

The self and its existence in the present social order: A study of Manoj Das's the escapist

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Abstract

Indian novels in English had begun to be written from various parts of India reflecting varied and variegated pictures of life from various lands. It has been nurtured, sustained and vitalized by the medium of experience in the life it describes. In the present paper, I have discussed how the novel *Escapist* reveals before us events which appear to be a mere reflection of our daily life and Manoj Das tries to reflect the deceptive nature of man in the present social context, and the awkward position of man in the midst of plenty and luxury. To him every individual in his ordinary state of living confines his self to the body and mind. But when he raises his self from physical to spiritual level of which he is totally unaware, the experience of the super mental state along with true knowledge, takes him on to the path of soul searching. The simple and pure way of living far away from the materialistic world provides an individual self-realization, to experience the Divine human nature.

Keywords: Manoj Das, Escapist, Indian novels

1. Introduction

Indian novels in English had begun to be written from various parts of India reflecting varied and variegated pictures of life from various lands. It has been nurtured, sustained and vitalized by the medium of experience in the life it describes. In the novel *The Escapist* (2001) ^[1, 13] we find the finest expression of the spiritual values in the Indian epic tradition and the present modern Indian society. Just as the stories of our epic tradition reflect how a mere dasyu (thief) Ratnakar with self-analysis could transform himself into Maharsi Valmiki. Manoj Das in a similar way invents such a character of the modern Indian society in order to reflect how Padmalochan becomes Padmananda.

One of the critics H.P. Sukla, considers that, "Manoj Das is not a 'modern' novelist, further there is nothing modish about him. His is the ancient Indian art of storytelling that speaks of eternal issues in a timeless voice. He comes from the land of *Panchatantra* and *Jataka* with a bag full of tales about "All the Monkeys around me masquerading as Men". His fiction creates a vision of reality which demands of its readers that they reconstruct their notions of realism." (Sukla, 4)

Padmalochan a simple village boy, is an orphan being utilized by his teacher to fulfill his political aspiration. Natbar sir's high ambition to bring about a change in the society fails. His first step into politics is based on baseless facts about the death of a goat and the fantasy of the Devil's dream. But it opens the doors of city for Padmalochan. He makes a self-analysis:

To be ambitious—playing a clown in the crude circus of ego was nasty indeed. But despite having grown up as a hapless orphan, I was, unfortunately, ambitious in a puny way. I was yet to learn that in some cases higher aspirations too, bursting out our superficial craving for power or popularity, albeit temporarily, soon to get sublimated into an urge for inner growth. (14-15)

He gladly accepts the opportunity to escape into the wide horizon of city life. His first escape from village life to the city provides him plenty of opportunity for growth and learning. He works with Sarmaji, his new master and guide, who had

been minister for years and in search of a scope to become the chief minister. It can be observed in Sarmaji's character, "customary detached and ascetic way" (5) of life without being touched by the great Indian spirit of sadhana.

The village road contractor helps him reach Mr. Sharma a seasoned politician. Manoj Das guided by the Aurobindoian philosophy 'Man is a transitional being', tries to emphasize this and make us realize that every individual possess the ability to change. But he has to utilize this inherent power within him in a conscious way for realization of the true self.

Every individual in his ordinary state of living confines his self to the body and mind. But when he raises his self from physical to spiritual level of which he is totally unaware. The experience of the super mental state along with true knowledge, it takes him on to the path of soul searching. The simple and pure way of living far away from the materialistic world provides an individual self-realization, to experience the Divine human nature.

The reality of our existence about which we are not aware has confined our outlook to our body and mind. The realization of the One Being conscious can only provide peace and happiness to man. It can make him refined. The transformation in an individual brings about a change in the world he lives.

Manoj Das being an ardent lover of man tries to deliver the course of an individual's search for the ultimate goal of life. Padmalochan, the Youngman who comes forward to help his teacher and first mentor, in his political agenda is be fooled by Advocate Mohan Rakhit. The narrator gives us a picture of the simplicity of village folk and the pretentious man of the cities. He wants to convey the message that the real picture of modern India is disgusting. He puts forth the social and cultural history of India which reveals that it has been ruled by many invaders. They have made every effort to establish their religion and culture on this soil. But, they couldn't destabilize the roots of Indian culture and its age old traditions; rather it has enhanced and infused new spirit and outlook to our social, cultural and traditional values.

In Indian tradition politics was of great value. Leaders like Mahatma Gandhi by means of non-violence fought against the

British for India's independence. By fasting and peaceful demonstration he could abolish caste system and develop a new outlook for establishing peace and prosperity in the country. But the present political leaders like Mr. Sharma are ready to cheat the innocent just for the sake of their own personal political gain and selfish desires. Padmalochan lives with Mr. Sharma, he becomes ambitious about his future and after serving as Sharmaji's chella, wants "to be called [Sharmaji's] personal secretary" (33). But Sharmaji's untimely death makes him again an orphan.

In search of employment and the unimaginable in life he reaches the house of Jayanta Thakore. On their first meeting the Thakore orders him to sit without offering a chair. Padmalochan assumes the posture as if sitting on a chair. The incident catches the attention of Ranjita Devi, the wife of the Thakur. Dr. H.P. Shukla, points out:

When asked to sit in a non-existence chair Padmalochan ridiculously assumes the posture of Utakatasan, Ranjita Devi, Thakore's wife seeing him thus sitted, takes no time to divine that he must be a great yogi with immense supernatural powers. That she could be the hostess to such a great Mahatma was indeed that fructification of her religious merit and aspiration! She could brook no argument to her divination, and Padmalochan without any desire and design of his own is irrevocably transformed into Swami Padmananda. (Sukla, 27-33)

A pious lady of deep religious faith admires Padmalochan as a holy man. Within moments the man in search of a job gets transformed into Swami Padmananda: Padmalochana pramanika "an ordinary boy from an ordinary village named Gobardhanpur, metamorphosed into Swami Padmananda." (11)

When Jayanta Thakore mocks at Ranjita Devi, she shouts: "Shut up, I say, shut up I say." "How dare you measure a yogi's age by your rotten arithmetical calendar? Do people of your ilk appreciate a single thing outside those logbooks of profit and loss? If you and your imbecile partners fall at the feet of a holy man, the soul motive is to change his kindness into raw cash, with no greater kind of joy than cashing a lottery cheque! I can see you fellows more transparently than the x-ray." (28) Manoj Das tries to show the hollowness of feudalism.

Padmananda invited by Ranjita Devi goes to the upper floor. Looking at the palatial house worth millions the simple village boy feels astonished: "I stood almost paralyzed under the impact of several contradictory emotions. Had I arrived on an earthly satellite of Paradise?" (31)

The innocent Padma at the moment wants to escape into his remote village, Gobardhanpur, but at that time his eyes went over to the sky. He feels, "How familiar, how loving, how reassuring it was! Seen from Jayanta Thakore's palatial house worth millions it was no different from what it was over my humble village or over the meadows and hamlets around it." Looking at the sky he realizes that before the vast and sublime simplicity of the sky the pomp and glory, lavishness of Jayanta Thakore, his fears and trepidations were insignificant. He remembers his childhood days, "As a child this orphan was accustomed to gaze at the twilight sky for an hour at a stretch and feel a subtle comfort directly conveyed by it in total silence. As darkness deepened, what fascinated me was the

Milky Way that I imagined to be a celestial lake. I dreamed of sailing or swimming across the blue and diving into it." (33)

He suddenly remembers that coming to the city he has lost the peace by forgetting the sky, 'it's grace and grandeur'. To him perhaps the sky was sending some signals and asking to become silent like it. Accepting the signals of the sky he gets transformed from Padma, the village boy, to Swami Padmananda. He finds himself entangled in the web of Ranjita Devi's innocence and the luxury of the Thakore's palace.

Looking at the sequence of events he is possessed with Padma asks, whence descended this dubious crown, all of a sudden, on my small and quite dispensable head? Which of the twinkling stars presiding over or molding my destiny brought this about?

To seek an answer to his questions Padma goes back to his root. He finds himself in the condition of an ambitious crown in a circus. He realizes the impact of ambition in an individual's mind under the impact of ego. He realizes false status is short lived but the temptation of his weak and ambitious mind makes him starve for glory and popularity. The novelist tries to show how a weak mind gets influenced by the false ego.

Manoj Das shows that from time immemorial man is a picaro by nature. In the past he moved from one place to the other in search of food and shelter, in search of the ultimate peace of life (Mokkshya) moving through jungles and climbing up mountains without success. He feels himself a selfless being in the present social order. *In The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*, Ernest Jones points out – 'The price of progress in civilization is paid in forfeiting happiness of the sense of guilt.' (Jones, 342)

No doubt man has been engulfed in his progress amidst the concrete jungles of cities; there still persists in his mind the search for the ultimate goal of life, with an attraction to the soil below his feet and the sky on his head. The change from Padmalochan to Padmananda is just a desire to become the Buddha from Siddhartha of course, the change comes to Padmalochan in its own way, but still the faith and affection of Ranjita Devi, stirs him at times.

Manoj Das tries to show that in social progress every individual wants to cross the other. But the world of competition has made man selfish by nature; he wants to acquire money, power and position to fulfil his wants and desire. This has ultimately made him loose social and moral values of mankind. Padmalochan once in search of livelihood is a changed personality to Padmananda, sitting on the top of all comforts in the midst of plenty and luxury.

Being engulfed in the mansion of Jayanta Thakore Padmananda teaches Ranjita Devi the spiritual aspects of life and in the process itself he receives his own spiritual education. In response to the questions of Ranjita Devi about the influence of mischievous powers over an individual's life he says:

There are. But never mind, they play with us as long as we live in ignorance. Once we decide to grow within, every situation can contribute to that growth, can play a helpful role in that direction. But, mind you, they can be justified only in terms of our spiritual progress, not per the rules of profit and loss, pain and pleasure, the standard our ego sets. Had a certain truth dawned on me because I was myself trying desperately to find a meaning in the strange situation in which I was? In interpreting her predicament, I had interpreted mine.

A peace settled in my heart. No, there was no hypocrisy in me. I was communicating with a sister of my soul. (54)

He puts himself in to the fire of purgation by trying to realize the attachment of a man towards woman in this world. He falls in love with Sushi, the Thakore's daughter-in-law. But fortunately the lady makes him learn the true nature of prayer and communication with the divine mother. When Sushi sings a Meera Bhajan, it transports him to, "the sublime plane at which the song and the singer had become an inextricably one "(45).

Padmananda could see the charm and beauty of her soul which had touched that plane where pains of life, was meaningless. He could see in her a superior being, living a life of detachment, "Her dignified gait, her dutifulness accompanied by a serene detachment, last but not the least, her dazzling beauty bereft of jewelry and cosmetics, were simply irresistible"(65).

The diamond stone presented to him by Maheswari Devi becomes a hope for Padmananda to acquire ultimate peace. But when he feels tormented in the hands of Rohit Pandey, he moves out in search of truth. He comes back to the Thakore mansion and learns about the death of Sushi. When he looks at the sky, the drops raining from his eyes cleanse away all his past. Sushi becomes his last mentor making him learn about the escape from the ultimate bondage of life. In the words of P. Raza,

In the poignant last scene we discover as much as padmalochan himself discovers the strength he has silently gathered deep within him while the surface of his life, barring his momentary meetings with Sushie, was marked by a series of encounter with fortune- seekers, pleasyre hunters, the vain glorious or the plain stupid. His inner being dominates him at this moment of anguish when inside a damp and darkish chamber he is assaulted brutally, his tormentors desperately trying to extract from him something of which he is totally innocent.(Raja, 196-199)

The theme of the novel is depicted by Manoj Das, in the foreword of the novel. He says, "Chance is the pseudonym of God which he uses when he does not wish to put his signature." (5). Many of the observations, by the author as well as the protagonist Baba Padmananda helps us to capture the presiding overtone of the novel. A lot of symbols and metaphors presented in the novel display varieties of meaning which reinforce the central vision of the escapist.

The structure of the novel revolves round the core metaphor of illusion and reality. The anti-hero Padmananda, is a deceiver. According to the author, "As it happens the deception owes less to his own intention and more to the dictates of circumstances and designs of other, beginning with the affection for Ranjita Devi who had no doubt about his occult potency and to disappoint would have amounted perpetrating a cruelty. The chief culprit, of course, is Jayant Thakur. As Padmananda goes through a series of unsavory episodes and igneous play-acting, he finds himself caught between illusion and reality."(5)

Throughout his life Padmalochan maintains a life full of duplicity and hypocrisy. Of course for time being, he succeeds in making people believe in him, but ultimately he pays a heavy price for his impulses. The irony of situations recurs throughout the novel from time to time as he tries to distance himself from the world of make-believe. Even, his attempt to escape from the Thakur palace is taken for his wilful

separation to live a more ascetic life. His role as a saint is out of compulsion but ironically, it becomes the key to his transformation. The way in which Padmananda gets entangled with a series of incidents, he feels helpless and psychologically distorted leading him to introspect and to be on the border of self-realization.

Mr. Das feels that man's self is filled with inherent desire for material comforts which always ends up with emotional setbacks in life. He feels that the physical aspect of life has nothing to do with an individual's joy or suffering. Hence we can conclude saying that an individual's consciousness always determines his state of mind leading him to have his own way of living in this world.

Reference

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