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Folk Characters in the Short Stories of Manoj Das: A Depiction in Indian Tradition

Jyoti

M.A. English,
Kanya Gurukula Haridwar,
Uttarakhand.

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Abstract:

Folklore is the study of the common people's life especially who live in the rural areas and it plays culturally and socially significant role in Indian literature. As the depiction of the folk characters in folklores is not artificial, but they are simple, flat, straightforward and present the real lives. Despite the confinement with a limited area, their influences on modern literature are immense. The characters in folk terrains are typically depicted either fully good or quite evil and they are easy to understand or identify by the readers. In oral tradition they do not only concern about men, women and likely children, the protagonists but they focus more on the nonliving and abstract objects like, "The Tree", "The Cyclone", "Two Nights to Remember", "The Forgotten Fragrance", "Farewell to a Ghost", and even the animals and the birds- "The Owl", "The Birds", stories present in same group.

Keywords: Manoj Das, folklore, folk characters, conservative concept, Indian tradition, rituals.

Introduction

Indian literature has been nourished on folk-tells like; *Panćatantra*, *Kathāsaritsāgara*, *Jatakas*, *Hitopadeśa*, children's stories, fairy- tales, fables and legends since ancient times and it has a deep impression on the Indians. Many Indian short story- writers have presented folklore in English or other native languages. In this way, Manoj Das has been an eminent short story writer and he has written in English and native Odia language. He is highly influenced by folk literature since his childhood, he says; "Folklore was an intrinsic part of the rural atmosphere in my childhood. Their classic compendiums, the *Panćatantra*, the *Jatakas* and the *Kathāsaritsāgara*, continue to fascinate me". (Das xv). Through the inclination of folklore and other helping sources of this genre, Das has compiled a number of short story collections like- "*The Bridge in the Moonlit Night and Other stories*", "*Chasing*

the Rainbow”, “*Selected Fiction*”, “*The Mystery of the Missing Cap and Other Stories*”, and “*Old Folks of Northern Valley and Other Stories*”, so on.

The characters in Das’s stories are purely rustic and they are depicted in a distinct quality either good or bad. These are not like the character of modern literature that changes their personalities in accordance with the situation, but they remain same in nature from beginning to the end. In this context, almost all the characters of Das’s stories are unchanged and live simple life at the village or small rural area of India. By the overriding specific desire as affection, hate, excitement, greed, generosity, sorrow and happiness they are indulged by its one of the motives. Das’s characters do not belong to the high class or the status. They come usually from the smaller parts and work one of the simple jobs like- ploughman, cobbler, hawker, black- smith and house maid etc. They lead their lives with plain life and high thoughts. Das’s male characters are better than female characters. In Indian tradition women have to follow certain ethics which are established by the conservative forefathers. With the same concerns many of his stories depict the various characters; they come from different societies and encounter many difficulties and struggles. “Whether a character remains stable or changes, the reader of a traditional and realistic work expects “consistency”- the character should not suddenly break off and act in a way not plausibly grounded in his or her temperament as we have already come to know it”. (Abrams 33)

The story ‘The Crocodile’s Lady’ has more attraction by its title and forces the readers to think about the lady in details like her name, background and life story. It creates the imaginary world for the folk people of the village that ‘Granny’, a real name of the lady was dragged by the crocodile and caught her into the depth of the river. Dr. Batstone, a curious sociologist who has always desire to meet the folk people and observing their tradition. After covering fifty miles by a bullock- cart he has reached his destination and experienced the real Indian village life and said frequently, ‘Wonderful, Wonderful’. Village people tells him about the mysterious lady that years ago she lived with her aged parents on the river- bank and she had been married at her little age and unfortunately widowed soon. Das says, “She is very much there- must be in her nineties- knows as the Crocodile’s Lady, I replied. By turns the villagers feed her. They also repair her hut when necessary. (18). Here, Das has depicted two central folk characters along with villagers. Granny is not the common character like others who have only simple performing in the story. She is one of the most charming folk characters of Manoj Das. On the other hand, Dr. Batstone, an English man who has practically wisdom and great inclination for Indian tradition, he confesses, “your

people are much more progressive than ours. At least fifty percent of my countrymen believe in ghosts whether they admit it or not". (16)

In 'The Submerged Valley', we become conscious of folk people's great attachment to their lands which is acquired by the government for the use of large dam. With other concerns the story points out a certain folk people of the Harijan community and wandering bull of Lord Shiva. An insane lady of the village owns pets, a mad dog and a cat. She died soon and left behind a crazy son, claiming that jackals and ravens talked to him. Author puts some impressions of his childhood and experiences when his family moved to town and due to the intimate attachment to the natives his mother wept during the departure time. It shows that she is highly traditional woman and follows its values.

The story 'The Third Person' is practically based on the author's observation of a folk couple during his journey that is filled with full traumatic experiences of annoyed nature with a vast sombreness. In a turbulent night he has to pause some hours in an inn where he sees another traveller loaded some burdens on his shoulders, a rustic man behind his wife, both seeking the shelter. He slept and went into imaginary world of myth in which a prince rescued his princess from the spell of vicious souls upon the ship- wrecked. But the early morning begins with chirping little birds and demolishes his excursion of imaginary world. He opens the window that indicating the fresh and clam weather. In the meantime, he observes, "The innkeeper and his late- night tenant locked in a quarrel. The innkeeper demanded three quarter of a rupee while the tenant insisted on giving no more than a rupee". (122). In fact, the folk couple came last night two in numbers but they had become three, one more member was in inn as a new born baby by the lady. The innkeeper now requires one rupee for them but the tenants stand in his firm determination for half a rupee. Das has created the unusual condition of the folk people from such a wonderful journey of his life.

In the stories of Manoj Das, there is another wonderful world of child characters of Indian village. They play a significant role in some narratives and author has secured a special identity for them. Das's folk characters belong to Balasore, his native place and other remote areas of Bengal but they cover whole Indian sensibility.

In 'Laxmi's adventure', Das walks through the tragic story of Laxmi. She has huge faith in God and through her devotion she establishes a deep intimation with Him. She regards the deity like her mother and communicates it as a living entity. The main motive of her concern is about the pitiable issues of her family; poverty, sorrow and suffering. Despite such a condition she stipulates two bananas as the offering of God in everyday. It indicates her intense love that is above all kind of selfishness. Consequently, the folk people of the

village have declared her death due to God's anger. Through this story Das has made of Laxmi's character as the manifestation of a new type of child character.

The story 'A letter from the Last Spring' shows the emotions of a little girl Rina with sad eyes who waits for her mother's letter continuously but she does not know that her mother had died in the sanatorium. Through a mother's letter to her innocent child Das opens her heart with unbounded affection. It indicates the emotional words, "*My sweet little Rina*", this is only for you and read it by yourself. The doctors have advised her to stay for long and during this time she will be away from her child. She encloses some rose petals inside it from hospital garden. She guesses the spring in the present weather. She always considers about her and dreams to reach her home as soon as possible.

In 'Mystery of the Missing Toe', Snehalatha is traditionally folk depiction of Manoj Das and a prey of Indian society with old assumptions. She is only girl in the village who has obtained so much education from the upper primary school and prepared now to be married at the age of playing game. The folk people are conservative in nature and they believe, "A girl was born only for the benefit of a stranger's home". (55). They always get together and work like a family member in function and marriage. Some where the entire village indulges together and allots the work. They make the strategy and choose the right person for wedding platform. Finally, the marriage day comes; Snehalata becomes the bride through a series of customary. Her house with relatives' laughter and frequent sound of conch shell indicates the environment with excitement. *Sehnai* players and old aged drummers add more charm in the marriage. The bridegroom's party had reached in front of the thatch and all respected men and relatives in their best folk wearing were happy to see the bridegroom with beauty. For the mean time one observes the bridegroom' missing toe and says,

"Ai! He is handsome, adorned with a butterfly moustache too, but...

But?

I looked at his feet again and again, keeping pace with the palanquin....

The girl wiped her eyes and mumbled in a cracking voice her tragic discovery, As I said, he does not have a single toe. Really, none at all, none, I swear!" (58)

But Indian tradition does not allow that a girl in bridal shape can reject her bridegroom at the last phase of the marriage and show dare to do this. A village girl is tied with the knot of rituals and she has to compromise with the situations and has to accept willingly or unwillingly all tasks by her elders.

The story 'Sita's Marriage' concerns the depiction of another child character, Sita, a pretty girl and daughter of the prestigious college lecturer Dev. It is traditionally connected

with many folk characters and focused on them through a series of varied components. The elders of the family love Sita most especially, the grandfather who had selected an ideal life-partner for her. She accepts him like other traditional girls of Das's stories are bent with ritual burdens upon her shoulders. Sita says, "Rama, as a charming boy but not without his mighty bow and his crown of the burning gold, has come to her as her bridegroom, accompanied by a host of child-gods amidst heavenly music". (142)

'The Cyclone', this story is the real face of Bengal in traumatic situation of the folk people's sufferings. It put the sad images men and women and many others that highly influential figures of the cyclone in October 1942. Das mentions it with all terrible phenomena that help to destroy the thatches of the folks, scattering the fruit gardens and smashing nearly whole Bengal from its existence. People had become the refugees or homeless and they took shelter in nearby houses. Das felt gloom to see the pitiable condition of all and he says:

The second half of the meadows leading to my school had become a cremation ground. Starvation was followed by an epidemic of smallpox and death wept across the villages at great speed. Relatives unable to arrange for pyres left their dead in the open. Even crows had grown plump. Domestic dogs, initiated into tasting human flesh, looked sinister. (14)

Many of Das's stories have depicted the folk people of real condition and got successfully a meaningful sense of Indian tradition. They are the collective records not only human lives but existence of the bird, animals and nonliving things.

In 'The Owl', folk people believe blindly all traditional values of their forefathers and regard them as their right path. They always indulge into the minor works, to spend their precious time in useless communications and to think only others not themselves. Vishalpur, rural village has the vague feelings and the owl is still considered as citizen with important hooting. It is a place where unusual things are happened in many ways, the priest carries the deity in his own mud house due to collapsed temple and other people use the cow dung to clean their houses and regard it as nectar. The hooting of the owl means the indication of noteworthy death, flood, cyclone, draught, and even the sign of happiness, the right time of wedding and upcoming issues for farming and domestic activities. Villagers humanised the owl, "But the controversy did not really matter. The owl was looked upon as a supernatural presence and there was no sense in measuring the age of something supernatural". (23)

In the story 'The Tree', the people of the village are most religious and traditional and they worship the deity and even the cow and tree (Bunyan tree). Das has minutely depicted

every part of it in ritual point of view like man and woman created in his other stories. The tree has huge branches with many leaves that work as shield for every wanderer. The shape has spread out by its innumerable bough and has been given the protection for generations. Here, Das points out unique features of it, “..affording shelter not only to those who bore love and regard for it, but even to those who had proved impudent towards it..”. (47)

Conclusion

Thus, the stories of Manoj Das are the real compendiums of tradition, culture, custom, ritual and the true to life depiction of folk characters with Indian circumstances. Rural society is steeped in moral and ethical values and it inspires not only the folk people, but even to those who come from different continents and meet them. Like, Dr. Batstone, a sociologist in ‘The Crocodile’s Lady’ experiences the real Indian village. After some years he praises the rural culture of the folk people in his letter to the narrator and says, “Often I pass into a reverie remembering the days and nights I spent in your village”. (21). So, it will not be hyperbolised to say that Das is the modern folklorist and his stories are the true depiction of folk characters of Indian rural society.

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