

## **Reinventing the Cultural History of Colonial Odisha through Creative Nonfiction: A study of J.P Das's *A Time Elsewhere***

“Nonfiction is creative when it presents concepts or information in an entertaining manner.”

– Jean Reynolds, Publisher of The Millbrook Press

Historical fictions and narrating the historical facts through creative nonfiction are different concepts, as in the former the details are fictionalised with the imaginative dialogues and events and in the later the historical facts are presented in a creative way that does not affect or disturb the authenticity of the facts. Here the epithet “Creative” refers to the use of literary techniques and novelistic narrative modes to tell the “true stories” or the factually accurate prose and does not mean the narration of imaginary events and the nonexistent things<sup>1</sup> (Lee Gutkind's essay “What is creative Nonfiction?”). It is true that history in an objective way details the significant events with utmost exactness. So the question comes while narrating the history in a creative way will not the creative process imbue the facts? Again in the process of analysis and interpretation of facts to narrate, the personal ideological bias of the author may be implicitly present in the text and the narrative takes the way as the author intends; for which the reliability on the factuality of the presented facts will be in doubt. The central concern of this paper is to study J.P. Das's *A Time Elsewhere* to explore how the cultural history of Orissa has been presented with factual accurateness of events, creativity and the cardinal principles of History writing, moreover to study the aforementioned writing as a creative nonfiction.

As mentioned above creative nonfiction presents the facts with “attention to literary style and technique” and the sole objective of which is to “communicate information” like a journalistic report but that reads like fiction (Gutkind 2007). It derives its subject matter from the real world and not from the author's imagination. The factual testimony along with the imagined details and emotional truth makes it something more than objective reportage or scientific prose (Lounsberry 1990). Theodore A.Rees Cheney in *Writing Creative Nonfiction: Fiction Techniques for Crafting Great Nonfiction* gives a clear view of the writing: “Creative nonfiction tells a story using facts, but uses many of the techniques of fiction for its compelling qualities and emotional vibrancy. Creative nonfiction doesn't just report facts, it delivers facts in ways that move the reader toward a deeper understanding of a topic” (Cheney 1). It is clear that Creative nonfiction explores the undercurrent of meaning in the facts and dramatizes that meaning in an interesting, evocative, informative way. The writing developed by the architextuality of facts remains compelling by expressing the “enduring human values” and “fidelity to truthfulness”, by rendering the “suspense of plot”, subtle and coherent theme etc. (Forche and Gerad 2001). In this sense Creative nonfiction presents a narrative that is intelligently knit, questioning about the logic, nature and the principles of the facts and implicitly alert to the world. Mention may be made of *A Time Elsewhere* that offers the historical documentation of late 19<sup>th</sup> century Orissa, starting from late 1950's to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the state was caught up with conflicting value systems and experiencing “an acute crisis of identity” (Das ix), under the colonial domination of the British.

Creative nonfiction is a widely inclusive genre that embraces manifold forms of literary art. It includes memoir, lyric, personal essays, plotted narratives, biographies, nature writing, literary and journalistic reports etc. The seemingly new genre has a “long history and honourable provenance” (Forche and Gerad 4). Its origin is anachronistically uncertain but can be traced back to the literary essays of Montaigne, Rousseau, Emerson, Thoreau etc., even to the essays of Addison and Steele, the documentaries of Daniel Defoe etc. As Forche observes that its root lies in : “ the humorous true

adventures of Mark Twain; the documentary immersion journalism Daniel Defoe, Charles Dickens, Jack London and George Orwell, the timeless war correspondence of Stephen Crane and Martha Gellhorn; the artful memoirs of Ernest Hemingway, Beryl Markham and Mary McCarthy; the cultural critiques of James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison and Marvel Cooke; the journalism of Tom Wolfe and Ken Kesey; the 'Gonzo' journalism of Hunter S. Thompson; the nature writing of Annie Dillard, Barry Lopez, Terry Tempest Williams and a host of others" (*Writing Creative Nonfiction 2*). Since there are numerous books written under the banner of Creative nonfiction it seems impossible to make the study of all. In the present work the focus will be on some of the important books which offer the historical documentations in literary way, thus can be studies in tangent with *A Time Elsewhere*. In this regard mention may be made of John Hersey's *Hiroshima*, Truman Capot's *In Cold Blood*, Herman Rosenblat's *Angel at the Fence*, Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi* etc. *Hiroshima* offers a true account of the infliction of pain, suffering and injuries by the nuclear war, through the memories of the survivors. Similarly, *Angel at the Fence* tells the historical subject of Holocaust along with Rosenblat's inspirational love story with a girl who used to offer him food during his imprisonment at Schlieben, as a part of Buchenwald concentration camp. *In Cold Blood* offers a narration of the history of crime in the late 1950's in Kansas, more over in America. It details the brutal quadruple murder of Herbert Clutter, a successful farmer belonged to Holcomb, Kansas, his wife and two of their four children.

From the above points it may be deduced that facts and fiction are the essential parts of literature and they grapple together to produce creative nonfiction. Again it seems, there is an inherent collaborative relation between history and literature. Thus exploring the poetic or fictive dimension of written history as well as the historical validity of literature is the central concern of Postmodern discourse of Historiography and novel. The strain of literature finds its way in to history through Hayden White's discourse of history, in his *Meta history: The Historical Imagination in nineteenth Century Europe* (1973), (a fundamental work on the philosophy of history). To Hayden White strains of literature are imperative for narrating the historical facts and he repudiates the idea of profound realism in history, even Ranke's idea of representing history "as it actually was" or "as it actually happened" (Cohen 318-319). By introducing the notion of a "poetics of history" he posits that literary form presents the framework in which the historical writing is developed and historical narratives are "essentially "constructions" rather than "discoveries" or "findings," which contain irreducible fictionalizing or invented elements"(Cohen 318). In White's idea it seems to be clear that history while following the "doctrine of realism" can not be oblivious of crucial poetic aspects that enhance value and readability of history. Such as the ideas of history and literature may be applied to *A Time Elsewhere*, which reads the history like a novel by employing "historical imagination".<sup>11</sup> (Refer to Ian Mortimer's essay "Creative non-fiction – where does history go from here?" This was delivered in a talk for the Friends of the National Archives on 12 June 2012 ). Like immersion journalism the author uses the individual consciousness to represent the history. In other words Das has combined together the real memory, the invented memory and the factual truth to make the narrative possible. This is the real memory of Das replete with colonial history inspires his invented memory to give a true account of Odishan history without adding any extra layer of subjective feelings; this is the real memory develops over years, thus tells many stories of historical past.

*A Time Elsewhere* tells a story of colonial dominion under which the traditional society of Odisha is transformed. The book starts with the events leading up to the disastrous famine of 1866 in Orissa, in which about one third of the total population of the state perished. Such as the peril and the affliction of people to which the colonial bureaucracy did not pay attention. Here the course of narration starts from

December 1859, in the year the king of Puri Sri Birakeshari Dev died after long suffering from diseases. The sudden demise of Birakeshari led to the event of accession of throne by Divyasingh Dev, the prince of Khemandi and the adopted son of the Thakur king. In the course of narrating the event, Das has given the account of the legacy of Ramchandra Dev, the father of Birakeshari and a devotee of Lord Jagannath who continuously demolished the large chunks of Konark Temple and brought the stone Sculptures to Puri for the repairing of Jagannath temple. But he was resisted from his work by the then Commissioner Rickett. Such events are narrated as the part of Birakeshari's remembrance in his death bed which is an effective narrative method. The narrative also gives account of the rule of tyrannical Marathas in the *praganas* around the Chilka lake and their defeat against the Britishers and the British occupation in Puri, Malud, Mithakua and other places. It is said that “the land disputes in this area provided them with a convenient pretext” to visit the places, to make enjoyment by shooting birds in Chilka lake and to make the British grip stronger in the Maratha occupied places (Das 13-15). Here the letter from the magistrate of Puri, J. B. Mactier to the commissioner of Cuttack Division, regarding the fresh happenings in Puri and Khurda areas and Gaurishankar and Bichitranand's conversation over the validity and intelligibility of adoption of the prince of Khemandi as the successor of Birakeshari as in 1760, the Raja of Khemandi attacked the kingdom of Birakeshari Dev the first (20) are undoubtedly the literary aspects of creative non-fiction.

As the occurrence of historical events is not consistent and coherent, Das moves backward and forward in the course of his narration. The story tells the events pertaining to transportation of Nabagraha statue from Puri to Calcutta, the management of the property of Jagannath temple as well as the function of the temple, the conflict over the property of king among Padmanabh Ray, Raja of Khemandi and the queen, the childhood of Divyasingh Dev as the king etc. in a very non-linear manner. The book also presents the growing foolishness of Divyasingh and the rise of a group of intelligent and educated people like Radhanath Ray, Fakirmohan Senapati, Harihar Das, Bichitrananda Das, Gauri Shankar and a host of others who were ready to take the responsibility of educating Oriyas (36-43) in an interesting manner.

Again the story gives the account of the failure of crops and shortage of rice in Orissa in 1865 due to scanty rain fall. The unequal distribution and illegal storage of food grains lead to the rise in price of rice in the state (55-56). Selling of rice to the people was no other than the act of Government that makes it sure that the food grain was equally distributed among the people. For that the officials of the administration made necessary arrangements otherwise there might be the possibility of discord (58-59). This gradual shortage of rice in different districts marks the beginning of famine in the state. As the book tells “people migrated to other places in search of work and the condition of the women and children left behind was wretched beyond words” (Das 70). The description of such condition of people seems to be parallel with the description of the survivors of the nuclear war in John Hersey's *Hiroshima*. The famine ubiquitously spread all over the state including the districts like Khurda, Puri, Cuttack, Balashore and other coastal areas and claimed thousands of life and brought pangs of suffering to others. After the famine the terrible epidemic of cholera claimed the residue of life in various districts. As a matter of fact in the whole year of 1866 suffering and death continued. Although some people like Bichitrananda and Gourishankar joined their hands to help the victim, local Zamindars extended their helping hands by distributing rice among the suffers and thousands of bags of rice were imported etc that could not create any difference and lakhs of people died out of starvation (101-108). Towards the end of the year there was a slight improvement in the situation as “the relief work was managed more efficiently” (121). Such as the terrible event that remains vividly alive in the memory for

all time. Here it may be acknowledged that *A Time Elsewhere* is not about the memory or consciousness rather it is all about the happenings and events that inspire individual consciousness and memory, which is undoubtedly the poetic quality.

Apart from offering a disastrous picture of the famine of 1866, the book gives an account of the decadence of the feudal lords and the kings as the state administration went in the hands of colonial Bureaucrats. Again it shows the emergence and growth of a group of Oriya intelligentsia, consisting of school teachers, government officials, Lawyers. They became aware of the potentiality of their own culture and literature started narrating their own voice. The launch of *Utkal Dipika*, the printed Oriya weekly of the time by Gaurishankar Ray, during famine marks the beginning of creative writing by the intelligent mass of Orissa. Fakirmohan Senapati translated the *Ramayana*, Pandit Harihar Das translated Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in to Sanskrit, Radhanath started writing poetry that celebrated the beauty of localities and landscapes of Orissa and Pyari Mohan being expelled from the British-run school, for defying British authorities wrote the history of Orissa and so forth. It seems to be clear in the book that the contact of the native people with the culture of the colonizer makes them aware of their own cultural identity. Finally it may be mentioned that throughout the book we come across different reports, letters, speech in short etc. which give significant contribution to the main narrative and to make above facts potentially concrete and correct.

To conclude, *A Time Elsewhere* is a narrative in which facts move towards making the narrative possible after being inspired by the author's perspective. The thoroughly researched history grappled with the literary elements make the writing more a creative non-fiction of colonial history than a novel. Like other creative non-fiction and modern historiographic fictions it has multi-conflicting dimension that inspires consciousness of historical events.

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