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RURAL CULTURE IN MANOJ DAS'S CYCLONES

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Abstract:

Manoj Das is an outstanding bilingual writer in postcolonial India. He is a master of dramatic expression both in his English and Oriya short stories and novels. He is writer of international repute. He has received many awards including the Padma Shree, Sahitya Akademi Award and Saraswati Samman.

Cyclones is the first novel of Manoj Das published in 1997. There are prominent features of rural culture which are reflected in this novel. Having grown up in a remote village in Orissa, he has drawn his experiences to create authentic picture of rural life, the rural air of India of the times. The customs, rituals beliefs, superstitions of the villagers have found an expression in his fiction.

The portrayal of rural life in the novel with people's problems and sufferings shows social reality. The novel begins with the description of a feudal family which is at its last stage of degeneration of economic standard. Life of the feudal lords is intertwined with the life of the villagers. The setting of the novel reflects authentic rural life in India. The locale of the novel is a village named Kusumpur of typical rural area in Orissa.

KEY WORDS:

Cyclones, Manoj Das, Rural Culture, Social Reality.

.INTRODUCTION

Manoj Das is an outstanding bilingual writer in postcolonial India. He is a master of dramatic expression both in his English and Oriya short stories and novels. He is a writer of international repute. His fiction is widely translated into major Indian languages and several languages of world. He has received many awards including the Padma Shree, Sahitya Akademi Award and the Saraswati Samman. No wonder, he has among his admirer celebrities such as Graham Greene, Keating; Dr. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar and so many academics in the western world.

"I thought born and brought up in a village at an impressionable age I can present an authentic atmosphere of the rural life, the rural air of India." Said Manoj Das in an interview given to the Times of India (May 18, 1980)

Cyclones is the first novel of Manoj Das published in 1997. There are prominent features of rural culture which are reflected in this novel. Having grown up in a remote village in Orissa, he has drawn his experiences to create authentic picture of the times. The customs, rituals beliefs, superstitions of the villagers have found expression in his fiction.

In order to be clear about the term 'rural culture' we should first discuss the meaning of the word 'rural' It is the adjectival form of the Latin word 'rus' meaning country. The Oxford Dictionary gives meaning of the term 'rural' as 'agricultural' or 'pastoral'. Webster's Dictionary explains the word thus:

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“rural is the comprehensive, non-specific word referring to life on the farm or in the country as distinguished from life in the city.”

On the other hand in Britannica Concise Encyclopedia Article, the term 'Culture' is explained as :

“Integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief and behavior that is both a result of and integral to the human capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations.”

Culture thus consists of language, ideas, beliefs, customs, taboos, codes, institutions, tools, techniques, works of art, rituals, ceremonies and symbols.

We get glimpses of rural life in the Indian literature of the olden days. The post-Independence period has been a period of development in the creation of rural literature. In the recent rural novels we find that they show a greater awareness of social events than earlier ones.

There are broad characteristics of the Indian rural fiction in English. Dr. V.D. Katamble in his *The Rural Novel in Indian English* gives characteristics of rural fiction. According to him a rural fiction must establish its characteristic local colour and rural atmosphere. Each village or each rural region has its own texture of life – its 'sthalapurana'; caste and class systems, traditions and arts, taboos, superstitions, social mores and dialects. Further he adds second characteristics of rural fiction. According to him the village or the rural region in a rural novel must emerge as a living protagonist, though of course, in terms of the story there may be central figure, a hero or a heroine who again is necessarily a representative figure.

Now, let us look at the features of rural culture reflected in *Cyclones*. The protagonist of the novel is social worker who is aware of his responsibilities and commitments to his society. The writer recreates a photographic picture of rural life which is plagued by the evils of traditional society.

The portrayal of rural life in the novel with people's problems and sufferings shows social reality. The novel begins with the description of a feudal family which is at its last stage of degeneration of economic standard. Life of the feudal lords is intertwined with the life of the villagers. The setting of the novel reflects authentic rural culture of India. The locale of the novel is a village named Kusumpur of typical rural area in Orissa where Cuckoos coo from the grove.

“It is used to be task of cuckoos to herald the advent of spring into the valley of Kusumpur. Almost the first coo emanating from the grove of Chowdhurys made a dozen voices restless.” (P. 149)

The description of nature of Kusumpur is vivid. It creates poetic mood. The Krishnachura trees burst into blood-red flowers. These trees which used to beautify the village in the past are mercilessly chopped off in the process of urbanization. The villagers only become mute spectators to the felling of the trees.

“The whole village looked bewildered the day the Krishnachura trees were felled. They lay like demigods vanquished in an invisible battle, their flowers glowing red with a vengeance after an untimely shower.” (P.150)

The sudden emigration of city men to the village stirs the villager's imagination. Motor vehicles ply regularly carrying the construction work of roads and buildings which gave the path for urbanization, meanwhile, a colonial town rises near the sea-beach of Kusumpur. The new colony from a distance presents the look of a magic town. The rural life of Kusumpur begins to receive the harmful effects of modern life. The evils of city life pollute the state of innocence of Kusumpur.

Manoj Das creates a story portraying rural life in a feudal society. Sandip Choudhry, an educated young man, is the central character of the novel. He comes to his village from his hostel to perform the customary duties of a feudal heir. The glory of his family has steadily declined from the days of Ugranarain, Hari Singh's father who led a life of luxury by spending the wealth of his forefathers. His son, Hari Choudhury too followed father's life-style at a young age. Riches and luxury made his character degenerate and his academic progress too was hampered.

The modern age of consumerism opens up new vistas of entertainment and feudal lords have an easy access to these. Scarcity of money lowered the dignity of their family. Roy sahib prefers to live in penury than beg for other's help. He keeps up the prestige of his family above all other considerations. He would let his daughter die without medicine rather than ask Sandip to call for a doctor. The rivalry between the Roys and the Choudhurys is peculiar case. Roy sahib, even on his evil days prefers showing false pride and hesitates to accept help from member of his arch-rival family, Sandip.

Roy Sahib marks the decline of feudal class, Sethjee on the other hand, stands for the rise of capitalist class with the fall of the feudal lords. The capitalists take control of the economy of society. Both these classes are the exploiters and the common man in the village is exploited. Seth Mukund Das, a business magnate strives to come to handle political power with the help of Sandip, a popular leader respected by the villagers. Seth Mukund Das's daughter, Reena a young and charming lady, comes in contact with Sandip while she is on a mission to help the cyclone affected people of Kusumpur. They

develop strong attachment for each other. When Reena's mission is over, she goes back to her town, and sends him an invitation of her birthday. To honour her Sandip comes to town and stands at the threshold of Seth Mukund Das which strikes Sandip's heart with awe.

The novelist views satirically the birthday celebration of Reena. The capitalists spend lavishly on various family functions. In the function, Sandip is introduced to the business tycoons. They, in turn, welcome Sandip cordially because they have an eye on the landed property of the landlords. The novelist focuses the life style of the capitalists and the feudal lords in contrast with miserable life of the villagers. The economic condition of these people grows worse at the time of natural calamities. A pathetic account of the suffering of the cyclone affected victims is presented in the novel.

The novelist also focuses the blind beliefs of the villagers which is the characteristic of rural culture. The people blindly believe the fury of nature as god's wrath on human beings. Once the cyclonic storm in Kusumpur is over, the villagers spread rumor about the god's anger :

"It was rumoured that something uncanny and unheard of had taken place during the last phase of the cyclone. Luminous as a meteor, a deity sped through space riding a white flying horse, crying out, 'Calm ! Calm !' Only then did the cyclone begin to subside. The consensus was that the daring being was the spirit of cyclones in the process of withdrawing the weird elements let loose by her." (P. 177)

Such a blind belief is linked with the death of two villagers, Raghu Naik and Nishamoni of Kusumpur. They are believed to have seen the goddess and heard her command. Both these men are dead and cannot substantiate their claim.

A pathetic account of the suffering of the cyclone – affected villagers is presented. Man is helpless before nature's fury. Heaps of carcasses of birds, animals and reptiles, and dead bodies of people lie scattered here and there infecting the environment with a rotten and foul smell. Voluntary organizations reach the flood-affected areas first to provide urgent relief work to the victims. The suffering of the villagers comes out of their own ignorance and lack of the education. They do not bother to educate themselves. Reena is taken aback when she knows that the villagers manage their lives without any newspaper and radio. People pay attention to rumors, superstitions and blind beliefs. When a Jackal moves inside village in the day time it is considered inauspicious, a sign of ill-omen of some unpleasant event about to happen. Here, the superstitious nature of the villagers is focused which is the strong feature of rural culture. Before Brandaban breathes his last, a priest of the village spots the unusual movement of a jackal :

"I know Brindavan's horoscope as clearly as I know the lines on my own palms. By the virtue of his piety he has already outlived his time by a year. It is futile to expect him tarry longer. In the morning I offered a special Puja to our deity, praying for his recovery. I placed nine flowers, one after another, at the Lord's feet. Not even one of them tumbled down. Also I saw a jackal loitering here below the veranda when I come here in the morning with a few Tulsi leaves from the deity. The harbinger of unfortunate tidings cast a meaningful look at me before I could scare it away. Does one come across a lone jackal right inside the village in broad daylight? we may hate these creatures, but they sense a lot in advance, particularly when things are forbidding." (P.210 to 211)

Moreover, if flames of a pyre rise up steadily, people believe the dead man to be a good soul.

As per the government's decision, an emergency airstrip is to be constructed in Kusumpur. Sandip protests against the injustice of the Government, when the very existence of the river Kheya is put to doubt. He holds discussion with the project Engineer a Britisher. The Sahib explains to Sandip with the help of bundle of maps and drawings, the government's plan of construction in proposed roads to airstrip and the port for this the small river Kheya is to be filled up with earth. The Sahib explains future importance of the port. Thus, the inhabitants of Kusumpur are called upon the sacrifice their dear river. The villagers protest the government's order for construction of the project. The novelist portrays the villagers' age old relation with Kheya. They are not ready to sacrifice their property. It shows their love for native place which is the feature of rural culture.

While returning to his village from the engineer sahib, Sandip comes across the contractor of the project, Navin. In an angry mood Sandip threatens to put an end of Navin's life in the presence of the other. But due to Sandip's ill-luck, someone murders Navin in the same night. The police suspects Sandip's hand in the killing. He suddenly disappears for the village. In the course of the time he comes in contact with Sadhu Sadanand. He receives spiritual knowledge and training there. Sandip's spiritual initiation makes his outlook broad and develops an insight into life. Saints are revered for their spiritual life and knowledge. The villagers believe that saints live more than hundreds of years. Sandip is unable to accept the popular belief that Soumyadev might have been born before the Sepoy Mutiny. The novelist presents his vision for a better society through spiritual life. But spiritual life has also a darker side when it is misused by fake saints and people of dubious nature. Such people exploit people's weakness for spirituality and religion and cheat

them in various ways in particular rural area.

Politics at times is governed by communal forces which are responsible for instability in our country. As a result riot, loot, genocide, arson between the Hindus and the Muslims take place. After the release from jail, Sandip comes across reports on newspapers with sinister headline. Suddenly a sensitive and tense situation grows in Kusumpur. In order to ease out the tension between the Hindus and the Muslims, Sandip ventures a new plan. He enters the Muslim baste and drives away doubts and suspicions of the Maulavi. The Maulavi embraces Sandip. Leading members of both the warring groups realize their mistakes and wipe out their tears. They surrender their weapons to Sandip. Sandip risks his own life to rescue, Haru Mia during communal riots in a town. But in the tense situation of bloodshed and riot, Haru Mia is stabbed by a Muslim assailant. The cooperation and mutual understanding between Sandip and Haru Mia symbolise the unity between the Hindus and the Muslims.

Thus, the prominent features of rural culture are reflected in the present novel. The locale of the novel is village, Kusumpur, a typical rural area in Orissa. The novelist presents photographic picture of rural life. The protagonist of the novel is a social worker from Kusumpur who is aware of his commitments to his society. The socio-political activities, traditions, blind beliefs, superstitions, thoughts of people have been focused in this novel.

Now times are fast changing. Democracy, industrialization, globalization and general social awakening are fast replacing the old institutions. The wind of change is blowing fast. The present rural fiction, therefore, shows a greater concern for the masses.

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