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## **Manoj Das: A Close Affinity between Realism and Fantasy**

**Amarjeet Kumar**

Research Scholar,  
Department of English,  
Patna University.

**&**

**Dr Naqui Ahmad John**

Assistant Professor,  
Department of English,  
Patna University,  
Patna, Bihar.

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### **Abstract:**

Literature and Art offer a vast canvas on which an artist draws imaginative and realistic pictures of life prompted by his own experience and sensibility. An art is not held to be authentic and genuine unless it bears the resemblance to life, or say, it convinces us to the utmost probability of the situations of life. In literature, writers often blend fantasy and realism to present something noble and profound which has been hitherto either unknown to or unexplored by us. The short stories of Manoj Das present a faithful portrayal of Indian life and scene, especially the rural life of traditional society as well as the semi-urban society, of the post-independence period. In his stories, Manoj Das provides a new dimension to the narratives where fantasy and realism are invariably juxtaposed with care and sincerity. This research paper aims to explore the fusion of fantasy and realism in the short stories of Manoj Das. Through the analysis of character portrayal, situation and scene of rural life, the predicament and circumstances, relationship between the characters, their aspiration and joy, disillusionment and revelation, it will be explored how the intermingling of fantasy and realism articulates and implies the true nature of reality in order to show the other dimension or side of the reality. While analysing the themes and character of Manoj Das's stories, it will be examined how the use of fantasy shows the subtle reality and vice-versa which puts readers in profound aestheticism presenting a broader and noble view of human life and society.

**Keywords: traditional, fantasy, realism, portrayal, aestheticism, intermingling, human life.**

**Introduction: -**

The spread of English education brought about the importation of western ideas and technique which made Indians familiar with the western literature and art. Indians were influenced by the technique and design of stories written in western countries. Too much attraction towards the western stories resulted in a fine fusion of India's literary heritage of the past and Europe's present. India has the old tradition of oral story-telling. During the last hundred years, the short stories have been one of the most popular forms of literature. Writers of the different language origin invariably began to produce short stories and other writings expressing the spirit of national consciousness for various causes. The short story, due to its form, typically suited to the mirroring of Indian life. It offered the writer's scope to pick up any aspect of life and deal with it with attention and care it requires. The works of Indian writer in English like R K Narayan M R Anand, Raja Rao, Rabindranath Tagore, due to their thematic and technical maturity began to be acclaimed in western countries, and hugely attracted criticism as well as accolades.

Manoj Das is one of the prominent writers of modern India primarily known for his plausible and delightful stories. Recognised as prolific bilingual writer, he gained wide readership in both his mother tongue Oriya in English. He has substantially published nearly 30 books in Oriya and in English each. Manoj Das is recognised as an able interpreter of Indian literature and culture. His short stories are internationally acclaimed, and have secured publications in several noted magazines and anthologies in the west. His stories have been praised by distinguished writers like Graham Greene and H.R.F. Keating. Manoj Das's first collection of short stories in English, "*A Song for Sunday and Other Stories*", appeared in 1965. Praising the stories, the renowned novelist, Graham Greene said,

"I have now read the stories of Manoj Das, with great pleasure. He will certainly take a place on my shelves beside the stories of Narayan. I imagine Orissa is far from Malgudi but there is the same quality in his stories with perhaps an added mystery."

Through his short stories, Manoj Das presents an authenticate picture of Indian life and atmosphere especially the life of village folk which remains changeless in the midst of

changing world, the quintessential India with its essentiality and peculiarity. The Other India that Manoj Das exhibits through his stories is the India in transition, the early post-independence India with new socio-political environment and with the rise of patriots, politician, minister, mayor, city father, professional like doctors, lawyers, engineers, police-officers. The semi-urban India wears the look of modernity assuming an air of sophistication, pretension, and hypocrisy.

In his stories, Manoj Das holds wholly an Indian view of the things and creates Indian aura of atmosphere. His stories cover a wide range of themes including hard-core realism, enjoyable fantasies, human relations, folktales, and fables. Themes like mystery, mysticism, and occultism permeate in his short stories and are treated severely and sincerely by him which creates a profound aura of fantasy.

The present research paper will analyse and explore the realism and fantasy through his select short stories and their significance in the formation of the distinct narratives of the story. In common parlance, Literature imitates and interprets life, and in a broad prospect, is a social document and reality. To be a member of society, a writer or an artist is a most conscious point of his age. He represents the spirits of consciousness of the society he lives in. A writer's ideology and his outlook towards life is, to great extent, is determined by the social consciousness and how he reacts to life and society determines the production of his work or art. His impressions and experiences apparently or inapparently unveil themselves and thus his works bear the stamp of the truth or a semblance of reality as it exists and is perceived by him.

“The artistic consciousness is nothing but a transmutation and crystallisation of the social consciousness.”

M H Abrams points out, “Realism is used in two ways (1) to denote a literary movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century” (especially in the prose fiction of Balzac, George Eliot and William Dean Howells and) (2) “to designate a recurrent way of representing life in literature.”

Social reality of the traditional rural India permeates the earlier short stories of Manoj Das. Through the portrayal of traditional society as well as semi-urban society, he presents an authentic picture of rural folk of traditional society, and shows a collective image or identity. Stories like “The Submerged Valley”, “The Tree”, “Farewell to a Ghost”, and “The Owl” show concern over the loss of community life and the erosion of bucolic existence. The narrative of

“The Submerged Valley” is realistic in every respect. The rural scene and atmosphere are faithfully evoked here. The characters of the story remind us of the very typical people of the traditional Indian village. An assortment of the people is introduced here who happens to visit a rock and temple which was once the pivot of the village. The construction of the dam caused the site submerged into the flood water but ‘the Shiva temple and the hillock behind it could be seen’ when the river grew feeble and the level of reservoir fell unusually low. Here, the image of the rural atmosphere with idyllic bucolic charm is very vibrant and lively. Through his vivid description, Manoj Das has drawn almost graphically an immaculate picture of village scene with its unique and identical features like ‘a lame crow perching on a crumbling stone arc of the temple’, ‘harijan community looking white caused by congenital vitiligo’, ‘the tree kneeling in meditation in front of the school’ and lastly the insane woman and her ‘crazy and no less arrogant son, Abolkara’. Through these physical details of the characters and the scene Manoj Das builds up exquisite scene and atmosphere of village life. The future of environment and character is very remarkable in the story.

“Farewell to a Ghost” also creates a realistic picture of traditional Indian society. In traditional Indian village, mysticism, occultism, and superstitious are normally embedded in the collective consciousness of the people. The narratives of this story is based on the superstition of the people and it equally presents a typical rural scene where village folk with their belief in the ghost the supernatural, endearing ‘the benevolent’ ghost girl as their darling daughter, the exemplary sign of pathos in bidding her farewell while shifting her to new dwelling, ‘a tall palm tree’, braving ‘the drizzle and the fear of a heavy rain’, the feeling of the narrator, children and other village folk are notably delineated in the story. The minute and vivid description of the scene tends to make the invisible ghost to be a tangible and living reality.

Born in the idyllic charm and natural beauty of Balasore village in Orisa, Manoj Das unobtrusively conjures up the village scene, the bucolic life of the village and the changes wrought by time. He easily recognises the members of his society and portrays flawlessly them in such a realistic frame that the readers begin to feel tempted to go back the old time and enjoy the rural milieu of the traditional Indian society. The setting and atmosphere he creates, the portrayal of the character and the sentiments and feelings he evokes through the character are

extremely realistic and natural. He confines himself, as Fielding writes, “within the bounds of probability.”

“The Tree” depicts the villager’s grave concern and pious reverence for the tree, ‘banyan tree’ under which “everybody ran to take shelter”, now, due to some unfavourable conditions the tree showed all tendency to fall. Alike any typical village of India the tree in the story commands the reverence and sanctity from villagers. The banyan tree, branching out into several trunks, has now assumed a formidable and giant form. It now fulfils the need of all and sundry in the village, like the usual site of the village meetings, “the much-revered bull” relaxing beside a neighbouring trunk, old woman leaning against trunk with a sack for resting. It offers shelter for a family of snakes, believed to be kind and courteous, residing “in a hollow at the foot of another trunk” of the tree and in the branches above, a legion of birds survives. As the flood broke out little past midnight, the villagers thronged on the river bank and started worrying about the imminent fall of the tree. Such scenes and description remarkably evoke the realistic picture of Indian villages. In our traditional society, especially by people of the Hindu community, the tree is regarded as a godly entity. People are religiously and emotionally connected to it. The whole scene of the flood and the tree is showcased before reader’s eyes. Like a wizard, with the magical wand of his subtle perception, Manoj Das conjures up in readers’ imagination the entire situation including the unforgettable village folk and their so-called Tree-God.

Set in the background of the post-independence India, “The Owl” stands parallel to “The Tree”, for the two stories are more or less modelled on the same theme, technique and design. As a keen observer of the society, Manoj Das comprehends the delicate nuances of the manners and mores of human society. Just as the traditionalists seek to “look inward on their community”, he sheds light on the social life and the ethos of the community.

A story is said to be a fantasy when it is based on an assumption that certain conditions are true and probable. It conjectures what might happen if certain condition exists. Manoj Das is a prominent writer of fantasy. His treatment of fantasy is same as that of his story of realism. Through his marvellous narratives, he has shown avowed interest in the strange, fantastic and wonderful aspects of life and those aspects alone allure and fascinate him. “His muse lustily revels in the carnival of fantasy.” Manoj Das creates a fantastic world of mystery and mysticism with special liking for supernatural elements. He revels in the enchanting world of fable, fairy-

tales, magic and mystery. In his fantasy, he delineates familiar characters like wily jackals, wise kings, sighing prince and wistful princess, and on the other hand his stories incorporate unheard and unimaginable things like tiger offering a golden bangle, doves arguing human matter, a turtle flying across the sky, a man lifting the mountain etc. Manoj Das mixes up real with unreal to carve out wonderful stories. “The Owl”, “Tale of the Northern Valley”, are highly enjoyable a delightful fantasy.

The story of “The Owl” like other stories is a blend of realism and fantasy. At Vishalpur, the hooting of the owl called for debate among villagers to ascertain whether the hooting was of the same owl which helped certain wise villagers prophesy drought, cyclone, flood and death half a century ago, or it was a new one. The villagers agreed to regard the owl as a supernatural presence and if it was hurt or killed, the guilty person would die. When the hooting of the owl abruptly stopped, the villagers accused the young zamindar, with a gun in his, of killing the owl. They strongly believed that the killing of the owl must bring death to the young zamindar as a consequence of his act. During a camp in the kachehari, the young man is haunted and vexed by the persistent visit of the villagers. Like the voice of dying-undying tree, they were stunned to hear the hooting of the dying and undying owl. Here, the fantasy turned into the plausible story of an intriguing owl. Here, the fantasy does not falsify and fictionalise the scene and situation. Nor does it distort and degrade but defines and articulate the true nature of reality. Fantasy serves as an “extension of reality.”

The tale of the “The Crocodile’s Lady” is held to be an excellent artistic endeavour that recants at once the question of fantasy and reality. The transformation of the missing girl into crocodile’s lady appeared fantastic and incredible to Dr Bastone, the sociologist, but he was enchanted when he heard the story form the lady herself. Such narrative is found in the folklore and mythology. It is masterpiece carved out of the evocation of the mysterious and wonderful. The intermingling of human and subhuman, and the elements of make-believe exalts this fantasy to different level.

In “The Friends and Strangers”, the two strange friends, Trithankar and Shivabrata, are moon-struck and afflicted with hallucination. They envisioned all short of improbable and inconceivable things which, in real life, do not take place. The two friends claimed to see ‘Pramarth’ going to present a shawl to Mr Wilson who was already dead for two months. When

the news of Pramarth's death in an accident reached them, it immediately dawned upon them that they must have seen Parmarth's ghost. Such improbable situation implied them to suspect each other to be dead, but they were, in reality, very much alive. Here, this fantasy resembles the story of O Henry, "A Strange Story", where the protagonist, John Smothers one night had hurried to bring medicine prompted by the condition of his ailing daughter. He returned after many years on a night when his granddaughter suffered similarly from colic and finally the little girl recognised him to be her grandfather.

One can never discard the probability of the occurrence of improbable things in real world. Fantasy is born out the sheer imagination which evokes us to peep into other side of the common things. "The power of fantasy penetrates into every corner of the universe..." In Manoj Das's stories, fantasy is woven out of the fairy-tale world of the king, queen and his retinue with the bawdy and earthy fun and humour as in "He Who Rode the Tiger" and "Man Who Lifted the Mountain."

The story of "Operational Bride" is a marvellous fantasy where readers feel like roving in the fairy world, along with it, they become aware of the dull distorting mechanistic world of science. The wandering prince, being enamoured of the daughter of the woodcutter, finds difficulty in the matter of his marriage with her. The king along with his ministers devises a plan of carving the girl into a suitable royal bride. Accordingly, the girl undergoes a plastic surgery wherein she was maimed and distorted by the latest electronic devices. Prince's firm pursuit for his dream-girl of the hill shattered when he found her nothing but a scarecrow and carcass. Here, the fantasy appraises the realistic situation of the impact of advancing modern time.

"The Man Who Lifted the Mountain" is a fine blend of fantasy and allegory. One requires to have a great flight of imagination and a generous heart to enjoy such level of fantasy. Can a mountain speak and be lifted as a feather? Is it reasonable to believe so in the real world? Of course, No, Not at all! Such improbable incidents are commonly seen in mythology. It transcends the real world where mortals live. But one has to believe and repress all qualms and disbeliefs. One has to chiefly subscribe what S. T. Coleridge call "*the willing suspension of disbelief*." Unreal situations and scenes apart, fantasy serves some other purpose as devised by the writers, the purpose to disseminate human values and moral messages. In this story, the unbridled desire of a man, Thieffou, is controlled by the inhuman entity, the mountain. Whether in

realism or in fantasy, Manoj Das never lags behind to take moralistic and idealistic side of the life.

Keeping in mind the realistic scene and situations of the society, Manoj Das invariably begins his stories but he moves away from it soon, expands the horizon of his writing and soars high in the realm of fantasy and finally comes back with realism, thus he completes the whole circle of his story-telling. Factual realism is not enough to cover up the broad space of human life because it has other dimensions also, the areas which remain unearthed and untouched by the realism. To peep into the hidden recess of the things and view the original self of the things, man has to transcend the logical bound of perception spurred by his fantasy.

For Dostoevsky, the truth lies in the 'exceptional', not in the 'arid observation of ordinary trivialities'. He opines, "What most people regard as fantastic and lacking in universality, I hold to be the inmost essence of truth."

The stories in 'Man Who Lifted the Mountain and Other Fantasies' and 'Fantasies for Adults' are fantasies with shred of realism. Though the scene and characters portrayed here are not real but a deeper plane of reality is not lacking in them.

### **Conclusion: -**

After the deliberation on the presence of the realism and fantasy in the short stories of Manoj Das, it is pertinent to infer that Manoj Das's fantasies are not wholly an abstract presentation of the things or simply a sheer play of imagination in mysticism. They are embedded in reality. The Fantasies are presented within conceivable bounds of one's imagining things. The unerring cogency and logic of probability make characters, scene and atmosphere plausible and palatable in the stories. Manoj Das does not produce vague and pointless fantasies. Nor does he create a mess of fancy and imagination. His fantasies are the direct product of creative genius. Beneath ordinary or phenomenal reality, there lies a subtle and hidden reality. In order to have a glimpse of this submerged portion, we require implying effective method to delve deep into the heart of reality. When we seek reality in oneness and diversity, it has to be viewed from several probable angles. For Manoj Das, fantasy is not merely a device of thinking but a portion of his technique, 'a sort of objective correlative to project his motif and vision'. Manoj Das's story-telling exhibits a fine amalgamation of realism and fantasy. He is gifted with the

natural trait of turning realism into fantasy and vice-versa while narrating his stories. “Despite the ambience of fantasy, a hard core of realistic predicaments and problems underlines the stories. Thus, the queer blend of fantasy and realism gives the stories of Manoj Das uniqueness and novelty which is found only in a few Indian writers in English. He can be invariably called “a romantic realist” because his stories imply a strong sense of mystery and fantasy while embedded in a deep sense of fact and reality.

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