



## BOOK REVIEWS

**A VOYAGE INTO THE DEPTHS**

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*THE MIRACLE AND OTHER STORIES* by Manoj Das; Sterling, 1993; pp. 128; Rs. 50.

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“I have now read the stories of Manoj Das with very great pleasure. He will certainly take a place on my shelves beside the stories of R.K. Narayan. I imagine Orissa is far from Malgudi, but there is the same quality in his stories with perhaps an added mystery” wrote the late Graham Greene to Dick Batstone of Batstone Books, United Kingdom, who published *The Submerged Valley and Other Stories* by Manoj Das in 1986.

After reading *The Miracle and Other Stories*, the book under review, one responds in much the same way. The human quality of the stories with the socio-cultural milieu of rural Orissa, is sure to appeal to a sensitive reader. This reviewer has come across some of these stories before, but a second reading often brings out some of the finer points one has missed earlier.

A few stories in the collection explore the realm of the supernatural, but not in the way stereotyped ghost stories do. The very first story called ‘The Shadow’ explores a very unusual relationship between Anjan Sharma, a very talented professor, and his shadow. After reading it one invariably looks back for one’s shadow and feels relieved to find it close by. In ‘Son and Father’ the nameless boy who approaches the forest guest house “at the speed of a shooting star” and rushes with the wind “under the focus of a dazzling outburst of clouds, as if eager to catch hold of a string of lightning and swing up to the clouds!” appears to be the spirit of creativity that eludes the self-conscious litterateur. It is a fascinating study in contrast: the successful writer full of his own importance as he sits in the forest guest house meant for top officials, wrapped in his expensive Kashmiri shawl (and his pride) and the boy who is inseparable from the elements. The writer wants to



Sept - Oct '95

assume that the implied reader is the voice of the ideology in the text. It is this that helps limit the meaning of a work of art which theoretically has infinite semantic possibilities. Let me briefly outline two instances where the ruling ideology covers up the gaps—contradictions and discrepancies—in *Prakritiniyamam* in order to make it aesthetically appealing. As mentioned above, the narrator's insanity in *Prakritiniyamam* in the novel's early sections is of a positive kind, and this is so partly because the narrative develops quite coherently and logically. The narrative puts the reader in no doubt about the real state of mind of the narrator. But this confidence of the reader gets a jolt in chapter 12 when a kind of fragmentation develops in the narrative in the course of the narrator's conversation with a dead friend's daughter. The reader would now wonder if he had been correct in regarding the narrator's putative insanity as a sign of sensibility and humanity. Later in the next chapter when the therapist arrives to treat the narrator the reader will be prepared to recognize the therapist, and not the narrator, as the voice of sanity. The narrator has to be cured of his illness after all. This is one instance of ideology getting mediated through the novel. The story becomes the novel only when the reader is reassured of its fictional status, and in the case of *Prakritiniyamam* this happens only when the narrator becomes "really" insane.

The second example is related to the symbolic use of the narrator's wife's dreams. Frequent references are made in the text to the couple's childless state and the narrator's possible impotence. This is linked with the narrator's inability to enter into any kind of fruitful intercourse with the world. Descriptions of human liberation in the novel are accompanied by images of male power in a language also suggestive of male virulence. This ideological intervention becomes more conspicuous towards the end of the novel when the wife's conception is imagined as happening in a context replete with religious symbols. These are encodings of ideology in the text of Parameswaran's novel which will be decoded as such by its readers. Far from laying bare social contradictions what the novel does is to repress them.

To sum up, the receptive possibilities of a work of art are determined by the formal expectations built into the structure of a literary genre, which in turn are governed by the society's ideology. An artwork, by virtue of its being the member of a historical genre, imposes on itself perceptual limits which can be transgressed only by denying its own existence. This is the politics of aesthetics. The reception accorded to Parameswaran's novel, in the final analysis, is a vindication of this politics. □



communicate with the boy but his worldly trappings get in the way. Das makes his point quite clear without seeming to moralise.

'The Red Red Twilight' is perhaps the most frightening story in the collection. It starts off on an eerie note: "There were uncanny sunsets when the horizon turned ghastly red. If one had to cross the meadow then, all alone, when the erratic breeze carried the smoke of corpses burning at some distance, one felt like weeping—more so if the water of the lonely pond with the huge old trees surrounding it looked awfully red and enchanted." The reader feels a supernatural presence. Was Kumudini murdered or forced to commit suicide? In either case her father-in-law, the old exorcist, was responsible, and the spirit of the dead woman chooses to take revenge on him in the most terrible way one can think of. The theme of being possessed by spirits is carried on in another story, 'The Interlopers' but somehow this reviewer does not find it so terrifying.

"Once his name was on the tips of a thousand tongues. But that is past. I don't blame people for forgetting Bimbardhar Bishoi, for today we are obliged to retain in our memory many more names than our forefathers were required to do...the names of numerous officials and big, medium and small leaders, film and sport stars of regional, national and international importance as well as the news-anchors on the TV and the radio." Gentle humour is Manoj Das' forte and the way he narrates the story of Bishoi's thwarted ambitions is sure to make one smile, at the same time feel a little sorry for the would-be politician whose career is ruined just when the prospect seems brightest, all because of a thoughtless action on his part. 'Two Slippers and a Soul' mixes irreverence with just the right degree of profundity and the result is delightful. One is reminded of an earlier story 'Mystery of the Missing Cap' in which the episode of the visiting minister's Gandhi cap being stolen by a half domesticated monkey changes the course of his life as well as that of his host whose lifelong ambition was to become an MLA. Politicians are often Das's targets; he cannot resist attacking their hypocrisy and pomposity.

Changing social patterns bring changing values in their wake, but certain basic human values remain the same, or at least they should. So the impoverished zamindar sells the gold covering of his walking stick to award a gold medal to the ageing actor, forty years after he had promised to do so. 'The Gold Medal' is one of the most touching stories in the collection because it brings out the best in the two leading characters, at a crucial point of time.

Sometimes the reverse can happen. A crisis can bring out the worst in a person, specially if it happens to be someone as ruthless



as Tara, "The dancer, but the one who found making others dance around her a great fun. Whoever happened to step into her aura had no other go than whirling and swirling almost in the manner of an insect around a flame till it burnt its wings." 'Pages from the Diary of Raghuvir Singh (1810-1880)' resurrects scenes of feudal decadence from the last century in which uncontrolled passion and jealousy obliterate all human emotions just as "...the thicker darkness that followed the flash seemed to blot out the castle."

Manoj Das's stories cover a wide range of subjects. "But the most noteworthy trait of his works is his powerful penetration into the subtle realities beneath the surface realities" in the words of a critic. Sometimes the penetration can have a comic aftereffect as in 'The Different Man.' Chowdhury loves meddling in other people's affairs and a young man "in an exquisite suit and glittering shoes...whose glistening hair was in a total disarray" attracts his attention in an airport lounge. He tries ticking the young men off but the latter is not prepared to listen to him and bystanders call him mad. Chowdhury is furious and as the young man with dishevelled hair is about to get into his car and start it he rushes to him and catches hold of his hair. The young man drives off quickly, appearing to be a different person. And the cat is out of the bag. "Chowdhury gave out a mild shriek when his eyes returned to his own head which for a moment looked alien to himself like that of an assassin, for it held something like a part of a head a complete wig marked by a profusion of glistening dark hair!" The shock cures Chowdhury of his meddlesome habits "Silently he apologised to the young man and all the others concerned." How one wishes all meddlesome persons could be taught such lessons!

Nature can make or unmake a person in the most unexpected way. A person at the peak of his career can meet with an ignominious end when all his power and money are of no use. Avani the politician in 'The Assault' realises this, when an unpublicised visit to a widow to pressurise her to part with her land (of course "He would be kind to her and offer a generous price for her land.") ends in a fiasco. Even before he can reach the widow's hut, he is confronted with a pair of yellow eyes. "The creature facing him was a billy goat, huge and strong. Its head reminded him of a demoniac wizard in the *Arabian Nights*. He could read in the beast's eyes an uncanny resolution to knock him down and pound and pulverise him if possible." Nemesis is never far behind, as the ancients often said. As he rolls down the mound ... "with each turn of his body was peeled off a certain value he cherished, each collision with a shrub or a clod of hardened earth



demolished one of the numerous monuments of his achievement."

A miracle can never be forced; it has to happen on its own. Do the devotees in 'The Miracle' realise this? This reviewer feels that Das has purposely left the end of the story open. It is up to the reader to believe or disbelieve in Brajagopal's spirituality. Perhaps there can be no absolute answer, as in life. Most of us have come across persons like Brajagopal and not known what to make of them. One realises that the reason one relates to Das's stories is that they are close to life, close to what one experiences or might experience. This gives them an authenticity. Also Das's handling of characters and situations has a depth which no reader can miss. All this gives the stories their special appeal and they haunt the reader long after one has finished reading them. □



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