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Unseen Roles of Water in the Waves of Sohan Roy's *Dam 999*

Marteena Joseph

PhD Research Scholar
Department of EFL
SRM University, Kattankulathur
Kancheepuram, Tamil Nadu.

&

Dr. M.P. Devika

Asst. Professor (Sr. G)
Department of EFL
SRM University, Kattankulathur
Kancheepuram, Tamil Nadu

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Abstract:

Water has been used by writers in different ways –practically, symbolically, allegorically and so on, to represent different things and to create various points of view in literature. This paper focuses on Sohan Roy's *Dam 999*, which is based on the lives of nine characters whose fates are inextricably intertwined with that of the waters of a reservoir. It is interesting to note that, these nine characters clearly express nine different emotions, known in Indian Aesthetics as *Navarasa*. In addition to this, all the nine characters not only have a virtual but also an emotional relationship with water. As the water flows along it is shown to interact with each character differently, such as providing solace to some but being the cause of sorrow for another. For some of the characters, water is a component and setting, for some, water is a companion and for some, water is a healer. The paper also juxtaposes the characteristics of waters of the dam with the emotions of humans.

Keywords: roles of water, Indian literature, Navarasa, personification, psychology.

The water you kids were playing in, he said, had probably been to Africa and the North Pole. Genghis Khan or Saint Peter or even Jesus may have drunk it. Cleopatra might have bathed in it. Crazy Horse might have watered his pony with it. Sometimes water was liquid. Sometimes it was rock hard- ice. Sometimes it was soft- snow. Sometimes it was visible but weightless- clouds. And sometime it was completely invisible- vapor- floating up into the sky like the souls of dead people. There was nothing like water in the world, Jim said. It made the desert bloom but also turned rich bottomland into swamp. Without it we'd die, but it could also kill us, and that was why we loved it, even craved it, but also feared it. Never take water for granted, Jim said. Always cherish it. Always beware of it. (Walls Jeannette, 148-149)

Biologically the role of water in human is to regulate our bodily functions and to maintain the body temperature. However the bigger picture reveals the role of water in human life is not only to clean our body and to quench our thirst but also to care, to heal, to pacify, and to show humans the way thus water takes different roles in different situations. From ancient times writers across the world have ignited the creativity and awareness in their readers by portraying the different aspects of water. Indian writers starting from Thiruvalluvar to Preethi Shenoy focus on the different roles of water in their works. The Journey of water from Thiruvalluvar's *Vaan Siraapu* to Preethi Shenoy's *The One You Cannot Have* portrays the importance and power of water. Yet, religious texts portray water as a cleanser and purifier while scientific texts and methods claim that water is a healer and an elixir of life. Some writers portray water as a component and setting, for some, water is a companion and for some, water is a healer and purifier. This paper analyses the unseen roles of water in the waves of Sohan Roy's *Dam 999*. Sohan Roy was born in Kerala in Punalur and settled in UAE. His novel *Dam 999* exposes his marine experience and his expert views about water. He often personifies water as a person and explains the various roles using different approaches. This paper also discusses the negative role of water in this novel. The importance of water is emphasized in every chapter.

The novel starts at a book launch by the character Captain Frederick Brown and goes into a flashback of the other characters. The novel revolves around nine characters portraying nine variants of emotion called *Navarasa* in Indian Aesthetics and their relationship with an outdated dam built by the British government during the colonial period in India. Like a dam, each of the nine characters in the novel holds back his/her emotions but ultimately the Dam shatters releasing all the water coinciding with that of its characters who break down with suppressed emotions. The paper also juxtaposes the characteristics of the waters of the dam with the emotions of humans. The story continues with Vinay, who is a mariner and protagonist of this novel. After a long time, he visits his native place in Kerala, with his son Sam to meet his father, the great ayurvedic doctor and astrologer Shankaran. Vinay wants his diabetic son to be treated by his father. He knows that, his father can cure his son and he is his last hope. Unexpectedly, there he meets Meera, his childhood friend and lover. They recall the sorrow and pain that had spread between them because they could not marry as their horoscopes did not match. Seeing the special bond between Meera and Vinay, the father Shankaran had studied their horoscope, and learnt that whenever they expressed their love towards each other, something terrible would happen. Upon knowing this prophecy Meera sacrifices her love and Vinay marries Sandra who is a TV journalist. Meanwhile, Vinay's friends Captain Frederick Brown, the son of past mayor, and his wife Raziya come to meet Shankaran for fertility treatment. Further on in the story we come across Frederick's sister Maria and her rescue from her cruel husband Durai, who is a politician and the antagonist in this novel. The story also revolves around how Durai uses the old Dam to win the election by threatening Maria and Frederick. In the end the author Sohan Roy connects all the nine characters and almost violently exposes all their suppressed emotions through collapse of the dam.

The author's use of *Navarasa* adds more flavor to this novel. Each character represents each emotion. This paper exhibits each character's relationship with water which eventually shows the unseen role of water in the makeup or personality of different emotional characters. The protagonist Vinay represents *Rowdra* which means anger in Indian aesthetics. The role of water in his life is significant because Water takes the role of a decision maker. The water seems to unite as well as to separate all his people he loves. It starts with his childhood friend and lover Meera. Due to the sudden release of water in the river Meera lost her parents and consequently stays in Shankaran's house. This makes Meera and Vinay enjoy and share their childhood. The friendship blossoms into love, but at the end of the novel the same water decides to separate them through the collapse of dam. The water separates Vinay and his friends too. Though the scene of Vinay's shipwreck is not in the book, through Freddy's word the author refers to the incident, where, in Chapter 3, Freddy teases Raziya regarding Vinay's arrival to their ship "Ok ok! I will give you a clue. We thought he was kidnapped by pirates and trapped in a shipwreck."(36). The water also separates Vinay and his mother when he was 14, when his mother accidentally drowns herself in the family pond. Though Vinay's approach to water professionally is a marine engineer, it is the water that decides many events in his life.

Next, is the character Meera who represents *Shokha* or 'sorrow'. Her links with water is as a Doctor that purifies and heals her throughout the novel. For example, in chapter 24, when she understands, she cannot be with Vinay, it makes her sad and frustrated, she approaches water for solace and as the author states "She stood in the chest high water and took a long dip. The cold water cleared her mind, she felt her dreams dissipate. She took more dips, with each dip she was returning to the person who she was before Vinay had come knocking on their door." (175). Each dip of water heals and brings her back to her normal life emotionally. Water purifies her body and also helps to clear her mind and inner conflict. Each dip of water helps to reduce her sorrow and pain. Finally, when she comes out of the water all her pessimistic emotions are washed away and she becomes a confident, positive person as she was before. Many times, she communicates with water and it appears to share her pain. As a doctor, the water helps her to analyse herself as in the lines,

The only solace she found was at the pond where she bathed, the cold water as always helped clear the haze in her mind. She repeated to herself the reasons for her action and blocked his pain away from her heart. I am doing it for him, for his life, for his family, I will cause everyone more pain if I try to alleviate his, she said to herself while taking dip after dip, submerging fully, in that cold water at the pond. (235).

Shankaran is another main character who represents *Shanta*, 'peace' in the novel. He is a famous Ayurvedic doctor and astrologer. He is a firm believer in *Karma* and *Nava Graha*, and also foretells the future incidents in this novel. His approach to water is unique. He gains knowledge by living near the river. The water around him gives peace of mind. He realizes that water is a peace maker. If the amount of water reduces in future, it could be the major reason for the future wars. He believes that water is an elixir of life. Since, he firmly believes in astrology

he predicts that at world the main cause of war to his daughter-in-law Sandra, in chapter 23, "See there is a water sharing contract with the neighboring state for 999 years, and legally it cannot be cancelled. This fight has been going on and on for decades after decades. So, tomorrow, if the world war happens, surely the cause will be water."(166). He declares the reason with confident.

The fourth character is Freddy, who represents *Hasya*, 'laughter' in the novel. Being the son of a former Mayor, he has good leadership qualities which, makes him curious to know about everything. As a Captain of a ship he is not only aware of his fellow mates but also of the waters of the ocean. He understands the power of water and he prefers to stay near the water. It is shown in the book, where Durai threatens Freddy in 'Summer Palace' then, Freddy replies in disgust, "If I wanted to enter your bloody politics I would have done it a long time ago. But lucky for you I'd rather live on the honest sea than among greedy landlubbers like yourself."(195).

Freddy also feels that the water is like a magician, who gives unexpected experiences and incredible delight every time. After rescuing his sister from Durai, he is tired physically and mentally. The outburst of Maria's emotions had exhausted him. So, he seeks his magician to enlighten himself. Being a light hearted person he approaches water in a positive manner as in the chapter 31, describes, "The hot shower had done its magic, he stepped out of 'Summer Palace' and the cool morning breeze caressed his face." (211). Once again the water has proved its magic power to Freddy.

Next, the character Raziya represents *Shringar* or 'love' or 'delight' in this novel. Being the wife of Freddy she shares the laughter and delight in her character. Like Freddy she also understands the power of water and prefers to stay near the water. As a woman she considers water as another woman. The caring and soothing nature of water kindles her motherly instinct. The water persuades her to care for other people. It has clearly shown in the chapter 7, when she gets a chance to be with Sam, she cares for him with full of compassion. Following that, the character Sam, who represents *Vismaya*, 'wonder' and Sandra who represent *Veera*, "heroism" in Indian aesthetics. Sam and Sandra, approaches water as a necessary element and considers it as a setting. Though Sam is surrounded by water most of the time, he uses water to quench his thirst and to purify the body while Sandra realizes the importance of water and exposes to the world as a reporter. The title of the novel indicates that this story is related to a dam, which by definition would mean a reservoir where water is collected or stored, for distribution. Sam's mind too is a reservoir for all his emotions, for example his desire to be with his mother, his ability to tolerate the pain of Juvenile Diabetes and his curiosity to learn new things like a child. Similarly, Sandra's desire to be with Vinay and Sam, and her curiosity to learn new things and to face adventure as a reporter shows her collection of emotions. As in the case of the water, Sam and Sandra too carries a lot of emotions that ebb and flow in their life.

The eighth character is Maria, who represents *Bhayanaka* 'fear' in this novel. Water plays the role of freedom in her life. Whenever she is near the water she is independent and

happy. Before marriage when she kept in touch with water she experienced happiness and delight. Her freedom had gone after her marriage with Durai. Like the Dam she suppresses her emotions in the novel. After so many years, Maria's suppressed emotions burst out in the form of uncontrolled tears. It is seen in the line, when Freddy meets and rescues her, here she remembers her father's suicide and comforts herself by releasing tears from her body, as is said in chapter 30 "Maria broke down crying, remembering that day as she had several times" (208). All the pain and agony comes out in the form of the salt water. The salt water cures her agony. As the Danish writer Isak Dinesen says, "The cure for anything is salt water: Sweat, tears, or the sea". At the end of the story too Durai burns her passport and she can only escape from that place as by travelling by boat. She gains freedom only by travelling in the ship.

The last and ninth character Durai represents *Jugupsa* or 'disgust'. He is the antagonist and a cruel character. He marries Maria only to get the position of Mayor. His greed for political power and fame makes him the worst of all. He uses water as a tool to enter into politics. He tries to bring corruption to water by building a fake dam. He fires up people's necessity to fight for water. He makes false promises to control people and politics, as is seen in the line, "Enough of this nonsense! Stop it! I know we need that water ...and I know that we are a bit delayed. But you will get that dam. You have Durai's word for it." (189). In the end, he dies because of the flood, a direct result, perhaps, of his disrespectful manner towards it. The water plays the role of a tool and destroyer in Durai's life.

The author, Sohan Roy compares salt water and fresh water often, which is a symbolic comparison of life and death. The suppression and release of human emotions runs parallel to the physical disaster of the dam and the surge of flood waters. Through the nine characters the writer compels us to reflect on the importance of water in the present scenario. Nowadays many people have started to fight because of 'water conflict'. Water conflict is a term describing a conflict between countries, states or groups over an access to water resources. This idea is explored in chapter 33 through the interview between Durai and Sandra. In that, Durai points out "The City is almost dry. Some people are turning violent for little water." (222). Though our earth is surrounded by more than two third of water, still we have to strive to get good water. By disrespecting and polluting all forms of water we enter into a water conflict. The non-consumable salt water level is increasing while the consumable good water is decreasing due to our carelessness. The English poet S T Coleridge also shares the same feeling in his poem, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, "Water, water, everywhere, Nor any drop to drink". We face the same precarious situation today where we find that though water is available everywhere we cannot use it because a large part of it is salty the rest we are polluting so badly that the use of this contaminated water could result in death. It is common knowledge that water as a purifier. But in this novel, Sohan Roy proves that even a flood can be a purifier. Floods are the main disasters in the twenty first century. Recently Tamil Nadu too was a victim of the disaster. However the author's positive approach to water makes the readers to reflect differently. The author mentions this through the character of Shankaran in chapter 27, who says, "Flood is a

natural cleaning process. Dams needn't have been built if man had learnt to live by nature's principles. Dams have even contributed to lowering the water table"(185).

Water is a metaphor in this novel. The comparison of water and other things has played vital role in literature. In this novel, most of the characters use water in their conversation and they compare water with everything around them. It is because either they have close relationship with water or their profession deals with water. We can also assume that the author's professional background is related to water. So he has a clear understanding of water and he wants the readers to understand the importance of water in all ways. Roy uses water as a metaphor through the characters in his writing, where Freddy releases book and gives a review about the book , as in Roy's words, "Freddy waited for the applause to abate and spoke in a serious tone, 'About the central character of this novel, his life is an ode to lost love. Raziya calls it a river of love flowing towards a sea of separation'."(29).

Water also plays as a tool to express nostalgia. Like a dam it carries within lots of memories. Sohan Roy uses water as a tool to remember past incidents. He wants us to cherish our memories by learning from it. Even the setting, of water in pond, gives hope for the future. This is seen in the lines,

Traditional houses such as this had large ponds, and were used for bathing as well as an occasional refreshing swim. It was a biologically balanced eco system, with its own plethora of aquatic beings that ensured that the pond was kept as clean as nature would. Vinay had a lot of childhood memories associated with this pond, this was where he learnt to swim. This was also where he and Meera as kids spent a lot of time playing in water. There was a flight of steps leading to the pond. In the moon lit evening, the shadows from plantains and trees around the walled borders of the pond played with the mind. Vinay thought he saw an apparition that resembled his mother turn and walk away from the water's edge. (94)

On the Surface level this novel portrays water as a material or setting but at a deeper level it reveals the relationship between human emotions and water. The collapse of the dam, in the novel, is not merely an environmental disaster, but also a psychological one where the suppressed emotions of the people in and around the dam site are shattered leaving the survivors deprived, yet wiser. The Unseen roles of water as a decision maker, doctor, magician, woman, healer, purifier, political tool and destroyer proves that water is not merely a setting or background, it plays a greater role in literature and life.

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