



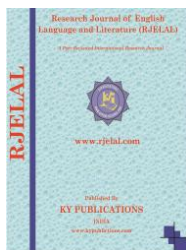
QUINTESSENCE OF INDIANNESS IN THE FICTION OF MANOJ DAS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present paper is to bring out the quintessence of Indian-ness in the fictional works of Manoj Das who is irrefutably Indian in his vision and wisdom but universal in appeal. His fictional works, like those of Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan, have brought out the essential Indian spirit that is at once macabre, mysterious, mythical, and occult. With Manoj Das we are in close contact with the tantalizingly creative giant of his. His is an extraordinary sensibility that can sensuously apprehend and comprehend the eerie and supernatural darkness of Indian villages and the primordial Indian sense and awareness. There is also to be found in his fictional works an undertone of typical Indian mysticism.

The fiction of Manoj Das explores the nature of Indian-ness in its various forms and colors and portrays the fear and anxiety, the belief and sentiment the queerness and eccentricities of Indian masses. His fictional works also bring fourth Indian ethos that is half real and half mystical and magical. The perception of reality often borders in them on fantasy and dream. It is through such a technique that Manoj Das has highlighted the Indian perception of reality in his creative works. He has drawn characters from almost all walks of life and from different periods of time ancient, medieval, modern, and also beyond time.

So far, Manoj Das's fictional works had not received the kind of attention that they had genuinely deserved. An attempt has been made in this paper to explore the central quest of his works that is the quest of Indian-ness and to place him in the honored tradition of Indian fiction in English. It is hoped that the present paper will further be of much help in discovering Manoj Das as a major Indian writer in English.

Keywords: Manoj Das, Indianness, Quintessence, Indian Fiction and Tradition.

Manoj Das is one of the important names in the new generation of Indian writers. Born in 1934 in the seashore village Sankhari in the Northern part of the district Balasore of Orissa, Manoj Das began writing in his mother tongue oriya. He seems to have been a born writer, for he started writing at the tender age of 14. His first collection of poems *Satabdira Artanada* that appeared in 1949 when he was a sixth standard student. Two years later, in 1951, Manoj Das published his collection of short

stories *Samudra Kshudha*. After obtaining his Master's degree in English, Manoj Das joined the Christ College, cuttack as lecturer in English. Four years later, in 1963, he joined Sri Aurobindo Ashram at Pondicherry and began teaching English literature at Sri Aurobindo International Center of Education. It is at this point that Manoj Das decided to choose English as another medium of his creative expression. His first collection of short stories in English, *A Song for Sunday and Other Stories*,

appeared in 1967. Manoj Das continues to remain a bilingual writer. He has published so far 15 collection of short stories in English and 15 in Oriya. In 1972, he received the prestigious Sahitya Akadami Award for his short stories. He also received the Orissa Sahitya Akadami Award twice, in 1965 and 1989. In 1987 when Manoj Das published his first novel, *Cyclones*, he was already a well established and fairly mature writer. Prof. Shiv K. Kumar's remark that "*Cyclones* appears to be a novel steeped in poetic vision (qtd in Raja 58) clearly suggests the depth and richness of this work. Since then he has published two more novels, *A Tiger at Twilight* (1991) and *The Escapist* (1996).

A preliminary reading of Manoj Das's works reveals that the quest for Indian-ness remains the most central concern of his artistic endeavor. It is in this sense that Manoj Das can rightly be introduced as a quintessential Indian English novelist. In a tribute to Das, Bhavan's Journal noted: "Here is writer truly Indian in his vision and wisdom and truly universal in his appeal", (Qtd in Raja 99). His fiction like that of Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan brings out the essential Indian spirit. It is macabre, mysterious, mythological and occult. It is also dream like as if woven by illusion (*Maya*). An Indian Persona has a different and distinct pair of eyes. He has a consciousness, formed or floating in the collective matrix, rising to the surface or hidden in the subliminal, which looks at reality as an ever living complexity of a variegated whole. It is an apprehension of Krishna's Universal from which includes all the gods, poets, Rishis, planes of being, life matter, counter viewpoints, denials, asuras and all else that can be imagined. It is so different from the contemporary western viewpoint that is dry, objective, scientific, rational or else hallucinatory and fantastical, a ghost without any life in it. In Manoj Das we truly come close to the ghost that is life itself, or the Holy Ghost, shall we say! His is an extraordinary sensibility that can sensuously apprehend the eerie and supernatural darkness of Indian villages and the primordial Indian sense and awareness. He is an Indian writer in English who is through and through an Indian and has a through grasp of the English language, "What is Manoj Das? Is he a social commentator? A psychiatrist? A sly

peeper who peeps into people's hearts? Or just a plain story teller?", asks M.V. Kamath and then neatly sums up his response: "Manoj Das is all these, and an incorrigible Indian besides." (qtd in the blurb, Manoj Das, *Farewell to a Ghost*).

Manoj Das's *cyclones* takes up the historical movement of India's partition as a backdrop and goes on to explore the Indian sensibility in its depth and variety. It portrays in a language and idiom that is typically Indian--- the simplicity and innocence of Indian village-fold, the rituals, beliefs and superstitions the beautiful and natural ambience of the countryside, the tradition of mysticism and spiritually and the ever-present malady of the Hindu-Muslim communal violence. But *cyclones* concerns chiefly with the immemorial Indian aspiration for freedom. Similarly, Manoj Das's next novel, *A Tiger at Twilight*, brings to focus the author's deep understanding and faith at different levels of *Karma*. The novel captures a real but unusual milieu, a valley amidst hills and forest with a solitary castle of former Raja and its impact on man and beasts around him- a fascinating fiction, its realism exceeding fantasy, a document on yet another fading locale. Aptly the author dedicated the book "*To The Nijanpur*" that was now a fiction.

In the earlier stories of Manoj Das one can observe an undertone of typical Indian mysticism. His famous short story "Sita's Marriage" has a mystical touch. Sita's quiet death assumes significance in the context of mystic faith that "certain souls dedicated to the divine would decide to depart when their inner life is threatened by external circumstances," Another short story "*Farewell to a Ghost*" has also a touch of mysticism in it. This is the story of a girl's spirit living in a deserted villa. It has the mingling of the natural with the supernatural. It seems ghosts have special fascination for Manoj Das. Human affection seems to be the dominant factor in this story. "The Submerged Valley" reveals an authentic rural atmosphere. We have an excellent fusion of the environment and character in it.

The richness of the institution of motherhood in Indian life and literature pervades the stories of Manoj Das as can be seen in "*The Third Person*", "*The*

Substitute for The Star”, “Laxmi’s Adventure” and Letter from The Last Spring”.

Manoj Das, a believer of life beyond life, tackles the theme of man’s relationship with death in his short stories in different ways. He is a believer in the mystic purpose of death. If the soul of the individual does not find the environment around its bodily existence quite suitable to its fruitful living or experience it will leave the body under some pretext or the other.

In spite of various attempts at defining Indian-ness, this concept remains ever open for further exploration. Different scholars have interpreted this Indian-ness in different ways. Prof Mucctchion interprets it in terms of little attitudes and modes of perception, while Prof Gokak describes it as awareness of many things like language, religion and Indian culture.

The fiction of Manoj Das explores the nature of Indian-ness in its various aspects and colures. His themes are always invariably about typical Indian situations. They portray the fear and anxiety, the belief and sentiment, the queerness and eccentricities of Indian masses. They also bring forth an Indian ethos that is half real, half mystical and magical. The perception of reality quite often borders on fantasy and dream. It is through such a technique that Manoj Das highlights the Indian perception of reality as illusion (*Maya*). In his choice of characters, Manoj Das shows again a wide variety of patterns. His characters are drawn from all walks of life and also from different time-periods. They are ancient, medieval, modern, and also beyond time. This helps Manoj Das in capturing the wide variety of Indian life. Manoj Das’s art of characterization is also typically Indian. It avoids the many contemporary frameworks and fads such as Marxism, Feminism, Psycho Analysis and Existentialism.

The short stories of Manoj Das, besides entertaining us with a lot of comic situations, show us how thin is the curtain that decides life and death, sanity and insanity, love and hatred, and above all the human and inhuman. A poet at heart, Manoj Das combines the old art of story telling with modern ideas and techniques. The method he adopts goes back to oral tradition. Like Vishnu Sharma, the writer

of Panchatantra, he too, writes beast fables. They are highly didactic and, sometimes, satirical in nature. As a social critic he uses the short story form to depict the passions and foibles of man as they surface in different circumstances. The short stories of Manoj Das, mostly in humorous frames, comment on varied aspects of life. Dr. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, the doyen of Indian English literary criticism, brackets Manoj Das as a writer of short stories with Tagore and Premchand. A British poet and critic, A. Russel, while reviewing *The Vengeance and Other Stories*, admits “There is little doubt that manoj Das is a great story-teller of the subcontinent and he also has too few peers, no matter what yardstick is applied to measure his ability, as an artist ... He shows how powerfully all artifices of story-telling can be used to write a story in realistic genre without any attempt at being faithful to the photographic details of facts. His world has the fullness of human psyche, with its dreams and fantasies, its awe and wonder. The height of sublimity could have been attained only by the depth of the fictive. He proves that the reality is richer than what realists conceive it to be.” (Poetry Times 12,2, 1987:135). Beneath the bubbling gaiety of even the happier stories there is an undertone of sadness, so characteristic of Indian life.

To sum up, it can be concluded with a few comments by Dick Batstone, the editor and publisher of Manoj Das’s “The Submerged Valley” and other stories from his introduction: Manoj Das has been compared, as a short story writer, to Hardy, Saki and O. Henry. This is misleading; He is like no one but Manoj Das himself. It would indeed be a serious defect if he works like an Englishman or an American. That “he should work like an Indian writer in English is the clean-cut implication of Dick Batstone’s appraisal of Das.”

As the historian of Indo-Anglain writing Srinivasa Iyengar has said, for a few Indian writers to succeed in English (Many worlds of Manoj Das, 15). “What is written has to be recognizable as Indian to the Indian reader and recognizably English to the English reader. One of the delights of Manoj Das’s writing is that he has not been trained to write like Charles Lamb or George Eliot, but writes a spontaneous English quite free from important

literary idioms. And he writes as an Indian, with a wholly Indian view of things, from an Indian background. One of the intriguing qualities of his English writing is the lack of clichés- the totally unexpected use of words and their collocation arising perhaps from the exact and fresh description of his visual imagining of Indian situations and agents, of a kind that an English writer would not have.

Some of the realistic stories of Manoj Das have influence of the popular Sanskrit classics on them. As the author himself admits: "The heritage of Indian fiction- the great Yarn-spinners of yore like Vishnu Sharma and Somadeva Constitutes the influence of which I am conscious." (**The Times of India**, May 18, 1980). As the statesman (June 2, 1988) observed, his stories leave a refreshing impression on the mind of the reader because of the indisputable power Das has over English language. It is, indeed, his forte and instead of using the familiar, imported phrases and idioms, he plays about with the language, picking words and using them with fresh connotation for building imagery suitable to the Indian background," On the whole, Manoj Das's fiction brings in the richness of Indian philosophy, mysticism and perception of life. His fiction is strongly marked by the quality of Indian-ness and it abounds in his proud love for India, the beauty and joy of Indian life, the richness of Indian culture. His colorful imagination mingled with vivid realism produces a variegated picture of India. He takes delight in nature as well as in the life of Indian humanity. He is no less than Premchand, Tagore, Vishnu Sharma, and Soma Deva in his presentation of Indian people engaged in different vocations and exhibiting various skills that give the realistic picture of India. His fiction also provides the optimistic way of living beset by beauty, love and joy. He declares that life should be accepted and lived with all its sweetness and bitterness because it is sorrow that is transitory, not the joy. His stories and novels are related to common life of Indian people, Indian thought and Indian philosophy. His India is real India idealized by his imagination. Undoubtedly, he remains a unique, superb, sincere and sweet prophet of India and Indian-ness.

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