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## **Spiritual Strain in *Chasing The Rainbow: Growing Up in An Indian Village***

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### **Abstract**

*Chasing the Rainbow: Growing up in an Indian Village* is a collection of short stories written by Manoj Das. It was published in 2004. It is part memoir, part social history of a vanishing ethos. This genre, in particular, seems to be more suitable for the mirroring the Indian life since its writer is free to choose any one part of life and deals it with utmost care and sincerity which it requires. Manoj Das is one of the greatest short story writers of India. Ruskin Bond, an acclaimed short story writer and novelist, remarks, "There are only a few good storytellers left in the world today and one of them is Manoj Das" (blurb on Das's *The Escapist*).

**Keywords-** *Identity, Untouchability, Resistance, Dominance, Supernatural, Spirituality*

In *Chasing the Rainbow*, a collection of short stories, the main site of the events, episodes, and characters is Sankhari, a village by the sea in Orissa, bordering West Bengal. The other place is Gunupur in the hilly and sylvan district of Koraput and the third one is Jamalpur on the river Suvarnarekha. The fourth and fifth are Jaleswarpur and Mirgoda in Bengal respectively. As a spiritual seeker, Manoj Das tries to explore Truth hidden in the different realities of life. Manoj Das tells his stories with the help of symbols. There always runs a subtle meaning beneath the surface meaning. Vijay Tendulkar, a leading Indian playwright and movie and television writer, points out:

Manoj Das, like Graham Greene and R.K. Narayan, is a deft spinner of yarns. Narrating an Indian experience in a language which is alien or not Indian, without losing the original Indian charm and ethos is a difficult task. Das succeeds in this like Narayan. (Blurb on *Chasing The Rainbow*)

Manoj Das seems to make sure to the bewildered man of the modern era that man is born divine, an irradiation of bliss and consciousness. The Supreme lies within the Self. He quotes:

. . . But the Indian village had surely several remarkable and special characteristics. It was peaceful but not passive. The villager was much more than resigned to 'seeking the food he eats/And pleased with what he gets.'

He did not advance economically, technologically or academically, but my conviction is, he made progress and matured inwardly, in his consciousness. And that they knew very well, was what truly mattered. (Manoj Das, Preface to *Chasing The Rainbow*, IX)

Thus, he seems to believe in the villager's inner progress in consciousness. Manoj Das as an ardent spiritual aspirant is a man dedicated to the understanding of man's eternal search. It was in 1963 that he joined the Sri Aurobindo Ashram to pursue an inner journey as an Ashramite and at the same time he did not give up his profession of teaching and his commitment and dedication to literature. In his youth, he had been a student leader, an ardent Marxist who once had a great opportunity of entering into a bright political career but he left it when he realized the fact that "No idea can deliver the desired goods as long as the human consciousness, remains in the state in which it is today" (Interview: *The Sun Times*, 3).

When Das tells about a mendicant who has a serene smile on his face and shows contentment, the writer conveys a message that a contented mind is the greatest blessing one can enjoy on earth. In order to enjoy the gifts, the blessings of God, one should look for contentment. Spiritually enlightened people are able to maintain a state of serenity, cheerfulness, and a good expression as a result of contentment. When he portrays a beautiful picture of his village, at once, he realizes the change which has taken place over the years in the form of degradation, the rapid metamorphosis of the village:

The village – Paradip – changed into an affluent port town with several supporting industries around. Most of the villagers now live in buildings and are involved in lucrative commercial ventures including export of prawn and dry fish. There are hotels, bars, and cinema theatres galore but the little Noi is no more; the beautiful primeval landmark had to be sacrificed at the altar of expediency. (Manoj Das, Preface to *Chasing The Rainbow*, XIV)

In the short story "A village by the Sea", he talks about a journey. Here the word journey is a symbol of the journey of life. In order to project his vision, he uses the symbol of a journey. Even his use of supernatural elements, ghosts and miracles is, actually, a device for him to drive home something greater and more subtle. Similarly, death happens a number of times in the long journey of continuous life. Death is merely incidental. It is something that happens in between. Death is not the full stop of life, it is just a comma and nothing else. It is merely the end of the physical body. There is no death as such, because nothing dies, only forms change. Death is absolute, inevitable and unavoidable. It is not the end of the journey. Das quotes, "But I had already had the vague feeling that all journeys must come to an end" (*Chasing The Rainbow*, 1).

Like every other child, he sees innocently. The question arises, why has he chosen a childlike perception in the book *Chasing The Rainbow*? The obvious answer seems that, with the passage of time, when one grows older, one's mind encounters uncompromising frames of likes and dislikes, dogmas, different kinds of experiences, fears, conflicts, greed etc. In this way one's seeing is affected by one's background. Hence, one's experience or perception of the external world is a product or outcome of one's mind. So, here the writer seems to suggest that a childlike perception is freeing oneself from that background and be free inwardly. According to him, if you really want

to know spirituality, do not look for anything. Just learn to look. He points this out and takes this to another level, “Under a starry and milky sky and skirted by a foggy horizon, the sea was not only vibrant with life, but also it appeared, as profoundly conscious as a great, if awful goddess” (*Chasing The Rainbow*, 3).

The stories of Manoj Das provide a profound insight into human nature that is so engrossing, mysterious, lovable, and reprehensible. In a number of his stories, the writer focuses attention on the psychological basis of joy and fear. For him, the child’s mind is like a mirror, it mirrors whatever it sees. Along with the thread of spirituality, the element of fantasy is also noticeable in his works. One can easily observe that his fantasy becomes the medium of his spiritual manifestation. Sarbeswar Samal asserts in his book, *Manoj Das: A Critical Study*:

His fantasies are not entirely abstractions or exercises in mysticism. They are rooted in reality and within the credible bounds of one’s conceiving and imagining things. There is an unmistakable cogency and logic of probability about them... They are allegorical, as they constitute a double frame of reference and hearken to something deeper in significance (69).

“An Evening with Woo” shows that Manoj Das is very sensuous in perceiving the beauty of nature. He used to spend a lot of time with his friends on sea shore or on the bank of the river. Kuma, a girl of his age in his immediate neighbourhood was his docile playmate. His large orchard dominated by a hundred-branched giant lichi tree, generous with its fruit in the summer, and the numerous guava, mango, cashew, and other fruit-bearing trees provided them with excellent opportunities for frolicking, playing, and chancing upon bunches of berries, ripe guavas or tender sprouts leading to the discovery of buried cashew fruit containing delicious tender seeds. One afternoon he led Kuma to Rangda. They ran after squirrels and butterflies and scared away a pair of herons. At once, he felt reassured of his superiority over all the creatures around him. Afterwards they began to play hide and seek. Now it was Manoj’s turn to hide. He was expecting to hear a triumphant giggle. But there was silence. There was no response from Kuma. He began to search her from bush to bush. Manoj was apprehensive that Kuma was shouting ‘woo’ again and again. Who knows if the real Woo – the fearful supernatural being – did not respond in a very practical way and carry her away? He wiped his eyes while resolving to make a clean breast of the tragedy before Kuma’s parents. But when he reached at her home he heard the very familiar giggle behind him. Kuma was safe and sound at her home. Vaikunth Uncle was surprised that he should still sob, hugging him. He wants to appreciate nature through the senses. Nature attracts him physically and spiritually. He wants to fathom its inner meaning or significance. He does not fail to feast his eyes on the lonely sights and colours of nature. He points out, “Dusk was peeping out from a hundred bushes around and the last few patches of sunlight on the topmost branches of the palm trees also slipped away” (*Chasing The Rainbow*, 10).

“The Cyclone” is another masterly story and a fine psychological study of a small child. A terrible cyclone hit his village and adjoining part of Bengal in October 1942. His elder brother, a college student in the city who had come home to spend his Dusserah holidays, was busy all the time opening and closing their main doors, to let the refugees in and keep the brutal wind out. All the houses were in ruins. Ten out of every

dozen cattle had died. At last, the cyclone came to an end, rather abruptly. Cholera too was already sweeping in the villages consequent on people eating anything they could lay their hands on. Soon an epidemic of smallpox broke out. Together they cut down the population like a scythe cutting down crop. His companion Prabhakar also fell victim to smallpox. Manoj also stopped going to school. Later on, schools were re-opened and people were busy in their business. The writer is not simply fascinated by the outward beauty of the different objects of nature. Lightning is not simply a phenomenon, not simply light or fertilising rain, in fact, it is a shining realm of the Omnipresent Spirit. On the other hand such truth can only be perceived and grasped in overall intuition by one who is spiritually awakened. Here lightning can be interpreted in a number of ways. On the spiritual level, lightning emanates inward light, as it forces one to close his or her eyes, to meditate. On the other hand, since lightning is a symbol of power and strength, the manifestation of an energy which establishes equilibrium. On another level, it refers to superhuman power, suggestive of threat and reminding human beings of their ultimate submission to god or nature herself. Manoj Das points out, "Flashes of lightning seemed to be the gnashing of teeth and thunderclaps the laughter of some weird beings in love with the demon of destruction" (*Chasing The Rainbow*, 12).

A number of his short stories are chiefly characterised by gratification of the senses. Here, Manoj Das seems to be sensitive to every fine-drawn change in the natural objects about him. Without a doubt he can give a graceful and subtle picture to the sheer sensuous delight of the world of nature. With great dexterity and skill he concerns himself, not with the obscure, strange and remote aspects of the earth, and sky, but Nature in her ordinary, familiar and everyday affairs. More often than not he tries to establish the need of man's spiritual discourse with her. Here, he makes a bee-line, rolls on the ground, he enjoys a sand bath to his heart's content and is hopeful of observing some ripened flowers.

Manoj Das not only sensuous pleasure but also a vision, his philosophy of life, a moral idea and most importantly he connects all these things with spirituality. Here 'sensuousness' is not just enjoyment and delights borrowed from the sense organs. It is something more than that. Here, the writer's vision and imagination are stimulated by what he sees and hears in nature. Further, he gives another beautiful description of natural scenes and sights. He points out:

The sun was setting. Outlined on the opposite horizon was a range of hills. Over it had flashed a rainbow. A year ago, another rainbow spanning the eastern horizon in my own village had tempted me to try to catch its end hidden behind a row of trees though it had eluded me rather treacherously. (*Chasing The Rainbow*, 40) In the story, "Flames Without and Flames Within", the writer has drawn a pathetic picture of an innocent creature, who is being slain. He asserts, "What was the need for the pig to run so desperately, its tiny legs themselves trying to run away from the rest of the body? Why was an insignificant creature like it so keen to alive? Did it hope to become something meaningful?" (*Chasing The Rainbow*, 44).

In the spiritual domain whether it is a single leaf of a tree, or a tender blade of grass, God manifests itself in all natural objects. God pervades the whole universe. He is

the core of all beings. He is the 'aadi' (beginning) and the 'anta' (end) of all beings. They have their origin in Him, exist in Him and dissolve in Him. He presents his ideas by way of tangible articulation. It looks as if he wants to say that there is a need of a certain sense of detachment. Only then one begins to see the play of Divinity all around. In one way, spirituality can be defined: the task of taking our sanctioned place in the series of life. Animals form part of the spiritual eco-system and friendship with animals helps one to identify the interconnectedness of all creatures. This recognition is the base of fellow-feeling. Here, Manoj Das by arousing our compassion towards the pig, probably, wants to convey the message of spiritual value that in essence, all creatures have an equal right to dwell and be happy on the earth. On the other hand he condemns the exploitation of animals which persists throughout our society. One needs to nurture compassion towards all living beings. A spiritual seeker's heart melts with magnanimity at the sight of misery and he sets about trying to mitigate suffering to the best of his capacity. Manoj Das asserts in "Flames Without and Flames Within":

Can we expect human beings to understand the sorrow of other human beings?  
What would you gain by cursing your daughter-in-law or son? The sole source of your peace is the Lord, my mother, pray to Him alone, and He will certainly respond. Now come, open your mouth. . . .(*Chasing The Rainbow*, 46)

Every person is by nature spiritual. Prayer plays an important role in one's spiritual growth. Prayer has great power. The things which are impossible can be accomplished by praying to God. Prayer works as a bridge between human beings and God. Prayer has great force and divine effect. Prayer is a kind of affection that binds us with God. For Manoj Das, a spiritual person is one whose soul has become one with God. He sees the world from a much wider perspective. When he prays to God his mind is at peace like the water in the depth of the sea. He believes that everything that happens in the world must have some logic behind it. With the help of intuition he can know the cause and effect on the earth. Hence a spiritual seeker by praying to God and having complete devotion to Him, is always at peace and does not feel disturbed by the mundane things of the world.

Manoj Das in the short story, "Descent of Freedom on a Sandy stretch", writes about his childhood experiences. He has a reverential approach towards nature. This experience is beyond explanation. Nature has uplifted him to a place of peace and delight. The writer has been brought up in natural surroundings. He writes about his companionship with nature. He finds an internal harmony between man and nature. Here, the writer finds his consciousness refined to a higher plane. The joy, happiness, fun and frolic, he gets from nature is not merely due to her beauty, but because he feels the indwelling consciousness in nature. In this way nature holds spiritual significance for him.

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