

IMPACT FACTOR: 7.86

ISSN0976-8165

THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

14 Years of Open Access

Vol. 14 Issue-IV August 2023

Bi-monthly Peer-Reviewed e-Journal

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Indian Rural Culture in the Select Ghost Stories of Manoj Das

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Article History: Submitted-29/06/2023, Revised-13/08/2023, Accepted-14/08/2023, Published-31/08/2023.

Abstract:

Science denies the existence of ghosts and spirits but the readers love to read about them. Many writers have handled the theme of the supernatural and the mystery in their writings. Manoj Das is a successful master storyteller. Many of the Manoj Das' stories centered around a ghost. These stories have a rural setting. The people living in the villages have strong faith in the presence of ghosts and spirits. They perform different rituals with the help of tantriks. In the present paper, an attempt has been made to trace the prominent features of rural culture in the selected ghost stories of Manoj Das.

Keywords: Indian rural culture, ghosts, spirits, supernatural, Manoj Das, rituals, tantriks, occultists.

INTRODUCTION:

Though we are living in an advanced age of science and Technology, there is fear of the unknown in our mind. Science denies the existence of ghosts and spirits but the readers love to read about them. The writers have handled the theme of the supernatural and the mystery in their writings. Many of Manoj Das' stories center around a ghost. He handles these stories with a different technique. We find his quest for reality in these stories. He depicts the dominating effect of Nature on human life. At the background of the ghost stories of Manoj Das there is moonlight and twilight, howling jackals, roaring tigers, blinding rain, hooting owls which create a supernatural atmosphere. These stories have a rural setting. The people living in the villages have strong faith in the presence of ghosts and spirits. They also believe in the phenomenon of the dead

possessing the living. They perform different rituals with the help of tantrikes or occultists to free the persons who are possessed by spirits. Manoj Das has handled this theme of the supernatural and the mystery very effectively at the background of rural settings of India.

Manoj Das is an outstanding bilingual writer who writes in English and Oriya. He has contributed to the various genres of literature and received the country's highest literary honor-Sahitya Akademi Fellowship. Manoj Das has presented a serene and simple way of life of rural community in India in his fiction which is rapidly disappearing. He has expressed his strong love for his native village in his writings. "I was born and brought up in a village at an impressionable age. I can present an authentic atmosphere of rural life, the rural air of India" said Manoj Das in an interview given to the Times of India (May 18,1980). He has drawn his experiences to create an authentic picture of rural life of the times. The customs, rituals, beliefs and superstitions of the village community of India have found an expression in his short fiction. The people living in the villages have strong faith in ghosts and supernatural aspects. There is a strong influence of traditional customs and beliefs on their mind. They believe in the rituals performed by tantrik.

"Red Red Twilight" is a horrific ghost story which is full of horror and suspense. It is an outstanding story for its setting and background. The setting of the story is a village. The central character of the story is Pundarik, a well known tantrik and occultist. His father, Raghav Sharma is also a towering tantrik of the region. The atmosphere of mystery is created at the beginning of the story. The writer states:

There were uncanny sunsets when the horizon turned ghastly red. If one had to cross the meadow then, all alone, when the erratic breeze carried the smoke of corpses burning at some distance, one felt like weeping-more so if the water of the lonely pond with the huge old trees surrounding it looked awfully red and enchanted. (MOS 68)

Raghav Sharma is a very famous exorcist. He is supposed to be a terror to spooks and spirits also to ghosts. As he is sick, he sends his son Pundarik to handle the case of Kuni who is obsessed by ghost. Pundarik wishes to marry a village girl named Kumudini. But Raghav Sharma opposes it.

Here the writer focuses on the strong effect of traditional customs, more on the mind of rural people which is the characteristics of rural culture. As Raghav Sharma is proud of his forefathers, he gives reason for his disagreement with the proposal of marriage of his son with Kumudini. He states:

Look here, son, Kumudini's mother was a child-widow who married for the second time. Kumudini might be a sweet girl and her father a rich man, but such facts do not undo the scandal. That is not the only snag. We are beholden to the distinction of our calling that has come down to us from our blessed forefathers. Our powers would be irreparably damaged once a bride from sinful stock has been ushered into our family. That would mean the funeral of our proud tradition. (MOS 70)

Pundarik remained silent and he did not protest his father. On the other hand Kumudini commits suicide. She drowned in the pond. Pundarik tried to forget Kumudini and even refused to see her dead body.

Now Pundarik has visited Kumudini's village to cure Kuni. He was very frightened. He began to run. He reaches the village hurriedly. Kuni had gone to pick berries from the shrubs on the ancient pond. When she stood under the banyan tree, a bough of tree came swinging down at her, she shrieked and fainted. Pundarik tries his best to free Kuni from the clutches of the ghost. The writer gives details of it. He observes:

Someone brought a saucer loaded with smoldering cakes of wood, puffing and blowing into it with all his vigor, and placed it between Kuni and Pundarik. From the darkness outside the room came the whimpering of a woman. Kuni's mother. (MOS 73)

Further Kuni raised her head and looked at Pundarik. He recognizes that Kuni is possessed by Kumudini's spirit. Kuni suddenly stood up and began to run, followed by Pundarik. She fell down under the big banyan tree. He began running toward his village. He reaches home and enters his father's room. Raghav Sharma gets frightened to see Pundarik obsessed by the spirit of Kumudini. The writer describes how Kumudini takes her revenge on the father and son. He states:

Raghav set up. No sooner had his eyes fallen on his son than he yelled, “What has become of you, Pundarik? Who are you? And why this sneer and giggle? Spare me, spare me, please! O God, I was not prepared for this!” (MOS 75)

Manoj Das has become successful in creating a very effective background to express the impact of ghosts and supernatural aspects on the life of rural people. He has created a mysterious and magical atmosphere with the help of the following expressions: the red horizon, erratic breeze, burning corpses, howling wind, vixen's wailing, the howling of jackals, a seasoned spirit etc. Thus, the story is the best example of an authentic presentation of Indian rural life.

“Farewell To a Ghost” is an outstanding ghost story by Manoj Das. The story presents the faith of the village folk in the existence of the ghost of a girl who is a century old. The people especially living in rural areas have a strong belief in ghosts and spirits which is the dominant characteristic of rural culture. The story takes place in a village. The girl’s spirit used to live in the deserted house which was built by the Feringhee Indigo planters. The story begins with the description of deserted villa, the abode of girl’s spirit:

It was on moonlit that the deserted villa looked particularly fascinating from the river bank. We looked at it in long silences. When the fitful breeze made waves of the tall yellow grass around it, the house looked like a phantom castle floating on an unreal sea. Though pale, desolate and eerie, I must repeat, it was as fascinating as a fairy-tale world. (FGS 101)

The writer has created an air of suspense and thrill with the help of this description. It also evokes a rural atmosphere.

The girl happened to be illegitimate daughter of a sahib by a tribal woman. As the legend goes, the three young feringhees had brought this girl. The girl kills three sahibs by giving them poisoned food. She plans to possess all the gold and money kept by her masters but she herself is stabbed by her companion. Three days later some feringhees with native sepoy forced the villagers to bury the girl’s body. Thus, the girl turns into a ghost.

The villagers always treated her as a member of their community. They looked upon her as an unfortunate daughter. They have a very sympathetic attitude towards her because of her harmless nature. The villagers treated her more as a living girl than a ghost. The writer here focuses on the simple and affectionate way of life of villagers which is the feature of rural culture. The villagers suppose the spirit as the guardian-angel of the village. Even the boys also respected the spirit. The villagers offered a share to the girl in almost all religious ceremonies observed by them. The narrator states:

No feast in the village, be it due to a birth or marriage or death passed without the girl's share being duly offered to her. The ceremony took place in the dead of night. Some young men would carry the food in earthen pots. The party would always be led by a respectable elderly man, generally the head pundit of the primary school. We juniors were allowed to survey their actions only from a distance. After the pots and an earthen lamp had been placed between the villa and the banyan tree, the head pundit would intone: Unhappy girl, here is your share of the feast which has been held by the benevolent so-and-so on such-and-such occasion. Be satisfied with this. And, we ask you to guard the village from evil to the extent of your capacity. We have never tried to dislodge you or disturb you, have we? No. Why not? Because we look upon you as one of our unlucky daughters. God grant you peace! (FGS 104)

Then there is shocking news that the government has decided to demolish the crumbling villa where the spirit of the girl is living. The villagers become anxious to settle the ghost in some other place. While discussing the solution, the writer uses the authentic expressions to reveal rural beliefs of the villagers in the following words:

'Can't we request the government to spare the villa?' 'No, since the time the zamindar was declared bankrupt, the land has become the government's property. The government does not provide for ghosts,' the village headman said, and his statement was followed by a prolonged silence and intermittent coughs and yawans. Then, a lizard tick-ticked and two or three people muttered, 'True, true!' 'But what will happen to the girl? She has lived there all these years and has never harmed us. Rather, there are reasons to believe that she

is a benevolent ghost.'The lizard tick-ticked again and this time more people said, and more loudly, 'True, true!' (FGS 106)

The villagers request the authorities to delay the demolition work for a few days. A religious ritual is arranged for farewell to ghosts. The writer throws light on the strong impact of beliefs and rituals on the mind of the villagers.

A priest, well-versed in necromancy was appointed to perform the ceremony. It was told that the priest wore a garland of beads carved out of the spine of a willful witch. Here, Manoj Das presents the socio- religious aspect of rural life very effectively. Customs, rituals and superstitions form the rural religious life which is the important feature of rural life. The farewell ceremony of the ghost is presented with effective expression which leaves a strong mark on the mind of the readers. It is very emotional incident:

'Almost every family had brought a little food-rice, bananas, coconuts, sweet meats or cakes – to offer the girl ... The presents were arranged in a semi-circle on the verandah. The priest placed a parcel at its center and slowly removed the red linen covering it. It was a complete human skull. He also held a stick of bone. He recited hymns while drawing figures in the air with the bone ...' (FGS 106-107)

The priest leads the ghost to a tall palm tree. Then he beat the tree with the bone and circled it a number of times. After this, the villagers walked in silence. Then everyone returned with weeping silently. The narrator and his friends used to visit this very spot every evening till the last day of summer vacation. The narrator was led to town for admission to a school.

The narrator returns to his village after three months. Then he notices the very tree where the ghost was placed. The tree was dead, struck by lightning. Now the village boys forget the ghost. Even the narrator's visits to the village became rarer. The new generation of the village boys are ignorant about the ghost. They are afraid of ghosts. Thus the story is a masterpiece of the representation of traditional beliefs and values. Manoj Das highlights the compassionate and innocent attitude of the villagers in rural India. The ghost of the girl has become part and parcel of the life of the villagers. The tree where the ghost was placed was struck by lightning. It indicates

the end of an epoch. Manoj Das shows his deep anguish for changing innocent beliefs and values of rural culture. Manoj Das presents beautiful village vignettes in his stories. His stories are set in villages and small towns. There is a presence of supernatural elements in the majority of his stories. We find ghosts, unseen spirits, demons in many of his stories. He creates an atmosphere of mystery in his ghost stories. 'Moonlight' contributes to the mood of the story. It creates a dream-like situation.

In his 'The Bridge in the Moonlight' Manoj Das creates a mysterious situation. He presents the theme of seeing a ghost in this story. He depicts man's helplessness before his destiny. The action of the story centers around the character of octogenarian Prof. Ashok. He remembers his past moments when he looked at the full moon. There is evocation of rural sensibility. The writer pens the beautiful Nature under the influence of moonlight which has a dreamlike quality. He depicts it as:

There were moments on such moonlight nights when he could see elves and fairies- he was surprised that they never aged – playing hide-and- seek among the silver – rimmed clouds and atop the starlit trees on the faint horizon. He enjoyed their frolic to his heart's fill, but often dozed off in the process and, what was intriguing, still continued to see them. His only problem was, he could not say how much of those playful beings he saw while awake and how much asleep. (FGS 50)

Thus Prof. Ashok is aware of his queer forgetfulness. But he is proud of his clear vision at the age of eighty. He gives its credit to his feeding at his mother's breast till the age of five, being her last child. Here the writer throws light on the intimate relationship between the mother-child in Indian villages which is disappearing in modern city culture. There was the bridge on the small river two furlongs away. But Ashok cannot see the very bridge. Then Sudhir, his friend younger to him by a decade arrives there. Ashok decides to visit the old bridge with Sudhir. But Sudhir informs him that the old bridge is destroyed and the new one will be constructed. Here the writer throws light on the changing placid and serene atmosphere of rural culture in the process of urbanization. He nostalgically pens it as:

'... Where is the blessed bridge? Why do you think we haven't enjoyed any stroll for a while? They have pulled down the dear old bridge to its last brick. They plan

to erect a new one – a stylish one with a number of jetties on both the sides for the taxpayers to enjoy their evenings around crotons and bougainvillea, cracking nuts and sucking at ice-cream sticks. In no time it will turn into a fish market, I'll bet,' Sudhir spoke with some anguish. (FGS 52)

Then Sudhir confesses the fact which had happened sixty years ago. He tells Ashok the truth that Meena had written a sweet reply to Ashok's epic love letters and she had agreed to meet him at the bridge. But out of jealousy Sudhir had torn it and thrown it into the water below the bridge. Thus, Sudhir feels guilty for his treachery and requests Ashok bhai to pardon him. When Ashok listens to this fact his soul leaves his body and goes in search of that precious but lost love letter. Then Mahindra, another friend of Ashok arrives there and tells the fact that a few minutes ago he has seen Ashok searching something under the dismantled bridge. Thus, Ashok bhai had not gone out that evening. He has fallen asleep on the sofa. When Sudhir and Mahindra tried to wake him up, they found him dead. Mahindra has seen the spirit of Ashok searching the shreds of the torn letter.

Thus, Manoj Das very skillfully presents the theme of seeing a ghost by creating an atmosphere of mystery. Moonlit night provides a proper setting for the story. The writer very effectively connects past memories with the present which creates a nostalgic mood. He depicts the character of Prof. Ashok who loved Meena, his student. But she never responded to him. He remained bachelor throughout his life. He remains faithful to Meena. While commenting on the melancholic atmosphere in the story Dr. Sarbeswar Samal states:

The bridge exists nostalgically in Ashok's subconscious like his passion for Meena. It stands as a memorial of love and loss and with moonlight it acquires the association of sadness and melancholy. But apart from this, the bridge as such, arching over the river and hanging under the sky connecting two unconnected patches of land, holds a perennial charm for the human mind. It is archetypal, esoteric and enchanting in its appeal. (95)

Thus, the bridge in the story links the past and the present which deepens the melancholic mood in the story. Ashok Babu represents deep and faithful love for Meena, his student and remains unmarried throughout his life. But such a type of faithful love is rare in modern culture. The writer expresses his deep anguish towards changing values of rural culture.

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