

Weaving the Indian Ethos: Fantasy, Irony, and Nostalgia as Markers of Indianness in the Selective Short Stories of Manoj Das

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Abstract

Manoj Das is one of the finest bilingual short story writers of the Indian subcontinent, who has been awarded with the Sahitya Akademi Fellowship, the top honor at Sahitya Akademi for “Immortals of Literature”.

This paper explores the postcolonial concept of Indianness in the selected short stories of Manoj Das- fantasy, irony, satire and nostalgia as narrative elements in which Das brings an Indian sensibility; storytelling technique that puts this Indian sensibility into the ostentatious version of basic elements; and how these elements convey the sublimity of the short story form in Indian context? Taking a post-colonial perspective based on Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity (1994), Said's theory of representation (1978), and Ashcroft et al.'s theory of post-colonial reclamation (2002), the study discusses in detail six poems by the two authors, namely: “The Submerged Valley,” “The Crocodile's Lady,” “Farewell to a Ghost,” “The Bridge in the Moonlit Night,” “The Crocodile's Lady,” and “A Tiger at Twilight.”

Das can be seen as a guardian of Indian narrative art as the analysis reveals his exploration of the Indian psyche in Das's fantasy, his un-cynical social examination in his irony, and the modernity's pressure with respect to his nostalgia to the past.

Keywords: Indianness; Manoj Das; Fantasy and Myth; Irony and Satire; Nostalgia; Narrative Technique; Postcolonial Literature; Indian Short Story.



Research Objectives

This study looks at the ways in which 'fantasy,' 'irony,' 'satire' and 'nostalgia' operate as a ambassador of 'Indianness' in selected short stories of Manoj Das and also examines the style of telling the story (frame narration, magic realism, symbolic characterisation) through which the imaginative world is created. It balances both these aspects to investigate how they collectively bring to life the sublimity of the genre of short story in India and addresses issues of social life in rural India, in particular, and narrative itself.

Introduction

Manoj Das is an unmatched one among the story-tellers of Modern India who is equipped with writing in both Odia and English language with the same dexterity. Many have compared him with Saki, O. Henry and Hardy, but Das's 'Indianness' (A. Nayak 199) or writing from a purely Indian point of view places him in a class of his own.

Das' fiction is of a realistic, mystical and satirical nature and the ominous ghost and omens seamlessly coexist with the realism of detail that resonates with Bhabha's hybrid cultural space of tradition and modernity (Bhabha 2). In this study the general overview of the Indian English short story tradition (which has been treated by many others including Mukherjee who discusses the colonial origins of the Indian short story) will not be attempted.

The tales discussed come mostly from *The Submerged Valley and Other Stories*, *The Crocodile's Lady and Other Stories*, *Mystery of the Missing Cap and Other Stories*, and *The Bridge in the Moonlight Night and Other Stories*, as well as from various other works, such as *Farewell to a Ghost*, *A Tiger at Twilight*, and the autobiographical *Chasing the Rainbow*, in which the village, the ghost story, and the ironic aside are the grammar of Indian experience.

Theoretical Framework

Das' stories are approached through the theories of Bhabha, Said and Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, as mediated constructions of Indian cultural identity as performed within the gaze of the coloniser not as an opposition to it. Das' ambivalence or postmodern control of the rational and the supernatural can be discerned through Bhabha's cultural hybridity, in which faith and reason do not go to war with each other, but simply live side by side, impotent harmonies (Bhabha 2, 37).

Das' references to feeling nostalgic for the village life could be interpreted as a postcolonial cultural reclamation where the indigenous way of life is valued in the fiction, rather than being dismissed as an effect of colonialism and urbanising modernity (Ashcroft et al. 27). Said's account of representation (Said 7) helps to describe why Das' satire is directed against the feudal/bureaucratic institutions of the rural community; it does so for the purpose of anchors for the paper's thesis on the intersecting strategies of cultural self-representation (fantasy, irony, nostalgia).

Research Methodology

Instead of all of Das' literature, the method is qualitative and involves both thematic and stylistic analysis as well as close reading of Das' six stories. The secondary sources are Das' scholarship (A. Nayak; S. Nayak; Ratti; Dash; Parida; Behura and Misra), postcolonial theories of Bhabha/Said/Ashcroft, post colonial theory of Griffiths and Tiffin, and Mukherjee's Indian English Literary tradition.



This method shifts from plot summary and toward an account of how the narrative options—plot, character, plot discontinuities, et al.—add up to a cultural claim on writing in English about India: Theme and technique are considered together, and cannot be separated.

Manoj Das As A Storyteller

But Manoj Das is not only a narrator of story; rather he is one who speaks the word of the human life and beliefs. His storytelling style owes itself to the oral tradition that has its roots in India where one tells/tells oneself a story (Ratti 21).

Clarity and Restraint of Language

Das's prose is parsimonious: There are plain, incomplete stories with clear implications that come as natural a part of his Indian sensibility in a non-Indian language as the loose, lingering melody that imbues his fables and illustrated tales with fanciful glamour. His friend (one of his earliest admirers) claimed that the novelty of his description was due to his exact imagination of Indian situations that a native English writer would not have been able to produce (qtd. in A. Nayak 201).

Blending of Realism and Fantasy

Ghosts, curses and inexplicable coincidences are commonplace throughout Das' tales, and serve as a metaphor of the world of rural India's frontiers of the visible and the invisible. He has been noted for his ability to spread "humanizing the non-human" (qtd. in Ratti 22) inseparably linked to his lifelong association with Sri Aurobindo's philosophy, and that of the Mother, who saw the visible world as a single layer of interpenetrating planes of consciousness (Ratti 20; S. Nayak 611-12).

Use of Satire and Irony

Das's narrative voice reveals social folly and at the same time lacks chillness for the very characters it mocks, as a naïve observer's simple reactions highlight the absurdity of both the village's hierarchy and that of the bureaucracy (A. Nayak 197).

Nostalgia and the Pastoral Vision

Das' writing is somewhat autobiographical, and it is evident that Das had an abiding sense of love for Odishan village life that was in no way denied by his activity elsewhere, but it is also clear that his was not a world where he didn't encounter poverty or a vulnerability to disaster that required him to move away.

Analysis Of Selected Short Stories

The Submerged Valley

Das' film, *The Submerged Valley*, is about a village that has been flooded with the construction of a dam, whose temple is sporadically revealed by the fluctuations of water in the dam reservoir. Das imagines the rural and Abolkara, a half-wild young man is believed to have been sitting on that submerged rock throughout the inundation, a denial of reason over myth, was key to the Dasian imagery of the rural.

Farewell to a Ghost

The compelling title piece of *Farewell to a Ghost* (Das) pivot on a rural community's long standing but arbitrary and unverifiable faith in a ghost which is thought to live in the local mountains, and



which no one is quite sure if it's leaving—or staying (and which is in fact never actually seen or named). An early reader, likewise, used the term collective make believe, different from self-deception, to illustrate the villagers' devotion and how it could improve their community's life even if none of them has ever witnessed the spirit (Parida).

The Bridge in the Moonlit Night

Both narrators of “The Bridge in the Moonlit Night” (Das, Bridge) are placed in a frame if trust can be placed in anyone, as the first narrates an event that was related to him years ago. There is sufficient ambiguity left for the events to be interpreted as either supernatural, coincidental or embellished; the characters are symbolic, given the themes of chance, fate and memory within the story.

The Crocodile's Lady

Das, Crocodile's Lady is the story of a woman widowed at the tender age of seven, who, after being mysteriously gone for 10 years, returns, and is said to have married a crocodile. They lap up her story into a cocooned collective narrative, instead of investigation into the truth, and it moves in the direction of Das's fantasy, a process of collective appropriation and re racontation, and appears to dramatize the clash between rationality and faith, which is ubiquitous in Das' fiction.

The Mystery of the Missing Cap

The title story (Das, Mystery) is set on the red arm of a visiting Minister's cap getting stolen by a monkey, causing the host to panic as to how to hide it. Declared in a humorous way, the comedy reveals as much as it does about host and guest seeking out their own versions of the truth to make sense of the situation, and about the forces of anxious status enacting official provincial existence – funny enough to be noticed as critique, but not so much as to be beyond sympathy.

A Tiger at Twilight

The negotiation between the known and unknown, in Das's “A Tiger at Twilight” (Tiger), the tiger as a figure of psychological fear as well as literal terror, mediates a character's private anxieties by embodying a single external threat, that of the animal – a lithographic performance of negotiation between the known and unknown.

Major Themes In The Stories Of Manoj Das

Fantasy and Myth

Das's fiction is often, though not always, a fantasy, and doesn't necessarily make a claim to being escapist. Spirits and invisible forces are presented not as objects for the dismissal of the past as ‘superstition’ but as a proper mode of knowledge in practice that is as much as anything else psychological and spiritual as it is sociological.

Irony and Satire

Where Indian fantasy is the spiritual undercurrent of Indian life, Indian irony and Indian satire view the social surface of Indian life, but do not cynicism or moralize. Das's structural irony frequently defers to the end of a story and what he criticizes are any unquestioned authority in the social sphere.

Nostalgia and the Pastoral Imagination



Das' nostalgia is one of the motifs that is not merely retreat into sentiment. There are characters who yearn for a changing village, but the yearning is complex enough so that it can be examined and the reader attuned to the things this longing is hiding – poverty and stratification, the vulnerability to disaster – as well as the things it clearly shows.

Humanism

Absolute to all three is a set of circumstances, and Das' characters, no matter how idiotic, are proved to be as much a product of circumstance as of personal shortcomings; a humanism that carries out the narrative laughter, instead of withholding it, specifically from the ones those characters are trying to expose (A. Nayak 197).

Narrative Technique

Das's frame narration and retrospective structure abandon impersonal realism, resembling oral narration, even if this is a tale of reportage, stories told and recollected get embellished along the way.

Related but briefly introduced is another Indian conception of what can be termed magic realism: "a naturalistic story line dotted with turns of the supernatural and detailed in an equally naturalistic manner as the natural events" (Ratti 21) (derived from Indian and Odishan folk belief).

Das also utilises a third key technique, symbolic characterisation: Das's characters are not only psychologically believable but also “allegorically charged” and expressive of a social position, with the allegory implying that there is no “universal” character or position (Dash 163).

Discussion

As a whole, they make a point to argue the relevance of Das fiction beyond the narrowly defined Das criticism to suggest that the genre of the Indian short story is capable of a sublimity other than the western realist or modernist short story. There is no meaning prior to another in a Das story: a tale about hauntings and horror can also be read as a social criticism and as a spiritual parable, and so on.

Das's fiction is located in the "gaps between" colonial rationality and native belief, "is in the interstitial space between reason and belief, logic and culture, rationality and tradition holder and held" (Bhabha 2). Through Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin's cultural reclamation, his nostalgia expresses the necessity of remembering something when the modern world is working on erasures (Ashcroft et al. 27); through Said, his satire demonstrates the lack of legitimacy of structures of authority which a village community is expected to honour (Said 7).

Original Contribution of The Study

Das' mysticism or rural realism or his narrativizing have been subjects of study on their own. This paper sets out, then, by using close reading, as a replicable model to use with other bilingual writers of Indian English, to look at the three as one inter-woven argument of Indianness'—fantasy, irony, and nostalgia.



Conclusion

This paper has suggested that the usage of frame narration, magic realism and symbolic characterisation allows the Indianness to emerge in Manoj Das' selective short stories in the interaction of fantasy and myth, irony and satire and in a critically aware nostalgia attitude. The fantasy would have been implausible without the oral frame; the satire would have been chilling without the humanist characterisation; the nostalgia would have been underdeveloped without an ironic awareness of what the remembered village also harboured: the proof of its own greatness – and not by following western formal innovations, but by enriching itself in a distinctly Indian way of storytelling.

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