

HUMANIZING THE NON-HUMAN: THE MAGIC IN CHARACTERISATION BY MANOJ DAS

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Abstract

Manoj Das introduces real life characters in his fictional works whether they belong to human or non-human category. The non-human may include sub-human, living or non-living characters. He has treated them alike in his popular fictional works like *The Selected Fiction*, *The Lady who Died One and A Half Times and Other Fantasies*, *Cyclones* etc. In many of his stories the treatment of humanization of the non-human characters is found which overcomes the demarcation between dream and reality. It takes the reader into another world where one can realize the complex vision of reality.

Manoj Das, the most popular bilingual writer from Odisha has excelled in story-telling. The most lighted part of his story telling is characterization. His characters are always realistic whether they are human or non-human. "He says that characters follow the theme of a story and the words are merely added by author to represent the thoughts of the character. That is the precise reason why Das's persons in fiction are from so many varied backgrounds and display many different dimensions of human nature" (*FacenFacts.htm*). They cannot simply be divided into the real and the unreal, because no matter how the characters use their magic or how they interact with other creatures and forces, they need to follow a set of rules. Das not only creates characters of blood and flesh from real and everyday world, he also very often projects birds and beasts, as well as ghosts and other supernatural characters in the tradition of folklores, fairytales and myths. We meet tigers, monkeys, crocodiles, owls etc., possessing human ego, greed, stupidity, passion and intelligence. We also find ghosts and spirits with real human values and characteristics well accepted by other living characters.

Das has a special attachment for tigers and he very often portrays them humanly. In "He Who Rode the Tiger" the tiger is real, though its behaviour appears to be supernatural when it takes the Prince with it into the Jungle. It is a mysterious force, a channel, an instrument, a symbol of transcendence. The wise Prince does not deserve the suffocation of living a meaningless life in a land of foolish people, and with the ride of the tiger now he steps up in a higher level by sacrificing his life.

In “The Tiger and The Traveller”, the Tiger is the transformed form of a greedy human who once entered into a pond for a gold bangle. After being a cursed tiger he receives intelligence and wisdom, though the evil and the dangerous self is still within. He is eager to free himself from the curse of the bangle by motivating the new traveller to receive it. Though in the animal form, it fails to give up its human nature. Filled with envy and selfishness it never warns the new traveller of the consequences of receiving the bangle and thus falling into the category of sub-human.

A pet tiger, loving and obedient, appears in “Birds at Twilight”. While the master is too anxious to set it free, the tiger is too much inclined to him so as to leave him. The tiger amazes us when it chases the master, clings to him and refuses to leave him, refusing to accept freedom. It is like a human child who does not want to be separated from his father. The unbelievable relationship between the master and the pet initially enchants us, but it ends in misfortune and sorrow as both of them lose their life.

Das presents another tiger in *The Fourth Friend* with almost human attributes. He not only saves the life of a human child, but also shows wonderful gestures that culminate in his friendship with the three boys. His nature is characterized by sympathy, universal fellow-feeling and kindness which are reflected not only in his relationship with the three boys but also in his interaction with the villagers and his master.

The Tiger in “Bhola Grandpa and the Tiger” behaves so strange that sometimes the reader cannot understand its action. When Bhola Grandpa, the old forgetful fellow passes by it, it simply stares at him and lets him go smoothly. The tiger’s whole -night -waiting for Bhola Grandpa to climb down the tree seems to be meaningless. The tiger silently observes him as if spell bounded or charmed by some magic. Being aware of the fact, Bhola Grandpa watches the tiger “stretching and yawning and preparing to leave the place as though its bewilderment was giving way to disgust.” (Selected Fiction 99)

The tiger’s presence in “The Night the Tiger Came” is not only ambiguous but also symbolic. It may be a real one or a phantom which is the illusory reflection of the people’s mind and serves as a magic mirror for unfolding their base existence. Writes Samal, “The apprehension of the tiger coming and moving in the colony is not only the nightmare they dreaded, but also the reality which they could not confront but run away from in fear” (Manoj Das: A Critical Study 98).

The author’s ingenuity culminates in the novella *The Tiger at Twilight*. A man-eating tiger is on the prowl. The tiger here is the center of attraction for its terror and attacks in the valley. Later it is found to be a tigress. All the characters in this novella are affected by the situation. The tiger takes the shape of a lady called Heera who is equally evil minded as the tigress itself. Heera was standing face to face with the tigress when the metamorphosis between them takes place. Both were killed at the end.

Humanizing the non-human characters is not limited to tigers, but is also extended to monkeys by the author in stories like “Man and Monkey”, “Mystery of the Missing Cap” and “The Stupid Servant”. Three types of characterizations are seen in three of these stories, but each one surprises the reader equally. In “Man and Monkey”, the monkey is a complete package of surprise which never leaves the master in any difficulty. Once in a circus they both work together where the monkey becomes the shareholder of the master’s name and fame. But afflicted by ill-

health when the master is driven out of the circus, the monkey risks its life like a human friend with great concern and care for him and becomes the only source of income for him.

The monkey named Jhandoo in “Mystery of the Missing Cap” is naughty and mischievous. One day during a visit of the minister to the village, Jhandoo gets inclined towards the minister’s cap and steals it which creates chaos that is really surprising, unexpected and hilarious. The climax of the story approaches when the monkey, setting down between the minister and Sri Moharana, his assistant, put the cap on its head and then offers it to the minister most genially. The minister gets bewildered and asks, “. . . er . . . is not this one the very cap taken away by the noble man ?” and quite helplessly Moharana uttered, “Yes, yes, this is the noble man. . .” (Mystery of the Missing Cap and Other Stories 8).

While the two monkeys discussed above are intelligent and entertaining, the third one in “The Stupid Servant” is not only annoying but also dangerous. Once, a king being too fancied by a rustic monkey appoints it as his body guard. But the stupid monkey takes the king’s life while trying to kill an insect. What it does after that is not only surprising but also shocking. It proposes the queen for marriage which drives to a state of utmost remorse ending in committing suicide. Being aware of the consequential punishment it flights into the jungle, giving up its human like traits.

In “The Crocodile’s Lady”, the so-called crocodile’s lady gains sympathy, honour, love and reverence of the people in spite of her mysterious disappearance for a decade. Although her metamorphosis into a crocodile is hard to believe, yet it is accepted as a truth by the villagers and even by Dr. Batstone, the foreigner. As believed, the lady is once taken away by a crocodile deep into the water where he falls in love with her. It is the magical spell of the crocodile for which the lady is obliged to him for so many years inside the water and forgets completely about her family and village. The lady, though lives there faithfully, all her faith is proved to be meaningless as soon as she regains her human form.

In this case, the groom-crocodile is more loving and loyal. He not only gives her the opportunity to visit the sacred places, but also gives her complete freedom in the new metamorphosed form. But she forgets the spell to return to the crocodile form and goes back to her village though not intentionally. The groom cannot forget the lady. He follows her to her home, caught by the villagers and is killed. He sacrifices his life for his love, what is not only human but also realistic. The real human emotions make the crocodile more than a human, and the girl is known as the crocodile’s lady for her entire life.

In the story “The Owl”, an owl becomes the symbol of supremacy for the villagers. Terror and anxiety are generated with its hooting that alarms the forthcoming danger. The owl earns the impression of possessing supernatural powers, so becomes forbidden and mysterious. It is the only inhabitant of a deserted temple; people believe that its presence there is eternal. As described by Das, “The owl was looked upon as a supernatural presence and there was no sense in measuring the age of something supernatural” (Selected Fiction 27-28).

It is called the owl of the shrine and its hooting is always associated with some prophecy. One Pundit’s son is believed to have disappeared as a result of mimicking the owl. The newcomer young Zamindar suffers till his death due to this belief. One day he makes a false announcement that he has shot the owl for fun. But the villagers take it seriously and convince him that his act of killing the owl shall bring about his own death. The owl is safe even though the villagers do not see it. On the other hand the Zamindar dies and the owl reappears after that.

Despite the death of the Zamindar the villagers associate the hooting of the owl with some more ominous activities in future. Thus, the owl's importance never fades and continues to grip the psyche of the villagers.

We come across other animal characters in the volume *The Lady Who Died One and A Half Times and Other Fantasies* that are treated humanly and they possess many human qualities. Most of the stories of this volume are based on animal characters and their human-like behaviour. In "The Lion Who Sprang to Life After a Century" the lion is not only wise, but also saintly. When it comes to know that its rebirth was only possible because of some human beings - Dhiman and his associates – it does not care about its dying hunger, does not eat them and grant them their lives. It says to Dhiman, ". . . I was ignorant as to who revived me. You gave me that knowledge. You saved me the sins that could have accrued me had I taken the lives of those who endowed me with life. . ." (*The Lady Who Died One and A Half Times and Other Fantasies* 31). Before its deathly departure it donates its skin to Dhiman as *Guru Dakshina* since it takes him as its *Guru*. The story is a complete juxtaposition of realism and fantasy; the realistic part shows the picture of human ego and stupidity and the fantastic part is shown by the saintly animal that completely surprises us with its behaviour.

The story "A Turtle from the Blue" is fantastic, but the characters are found in purely realistic settings. The central character is a huge turtle named *Kambugriva* who one day decides to fly high with the help of *Sankata* and *Vikata*, the two swans who visit him occasionally. They carry him with the help of a rod which they clutch it in their mouths. The human tendency of the turtle indicates towards the aspiration of maintaining the top position forever. As observed by *Kundu, Das's* turtle is not only ambitious, he is also ego-centric and stupid, and thus represents many a human aspirer" (*Intertext* 268). *Kambugriva*, flying too high, forgets his limitations and starts replying the boys down who tease him. It is another human characteristic to lose temper over trivial matters. It results in his dreadful death and he becomes a good recipe for the king that night on whose palace-roof he falls down and dies.

The striking point in a story like this is that it allows one to play with ideas. It provides comfort and consolation against the pressure of real-life problems. Like all the great fairy tales, the characters of this volume of stories are delightful. These stories leave us to fantasize about life and human nature in extreme conditions. There are fanciful elaborations and exaggerations while unfolding the very realistic part of the stories. *Chibber* says, "Das creates a string of modern *Aesop's* fables, almost like the twentieth- century *Panchatantra*. His jackals and other animals assume modern roles which refreshingly give a rare touch of contemporarity and also a hunting sense of some inexplicable inadequacy enchanted deep in the human fount." (*The Sunday Standard* 1979)

A non-human character does not only mean to animals. It can also be an object of nature, a tree or a mountain or a river. In the story "The Tree", the age-old banyan tree is treated like a goddess. This is a legendary tree said to have travelled to the Himalayas and other holy places in the era of truth. The legend says that once a king wants to cut down the tree for the renovation of his palace but the palace is destroyed in the storm instead. The storm subsides as soon as the king repents and the king and his family are all protected by the tree itself. The tree becomes the centre of hopes and aspirations again in the present time when the village is engulfed by the flood. Even the tree is uprooted by the flood the beliefs continue to persist and the villagers, though scandalized, anticipate the tree to take re-incarnation, as prophesized earlier.

The mysterious mountains and hills created by Das also play characters in some of his stories. Writes Das about the Luvurva Mountain, "There was, no doubt, something queer about the hill, as though it had revolted and broken away from the nearby range of mountains, choosing to stand and brood ascetically alone amid the dense forest." (Selected Fiction 143)

The Peacock Hill, in "The Dusky Horizon", which is the source of all fascinations, actually had something extraordinary and mysterious about it. The associated stories about the ogre and the ghosts are both fascinating and horrifying. After sunset its terrifying, yet impressive stance affects the 'rural darkness' which is 'awfully alive'. And "when the moon hung over the hill, the tall trees atop it looked like a solemn committee of supernatural beings in session." (Selected Fiction 203) There is a rumor in the village that a fire-sprouting ogre lives on that hill and some people suspected him as Nana Saheb. It is proved from this novella that nature plays a phenomenal role in the stories of Das. Tiwari writes that in the stories of Manoj Das "Nature has been humanized, glorified and even integrated to the very spirit of human life" (Indian Fiction in English Translation 140).

We very often come across storms, cyclones, wind, rain and flood when magical things are about to happen. In the novel *Cyclones*, Nature is the destroyer, a ferocious force from which there is no escape. As described by the author, "The approach of a storm at Kusumpur, fringed by a forest and a humble range of hills, the sea and a pair of rivers, was always awe-inspiring and exotic. To begin with, a magic spell of silence descended on the region" (*Cyclones* 20).

In the fictions of Das moon plays a vital role in a supernatural way, often making people lunatic. They are possessed by it and appear ghost-stricken. In the story "The Bridge in The Moonlit Night" moon is a lively and necessary character for the story. Das describes, "Ashok loved to chit-chat with the moon, particularly when it was full. He had just told it, 'I crossed eighty some years ago. What about you?'" (Selected fiction 48)

And in "Friend and Strangers" he describes, "On nights when the moon looked somewhat wild and the wind went crazy, the two friends, if they were in town, kept to their room and peeped out through their windows looking perfectly bewildered." (Selected Fiction 112)

In the fictions of Das humanization of Nature is closely associated with the supernatural. Ghosts and spirits are an integral part of it. In "Farewell to a Ghost", the presence of a ghost in a villa is accepted by the villagers quite naturally. The ghost is believed to be of a girl, who not only receives sympathy, but is also respected by people of the village. They offer food and show their deep concern for her. Following the shift of her dwelling the children change the venue of their playground to her new dwelling-place in order to give her company. The supposed ghost is a part of that village and its inhabitants, who receives farewell in a grand manner while leaving the villa. Tiwari writes, "The Ghost is no less than the headman of the village." (139)

The presence of a spirit in the story "Evenings at Nijanpur" seems to be possible because so many weird incidents could not have taken place without the interference of an invisible agent. The two main characters are terribly affected by the spirit of a young man, and no explanation is provided to the unexpected ending of the story. The author expresses no surprise in his treatment of the ghost. P. Raja writes:

One sometimes feels that the ghosts have a special fascination for Manoj Das. Many of his stories centre around a ghost or ghosts. But Manoj Das has a special technique of his own in handling them. To bring a touch of

the supernatural without a touch of awe is the special quality of the ghost stories of Manoj Das. (Many Worlds of Manoj Das 76)

Like Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the great magical realist writer, Manoj Das very successfully portrays characters, both real and marvelous. For him ghosts, spirits, imps, ogres and subhuman bodies are as real as the living bodies. Writes Das in *The Tiger at Twilight*, “the forest we saw with its birds, beasts and reptiles was only the visible dimension of a reality that was far richer in its invisible dimensions. There was at least one more forest involved in the physical one—a forest inhabited by spooks, sprites, and fairies” (266). His world is warm and palpable, and his characters are portrayed with great care and intensity. His art of characterization is marked by hints and guesses, pathos and humour, subdued irony and gentle mockery that go well with the plot and the situation. He successfully humanizes the non-human characters.

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