THE THEME OF METAMORPHOSIS IN THE FICTIONAL WORKS OF MANOJ DAS

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Manoj Das uses a forceful narrative technique having the mesmerized quality of grandmother's tales, which is capable of transporting the readers to another time and another place while synchronizing perfectly with the present day sensibility. He links the traditional with the modern and the mundane with the magical which makes his fictional world and his characters, real and unreal, so fascinating and enduring. Through his remarkable narrative technique, he blurs the demarcation between the real and the marvellous. He uses all types of narrative strategies, such as orality, fabulation, fantasy, symbolism, ambiguity, and incorporation of myths and legends. These strategies, along with the inevitable destabilizing of personages and objects-of temporal and spatial demarcations; the unhinging of the narrative from sequential progression; the digressions; and series of fragmentation; metamorphoses that blur distinctions and transform things, and the strings of surreal images often bathe Manoj Das' narrative in a hallucinatory light. Das' is a world in which fantasy and reality, the supernatural and the empirical coexist in an antinomical interfacing.

The theme of metamorphoses, combined with a problematic past, is an important theme in the fictions of Das. Das's metamorphosis is a different one, believably dreamlike and yet at the same times a superb creation of art. Though short, it creates a small, dense world, more often nightmarish. This is a world that encapsulates a variety of fears, anxieties, and longings in an effective fashion.

The techniques of metamorphosis used by Das are not only physical but also manifest transformations of the inner-self. In *The Tiger at Twilight*, the metamorphosis occurs through fear and anxiety - from dream to hallucination and from illusion to reality. The man-eater appears in and out of the village's history, sometimes in tales and sometimes in dreams. It is a supernatural figure that is said to have died, but then often returns at a particularly momentous period in the village's history. The tiger, once declared to be dead, is found to be a tigress, creating more awe in the atmosphere of the village. Ultimately it takes the shape of the evil-minded Heera, the mysterious step-sister of the Raja. Dev, the narrator and the heir of another royal family, confronts Heera and the beast in the climactic scene when the metamorphosis occurs between Heera and the tigress. Everyone waits to see the tigress hunt, but when Dev takes position with his gun, Heera suddenly approaches there and faces the tigress abruptly. Both of them appear one and the same to Dev before he pulls the trigger. This experience is so shocking to Dev that his inner self cannot bear it. He narrates:

It was dreadful; the sensation was simply maddening. I felt like dashing my head against the tree. I thought I wept blood. But I could not know the human from the beast. I do not trust the accuracy of my vision or my memory of that moment, but think I saw them springing on each other with equal frenzy and fury. At once, my power of discrimination was restored. I shot, aiming at the beast, before I fell into a dead faint. (*Selected Fiction* 338)

The story, almost like a gothic novel, presents many issues through this metamorphosis. It takes the reader to another time and another place, even though the present day sensibility can be found there. What is striking about Das' fictions is his ability to link the traditional with the modern and the mundane with the magical.

Another transformation comes to view through a different tiger in "The Tiger and the Traveller." It is the re-creation through destruction where the humanistic self is overpowered by the beastly that keeps lurking in our inner self. The traveller is disinterested in life and wants to commit suicide. But once greed overpowers him, he again becomes attached to life and his free soul now is entangled. The traveller is transformed into a tiger in a magical situation and realizes it only after the transformation takes place. Describes the traveller, "I could not take my eyes away from the bangle. And as I gazed at it, I clearly felt the grip of life slowly tightening on me" (*The Lady Who Died One and a Half Times and Other Fantasies* 57).

The traveller notices the tiger in a relaxed mood and feels relaxed himself, not knowing about his own metamorphosis into a tiger that is taking place. This is horrifying, as the tiger dies peacefully, and there is no way for the traveller to regain his human form. The traveller sighs, "But I was horrified the moment my eyes fell on my hands. How strange they appeared! And all my other limbs too! I sat totally stupefied for a moment. Then advancing towards the pond I gazed at my reflection in the water. It was true. I had turned into a tiger" (58).

The metamorphosis which begins with the crack in voice is completed with the loss of the power of mind and the traveller fails to analyze the conversation of the dove couple. There is only the anticipation left for the traveller-turned-tiger of another transformation of himself by delivering the cursed bangle to another greedy traveller. Rama Kundu writes, "With what a superb touch of surrealism the author captures so powerfully the intense anguished irony and terror of the self-annihilating metamorphosis!"(*Intertext* 265-266).

As we discuss the theme of metamorphosis, we realize how Das makes time overcome history. The stories and fictions of Das written about the time of pre-independence and post-independence period present the effects of transition that brings about the metamorphoses of villages into new towns. Born in a remote village in Odisha and born before India's Independence, he thoroughly uses in his fictions the experiences of his impressionable age and of the epoch-making transitions through which the country was passing. Thus we meet in his works lively themes relating to India's passage from the colonial era to freedom, the impact of the end of the princely states and the feudal system, and the mutation of several patches of rural India into clumsy bazaars. In this context writes Iyengar, "The background is rural India, the changing yet changeless Indian village or the rather more quickly changing 'our small town'…not of Orissa alone, but of rural India" (*The Hindu* 1986).

In the novel *Cyclones*, the post-colonized Indian village with all its transformations appears, but without losing its tradition and conventional values. When Kusumpur emerges as a market-town, new elements of militancy and inter-racial violence enter slowly inside it. The

villagers give much importance to the war that is taking place and which is beyond their reach. But what is maintained throughout the novel is the changelessness in their attachment and love towards their village and Nature.

In the story "The Submerged Valley", Das elaborately deals with this theme with the theme of time. Here he narrates the incident when some villagers meet his engineer-father, requesting him to stop the construction of the Bridge that is going to submerge their village. And the father explains:

> '…whole of history is made of only two factors, construction and destruction - be the latter planned or accidental', he said. 'Where is Harappa today and where is Babylon? Time has licked them off - just for the sake of change. On the other hand, if we are losing our lands, it is for a change for the better, for the welfare of a larger population…' (*Selected Fiction* 89)

Cyclones (1987), *The Tiger at Twilight* (1991) and *The Escapist* (2001) - all these three are about India and they have a deceptively contemporary canvas. While *Cyclones* unleashes the upheavals of Partition and *The Tiger at Twilight* laments the passing away of an age, *The Escapist* showcases the chiaroscuro of contemporary postcolonial India. However, behind the changing appearances can be seen the slow but sure emergence of a nation's soul. Here the metamorphosis is both external and internal.

Das has shown the spiritual metamorphosis in the story "The Tales of Northern Valley", where a total village is avenged by a Hill through destruction. The story is more magical than real, and the characters of the village are realistic portraits of contemporary people who are greedy and demanding. The Hill which gives sufficient food to the villagers by the boon of the monk one day takes revenge on them as they transform themselves from the saintly to the greedy and the boon is thus transformed into a curse. The apocalyptic ending is reminiscent of the monk's warning to them against departure from saintliness. No one is saved or allowed to escape. This backward metamorphosis is quite intriguing. The reader feels that the only way to deal with modernity is to escape it which is characterized by greed.

A reading of *The Escapist* invites the reader to understand the theme of spiritual transformation in a different way. In *The Escapist,* Padmalochan's alienation from society is seen through metamorphosis and fragmentation of the self. His journey from a simple poor man to an acting Saint and then to a real mystic is not easy to complete. It goes beyond the way of normal perception and understanding. The mystical experiences of the fragmented self and its merging with the deviated soul form the core of the story.

With its treasure of unfathomable mysteries, it is also a repository of enchantment. In *The Escapist*, the author's narrative strategy achieves perfection in a rising crescendo of irony. The plot is such a bizarre configuration of happenings that it would otherwise become very difficult for anyone to find it believable. But the deft treatment of Das makes it so true, so credible that the play of diverse forces seem operational in everyday life. The theme of metamorphosis begins with the incredible adventure of Padmalochan, both in body and soul, in search of his identity. As narrates the author, "Padmalochan Paramanik, an ordinary boy from an ordinary village named Govardhanpur, metamorphosed into Swami Padmananda" (11).There is a flashback in the narrative that traces the protagonist's journey from a simple, innocent village life to the more sophisticated town life which is forcefully imposed on him by Destiny.

One of the significant features associated with *The Escapist* is the fragmentation of Padmalochan's self which manifests in the narrator's voice that is engaged in a kind of self-reflexive creative freedom through fantasies that challenge the reality of the everyday world. It reveals images and events beyond rationality to unfold the problematic relationship between Padmalochan's fragmented self and society. His fragmented self epitomizes a broken identity, the identity that is otherwise ideally seen as being integral, though not complete. It is more and more threatened by an all-powerful hostile post-colonial situation and exacerbated by global tendencies. Nothing holds good for a long period in a world that has lost its morality. As a result of the power of self falling apart and of the diminishing role of the contesting philosophies and ideologies, everything is uncertain and untrustworthy.

Das muses metaphorically throughout the novel on the meaning of life and the meaning of existence. At the core of his delving questions are the fragmented selves of Padmalochan which are presented as a blurred identity – an identity that is ever in doubt. We thus see the protagonist from the outset as unsure of his own self and losing his sense of time and place. However, at last he recognizes his soul's desire and attains mystic knowledge through self-realization.

A different kind of metamorphosis happens to Sita in "Sita's Marriage" where the social system of marriage transforms her into an escapist. Customs like dowry and its deadly consequences scatter her childhood dreams, and she can never recover herself from it. The sense of being out of harmony with the world is too personal to her and she dies because of it. Similar is Tipiri in "The Bride" whose disoriented self remains mysterious forever. The emphasis is on the psychology rather than on the surreal, as the nature and the reason of her escape are not known to any one, not even to her parents or to her fiancé whom she loves so much. The metamorphosis is disturbing, presenting before the reader a world in which reality loses its hold with the intervention of the supernatural.

This theme reappears in "Return of the Cat". Mahindra Mishra, the retired District Magistrate and Collector dives into the forgotten memories of his childhood and early youth from where proudly emerges the face of a cat resembling the faces of many cats which were once kept by his mother. As the cat is taken by him as a competitor in receiving food and affection of his mother and is always being protected by her from his wrath during his entire childhood, a feeling of defeat and an urge for revenge dominate him gradually. When after some years he returns home as the newly appointed District Magistrate with power in his hand, he decides to punish the cat when it begins to show its supremacy over him in its usual manner. He chases the poor animal that is not acquainted with any type of resistance and in the critical condition of pregnancy it runs for its life, losing the trace of the way to return. This follows the growth of remorse in the mother, a guilt-feeling for not been able to rescue the cat that was the last connection with her parental home. She is to shift to a new place with her son and so the chance of meeting the cat again is now impossible. Her inner suffering and death affect Mahindra thoroughly which gives rise to a painful memory and a guilt-feeling often returns to him as a dream. After many years he returns when, by that time, his mother is already dead and he searches for the cat in vain. The psychological transformation in him takes place in an incredible way as a result of his preoccupied feelings with the cat which, eventually, results in his psychological metamorphosis into a cat. The subconscious regression and lifelong repentance lead him to a small journey – a search for the cat along the way he once chased it. But this journey seems to be a journey too far, too long, too time-taking. However, this gives him the

greatest satisfaction of his life when he discovers the cat within him. There is no sense of humiliation or repentance afterwards as he achieves some heavenly pleasure and ultimate peace through this search and he feels that his whole life's burden has been relieved. Like a cat he enters into his mother's old kitchen stealthily and crawling, fulfilling all the expectations of his mother. He himself becomes the lost cat and returns home like that - softly and cautiously - and at the verge of mewing he returns to consciousness with his wife's concern about his strange behaviour. Though it seems to be fantastic, his search is a realistic tribute to his dead mother by the much awaited return of the cat through him. The story is a pure combination of fantasy and reality where the subconscious dominates the conscious in such a way that one is unable to distinguish between reality and imagination.

The pressure and fear of society, community and family sometimes compel people to live in a fantastical world and make others believe in that world. This fantastical reality makes up for their sense of inferiority. "Kuturi Nani" is a story where a helpless and suppressed woman builds a magic castle in her imagination in which she lives with her prince charming. According to her, the castle cannot be seen by any ordinary person, and the bridegroom cannot meet any one in day-time during which period he is metamorphosed into a bear that even attacks her. Everything is proved to be false one day in front of the child-narrator and the magic castle for him turns out to be a dilapidated hut, and the prince charming a cruel drunkard who beats the poor woman in reality and not in any metamorphosed form. All these are difficult to understand by the small child and he suffers due to the transformation of his beautiful dream-world into a terrible reality.

"From Roy Singh's Diary" is a fragmented story, a combination of dreams that are contrasted with a defeated reality. The story about Roy Singh and his dreams are clouded with uncertainty. He is the descendant of a feudal family who fantasies a married lady as his lady-love and himself as her lover and liberator. The liberation is conceived to be from a supposed torturous husband who, in reality, lovingly accompanies her all the time. In a state of illusion, Roy Singh shoots him down immediately when he gets a chance to do so. However, the prey is found to be an innocent dog that was only metamorphosed into the man Singh thinks his enemy. It adds frustration and confusion in him, blurring his capacity to distinguish between appearance and reality but he cannot accept the truth: the reverse metamorphosis, i.e. the transformation of the man (his prey) into a mere dog. The confusion remains with him till the end of the story, ending with his imaginary betrayal of the lady by leaving that place and her.

The theme of metamorphosis in "The Vengeance" is treated in an occult manner. Vilas Singh chases Bahadur, his age-old enemy with an unending vengeance that ends in sheer irony. Singh has strong faith in Hidamba Baba, the *tantrik*-astrologer who gives unfailing assurance to him about the fulfillment of his desire of vengeance. But he turns wild in frustration on finding Bahadur dead. However, Baba's reassurance to him of meeting his enemy in a re-incarnated form with some of his past physical resemblance makes him relaxed. But back home he meets his newborn son with a mark on his forehead. It is the same mark which was left on Bahadur's forehead as a result of the wound inflicted by him. Thus, the occultist's prophesy proves to be true but ironic with this metamorphosis through reincarnation. The situation becomes paradoxical as the enemy is reincarnated as the son and the vengeance would be converted to love and care.

In the Crocodile's Lady, the old granny is believed be metamorphosed from human to crocodile and again from crocodile to human. This metamorphosis might have happened inside

her mind, but its physicality is often claimed by her and accepted by everyone. The meeting of eyes between the crocodile and the poor girl dragged by it, their love at first sight, the underwater transformation of self of the girl and her becoming the lady crocodile is magical; but the lady's remembrance of her family, the groom crocodile's chasing her and sacrificing its life for her is too human from the psychological point of view. The emotional metamorphosis of course took place among the audience of the old lady in the story.

Manoj Das' fictional works embody a complex vision of reality which is an extension of the quotidian, everyday objective reality. In his works he portrays the real world itself having marvellous aspects inherent in it, thus creating an awareness of the unknown, supernatural planes of reality. He uses the technique of metamorphosis to offer a world view that is not based on natural or physical laws of reality, though his fictional world is not separated from reality either. In his attempt at an intense exploration of reality he focuses the scientific reality with psychological human reality by incorporating such aspects of human experience as thoughts, emotions, dreams, cultural mythologies, imaginations etc. to yoke the opposites like natural and supernatural, life and death, real and surreal in the components of his fictional works. He delves deep into the magic of being to reveal an insight into the unexpected richness of reality.

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