

Indian psyche in turmoil

CYCLONES: A Novel by Manoj Das (Sterling Publishers, New Delhi. Rs. 125).

One opens a first novel by a reputed short story writer with a mixture of excitement and apprehension: it is almost like watching a Tennis champion walking to the crease to open his innings in a cricket match. There is immense relief, however, on laying down Manoj Das's *Cyclones*, and a rare sense of fulfilment as well. In short stories, it is possible by resolved limitation to strike a single reverberant note—tragic, heroic, satiric, ironic, comic. The aim may be to snap a sudden shift from tradition to modernity, innocence to experience, the pathetic to the beatific. In a novel, the challenge is to forge unity on teeming variety or multiplicity. The single note has to give place to a symphony, the sharp scent to blended essences.

Aptly enough, 'Cyclones' in the plural is the title, for the storms within the Indian psyche during 1944-46—the passage through the no-man's-land between the dying old order of alien rule and the promised new order of 'swaraj' struggling to be born—were even more damaging than the political 'cyclone' without. And Manoj Das's novel projects both—with all their symbolic undertones.

The seaside village, Kusumpur, like Raja Rao's 'Kanthapura', is quintessential India. The creepers fan out from the Choudhris' 'Villa' to the village, and reach out to the adjoining Lalgram; to the sea on one side and the forest on another; to the nearest bus-stop 10 miles away; and on and on to the towns and cities, to all India (and the whole world). Many a chapter has its own autonomous self-sufficiency as a place of fiction, and the 31-studded necklace has its scintillating unity too.

Sudhir Choudhri of Kusumpur and Geeta Roy of Lalgram feel drawn together since almost their childhood, but fatality tears them apart. Sudhir and Geeta—Kusumpur and Lalgram—India and Pakistan—America and Russia: the curse of suicidal separativity, jealousy and fear, like the fatal death-grapple between the two maddened bulls (p. 14), manages always to get the better of the deeper Truth of unity, harmony and human solidarity.

With a few deft touches, the stifling of the river Kheya, the rape of Kusumpur's innocence by invading 'civilisation', the spiriting away of vengeful Roy (Geeta's father) by the crocodile, the cynical compulsions of the stimulated nation-wide Hindu-Muslim aggressive postures, and—as residual *Grave*—the peace radiating from Soumyadev's face, all are uncannily evoked to haunt the reader's memory. The protagonist, Sudhir, suffers and dares and grows; his reactions to the three women in his life—Geeta, Reena, Lalita—comprise travels in different worlds; and we see him at last embodying all he has met and experienced and achieving a final leap of transcendence, and now at last poised for the future waiting for the sunrise. Sudhir might be India, ageless yet forever young, and not ceasing to hanker. The "basic helplessness underlying life" may be the elegiac *sruti* of the novel, but there is always the hope of Dawn, however delayed it may seem to be. The writing is connotatively rich, and often tremblingly poetic. And while lightning, thunder and rain may dominate the foreground, the Eye of the Storm—Soumyadev's cave of *tapsya* is promise enough of the return of calm and the light of Day.

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