

BEYOND THE IMAGINED: FANTASY AS A POSTMODERNIST STRATEGY: A STUDY OF MANOJ DAS'S FANTASIES

Sameer Kumar Panigrahi
Research Scholar
Department of English
North Orissa University,
Odisha

ABSTRACT

Fantasy as a postmodernist strategy combining with allegory, symbolism and satire possesses a critical attitude towards literary representation. This paper attempts to highlight the elements of fantasy in Manoj Das's fictional works. Das's fantasies are manifestations of experiential imagination where reality lies at the base and fantasy is the outer framework. In Das fantasy is used as a standard bearer at the operational level against which modernity is tasted efficaciously. He enables man to transcend the logical bounds of perception and enters into the hidden recesses of things/situations. The paper discusses different features of fantasy and the way Das handles them in his stories.

Key Words: Fantasy, Allegory, Symbolism, Realism, Postmodernism

Fantasy: A Literary Overview

Fantasy in keeping its etymology comprises the use of supernatural or apparently natural. Fowler in *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms* gives an exhaustive analysis of the fantasy as a mode of writing:

Not all works in which the supernatural or eerie appears are classified as fantastic - - - References to familiar everyday activities render these worlds more homely and comprehensible. The everyday details are integrated into the other world, extending its range of reference; the combination of "real" and "supernatural" suggests a world of greater opportunity and fullness than one consisting of 'real' elements alone (88).

Eric Robkin in *The Fantastic in Literature* expresses the view that the fantastic is more nearly allied to the "disexpected" rather than the "unexpected" and fantastic is comprehensible only in relation to reality (33). In *Strategies of Fantasy*, Attebery distinguishes between fantasy as a formula, a mode, and a genre. Attempting to attenuate a divide that exists in the critical interpretations of fantasy literature, Attebery offers two definitions:

Firstly, fantasy is a form of popular escapist literature that combines stock characters and devices—wizards, dragons, magic sword, and the like—into a predictable plot in which the perennially understaffed forces of good triumph over a monolithic evil. Secondly, fantasy is a sophisticated mode of storytelling characterized by stylistic playfulness, self-reflexiveness, and a subversive treatment of establish orders of society and thought. Arguably the major fictional mode of the late twentieth century, it draws upon contemporary ideas about sign systems and the indeterminacy of meaning and at the same time recaptures the vitality and freedom of non-mimetic forms such as epic, folktale, romance, and myth. (Attebery 293-294)

As a literary mode fantasy operates between imaginary and the marvelous. Rosemary Jackson says:

The fantastic is analyzed from a structuralist position, looking at the narrative qualities of the mode, and from a psychoanalytical perspective, considering these features as the narrative effects of basic psychic impulses (8).

Fantasy serves as model in postmodern fiction to point out the “imaginative leaps in time and shape required in the reading of any fictional work” (Hutcheon 81) and “as a human psychological impulse, it is the source of the inventive energy that created man’s earliest myths as well as his most self-conscious modern art” (Frey 31). In fantasy the writer tries to communicate to the reader “a vision of some kind of transcendent reality” (Swinfen 121).

In postmodern narrative fantasy is a form of multivalent writing and makes use of symbolism and allegory. Symbolism is used to provide a wider frame of reference which is characteristic of fantasy. Jonathan Raban says:

Symbolism allows an author to link the limited world of his characters to one of the greater systems of values, so that we are made to compare the happenings in the novel with their mythological or historical parallels (79).

Allegory is used as a distancing device. While realism draws people to empathize with the subjects of the composition (usually a reflection of themselves or their own history), allegory conveys different aspects of a contemporary issue using multiple elements that would not normally appear in a straightward realist composition. Ann Swinfen says in fantasy literature:

Allegory is rarely overt, as in the traditional allegories, but may often shape the structure of the action in the form of a life’s journey, a Psychomachia or a Faustian temptation occasional archetypal figural allegory is used - - -but the allegorical figures are very individualized conceptions on the part of their creators, and can in no sense, be regarded as naïve personified abstractions (134).

Postmodernist fantasy is meta-cognitive and estranges cognition by positing an infinite possibility that challenges the limits of human thinking. It is in its disguised mode projects the difference between what the things/situations are and what they ought to be: the representation of supposed reality and experiential imagination.

Manoj Das's Treatment of Fantasy: Mode, Theme and Vision

Manoj Das finds in fantasy a suitable mode and “a medium of comment on current problem and realistic issues” (Tharoor). His use of fantasy is not a way of escape from the hard realities of life but a wonderful and amusing way of presenting the contemporary reality. In fact realism is the base and fantasy is the outer framework. Brooks and Warren opines: “- - - the intention of the character of the fantasy is not to provide us with an escape from our ordinary experiences but to provide us with an interpretation of our experience” (389). In Das fantasy is used as a standard bearer at the operational level against which modernity is tasted efficaciously. He enables man to transcend the logical bounds of perception and enter into the hidden recesses of things. His Vedantic assumptions particularly with respect to ideas about illusion and reality, matter and truth find in fantasy a suitable mode to delineate the issues coherently and quite faithfully. The stories which are included in *Fables and Fantasies for Adults* and *The Lady Who Died One and A Half Times and Other Fantasies* are pure fantasies but interspersed with realism.

Das injects the elements of the fantastic into a realistic setting. In the story “Farewell to a Ghost” and “A Night in the Life of the Mayor” the setting of the old villa and the river are realistic where the storyteller shows the fantastic plot of bidding farewell to a ghost by the villagers and the Mayor standing naked in the river after his clothes being eaten by a stray cow. In “Story of a Last Journey” the use of anthropomorphic animals (i.e. animals that speak, think and act like human beings) is projected with realistic details. Even at the most fantastic moments, they create a sense of reality as they follow a version of the real world's rules. The behaviour of Jackals, the Lion and the political assembly of animals hold the mirror of the real world. Here the animals are used as ‘signification’ (the action of signs) – the symbolic replica of structuring experiences.

Fantasy has uncanny relationship with reality. Moreover, fantasy mediates reality and the unconscious in textual form, in which the uncanny effects are in symbiosis and the metamorphosis is one of the expressive ways to present the unconscious desire. Metamorphosis refers to the change of shape into another which is other than oneself. Das insists on physical changes, which induces uncanny feelings towards the individual self and make the subject's identity disputable. In “The Crocodile Lady” the metamorphosis of the village girl into a crocodile's lady appears fantastic and fictitious to Dr. Batstone, a western sociologist, but he is simply charmed when he heard the story from the lady herself. The story is a fantasy about the romance between the human and the subhuman where a rural lady happens to marry a crocodile and lives under the water, “seven palm trees deep” (42). Her return to the village after ten years following the intrusive entry of a crocodile in the village which is later killed by the villagers makes the superstitious villagers to believe the fiction to be a fact: “Our people believe that out of respect for the woman who had once condescended to marry a member of their species, the crocodiles of the river do not harm the villages!”(44). It is natural that the lady's disappearance from the village during her youth is all in probability to fabricate a fictitious tale in order to keep her social reputation intact. Here the storyteller synthesizes fact with fiction, realism with fantasy to create a world of make belief in which the simpleton rustics believe the fictitious tale of the crocodile's lady a fact. In “The Tiger and the Traveller” the traveller who was going to commit suicide was lured by a golden bangle offered to him by a tiger. Having accepted it, he was metamorphosed into a tiger to suffer the pain of death-in-life existence. The gold bangle appears to be the Adam's apple – the replica of man's temptation of wealth. Further Das presents the transmission of spirit from one body to another fantastically, but they are rooted to reality and

within the believable bounds of one's conceiving and imagining things. The spirit of Kumudini in "The Red Red Twilight" enters the body of Pundarik to take revenge on tantric Raghav Sharma. Metamorphosis of spirits brings uncanny feelings to the subject. Similarly in "The Lady who Died one and a Half Times" the spirit of Susmita enters into the body of princess Himavati to take revenge on the culprits. Das injects romantic elements with Indian mysticism:

My boy (Sage Dhimran addressing Tanmoy), what possessed Queen Haimavati was by no means Susmita's soul, but only her vital being, her life-force, an explosive reserve of her desires and passions. The Susmita you know was so different because her vital being was constrained by her soul. Once dead, her soul went away to its own sphere where it must await an appropriate rebirth. Detached from the soul, her vital being must have come under the influence of some hostile elements. It is one's vital being which generally, though not necessarily wanders about for a while after one's death (15).

As an ardent follower of Sri Aurobindo, Das believes in the doctrine of re-birth and the progression of the soul towards *Nirvana*, the state where the soul is free from the circle of birth. But before that state the soul must pass the state of suffering. Tanmoy continually and distinctly feels the contradiction between two worlds: that of the real and that of the fantastic, and is himself amazed by the extraordinary phenomena which surround him. The storyteller deals the problems concerning man's confrontation with the darker powers of the universe and tries to work out a synthesis between the physical and the metaphysical, the spirit and the soul, the human will and the inevitable destiny that awaits him.

Das's fantasies are allegorical. The theme of "Man who lifted the mountain" is allegorical. Thieffou is a thief and a poor man. This aspect has certain narrative impetus. A person who is poor and a thief naturally gets attracted by wealth and as he is not an honest man does not hesitate to blackmail the king and the officials. After being bribed by the lawyer of Rooplal, Thieffou says to the king:

Now will you please direct your income tax minister to come out of the crowd and stand on the ground there? The fellow has done great harm to the country's economy. Every square inch of his huge body is made of bribes received from corrupt business houses. And he looks upon patriotic capitalists like Rooplal as his foes. So I wish to plant the mountain on him (147).

Das satirically points out the realistic problems under the mask of fantasy. He tries to convey the message that a country's economy is sure to dwindle if its business houses and political leaders resort to corruption. Thieffou, who threatens to kill both the income-tax minister and Rooplal placing the mountain over their head, is not a patriot but a selfish fellow harassing others for self-interest. The king who promises to appoint a commission of inquiry to find out the acquisition against the income-tax minister finds a resemblance of current political trend where political leaders assure people of appointing commission of inquiry just to avoid a terrible situation. Thus all of them are caught up in the web of satire and are meant for ridicule. Under the garb of fantasy, Das reflects the contemporary realistic affairs. In a state of over excitement he forgets his oath that he has committed to the mountain. The Mountain which remains on the finger tip of Thieffou slowly settles down keeping him under it. The storyteller shows the ultimate consequence of human avarice is death. There is seen a kind of artistic marriage

between fantasy and realism in the story. It is allegorical in the sense that it constitutes a double frame of reference and reveals the deeper reality. Das uses allegory as a satiric device. Under the mask of fantasy, he satirically exposes human follies and foibles. The Swiftian satiric strain is seen in “The Last I Heard of Them” where the readers’ witness the fantastic spectra of grinning skeletons dancing, a symbolic representation of human sensual avarice. The seven old seekers visit Hidamba Baba in their quest for “a short-cut to God” (175). But forgetting their motto they implore Baba to bless them with the charmed water that will show people in nude. Their search of God ends in their desire for libido. The old guys in their maddening urge of sensuality forgets the warning of the Baba and put more charmed water in the eyes to watch long lurid sight of dancing nudes, but only see the horrible spectacle of grinning skeletons circling and pursuing them from all around. Here there is an artistic marriage between realism and fantasy. Das is simply not concerned with action but with the meaning of the action. The storyteller synthesizes nudity with man’s sense of civil propriety. Man is hungry for the sensual to derive senseless pleasure out of it. However, his desperate search for the same results him disaster, as it happens in case of the seven old seekers.

In Das’s mythopoeic fantasies while allegory is concerned with the form, symbolism is associated with the theme of the story. Symbols get their significance from allegorical association and the symbolic association often merges with the allegorical significance. In “The Turtle and the Sky” the turtle while flying across the sky clutching a stick carried by the swans, unable to restrain his passion to mock at the laughing people below. He opened his mouth and fell down to the ground to be cooked for a feast. This allegorically projects that people who are not restraint with their passion like turtle pay heavy penalty for their irrationality and unbridled desire. The turtle symbolically represents human stupidity, vanity and uncontrolled passion. Das’s fantasies bear symbolic imprints. In the story “Farewell to a Ghost” Das synthesizes the supernatural world with that of the ordinary work-day world of common human beings. The ghost participates in human affairs and receives foods from human beings, which is not only a matter of make-belief but an experienced fact of life as told by the narrator. The “Ghost” symbolically represents the innocence, the traditional belief and ethos that bolster the community living. The farewell to the ghost suggests a farewell to that culture which pre-occupied in the psyche of the superstitious rustics as archetypes. When the tree in which the ghost is forced to dwell is struck with lightning and died, it marks not simply the end of an innocent belief but the death of innocence. Here the ‘ghost’ symbolizes man’s pre-occupation with the mysterious power of nature. Thus through symbols and allegory Das creates a fictional world of fantasy.

Das’s cosmology is a healthy symbiosis of fantastic and realistic, mysterious and commonplace, natural and supernatural. He though presents events in a fantastic way, but beneath it he realistically depicts the general human nature and different social issues and vicissitudes of present day life. His fantasy has symbiotic relationship with the reality, as comic with the serious, satire with sympathy and fault with repentance. In this impeccable duality and harmony lies the charm of Das’s fantasies.

Works Cited

- Attebery, Brian. "Strategies of Fantasy" *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader*. David Sandner, Ed. Connecticut: Praeger, 2004. pp. 293-309.
- Brooks, Cleanth and Robert Penn Warren. *Understanding Fiction*, New York: Appleton- century Crafts. 1971.
- Das, Manoj. -. *Fables and Fantasies For Adults*. New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks. 1978.
- - - *The Lady Who Died One and A Half Times and Other Fantasies*, Calcutta: Rupa, 2003.
- Flower, Roger. Ed. *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms*, London: Rutledge & Kegan Paul, 1993.
- Frey, Northrop. *Fables of Identity*. New York: Harcourt Brace and World.1963.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*. London: Methuen, 1980.
- Jackson, Rosemary. *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, London: Methuen, 1979.
- Raban, Jonathan, *The Technique of Modern Fiction*. Paris: U of Notre Dame, 1969.
- Robkin, Eric. *The Fantastic in Literature*. New Jersey: Princeton U P, 1976.
- Swinfen, Ann. *In Defense of Fantasy*, London: Routledge, 1984.
- Tharoor, Minu. "Aesop, Faith and Manoj Das", THE STRAITS TIMES. Dec. 5, 1981.