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Indian Life in Transition: A Critical Study of *A Tiger At Twilight*

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Abstract

In *A Tiger At Twilight* (1991) the erstwhile raja of Samargarh returns to his abandoned palace in Nijanpur, after years of self-exile, with his sick daughter and his supposed half-sister, and immediately assumes the responsibility of killing a man-eating tiger. Assisting him are a few noted men of the valley including Dev, the owner and manager of a resort. But as the hunt intensifies Dev realizes that things are not as they seem: Heera, the raja's sister, has an inexplicable power over the men in the hunting party and a strange connection with the tiger. As the men get closer to killing the beast, bizarre things begin to happen, hinting at the influence of the supernatural.

Keywords- Materialism, Realism, Sentiments, Nostalgia

Manoj Das presents the complex human situation with the agony and ecstasy of life; the various feelings, emotions and sentiments that give meaning to life. The truth that Manoj Das seeks to explore in his stories is the essential helplessness of man in the face of the hostile circumstances of life. In this way, he throws ample light on human nature. Dev, the protagonist of the novel, was an orphan. He had stepped into his twenty-fifth year. One day he immersed in nostalgia and recalled the imprint of a storm. He used to miss his mother a lot. He recalls as, "At relatively sober times, the rumbling of the thunder was like the anxious cries of a brood of lion cubs lost in the hills, yearning for their mother" (*A Tiger At Twilight*, 3). Sarbeswar Samal asserts in his book *Manoj Das: A Critical Study*:

Manoj Das's stories are a convincing reading of life and stories of hard core realism. All his stories including the fantasies are realistic in base and substratum. He gives a faithful portrayal of Indian life and scene. Readers accept his portraiture of India because it resonates with the clarity of authenticity. His characters behave in

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ways that are recognized as Indian by every foreigner who has ever visited India. His books have the ring of true India about them. The image of India he presents in his stories is essentially original and autochthonous (46).

The writer has made a comparison between the rumbling of the thunder to anxious cries of a brood of lion cubs, as they have lost their way to their mother. Here, the writer reflects the anxiety, feelings or emotions of lion cubs with the help of the rumbling sound of thunder. So it is profitable to shun those anxieties, emotions and go ahead keeping under His shelter. One ought to remember Divinity. His love is pure and everlasting. One needs to remind oneself this every day.

Dev owned the mansion, Horizon. Behind it stood a mountain, bearing the name Nagdev, a barren peak raised like the hood of a cobra, looming protectively over his mansion. Its location was enchanting. He took pride in owning the mansion. In fact, the mansion was built by the young and the last raja of Samargarh shortly before his state was lost to him. The young raja had christened the mansion Heera Mahal in honour of a young lady named Heera, somewhat of a legend and enigma during that era. Heera was the subject of many a gossip, some juicy and some fearsome. She was charismatic. The people attributed a certain supernatural quality in her charm. Dev asserts:

The heavy downpour and dark clouds either blotted out the world beyond my window, or revealed it only in fragments, inspiring me to fill up the blank spaces with my own ideas of the state of things. The good old meditative hills were metamorphosed into fantasies, sometimes looking like a colonnade of the citadel of the gods, its roof invisible above the clouds and, at other times, like primeval giants in a conference (*A Tiger At Twilight*, 3).

Special perception may be realised by persons having highly developed spiritual minds. By developing a spiritual inclination in oneself, one's minds will develop at all levels, and the power of conception will also develop. When human beings become spiritually evolved people, only then can they understand the cosmic mystery, in its truest sense. Otherwise their world functions within the limitations of their senses and perceptions.

In this way, Dev seems to acknowledge that intellect is not potent enough to realise ultimate reality. Manoj Das has dealt with a number of themes. They are quite spontaneous. His themes range from the most matter of fact happenings of everyday life to events suggestive of the supernatural. At the same time his stories are greatly influenced by Indian mythology and folklore. As an Indian

writer, he has never forgotten to reflect on the age-old cultural and literary traditions of India. He always feels that there are certain truths that are found only in Indian culture and they should be presented to the entire world. That is why in his stories he always tries to inculcate the theme of Indianness, the most cherished aspect of his creative vision. He says in an interview:

I was born in a village, born just before independence and hence and hence living through the transition at an impressionable age, I could present through English a chunk of genuine India. Well, right or wrong, one is entitled to one's faith in oneself (*The Times of India*, 13).

Transition is one of the most important themes of the novel which recounts changes wrought by the passage of time. The novel is a document of an aspect of Indian life in transition. In the introductory note to it Manoj Das writes, "...Sometimes a decade might change a tradition or a habit or an attitude that had prevailed for centuries" (*A Tiger At Twilight*, 10). Manoj Das is very sensitive to the panoramic yet pathetic changes wrought by time which are projected in a number of episodes of the novel. Like Maupassant, he not only gives the picture of a faded nobility and dwindling aristocracy but the pathos involved in it. Thus time and its legitimate and lurid child, change is the recurrent theme. Here, time is the principal actor, the chief wrecker and destroyer bringing in all the ruins and spoils in the process.

Further Manoj Das has an uncanny fascination with the past. Anything belonging to the past i.e., the village, its people, their superstition, belief in supernatural beings and the feudal order fascinates him. His is not the historical past but the past that is undying and green with an eternal charm and a wholesome integrating effect on the mind. Manoj Das celebrates a beauty that is gone forever. He creates myth out of the beauty of the past. Most of his stories are recreations or recapitulations of a lost world. He finds ample compensation in terms of fictional recreation for what he has lost in reality.

The writer introduces a number of characters. Rao owned a small mine on the out-skirts of Nijampur and has become almost a permanent resident of the valley. Pundit Indranath Sharma, an erudite scholar, is one of the most comic characters of the novel. He hails from Nijampur, but serves as headmaster in the high school at Samargarh. Sharmaji has taught Dev in the village school. Once again Dev recalled the event when he had cut off the holy Plaited hair- roll at the back of his head while Sharmaji enjoyed a mid-summer noon's nap on his table. Dev admits that act was a part of his routine mischief and was secular in spirit, it had been considered an outrageous sacrilege and had created a brief commotion.

Sahoo is another very interesting character in the novel. In the novel Sahoo, a prosperous merchant, was widely acknowledged for his frugality and worldly prudence.

Spirituality, the experience of one's own nature deep within, provides the key to this vital relationship with oneself, with others and with our environment. This connection to our own essential nature eliminates negative emotions, elevates one's consciousness and creates a spirit of care and commitment for the whole planet. In this way one needs to revive traditional practices of honouring and conserving nature.

The raja had a sick daughter. Doctors had suggested her total change of climate and environment. In the meantime, the beautiful and charming Heera became the student of Sharmaji. Next to the raja, the tiger had become the talk of the valley. The tiger continued claim lives. On the request of Rao, Sahoo, and Sharmaji raja sahib jumped at a challenge thrown by the man-eater. The description is as:

Behind it stood a mountain, bearing the name Nagdev, a barren peak raised like the hood of a cobra, looming protectively over my mansion. On moonlit nights, the ashen peak radiated a bluish hue. Fairies played on it, asserted a native legend. On a full moon night when it looked particularly resplendent, I would watch it for long, in the hope of stealing a glimpse or two of those supposedly charming beings. I loved to believe that they would peep out of the peak or the clouds surrounding it any moment (*A Tiger At Twilight*, 4).

There are a number of literary examples of visionary writers or poets revealing primeval truths. These poetic revelations are universal spiritual truths to which no one person, age or religion can lay exclusive claim. Of a radically different milieu and conviction, in their attempt to unravel the mystery of life and death, writers like Manoj Das secure the same rapport with the central spiritual reality, as could sages. Mystics perceive reality through self-realization and poets and writers perceives it through transcendental imagination. Once they experience out-of-body consciousness, the writers reach the realm of pure consciousness and the self seems to dissolve and fade away into boundless being; and this is not a confused state, but the clearest of the clearest; the loss of personality, if so it were, seeming not extinction but the only true life.

The protagonist, Dev enjoys the bliss of nature. He shares his extraordinary experience when he is amid nature. Natural sights have the power to heal the body, enlighten the mind and inspire the heart. Here, the writer presents a fascinating explanation of the miraculous phenomena that occur at him. Once,

Dev comes upon a scene that is strikingly beautiful and sublime. Again he personifies the natural objects, for e.g. the moon is gnawing through the clouds and descending a few steps to have chat with hills. He believes in the oneness of the spirit. The Great Spirit, who created the earth, pervades everything. He observes a kindred spirit in all natural objects.

Nature has a great healing power. It is a way of experiencing peace of mind and a positive approach to life. Nature provides great opportunity to explore one's own spirituality and learn skills of reflection which will help develop inner calm, clear thinking and personal well-being. Dev remarks:

Any violent destruction of a form built by nature always pointed out to me a kind of defencelessness underlying our existence - and the wrecking of a human body was certainly the most poignant reminder of the reality (*A Tiger At Twilight*, 42).

Today human beings are not at peace with nature. Everywhere one can see the complete and utter waste of Mother Nature's resources. Day by day we are losing the harmony with nature. Our individual well being is intimately connected both with that of all others and with the nature in which we live. Today we need to realize the fact that we are actually a vital component of nature, and it is our sacred obligation to preserve and protect the planet that God has given to us as habitat.

In the meantime, another character is introduced, Vimla, who was the childhood nurse of Dev. She had been devoted servant of Dev and his family. But later, she left Dev's family on an impulse, after a misunderstanding with his mother on some petty issue. But once habituated to a feudal household, Vimla never felt comfortable in any other environment. She looked for a similar haven. Vimla had found it.

A comic scene was introduced by the writer when Sharmaji, in order to impress Heera, had abandoned his dhoti and kurta, the kind of clothes to which he had been accustomed all his life, and taken to trousers and short-sleeved shirts, ready-made sets he bought at Samargarh. Further, Sharmaji declared his love for Heera. He says:

To our right was a gentle slope with a small pool of water at its base. Some tiny creature splashed into it, shattering the moon's reflection into a thousand fragments, each trying to appear complete. The raja stopped and gazed at the golden ripples creating circles on the water. 'We could devote hours to gazing at such minuscule marvels – a leaf, a bud or a butterfly, only if we had a mind

unencumbered by agonies from time past and anxieties for time ahead... (*A Tiger At Twilight*, 50).

For raja, being in wild nature engenders a sense of mystery about the world; a sense of awe or wonderment about the earth or particular naturalscape; a sense of connectedness or oneness with the natural world; a profound feeling of transcendence (within and without); a belief in a power greater than oneself; and an appreciation of the beauty in nature. It sparks feelings of inner peace, hope, joy and empowerment; promotes physical and emotional well being, and brings about significant changes in attitude and behaviour.

In fact, Heera, unable to get on with the rani, had been living separately. When Heera took the place of rani, Balika was shocked. Yet the more Balika rejected Heera, the more determined Heera grew to make the child accept her. Heera seems to believe that kinship with all creatures of the earth, sky and water is a real and active principle. He wants to establish a good rapport with natural objects. Nature provides a logical and practical understanding of the relationship between spirit and matter, as well as an understanding of the interplay between souls, God and the material world.

Dev cannot pursue his own highest good without at the same time necessarily promoting the good of the others. A life based on narrow self interest cannot be esteemed by any honourable measurement. Seeking the best in him means actively caring for the welfare of other human beings. His human contract is not with the few people, with whom his affairs are most immediately intertwined, nor to the prominent, rich, or well educated, but to all his human brethren. He ought to view himself a citizen of the world wide community and act accordingly. Selfless action is the outward expression of selfless love. When the heart is filled with love, it expresses itself in the form of unselfish action. One is the deep inner feeling and the other its outward manifestation. The rays of light in the atmosphere are imperceptible, but when they fall on any object it becomes visible by the virtue of the reflection caused by light, which also causes shadows. Similarly, when Dev observes himself with this inner light he perceives reflections and shadows within. Light is nothing but pure conscience. Dev says:

What I saw in the tree and beyond it in the clouds gilded by the moon were innumerable fairies. When not dancing, they would play hide-and-seek and smile at one another. The tree seemed to me to be a world by itself. Yes, a world not limited to its physical form or size, for every branch of it was a ladder into a fascinating realm. Once a smart though naughty puff of cloud came incredibly close to me and

teased me for my laziness. ...Yes, that reminds me of something sweet, something beautiful (*A Tiger At Twilight*, 84).

Every time he looks up and sees a cloud and understands it, he is closer to understanding himself. When one picks up a rock and admires it instead of heaving it at something, one is closer to some ultimate truth. When he hears a bird and stops for the sheer pleasure of that sound, he is nearer to real life than he was before.

Dev thinks of God as a presence rather than a person – a presence that allows a seed to sprout, that moves the stars across the sky, and simultaneously moves a thought across Dev's mind. It is his presence that grows the grass and grows our fingernails all at the same time. This presence is everywhere; therefore, it must also be in each and everyone. If it is everywhere, it must be in all that Dev perceives to be missing from his life. In some inexplicable way, he is already connected to all that he would like to attract into our life by the presence of this universal all powerful spirit called God.

Dev loves the earth and all things of the earth. His attachment is growing with the age. Nature leaves a great impact on him. To him, nature is soothing, strengthening, cleansing and healing. Now he is able to think more deeply and to feel more keenly. He can see more clearly into the mysteries of life and come closer in kinship to all natural objects.

When Balika was born, it drove Heera to the height of her madness. Perhaps it was beyond her to stand the Rani's elevated status as the mother of the raja's child. On the command of the raja, Heera took charge of Balika and developed a frenzied attachment to her. Havlock makes Dev understand that there is specific time for everything. But what is more important self-awareness in the present movement. Life can only be lived in the present. One can remember and imagine life in the past and the future, but one can only live life in the present. We are all born in the present, live and die in the present. All that remains is for us to be in the present, to be self-aware always.

Death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it. Death is very likely the single best invention of life. It is life's change agent, clearing the old for the new. The wisdom lies in accepting death, the ultimate truth, it enables us to have the courage to follow our heart and intuition. Manoj Das writes in the same vein in *Chasing the Rainbow*, "...But I had already had the vague feeling that all journeys must come to an end" (1).

Further in the same book he writes:

What I felt then and could articulate only years later, was that all deaths and disappearances had something to do with the vast

meadows and the sea spread out in front of our house and the horizons beyond them. Perhaps they stood for death's vastness in relation to life and the infinite's in relation to the finite (3).

Death is not an occasion for grief. It is only a separation of soul from body and is basically a journey towards the final merger with the Supreme. It is a normal part of the life cycle and one should not dread it. At last, Dev was immensely sad; yet, at the same time, he was waking up to the thrill of discharging his new responsibilities to look after Balika.

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