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## (Re-)Presenting History in Manoj Das's *Cyclones*: A Postmodern Analysis

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This paper offers a postmodernist reading of Manoj Das's *Cyclones*, with special regard to the postmodern theory of history. The approaches of Linda Hutcheon and Homi K. Bhaba will provide the fulcrum for my reading of *Cyclones*. Das's use of history both for the thematic construction and as a postmodernist narrative strategy will be discussed. This very framing strategy for (re-)presentation and (re-)interpretation of historical events will act as a meaning-making device, and, consequently, separates fiction from historiography. The prime focus will be on the pedagogical and performative principles of history. The novel will be studied as a histographic metafiction and the emphasis will be on history as a human construct.

History forms the narrative structure and the theme of Manoj Das's *Cyclones*. The national history in the novel is split between "a didactic-pedagogical" and "a postmodern-performative pole", to use Homi Bhaba's terms who argues that a nation's people must be thought in "double-time": first, as objects of a national pedagogy, and second, as objects of signification, as living, performative principles, who intervene into this very pedagogy (145). This split creates a constant tension in the novel: performative images haunt pedagogical constructions, posing a challenge both to didactic nationalist ideologies and to those critics who claim that history is dead and gone in the postmodern. The novelist brings to the readers' attention not so much the events themselves as the subjective processes and efforts inevitably entailed in (re-)interpreting such events as a means of making sense of them. He recontextualizes historical events that occurred during British colonial rule in India, thereby providing counter discourses to Orientalist knowledge. In doing so, Das displaces the colonial discourse as the centre of authority on these famous historical events. However, all these accounts are the work of fiction. Therefore, Das's use of the intertextual allusions may also be suggestive of the novel's own departure from realist representation as part of the postmodern inquiry into how meaning and knowledge are produced. In her discussion on "re-presenting the past" (59) Hutcheon argues that in postmodern fiction,

...the narrativization of past is not hidden, the events no longer seem to speak for themselves, but are shown to be consciously composed into a narrative, whose constructed – not found – order is imposed upon them, often overtly by the narrating figure. The process of making stories out of chronicles, of constructing plots out of sequences, is what postmodern fiction underlines. This does not in any way deny the existence of the past real, but it focuses attention on the act of imposing order on that past, of encoding strategies of meaning-making through representation (63).

Representations of the past as postmodern strategy therefore bring to the surface how narratives of past events are constructed and retold. While this does not deny that these events happened, it

does underscore the limitations of realistic representations. In constantly subverting the realistic framework, the historical 'truth' lurks beneath the fictional framework of the text. The use of history in *Cyclones* is not merely the chronological interaction of facts but the productive outcome of the intersection of postmodernism aesthetics with a redefined postcolonialism. In the context of history, *Cyclones* contains metafictional level.

*Cyclones* can be studied as a postmodern "histographic metafiction", where the readers can easily trace different voices and historical events and the novelist's emphasis on "history as a human construct" (Hutcheon 16). Here the novelist synchronizes the individual history with the national history, leading to a universal significance. Emergence of the self as a historical entity has been philosophically highlighted. Sandip's (Protagonist of the novel) growth into maturity coincides on the political level with India's struggle for liberation from colonial rule and the partition trauma and the Post-independent political gimmicks; and at social level with the disintegration of feudalism and the rising of capitalism. When Sandip reminisces about his childhood the readers are transported into the feudal era through stereotypical images of that era. The main setting is the traditional village-based context of Kusumpur, Das portrays traditional society and contrasts it with the influences of western culture (urbanization) affecting the young generation. The novelist carefully points out the transformations that occurs through a complex dynamism negotiates through tradition and change, as Kusumpur, the village which symbolically represents the traditional Indian society, affiliates itself to modernity. Ragini Ramachandra says:

What Raja Rao does with Kanthapura and its people, Manoj Das seems to do with Kusumpur and her inhabitants "caught in the current of a historic transition" during the period 1944-46, the eve of India's independence through brainstorming events that justify the title (67).

The novelist presents the process of transformation both in individual psyche and social structure comprehensively and quite convincingly. This process of telescoping the national self is based on the idealistic epistemology of the time. Das maintains the sanctity of the village at an ideological level, but permits mobility and change to keep it in rhythm with the time. Kusumpur is the microcosm Indian rural society which stands confronting the pulls of the tradition and modernity. The novelist has portrayed Kusumpur not just a background but as a leading character in the novel, capable of adjusting itself with the changing patterns of time. The age-old social harmony that Kusumpur posits despite stratification of castes and religions has been challenged by the growing communal hatred in the colonial era. The way the villagers respond to the communal agitation is a kind of response and an effort to make them rhythm with the changing national movement. In this multi-religious country, there is always a cold war going on among different ethnic groups, but the most alarming one is between the Hindus and Muslims. S.K. Das says:

The challenge to the India of Indian nationhood subordinating its religious plurality is the outcome of a deep-seated suspicion and false sense of superiority nursed by the two communities: Hindus and Muslims. The hostility was fanned partly by the Hindu

construction of the Pre-British period of Indian history interpreting the Muslim domination as an alien interlude in Hindu India” (349).

Preservation of one’s religious identity has been the cause of much bloodshed. The novelist presents a glaring picture of the communal riots that the Transition Era had witnessed. The story of the riot and communal disharmony in the novel is told through three voices: firstly, the Muslim leaders in their urge for the partition of the state promotes communal hatred to achieve the desired goal; secondly, the Hindu religious fanatics symbolically representing by Swami Sobhananda, who efforts for the Hindu chauvinist preservation by destroying mosques and historical monuments of Muslims’ made and lastly, the upholders of age-old secularism who believe on the basic principle of Indian national integration - “Unity in Diversity” represented by Sandip, the upholder of cultural collision and Indian national sentiment. The leaders of Muslims have achieved their desired goal by dividing India into two parts and permanently planting the seed of communal hatred in the minds of the Hindus and the Muslims. The Hindu religious fanatics promote religious antagonism in their own ways. Swami Sobhananda who is on his way of organizing a mass movement to blow up the mosque stands on Krishna’s birth sport at Mathura confides Sandip:

I have drawn up a sound scheme of achieving Hindu-Muslim unity on a permanent basis.  
- - - The Mosque in question is the single greatest factor in breeding vengeance in the heart of the Hindu against the Muslims! - - - Muslims invaders pulled down the shrine again and again - - - As if that was not enough, Aurangzeb built a masque on it – a monument of his hatred and bigotry (158).

Amidst the ethnocentric rivalries the novelist engages himself in a search for the essence of human living. So Sandip acts as a voice incarnate of the writer prophesying the solution to the religious antagonism: “Let me tell you what I believe true unity can be realized only by our rising above arguments, above the agonies of the past and if you will bear with me, above religiosity” (159). The way Sandip successfully saves his village from the communal riot by negotiating the Hindus and the *Bastiwallas* of his village posits the essential spirit of India. Sandip, born and brought up during the Emergency, is a synthesis of Shiva and Saleem. He creates new myths, as new myths are needed in India, since the existing myths of freedom and religion and money have failed. The novelist tries to bring forward the need for a synergetic civilization to avoid a communal holocaust. There must be peace among the citizens of the nation and if the majority and the minorities would not tolerate one another, there will always be a threat of a riot or a war. Das urges for a cultural synthesis by projecting the unity of human experiences under the pretext of socio-cultural diversities and in this synthesis lays the true spirit of Indian nationalism. “His (Das’s) fiction, like that of Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan brings out the essential Indian spirit” (Shukla 192). In *Cyclones* Das finds in Gandhianism a liberating panacea which gets ossified into a myth. The novel traverses a major swathe of the history of the subcontinent, homing in on crucial moment of Pre and Post-independence, but the narrative

crosses the boundary of narrow nationalism and propagates universal brotherhood and doctrine of non-violence.

The novel presents multiple realities of Indian social life and holds the mirror of partly Marxian and partly Gandhian. In the process of storytelling, the protagonist becomes a microcosm of India where the novelist projects his views about various strata of Indian society. The novelist makes an attempt to bring everyday reality into the realms of fiction. Fictional representation of historical reality through the characters is the supreme achievement of this novel. Sandip's life is the social background of all the events in the progressing time of the story. The newly emerging conceptualizations of nationalism find its vision in the growth of business aristocracy. Sethji who wants to accumulate political power by investing the wealth earned from business projects Marx's theory of "class antagonism" where the 'bourgeoisie' bends on exploiting the 'proletariat' financially and politically by the power of the money (4-38). His planning to project Sandip in the election of legislative assembly, a popular social worker and the scion of a great feudal family is only to spread his business kingdom by keeping the remote control to operate political machinery. He persuades Sandip for the political cause: "You (Sandip) have the spirit and I have the vision. I tell you, Sandip-ji, a more opportune time to serve the people - when the country is in transition from its colonial past to a liberated future - will never come again" (170). Sethji symbolically represents the business aristocracy of the Post-independent era. Even he butchers out Gandhian doctrine of *Swadeshi* for his own advantage:

Bapu, your spinning wheel is fine but why should we not beat Manchester and Lancashire at their own games? - - - There is no reason why we should not be able to clothe the Sahibs and the Mem-Sahibs with our very own linen in the years to come. Confrontation with the British must not end with our winning freedom, but must go on until they have been obliged to return all the *Salamms* we have offered over a couple of centuries"(67).

This is the cry of a capitalist for the economic sustainability not of the country rather of himself, who very well knows how to mobilize the poor underdogs of the society through the velour of his tongue. However, Sandip's rejection of a political career in quest of spiritualism echoes Gandhian detachment from power and money.

Tolerance and sacrifice are the essential foundations of Indian culture. Non-violence is the blasphemy to Indian religion, culture and civilization. Sandip underlines Indian values of life. He is a symbolic archetype of history. The cultural continuity becomes a part of the warp and woof of his consciousness. His vision of life registers the ultimate triumph of man's human values over the menacing lunacy overtaking the country during the transition era. Das points out that in the Indian sociological tradition the relationship between the individual and the society is a metaphorical linkage and identity formation which is the integration of part to the whole. So, the novel *Cyclones* needs to be read as both existential and mythic. Sandip's life is an initiation-

journey, ending in illumination and enlightenment. Here religion and faith acquires a political and cultural connotation. The historical consciousness is presented as a religious one.

Sandip's subjectivity as a narrative process presents postmodern textual traces. History, like identity, is a narrative construction and thus a product of a deeply imaginative and interpretative process. It is not a place for fact-based empiricism. What happens when Das narrates Sandip into existence is that the textual traces are glued to one another through imaginative principles; so that together they form the meanings and this process results in an ethico-political subject. As Radhakrishnan explains:

“Value” thus presides over the narrative (also, the identity project), both as an epistemological and as an ethico-political imperative. The imperative is epistemological in so far as the “subjects” involved in the process need to be able to think of their intended identity as a worthy object of knowledge, and ethico-political since the value is also related to questions of representation, hegemony, authenticity, correctness and fairness (18).

Sandip makes a parody of Gandhianism, an Indian value system by applying it to an ethico-political case. N.K. Mishra and Sabita Tripathy opine: “The novel can be viewed as a social document in which the writer discharges the role both of a creative artist and a social reformer” (164). In the novel “Life by time” and “Life by values”, to use Foster's terms, are intertwined together to convey the readers a vivid sense of the enigma of time.

In Das the use of history functions as the framing devices that punctuate the themes of the central narrative and provides the metafictional vision of the theme. This method of framing narrative through history involves the mobilization of critical archetypal images that lend potency to the underlying ideologies that the works strive to present. *Cyclones* as a ‘histographic metafiction’ is obsessed with the epistemological status of past events for contemporary representational strategies. In the employment of the tradition of mythicizing historical events, the novel offers a rich and fascinating field of study.

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