

tolerate the hand of fate, and believe in the infinite dilemmas of daily life.

Nisha da Cunha's been a name to reckon with in the world of English teaching in Mumbai and Delhi for decades. Many of her former students speak of her in hushed whispers, mingling reverence, affection and distant devotion. The reason why imbues these pages—references to Jane Austen and Octavio Paz, Doris Lessing and Shakespeare's sonnets. The self-enriching literary universe that sustains her impregnates these stories.

Though the author's experiments with

alternative endings don't always work as a literary device, falling short because each voice is not distinctive enough, they add an unusual twist to the tale. Her recreations of physical landscapes are rich with detail—moss glistening on an old church wall, potholes filled with muck, a brass filigree-work dargah lamp.

Yet, as a reader, I felt a deep sense of loss when the last page was turned. Because I knew these once-read stories wouldn't call me back. Because these characters were too close to home to set my imagination alight. Because, though I

found da Cunha an easy read, these stories somehow felt as if they were incompletely realised. Between their potential and their substance fell the shadow. That's the tragedy of a talent that might have reached for the stars, but didn't.

Whatever the reasons latent in the lacuna, da Cunha should try to bridge the chasm between the reader and the writer before it's too late to mend the rift.

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Forever Fresh

A horde of nudists is about to descend on the palace of an erstwhile princely state for an annual conference. What does an old-fashioned estate manager do to accord a proper welcome to the royal guests, knowing well that receiving them fully dressed would be an affront to their sensibilities? Or take the case of the office clerk, who is baffled by increasing and inexplicable abnormalities in others. What tactic does he adopt in order to draw the attention of a well-dressed man to his dishevelled hair? And what story does an aspiring politician invent to explain the mysterious disappearance of the minister's cap?

While the characters try to come to grips with their awkward predicaments, they never seem to lose their individuality, making this fictional world unfailingly fascinating. The sheer range of characters introduced in the twenty-eight short stories and a novella, which make up *Selected Fiction*, is breathtaking. The writer hand-picks them from the vast pool of rural India that is his happy hunting ground. There is the ubiquitous schoolmaster, to whom the villagers always turn when things do not make sense. The venerable priest, the *sadhu* and the *tantrik*, with their

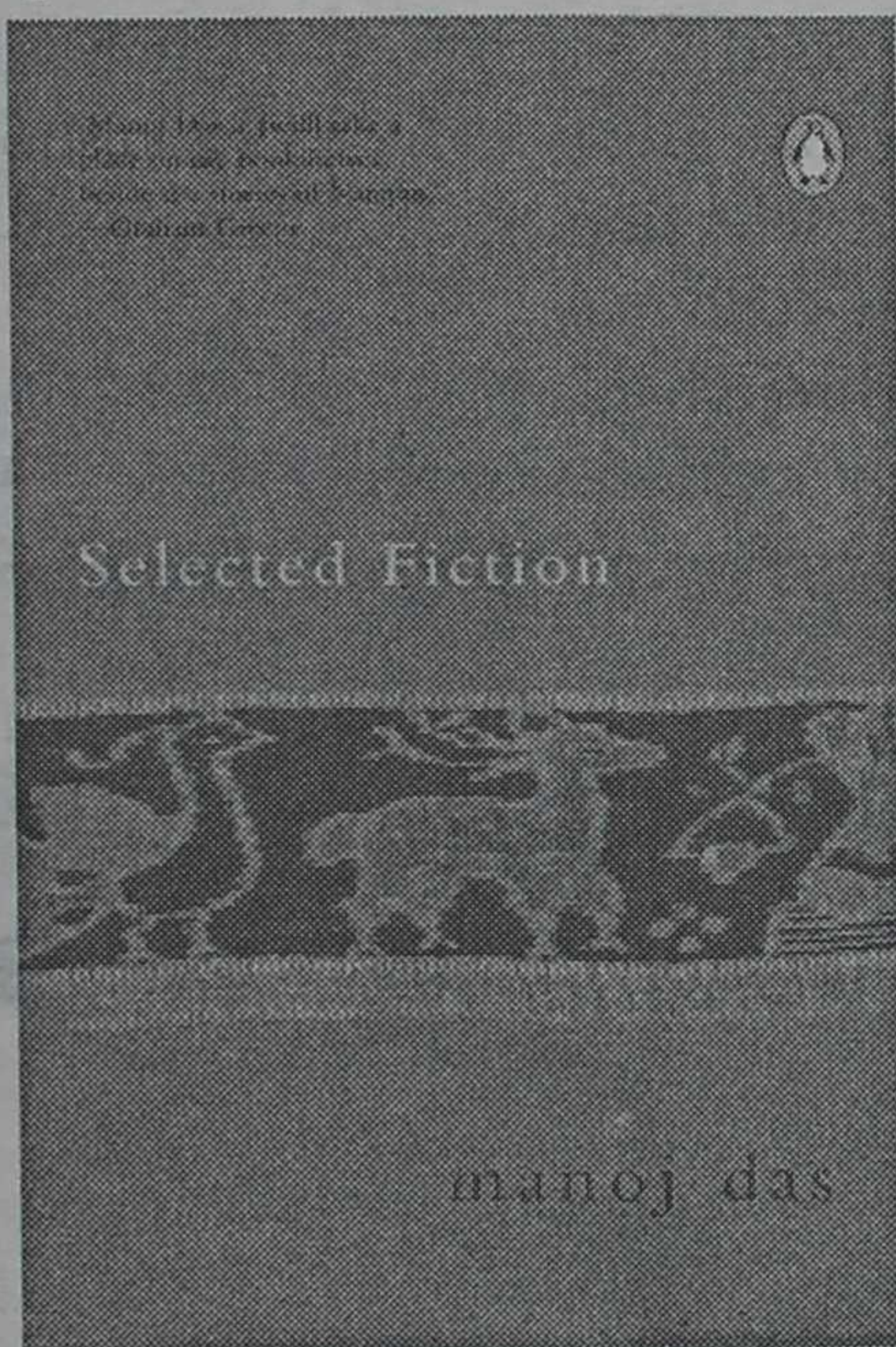
inscrutable ways; the ambitious politician, with his endless schemes; the college-going village boy with his newly acquired irreverence; and the old and the infirm, battling to keep pace with time—the list goes on. One also occasionally comes across a homoeopath, a retired midwife, a few dramatists, a lunatic and a faceless multitude characterised by rustic simplicity. For all their vibrant individuality, a sense of community and fellow feeling binds them together. Thus when the grand banyan tree crashes, all the villagers keep vigil braving the very rough weather ('The Tree'). When it is time for a benevolent ghost to leave, everyone walks in tears to the edge of the village to see her off ('Farewell to a Ghost').

If this kind of camaraderie sounds incredible now, it is because the winds of urbanisation and consumerism had yet to sweep over the rural landscape which Das was intimately familiar with. But even then, people were not totally invulnerable to the forces of change. In fact, the experience of being uprooted and dispossessed is a powerful and recurring leitmotif in Manoj Das's stories. In 'The Submerged Valley' a whole village goes under the waters of a dam, and when the water recedes, the villagers return only to have a

last glimpse of the place they have lost forever.

The sense of dispossession is perhaps the strongest with the former rulers of the princely states and other beneficiaries of the feudal system: characters who never fail to tickle Manoj Das's fancy. These idiosyncratic figures are horribly shaken at the sudden removal of their power and grandeur in independent India. Try as they might, they just cannot master the art of living like ordinary mortals. They don't know where they belong in the new dispensation and they shuttle restlessly between their new homes in the city and their old palaces in the countryside, making fools of themselves in the process. Fired by patriotism one former ruler decides to take part in the war that independent India is fighting. 'Unfortunately, after waiting for days, at last when Raja Sahib was able to secure a first class A/C berth for proceeding to the capital to notify the Defence Ministry of his momentous decision, the war was over' ('The Martial Expedition'). Often their magnanimity and large-heartedness clashes with cramping reality. The author approaches them with respect, sympathy, compassion and restrained humour.

Other characters who provide grist to the mill of Manoj Das happen to be the denizens of the submerged valley of the human psyche. Ghosts, imps, ogres and human-animals: you name them and they are there. 'There was at least one



more forest involved in the physical one—a forest inhabited by spooks, sprites, and fairies. Chogan Baba seemed to walk along the thin line that divided both, passing into either one at will' (*The Tiger at Twilight*). How much this rings true of the author! In his simple and gossipy style the storyteller manipulates these exotic creatures, lending them a credibility, which even a rationalist would not question. The ghost of a murdered girl that inhabits the old Company building is so much a part of the community life—loved by all as the daughter of the village—that nobody is curious to see her in flesh and blood ('Farewell to a Ghost').

Manoj Das has mastered the art of creating atmosphere. His ghosts, for instance, feel at home in the eerie ambience made up of marshlands, dark forests, deserted

palaces, old temples, howling jackals, roaring tigers, hooting owls, screeching bats: all awash in the many shades of moonlight. Moon is a recurring and powerful image in these stories. Just before introducing the bizarre in 'Friends and Strangers', the author describes the autumn evening scene thus:

The moonlight on the lush outskirts of the town was so thick, one felt one could net a kerchief-full of it and pocket it for future use.

The short stories included in the selection have the mesmerizing quality of grandmother's tales. The fables and fantasies easily fit into the great fictional tradition of our land. The author's ingenuity culminates in the novella, *The Tiger at Twilight*. A Raja returns to his old castle with his ailing daughter and a mysterious stepsister, Heera. A man-eating

tiger is on the prowl. The narrator, Dev, heir to another royal family, comes face to face with Heera and the beast in the climactic scene. The evil-minded Heera appears to him like the man-eater just before he pulls the trigger. The story, which reads like a Gothic novel, grips the reader from the beginning.

Although these stories take the reader to another time and another place, they sync perfectly with the present-day sensibility. The author's ability to link the traditional with the modern and the mundane with the magical, makes his fictional world so fresh, and his characters—and ghosts—so enduring.

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