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Environmental Consciousness in the Writings of Manoj Das

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Abstract

When the first phase of Ecocriticism promoted regional understanding of ecology, Manoj Das as a distinguished writer of India in English emerged the scene with environmental concern. He portrays environment and its relation to human beings in much of his writings. The issues related to the spoil of environment in the name of development, industrialization and economic gain have always been majorly focused in his writings. Set in rural villages, his writings not only depict the community life as a whole but the nature as a significant force. He portrays rural life, traditions, customs, superstitions and religious beliefs in his works. This paper argues that Das is no doubt a great writer of socio-cultural concern but his concern for environment begs him even greater place in the history of Indian literature.

Keywords: Environmental Consciousness, Manoj Das, Ecological Thought, Nature.

Background

Since prehistory, literature and the arts have been drawn to portrayals of physical environments and human-environment interactions. The modern environmentalist movement as it emerged first in the late-nineteenth century and, in its more recent incarnation, in the 1960s, gave rise to a rich array of fictional and nonfictional writings concerned with humans' changing relationship to the natural world. Only since the early 1990s, however, has the long-standing interest of literature studies in these matters generated the initiative most commonly known as "ecocriticism," an eclectic and loosely coordinated movement whose contributions thus far have been most visible within its home discipline of literature but whose interests and alliances extend across various art forms and media. In such areas as the study of narrative and image, ecocriticism converges with its sister disciplines in the humanities: environmental anthropology, environmental history, and environmental philosophy.

Indian philosophy is rich in ecological thought since Veda which paid equal importance to all organisms. India is also a land of rich biodiversity. From the Himalayas of North to Kanyakumari of South, from the Bay of Bengal off east to the Arabian Seain the west, the country has versatile physical surroundings leaving a deep impact on human beings. Literature is not apart from that. A good number of writers deal with ecocritical texts. Ecocritical perspectives may be best perceived in the writings of Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore who founded Viswa Varati at Shantiniketan far from madding crowd. His *Rakta Karabi* and *Muktadhara* are the best example of ecocritical texts where he denounces human atrocities against nature. His ecocritical poems include "The Tame Bird was in a Cage" (The caged bird has even forgotten how to sing) and "I plucked you Flower" (The human feel that plucking flowers is their own right. Nature is not a silent spectator. One day it will react. It would not be just a thorn-prick but can be a mighty tsunami. The human should be careful about this). Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountains* is a good example of ecocritical text dealing with the problem of animal killing, population explosion, moral degradation of man -all causing a threat to the ecology symbolized by frequent fire in the forest.

Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* represents Nature as a destroyer and preserver of life. The novelist here has shown how the evils of industrialization spoil the sweet harmony of a peasant's life. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is a portrayal of Exploitation of nature, by human beings in the name of progress and modernization which is a dominant theme of the novel. The authoress here has shown her keen awareness of today's pressing environmental issues. The novelist in this novel has raised her voice for the environment, which is now under a great threat of pollution. In this novel, she not only exposes the massive degradation of nature but also reflects on the reason behind its dehumanization. Ruskin Bond's *No Room for a Leopard* presents the pathetic condition of the animals after deforestation. Kiran Desai in her *Hullabaloo in the Guava*

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Orchard is critical of the hectic town life, having been dissatisfied of which the protagonist takes refuge in the Guava Orchard. In her *The Inheritance of Loss*, the novelist shows how Kanchenjunga pays for the brutality of human aggression. Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* is a powerful ecocritical text as the novel underscores environmentally and socially oppressive system harbored by humans. The delta of the Sundarbans has been presented as the destroyer and preserver of life (Mishra,169).

MANOJ DAS AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS

When the first phase of Ecocriticism promoted regional understanding of ecology, Manoj Dasas a distinguished writer of India in English emerged the scene with environmental concern. His literary works are basically set in rural villages. His writings not only depict the community life as a whole but the nature as a significant force. He goes on to portray the life of people living in villages, their values, norms, beliefs, attitudes, traditions, customs, superstitions, religion etc. At times, natural calamities and the devastation followed by these leave deep mark on the mind of Das.

Cyclones, is Das's first novel. It was written originally in English and published in 1987. This book reckons many issues with certain details. It represents the defining moment in the country's history that of the freedom struggle and the eve of independence in the wake of Partition. It exhibits the author's sensitivity to Nature and aspects of Nature and in the process establishes link between the human world and its environment. He also explores the climatic patterns of the place, the cyclonic devastations followed by famine, a recurrent feature of the land. He describes the havoc caused by a cyclone as:

"The cyclone had spared no tree tall enough to respond to the wind in the village. The devastation had been stunning. There was no rustling of leaves, no human murmur either.

Cyclones is set in Kusumpur, a small coastal village of Odisha. The village is destroyed by a cyclone. The war time colonial government, though, wants to turn the sleepy hamlet into a busy port town. They plan to fill up the river that flows by it, in the process angering all the villagers, including Sandip, the protagonist of the novel. When the contractor for the project is found murdered,

Sandip is accused of the crime, forcing him to flee from the village. The novel offers an in-depth study of a hero's disillusionment with British temperament, the Eurocentric imperialism for destroying the natural wealth under the sheath of urbanization. The novel can be treated as a metaphor of violence against nature as the structures that hit the root of feudalism were not demolished.

The novel makes a comprehensive picture of the troubles in the village surroundings of Kusumpur. After the British invasion into the fantastic ecological kingdom, the transition has been rapid. The British political officers set out on a mission to explore the course of the river Kheya flowing through the territory in the midst of the dense natural surroundings. The rural community life is inclusive of the land, the river, the trees, the animals, and the forests. And the river Kheya to the people of Kusumpur had a special significance that they thought of it as their beloved Kheya, "the companion that had never failed them through the ages, a river that had never troubled them, even with a mild flood"³ (Cylones p -218). The disappearance of the river Kheya brings the villagers physically closer but had coincided with a terrible emotional estrangement. The embankment that used to guard the Kheya crumbled down and it had no role to play. The multi-tier home for white and the rich still lay sprawled. With the river gone, the forest loomed larger on the village. The villagers were panic stricken and sleepless as the wolves and hyenas frequented the villages, stalking their streets at night. Manoj Das crafts the village ambience sympathetically. The villagers were passing through an extremely tough time. They inhaled some kind of poison that was in the air. The disappearance of the river had brought many consequences in the village.

The British government perished the natural wealth of villages in India for the urbanite structures. This is proved by Sandip's narrative on postcolonial rage. When the river Kheya had been done to death, the approach of death always built up some sort of atmosphere in the village. The clay house assumed a gloom. The cawing of the crows and the hooting of owl sounded ominous. The destruction of the river had become a fate. The natural wealth of the place Kusumpur was at stake. Sandip hailing from a noble family, only educated in the area shouted angrily. When there were maps and drawings spread out on the table by the engineers before Sandip, for constructing the lock at the point of the mouth of the river, it was much obvious that the White Government thinks of

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expanding into a minor port. The chart shows the loss caused by the flow of water from Kheya branching out at the spot. Two broad roads are to be built to the proposed air strip and the port. The fishing community is cheated with the new lucrative sources of livelihood working for the construction of the port. A comprehensive narrative churns out the variety of the reliance of man on nature. Manoj Das, a philosopher and a reformer concerned for promoting environmental ethics is more reflected in his story. "The submerged Valley" is the testament that reflects the displacement related problems. Again, this is a document which has revealed that displacement is not only a socio- economical problem but it is related with religion, culture and emotion. It also throws light on the disruption of life-in-harmony cast into the peaceful natural environment.

By the order of the government and for the hope of development, the villagers succumb to the tragedy of the displacement. Mere sentimental approach to homeland is accurately portrayed in "The Submerged Valley" where the poor Abolakara, who is assumed to be mad for his intense love for the village where he was born and brought up, is ready to immerse with his village. But he was rescued by the father of the narrator who being the chief engineer to carry out the order of the displacement and also suffers equally like his villagers and sustains the same pangs like them but he manifests it differently. He tries to make the villagers understand saying, "Where the Harappa is today and where is the Babylonia? Time has licked them off--- just for the sake of change. On other hand if we are losing our lands, it is for a change for the better, for the welfare of the large population". (p3) The village is lost. It is erased from the map as the newly built reservoir swallows it up completely inundating forever. Das sweepingly reveals his agreement that in the name of so-called development natural environment is sacrificed.

"The Tree" is another short story by Das in which nature plays vital role. The story revolves round the huge banyan tree in the village. The tree, in the story is a part of nature and connected with the life of the people of the village. During calamity the villagers take shelter under the banyan tree. As the narrator narrates "The leaves of banyan tree chattered incessantly their familiar language of hope and courage. Its innumerable boughs spread out overhead had been the very symbol of protection for generations, affording shelter not only to those who bore

love and regard for it, but even to those who had proved impudent towards it, of course, so far as the latter were concerned, only after humbling to their knees."(57). The tree, an element of nature is treated as a symbol of protection for generations. It has been saving generation from natural calamity. The villagers take shelter beneath the tree during their hard times. The tree has considered as a saviour who speaks of hope and courage through its leaves. The mound near the tree was mark of its temperament. Once the mound was a palace and was destructed because of the encroachment of the anonymous king. It had happened because the king wanted to cut down few branches of the tree to make room for an extension of his palace. The Royal family saved after taking shelter under the same tree. The story thus implies how the ill intention of cutting the branches of the tree proves fatal. It is a reaction in nature towards the intended action of the king. Here probably Das warns against causing harm to the natural habitation, the natural environment.

CONCLUSION

Manoj Das portrays environment and its relation to human beings in much of his writings. However, his portrayal is not just. He probes deep into the scenario. He reviews the issues related to the spoil of environment at the behest of development, industrialization and economic gain and at the same time underlines the devastation, suffering caused at this end. Das is no doubt a great writer of socio-cultural concern but his concern for environment begs him even greater place in the history of Indian literature.

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