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Folk elements in the short stories of Manoj Das: A critical study

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Abstract

Folk literature is the part and parcel of life and plays a paramount role influencing the culture and literature. Folk culture and literature is confined within a limited areas but its impact on the modern literature is immense. Manoj Das mainly focuses on the folk tales of Odisha and follows the folk tale styles of story writings.

Keywords: Folk tale, folk literature, Folk culture

Introduction

Folk tales lays the foundation of literature which the root and the modern literature is the fruit of it (folk literature). Hence it is appropriate to discuss the nature and feature of folk culture, folk form or folk literature to connect them to fiction. Folk culture belongs to the antiquity past but is still alive in the present. When we go through the Vedanta, *Astadasapurana* and *Mahabharata* we find elements of folk culture. *The Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* are the combination of a lot of folk tales. Folk forms like folk songs, tales, theatre, rituals are generally focused on a particular event of a particular place. It is confined to a limited area taking its cultures, traditions, customs and ways of life. Folk literature is generally a literature of an imaginary world which is far from reality. It is concerned about a time and space where animals talk, witches and wizard's realm and magic spells are common. The most important characteristic of the folk form is that its creation and creator is debatable and unknown. The time of its creation is also unknown but it passes from generation to generation verbally sometimes being little bit edited from one generation to another generation.

The setting of folk form is usually unimportant. It starts with a vague description and vague term. For example most of the folk tales starts with the sentence like that, ("Long ago in a land far away" and "Once upon a time in a dark forest..."). In this way the folk form deludes the time and place. The place is an imaginary land which is colored to stimulate the imagination of the listeners. Medieval Europe created folk tales because most of the people were illiterate and storytelling and listening were the only way of entertainment. The folk literature of Medieval Europe describes the typical landscape of the story culture. It describes forests, castles and cottage of that time. The African folk literature mainly delineates the hills and forests where in India and China folk literature portray splendid places. The setting of folk literature differs from place to place due to the socio-geographical differences.

The characters in the folk literature are usually simple, flat and straight-forward. These character are not a mixture of good and bad qualities like the character of modern literature. Almost all characters are painted only in one color either god or bad. If a character is good he is entirely good without having even a slightest evil in him or her. In case of evil the character is evil staring from beginning to end without even a slightest goodness in him or her. These characters don't internalize their feelings and seldom are plagued by mental torment. In other words, the characters of folk literature are very simple and open-hearted.

The motivation in folk tale characters tends to be singular. These characters are motivated by one overriding desire such as love, hatred, greed, fear and jealousy. When a reader goes through folk literature he usually finds stereotypical characters.

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These characters are wicked step mothers, weak-will father, jealous sibling, faithful friends' etc physical appearance directly defines the characters but disguises are common.

In folk literature hero and heroine suffer a lot. Their paths of life are full of thorn though they enjoy heavenly bliss at the end of the story. They are often isolated and fortune and are usually cast-cut into the open world. Often they are friendless and pass hard-time either in prison or in struggle for improvement or to nearest and dearest from the clutches of giants.

The plots of folk literature are generally short and simple than other genres of literature. It is short because it was meant for illiterate people. So, within an hour the story should be finished. As the stories are made for the simple people of the rural masses/areas the plots are very simple and direct without having any suspense. The journey of the protagonist is common in folk literature. The protagonist travels long distance which takes even years. The long journey is very much symbolic which is cleverly and artistically devised for his self-discovery in almost all folk literature the protagonist travel, come in contact with various types of people and often struggle for food and protection. In the course of his struggle the protagonist gathers courage and strength against all the odds of life and after that he achieves the fruit of success which proves him as the hero of his time.

Folk literature often repeats the same theme and event and same incidents for which it is called repetitious patterns. Repetitious patterns are found suggesting the ritual nature of folk tales and perhaps to aid the story teller in memorization. Examples can be cited that events often occur in sets of three for example-three pigs, three bears, three sisters, three wishes etc.

In folk literature action is always concentrated. There is no lengthy explanation or description. The explanations are open and direct and the descriptions are precise. Conflict and disputes are quickly established, for minor events are incidents which move swiftly story to their conclusion. Conflict is the climax of the folk literature after that the story starts becoming interesting. The action in folk literature seldom slows down. The end of the story is always happier. Almost all the folk tales end in union, laughter and happiness unlike Shakespearean tragedy. The folk tales begin with happiness and moves with tragedy and ends in union. The story ends with the sentence like, "they lived happily ever after".)

Themes in folk literature are usually simple, but serious and powerful. Folk tales themes espouse the vice of selfishness and excessive pride. In the folk tales of 'Beauty and the Beast' there is a struggle of young children to break away from the iron rules of the parents. The story describes how the children bend down before the whims and egos of the guardians and suffer sacrificing their loves. In 'Fack and the Beanstalk' the children fight heart and soul to meet the expectations of their parents. In the course of their struggle the children suffer a lot which is a bagger's description. In the 'New Arrival' the anxiety of the displaced people is erupting just like a lively larva for being displaced from their birth place to which they are attached in religious sense. These people suffer from the pang of displacement and a fear of uncertainty is triggered the anxiety about the new land of their dwelling.

Generally, the themes of folk literature are very heart-touching and they are at the very heart of growing up. These

are similar to the themes of Greek tragedy. The folk literature bears the message that wisdom comes through suffering. For every benefit there is a condition, nothing in life comes without strings attached to responsibilities to be met and bargains to be kept.

Folk literature is designed in simple and colloquial language, often in dialogue that bears a lot of philosophical significance. The language is typically economical with minimum amount of descriptions. Repetition of phrases is common which provides a rhythmical quality that is desirable in oral tales and perhaps aided in memorization the stories. The technique of folk tale is in stylized intensification, which occurs when, with each repetition, an element is further exaggerated or intensified. This has the effect of increasing the drama. Folk tale motifs are quiet prevalent, they may have served as mnemonic device when the tales were still passed orally. Example of common motifs included journey through dark forest, enchanted transformation, magical cures another spells, encounter with other animals or mysterious creatures, foolish bargains, impossible tasks, clever deception and so on. Many folk tale motives are example of magic: helpful animals, enchanted transformation, granted wishes etc. The magic when it appears is always greeted by characters with matter-of-factness. Characters acknowledge magic as a normal part of life without surprise or disbelief. This stylistic feature distances the folk literature from reality and it provides an important distinction between folk literature and modern fantasy.

The hero and the heroine of the folk literature are often lifted to higher and more refined level where they remain dutiful, noble and pure through the process of sublimation.

For literature is a major component of the ancient literature of India. Indian literature is supplemented by its enriched folk tales which are religious and secular, moral and material.

When we analyze folk literature in general, it is noticed that folk tales and culture of a place are the two sides of the same coin. Folk literature is the replica of the culture of a particular area. India has a fertile culture from the unknown past. It has with different languages, cultures, traditions and diversified religious which are vividly reflected through the Indian folk tales like, '*Hitopadesha Tales*', *Jataka tales* and *Panchatantra* tales. Indian folk lore has a wide range of stories and Mythological Legends which emerge from all works of life. These interesting stories rang and from the remarkable *Panchatantra* to *Hitopadesha* from *Jataka* to *Akbar Birbal*. Indian epics like *The Ramayan*, *The Mahabharata* and *The Bhagavad Gita* are full of didactic stories inspired from the lives of great souls. Being full of moralistic value, Indian folk lore makes perfect stories for children who are required to be instilled with right values. All these ancient stories have been passed from generation to generation creating bondage of traditional values with present day generation.

The *Hitopadesha* is a remarkable compilation of short stories composed by Narayan Pandit. *Hitopadesha* had its origin around a thousand years ago. In Indian literature *Hitopadesha* is regarded as more or less similar to *Panchatantra*. In the vein of *Panchatantra*, the *Hitopadesha* was also written in Sanskrit following the pattern of prose and verse. The *Hitopadesha* tales are written in reader-friendly way which also contributed to the success of this best seller after the *Bhagavad Gita* in India. *Hitopadesha* has

been translated in to numerous languages to benefit the readers all over the world since its origin.

In 300 B.C. Jataka tales were written for the mankind to gain knowledge morality ever since. Jataka tales have become story books that are both knowledgeable and enjoyable. Originally written in Pali language, Jataka Buddhist tales have been translated in different languages around the world. The luminous fables of Jataka are intended to impart values of self-sacrifice, mortality, honesty and other informative values to the people.

After *Jataka Tales* the *Panchatantra* occupies a central place among the folk literature in India. Originally composed in the second century B.C, *Panchatantra* is believed to be composed by Vishnu Sharma along with many other scholars. The purpose behind the composition was to implant moral values and governing skills in the young sons of the King. The ancient Sanskrit text boasts various animal stories in verse and prose. During these centuries many authors and publishers worked hard to make these fables accessible and readable by a layman. The grant assortment has extraordinary tales that are liked perhaps even loved by the people of every age group.

The folk tales fire the imagination of a child and exert a profound influence on him to be an artist. Folk literature renders circumstance to a child to explore his artistic talents lying within him. A child listens folk tales when he goes to bed. The grandmother or mother lulls him to sleep by telling the tales of witches, angels, ghosts and about other supernatural elements which help the child to fly through the wings of imagination. Such circumstance in home laid the foundation of child to be an artist in future which happened not only in the case of Prafulla Mohanti and Manoj Das but also in case of many others. As a child Manoj Das showed a great interest to listen to folk tales from his grandparents that laid his foundation to be an artist. Manoj Das, who started writing during the 1950's/1960's, has depicted post independent ideologies which are linked to the values of past. These social values he took from the ancient folk literature of India. The Philosophy of Manoj Das is undoubtedly modern and scientific based on the spiritual thought of Sri Aurobindo. However he also presents the old social order like feudalism, making a bridge between the pre-independent and post-independent literary traditions. His desire to deal with the Indian subject matter relating to folk elements is quite obvious in this effort. His vision has not been confined to the rural Odisha but he extends himself to the pan Indian themes as well. He expresses his intention in an interview given to *The Times of India* (May-18/1980) as P. Raja quotes:

"I thought born in a village, born just before independence and hence living through the tradition as an impressionable age, I could present through English a chunk of genuine India. Well, right or wrong, one is entitled to ones faith in one self." *The Times of India* (May-18/1980)

Manoj Das's rootedness in faith, ideology and the folk literature of his society is quite obvious in his literary works. The influence of the tradition and the folk tale on his individual genius is apparent in his choice of subject matter, incident and events which are to be found in the rural village of India. The issues and incidents he takes into his stories are not only regional but also Indian in scope. For example, a Feudalism and folk element which Das deals with is not only a regional but also all Indian in character. The political situation, freedom movement and nationalism presented by

Das have a connection with the pre-independent and post-independent India. But the social values behind these incidents and events go back to the ancient Indian's folk tradition. The treatment of family and family life though set in rural village of Odisha reflect much of the trends of traditional Indian patriarchal family. Thus the reality of Das's works springs from his deep rootedness in folk literature of Odisha and India.

Primarily, Manoj Das was a Marxist. His Marxist thought is reflected in his literary works. The subject matter of his works reflects Marxist thought in the matter of political situations, freedom struggle, feudalism, community life and human relations.

Being close to the period of freedom struggle, Das presents the turmoil of political change in his novel *Cyclones*. This novel depicts the transitional situation of India during 1994 to 1996. In this novel Das wants to bridge the gap between the poor and rich. People are against the rural areas and they promote the culture of city. The capitalistic nation of the rich town people were not accepted by Manoj Das who wants to bring about a classless society breaking the barriers between the rich and poor such Marxist ideology also found in the writings of Prafulla Mohanti, an Odia living in London. In '*My Village-My Life*' Mohanti has also ventilated his anger against the rising capitalism in India like Manoj Das and wants his village Nanpur be a classless society. The mouth piece of the author is Sudhir the main character of '*Cyclone*' is a staunch supporter of Gandhi. He takes a lot of efforts to assimilate Gandhian ideology in society. In this way Manoj Das portrays the picture of a leader through Sudhir who is devoted to his country, very much sincere to his duty and solely dedicated for the cause of nation. Sudhir is always ready to bite the bullet protesting against the British Government in India. His leadership qualities are vividly exhibited in voluntary works and acts of protest just like Marxist leader.

The people of Kusumpur trust Sudhir and seek his advice and suggestion to fight against the government and plan to fill the river Khoya. Sudhir is character who has a lot of similarity with the hero of a folk tale who is portrayed flat and straight without having any diplomatic bent of mind. From the beginning to the end, Sudhir's role in the novel is just like the main character of a folk tale that is very open, frank and transparent and follows a straight line.

Manoj Das's Marxist ideology is that the young man's strength and old people's wisdom combining together can bring about a change in the society. In '*Cyclone*' Seth Mukund Das, an industrialist is an old man who is a symbol of wisdom and Sudhir, a young man symbolizes the strength of youth of Kusumpur. Mukund Das advises Sudhir to contest the election by which he can serve the country best. This is the scene when Sethji tells Sudhir, "and now is the hour to set the process in motion. You have the spirit and I have the vision." (Cyclone-1987, 166)

His patriotic feelings are reflected in his novel '*Cyclone*'. The impact of nationalism is seen in another young lad Shym, a college friend of Sudhir. Shym as an educated person understands the need and importance of making people conscious about the prevalent situations. His urge to cater to the people is seen in his sincere and serious taking with Sudhir.

"What we must understand is here is that here is an opportunity to make the people act collectively, something they have never done, to raise them to their right to agitate,

to give them a test of thrill of resistance. Why? Well, that might help them to prepare for a greater and more sustain struggle in the future. Do you understand?"(Cyclone, 63)

Manoj Das was deeply influenced by Gandhian principles and socialism like Raja Rao. Like Raja Rao's hero 'Moorthy' who being influenced by Gandhian principles works for the upliftment and enlightenment of his fellowmen and society, Shym, Reena and Kamal are seen helping and giving relief to the common people. The rise of the volunteer organization to serve and create awareness in common people is seen in Shym, Kamala, Kamal, Reena establishing blood donation camp and relief camp etc.

The philosophy of Manoj Das changes according to the change of his age. Primarily he was a socialist and wrote stories describing the difference in society. He wanted to equalize the difference of thought, culture and tradition among the different categories of people. Das wanted to bring about equality, justice, brotherhood through his writings. When he was convinced after a lot of experiments that the transformation could not be brought about by Marxism in India he rethought about it. So Das was disillusioned about the Marxist society and changed his mind.

His mind was changed by the philosophical doctrine of Sri Aurobindo, which is rooted to the Hinduism. Sri Aurobindo's change from an extremist to a spiritual idealistic was an important event to simulate the social cultural thought of India which directly exerted a profound influence on literature. Aurobindo emphasized on work culture which he directly derived from the Bhagavad Gita. In '*The Essays of Gita*', Aurobindo emphasized that man can change his fate by right action which must be free from desire. The work, free from desire and aspiration, can elevate a man from the mundane world to be a world of spiritualism where he can realize the essence of God.

Man can feel the presence of god by serving his children who desperately need assistance to survive. Karma and Seva is the path to approach the almighty that is the essence of Bhagavad Gita. Aurobindo gives stress on ideal personality who is the light of society. An ideal person can change the world and can save the pupil from all sorts of evils. The epic '*Savitri*' is a prophetic vision of the world history including the announcement of the earth future. The importance of Savitri is immense. Its subject is universal and its revelation is prophetic. The mother has referred to it "the supreme revelation of Sri Aurobindo's vision." '*Savitri*' is the tale of Satyavan and his devoted wife Savitri is recited in the Mahabharata as a story of conjugal love conquering death. But this legend is as shown by many features of human tale one of the many symbolic myths of the Vedic cycle. Satyavan is the soul carrying the divine truth of being within itself but descended into the grief of death and ignorance. Savitri is the divine ward, daughter of the sun, goddess of supreme truth, who comes down and is born to save. Aswapati, the lord of horse, her human father, is the lord of Tapasya, the concentrated energy of the spiritual endeavor that helps us to rise from the moral to the immortal world.

The writings of Manoj Das are the harmonious blending of Indian folk tales and western thought. These two notes are unmistakably and clearly discernible in his writings and his literary practice and life bear testimony. To this fact Sujata Shiven writes:

"Where Manoj Das was quite influenced by the mysticism of Sri Aurobindo, the effect of western thinkers on him is

well visible in his writings. Freud and Jung affected him so much that he used to write about dream and psychological analysis, mental imbalances, insanities and craziness through his characters."

Many of Manoj Das's stories witnessed the presence of Indian poetic, Indian mysticism, folk elements of India and Odisha as a whole along with western literary theory and western thought. Das came under the influence of many Indian mystics. Likewise, the theory of magical realism as revealed in the western writers like Garcia, Marquez, Isabella, Allende and Salman Rushdie, is clearly noticeable in the stories of Das. For instance, "*The Last I Heard of Them*" and "*A Trip of the Jungle*", which deal with the theme of search for ultimate happiness and its dreadful result.

Anything connected with the supernatural always has an appeal to the mind, appeal of terror or delight. It has two fold effects. For children it is full of surprise, mystery and on their mind and body like experiencing moral, spiritual or psychological knowledge from these channels. It is far away from the so called natural understanding process.

Folk tale still plays a big role influencing the modern writings directly or indirectly. Theme and ideals of folk tales becomes the guide lines for the writers who deal with humanity.

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