

**FOLKLORE TRADITION IN MANOJ DAS'S *SELECTED FICTION***

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**ABSTRACT**

Folklore is the traditional beliefs and stories of a group of people. It serves as a symbolic language which portrays the livelihood of the rustic people. Verbal folklore is the oral tradition with specific genres such as proverbs, riddles, lullabies, prose narratives and songs. The non verbal modes are dances, games etc. There are also composite a performing arts such as street magic, representing every aspect of city, town and village life. The Stories discussed in this paper have strong oral narrative style and supernatural elements as a characteristic of folktales.

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As Manoj Das is an Indian writer, he has shown strong affinity to typical Indian tradition of story-telling. Folktales are oral in tradition. They came down the generations by word of mouth. Some of the tales that today's grandmothers tell their grandchildren are centuries old. A.K. Ramanujan tells that the story "Crossing a River, Losing a self" which he has heard in childhood, is composed by the great Indian Philosopher Sankara in the seventh century. The eleventh century *Kathasaritsagara* has stories that can be seen in the *Arabian Nights*, in *Boccaccio*, in Shakespeare's *All's well that Ends well* and *Cymbeline*. In the nineteenth century, S.M. Nates and Sastri have published some folktales both in Tamil and in English (1870's). This shows that the folk tales

which are recorded in the written form is a late trend. The oral tradition covers the whole gamut of the storyteller playing a significant role. There are professional and non-professional story tellers. Professional story tellers usually travel from place to place. They tell epic stories from *The Ramayana*, *The Mahabharata* and the stories from the puranas. Domestic tellers are the non-professional ones like grandmothers, aunts and so on. They tell stories to keep the attention of their children and make them consume more food. These stories have a blend of characters like animals, men, and women and so on.

Mostly, Manoj Das's stories are presented as part and parcel of the Indian village community. A.K. Ramanujan in his *Folk Tales from India* classifies folk



tales into many kinds. They are male-centered tales, tales about fate, death, gods, demons, ghosts and so on. Folk tales employ special phrases like "Once upon a time", or "In a certain town" and so on (8). These phrases would mark the beginning of the tales. They are key words to provoke the interest of the listeners. Manoj Das also begins with those special phrases in his stories. As P. Raja in his *Many Worlds of Manoj Das* points out:

Often he begins the stories with: Once upon a time, not long ago certain kind... a technique made immensely popular by fable-makers and grandmother. But this as we soon come to realize is merely a literary subterfuge. Manoj Das being a creator of many modern fables and fantasies appears to have perfected a creative technique peculiarly responsive to the various levels of readership. His short stories are a delight for the lazy reader seeking merely to while away the time in the over-crowded railway carriage.(73)

Hence, Manoj Das's stories are folklore by nature. Folklore is very much contrary to the romantic notions. Manoj Das shows interest in the said typical Indian tradition of storytelling. According to R.K. Narayan the prototypes of Indian short story writer has the depth of epics and mythological stories. Manoj Das's stories bring out the culture of the people. These stories have semi-rural background. One gets to know their beliefs in astrology, horoscope, supernatural elements, fear, nostalgia, love, life and death, post-independent, India, old age, human relationship, death relationships and so on. His stories concentrate on the regions with their community life. He presents the Indian subject matter vividly. Usually his stories deal with the mystery of life. Manoj Das's "Friends and Strangers" tries to humanize the non-human nature. The story is based on the class divisions among people on the basis of social, economic and educational status. Trithankur and Shivabrata belong to upper class. The atmosphere of the story is set on an autumn evening. Autumn evening is the symbolic representation of sadness or death that will occur

later or at a critical situation in the story. As the narrator in his *Selected Fiction* says:

The two looked upon each other as unreal. Consequently, the townsfolk had gradually learnt to look upon both as unreal. It was on an autumn evening that had set into motion the chain of events culminating in this bizarre situation. The moonlight on the lush out skirts of the town was so thick, one felt one could net a kerchief-full of it and pocket it for future use.(109)

These sentences reflect the mystery waiting for the readers. Usually Trithankar and Shivabrata visit their small town to spend the holidays. They have a friend Pramath, working in a frontier town famous for its woollen materials production. Usually Trithankar and Shivabrata sit on a rock at night near the palm trees. They call their friend Pramath who walks fastly to give a woollen shawl to Mrs. Wilson, who always demands every passer-by to some small service by sitting at home and gazing at the road. Trithankar and Shivabrata are shocked to hear Mrs. Wilson's death. But Mrs. Wilson passed away two months before. The narrator in his *Selected Fiction* says:

Trithankar and Shivabrata kept sitting, nonplussed. Pramath did not give them opportunity to tell him that Mrs. Wilson was no more. Two months has passed since the evening she was found dead seated in her usual posture, apparently gazing at passer-by. (111)

They conclude that this may be due to pramath's hallucination. As the narrator points out, "Hallucination caused by his habit of seeing her seated in that position year after year" (111). They wait for Pramath to come back but in vain. They come down to Pramath's house and are shocked. Pramath's parents and others weep by telling them that he has died in an accident at noon.

Here, Manoj Das heightens the mystery of life. It raises the question of the appearance and the disappearance, known and the unknown, and real and the unreal among the readers.

Both the friends walk in total confusion without looking at the house of Mrs. Wilson. They feel that



they are unreal. The narrator in his *Selected Fiction* admits, "It was when they passed by the rock that the moon emerged from the cloud and flashed in their faces. And it was then that, looking at each other, each felt the other to be unreal as Pramath" (112). One wise man explains the incident clearly that two friends have not seen Pramath but a passer-by. It is the trick played by moonlight and the breeze which has confused the two friends. This story brings all the incidents on the basis of illusion and reality. Here more than the human character the atmosphere plays a significant role. The setting, the physical surroundings bring life to the characters and the story part itself. The atmosphere would tell a story more than the character itself. It tells the happenings of time and so on. The characters in this story are influenced by the atmosphere. As Sylvan Barnet in *A Short Guide to Writing about Literature* says:

Broadly by speaking, setting included not only the physical surroundings the point or points in time. The background against which we see the characters and the happenings may be specified as morning or evening, spring or fall, and this temporal in a good story will probably be part of the story's meaning, perhaps providing an ironic contrast or perhaps exerting an influence on the characters. (97)

The atmosphere creates confusion regarding the characters being alive and dead. As P.Raja in his *Many Worlds of Manoj Das* reveals, "What is dominant in "Friends and Strangers" is the atmosphere" (80). Hence Manoj Das reveals the perception of the mystery of life in folklore tradition.

Manoj Das's excellence in the art of story-telling is not only seen in unreal world but in real world too. As a native writer he comprehends the real situations and depicts them in his works.

Fear for ghosts is a common scenario among the people. Everyone seems to be interested in hearing the stories of ghosts or to know something about ghosts. Here Dr. Batstone, a learned sociologist from the west is surprised to hear many tales from the villagers. Dr.Batstone is much eager to know something about ghosts. As Dr.Batstone asks the narrators: "Tell me Baboo do all these people believe

in ghost?"(18). Here the narrator brings the westerners interest in Indian beliefs. Almost all Indians seem to believe in the existence of ghost. They have exorcists to drive away these ghosts. Dr.Batstone is much interested to hear from the head Pundit that a mother who abandons a child in the cremation ground. The child's name is Mahatma Languly Baba who is protected or taken care by the ghosts. The head pundit says:

Tell me who protected the Mahatma for twenty-four hours? Jarkals and dogs and vultures and ravens were all there but all sat twelve yards away, watching the Mahatma in silent awe. Tell me, who threw an invisible cordon around the infant Mahatma?(19)

Manoj Das shows the psychological condition of the villagers. He shows them as innocent when they accept and approve the head pundit's explanation. Manoj Das presents the simple and fearful people of the villagers. He portrays the story mingling the natural with supernatural elements. The discussion over the stories on ghosts has come to an end. The narrator starts to tell about the story of a crocodile lady. Dr.Batstone with much enthusiasm raises questions about crocodiles and this reveals the little of the story. Dr.Batstone hears the tale of a crocodile marrying a girl.

The crocodile lady was married at the age of three. She became widow at four. And then she lives with her parents. Usually, she bathes in the river. And the crocodile has fallen in love with her. Finally the crocodile marries the girl.

The crocodile tells the lady to recite the mantra thrice so that she will take the human form. But if he is near her the Mantra will not be fruitful. After some days, the crocodile lady accepts the male crocodile as her husband. They lead a very happy life. This continues for a long period. But ten years later the crocodile lady has wanted to see her parents and to seek their permission. He grants her wish and she visits her place and feels very much disappointed. As she loses her parents, she has to lead a lonely life for nearly seventy years.

Dr.Batstone's confusion grows when he meets the crocodile lady. The narrator says, "I laughed and uttered the professor's pet word 'Fantastic'! And



added, 'Dr.Batstone, I'm afraid, you took Granny's tale too seriously" (24). And the professor writes, "Surely, I was under the spell of a mantra (who uttered it?) for a brief time. Fantastic!"(25).

The narrative technique of this story may remind Coleridge's technique "Willing suspension of disbelief" as P.Raja points out in '*Many words of Manoj Das*'.

Hence, Manoj Das's way of telling the story not only gains the momentary submission of Dr. Batstone but the reader too. The Stories discussed in this paper have strong oral narrative style and supernatural elements as a characteristic of folktales. In the Previous century, folklore was looked upon as the source of all knowledge. As a result many researches are being done on folklore today. Though Manoj Das's short stories bring to light the culture of a particular group of people, one finds cultural similarities beyond geographical polarities and this is exactly what folklore is about.

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