only channel of communication throughout the world will help the people to get a glimpse of truth that are inherent in Indian culture and that is why Manoj Das, a devout worshipper of the rich ancient culture of India made sincere effort to present the world the best part of his creative thoughts through his short stories. His first short story collection A

Song for Sunday and Other Stories appeared in 1967 and the second one Short Stories of Manoj Das came out in 1969 (Triveni Publishers). Widely acknowledged as an authentic interpreter of India's cultural and spiritual heritage Manoj Das has fourteen collections of short stories and three novels published so far in English. Besides the above mentioned two short story collections his other publications are:

The Crocodile's Lady (1975),

Fables and Fantasies for Adults (1978),

Man Who Lifted the Mountain and Other Stories (1980),

The Vengeance and Other Stories (1986),

The Dusky Horizon and Other Stories (1989),

Mystery of the Missing Cap and Other Stories (1989),

Bulldozers and Fables and Fantasies for Adults (1990),

The Miracle and Other Stories (1993) ,

Farewell to a ghost (1994),

Selected Fiction (2001) and The Lady Who Died One and a Half Times and Other Fantasies (2003).



Novels, he has to his credit, are Cyclones (1981), A Tiger at Twilight (1991), The Escapist (2001)

Manoj Das is versatile; his contribution to the other fields of literature is quite remarkable. He is a great lover of children and he always writes for children. It gives him joy to know that he has contributed something to their world, no matter how little it is and he feels it his duty to write for them, once Manoj Das told an interviewer (Odyssy 10). The stories he has written for children are really enchanting. His best loved books for children are: Stories of Light and Delight (1970), Books for Ever (1973), A Bride Inside a Casket and Other Stories, Legend of the Golden Valley (Novelette, 1996).

Manoj Das is a successful bilingual writer. With the coming out of his first collection of short stories in English he received his earliest encouragements from K.P.S. Menon who had made this comment in a letter to the author, "My old magistrate used to say, (he was an Englishman) that an Indian writing in English appears like a man playing a piano not with his fingers but with sticks. But no body would say so about your writing in English" (JIPMER MAGAZINE 80). This was a significant observation on Manoj Das, an already famous writer in Oriya to venture into a foreign language.

Short stories of Manoj Das cover a wide range of experience and experimentation; along with his deep probing into Indian psyche and Indian spirit. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar states that, "His English Stories, convincingly

autochthonous, have by virtue of their own Indianness won for him a discriminating world audience (History,16).

This Indianness one can find in his realistic stories and more vividly in the bunch of fantasies he has written. When, a tiny collection of his fantasies was brought out in 1978 by the Spectre Press of Britain, The British fantasy writer Adrian Cole commented that these fantasies could claim a place in any established fable collection and that they had an Arabian Night quality about them, punctuated with very tasteful imagery. He also observed, “We are also given a number of insights into the Indian way of things, which the author delivers unobtrusively and Unprejudicially “(History 16).

In 1960, a premier Oriya monthly, Dagora, had conducted an opinion poll to decide who had made the greatest contribution to Post-Independence Oriya Literature. Among the veterans like Gopinath Mohanty, Surendra Mohanty and Sochi Routray was Manoj Das, in his mid-twenties.

Manoj Das’s stories found an international recognition also. The late Martha Foley, who edited the annual collection of the best American stories for many years, included in her catalogue of outstanding stories for the year 1975 all the five stories of an Indian author, which were published during that year in some of the most prestigious magazines and anthologies of the U.S. A. and that author was none other than Manoj Das.

A prolific writer, a many faceted genius, Manoj Das has proved himself quite successful as a profound essayist, author of belles-letters and travelogues, a columnist in many leading national newspapers and Dailies of Orissa and also as an editor of the very popular cultural monthly, The Heritage. He was the editor of World Union, an international quarterly, during 1968-69.

An Ashramite and a resident of Pondicherry, who 'evolved' into Sri Aurobindo's world, Manoj Das has never failed to reflect his impression and understanding of Sri Aurobindo through his writings, As an Aurobindonian Scholar, he compiled the early phase of India's freedom struggle from valuable documents from the archives in London and Edinburgh in a book titled Sri Aurobindo in the First Decade of the Century (1971). He was asked to write a book by Sahitya Akademi on its decision to publish the monograph to coincide with the celebrations of Sri Aurobindo's Birth Centenary in 1972. That was the book Sri Aurobindo which was published by the Akademi under the 'Makers of Indian Literature' Series. Another book Sri Aurobindo on Education, published by National Council for Teacher Education in 1999, is an essential reading material for teacher training programmes.

Manoj Das as an educationist, has given his contribution during his orientation to a programme launched by the Ministry of Education, Singapore. He was the Educational consultant to the government of the

Republic of Singapore (1982-1986) for introducing in their curriculum the Indian Spiritual heritage.

Manoj Das has covered a long distance since he made his journey, at a very tender age, along the path of Literature. Naturally he has bagged many prizes, honours and accolades to his credit.

Awards are not the yardstick to measure the worth or talent of a writer like Manoj Das. His works surpass such recognitions. He is a master story-teller and perfect craftsman. He is unique and outstanding in style and theme, original in its conception and execution. His stories are distinguished by depth and sensitivity, vividness and significance. They are marked by a rare delicate beauty and subtlety.

He combines Tagore's tragic awareness and Fakir Mohan's (Father of Oriya short story and fiction) satiric stance and comic perception. He combines Maupassant's sense of plot and direct dramatic presentation, Chekhov's sense of sympathy and mystery and O' Henry's tricks and understanding of human psyche.

Manoj Das will certainly survive the test of time for the perennial qualities and timeless values inherent in his stories. He himself realizes that the most important of human experiences, as well as human quest, has not gone through any qualitative change over the centuries (Newsletter 2). To

probe into those eternal aspects of his stories is certainly a hard task but this study aims at accomplishing it starting from his theme and vision.

## IV

A story expresses the vision of a writer and his conception of the human condition. In that sense, the whole story embodies his theme and vision.

The thoughts, feelings, and the vision that a writer projects in a story are seldom very simple. Most stories cannot be reduced, like Aesop's Fables, to a simple moral. A modern short story is not conducive to plant a sermon nor can a story be translated into a philosophical treatise or a sociological text. "Weighty ideas need systematic presentation as free as possible from the mess that is human beings" (Stone, Packer and Hoopes 23). Yet, all serious readers demand more than an accounting of events, they demand that these events in some way illumine their own lives—that events be shaped into a meaning. After the pleasure or pain, excitement or perplexity caused by the story has receded, the reader is left with a residue, a distillation that we call its theme. It is the light at the end of a tunnel.

Often the rich and varied underlying idea of the action is the theme. It is the controlling idea that informs a literary work. As it is not the 'moral', it is not to be understood as the meaning either though it is very close to meaning. Flannery O'Connor, one of the great masters of the short story form has written of theme and meaning

People talk about the theme of a story as if the theme were like a string that a sack of chicken feed is tied with. They think that if you can pick out the theme, the way you pick the right thread in the chicken feed sack, you can rip the story open and feed the chickens. But this is not the way meaning works in fiction ... the meaning of a story has to be embodied in it, has to be made concrete in it. A story is a way to say something that can't be said in any other way, and it takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is (Quoted in carpenter and Neumeyer 151).

Theme is cousin to meaning, and it helps define the meaning. In a literary work, theme may be as obvious as the message in Uncle Tom's Cabin that 'Slavery is cruel and morally degrading and must go' or the implicit point of Robin Hood that "some rich folks deserve" to be taken from and some poor folks need to be given to" These can be hardly compared with such profound thematic implications as those in Macbeth or the Scarlet Letter. As theme is a complex aspect of literature, one requires a very deep thinking to discern, and locate it.

We may consider the story of "Ruth" in the Bible. The tale concerns a homeless refugee who meets and marries a well-to-do land owner. That is the simple narrative line, but it is not the theme. The theme is what this meeting and marriage between the two lonely people means, and what the

marked courtesy, decency, and mannerliness between all the people in this little tale means.

So theme is the total meaning of the story. However it is a structural necessity and it creates what the critics call the unity of impression.

Manoj Das has dealt with a number of themes. They are quite spontaneous. His themes range from the most matter-of-fact happenings of everyday life to the events suggestive of supernatural. At the same time his stories are greatly influenced by Indian literature-mythology and folklore. As an Indian writer, he has never forgotten to reflect on the age old rich cultural and literary tradition of India. He always feels that there are certain truths that are found only in Indian culture and they should be presented to the entire world. That is why in his stories he always tries to inculcate the theme of “Indianness”, the most cherished aspect of his creative vision:

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 ([The Times of India 13](#)).

It is also true that his stories with the theme of 'Indianness' are not a conscious effort made by the author to make the same pronounced rather it is a natural trait of the theme which is greatly felt and experienced by a reader.



Mystery, mysticism and occultism are the basic ingredients of 'Indianness'. In the stories of Manoj Das one can find these elements treated in a varied manner but not at the cost of exhausting the scope of Indian sensibility. Raja observes: In 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, (Language Forum 134).

In "Sita's Marriage", the element of mysticism lies in child Sita's dream and her mysterious death just before her marriage. Sita, who is very eager to find a suitable bridegroom for herself, visualizes Rama Chandra to be her real groom. In her dream she sees the same sight as she has imagined before: Rama, as a charming boy but not without his mighty bow and his crown of burning gold, had come to her as her bridegroom, accompanied by a host of child-gods amidst heavenly music (Das, MOMC 142)

To this dream, her parents laugh, but Sita grows increasingly serious, at last she dies after a slight attack of fever just when her parents are arranging her marriage.

A question as has been raised by S.Samal about the mysterious link between Sita's dream and her death has also been answered by him:

There seems to be an element of mysticism here in that her soul no longer felt it necessary to stay in the world for it was mystically married to her dream-spouse, Ramachandra. Thus it fled and departed for its destination (14).

This mystic faith resumes its curve in the story "Laxmi's Adventure" also. Laxmi, a six year old girl meets God in her dreams. The idol inside the village temple is a living reality for her. She is used to talk to the God in the temple during noon hours when the priest is already asleep and snoring outside the temple. One day, Laxmi in her child-like innocence discloses her heart's anguish over many things she concerns for - prayers through loud speakers, the money-lender's cruelty towards her father, her father's helplessness, her own desire for a frock remaining unfulfilled, her mother's forbearing - everything. Laxmi is a true devotee, believing innocently in the physical presence of 'God' in that idol. She takes away two bananas from a huge bunch of banana thinking that God has told her to do so. She is considered a thief by the priest and the villagers can not survive the shock and humiliation and after suffering from fever for three days she dies.

This untimely death of Laxmi like that of Sita's has something mystical in it. Their relationship with God, their departure - all are mysteries from a particular point of view.

Das is of the belief that there are numerous realities beyond the surface realities that our eyes meet. Ordinary human beings for their lack of

'true knowledge' fail to realize it but saints and sages marvel with their realization of various invisible realities and live a blessed life. He clarifies this in his story 'The Sage of Tarungiri and seven old seekers'

"The Sage of Tarungiri and seven old seekers" is a story about a mysterious sage and seven selfish oldmen who seek his blessings to overcome the worries and anxieties of their life. The old bearded sage, Tukan Baba weeps all the while and lives in his lonely cave. He comes out of this cave only in fullmoon nights. His disciple, Meghanada has the mystic faith that whoever touches the feet of this spiritually enlightened sage in that blessed moonlit night and seeks his blessing is rewarded splendidly and all his desires are fulfilled. The seven old men are convinced that there are more things in heaven and earth that are dreamt of in their philosophy. So they make all fictitious preparations to collect blessing from Tukan Baba. But when Baba comes out smiling instead of weeping, a rare occasion in a gap of twenty years, they miss the chance for their material attitude and foolishness.

In the meanwhile, Baba has gone back to the cave. These seekers in their dismay have forgotten to touch his feet. So they entreat Meghananda, his trusted disciple that Baba should appear to them once again. In spite of Meghananda's refusal that Baba would never come back again, these old egoistic materialists tried to enter the cave forcibly. Just then a ferocious roar shook the hill and what shone like a pair of stars inside the dark tunnel

seemed to grow closer to them. Out of extreme fear they bounced back and rolled down the hill.

There is a spiritual world beyond the reach of ordinary mortals and none can enter into it unless he has purified his heart and developed his soul. The seven old seekers are gross egoistic materialists and are ignorant of the ways of the sages. Baba's weeping or smiling is too mysterious a thing for them to understand. So they fail and they have to wait for another twenty years during which there can be a lot of change in them to avail spiritual bliss.

In this story mystery, mysticism and occultism are shuffled up in a nice manner.

"The Last I Heard of Them" is the story of seven old men, rich and prosperous, who want to have a short cut to god. A "mystic vagabond" known as Sadhu Lambodar leads them to Hidamba Baba, a non-spiritual occultist who performs miracles. The seven old men forget their true mission and are lured by miracles. They meet horrible outcome of their endeavour to see the men and women naked by some magic drops in their eyes. It reveals the dangerous side of the occult power and its implementation.

Some stories of Manoj Das where mysticism and plain mystery merge in a twilight zone and where the thread of some sort of 'magic realism' runs through are "Farewell to a Ghost", "The Crocodile's Lady", "The Bridge in the Moonlit Night", "Friends and Strangers" and 'Evenings at Nijanpur'.

In a particular village, there is a deserted Villa once constructed by the Feringhee Indigo Planters which is believed to be haunted by the spirit of a girl. No body has seen her but there are gossips galore around that maiden spirit. But strangely no body seems be afraid of her rather she enjoys the status of a very near and dear person to the villagers. This charming ghost would participate in all the feasts of the village. The villagers are sad when the Villa is going to be soon bulldozed to make way for the implementation of some mysterious government project. The villagers ruefully led the ghost to a new dwelling (a palm tree on the outskirts of the village) with the assistance of an exorcist and the favourite playground of the village lads moved with her. At last the narrator of the story finds the palm tree dead, struck by lightning. As it is aptly commented by P.Raja:

Nowhere in the story has one met the ghost. Yet she serves as a magic mirror on whom a variety of minds are reflected , building a little world of rural romance, at once enchanting and convincing (Language Forum 135)

For Manoj Das, ghosts, imps like supernatural elements belong to some other plane of reality. It seems as if he has a special fascination for ghosts. More or less ghost story of the author creates an atmosphere of mystery as one reads by.

“Friends and Strangers” deals with a mysterious situation in which two friends take each other’s existence as unreal. In a moon-lit evening

two friends, Tirthankar and Sivabrata are sitting on a rock in a forlorn area surrounded by the tall palm trees. They are chit-chating when it seems to them that their other friend Pramath is walking through a narrow path fifteen feet below and fifty yards away their rock. They hear him telling them that Mrs Wilson has already seen him; therefore he must visit her first. They are surprised as they know that the old lady has died since two months. When they go to check with Pramath they find that he has died that noon. These two friends then believe that the other no longer exists and preferred to continue with this unreal situation throughout their life.

“The Bridge in the Moonlit Night” is a story where we meet a similar mysterious situation. Here, the octogenarian Prof. Ashok who spends his time in a dazed state (half-awake and half-asleep) learns about a fact which had happened some sixty years ago. Sudhir, his friend and once a student reveals to him the truth that to his many love letters Meena had responded but he (Sudhir) out of jealousy and baseless apprehension had torn that sole love letter of Meena and thrown it into the moving water below the bridge. When Ashok heard this he immediately leaves his body there and goes in search of that long lost love letter. Meanwhile, Mahindra, another friend of Ashok and Sudhir arrives there and expresses his surprise over the fact that how fast could Ashok walk and outrun him and reach home while a few minutes ago he has seen him engrossed in looking for something at the dismantled bridge. This is when Sudhir finds Ashok dead. Who was then looking for the shreds of the torn letter. Was it the spirit of Ashok? Such

questions are natural to haunt and crop up and the answers are still shrouded in mystery as far as human perception is concerned.

Supernatural presence yet makes another story quite mysterious and unusual. There is the theme of being possessed by the spirit. In the story "Evenings at Nijanpur", the atmosphere and happenings as recollected by Vikram is quite strange. It is obvious in the following descriptions.

But the strangest experience of his life was yet to come. 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 anxious to express itself and, since that was not possible, it was as though passing its personality to Vikram, to act through him. Vikram was unable to shift his eyes from the picture in spite of his feeling of becoming a captive. His outer self had been numbed by the crazy utterances and weeping of the lady, while from beneath his skeleton was emerging an alien being.

Then he uttered a few words - an act the memory of which bewildered him even today twenty years after that fateful evening. He said that he had indeed come to take away the lady with him in a voice which was simply not his (Das MOMC ,89)

The narration here clearly shows how vikram had been possessed by the spirit of the dead Youngman in the photograph who was perhaps the lover or the husband of the head mistress of the girl's high school. This appeal

to the readers' sense of mystery. Life is not certainly a mirror in which everything finds its true reflection. Life is itself a mysterious phenomenon. A writer faithfully tries to reveal that mystery according to his perception and conviction.

The theme of 'Indianness' of which mystery is an indispensable part is present in many stories of Manoj Das. Sometimes this is expressed through blind beliefs, superstitions, simplicity of the villagers and some convincing situations. In "Crocodile's Lady", a young village girl is believed to have lived a life being a crocodile's lady in the depth of the river. In fact, she had been dragged by a crocodile while bathing in the river. She was lost for a decade. When she returned to her parents a crocodile was also found near her house and killed by the villagers. A strange story was woven round her missing that she was married to that crocodile and lived under water. She herself believed in this fantastic twist and turn of the facts-perhaps for her own safety. When she narrated her life as the crocodile's lady to Mr. Batstone, a foreign visitor, the latter seemed to be overwhelmed taking the story as a truthful account of her life.

It is a superb story evoking the mysterious and wonderful and here not only the human and subhuman mingle but also the subhuman is humanized and raised to the level of the supernatural as well.

Stories like "The Tree" and "The owl" are raised to a supernatural level by the superstitious beliefs of the people and they have a mystical aura



about them. In the novella A Tiger at Twilight one will find an abundance of mystery. The atmosphere which pervades the novella and some of the characters and their actions are mystifying beyond the penetration of common intellect.

“Mystery in a wide and subtle sense - mystery of life, indeed, is the core of Manoj Das’s appeal”, says P.Raja (II). Graham Green confirms it when he has made this remark after reading stories of Manoj Das that his stories “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*” (Qtd. In Raja II).

The theme of “Indianness” in the stories of Manoj Das has another important aspect also, that is the presentation of beautiful village vignettes.

Most of his stories are set in remote villages. Born and brought up in an idyllic village the writer has richly drawn his characters and settings from the vast pool of rural India. Those who have reviewed his stories never forgot to focus on this particular theme of his work. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar says:

The background is rural India, the changing yet changeless Indian village, or the rather more quickly changing ‘our small town’ Bholagrandpa, the retired general Valla, the elusive yet ubiquitous Abolkara, the dying undying village tree, Kunja and his kite, the intriguing owl, the well-beloved local ghost, the faded heroine of the local myth about the

crocodile bridegroom, the would be murderer, the obsessed avenger- these and other uniquely realised persons and powers are, not of Orissa alone, but of all India (The Hindu 15)

Manoj Das's familiarity with different aspects of village life gives his work a certain concrete image filled link with rural India. His stories invariably mirror the "typical" Indian village of the Forties and Fifties: the feudal hierarchical relationships, the simple pleasure, the credulity and the unexpected depths of wisdom and above all the upheaval round the corner as the village encounters the political and social repercussions of the independence movement.

Das's rural India is painted in picturesque images. An authentic picture of the same is given in the story, "The Submerged Valley":

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

The trees that stood in front of our school used to appear as human to us as the wandering bull of Lord Shiva. One of the trees looked as if it was kneeling in meditation. Two more were never tired of chattering to each other. If the teacher had scolded or thrashed us, they seemed to be sympathizing with us. At the approach of a vacation they seemed to be talking of the many sweet moments in store for us (Das SF 87-88).

Kasturi Kanthan, a reviewer of the book Farewell to a Ghost : Short Stories and a Novelette, has given a detailed description of Manoj Das's rural settings:

Manoj Das of course, does not identify his locale so specifically but he definitely sets his stories in villages in Orissa- Sapanpur-on Sea, Vishalpur, or Parvatipuri. This rural settings offer an insight into the daily life of these villagers, meandering through lanes and life with an ease which one wishes one could easily emulate. Time seems to stand still in these villages where the teacher "has taught for forty years without having heard of Hegel or Marx or Freud or Einstein or even Bernard Shaw and Charlie Chaplin" ("The Crocodile Lady"). Untouched by time or progress, no winds of change blow through these villages/ stories. The tumultuous tempests, tidal waves, whirlwinds and upheavals of society do not touch these coasts. Nestled in a warm, comfortable and sheltered atmosphere these villages are not riven by the familiar themes

of caste wars, tragedy of the landless, exploitation of innocence, industry and integrity. The themes are not of desire or frustration. There is no seething anger or resentment. Voices are not raised against oppression, clamouring for reforms and redressals. If at all they are raised, they are not screams of anguish or pain, but either to question the young zamindar on having shot the “owl of the shrine dead” (“The owl”) or to shout at the youngsters when they talk of the old banyan tree falling. “What! The tree fall? How dare you say so?” (“The Tree”) or to hold a few unreported meetings in the village about the building of the new dam which will replace them. “Must everything go under water, Babu? Are we so unlucky that the cruel hand of the government will so unceremoniously tear us away from our god-given lands” (“The Submerged Valley”) (The Book Review 27).

Besides this his stories present a myriad facet of Indian scene. They abound in angry rivers that flood villages, small temples on hillocks, jackals, tigers, ghosts and magic. It is primarily the magical and that beyond reason, which attracts the author to the villages. On occasion, this theme is woven completely into better stories generally vignettes of childhood- so that the story is flavored with a delicate nostalgia for youth and its capacity to believe in the mysterious. In “Farewell to a Ghost”, for example, the narrator remembers with affection a resident ghost in the village where he spent a happy childhood. On one of his trips back to the village, the narrator now adult, finds the palm tree in which the ghost lived dead, struck by lightning. His visit to

the village become rarer, “the new generations of village boys were so different, so ignorant. They were just afraid of ghosts (Das 108).

Thus the theme of ‘Indianness’ has been a conspicuous feature and tenor in all the writings of Manoj Das. As M.V. Kamath has rightly pointed it out, “The thing that stands out about all the stories is their Indianness that indefinable quality one first discerned in mulk Raj Anand and later in R. K. Narayan (The week 1-7)”.

Colonial rule, pre-partition and partition days in India have led most of the Indian English fictionists to deal with a new genre of literature, that is, ‘transition’ literature. This is also one of the prominent themes of Manoj Das. The erosion of traditional bucolic existence by modern life- the passage of India from colonial rule to independence- and the socio economic political complexities created thereafter offers a wide range of situations for the author to deal with. In the introduction to the book The Submerged Valley and other Stories the publisher Dick Batstone Says:

Born in a remote seaside village of Orissa, some twenty miles from the nearest railway station, Manoj Das grew up during the heady period leading to independence. His work shows familiarity with every aspect of Indian village life, and also with the effects of change on the feudal society that was breaking up, and the predicament of people formerly of some importance caught up in the social upheavals involved in the making of the new India (Intro ix).

What actually concerned him about this transition has been written by him in his editorial of the Heritage of January 1989 issue. Here, we get an important clue to appreciate the theme of transition in several of his stories. The writing is:

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 emphasized 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 excluding) as seventeen hundred slums in search of a city... (6-7)

The author's anguish over the end of the age-old Indian village is quite obvious in the above passage. It is reflected in several of his stories. This transition happens with gradual replacement of a feudal system by a new capitalist economy. This is hinted at in "Pages from the Diary of Raghuvir Singh (1810-1880)" and again beautifully captured in the plight of an ageing village actor in "The Gold Medal". The actor suddenly finds himself without a patron, as a result of the growing impoverishment of his Zamindar beneficiary. Finally the village also has to reckon with the advent of grandiose national development schemes, which constitute the inevitable fall-out of a centralized bureaucratic machinery and unplanned industrial and urban growth. This is reflected in "The Submerged Valley" where the construction of a dam threatens to submerge the entire village and erase it from the national cartograph and public consciousness. At the close of the tale, although Abolkara, the mute witness to the apocalypse is rescued, the village sinks inexorably into oblivion.

Manoj Das, as it is discussed earlier, records an era of transition at three levels in three fronts: its passage from a colony into a free country; the passing of feudalism (the Zamindari system) and the transformation of innocent villages into hick towns. All these three transitions are vividly portrayed in his

novel Cyclones. Prof. Shiv K. Kumar in the course of a review of the novel recounts:

Ingeniously patterned around an earth-shaking cyclone that ravages the village of Kusumpur, it also symbolizes 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 consels 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” .

This novel might have been titled “The Death of a River” because as technology invades the Kheya, 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 (The Hindustan Times 33)

A Tiger at Twilight, the novel abounds in facts of Indian life in transition.

The author says in the introductory note to the novella:

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 (3).

The typical Indian feudal world has vanished. In fact, the experience of being uprooted and dispossessed is a powerful and recurring leitmotif in Manoj Das's stories. In "Time for a style" we will see the reaction of a former zamindar to the challenges of transition. Hrishikesh, 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 was away. Long ago, in his youth, the land lord had once tried to look fashionable with long hair. His father did not let him do that. Now when the old barber, loyal Chaitan, who has perhaps guessed what might have happened to the zamindar during his absence goes to his master and offers his service, the zamindar informs him that he has decided to go stylish once again, after decades, and grow long hair. This decision made by the Zamindar reveals that he is unable to cope with the modern ways, and the changes wrought by time.

The change of old world orders leads to another changes: the change of values. In the two stories “The Brothers” and “The Old Man and the Camel” the author attempts to portray faithfully freedom fighters caught in the transitional point of shifting values, and the tragedy that lies in their inability to accept the change.

The perversion of values is yet another theme which Manoj Das has dealt in the context of changing India. In “Operation Bride”, the bride, made to live by sophisticated electronic devices suggests a human existence devoid of any spirit behind the tinsel glitter of our jaundiced civilization. Here lies the satire of the sensitive humanist who rarely offends but only focuses on the pathetic plight of the fallen man through a criss-cross of humour and pathos.

“Sharma and the Wonderful Lump”, is another example of this kind. This is the story of one Mr. Sharma, a dutiful clerk at the Roolal Textiles, who has a growth on his head. He is sent to USA for an operation but situations take a different turn. His lump or aboo is recognized as a medical wonder by the doctors and other Americans. Sharma is now out to exploit the promises held out by his wonderful lump. He becomes a celebrity first, then in a bid to earn more and more money he poses with a slut for the photograph of his wonderful lump to be published in a sensational magazine. One event worse than the other follows and the story 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.

Another story “He who rode the Tiger” and stories under the caption “The Panchtantra for Adults” are also symbolic representations of decadent values. More over in his novel Cyclones Manoj Das has presented vivid accounts of transition and degeneration of values following it. The author has subtly dealt with the wide changes brought in this phase, crammed with the eclipse of feudalism, birth of “Populist politics”, communal riots, rise of Communism, and the general awakening of the masses. The hypocrisy and selfishness of the so-called patriots and assorted leaders are brought out in a skillful fashion. Innocent villagers are turning into sceptics. Rumour-mongering, issuing of false statements and supply of weapons are some of the events which change the minds of the simple villagers and their age-old beliefs and values get a tremendous shock.

Romance or romantic Love, as a theme is not quite pronounced in the stories of Manoj Das nor he has dealt with love in its superficial sense. In fact, love in its ordinary sense does not find any conspicuous place in his works. Though he has not dared to deal with this profound subject, yet there are hints of it, hints of a search for it in some of his stories. Love in its subtler and broader sense is not totally banished from his works. In a story like “A Letter from the Last Spring” we see it in Reena’s empathy with the old professor for whom she sacrifices the only letter she has received from her

mother. In “Sita’s Marriage”, there is a faint notion of love in Sita receiving a feel of it through her wedding with Rama in her dream and therefore leaving the world untimely. In his novella A Tiger at Twilight the love of the protagonist Dev for the Raja’s invalid daughter “Balika” has certainly done a magic. It transforms the life of the childlike Balika when she is able to understand things and walks into the morning light in a rather unbelievable manner.

Though there are no clear descriptions of love-making scenes, romantic or passionate exchanges between a man and a woman, yet one can discern flashes of romantic love in some of his stories. Whether it is Chinmoy Babu’s for Aunty Roopwati in the story “The Misty Hour”, Prof Ashok’s love for Meena in “A Bridge in the Moonlit Night”, Subrato Das’s fascination for the beautiful daughter of the Zamindar Chowdhuri in “The Irrational” or it is of Prafulla Babu’s for the girl whom he had once requested for a kiss in the story “Smiles and...”, all are incomplete stories of love and romance. These characters are groping for love through-out their lives but there is no fruition of the same for them.

The theme of love in the stories of Manoj Das has not yet achieved its fullness as the author is still aspirant to tackle this theme in future if he gets the right inspiration.

‘Helplessness’ as a theme is treated distinctly in the stories of Manoj Das. In every human life, there comes a time when one feels utterly helpless. Even the most powerful king of Lanka, Ravana, understood this when

he died a wretched death in the hands of his supreme rival Rama. A basic helplessness underlies every life on earth. But sometimes a human being becomes more helpless as he is always driven by his false pride, vanity, self made ideas and a wrong attitude towards life.

In the story "A Night in the Life of the Mayor", the Mayor of Madhuvan had laughed at his old professor, Sudarshan Roy when at the corporation meeting the latter had narrated the hazards wrought by stray cows and bulls, particularly of an omnivorous cow who had eaten up his grand daughter's psychology Honours note-books just before her examination. At this point the old professor had wept and Divyasimha, the Mayor, had obviously laughed at him. He did not know then that the tragedy which had made the old professor helpless would be repeated in his own life after four hours only. He did not even imagine what helplessness' as referred by the old professor would mean for him. At that time he just pooh-poohed it away arguing with himself, "Helplessness? No. He had never known it. He never lacked the powers that matter- of mind, men and money" (DHOS 57) But that 'helplessness' exploded on him with full force to make him realize how powerful and devastating it could be. At the evening Divyasimha had come to a lonely part of the riverbank and could not resist his temptation to have a full bath in the river. He stripped himself of his clothes except the underwear and started swimming in the cool and inviting water of the river. Suddenly he felt a fish entering into his underwear and to be free from the tickling sensation he took off the underwear and it slipped out of his hand and drifted away in the steady current. Because it

was already dark he thought he would not have any problem to leave the water and put on his clothes.

His speculation went wrong. That 'omnivorous cow appeared on the scene and chewed up all his clothes. The naked Divyasimha shouted, chased the animal but in vain. Perplexed, he was thinking his next' course of action when the headlights of a jeep focused on him. Out of fear he jumped into the river again lest he would be seen by others in that naked state. The jeep left the place and with this his hopes are gone. The mayor could not reveal his miserable condition to anybody. Stricken by shame and indignation he now woke up to his own aloneness and utter 'helplessness'. He cried aloud.

In the story 'The Mystery of the Missing Cap' both the minister and his host Maharana cry simultaneously when the mystery of the minister's missing cap is revealed to him. Shri Maharana, a happy villager becomes ambitious to join politics and 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. The arrangement for the reception has certain grandeur in it:

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 every day 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, and How do you nurse this long and broad universe! (SF145)

Everything was normal until it was found that the Hon'ble Minister's white cap was missing. A crisis dawned in that remote village. Shri Maharana was apparently worried. It seemed to all a mysterious thing indeed. But the narrator of the story, a boy of the village knew the mystery of that missing cap and he revealed it to Moharana. 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. This was announced in the public meeting before a mammoth gathering to prolonged applause.

The minister was quite satisfied thinking his own greatness as estimated by others. He decided to remain bareheaded for that whole night as a mark of respect to that unknown lover of his. Shri Maharana though handled the situation with his timely action was feeling guilty as it was not in his nature to tell lie. The situation had made him completely helpless to do so. Before the departure of the minister the mystery was revealed. It came as a terrible

shock both to the minister and to Moharana. A half-domesticated monkey handed the cap to the minister in the most genial way. In the words of the narrator:

My heart beats had trebled. Looking at Shri Moharana's face I saw an extremely pitiable image-pale as death.

The bewildered minister mumbled out, "Err...er...isn't this one the very cap taken away by the noble man?"

And something most fantastic came out of the dry lips of Shri Moharana who seemed to be on the verge of collapsing: 'Yes, Yes, this is the noble man...?'

His eyes bulging out, the minister managed to ask, 'what...what did you say?'

But Shri Moharana is no condition to say anything more. He broke into tears. Next moment, I saw the Hon'ble minister Fisheries and Fine Arts weeping too (Das 152).

Both Shri Moharana and the Minister understood each other's helplessness in such a situation. The Minister was lost to politics and Shri Moharana did not aspire for a political career thereafter.



Avani, a leading politician and an elected president of his party goes through a traumatic experience in the story 'The Assault'. He is attacked by a billy goat and becomes invalid. The recollection of that horrific memory is a heart rending experiences for him:

But he would still get spasms and Shivers--- result of an eerie mixture of horror, humiliation and helplessness whenever he would recollect the first moment of his meeting with his tormentor (SF, 184).

In spite of his V.V.I.P identity, his popularity and social political status, Avani could never forget those moments of helplessness.

Ignorance, lack of proper knowledge, superstitions leave a human being in an awfully desperate condition like the young zamindar in 'The Owl'. The college educated youngman fires a shot from his gun aiming at the hooting owl who resides in the old temple of the village Vishalpur. For the villagers the owl is sacred. It has gained certain occult status. Now they think that the owl is dead and are sure that the Zamindar would die as a consequence of his action. The youngman's reasoning could not fight with the collective blind beliefs of the villagers. He is down with fever-and dies. His dead body is carried away to his own villages at night. The leading villagers, half-dazed by the tragedy, keep sitting on the meadow when, just before dawn, the owl is heard hooting. This shows how the Zamindar helplessly becomes a victim of the collective superstitions.

The human helplessness is presented in all its ludicrous aspects and proves how the vanities of men have rendered them all miserable human wrecks. The story 'Trespassers' shows the plight of Roy Sahib who was once a snob and maintained a distance from his ordinary neighbours. In his old age the Roy couple could not find shelter near their two 'worthy' sons and led a desolate life in the old mansion.

"The Statue Breakers are coming" is another example. Yameshwar Gupta, a former mayor, 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 big national leaders. Several statues have been bombed by them. Gupta desperately tries to alert the authorities but no body pays any heed to it. In his desperate attempt to convince one and all about his own greatness Gupta caricatures himself and seems very helpless before his won ideation of himself. At last when he finds that the statue-breakers do not care for his statue, he bursts out before them to argue with them that he were actually great and his statue deserved a bombing!

Sometimes, without any apparent reason a human being suffers and helplessly bears with it. In "Dusky Horizon", Jagatbandhu has witnessed a number of deaths in his family. Only his grand daughter 'Lily' has remained as the sole consolation and companion of his old age. Lily, a sweet smart girl one day goes out on an expedition to the Peacock Hill with three boys of the

village Nabin, Hatu and the narrator of the story who was a boy then. Half-way to the top they meet with a violent storm and hurry their way back. Lily, who cannot see without her glasses as she has a very poor vision, loses the glasses. Under heavy down pour little Lily cannot proceed further. She falls into a precipice and meets her tragic end. The following narration shows clearly the mental state of Jagatbandhu:

All hurried down, Jagatbandhu with the support of others. He sat down and examined his grand-daughter-perhaps the last case in his career as a physician and continued to sit still. Even thereafter it drizzled for a while. The lanterns gave way. The moaning from the forest seemed to come closer. But Jagatbandhu, taking Lily's head on his lap sat like a statue. None dared to disturb him.

Lily was buried on that very spot, the next day, Jagatbandhu then left the place and, in a few hours the village. It was clouded morning and the whole village had fallen into the spell of silence. Once before he had left our village, in a somewhat similar situation, half a century ago. But then he had in him the spirit of a rebel, the dream of leading a life independent of things rotten he was leaving behind. It was so different to day! From distance we looked on as he got into a bullock cart. Later in life, often when I had an occasion to pray to god, I said, "Grant me, Lord, that never again should I see a man as lonely as Jagatbandhu!" (DHOS 21)

Man's basic, intrinsic 'helplessness' is deeply felt by the author and he wants the same to be felt by his readers also, so that they can empathise with those poor human beings who suffer helplessly either in the face of circumstances or in the hands of providence. Very often he makes his characters laughing stocks that are ridiculed and humiliated to learn the simple truths or lessons of life.

But their predicament is not totally hopeless. Here develops another theme of Manoj Das's stories: disillusionment. All his characters who are seemingly helpless are disillusioned thereafter. 'The Mayor', 'Shri Moharana' 'Avani' 'The Minister', 'Roy Sahib', 'Yameshwar Gupta' all are shattered piece of ego disillusioned and they rebound with unexpected resilience to a throbbing acceptance of life. Disillusionment indeed is a cardinal strand in Manoj Das's writings. It helps the characters to grow inwardly.

And this inner growth may lead them to a greater psychic and spiritual experience. This is the most powerful aspect of Manoj Das's stories which will be elaborately discussed in the chapter following.

The stories of Manoj Das are rich and varied. They open up new possibilities of life before the minds of the readers. The hidden treasure of Indian tradition and culture, the scenic beauty of pastoral India are presented with sweetness and vigour. The motif of his stories is no other than human life with Nature in its back drop. The human predicament, the meaningful-truth

concealed behind the obvious, is the hall mark of each story and a pertinent reason for its inclusion.

As it is already discussed, the themes of Manoj Das reveal a marked preference for problems confronting ordinary mortals in their day to day life or existence. Both outer and inner realities are exposed in the stories. He writes to encompass life in its immense fun and simplicity.

Here emerges the vision of the writer. According to Samal:

The vision of an artist means how an artist views life and visualizes things. It refers to his foresight and insight, his philosophy and attitude to life and the world. Vision is born out of an intense awareness, of life and a profound perception and subtle understanding of truth and reality (39).

Manoj Das, since his school days, had been searching for a greater vision for humankind. He became a Marxist but was not satisfied as every political theory has its limitation. He 'evolved' into Sri Aurobindo's world. He says, "My quest for the meaning of life, for the destiny of man, led me to Sri Aurobindo". (Sabda Newsletter 17).

Fiction is not a spiritual discourse. It is a projection of life with its large range of possibilities both positive and negative. But if the writer in his personal consciousness has a vision- a subtle and meaningful

conviction-it will most probably be reflected in his fiction. One may or may not detect it in one particular story or novel, but it should become evident in the totality of his creation.

So, Manoj Das's vision lies in the futuristic vision of his spiritual master-Sri Aurobindo. He has great faith in Sri Aurobindo's vision of the destiny of man in relation to evolution and his assurance to the mankind that all human calculation would fail before the evolutionary force behind our life, that man is an evolutionary being, which despite all signs to the contrary proceeds towards a meaningful future. Thus, the vision of Manoj Das is chiefly humanistic. He trusts in the basic goodness of every human being. He holds that man has not basically altered or become worse, but the rapid change in Science and technology has rendered him worse: "Hence, a thrust towards a qualitatively superior human consciousness is needed" (The Hindu II).

This new vision of man has been manifested in his creative writings. His stories are essentially studies in human character. When he deals with his characters, he tries to make their inner life of feeling and motive real to the readers, giving meaning to their actions to make them convincing and credible.

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## CHAPTER-II

### ***THE SPRITUAL AND PSYCHIC ELEMENTS***

The journey of man in this world is outwardly towards more knowledge, more technological advancements, comforts and material progress, but inwardly a human being's journey is from ignorance of the self to the knowledge of the self; from an imperfect state of being to a more perfect and harmonized state of being; from a half-conscious living to a living in total awareness and moreover man's journey is towards a luminous and glorious future with the complete realization of the true meaning of life. The record of man's inner progress is there in the Vedas, the Upanisads, the Bhagvadgita and other creations of many realized persons, Gurus, Yogis, Philosophers, Artists and Spiritual aspirants. While philosophy attempts at an understanding of this journey of man, religion prescribes certain rules and paths leading to the attainment of the truth. Literature reflects it. It deals with the life of an individual living in a society at a particular time and age. The outward and inward flow of experience in an individual's life gives us a glimpse or a complete vision of his psychic and spiritual progress. Like all roads lead to Rome, all attempts to understand life lead to eternity.

Manoj Das, the author in discussion, is a man committed to the understanding of man's eternal search. Way back in 1963, he joined the Sri Aurobindo Ashram to undertake an inner journey as an Ashramite, though he retained his 'Svadharna' by not forsaking his profession of teaching and his commitment to literature.

A student leader, a zealous marxist who once had a bright chance of entering into a promising political career left it for good when he became aware of the fact : "No ideal can deliver the desired goods as long as the human consciousness, remains in the state in which it is today" (Interview: Sun Times 3). In the same interview he says, "True spirituality is nothing but a science of consciousness" and his change of attitude is in keeping with his progressive quest for "the meaning of life as a whole including the meaning of suffering."

Spirituality gives a new meaning to everything. Today mankind is passing through an evolutionary crisis. A deep spiritual faith is quite necessary to grow up in one's consciousness. To the question "whether this faith can bring a change to our present predicament strengthened by our so-called scientific and technological progress of scientific truth and material growth", Manoj Das answers echoing Sri Aurobindo:

Yes, but it must be a faith supported by an aspiration to grow beyond mind; we must know that all our scientific discoveries are in a way an exploration of the known. Nothing need be dismissed; nothing need be

shunned in an ascetic manner, but all our endeavours can be an offering towards the fulfilment of human destiny- the spiritual destiny. Spirituality is not asceticism or rejection of the world, but giving a Godward turn to everything (the Sun Times 3).

This belief, this faith is truly reflected in his writing and creations. His conception and conviction of spirituality is something higher than the general understanding of the same. In a personal interview with this researcher he has clearly stated, “All that has helped man to grow in his consciousness, has led him to aspirer, to explore the *raison d’ etre* of life, is spirituality. Needless to say, it has nothing to do with dogma, creed, rituals, superstitions taboos and moral laws. Spirituality is an adventure in consciousness” (Personal Interview).

The term ‘Psychic’ on the other hand is synonymous with ‘soul’ or ‘spirit’ according to any leading dictionary. But beyond the lateral meaning there is something for us to understand in order to find the connection between the ‘Psychic’ and the ‘Spiritual’. It is best explained by Sri Aurobindo as:

The Psychic being is formed by the soul in its evolution. It supports the mind, vital, body, grows by their experiences, carries the nature from life to life. At first, it is veiled by mind, vital, body, but as it grows, it becomes capable of coming forward and dominating the mind, life and body; in the ordinary man it depends on them for expression and is not able to take them up and freely use them. When the psychic being can by

Sadhana become dominant and freely use its instruments, then the impulse toward the divine becomes complete and the transformation of mind, vital and body, not merely their liberation becomes possible (Selections from the works of Sri Aurobindo and The mother 19)

Though, it seems outwardly that there is no difference between the psychic and the spiritual as both include a human being's aspiration for light and truth, still there remains a subtle difference between the two. The Mother puts it in these terms as an answer to a question:

The psychic plane belongs to the personal manifestation; the psychic is that which is divine in you put out to be dynamic in the play. But when we speak of the spiritual we are thinking of something that is concentrated in the Divine rather than in the external manifestation.

When I speak of the Psychic or the spiritual, I mean things that are very deep and real behind the flat surface of the words and intimately connected even in their difference (Selection from Sri Aurobindo and The mother 36).

From the above explanations given by the great masters, we derive a simple conclusion to serve our purpose that the psychic being in the human being is the manifestation of his spiritual aspiration.

As literature is not spiritual discourse what we have to search for in the fiction of Manoj Das is, in fact, this manifestation of the 'psychic' which is brought forward by the concerned character's spiritual aspirations--sometimes conscious and sometimes a preparation unknown to his outer mind. This manifestation opens up a higher possibility not only for the redemption and sublimation of the characters but also for the readers to elevate their consciousness to a higher perception of different elements of human nature. A. Russell, a British critic says about the many worlds of Manoj Das in the following terms:

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 the realists conceive it to be (Quoted in: DHOS, cover page)

The waking up of human consciousness is not a question of time. It is an explosion; a sudden acceleration of the evolutionary process which takes place at the very source of one's being and prevents the crystallization and the hardening, of the psychological entity. It is an explosion in lucidity and in insight. This causes a mutation in human psyche. Many of the characters of Manoj Das have undergone similar transformations in their consciousness. At first they seem to be unchangeable due to their hard surface personality, their inflated ego, but underneath there is an inner preparation to grow above their limitations quite unknown to themselves. This inner preparation is there like a

seed underneath the earth waiting for the right atmosphere to burst open. Man as an evolutionary being consciously knows not whence he had started this journey. But his Psychic self knows it well. Only it waits for a suitable moment—a moment when all illusions vanish before a clear conscience, before a wholesome understanding. This disillusionment acts as a cardinal force to lead a character to sudden illumination in some of the stories of Manoj Das.

In the story “A Night in the Life of a Mayor”, the mayor falls into such a helpless situation, all of a sudden that it opens before him the door to inner realization.

Divyasimha, the mayor of Madhuvan was quite jubilant with his newly-own victory in the mayoral elections when his old professor Sudarshan Roy, the person defeated by Divyasimha, attracted his attention to the hazards wrought by a particular notorious and omnivorous cow who had chewed up the psychology note books of his grand daughter during her preparations for the Honours examination. Even Prof. Roy shed tears of helplessness and disappointment while narrating the tragic incidence. For Divyasimha, this was a sheer amusing thing. He laughed at it; laughed at Prof. Roy’s unnecessary fear and thought. The matter in fact, was very trivial for a person like him who had ‘mind, men and money’. He felt an urge to put an argument with Sudarshan Roy to defeat him again in words but that thirst remained insatiated as the latter wished to remain alone with his tragedy.

Divyasimha who was now in complete possession of his inflated 'ego' felt a burning sensation of humiliation and needed a lonely spot and cooling breeze to calm down himself. He came to the lonely side of the river and longed for a plunge in the cool water. The time was evening and no one was there. The Mayor took off all his wearings except the underwear and descended into the river. He had to take off the underwear too when a tiny fish entered into it causing a tickling sensation. He did not even care to recover it when the river current drifted it away. Bare, naked the mayor was still confident of his own secured state in that lonely part of the river when suddenly he could see something devouring his shirt and the banian. Divyasimha was possessed by a terrible apprehension that it could be the dangerous cow who featured so prominently in the corporation meeting. In fact it was the same cow. Before Divyasimha could promptly come to action the cow had already stomached all his clothes. Stunned, bewildered Divyasimha stood on the river bank when the headlights of a jeep focused him. With shame and fear the Mayor hopped towards the river like a frog.

Incidents that followed next were not favourable for Divyasimha. He could not present himself with his bare body before the people who assembled there on the river bank; particularly before the professor, Divyasimha has laughed at, just four hours ago. Divyasimha let himself be pushed away by the currents of the river. Everybody who had come in search of him left the place.



Now Divyasimha, the mighty mayor of Madhuban had no chance of rescue from such a plight. He felt terribly trapped and helpless. He could not have imagined a miserable condition like this for himself before as he had always been taken care of in affluence. He had not wept for years. But now lying in a small boat which he had unfastened from a tree somewhere near the bank, the Mayor, in his consciousness grew into a different reality. The river seemed a mother to him and the blue sky above the father. Nature's benediction made his inner turbulence calm. He preferred to feel 'helpless' like a baby. He wept like a baby in the lap of his mother. His 'ego' was swept away with his tears. Now he is a man, bare like the river, open like the sky, nothing covers his clear consciousness. He became greatly relaxed and calm. The following description shows the Mayor's unique experience of peace and tranquility :

After his most memorable few hours Divyasimha now felt, somewhere deep within, a hitherto unknown kiss of calm.

Was the sky always so beautifully blue and were the stars always so very elegant and tranquil? He wondered. The little boat glided on. Each cell of his body was tickled with the gentle cool breeze. Along with the darkness that was slowly fading his anguish and anxiety too was leaving him. The experience was so concrete that he thought he could have seen them leaving were they not immediately swallowed by departing darkness

(DHOS 55)

The experience is really great for Divyasimha. His consciousness attains a state of calm where clear understanding dawns. Now he is no more his former self. This experience illumines the dark corners of his mind.

In addition to this, he found help from some poor people who were living in a hamlet near the bank of the river. A little girl fetched for him his father's towel. In that girl's affectionate concern, he saw the grace of the Divine Mother. He narrated his condition to the poor fisherman, the little girl's father without hesitation. He was enriched by the understanding and sympathy shown to him.

He rode into a bus to the city. Now with his clear conscience, he is no more bothered about the people of the city rather he thinks it is his prime duty to go immediately to Prof. Ray and tell him, "I beg to be pardoned, Sir. Now I know what helplessness is; I believe" I earned my adulthood last night "DHOS 62).".

Really this 'adulthood' is the unfolding of his psyche.

In the life of a human being, realization dawns all of a sudden and he understands its true value and import. Sometimes a cruel bang on the closed door of his consciousness makes him realize what he is; thus making him delve into the inner part of his being which has remained hidden for many years. It may come late but nothing is late for the evolution of a human consciousness.

Avani, the budding politician, received an unusual type of letter of good-will from a venerable freedom-fighter and a former leader just when he wanted to enjoy his newly gained victory in the state elections. The letter read like this:

Alas, dear Avani, it took me six long decades to realize that I was hardly different from those who I thought were inferior to me. How at last this realization dawned on me is a matter too personal. It brought me surprise mixed with remorse, but was followed by a sense of peace. To be free from the obligation to appear special in one's speech and conduct-- is that not a bliss? Avani, I am happy at your success. You sought my good wishes. Well, all I can do is pray that you don't wait till you're sixty for a similar realization (SF179)

Surely, at that proud moment of his life Avani had not expected to hear such wise words from any one. He cared a little to understand the import of the good wishes meant for him then But now, sleeping in the hospital bed Avani understands the meaning of his former politician's advice, word for word. A many time minister of the Assembly, a reputed and successful politician, and presently the party's president, Avani is lying in the hospital bed in a severely injured condition. Naturally every one in the government and media, his political rivals even besides his family members and relatives, are keeping an eye on the improvement of his condition so that he can relate the story of his plight before all of them. His own son and daughter-in-law are urging upon him to

narrate the story of his physical assault in a coherent manner so that the assaultants could be punished. But they don't know that something strange has happened to Avani, far more strange than any type of physical assault, to recount which Avani has to understand its implication fully, himself.

Avani haunts his memory of the dreadful incident of the fateful day. In the most material way he had gone to grab the land of a widow, close to his paternal home in the village, for his contractor son's ambitious desire to build a multi-storeyed apartment there. Avani was quite sure of himself: his position, his position, his recognition and power. But destiny's design was something else. Before approaching the widow, he encountered an unimaginable circumstance. He had a terrible confrontation not from the side of any human being but from the side of a billy-goat-- a fierce looking creature with revengeful yellow eyes. As if ordained by providence, it attacked Avani with full force. Avani, in his utterly perplexed and panic-stricken state even behaved in a ludicrous manner—pleading with the he-goat in these words, “Perhaps you don't know me. I am a VIP, rather a VVIP. Please be reasonable and ask yourself before taking the next step: should a man of my status go down in history as one trampled by a billy-goat (SF186)?” But the grimmest thing happened. The beast attacked him. How he left at that moment of crisis is described like:

He began rolling down the mound. And with each turn of his body was peeled off of a certain value he cherished, each collision with a shrub

or a clod of hardened earth demolished one of the numerous monuments of his achievement (187).

A human being lives in perpetual ignorance of the self until he gets a sudden light in the form of a shock which takes away the veil of darkness. He then sees his true self; even helplessness renders him to be humble and try to understand the reality. Avani after getting the humiliation of his life is no longer under the illusion of false glory and hypocritical concern of others. He desires for light and freedom.

This is the turning point of a human life. When a person's inner being is ready for transformation even farcical external situations present themselves as opportunities. We have seen it in the story described above, yet a story like "The Mystery of the Missing Cap" will give us more scope to penetrate into human psyche.

The story in its description though has many comical elements; it leads us to such an end which transcends everything. Shri Moharana, a man unambitious and honest by nature finds himself carried away by the waves of patriotism and emerging politics at the time India gained independence. The new situation is like this:

Came independence. As is well known, the ancient land of India has had four major castes from time immemorial. But during the days immediately preceding independence a new caste was emerging all over

the country-that of the patriots. The 15<sup>th</sup> 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 (Das 1,MOMC).

Shri Maharana was caught in this vortex of political ambition. He wished 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. A grand reception was duly arranged for the Minister Babu Virkishore with Shri Maharana as the chairman of the Preparatory Committee.

Everything went well until it was found that the Minister's white cap was missing. It happened when the minister was taking rest after being served a sumptuous lunch at Shri Maharana's house. A crisis overtook the village. Shri Maharana was in a critical condition. The Public Relationships officer took it as a 'deep-rooted conspiracy'. But the child who narrates the story knew the truth and confided it to Shri Maharana. The bare fact was so humiliating that Shri Maharana did not intend to expose it. Rather he found some good explanation for the mystery of the missing cap and convincingly put forth it in a public meeting before thousands of people who gathered there to hear the minister's speech. But the crude truth exploded in an anti-climax just before the departure of the minister. That the cap was neither stolen nor a certain nobleman did take it to preserve it as a sacred memento, it was the mischief of a half-tamed monkey. This truth was revealed so unexpectedly that both Shri Maharana and the Minister became utterly stupefied and

speechless; “Shri Maharana was in no condition to say anything more. He broke into tears. Next moment I saw the Hon’ble Minister of Fisheries and Fine Arts weeping too” (MOMC 8).

This anti-climax reflected how helpless a man could be in the face of a particular situation. Both Shri Maharana and the minister soon vanished from the politics. The narrator concludes, “I strongly feel that it was the episode of the cap that changed the course of their lives” (8).

As it is known Shri Maharana had never spoken a lie. But when under a compelling situation he had to do so, he did it before thousands of people. His true nature could not stand this. He became conscious of his ‘swadharma and kept himself away from politics. To evaluate the story Manaj Das says in an interview.

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 (Interview Sun Times 3).

Man has always been attracted towards the earth and the sky. While he is deeply attached to the earth, he cannot avoid the call of the sky. A man’s consciousness is like the vast expanse of the sky. It is the symbol of

infinity. The protagonist in the novel, The Escapist has also had this beaoning from the sky more often though he could not understand it fully until he reached a certain phase of his life. The protagonist, Padmalochan, a village urchin, who turned into Baba Padmananda, a godman, in course of the novel and in course of his life's journey; walks a long way in the depth of his consciousness till he quite understands the import of the hints sent to him by the sky above. The chain of actions leads to the opening of his psychic being through his own inner quest.

The novel is a recollection of events by the protagonist who writes in the Epilogue a letter to his benefactor, "My narrative may read like a novel. This too is a Yajna-an offering to the past--a past that had let me transcend it instead of keeping me in its bondage (Das 156)".

The real intention of the author behind the novel is to impart the message that a funny or farcical beginning of an individual's life can lead him to discover his psychic truth through inward journey and progression.

Padmalochan has been made a puppet in the hands of providence since the beginning of the novel. A village boy, he arrives in the city in search of his luck, first serves a politician and after his death approaches Jayanta Thakore, a liquor-baron for a job. Here, by a combination of forces, he slips into his new incarnation, that of a Godman, Swami Padmananda, as Ranjita Devi, Thakore's indulgent wife sees him. In the



Introduction of the novel by Sachidananda Mohanty this situation is viewed as:

The chance meeting of Padmalochan, the boy, in search of a job, with Ranjita Devi is a classic example of the role of co-incidence in human life. The feat of Utkatasana to which Padmalochan takes recourse under a funny but credible pressure of circumstance, amounts to a miracle so far as Ranjita Devi is concerned, obviously because she was thirsting for some solace from some body that she could look upon as an agent of the forces supernatural; she was yearning for a miracle. Thereafter the transition of the job- seeker to the status of a Baba is almost ordained by her irresistible subconscious will (Intro).

The following dialogues and Padmalochan's own recount of the incident clearly tell us about the metamorphosis:

"What's the name by which people address you, Baba?"

"Padma....."

"Padmananda, Swami Padmananda, I know".

"Thus, midway up a stair case, one fateful summer noon, I, Padmalochan Pramanik, an ordinary boy from an ordinary village named Govardhanpur, metamorphosed into Swami Padmananda". (Das The Escapist, II)

There are events in human life which are pre-destined, pre-ordained by Eternity. A penniless job-seeker Padmalochan was viewed by Ranjita Devi as a great saint who could perform any miracle. Her child-like faith in him made him not to disappoint her. He stayed there, as Baba Padmananda. He also believed truly in what he quoted to Ranjita Devi as a mystic epigram; "My daughter, there cannot be a situation in life which would not prove to be God's grace, if one had the right attitude towards life and if one aspired for one's inner growth (Das 47). But there remains a large gap between a human's psychic self and his egoistic self. To purify one's consciousness one has to understand the complicated elements lying in-between. A constant aspiration helps the seeker to achieve this. Padmalochan after assuming the role of Baba Padmananda tries to be 'true' to his inner commands and to be worthy of the simple but poignant faith of Ranjita Devi. He consigns himself to a sort of penance by taking the vow of silence with only one meal a day after the sunset for long three months. He is put in the garden house of Ranjita Devi--a cute cottage with a view and with a good library. There with the observance of outer silence, Padmananda tries to move inward and achieve inner silence too. At first it becomes difficult; a chattering mind seems formidable for him, but by his prayer to goddess Durga and by keeping a vigil on his mind he becomes able to slow his thoughts. The description below gives us a clear picture of his mind during meditation:

Following the little I knew about meditation, I closed my eyes and imagined that mother Durga was not outside but inside me, not in the

portrait but in my heart. I concentrated on it. I tried to catch by their forelocks and hurl out of me the arbitrary thoughts which made my mind a market-place. I then tried to keep the doors of my mind tightly shut.

But the expelled thoughts would impishly sneak in, never letting me know the precise moment when they did so and I would find, to my horror and disgust, that the tranquility I had achieved for a moment had once again given way to the chaos and hullabaloo of a forenoon fish-market. I never reached even the brink of Samadhi or any other kind of trance but after repeated efforts and diving deeper and deeper, I had an occasional feel of the serene and I knew for certain that there was a vast calm under the turbulent surface of my mind and its activities, though the moments when I had such experiences were lamentably brief. How much I wished that I could cling to them. Only if I could, I was sure, all sorts of fear and guilt would be reduced to a fading memory (Das 61-62)

Padmananda, however little he might be conscious of his inner being his psychic self has all the while remained steady in his aspiration, has kept a vigil on his mental activities and turned inward when faced by an outer challenge. As Sri Aurobindo puts it, "Aspiration, constant and sincere, and the will to turn to the Divine alone are the best means to bring forward the psychic" (The Psychic Being, 114). As we see Padmalochan never lacks it.

Outward circumstances change rapidly. A few days before the completion of his vow of silence, he breaks it unconsciously and does not

pretend to go into it again. He becomes aware of the critical situation of Ranjita Devi. He meets her on the verge of her death and his granting of the boon at the insistence of Ranjita Devi, 'to depart at the earliest' comes true and for some people it is a real miracle. Jayant Thakore takes advantage of Padmananda's growing reputation as a god man to influence the big people of his city. Padmalochan stays put as he imagines himself as Sushie's would-be saviour. Sushie is Ranjita Devi's daughter-in-law, an extra-ordinary woman with a far more evolved consciousness and is not dependent on anyone for any kind of help. Padmalochan realizes this later. Meanwhile he meets a group of seekers seeking for their mundane profit, but Padmananda's answers to them, quite unexpectedly are revealing and reflect his own inner progress. Situations take a sudden turn when Padmananda is given an invaluable diamond to hand it over to Sushie as a present for her by her late mother-in-law. That gem falls into the hands of Kumar, Sushie's half-crazy husband and afterwards is stolen by Jasmine, his father's cunning private secretary. Kumar hurts himself badly and is taken to hospital. Sushie, after a poignant conversation with Padmalochan accompanies Jayant Thakore to hospital as kumar needs blood which only Sushie can give. Padmalochan flees from the house of Thakore but is followed by his rowdies. They capture him and torture him to recover the gem as it is reported by Jasmine to Thakore that Padmalochan has stolen away the stuff.

The last scene of the novel before the Post-Script is quite important for us to understand the psychic revelation of Padmalochan. P. Raja views it in its true perspective:

In the poignant last scene we discover as much as Padmalochan himself discovers the strength he has silently gathered deep within him while the surface of his life, barring his momentary meetings with Sushie, was marked by a series of encounters with fortune-seekers, pleasure hunters, the vain glorious or the plain stupid. His inner being dominates him at this moment of anguish when, inside a damp and darkish chamber he is assaulted brutally, his tormentors desperately trying to extract from him something of which he is totally innocent (Book Review, Indian Literature )

This is how he reacts in the silence of his being when the rowdies demand the 'truth' out of him:

It was the most significant moment. I experienced in the fellow my most intimate friend, a fellow-seeker, and senior to me in our common quest. I was a mere creature of circumstances pushed into a seeker's role. But looking for the truth seemed to be this gentleman's conscious vocation. Indeed, what super-soul had taken charge of my budding soul just now! I was experiencing the crescendo leading to the finale of an existing orchestra. I also had a feeling parallel to it-of walking along a razor's edge-but about to reach the goal and breathe to my lung's fill (Das 148)

The above recounting of his experiences amidst torture and pain shows the expansion of consciousness which becomes as vast as the sky, as deep as the river and as luminous as the Milky Way. He is abandoned at midnight on the river bank. There, looking at the infinity he muses:

How long had the sky remained spread out like this? O my river, O my sky-and the stars! Will you teach me how to convey my unfathomably deep feelings for you--my gratitude to you?

O my sky, you are yourself a form of my sense of gratitude-- you're a form of myself. So many times you've conveyed this to me through subtle hints. At last you brought me the realization-you are I and I am you. You've always been above me, be it night or day. You've been always within and around me. But how little I knew you!

O my sky! O my milky way (Das 150)

The characters which are already discussed become aware of the facts about themselves that they are profoundly ignorant, that they are impotent to the point of helplessness and that the most valuable elements in their personality are unknown quantities existing "out there", as mental objects more or less completely independent of their control. This discovery may seem at first rather humiliating and even depressing. But if one wholeheartedly accepts them, the facts become a source of peace, a reason for serenity and cheerfulness. This awareness leads to understanding -- of a

deeper truth (the divine) within themselves--which sustains them, preserves them and gives them a long succession of second chances for living meaningfully. They experience an inner liberation, if they co-operate with this greater power, the divine self, an un-known quantity at once immanent and transcendent, at once physical and mental, at once subjective and objective.

Human consciousness-as it is, always remains clouded by chaotic movements of different kinds of vibrations, emanating from man's egoistic-self, from his desire, greed, envy, anger, and other unwanted elements of mind. In the depth of his being, there is always a wish to be free from all such entanglements. Sometimes, unknown to the outer self, a silent preparation inspired by the psychic being liberates a person and he tastes a great sense of freedom.

This happens for Kuman Tukan Roy one evening. Kumar Tukan Roy, one of the illegitimate sons of the late Raja Sahib of Mandarpur, has a pastime for hunting birds every afternoon in the marshland and valley spread out to distant horizon. That evening also he is out in his expedition. He locates a pair of green pigeons sitting on the topmost bough of the old banyan tree and takes his position aiming his gun at the birds. A third pigeon comes and sits in between the two. An elated Roy, while anxious to press the trigger, is suddenly dazzled by a flash of lightning across the clouds and the birds fly off. But unlike other evenings he does not become annoyed. His eyes get fixed in

the distant clouds and in the flight of birds who seem to him as “fairies of solace” melting away in the infinite.

This experience is quite new for him and prompts him to do something unusual:

He stood up abruptly and, leaving his gun on a rock, set off running pacing himself with the flight of doves overhead. He was pacing inwardly too, for he felt that the joy he was experiencing was not entirely new – it inspired a remote memory of something similar, He felt a strong curiosity for tracing its origin.

He succeeded before long. The joy he had just felt was the echo of a sensation he had fifty years ago when the Raja who exercised over him all the authority of a father but was not willing to allow him the status of a prince, had suddenly collapsed of a heart attack.

It was the thrill of freedom ( SE 154-155).

This time the thrill is of a different quality. It is not associated with any kind of selfish desire to be fulfilled without any obstruction.

The silent charm of the valley expands his vision. A vast sense of freedom dawns on him. The flying birds have “brushed away from his eyes the accumulated dust of many years (155) and left them pure and young. The



veil of ignorance is also taken off from his mind and he develops an insight and a penetrating vision to see into the life of things.

This experience works upon his consciousness transforming it into a purer one, liberating it from the old habits and inclinations. That night unlike the other occasions he eats a vegetarian meal happily. Not only that but the sense of freedom he has felt also makes him free the tiger, which was in captivity inside their personal zoo. He runs with the tiger into the deep forest as the latter is unaccustomed to it. Tired, exhausted, he takes rest on a flat rock in the deep forest and feels at one with the tiger in the plane of consciousness. He embraces death in perfect peace while his soul flies away into a new horizon, like the birds at twilight.

Manoj Das believes in the continuity of life. The history of evolution confirms this continuity. Man's inner growth is different from other inferior species. Sri Aurobindo has observed it in his masterly book The Life Divine as:

This terrestrial evolutionary working of Nature from matter to mind and beyond it has a double process: there is an outward visible process of physical evolution with birth as its machinery, for each evolved form of body housing its own evolved power of consciousness is maintained and kept in continuity by heredity; there is, at the same time, an invisible process of soul evolution with rebirth into ascending grades of form and consciousness as its machinery, the first by itself would mean only a cosmic evolution, for the

individual would be a quickly perishing instrument, and the race, a more abiding collective formulation, would be the real step in the progressive manifestation of the cosmic Inhabitant, the Universal Spirit: rebirth is an indispensable condition for any long duration and evolution of the individual being in the earth-existence. Each grade of cosmic manifestation, each type of form that can house the indwelling spirit, is turned by rebirth into a means for the individual soul, the psychic entity, to manifest more and more of its concealed consciousness; each life becomes a step in a victory over Matter by a greater progression of consciousness in it which shall make eventually Matter itself a means for the full manifestation of the Spirit (843)

The spiritual aspiration is innate in man. It is a silent process for some of the characters of Manoj Das. Sometimes the psychic growth becomes obvious at the last moment of the progression of a story or a novel. In the novel Cyclones, Sandeep Chowdhury's character reveals this growth making the end of a phase of his worldly life.

The protagonist of the novel, Sandip Chowdhury is the scion of a ruined feudal family of Kusumpur. He is the adopted son of the landlord Hari Chowdhury and his birth is somewhat shrouded in mystery. Hari Chowdhury disappears all of a sudden following a bizarre incident created by a drunkard youth of the village. Sandip is called back from his exciting college life where he has just been involved in freedom movement by participating in the bonfire of a bale of Lancashire cloth. Sandip's home-coming is followed by a terrible

cyclone which nearly causes devastation and leaves the villagers in the lurch. Sandip wholeheartedly helps the villagers during and after the storm. But his dream for a peaceful and settled life in Kusumpur gets a jolt when unwittingly he becomes involved in a revolt to stop the government's move to fill up their sweet little river Kheya and comes under suspicion of the police when one Navin contractor is killed. To avoid an arrest, he absconds into the jungle where he meets an ascetic Soumyadev. The sage's serene presence makes Sandip's inner-self unfold gradually. He gets answers to many of his queries. He learns naturally like a disciple in a Gurukulashram. He forgets everything except his quiet living in the presence of Soumyadev. He reads Gita, the sacred book, and becomes aware of "the plays of numerous forces around him and of a power sublime that embraced all the happenings, big and small"(Das Cyclones 116).

Sandip's sojourn in the forest is quite meaningful for him and contributes to his inner growth. He becomes aware of the role of his 'ego' in the act of his life. He delves deep into the subtle realities behind the surface realities. The following words of Soumyadev make the meaning of everything deep and revealing for him:

The very first thing one must learn is to look upon one's life as a perpetual process of growth, a journey from the prison-house of one's ego into infinity's freedom. Whatever be the experience of a given moment--happy

or unhappy must be taken as contributory to the process. This attitude not only brings a new awareness of life but also saves you so much anguish (17).

Sandip dreams of a sunrise-a new sunrise for the awakening of his soul. But his life's experiences are not ripe yet. He has to return to Kusumpur with the kind permission of Soumyadev when his new manager Ravi informs him that his former Gumastha Brindavan's widow is dying and wants to see Sandip for the last time. Sandip obliges her and she reveals the 'truth' of his birth which gives another shock to Sandip and leaves him totally disillusioned. He learns that he is not the son of Hari Chowdhury but an illegitimate off-spring of Brindavan and the maid who served Durgawati, Hari Chowdhury's wife.

Sandip's mental turbulence encounters a great storm outside. Communal riots on the eve of independence have exploded and innocent people are exploited. The fire of communal hatred spreads every where and killings of Hindus and Muslims suspend men's moral stand. The transition has wrought a cyclone in the minds and hearts of the people. Swayed by that inviolable turn of events Sandip is taken by force to prison and spends a period there during which he meets a number of characters who make him think of life more seriously. When Sandip is released from Jail, freedom was knocking on the door, Sethji, his friend Kamal's father insists him to enter into politics. In him Sandip sees an ambitious politician having no concern for the people. He wants to exploit Sandip's love for his country to fulfill his petty ambition. Sandip knows this and forsakes him. He returns back to Kusumpur, with a clear vision of

realities outside and inside himself. A faint worldly hope still lingers in his mind. That is to have his childhood friend Gita, the only daughter of Lalgram's Zamindar Roy, an arch rival of Chowdhury's as his life-partner. Geeta refuses to accept him as this was the last wish of her father before death. He had made Gita promise not to accept any alliance with Chowdhuries.

With no hope left in this material world, Sandhip now prepares himself to undertake the inner voyage into the realities of his own self. He visits the annual festival near the Siva temple. There, as a matter of chance he climbs a long pole of bamboo in the guise of an acrobat who was supposed to show a great feat that evening. At the top of the pole he sets fire to the robe of the acrobat and throws it downwards to the ditch underneath. It was a cloudy and stormy evening; darkness prevailed every where. All the people assembling there left the place thinking that an accident has happened. But for Sandip, it is like having a new birth, a psychic birth. He has thrown the garb of his ignorance and is ready to enter into a new domain of knowledge. He slowly climbs down the pole. The sky is clear of all clouds. His mind too has become cleared of all confusion. A new reality grows out of his own perception of life as a tree grows out of the essence of a seed. A calm face beams before him and that is of Soumyadev's.

The fundamental truth of our being is spiritual. One has to feel this truth growing in the depth of every human being when like lightning it gives a sudden spark and illumines everything it touches. There can be sublime

moments, gestures, and dreams that bear the stamp of something more than the mind. Manoj Das has not failed to immortalize such unforgettable moments in his stories. In “A Letter from the Last Spring,” we see a true communion between two souls, outward differences notwithstanding.

In this story Rina, a sweet little girl, waits for her mother’s promised letter day after day, totally unaware of the fact that her mother has died in the distant sanatorium. The narrator of the story, an old retired professor who has made it a habit to look at Rina from his apartment on the upper floor of a small hotel opposite her house, finds that Rina gets no letter from anyone though quite anxiously and patiently she waits for a letter from someone. The professor though cannot see Rina closely feels the sadness in her beautiful eyes.

Rina, too amidst her reverie and anxious waiting looks at the professor. This has become a pleasant habit with the professor to watch Reena everyday as he has no other work to do during daytime. He describes this sweet experience as follows:

The habit grew out of my thirst to gaze at the little Rina. She too gradually felt more and more inclined to bestow her sweet look upon me. At times I felt that she wanted to enquire something of me, but modesty forbade her to be so forthcoming. I felt the delight of an inaudible exchange, and knew that we had grown rather intimate with each other (DHOS 47).

This silent intimacy one day brings something unimaginable for the professor. The watchman at Rina's gate one day knocks on his door and hands over an open envelope to him. Surprised he unfolds the letter and reads what Rina's mother had written to Rina so affectionately. There was the promise to send letters regularly. The professor knows that Rina has not received any letter since then. He knew from the watchman that Rina's mother had died shortly there after.

Little Rina has seen the professor getting no letter from his mother also. She feels a deep empathy for him. So she decides to sacrifice her only letter from her mother and hopes he will be happy.

This spontaneous act of the child brings untold tears to the eyes of the readers. A human heart which eternally aches for love finds its fulfilment when such a thing occurs. This direct, unfathomable communion between two souls is most felicitating in this story.

Another story which depicts the subtle communication of souls is "The Brothers". When two human beings understand each other perfectly, the experience transcends everything mundane and becomes supreme.

Bhuban Mishra in this story, is an idealist freedom fighter who, in spite of strong protest from his home did not quit his political advancements. India became free. There were good chances for Bhuban to be elected to the state legislature. But he was a man who believed in self-less service. Others

took the opportunity for their own favour, Bhuban was left alone. His brother Saroj had been successful in his academic career, became a good physician and went abroad.

Bhuban sees corruption among political leaders. His idealistic mind gets shocked to see it. As per recent developments, Bhuban is looked upon by others even by his son Ravi, as a man who has developed insanity.

At this point, Saroj Mishra returns back from England. He also becomes worried to hear about the changed nature of his elder brother. When he meets Bhuban, he finds that the latter has walked ten miles since morning in search of fresh butter which Saroj loves, very much. He feels grateful that his brother's love is still intact for him and has not lost its warmth. He becomes absent minded for a moment and lights a cigarette.

Suddenly he receives a slap. When he was a boy he was threatened with this consequence if he smoked again –and the elder brother has found him smoking now. Bhuban realizes his folly and breaks down; his heart is crystal clear now. Saroj understands how pure is the affection and concern of his elder brother for him. He sees the bare loving soul of his helpless and idealist brother. The two brothers understand each other.

Life is an interaction with human beings. When two persons meet and accost each other at the same mental and psychic level, the difference



between 'I' and 'You' evaporates. This perfect understanding expands one's consciousness beyond one's egoistic feelings.

In his book, Many Worlds of Manoj Das, P. Raja writes, "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"(26). Human nature and human mind is a complex entity. But Manoj Das has successfully delved into the subtle mechanism of human psyche and found how the transformation happens there.

There are several planes of realities. Often Manoj Das explains it through a fine imagery: Some mountaineers have set up a camp at the base of the mountain, some are in a tent midway and some are spending the night in a tent atop the mountain. At dawn the middle-campers are sending signals to the base campers asking them to get up. The base campers are vexed, for according to them it is still dark. Those atop the hill can already see the sun about to rise but they dismiss neither the middle-campers reading of the situation nor the base campers (Interview: Mother India 272)

At different levels of perception, all the experiences discussed above are realities. In stories like "A Crack of the Thunder" and "Laxmi's Adventure", the author shows how through repentance two persons who have done something gravely wrong achieve transcendence. Their tears of

repentance wash away their mistakes, thus cleansing their minds and enabling them to re-discover themselves in the light of progress. Sekhar, the Naib of a locality owned by a Zamindar used to send girls for the entertainment of the latter. He had done it for the old Zamindar and doing the same for his son, the new landlord too. He had not felt regretted for what he was doing rather had included it to his duties for the Zamindars. But when this time his master ordered to bring Lalita, a dumb, innocent orphan girl of the village he felt the pang of his conscience. He could not protest before the Zamindar in fear of losing his job but the task became too heavy for him. Lalita came easily without knowing the intention behind it. Because she was lured with ornaments for which she had a great weakness. Leaving Lalita at the Zamindar's kutchery Sekhar went back home. He could neither eat nor sleep. The night seemed long and ominous to him. He came out of home. It was raining heavily. He took shelter in the shrine of Goddess Mahamaya. He realized his mistake so greatly and felt miserable. His prayer to the Goddess, "Pardon this sinner, O Goddess!" reveals his repentance and agony at that very moment. He became unconscious for a time and when woke up the sky had become clear showing the signs of dawn.

It was a dawn for his consciousness too. A new realization of calmness came over him. He felt the peace in his heart. When he reached the kutchery he saw Lalita adorned with a new saree and jewelleryes and mistook her as the idol of Goddess Durga. When he realized the truth he knew that the Zamindar's motherless little son had come there last evening and he found in

Lalita, a wonderful model for Goddess Durga. He put a crown on her head and began drawing her portrait all through the previous night. Sekhar's gratefulness for the Divine Mother made him fall flat at the feet of Lalita while in his mind he heard the invocation to the goddess, "Ya Devi Sarva –Bhutesu Matri Rupen Samsthita! Thou dwellest in all as the mother"( DHOS 132). He had woken up into a new reality of his 'self' which was sublime.

In "Laxmi's Adventure" we also see the changed mental state of the priest following the realization of his guilt.

A little girl Laxmi creeps into a shrine and pours out her problems, her intimate feelings before the deity. Whatever she likes or dislikes she tells and asks God if He can solve this problem without any difficulty. She believes that God listens to her intently, comes to her in her dreams and also talks with her. She becomes totally engrossed in her conversation with God and feels that the deity is asking her to take away a pair of bananas from the bunch offered to Him.

As little Laxmi is leaving with the bananas, the priest who had fallen asleep wakes up. Laxmi's eyes are dazed in the bright sun. The priest calls her a thief and gives her a chase. The little girl is terrified and runs into a pond. There is soon a crowd. Her father wades his way through the crowd and takes Laxmi away after handing over the two bananas to the priest.

Laxmi has an attack of fever. She suffers silently for three days and dies. Her death is interpreted by the people as the consequence of her stealing from the deity, where as the truth is quite different.

The priest knows that Laxmi is not a thief. He knows how simple and innocent she is. He feels that his raising a hasty scare, his pride and arrogance as the guardian of the temple has led the girl to death. His repentance is great. He too does not wish to live and falls ill. Till his death he is heard to have mumbled a rather queer prayer," God! Next time let this sinner be born without a tongue "(77)"

Sometimes an act; a feeling or a vibration becomes so intense, so strong that one cannot hold it in oneself. It is so vast that one can't contain it. A sudden revelation comes. The person looks inwardly and understands what he is better than ever. Laxmi's untimely death makes the priest repent and in this repentance lies his redemption.

Manoj Das has tried to bring home a very complex phenomenon that is "Death" in some of his stories. Why innocent children like Laxmi and Sita die so young? What is the mystery behind the deaths of these sweet little cherubs? In a personal Interview with this researcher the author gives his answer that tender minds do not survive the shocks received from their environment. But so far as Sita and Laxmi are concerned, they are higher and evolved souls. They come down for a short experience of some aspect of life

and then depart. No doubt they would have continued, if the environment would have been conducive to their living.

To study the environment which innocent souls do not find conducive to their living and why, the stories like “Sita’s Marriage” and “Laxmi’s Adventure” need to be discussed.

Sita, the sweet little daughter of Dev, a college lecturer, wants to witness the pomp and grandeur of a real marriage ceremony. Finding no one to marry, she decides to marry herself and faces the problem of finding a suitable bridegroom. Her grandfather suggested affectionately to call Lord Ramachandra who will be an ideal bridegroom for little Sita. Sita sincerely calls Him and in her dream sees Him as her bridegroom. According to her description: Rama, as a charming boy but not without his mighty bow and his crown of burning gold, had come to her as her bridegroom, accompanied by a host of child-gods amidst heavenly music (Das, MOMC 142).

Though at this age, Sita hardly understands the distinction between dream and reality, she accepts her dream to be a real one. Her faith is so strong that it continues even when she grows up into a young girl. Her marriage was the real one for her not that of her neighbour’s daughter Basanti’s who committed suicide after a few days of her marriage. Sita grows up with her psychic being fixed in her childhood commitment. She departs without suffering from any illness when her father arranges for her marriage.

Sita's unwilling soul could not accept the changing situation as it would not be helpful for her inner growth.

Another child Laxmi also leaves this world early because she finds it difficult to live with her faith when her environment becomes adverse to it. In the story "Laxmi's Adventure", little girl Laxmi takes the deity of the temple to be her best companion who not only understands her but also comes in her dreams and communicates to her. Her faith is also very strong like that of Sita's though with a little difference. Laxmi is a meek, humble little girl who has more faith in the God than in herself. Whenever she finds an opportunity she enters the temple, kneels before the deity and talks to her heart's content. She talks almost everything to God. She enjoys this silent communion with God. She believes that the deity is listening to her. In a state of complete obliviousness of the reality, she also believes that God has offered her a couple of bananas. She takes the bananas and comes outside to face the harsh realities and cruelty of the world of the adults. She is chashed by the priest of the temple who calls her a thief and enters into a pond. Her father takes her away and hands over the bananas to the priest. This is too much for Laxmi who cannot tolerate the humiliation of her strong faith in the Lord of the temple. She departs after suffering silently only for three days. Perhaps this is the destiny her soul has preferred to accept. For her soul, a change of environment becomes expedient and it takes a decisive action by departing for its eternal abode.

Sri Aurobindo says, "Death is the question Nature puts continually to Life and her reminder to it that it has not yet found itself" (Quoted in: "Conquest of Death....", The Statesman,2003). To find one's true self is to reach at the highest spiritual point of one's journey. Sita and Laxmi's predicament from this point of view is not totally unprecedented. Rather it is the choice of their souls. Death, as long as it is not suicide, is not necessarily a defeat, it is a transition. Sita and Laxmi are not defeated. They have just left their environments

Once a well-meaning Bengali critic described Manoj Das as an existentialist. But he gently protests it. He says, "I believe that life is far greater than any theory. Literature projects life and strives to project what is more than life" (Interview, The Times of India May 18).In the stories and novels discussed in this chapter Manoj Das has projected what is "more than life" within life. The characters are beholden to the inner progress through different situations and happenings of life. It proves his vision and faith that all developments man has made is really the unfolding of consciousness. From the world of vegetation to the animal world, then to the creation of human beings and man's journey from the pre-historic age to the modern age everything marks this progress. This is the nature of evolution. From psychic and spiritual point of view, man's ultimate destiny is to realize 'God' or the 'Truth' in himself. So all the life's experiences are a contribution to this realization. It is decided by one's 'psychic being' what circumstances and events would provide the opportunity for his spiritual progress.

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## **CHAPTER-III**

### ***OVERTONES AND SUGGESTIONS***

A writer's scope of writing is not limited to describing visible things or objects. His canvas of writing is unlimited. He not only deals with things or people who are easily seen or felt but also he deals with unseen moods, sensations, ideas and feelings for which there are no physical objects to point to. He is capable of forming concepts and sometimes even creates a simultaneous and complicated cluster of feelings for which we do not even have precise words. That is where symbolic overtones come in and the writer tries to suggest through them what he wants to say.

Whereas it is usually the case that words stand for specific things-- flags, journey, cross etc.-- sometimes the same words can be used to mean or signify more than what they do on the surface. Then these words become symbols. Symbols are words that suggest much more than what they represent on the surface and are necessary to help us express complex ideas. A flag stands for a nation; a cross is the symbol of Christianity. These simple signs evoke a host of complicated and interrelated feelings. A symbol can be a word, a phrase or an image that stands for a larger idea.

Symbols are conveniently classified into three categories: natural symbols, conventional symbols and private symbols. Natural symbols are

words or images that suggest their larger meanings to the reader without the reader having to be instructed in those meanings. For example, the span of a person's life is symbolized by a 'journey'; as the ocean and the sky suggest time and eternity.

A conventional symbol is an image that has, by tradition and by certain people in course of time and in a limited place, been assigned a meaning beyond itself. A round metal disc dangling from a piece of ribbon suggests gallantry, heroism or bravery on the part of the person who wears it. It is a symbol-- a conventional symbol of approval.

A private symbol is one that the author uses to bring home a complex idea or phenomenon. It is his own conventional symbol. The place "Malgudi" in R.K. Narayan's fiction has grown into his own symbol of a budding town, an outcome of social and political transition.

Symbolism is a literary movement which had its origin in France in the last half of the nineteenth century. It strongly influenced the Irish and British writings around the turn of the of the century. Indian writers are also influenced by this movement. Broadly, symbolism is the use of one object to represent or suggest another in literature; it means the use of symbols in writing, chiefly the serious and extensive use of it. Prof. K.R. Srinivas Iyengar says, "The beautiful is to be magically evoked, not simply described .... The cardinal symbol words, should be the open 'sesame' that throws open the gateway to the soul of things" (Qtd. In Samal: Manoj Das a Critical Study 88)

William Blake gave an idea of infinity in a grain of sand and the idea of immensity and ferocity of Nature and life through the image of the bright burning tiger. When an image persistently recurs, both as presentation and representation, it becomes a symbol.

There is always a very subtle relationship between life and the universe. It is not possible to express it through every day's language, so a writer makes use of symbols. Symbolism adds an element of artistic piquancy to creative writing.

The characteristic of a good story is inherent in its symbolic meanings. As a symbol signifies something beyond itself, a good story also signifies something beyond itself, something intricately tied to its theme. Manoj Das's stories are no exception to this. Almost all his stories suggest something other than the surface meaning.

He sometimes uses symbols to project his vision. His stories are embodiments or crystallization of his ideas or themes as their precise meaning can't be said in any other way. His symbols are traditional just as his manner of story-telling is traditional. He sometimes uses his own private symbols also. The background of his symbols can be traced back to the repertoire of Indian folk-tales, legends, fables and other common stock and sources.

His stories are symbolic in the sense that there always runs a subtle meaning beneath the surface meaning. As Nancy Hale says, "A good

story is like a glass that struck gives out a clear ringing ... that keeps sending, that rung note farther and deeper and fainter down into consciousness (Qtd. In Samal, 89).

Such farther and deeper notes Manoj Das's stories do have. His fictional world is built on a wide range of themes. They are all poetic and symbolic. They do not deal with man in relation to society but in relation to himself, to the things occult, supernatural, spiritual and mystical.

As his themes encompass ghosts, animals, demons, simple villagers, innocent children and adults, the author uses them "as means of driving home certain ideas of reality" (Interview The Critical Endeavour 193-198)

In this perspective, Manoj Das's stories are suggestive of some deeper meaning and realities. His belief in the supernatural elements, imps, ghosts and miracles is in fact a 'device' for him to drive home something greater and more subtle.

So, this end is achieved not by his 'beliefs' in the supernatural only but also by his belief in the hidden divinity of man which has made him probe into the psyche of the characters and find out the elements of truth in human nature. Besides he shows us the subtle interplay of adverse forces-- both natural and supernatural-- in the shaping of human destiny. His stories

always present an “added mystery” as felt by Graham Greene and it is the perfect handling of mystery that constitutes the symbol.

His symbols gain meaning from the allegorical association and the symbolic association often merges with the allegorical significance.

The ghost in “Farewell to a Ghost” shows man’s uncanny fascination for the unseen and unknown. It represents the traditional belief and ethos of the society. It is more a psychological phenomenon, a phantom that thrives on the collective belief. What is important in that story is not whether the ghost was there or not, but the feeling of compassion and attitude of a village expressed through a symbol, the romantic budding of feelings in the boys, so on and so forth. The ghost had become an innocent and indispensable part of the life of the villagers. When the tree in which the ghost was left to dwell was struck by lightning, it marked not simply the end of an epoch but the superstition which was the part of the ‘emotion’ of the villagers. It suggests a farewell to the culture and the innocent belief that had nourished their existence.

“The Crocodile’s Lady” evokes the mysterious and the wonderful in an unforgettable manner. It also depicts the simplicity of the unsophisticated village folk.

The story which justifies the years of missing of a village girl who has been accepted by the villagers as the ‘Crocodile’s Lady’ can produce a

hypnotic effect on the mind of Dr. Batstone, the man from the land of skyscrapers. The tale is so absorbing and bewitching that Dr. Batstone is completely carried away and his behavior also changes as the following description reveals:

The professor stumbled against the same dog, which did not protest this time, and perhaps the same tortoise, now on its way back to the river. But his mind did not seem to register the encounters, he walked like a somnambulist.

He suddenly stopped on the river bank.

'Where is that confluence?' he asked.

'Which confluence?'

'Why, where they lived--the crocodile and his lady!'

I laughed and uttered the professor's pet word, 'Fantastic!'

And added, 'Dr. Batstone, I'm afraid, you took Granny's tale too seriously,'

The professor grew grave. We resumed our homeward walk (SE 24).

Manoj Das has used natural symbols in most of his stories. It is not possible to make one to-one rendering of stories as they are all

symbolically depicted, where beliefs, traditions and superstitions of simple village folks are associated with.

“The Owl” projects the typical thinking and attitude of the village folk and the baselessness of their superstition. The nocturnal bird ‘owl’ is generally seen as bad omen and its hoots at night bring ominous consequences. But for the villagers the owl here is a symbol of ‘sacredness’ with a formidable occult significance. It is revered as ‘the senior most resident of the village’ (SF 27). Because it resides in a hollow in the age old village temple it is sacred. It is treated by the villagers as a co-resident of the deity. Its hootings are believed to give prophetic hints about droughts, cyclones, noteworthy deaths, etc. With the sound of the gunshot and the presence of the young zamindar in the village, the people thought that he (the zamindar) had killed the owl and would meet the dire consequence. The zamindar, as if, possessed by such strange prophesy, dies a tragic death. The villagers get the greatest shock of their life when the owl’s hootings are heard again. But their ‘belief’ remains intact. The ‘death’ of the zamindar here suggests the passing away of the ‘Zamindari System’, in the backdrop of post-independence India. The story can suggest something more; as observes P.Raja:

“The Owl” impresses us with its power without a mystic nuance or even an element of mystery. It is a many dimensional story, a story of transition, of efficacy of suggestions, of an interplay between superstition



and innocence, but above everything of the intrinsic helplessness of men—a characteristic of the fiction of Manoj Das (The Literary Criterion 85-89).

The story “The Tree” is woven round an age old banian tree of a village which stands there as a symbol of protection since the era of truth. The old and ageless tree standing at the end of the village has been a mute spectator of changes in culture and civilization. It has become an existential part of the life in the village. It is treated as holy and sacred. It vibrates the feelings and emotions of the simple villagers. Symbolising the past, present and future, it is intimately connected with the villagers and their life pattern. The nerve-racking sight of the tree being swept away by the flood is simply unbearable for them. The people of this Orissan village where life is governed by rituals, orthodoxy and superstitions think of the rebirth of the tree in thousands. Through its undying and unbroken continuity, the community wishes to live and perpetuate its life.

The story vividly presents the typical rustic psychology in clinging to the tree as a symbol or primordial totem of shelter and protection.

Manoj Das has created his unique world of fiction with elements of nature. Even moonlight and twilight create a magical atmosphere in the setting of the stories. The moods and behaviour-pattern of the characters undergo a change under the spell of this faint alchemy of nature. ‘Moonlight’ occurs in a number of stories like “The Bridge in the Moonlight Night”, “The

Love Letter”, “Friends and Strangers” and in the stories which the author has developed upon the Panchatantra and the Jataka tales. Such tales are “The Last Night”, “Jewels from the Sky”, “The Tiger and the Traveler” etc. Under the influence of the moonlight the characters behave abnormally. It confuses them and confounds their thoughts. They imagine all sort of improbable things and suffer from hallucinations. The moon lends a dream-like unreality and translucence to the situation where the characters are placed.

For octogenarian Ashok, the moon has always been a fascinating object. He often feels tempted to shake hands with it or plant kisses on it. Sitting on his balcony, he also chit-chats with the moon: “I crossed eighty some years ago. What about you” (SF 49)? But this so familiar moon sometimes becomes a mystery for him and performs a great magic to him. When his friend Sudhir reveals of a fact of the past; about a letter written by Meena, Ashok’s beloved, and the letter was addressed to Ashok which was destroyed by Sudhir in sheer jealousy, Ashok falls silent. After a few minutes Mahindra, another friend, informs Sudhir that he has just seen Ashok near the dismantled bridge in bright moonlight. He was searching something there and Mahindra expresses his surprise over how could he reach the house so soon. In fact, Ashok died when he knew about the letter and his spirit immediately went to the place where the letter was lost long ago, to search for it. For Mahindra, it is a reality and this is the magic of moonlight.

The story is a tragedy of old age and unrequited love. The story draws our attention to the bridge which exists nostalgically in Ashok's subconscious like his passion for Meena. It stands as a memorial of love and loss and with moonlight it acquires the association of sadness and melancholy. Its significance is given by Samal: "The Bridge as such, arching over the river and hanging under the sky connecting two unconnected patches of land, holds a perennial charm for the human mind. It is archetypal, esoteric and enchanting in its appeal" (95).

In another incident, the moonlight has caused a great change in the lives of two friends--Tirthankar and Shivabrata. In the story, "Friends and Strangers", these two friends in one autumn evening are sitting on a rock bathed in clear moonlight. They are expecting their friend Pramath. Suddenly they could see him coming down the narrow road, dressed in white, his usual holiday costume. They call to him and seem to get his reply too. They want to stop him from going to Mrs. Wilson to hand over her the gift of a shawl he has brought for her; but he is determined to go. Both Sivabrata and Tirthankar know that Mrs. Wilson is no more. They decide to follow Pramath and get the shock of their life when they know that Pramath has died that noon. While these friends are returning to their respective homes together in silence, the sky is clear and cloudless and bright moonlight flash on their faces. They look at each other and each one seems to the other as unreal. It is the most surprising ending of the story which says that the two friends consider each other's existence unreal and one takes the other for a dead person even

through there are evidences enough to prove that both of them are living persons.

Manoj Das depicts a different aspect of human psyche under the influence of moonlight or twilight. He tries to bring home realities at different psychological and occult planes in some of his stories.

In “Jewels from the Sky”, the old Pundit performed a miracle before band of dacoits under the influence of moonlight, though he was warned by Bodhisatva not to do it. He could not stop his temptation to have a shower of jewels from the sky and his act brought the dire consequence at the hands of the bandits.

“The Last Night” tells a different story. One full moon night, the eighty year old husband found himself in the embrace of his young wife for the first time since his marriage with her. The old man attributed this strange behaviour of his wife to the wonderful virtues of the full moon--but later realized that it was the appearance of a bandit inside the room which made the girl do so. The bandit, as if charmed by the effects of bright moonlight, neither killed nor robbed them rather advised the girl to take good care of her husband.

Similarly, ‘twilight’ creates illusion and a mysterious situation with occult significance. Twilight is a transition between day and night, light and darkness and it is considered as the most confused time of a day. It is the

time when supernatural elements are more active and they create illusion in human minds.

In the story “The Night the Tiger Came” people fall prey to an illusion that there is a tiger swimming in the stream of water. (The hour, it is seen, is the twilight hour). Their own private fear is aroused and each one imagines the tiger in his own compound. “A Tiger at Twilight” brings a mysterious stupefaction of mind and the narrator could not discriminate between a human being and the beast.

Not only in his memory but also in his stories ‘tiger’ has a special place. A greater part of Manoj Das’s family estates situated in the Sunderbans, the abode of the Royal Bengal Tiger. So for him it is both a reality and a symbol’ (Personal Interview).

‘Tiger’ is a recurrent symbol in some of his stories. In “The Night the Tiger Came”, it is a symbol of man’s own innate fear. The characters involved, one after another, see the tiger at night, but there is no tiger in actuality. Their inner fear, owing to its origin in their guilt, envy, ambition, complex etc. create the illusion of a tiger in their consciousness. The theme of the story suggests a somber, fearful world; each human being has created for himself, where by, he is always haunted by the fear of a ‘tiger’, some grave, fearful consequences for his own wrong doings.

In the fantasy, “He Who Rode the Tiger”, ‘Tiger’ is a symbol of man’s insatiated ambition. Under the garb of farcical situations, man’s utter folly in gaining vain glory is revealed. The ambitious and foolish king orders his son to ride the tiger saying, “Son! You’re going to achieve a glory, the like of which had never been tasted by any of our illustrious predecessors. Go and ride yonder tiger” (Das, The Lady Who Died One and a Half Times 97 ).

The king is so much drunk with ego and blinded by vanity that he does not think about the dire consequences that accrue when the tiger devours his only son.

Here, the tiger also symbolizes the ego ruining the innocence symbolised by the prince. The story also suggests the generation gap where the elders will prevail and impose and the younger ones cannot choose or escape.

‘Tiger’ in the novelette, A tiger at Twilight is both real and symbolic. Here it stands for cruelty and ferocity, the very element of its nature. In the twilight hour, Heera and the tiger became one, the protagonist was under the illusion that it was a beast and it was also human. In his words, “Looking at Heera I wondered if she was not the tigress, and looking at the tigress I wondered if she was not Heera” (Das, SF 338).

The novel makes one realise how thin the difference between reality and illusion is, how interspersed facts and fantasy are. And the ‘tiger’

here is a law unto himself, killing and mauling at will. In the context of the novel it can stand for the untamed perils of the power game which fill the vacuum created between an old world order changing to the new in our country.

In his new Panchatantra tales “The Tiger and the Traveller” is one. It suggests that ‘greed’ is the deadliest of the deadly sins and a prolonged agony is its consequence. Here, unlike in the Panchatantra, the traveller does not die. He is tempted by the tiger and takes the golden bangle from him. Instead of being devoured by the old hungry beast, he changes into a tiger as the old tiger dies. Life becomes an endless torture for him. He will stand there till he lures a traveller to take the bangle, and then only he will be free from this agonizing state.

The tiger here is a tempter, who goads man to evil. The traveller is the personification of ‘greed’ who is tempted easily and trapped unaware. The ‘tiger’ in “Bhola-grandpa and the Tiger” stares but does not pounce upon Bhola-grandpa when he walks past it calmly forgetting its presence altogether. The Tiger here also belongs to the tradition of ancient Indian tale and as such is liable to be outwitted. In the story “The Birds”, the tiger and Kumar Tukan Roy are co-travellers and pilgrims in their quest for liberation.

The other animal that recurrently figures in Manoj Das’s stories is the monkey. Apart from the fable or allegorical aspect the monkey is a real one in “Mystery of the Missing Cap”. Here, the half tamed monkey steals

away the cap of the minister and slips into a grove. His host Sri Maharana 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 become happy. But the climax comes when the thief, the monkey, springs up before the minister and in a show of affability returns the cap.

While the climax itself was stunning enough, 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” (SF 152), says the narrator.

Thus the monkey makes a mockery of the entire situation. It also plays a crucial role in changing the course of their lives. Through the ‘monkey’ image the silliness and absurdity of human affairs is brought to the fore.

‘The Stupid Servant’ is a fable where the monkey is projected not only as a stupid servant who kills his master but also of one who heeds to the advice of a bad guru and acts more foolishly only to be disillusioned at last. The story suggests at the end that this ‘disillusionment’, rare to the species of a monkey, may expedite his evolution process and may he will be born as a human being in his next birth. The story’s real significance lies in the deep subconscious layer of a human being who on many occasions acts stupidly.

“Of Man and Monkey” suggests how man is no better than monkey in his utter callousness and lack of fellow-feeling. The monkey serves



as a contrast and a norm as well to measure as to how much man has progressed or regressed.

The very titles of some of the stories like “The Birds”, “The Kite”, “The Shadow” are symbols which unlike traditional ones the cross of Christianity or the dove of peace- are not inherited, but created by the author and suggest a deeper meaning in the course of the narration of the stories.

“The Birds” and “The Kite” suggest man’s higher aspiration to ascend to a spiritual elevation. Whether it is Kumar Tukan Roy who feels elevated at the sight of the flying birds in one silent afternoon or Kunja who almost grows mad at the touch of freedom; these all symbolise man’s eternal quest for freedom. This is something extraordinary experienced by the ordinary characters like Kumar Tukan Roy or Kunja. They totally identify themselves with the birds and the kite and fly with them to the soaring heights, to infinity- a domain where they experience total liberation. As S.Samal puts it:

The joy experienced by Kumar Tukan Roy at the flight of the birds was only a sign of his soul’s readiness to fly into a new horizon from the state and stultifying confines of life, so much so that he released the half-dead tiger in the zoo in order to make it taste its own freedom. Thus the birds fluttering their wings in the air suggest the vibration of freedom and the soul’s yearning for emancipation (93)

Similarly kunja, the prisoner, was 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 is gathering momentum when suddenly a gust of wind releases the suspended kite and it is swept towards the horizon.

Kunja runs and runs. He loses all links with the mortal world. He has no sense of time or surroundings. He marches forwards towards the sea--to set out a longer voyage to infinity. He is a liberated spirit now and "he was beginning to fly, he felt" (Das, The Crocodile's Lady 119).

"The Birds" and "The Kite" symbolise man's psychic growth. "The Shadow" explores a very unusual relationship between the protagonist Anjan Sharma, a very talented professor and his shadow. Here the 'Shadow' stands for what "he is" or rather a very close friend of him who will never quit him. So he grows nervous when he cannot see his shadow and gets relieved when he finds it again.

The story "The Gold Medal" brings out best the basic human values in the two leading characters in the backdrop of changing social patterns and changing values.

"Encounters" focuses on the predicament of human relationship and failure of communication. The story shows modern man's

pseudo culture and spurious status or prestige consciousness; a strange situation born of uncalled for pretension where men stand estranged from each other.

No fruitful rapport emerges from the sterile chance-encounters. Thus “Encounters” is symbolic of the crisis and the stalemate in human relationship. Though seemingly satirical, some of the stories do convey deeper and broader meanings. “Sharma and the Wonderful Lump”, carries many a symbolic suggestion. Through the commercial transactions of Sharma with various American companies ranging from American T.V. to Baldbreast’s campaign, Manoj Das focuses on the vulgarity and perversion of values in our civilization.

Sharma is a composite symbol of the people in our society who become crazy to earn money and fame overnight.

The ‘aboo’ or the lump on the head is not wonderful but abominable; it is not a thing of beauty but ugliness. It is a replica of social distortion in the form of fake values and pseudo pursuance. It represents the moral degeneration and aberration from the path of sanity. Sharma’s mother’s advice to his son at the end of the story ‘My child! I beseech you to rise above your folly. The guru’s blessings, a channel for the Divine’s grace, were meant to liberate you from the ‘aboo’. You are not supposed to make capital out of that. Through the thrill of liberation you should now be experiencing, I am dreaming of a day when the world as a whole will be liberated from the several gigantic ‘aboos’ sitting on it (Das, The Lady Who Died One and a Half Times 139).

Similarly, “Man Who Lifted the Mountain” is a fantasy and allegory. The story deals graphically with the consequences of vanity and ambitiousness, how irrationality leads to extreme results. Here, Thieffou, the chief character is a symbol of greed and exploitation. The writer ironically and allegorically hints that change never occurs in a consciousness which prefers ignorance to knowledge. The mountain symbolises justice and mercy. Out of kindness, the mountain becomes light so that Thieffou can lift it easily. Thieffou had a great chance of changing the course of his life, which he lost due to his greed and arrogance.

The episode of lifting the mountain is symbolic of man enlarging and flattening his ego and hubris. Through this fantastic situation of mountain being held aloft, the egoistic and arrogant Thieffou is once again crushed and punctured.

“Operation Bride” suggests perversion of taste and muddleheadedness of intellect. That the experts and specialist would carve a perfect bride only underscores their stupidity and foolishness. The story is a mockery of human being’s seeking of superficial perfection through science and technology. In order to make a perfect bride of the woodcutter’s daughter the specialists and experts only ended distorting a fairy like girl and thereby creating a bride sans soul—‘that little old thing which is in every creature’(The Crocodile’s Lady 173). A chirpy girl changes into a mechanical being-- this is

the tragedy of the story. It suggests a human existence devoid of any spirit behind the tinsel glitter of our jaundiced civilization.

In “Bhola-grandpa and the Tiger” beneath the façade of slender facts and gentle humour, the writer draws our attention to the significant aspect of the character of Bhola-grandpa.

Bhola-grandpa’s action and attitudes are quite funny and interesting because he is forgetful. Monaj Das has created in him an archetypal figure, at once fascinating and lovable, immortal and unforgettable, the sample of original humanity with primal innocence and simplicity.

“The Old Man and the Camel” is a story of man’s disillusionment and outright betrayal of life and his sense of alienation in an ungrateful world.

Old Basu had a queer fascination for the camel because of its peculiarities and mode of living. He always longed to see a camel. In the days of his confinement as a prisoner in the Andaman’s and after he was freed when he started living in isolation in his minister son’s bungalow; Basu had a great longing for the camel. His desire to see a camel was rather strange and inexplicable.

Perhaps the camel was the only creature in which he found an agreeable counterpart for his own suffering, deception and betrayal.

Undoubtedly, he had a great deal of circumstantial as well as temperamental affinity with the animal.

While the old man stands for suffering, sacrifice, and betrayal, the camel stands for life-long desire unfulfilled. It also represents something dear and unattainable in life like a streak of dream that haunts but eludes all the time.

Manoj Das conveys poignancy of the human situation through humour. In his stories the comic always has a symbiotic relationship with the serious. Beneath the uproarious fun and laughter of his short stories, the helplessness of human predicament, the agony and eclipse of life are presented. This predicament is movingly illustrated in the story "the Princess and the Story-teller". Bhatt and Shawoo, whose finer feelings have been blunted during their criminal career, suddenly find themselves exposed to the tender side of human existence in the act of the story-teller's sacrificing his eye for his beloved princess and the princess in turn offering herself to marry him. Later on, even though the story-teller confesses it to be only fiction, both Bhatt and Shawoo refuse to accept it as fiction as they have been suddenly led to a realm of tender values of life of which they were deprived earlier. Their stubborn refusal to accept it as a figment of imagination speaks of their yearning for life.

How the vanities of men have rendered them all miserable human wrecks is suggested in the story "Statue Breakers are Coming". Yameshwar Gupta learns to live happily when his statue breaks into pieces.

Before this, his preoccupation with his statue is suggestive of modern man's narcissus-complex and his sordid craze for fame.

Manoj Das's concept of evil and its symbolic significance is suggested through some of his stories. When a human being is possessed by 'evil' forces, his consciousness remains in a state of total darkness and he becomes incapable of inner progress. That innate 'evil' in man is best projected in the stories like "The Hunger" and "A Trip into the Jungle".

"The Hunger" suggests Man's primeval instincts and insatiable desire. The soldiers who had camped in the old and rejected house of Sobha were cruel and lustful. According to the author they were like 'bears and jackals'. They pounced upon innocent Sobha, who had gone there to search for her lost husband who was in the army, and killed her little son too. The 'hunger' here suggests the lust and bestiality in human nature.

"A Trip into the Jungle" also projects in their basest form the evil and the villainy in the nature of man. The elite from the town killed an innocent youth Shyamal, locked him in the room where they had already lodged a wild boar. They danced round the camp fire and ate the burnt meat but were not sure of what they really ate--the beast or the human.

These two stories were written before the author found for himself a spiritual anchorage in the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. His faith in Communism was thoroughly shaken and he was searching

for a greater truth which would sustain him. In his later stories we find a shift of focus and attention. The base human instincts are no more projected crudely and some of his stories though symbolically represent the 'evil' never fail to suggest the possibility of transcending it also. His later stories suggest that everything that appears evil is only a distortion or perversion of some truth and there is an aspect of Divine power that is poised to set every distortion right.

The stories like "The Murderer", "The Assault", "Mystery of the Missing Cap", "A Crack of Thunder", "The Naked", "A Night in the Life of the Mayor" do suggest the possibility of an inner change in the characters involved. These characters are not doomed because of their deeds; rather they are uplifted in their consciousness through disillusionment and a sudden illumination.

Some of the stories also give a new awareness of the sweetness and serenity that pervades life in general and the rural Indian life in particular. The great bond of human love which binds hearts together is projected in the stories like, "The Rest of the World", "The Brothers", "Kuturinani", "A Letter from the Last Spring", "The Concubine" etc.

"A Letter from the Last Spring" focuses on the psychology of a tender child who has come forward to share the common sorrow of the loss of a mother in an intimate human understanding.



In the story "The Concubine" hatred and violence vanish before benign love and affection of Sati Dei. She is "Motherhood" incarnate here.

"The Brother" suggests the bond of brotherly love and understanding. Though everyone, including his own Son Ravi thinks Bhuban a mentally deranged person, his younger brother still sees in him a caring and loving brother with a great deal of good will in him.

These stories certainly open up new horizons for humanity-- horizons of promise and faith.

'Death' in the stories of Manoj Das is not the end of life but a powerful symbol of a human soul's need to change one circumstance and choose another. It is also a 'necessary end' to something which assumes immense significance when viewed spiritually.

Manoj Das is a believer in the mystic purpose of death. If the soul of the individual does not find the environment around his or her physical existence conducive to its evolutionary growth it leaves the body under some pretext. It happens in "Sita's Marriage" and "Laxmi's Adventure". Sita and Laxmi, two evolved souls, die because they come down for a short experience of some aspect of life and then depart.

Other deaths do happen in the fiction world of Manoj Das. Kumar Tukan Roy dies, Kunja also dies, but here the death is a synonym for their

freedom. The physical death of a human being is described by the author in his book The Mystery of Death as:

The physical factors bringing about death are only symptoms of its far more sophisticated inner causes, linked with the very purpose of life and the destiny of man. "An eternal perfection is moulding us into its own image," says Sri Aurobindo. It is only when that perfection has been fully realized that man can possibly emerge as a being no more tyrannised over by death (35)

"Death" also suggests an 'end' to something other than the physical existence of a human being. It is sometimes an end of a certain kind of living for the characters and sometimes it is symbolic of an end of an era, or a tradition. As in the story "The Murderer" Dabu Sahukar's transformation from greedy and lustful man to a sage accounts for the death of his former self. His personality has undergone a complete change. The sage's remark at the end, "Who says Binu did not kill me" (Das, SF 47)? Suggests the symbolic killing of Dabu Sahukar's former self.

The story in which death, while visiting an individual also symbolizes the end of an era and a tradition is "The Owl". The young zamindar, on a visit to a Kachahri of his father's in a village away from home, unwittingly shoots at an owl in a temple. The villagers believe that he shall die as a consequence for his action. This collective

expectation and his own fear at last bring about his death. The question asked by a villager, at the end of the story, "Is the rumour I heard in the market the other day, that the zamindari system will be scrapped, true"(33)? is suggestive of the end of the tradition of feudalism.

We find that Manoj Das's stories are rich in symbolic overtones and suggestions. His stories and symbols simultaneously share important characteristics in expressing ideas complex and unconventional in a deeper and broader perspective.

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## **CHAPTER-IV**

### ***LANGUAGE AND STYLE***

Every work of literature, whatever it may be, is a verbal structure. A writer expresses himself/herself through language of his/her choice and the way he/she handles this language is considered as his/her style. Before we interpret and evaluate any text, we have to understand it and the process of understanding is likely to involve, among other things, the way language is working. Every author has specific means of using his language and diction; organizing his sentences or expressing his attitudes and views which constitute his style. Language and style is the body to which thought is the soul and through which thought expresses itself.

The study of how language works is a recent development in the history of literary criticism. From Aristotle onwards, most literary critics until the last century concerned themselves with larger, more general and theoretical issues--such as, the nature and function of literature, the definition of genres, and the morality of art. I.A.Richards, the innovator of 'Practical Criticism', tried to shift the attention of literary criticism to the internal features of a text rather than to historical, biographical or other external considerations. F.R.Leavis made this method popular and he exerted a far-reaching influence over the literary critics who came afterwards.

In America, the emergence of 'New Criticism' was a development of the work of British critics already referred to. John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren pioneered an anti-historical mode of criticism and stressed the self-sufficiency and autonomy of the text based upon the study of its language and style.

This development of Anglo-American criticism also influenced the Indian-English critics and during the first half of the twentieth century the language of literature became almost for the first time, the object of close critical attention. Prof. Srinivasa Iyengar, a modern critic, points out that the poet or the novelist.... all need the instrument of language and "style is the consummateness of their mastery of this instrument....(Qtd. in Samal, Manoj Das: A Critical Study 160). Not the instrument of language but the manner in which the writer is largely determined "by the temperament, the resourcefulness, the whole personality of the man" (Samal 160).

To understand Manoj Das, a successful bi-lingual writer, we must take into consideration the way he uses English language, which is no doubt a second language for him. When interviewed in this regard he says:It is not a barrier, but a challenge. Great is the power of language-of any developed language-to let even a most complex emotion to find its expression. Art lies in handling the language-through the right use of poignant phrase-through new combination of crisis and association of ideas" (Sun Times 3).

Manoj Das believes that there is a spirit, a divine genius, behind every language, a belief quite close to that of Goddess Saraswati presiding over the spirits of literature-and with humility and love one can approach that spirit and gain a certain personal access to the glorious citadel of a language.

With such a belief he confidently creates and transcreates his literature. Sometimes his creative thoughts make him write in Oriya, his mother tongue first and then he transcreates it in English. At other times he writes in English and vice-versa. But he always thinks in the language of silence. He gets his creative inspiration through this silence and his language and style are spontaneous outcome of it; they express the magnitude and versatility of his creative vision.

Manoj Das has often been interviewed about his bi-lingual stand. He takes it easy. To Bijay Kumar Das, he says;Of course I have to write in any one of the two languages first. When I render the same story into the other language, I do not translate but recreate.... I am not a translator of my writing. I am the writer; I write in two languages instead of one. That gives me the freedom to change a story when I work upon the plot for the second time in another language (The Critical Endeavour 193-198).

Thus he gives a fresh treatment of the theme in both the languages. And as for the language, the style, and pattern he uses, he is of the opinion that he never consciously uses a technique. In a recent interview in Oriya with two famous Oriya poets Prasanna Kumar Mohanty and Mamata

Dash, he has discussed this point. He says that as a writer he feels, his style and technique spontaneously follows his themes. He allows a natural flow of language and style deemed fit for the creation of a particular situation, atmosphere or character which is the means through which his themes find embodiment (Jeevan Jijnasa and Smaranika Stabaka 95-96).

As for his English language, he is at perfect ease with it. Like Raja Rao, he tries to make the English language 'yield to the Indian need'. In this context Prof. Samal writes: In this experimentation, he takes the maximum liberty with the idiom and syntax of the English language and conforms to the exact laws and demands of grammar, while trying to evoke a particular mood or thought. He moulds the accepted diction and fashions it anew with a twist or configuration. It is essentially a personal experiment where he has forged an individual style and medium that best answers his need. In consequence, his is a type of English that expresses the shades of Indian thought and feeling, while remaining as chaste and polished as English forever (163),

We may take for example the opening scene of the meeting held in honour of the minister of Fine Arts and Fisheries in the story "Mystery of the Missing Cap": Not less than five thousand people had gathered in front of a specially constructed stage when the minister ascended it, that remarkable smile still clinging to his face. Shri Moharana's niece, the lone high-school going girl of the region, garlanded the minister. A thunderous applause greeted the event, for that was the first time our people saw what they had only heard



in the tales of the ancient *Swayamvaras* a young female garlanding a male in public. Then the chorus 'O mighty minister' was sung in Kirtan-style to the accompaniment of two harmoniums, a violin and a Pakhauj drum (SE 149).

It shows how Manoj Das uses his language and diction to express a purely Indian incident. His writing is spontaneous, not stilted. 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 descriptions of his visual imaginings of Indian situation and agents. To illustrate this there are some more examples: In the Sundarbans of those days nobody would walk alone even in daytime. Tigers apart, alligators frequently sneaked in from the swamp. People took care to move about only in groups, particularly after sundown. Often they were led by a necromancer who, from time to time, gave out a piercing yell that could not be imitated by the uninitiated. The eerie sound was believed to drive away or immobilize all beings, natural or supernatural, hostile to man (SE 98).

The same appeal and felicity of language is also found in the following description of the 'Villa' in "Farewell to a Ghost": It was on moonlit nights that the deserted villa looked particularly fascinating. From the river bank we looked at it in long silence. When the fitful breeze made waves of the tall yellow grass around it, the house looked like a phantom castle floating on an unreal sea. Though pale, desolate and eerie, I must repeat, it was as fascinating as a fairy tale world (100).

The 'hut' of the old woman is a typical instance of Indianness which is described like this: The Crocodile's Lady sat crouching beside a kerosene lamp in a corner of her hut, softly singing to herself, with her chin on her knees. She smiled at us most affably. We sat down facing her and poured into her ancient stone vessel some crushed rice and sweetened milk with which her toothless gums should have no difficulty. She smiled again

She talked for nearly an hour and a half. In the flickering flames of the lamp our phantom shadows danced on the mud wall and occasionally we could hear the oars stabbing the water in the river behind her hut (22-23). Chandrasekhar Rath, an eminent Oriya writer and a professor of English has observed that Manoj Das is not only sweeping and powerful in Oriya, but also has equal command over English. In his words:

He had raided English with a plethora of expressions, images and metaphors and stories, distinctly Indian in flavour and content, and is yet far from any quaint or laboured form of English. He picks up English almost playfully with the innocence and charm of a divine child lending it a hitherto-unknown touch of naiveté and poetic wonder native to the soil where he was born (Sun Times 4).

The English that Manoj Das employs in his stories is generally lucid and charming. He has succeeded in imbibing the Indian imagery and rhythm. Examples like "Over the cozy 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 to switch it off was a resolution passed by the city fathers “(The Vengeance and other Stories 80). An abiding and effervescent sense of humour saves Das’s English from being pompous and adds grace to it.

Manoj Das’s stories are popular among all kinds of readers for two main reasons. 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, humour appeals universally to the moods of the readers. Manoj Das certainly charges his stories with humour though he himself is not quite conscious of its use. In an interview with P. Raja he says:

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).

The stories of Manoj Das are full of "Bubbling gaiety" and there is always more in them than meets the eye. One among such stories which justifies his statement is "The Mystery of the Missing Cap". While the plot of the story is highly interesting, the concluding lines are quite significant. Both Shri Moharana and the Minister received instant blows which made them remain out of politics forever. Perhaps they were good souls, after all. Ragini Ramachandra observes: "The Mystery of the missing Cap" is an admirable exposition of rustic naiveté 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 Criterion66)

The real significance of the story rests in its psychological elements: 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.

Das's language and style underwent a change when his understanding of the problems of human suffering entered a new phase by the early sixties. He realized that suffering is fundamental to human condition and no social revolution however successful could remove misery from our lives. The external situations, as he was convinced are not the sole cause of suffering, on the other hand, they are often, not always, the projection of something that is amiss in the consciousness of man. The young thinker, with his marxist ideology already dead sought an answer to this problem and found it in the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. He came to know that man is essentially an 'evolving being'. The mind of man reflecting an interplay of the different layers of his consciousness dominates him to-day in a transitional phase.

Man suffers because he responds to the call of his mind and submits to his base passions and instincts; but man with his weaknesses and imperfection is immensely capable of self-development. He can transcend his present state and rise to the higher levels of consciousness by his own conscious efforts.

This eternal knowledge of human life brought in Das a new awakening and optimism which he enlightens in all his stories written in English particularly after he joined Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education as Prof. of English in 1963. His language expresses this new vision in many of his stories. For Example in the story 'The Murderer', Dabu Sahukar, the money lender who led a lustful life and had a bad reputation for his evil deeds one day experiences a total change in his consciousness. The description is like this: While crossing the forest, Dabu Sahukar felt an irresistible urge to see the interior of a deserted shrine. He asked Binu to wait outside and entered the weird compound. Suddenly he came face to face with an ascetic. For long he could not take his eyes off him. He was experiencing an explosion in his consciousness. He shook like a blade of grass and fell at the ascetic's feet. He got up after a full hour. The ascetic who had been his gurubhai in his previous life was making him wake up to the memory of his inner self (The Vengeance and Other Stories 6).

Similarly Vilas Singh in the story 'The Vengeance' feels that all his feelings of vengeance against his arch rival Bahadur has become meaningless at the sight of his one-month old little son. Das's language is quite revealing here; "Suddenly he felt like a dozen thunders bolts blasting his head. He rubbed his eyes and looked again. No, his eyes had not deceived him."

The expressions of the priest in the story 'Laxmi's Adventure' and of Sekhar in 'A crack of Thunder' show how guilt is washed away in the tear drops of repentance. The priest's last prayer, "God! Next time let this sinner be born without a tongue" and Sekhar's appeal to the Divine Mother, "Pardon this Sinner, O goddess!" clearly depict how these small expressions reveal the agonies of two repentant hearts.

Manoj Das does not like to state an action directly; he likes to render it in terms of scene, situation and character. The farcial scene of Avani being attacked by a billy goat in the story 'The Assault' needs to be mentioned here: The beast lowered its head and made a dash at him. He stumbled, face down, right on its back, and then slipped to the ground rolling down the mound. And with each turn of his body was peeled off a certain value he cherished, each collision with a shrub or a clod of hardened earth demolished one of the numerous monuments of his achievement. That is how he felt (SF 187)

Manoj Das is humanitarian in outlook. He has all sorts of sympathy for the ludicrous characters of our society. He aims at revealing their helplessness and loneliness with much kindness and sympathy. Das's humorous exposition of human odds and weaknesses is in fact, intended to remind people of their present state of consciousness, which may inspire them to correct their mistakes and raise to a higher phase in evolution.

“Sharma and the Wonderful Lump” is the best example of his stories with original humour, subtle undertones and sparkling new metaphors. Reviewing the collection Fables and Fantasies for Adults that has 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 civilization 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 Jan.28).

“Sharma and the Wonderful Lump” is the story of a dutiful clerk at the Rooplal Textiles, who has an unnatural growth on his head, diagnosed to be “True or Neoplastic tumour”. He is sent to America for the removal of the lump through surgery. But to his amazement, sharma finds that the very aboo (Sharma likes his tumour to be known by its native name) his fellow employees in India did not care two hoots for, is hugged and applauded as a medical wonder by the Americans. So, Sharma postpones the operation and is out to exploit the promises held out by his wonderful lump. He becomes a celebrity almost overnight, after appearing in a T.V. 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 money and publicity. Consequently, he is on the verge of losing a true friend, Miss Marilyn 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 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 goodness of Sharma and a remarkable laugh at the society.

To consider the purpose humour serves in the stories of Manoj Das, we may quote P.Raja: Probably Manoj Das has realized 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 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. (Many Worlds of Manoj Das 92).

The breadth and inclusiveness of Manoj Das's canvas is quite vast. The events in most of the stories are narrated by children or elderly persons recollecting their past. The purpose is to achieve simplicity and a virtual authorial transparency or invisibility. It is in very few cases that the narrator's presence as a mediator of experience is active and assertive. "Creatures of Conscience" is one such example. There the story is particularly compelling for having been processed through the consciousness of a retired Anglo-Indian School teacher in an old age home.

Manoj Das devises an 'idiolect' that serves his purpose. He selects the type of language, imagery, even form and atmosphere that answer best to the nature and demand of his story.

Take, for example, "So Many Smiles". Bapi's exposure to the idyllic world of peacock hill, his tryst with the sweet little girl having a sack full of sweet ripe guavas, his meeting with the men and women on his way back home, who smiled at him benevolently... are all described in a tender and mellifluous language: On the top of the peacock hill the trees swayed in the breeze. Bapi fixed his gaze on the hazy scene, somehow, seemed quite amicable, even inviting. And, in a lightning flash, a fantastic question disturbed his mind: could he not cross the hill and reach the riverside, all alone? That should be exciting, wonderful, only if he could make it !

But that would also mean daring the demon. That was unimaginable.

But suppose he could give the demon the slip? He had even a faint notion that a man's night was a demon's day. This hour of the morning was perhaps the early evening for the demon and he might be just preparing to fall asleep!

Bapi was surprised--and no less thrilled--to see that he had already started walking in the direction of the hill. It was the first ever time in his life that he was going anywhere alone, guided by nothing but the sheer spirit of his own. Every step through the bushy meadow was sensational; every

sudden movement of a squirrel here and a mongoose there, every sound made by a sparrow or a partridge was titillating.

He had hardly covered half a mile when what should he see but a real rabbit! It stood on its hind legs and watched him till he had enough time to say, "Yes, Yes, I know you. You should know that right last year I finished my alphabet book, the cover of which shows you writing the first letter of your name" (The Vengeance and Other Stories 93-94).

The story "The Submerged Valley" can be read at several levels. It has a sentimental appeal and penetrates into the psyche of the narrator, his mother and the villagers through the choice of words, phrase that evokes an indigenous sensibility and recreate the rural characters in their own situation. Manoj Das puts into the mouth of a young child, words that recapitulate the village scene in all its details and give us an access into the minds of the people. Here are a few examples:

Mother wept. By and by several respectable men of our area visited us and not one of them went back without shedding tears.

We heard that on the eve of their departure the villagers rolled on the ground, crying and beating their heads against it and smearing themselves with dust. We never saw our village again.

The temple and the hillock had always remained green in my memory. Their appearance in this novel setting aroused in me a strange sensation--an excitement tempered by sadness. But Putu, who was only a year old when we left the village, was even more excited. And mother--she sat absorbed in her thoughts, her cheek resting on her hand. The clouds, the somber lake, and her deep eyes combined to make it a serene experience for me (SF 88-91).

In this story, "The Submerged Valley" Manoj Das has successfully recreated the village scene in Orissa and demonstrated in no uncertain terms, the anxiety and agony of the native villagers who were made to vacate their place of birth and ancestral habitation in the wake of the construction of a dam. The changing rural scene yielding place to industrialization is a hall mark of post-colonial Indian situation. The authenticity of subject-matter coupled with the unique expression makes this story readable and enjoyable. The Indian English idiom, in which the story is written, fulfills the condition of post coloniality in our situation. The characters in this story, particularly the engineer, his wife and children including the narrator are life-like and very convincing. The sister's whisper to her brother in the end brings out a child's psychology in realistic terms: "Father is wonderful, isn't he" (95)?

His language unfolds the greater possibilities underlying the characters to the readers who would otherwise remain in darkness. For the Mayor of Madhuban it was totally a new experience when he felt:

It was ages ago that he, a naked babe, had cried, on lying his mother's lap or clinging to his father's chest. He had not cried for a long, long time (The Crocodile's Lady 95).

He woke up to his aloneness. The boat moved on. The river was narrow. So at times the boat dashed against the shore. Each time that happened it whirled once or twice and then continued on its course.

There were wide fields on both sides. The sky appeared as though it had come quite low, he felt in the river his lost mother's lap and in the sky his father's chest--broad and generous.

It would be foolish not to cry tonight (95).

Thus using language as a means of unfolding the deepest feelings of the characters, Manoj Das makes his readers see the psychic growth in them.

Manoj Das's 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. Invariably one is hooked by the very first sentence which is often a conversational titbit such as, "you are not coming before October, are you" (DHOS 111)? But more commonly a piece of description that plunges a reader straight way into the scene as for instance, "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 wide ring of uncanny aura around the moon had informed them that there were terrible days ahead (SF 56).

Manoj Das has broadly followed traditional methods of story-telling though sometimes we find the beginning with a dramatic suddenness and the ending with a surprise note. It has been noted that his narrative technique is conventional and he follows the traditional beginning-middle-end structure in each of his stories.

While reviewing Manoj Das's sixth collection of short stories, "The Vengeance and Other Stories" Geeta Doctor 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....(Indian Express July 12).

One can see the truth of the above statement in the stories of Manoj Das. Often he begins the stories with "Once upon a time, a certain King....." a technique made immensely popular by fable-makers and grandmothers. To appreciate such a style P.S. Sundaram writes, "This is the

secret of Manoj Das's style. He can present characters and situations with a dead-pan "So it was" and we listen like a three year old, the mariner hath his will" (The Book Review 48-49). But Manoj Das appears to have perfected this creative technique peculiarly responsive to the various levels of readership. His short stories are a delight not only for a lazy reader seeking merely to while away the time in the over-crowded railway carriage but also for the more discriminating readers, the same stories contain a penetrating satire which exposes the false values we have somehow come to cherish over the ages. For his modern fables and fantasies this technique suits the best. In the story "Man who Lifted the Mountain" the narrative goes like this:

Once upon a time--long long ago--there was a king who loved his daughter--his only child--more than the sea ever loved the moon.

Every morning the princess galloped towards the rising sun across the hills, her face glowing in the early glimmer like a shooting-star, her flying hair marking a sparkling trail. It was a divine sight for all the people--the princess riding towards the blue and bright horizon and the sun narrowly escaping into the sky! One morning the Sun rose all right, but the princess did not (The Crocodile's Lady 139).

The technique of surprise ending is found in some of his stories. M.V.Kamath in his review of the book The Submerged Valley and Other Stories gives his opinion:

Manoj Das has been compared as a short story writer to Hardy, Saki and O' Henry. The comparison is unfair. Not that Manoj Das does not know how to give his short story the surprise ending. That part of the craft he obviously does not need to learn from anyone. One has only to read the lead story itself or any of the others to realize that here is a master of the craft (The Week 1-7).

Examples of surprise ending are there in the story "The Murderer". Binu, who is a person of some standing in the community because he murdered Dabu Sahukar, is no murderer after all. Dabu left Binu in the dead of night in the company of an ascetic to return later to the village as a hermit. In "The Owl", the collective will of the villagers drives a young zamindar to delirium and death because they were convinced that he had shot the owl dead who had some occult standing, but the owl returns to hoot again at the end of the story. "The Love Letter" which Gita, the young painter, was supposed to have written but had not been dispatched before she died "at the exciting prime of her youth" (The Submerged Valley and Other Stories 17), and claimed by three different people of the place including a musician and a professor of Italian, turned out to be fictitious, a lie invented by the researcher who wanted people to think that Gita had been in love with him.

The ending of the stories is also significant from a different point of view. Sometimes a reader reaching the end returns to the beginning. The general appeal of some stories like "Statue-Breakers are Coming", "Mystery of



the Missing Cap”, “A Tale of the Northern Valley” goads the minds of the readers to read the story again and again.

Here, the whole of the story becomes memorable, neither the beginning nor the end. In an interview the author says about the end and the evolution of his story: Sometimes the end occurs along with the whole story. I think, if I am not mistaken, it was O’Henry who once said that first the very end of the story occurs to him and he builds up just to reach that end. But in my case it has not been so always. Sometimes the total story occurs in a flash and sometimes there is just a compelling urge to write. The incidents and characters are there and as I sit down and go on writing, the story evolves. So it has been both ways. It is a complex process, not always predictable. As I sit down and submit myself to the process, the inspiration unfolds itself and the totality emerges (JIPMER MAGAZINE 78-84).

At the evolutionary stage of his creativity there has been a phase when the writer has spontaneously followed his creative inspiration and new horizons have unfolded.

Manoj Das has mastered the art of creating atmosphere. We sometimes come across ghosts, who feel at home in the eerie ambience made up of marshlands, dark forests, deserted places, old temples, howling jackals, roaring tigers, hooting owls, screeching bats: all awash in the many shades of moonlight.

Ghosts in his stories are always invisible. The atmosphere and people's general reactions make the reader to feel the presence of a ghost as one may find in the "Farewell to a Ghost": A dozen brave men of our village entered the villa the next morning. They had sprinkled on their heads the sacred Ganga water and hidden pieces of iron under their girdles to check the ghost from coming so close to them. But, I can swear, no one even thought of carrying sticks or weapons. They would not do anything to offend the girl (SE 101).

Nobody sees the ghost in the story, but the presence of it is made as real and living for the villagers and the readers as well. Behind the presumption remains the logic of the collective faith of the villagers.

The atmosphere in "Friends and Strangers" is of different type. Human affection or sentimental empathy is the dominant factor in "Farewell to a Ghost", where as it is a strange feeling related to human sub-conscious which is depicted in "Friends and Strangers". The author describes the autumn evening as: "The moonlight on the lush outskirts of the town was so thick, one felt one can net a kerchief-full of it and pocket it for future use (SE 109)", and the erratic breeze which "Smuggled away into the bushes half of the words" (110) from one's talk, which is responsible for the dramatic situation in the story. Tirthankar and Shivabrata, relaxing on a high rock, see their friend Pramath, walking past along the narrow road far below them. The two friends have just come to their native town on holiday and they are happy

to see that Pramath too has arrived. They call out to him. But Pramath says that he has seen Mrs. Wilson as usual seated in front of her house and that has reminded him of her request for a shawl and he must hand it over to her. The two friends are aware that Mrs. Wilson is no more. Whom did Pramath then see? They feel something strange in the behaviour of Pramath and the atmosphere justifies the confusion of their minds: Two hyenas fought and howled somewhere behind the tall bushes on the lake. Dogs in the suburbs moaned at that 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 (SE 111)'

They return and to their horror they learn that a telegram has arrived that day bringing the news of Pramath's death in an accident. Whom did the two friends see then? Soon Tirthankar and Shivabrata take everything as unreal. Even their presence to each other seems unreal in their eyes: "On nights when the moon looked somewhat wild and the wind went crazy, the two friends, if they were in town, kept to their rooms and peeped out through their windows looking perfectly bewildered" (112).

Thus the illusion created in the minds of the two friends is due to the atmosphere in the story.

The atmosphere in the beginning of the story, "The Tree" makes it clear that something terrible and grave is going to happen in the life of the villagers. The description is:

Right from the time the season began changing into monsoon the village elders had begun to look grave. The sinister cloud formation on the mountains several miles away, and the eerie circular aura around the moon had indicated to them there were terrible days ahead.

The moon was draped in clouds and the stars were as pallid as the eyes of dead fish. Nothing much of the river could be seen, but one could sense it swell and hear its hiss like a thousand-hooded cobra (SF 56).

Similarly, before enlightenment comes, the character undergoes a mental environ which reveals the gradual unfolding of his mind and psyche.

Kumar Tukan Roy, out on one calm afternoon for the hunting of birds, experiences something new, something vast and very close to a thrill of freedom. The atmosphere which leads him to realize such a vastness of consciousness is the following:

The birds were in too much of a hurry. It was not possible to keep pace with them. Roy stopped and rolled his eyes across the sky from horizon to horizon. He had never known that his eyes were so big that they could grasp so much of the vast sky. The birds which had just flown across

the sky and across his eyes had brushed away from the latter the accumulated dust of many years, and had left them pure and young (SE 155).

Not only atmosphere and situation but also delineation of characters with scintillating wit, genial humour and subtle suggestive power shows Manoj Das as a story teller who knows his techniques well. He very delicately satirizes the actions of men who have lost their balance, and by a sudden twist of fate or stroke of commonsense, are allowed to regain it. As for example, Vilas Singh in the story "The Vengeance" loses himself through his desire for revenge. He is abruptly brought to his senses by a stroke of fate, that has about it the supernatural and the ordinary, the unexpected that teaches man what is expected of him.

Vilas Singh is bent upon to take revenge on Bahadur even after his death and meets one Hidamba Baba to know where the soul of Bahadur would take a rebirth. Hidamba Baba gives him some hints about the location and sign by which he can recognize the baby as being Bahadur in his previous birth. When he returned to his village a pleasant surprise awaited him. It was his new-born baby. Vilas, with a throbbing heart goes to see the boy. But here the unexpected happens. It is described as: His heart throbbing in excitement, Vilas Singh cast his first ever look on the child. Suddenly he felt as if a dozen thunder bolts were blasting his head. He rubbed his eyes and looked again. No, his eyes had not deceived him. Still he made a desperate attempt to appear

composed, and brooded upon the geographical situation of his village, was it really in the north-eastern direction when viewed from Luvurva? Indeed, it was. Vilas Singh looked at the infant's forehead for the third time. The mark was a delicate miniature of the wound he had once inflicted on Bahadur (SF 201). This irony of fate is revealed quite appropriately in the above passage.

Manoj Das admits of being influenced by the great Story-tellers of ancient India like Somadeva and Vishnu Sharma and the unknown lot who built the vast heritage of folk-lore. In his latest collection of short stories, The Lady who Died One and a Half Times and Other Fantasies, Manoj Das has recreated or rewritten some of the stories of these past masters in a style of his own. These are mainly expansions of and development over tales from the Jatakas and the Panchatantra and are presented through an ambience of fantasy. About the stories belonging to the genre of fantasies, Manoj Das says in the preface that he has taken advantage of the wide range of freedom and flexibility fantasy as a form allows. "He is the master of the perfect blend of realism and the fantastic which he uses to drive home points of social and human import. He uses it in a manner so vivid, so well synchronised in meaning and form that the reader is left confused as to the tale from the truth" (Times of India 4 April).

The stories presenting such a blend of realism and fantasy are: "The Lady who Died one and a Half Times", "The Last Demoness", "The Lion who Sprang to Life After a Century", "Jewels from the Sky", "The Last Night",

“The Tiger and The Traveller”, “A Turtle from the Blue”, “The Stupid Servant” etc.

In all these stories, which are based on the Jataka tales and the Pachatantra, the narration clearly indicates the point where the original version ended so far as the plot is concerned (even though that part is retold by the author in his own way in keeping with the totality of the story), and then from where the author builds up the story according to his own inspiration. Here lies the art of Manoj Das. The stories are presented through a dialogue between two Orissan folk characters, Samanta and Abolkara. While the former is endowed with a great fund of knowledge, the latter has an insatiable curiosity. The following example will clearly show the genuineness of his style:

‘The king looked more like an ascetic, if not a sage, than a potentate’, observed Ablokara, ‘whose is this tomb, Sir?’

‘Of a one-and-half-times dead lady’, answered Samanta, almost lost in some remote reverie.

They sat down under a banyan tree, close to a cool lake, for a frugal lunch, but as Samanta finished with his last bite, Abolkara crooned very warmly, ‘Sir!’

‘Yes!’

‘I keep sitting!’

'I can very well see that!'

'I don't feel like getting up!'

'Look here, Abol, is it terribly important that you must preface your demand with that uncanny and worn-out threat? Since I've unwittingly uttered a rather intriguing phrase, I must give out the story behind it to explain it!'

Samanta then went on: (LWDOHF 2):

Manoj Das combines old art of story-telling with modern ideas and techniques in these stories.

The element of phantasy which is an integral part of the magical mode by which a child tries to cope with the adult world finds its expression in stories like "Bhola Grandpa and The Tiger", "The General", and "Farewell to a Ghost". They delight us with their charming mixture of fantasy and a child's natural acceptance of the mysterious. The writer's capacity to mix gravity and gaiety in telling tale is evident in such stories. As for example, the grandson of Bhola grandpa is lost. Every one is tense as to where the child may be. But the following lines produce a comical effect to the situation:

"The grandson, who had found a congenial shelter under a cow's belly and kept blinking at the unfamiliar people passing by, was rescued before long (SF 97).



The most distinct feature of Manoj Das's language is its sound aspect. He manipulates sound for thematic as well as humorous effect. He has a fine sense of the music of words. His sensitiveness to the various sound devices like alliteration, the degree of euphony, consonance, and assonance accounts for intense lyricism. The reader is drawn to the verbal surfaces of the words.

Sentences like "The hurricane lantern was burning with the growl of a wounded panther", "its mantle growing pale at regular intervals" or "The river hissing like a thousand hooded cobra" (SF 56-65)....are euphonic in nature.

Manoj Das is a poet at heart. The use of similes, metaphors, hyperboles and alliterations sometimes show the full fledged poet in Manoj Das. An example in each of these figures of speech says it:

\_\_\_\_\_The minister and his commander, both shaking like blades of grass in the teeth of the wind.

\_\_\_\_\_The star-eyed and apple-cheeked princess.

\_\_\_\_\_Shed several tear drops as large as grapes (LWDOHF 84-91).

His alliterations are: 'Fidgeting fingers', 'bared his bleary eyes', 'placing the plastic tray on her lap', 'orational operation', 'mumbled out Miss Moberly', etc.

These alliterations and sound may seem somewhat deliberate contrivances but they are part of his style and mode of seeing things.

In his narrative he combines poetry and drama in a superb manner. “Where do all the butterflies go during a storm”, “The red sun, as though shot at sank down behind the hills”, “The summer noon descended on the stubborn hamlet like a medieval school teacher” are some of the opening sentences quickening the imagination of the reader with more than what meets the eye. About his style, an eminent Oriya writer says, “He flashes and freezes at will in his narrative and yet holds his reader a captive. The sophistication of modern story-telling is subsidiary to the freedom of narrating a fairy tale in the grandmother style but both combine to offer a fabric that is singularly Manoj Das (Sun Times 4).

Manoj Das is a master story teller with a brilliant combination of technique and language. He prefers to make his stories appear realistic in different planes of consciousness and shed different lights on various types of readers according to their receptivity. His use of language shows that “Indianness” is reflected in all his stories. He has a vast canvas upon which he has drawn myriad pictures of people, scenes and situations which are real and sincere representation of his “Indianness”. We may conclude with Arundati Subramaniam who says that:

Limitations notwithstanding, if one is still able to ‘vibrate to’ Manoj Das’s work (as H.R.F. Keating so evocatively puts it), it is probably

because he owns an abundant share of that eternally winsome appeal of a storyteller for a rainy evening, whose tales of spirits and sorcerers, forests and crocodiles, dancing girls, ruined palaces and village idiots, still excite the imagination, and transport one to the world of one's childhood, when barriers between daytime consciousness and nocturnal non-rationality seemed irrelevant and ephemeral (BEAM 29-32).

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## **CHAPTER-V**

### **CONCLUSION**

Manoj Das is widely acknowledged as a leading Indian-English writer. He is one of the foremost of the new generation of Indian writers. He is known to his readers as a story-teller, who is disciplined, economical, has control over the medium and the message, over the art and the plot and who has a great penetration into the minds of his characters.

When the entire world is faced with an imminent cultural and spiritual crisis, when every positive virtue like love, courage, honesty and friendship, is replaced by perversity, cowardice, dishonesty and violence, when the very existence of man is threatened by the degeneration of values, Manoj Das comes with the panacea that beyond this darkness of ignorance there is the light of knowledge, that this darkness has deepened because a new dawn of awareness will certainly follow. No wonder man has many weaknesses but simultaneously he has the inner potential to transcend such weaknesses and be illumined in his own consciousness. This will happen in two ways- either his conscious quest will lead him to it or nature do it by hitting hard his ignorant self by giving him a sudden realization of truth. Being a keen observer of the changes happening in the society and the workings of human mind Manoj Das has become an experimenter of all that leads to perfecting and illuminating human consciousness.

He is a potential writer who makes his readers laugh and be thoughtful simultaneously. He is a past master in the genre of writing short stories.

Born in 1934, in the picturesque surroundings of a remote village Sankhari, in northern Balasore of Orissa, Manoj Das has emerged as a great writer and thinker, a person who has excelled in every field he laid his hands on. In the backdrop of those idyllic environs, child Manoj loved Nature: chased after the rainbow to touch its two ends in the distant horizon. He had two traumatic experiences--one of a devastating cyclone and the famine that followed and another of dacoity at his affluent home which reduced it to penury. These impressions and experiences of early childhood remained in his subconscious to be expressed potentially later on.

Manoj Das is a versatile genius. In the beginning of his career as a writer he was a poet. He has remained a poet at heart always. His creativity urged him to express himself from a very early age; when he was a school boy he wrote poetry at first in his mother tongue--Oriya as he believed that poetry could be best expressed in one's mother tongue, which is the language of one's sub-conscious. He felt the need of expressing whatever he saw and felt for a wider readership in a more common medium and for that matter he started writing short stories. From that young age he established himself as a good short story writer.



His writing in English started as a reaction to a piece of writing written in English by an Indian and published abroad which was shown to him. The passage was about Indian rural atmosphere, the rural people and their psychology. He was shocked to find it a distortion of reality. To present a true picture of rural India to a wider readership he took to writing in English and became successful. He is an internationally acclaimed writer whose stories are well received and appreciated for their "Indianness".

His English has an Indian flavour and is effective in evoking the atmosphere of the villages in which most of his stories are set. In his short stories, the author explores what he calls the essential helplessness of man, set against the hostile circumstances of life.

Manoj Das himself recounts that: The magic of a successful writer is basically inspirational: A writer does not however, keep on waiting for inspiration to come. The conflict inside him, the question of the fundamentals of existence and the trial-error method of trying an answer-all begin long before inspiration bestows its gift on the author (Economics Times, 26Aug '90).

He was aware of the crises outside. The plight of men, the grim struggle for sheer physical existence, the pale faces showing resignation to fate posed him serious questions: what is it that sustains man through travails and torments of life? Is it the dream of happiness? Can man ever be happy?

He pondered over these questions. His empathetic feelings, his concern for others got their expression in his writings. His early poems and stories described poverty and hunger which breeds helplessness. Such poignant and heartrending stories are “Catching a Thief” and “The Discovery”. In “Catching a Thief” Raghunath’s married daughter Annapurna (meaning the bountiful goddess!) braves a rainy night to steal away a bag of rice from her father’s home and consequently faces an angry chase by the villagers who take her as a ‘thief’. In “The Discovery” it is the grimmest condition of human beings who even gulp down living mice to appease their hunger.

Manoj Das turned to Marxism as panacea for human misery. He became student leader, led students and peasants demonstrations, spent a jail term in Cuttack, and participated in Afro-Asian Students Conference at Bandung. While doing all these, he was continuing writing and pondering over the basic questions of human existence.

His inner quest for the meaning of life, for the destiny of man led him to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. About Sri Aurobindo’s relevance in present times the author says in an interview:

I should say--it is for today and tomorrow, Sri Aurobindo came at a time when mankind is groping in darkness, for all its favourite resorts--religion, politics, science--seemed to have reached their dead ends without bringing to man any sense of ‘liberation’, any sense of having arrived at! Sri Aurobindo was the only one to diagnose the impasse as

an 'evolutionary crisis' which has engulfed humanity. He shows as the way to cross into a new phase of evolution--into a gnostic tomorrow.

(SABDA Newsletter 17-18)

The author has truly inherited a 'vision' of mankind from Sri Aurobindo. He learnt to look at man from angles which he was not conscious earlier.

An ashramite and a resident of Pondicherry for the last forty five years Manoj Das has fifteen collections of short stories, fourteen collections of stories for children, three absorbing novels and four volumes of non-fictional writings in English. His oeuvre in his mother tongue, Oriya includes more number of books than in English.

His stories and novels inspire the reader to ask the fundamental questions of existence to himself and introspect on their answer. This according to the critics is the magic of Manoj Das.

Manoj Das deals with a variety of themes. Natural and supernatural characters and situations, denizens of forests are the means through which his theme finds embodiment. He has made use of superstitions, myths and legends as themes of his stories too. He does this as means of driving home certain ideas of reality. Myths and legends are often symbols of a complex or occult truth.

'Indianness' is one of the major themes of the author. His stories present myriad facets of the Indian scene. Mystery, mysticism, and occultism permeate his work. Mysticism is a pan Indian theme. In the stories of Manoj Das, it is treated severally. Sometimes it is plain mystery, sometimes it is pure occultism and in some cases, mystery is mixed and shuffled with mysticism and occultism.

The stories that come under this category are "The Last I Heard of Them", "The Sage of Tarungiri and Seven Old Seekers", "Sita's Marriage", "Laxmi's Adventure", "A Bridge in the Moonlight Night", "The dusky Horizon", "The Crooked Staff" and "The Vengeance".

In these stories 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.

In the stories "Farewell to a Ghost", "Friends and Strangers", "Evenings at Nijanpur", "The Crocodile's Lady" one sees mysticism and plain mystery merge in a twilight zone. The mingling of natural and supernatural is artistically handled through native imagery which is a marked trait in his stories. Manoj Das 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, that 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 pillow with him to doing half the shopping for his marriage? Yet who in his wide world does not know that this treacherous brother-in-law of mine, I mean his ghost, chose to harass me, out of all the thousands and millions of people of my village, within a week of his death? Who does not know that for a whole year, till his annual *shraddha* ceremony had fully satisfied him-- and for your information I was obliged to share half of the expense--I never stepped out of my house at night even at the most pressing call of nature?’ declared Shombhu Das, the moneylender. (SE 19).

Indian scenes are vividly described in his stories. The majority of his stories are set in some remote villages or provincial towns where the most learned person is the village school master and the most pressing problems are posed by the encroachments of the modern world. These stories are mostly the recollections of the narrator’s childhood events. The stories which evoke the village scene and atmosphere are: “Mystery of the Missing Cap”, “The Tree”, “The Owl”, “The Bull of Babulpur”, “The Dusky Horizon”, “The Crocodiles’s Lady”, “The Submerged Valley” etc.

Colonial rule, pre-partition and partition days in India fascinated every writer of fiction. The transitional period--that is the passage of India from

colonial rule to independence, the crumbling of the old feudal system, is depicted in the stories like “Time for a Style”, “The Candle”, “The Submerged Valley” and “The Dusky Horizon”. His novel Cyclones gives a clear picture of the changes that have come over the village after independence. Manoj Das is anguished over the end of age-old Indian village, its beauty and serenity, its grandeur and simplicity in the name of progress.

Helplessness and transcendence are two important themes in his stories. In every human life, there comes a time, when one feels utterly helpless. “A basic helplessness underlies life”, says Manoj Das in his novel Cyclones. His characters in the “The Mystery of the Missing Cap”, “The Naked”, “A Night in the Life of the Mayor”, “The Assault”, The Escapist, are quite helpless in the face of circumstances. They are thrown into a whirlpool of crises, they are sometimes found to be intricately involved in a strange situation, still they have the capacity to transcend it.

Manoj Das has also dealt with the theme of romance and romanticism, of psychic growth of the complexities of human mind etc.

His themes reflect his vision of man’s predicaments and possibilities. His themes reveal a marked preference for problems confronting ordinary mortals in their day to day life or existence. Both outer and inner realities are exposed in his stories. “Here is a writer truly Indian in his vision and wisdom and truly universal in his appeal” (Bhavan’s Journal Jan25), this remark by Dev Das is quite convincing.

Man's quest for light and truth is eternal. Manoj Das's quest has led him to spirituality and his vision is reflected in his stories and novels.

Literature is the mirror of society. Now-a-days, in society, the basic goodness of a human being is gradually on the decline and is eroded by vulgarism, consumerism, and criminalisation of politics. Manoj Das observes that Man's quest for the purpose of life has been subdued and eclipsed. He says, "The purpose for him is to seek answers to queries like: who am I? Why am I born? Why shall I die? (The Hindu 18March 2001). Man should consciously and determinedly pursue the real goal of his life and this should be his primary mission.

But he is not disheartened to see such human conditions. He is an avowed optimist and holds that man has not basically altered or become worse. His writings hold out a mirror where one beholds the image of one's psychic self. His characters who as human beings do commit a lot of mistakes still have the possibility of transcending them. Like Dabu Sahukar in the story "The Murderer", the priest in "Laxmi's Adventure", and Sekhar in "A Crack of Thunder", everyone has a chance to grow through experience. All these characters repent for their mistakes in their heart of hearts and pass through a purgatory. This repentance washes away the stain of their Karmas and expiates their (sins) misdeeds, thus purifying them, leaving them with a clear conscience. A reader also grows along with his characters; like Divya Simgha who gets disillusioned, like Padmalochan or Padmananda who gets in contact

with his true self through physical and mental shocks, like Sandip who grows inwardly to find an unshakable 'faith' in himself. One's mental horizon expands and he reaches an understanding of life which helps him attain his psychic and spiritual growth.

Spiritual and psychic elements form a major aspect of Manoj Das's stories. It includes his vision and optimism for the golden future of human race. He believes that man is passing through an evolutionary crisis, a transitional phase of his existence. He can transform himself and march forward towards Light, Truth and Joy. This is possible through a perpetual unfolding of a growing perfection that is more and more total and comprehensive. 'Psychic' is the name of the psychological centre of our being, the seat within us of the highest truth of our existence, that which can know this truth and set it in movement.

His stories and novels reveal the hidden secrets of human mind. His characters move from one phase to another at their psychic level till illumination dawns on them all of a sudden. Constant unfoldment makes them discover the truth of life. A true picture of this transformation in human consciousness is given by the Mother as: Something opens within you and all at once you find yourself in a new world. The change may not be final and definitive to begin with: it sometimes requires time to settle permanently and become your normal nature. But once the change has taken place, it is there, in principle, once and for all; and then what is needed is to express it gradually



in the details of practical life. The first manifestation of the transformed consciousness always seems to be abrupt. You do not feel that you are changing slowly and gradually from one state into another; you feel that you are suddenly awakened or newly born (Sri Aurobindo's Action Feb-March 9).

With this sudden transformation, the characters of Manoj Das soar like an eagle to reach the height of sublimity. Divya Simha in "The Night in the Life of a Mayor" feels an all-pervading calmness in his consciousness, an experience quite unknown to him till that moment. Padmalochan and Sandeep rejoice in the glory of their awakened self when through disillusionment they perceive suddenly all things in their pure nakedness.

Though Manoj Das's creative vision is greatly influenced by the Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, nobody will find his literature preaching the same. He has not used his creative writings to be a spiritual discourse. In this context he clarifies: In the first place spirituality cannot be preached. Spirituality is no religion. It is a man's awakening to supra-physical realities that surround him but of which he is not ordinarily conscious, it is a natural quest for truths sublime. It grows in one when it is time. Many are spiritual, without others or even themselves knowing it; many who are known to be spiritual are really not so. Secondly, because I have no right to preach spirituality. I am a small seeker. It is the profundity of Sri Aurobindo's vision and the love of the mother that brought me here. I wish to keep that as much as personal affairs as possible. Thirdly, I do not believe in making the creative

writing a medium for anything else. A writer's consciousness, nevertheless will be reflected in his writing. If I gain anything in consciousness, that would be subtly transmitted to my writing. That will be the natural thing, not a conscious missionary zeal (The Eastern Times 4sept. 1983:4).

In fact, literature does not preach, it reveals. Tolstoy said that the highest purpose of art is to make people good by choice. Manoj Das is of opinion that it is to make people 'grow' by choice.

Manoj Das's stories are suggestive of some deeper meanings and realities. They are the symbolic representations of his Creative Vision. For example, man's irrational fear and primal dependence is suggested in the story "The Tree". "The Owl" projects the typical thinking and attitude of the village folks and the baselessness of their superstition. It also symbolises 'transition', the passing away of an old world order. Degradation of values and perversion of taste is symbolized by the story "Operation Bride". "The Kite" symbolizes a human being's yearning and aspiration. In the story "Man Who Lifted the Mountain" Thieffou is a symbol of greed and exploitation. "Tiger" is a recurrent symbol in some of his stories. In "The Night the Tiger Came" it is a symbol of man's innate fear. "He Who Rode the Tiger" is a symbol of man's insatiated ambition. Here, the tiger symbolizes the ego ruining the innocence symbolized by the prince. 'Tiger' in the novelette A Tiger at Twilight is both real and symbolic. Here it stands for cruelty and ferocity, the very element of its nature. "The Birds" suggests man's higher aspiration to ascend to a

spiritual elevation. "Sharma and the Wonderful Lump" is a story of composite symbols. The lump symbolizes the moral degeneration and aberration from the path of sanity. 'Evil' is suggested in the stories like "A Trip into the Jungle" and "The Hunger". The stories like "The Murderer", "The Assault", "Mystery of the Missing Cap", "A Crack of Thunder", "The Naked", "A Night in the Life of the Mayor" do suggest the possibility of an inner change in the characters involved. 'Death' is a symbol of a human soul's need to change its circumstances and choose another. It is also a symbol of the ending of a social order, ending of an era or a tradition.

Through his symbols and suggestions the author's vision is reflected and understood. 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.

Manoj Das has an uncanny capacity for presenting the serious and the serene in a manner that is amusing, and often arousing a lasting mirth.

His approach is always subtle. His seemingly simple and open designs never betray his real intentions. Slowly and steadily, he leads to a depth the reader is hardly aware of. Hence subtlety is the cardinal characteristic of Manoj Das's stories.

“Although he presents human predicament in his stories, his world is not that dark and bleak. In his stories, we never come across Kafka’s grim, harrowing, and unredeeming, picture of human loss, estrangement, guilt, anxiety... an experience increasingly dominant in the modern age” (Samal 176). This is what makes Manoj Das a unique story-teller.

His range is vast. His style is original, there is an aristocracy in the English--a trait which evolves out of a deep involvement with the spirit of language.

Time and again, Manoj Das seems to suggest that evil or any other negative impulse can be transcended by a positive human feeling or action or attitude like love, sympathy or fellow-feeling.

We are convinced by reading his stories that man has never stopped growing. He is neither an accident nor a freak of Nature. He is an evolving being, awaiting his fulfillment.

Manoj Das’s stories do not provide mere literary entertainment. They have a greater purpose to serve. In his own words: The Indian tradition has never allowed the writers to remain satisfied by merely providing the readers with literary entertainment. Entertainment or what we understand by entertainment has been only an aspect of literature. The best word which I can perhaps use and which has been the prime motivating force behind creative writing in India is enlightenment. Now, you see, the Indian tradition is such that

those who were the great poets of the past, they were also great seers--if not always in a Yogic sense, in the sense that they were all gifted with a vision which are potentially deeper, wider, and far-expanding than the vision with which even an intelligent man could be credited. So, they could see and interpret life in a much subtler and comprehensive manner, detecting the many invisible forces influencing the life, than a sociologist or even a social prophet could ever do. So, providing entertainment may be just a part, an aspect of the writer's work. Not the whole of it, certainly. But this does not mean that. I would like to set any mission as the goal of the Indian writer. One thing is certain-- we should not mince words about this-- that however laudable and great may be the targets fixed by a certain social authority at a certain time, their vision is always limited to the present. A writer's vision need not be and cannot be limited to the present alone. So if the demands of, say, the state at a given time can be fulfilled by a writer spontaneously, it is well and good, but the writer's vision must not be limited and encumbered by such a goal. His work will continue to be art only if he can serve the said goal spontaneously, not otherwise (JIPMER MAGAZINE 79-84).

The above conviction and a futuristic vision of the writer is sustained through his stories and novels.

However, there can never be any final word on spirituality and human psyche. Hence, any attempt, and for that matter this attempt of mine, to study Manoj Das's thoughts and vision about the nature of human life and destiny

as revealed in his stories, is bound to be an humble endeavour to formulate a perspective. Like life, any creative writer's views and visions are under progress. Therefore, only it can be said that Manoj Das's stories will make a reader 'grow' in his consciousness.

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