

Nostalgic Yearning for Rural Culture in the Select Short Stories of Manoj Das

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ABSTRACT:

There was growth of industrialization/urbanization in India after the First World War. As a result there is a gradual change in the life of the rural people, in the structure of their social, religious and cultural relations. Rural culture in India underwent several major transformations. The present paper highlights nostalgic yearning for rural culture in the select short stories of Manoj Das who was born and brought up in a village in Orissa. Das has expressed strong love for his native village in his writings. The disappearance of serene and placid village life causes him pain. The writer expresses his strong yearning for harmony, serenity and beauty of rural life which is fast changing giving a way to bizarre life.

KEY WORDS: nostalgic, yearning, rural culture, Manoj Das, transformation, industrialization.

INTRODUCTION:

There was growth of industrialization/urbanization in India after the First World War. The new tools of farming, new means of transport and communication and chemical substances were introduced. As a result there is a gradual change in the life of the rural people, in their economy and the structure of their social, religious and cultural relations. The traditional rural society resisted the change, but ultimately reconciled to it. The rural culture in India started several major transformations. With this discussion in mind an attempt has been made to throw light on the nostalgic yearning for rural culture of India in select short stories of Manoj Das.

Manoj Das is a significant milestone in the post-independence Indian English Literature. He is a versatile writer. He was born in the small seashore village Shankari in Orissa in 1934. Manoj Das has presented a serene and simple way of life of rural community in India in his fiction. He has expressed his strong love for his native village in his writings: "I thought born and brought up in a village at an impressionable age I can present an authentic atmosphere of the rural life, the rural air of India" said Manoj Das in an interview given to the Times of India (May 18, 1980). Manoj Das has drawn his experiences to create an authentic picture of rural life of the times. The Disappearance of serene and placid village life causes him pain. In his editorial part of the monthly *The Heritage* devoted to the 350th Anniversary of the city of Madras, he expresses his views on changing village life. He puts it as:

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.

The story “**Quest of Sunderdas**” is a plea for pure rural culture. The writer aspires for the nourishment of purity, innocence, love, simplicity and straightforwardness of village culture. The story is a tale of Sunderdas, who sets out to various cities in the world in quest of happiness. The action shifts from village to city and back from city to village, disappointed and shattered.

The central character of the story is Sunderdas. The action takes place in a placid village so far unaffected by impact of the city culture. The villagers are under the impact of superstitions and beliefs. The writer throws light of the beliefs of villagers when they watch plane flying in the sky. The writer describes it: Soon the plane had been lost amidst a bouquet of clouds colored by a setting sun. The villagers discussed the phenomenon till late night. Although they were more or less sure that it was made of metal, the thoughtful ones were of the opinion that a giant English eagle had been harnessed to do the flying. The wisest ones refuse to be surprised at all, for they could easily remember several instances of flying chariots used by the heroes in the epics. They credited the Sahibs with rediscovering the secret. (DHOS 68)

Sunderdas keeps quiet while listening this discussion. He thinks his village as “habitation of dwarfs”. (DHOS 68) So he decides to shift from his village to the city in quest of happiness. He begins his life as a clerk to an Anglo-Indian contractor and soon becomes a contractor. Further he shifts to a British Colony in Africa and becomes a millionaire and his business shifts to the West.

The writer throws light on the difference between village culture and city culture. Sunderdas’s realization of harsh realities of the modern urban world is expressed at several places in the story. He falls in love with a daughter of a wealthy partner. They become engaged. But he suddenly notices same girl in someone else’s embrace. She is not a faithful girl. Even second time he watches her into a similar scene. He cancels his proposal. He remembers his late mother and the rustic face of a girl who was his proposed bride. He becomes sad and depressed. The writer uses past memories of Sunderdas to rouse nostalgic feelings. Sunderdas remembers the death of his mother. His brother informs about death but he was busy in his business. He sent thousand rupees for her last rites. Even his ancestral house and land had been sold by his brother with his permission. By then his business flourished and he started to earn five thousand rupees an hour. He becomes very wealthy and decides to build his private hill in the valley amidst the Himalayas. He marries his secretary who is charming and loving. Sunderdas thought that he is the happy person in the world. But there is turning point in his life. Fate plays very important role in his life. His wife dies leaving a son to Sunderdas. He becomes addicted to the costliest drinks.

His friends try to console and support him. When his son becomes grown up, he decides to return India. But his son does not agree with him. He becomes desolate. He wants peace of mind and wants to visit remote place. He visits a world-wide travel agency. He is dispatched to a genuine house in a village. The writer pens an authentic village life. He describes it: A pair of cuckoos sang at some distance. The sound – heard by him after decades – surprised and delighted him. “Good Morning, Sir.” It was the young lady. “It is time I give you a brief outline of this scheme. It should be a thrill for you to know that you are in a genuine Indian village. No Sir, not a make-believe one! This earthen house was once owned by a real villager. We have not altered it in any way. Our agency has acquired only half a dozen such houses in different nooks of this vast country. The Government is reluctant to let us have more at the moment. Of course, we have acquired a few similar houses in South America, Africa and Formosa too. Now, Sir, you must forget your air-conditioned mansion,

your telephone, T.V., radio, newspapers, as well as your attendants. Nobody on your staff knows your address. Hence no call from any area of your business empire is likely to disturb your peace. Even though we will be at your back and call, we will remain invisible – confined to that small bungalow yonder built for us.” The lady smiled and resumed, “I hope it will rain and you’ll have the thrill of living under a real leaking thatch, enjoy the true touch of a peasant’s residence. There is a pond behind the house. You can bathe and catch fish. There is a small orchard with ripe fruits guarded with care for you to pluck them personally. Is it not wonderful, Sir? Our boss is remarkable for his adventures in ultra-modern ideas. Here are oil lanterns and earthen lamps. A village maid will come to cook for you. Of course, we have your favorite menu with us and we will be ready to supply the food you are accustomed to should you prefer that. What will you have now, sir? Tea or coffee?” She paused. (DHOS 71)

Sunderdas does not reply to the lady. He slowly walks to verandah and steps down to the sandy stretch. He observes thick bushes where his grandma used to say that an ogre lived. Thus, Sunderdas identifies that it is his own house which he had left years ago.

Sunderdas does not get happiness and peace of mind outside his village. The story gives us message that the true happiness dwells inside of oneself. In the story we find idealization of the village. The story is remarkable for the writer’s nostalgic yearning for the village culture, which is changing in the course of the globalization.

Manoj Das in his preface to *Chasing the Rainbow* throws light on his nostalgia. He states it: ... Nostalgia has certainly been a driving force behind my recreating these lost moments, situations and characters. But the real inspiration behind the exercise has been the fear that they will be lost to a future that is bound to be so different from them. I may appear to be romanticizing the reality, but that is because I have been faithful to the vision I had as a child and a young boy – a vision that was by all means subjective, but vibrantly true so far as the observer was concerned. (XVII)

Manoj Das depicts everyday life in Indian villages in his stories and novels. In “Return of the Cat” the writer throws light on the nostalgic recollection of the past memories of Mr. Mahendra Mishra, associated with the pet cat and his mother who is no more.

The setting of the story is a village. The story centers around the character of Mr. Mahendra Mishra, the retired District Magistrate and Collector. He recalls how he chased his mother’s pet cat like Arjun or Parasurama crushing bushes and shrubs but unable to capture it. The writer describes his vision of the cat. He puts it as: The cat was back in his vision – and along with it the face of his mother who never ate or slept until the cat’s return if it had strayed into the neighborhood in the evening. In the backdrop of a total silence the cat would suddenly drop from the wall-top with a soft thud and purr on, rubbing itself against Mother’s legs, its tail raised triumphantly. (MMCOS 26)

There is strong intimacy between the mother and the cat. After the death of her mother’s widowed mother and destruction of their house in the fire, her mother’s cat crossing three villages, two cemeteries and acres of paddy fields reaches Mahindra’s house. Mahindra tried his mother to get rid off the cat but mother forced him to bear with the cat.

Further he becomes Sub-Deputy Collector at the remote Gunupur taluk. He comes home to take mother along with him. The mother prepares his lunch. While taking his lunch, the cat appears and tries to pull a piece of his fish. Mishra becomes angry and starts chasing the running cat. The cat disappears in a long stretch of bushy meadow. At midnight Mishra sees his mother waiting for the cat. But the cat does not return. Next morning, they leave the house. Here the writer throws light on Mishra’s mother’s love for native place. The writer describes the village in a routine manner with its trees, the ponds and the houses. He describes it as: After a last look at her locked house, mother boarded the bullock-cart a little before sunrise and they left for the railway station. Much later, when Mahindra recollected

the tearful eyes with which she had looked at the trees, the ponds and the houses of the village while the bullock-cart speeded up, it appeared to him as if she knew that she will never again set her foot in the village that had been her home for more than thirty years. (MMCOS 30)

Mahindra's mother lived with him for short time. She was always worried about the cat. She became sick and died. After his retirement he returns to his native village to spend his rest of life. He remembers his mother and her pet cat. He sets out in search of the cat. The writer focuses the nostalgic feelings of Mishra. There is photographic description of rural life which is peaceful and placid. The writer describes it as: Tiny streams crisscrossed the sandy village road. All was quiet except the drip-drop upon the trees and the rumbling of the distant thunders. He recognized the bokul tree between the village and the meadow. He was fond of its fruit when very young and his mother brought him here, holding him against his waist. The cat came with them. Even the village dogs were so respectful for mother that they would not bark at her cat. Its intrusion into any kitchen in the neighborhood was readily pardoned. (MMCOS 30-31)

Mishra's search for the cat which had been lost thirty-five years ago becomes futile.

The story depicts very effectively the strong bond of love between man and animal which is the dominant feature of rural culture. Mishra's search for cat symbolizes his yearning for rural culture which is changing in the course of time.

Dr. Bishnu Charan Dash while commenting on "Village Ecology" in the present story states: In "The Return of Cat" Das has quite convincingly appropriated cat as an indispensable member of the rural home and an endearing and aesthetically satisfying impetus that edifies village ecology. Through the sensitive character of the retired District Commissioner, Mr. Mahendra Mishra, the story writer creates a powerful sentinel of village ecology and ingeniously applies memory and nostalgia to revive down the memory lane the intimate association of the cat with his mother who is no more ..." (227)

The story is outstanding for its close observation of rural life.

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