UNIT 16 MANOJ DAS’S TALES TOLD BY MYSTICS AND THE LADY WHO DIED ONE AND A HALF TIMES AND OTHER FANTASIES

Structure
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16.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to
• understand the making of the author Manoj Das, and his artistic form and style;
• appreciate his concern for certain values that lead us to live better lives;
• figure out how he achieves this through his creative work; and
• analyze the sources which he delves into in order to achieve this.

16.1 INTRODUCTION

Manoj Das is an award winning and internationally recognized writer, columnist, editor, philosopher, educationist, radical student leader and a devoted disciple of mysticism and yoga. He currently lives in Pondicherry, working as a Professor of English at the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education. He writes in Odia and English. As a bilingual writer, he has nine novels, nineteen short story collections, six travelogues, two collections of poetry, and several other writings on history and culture to his credit. Graham Greene writes:

I have read the short stories of Manoj Das with great pleasure. He will certainly take a place on my shelves besides the stories of Narayan. I imagine Orissa is far from Malgudi, but there is the same quality in his stories with perhaps an added mystery (quoted by Sachidananda Mohanty).

He is greatly influenced by Fakir Mohan Senapati, pioneer of modern Odia fiction, and by Vyasa and Valmiki. Manoj Das’s short stories are especially acclaimed world over. Two recent short story collections, Tales Told by Mystics (2001) and The Lady who Died one and a Half Times and other Fantasies (2003), mark Manoj Das out as an explorer of mysticism and a seeker of the right path after long years of meditation at the Pondicherry Ashram. These two collections of short stories are eye-openers in this era of rapid industrialization and material pursuits. These two collections lead its readers away from the mechanized and dehumanized realities which they inhabit towards an enshrined and enlightened path of divine grace. In other words, these two works posit the message that esoteric aestheticism is transient and only the divine path is eternal. Concurrently, Manoj Das, in order to arrive at his
formulations, falls back on the rich culture and heritage of our country. His stance is that of a pilgrim of rare sense and sensibility and his authorial personality is that of a visionary seer.

16.2 THE TEXTS

- Tales told by Mystics

*Tales Told by Mystics* authenticates Manoj Das a seeker of truth, justice and enlightenment. Life, for him, changes, and so do his thought, perception and writing. Born in Shankhari in Balasore, Odisha, Manoj Das grew up as a staunch supporter of Marxism in his student career. He was a radical thinker who believed in social action and its impact on the world. Later on, however, he was transformed into a seeker of realism, and is now an ardent quester of spiritualism. In this collection, Manoj Das has attempted to compile a hundred short stories from the mystics against the backdrop of the rich resource of Indian mythology – the *Puranas*, the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, among others. Das writes in the preface:

The India of yore, evidently, was an astoundingly fertile ground for the growth of several genres of fiction. Parallel to the chronological development of its mythology (the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Itihasa or the epics and the Puranas), there grew a solid ethical, moral pragmatic and purely earthly tradition of literature consisting of the *Brihatkatha* (only a part of which is available to us as the *Kathasarit-Sagar*), a compilation of lively tales of wisdom, wit and delight; the *Jataks*, the world’s first compilation of fables, apart from stories based on dramatic events and characters of a remote past, like those of Savitri and Satyavan, Dushyanta and Shakuntala, Nala and Damayanti, king Harishkhandra etc. some of which were in corporate in the *Mahabharata* an came to be regarded as aspects of our mythological lore. (ix)

Whatever themes he takes in his stories, one thing is sure that nostalgia/memory haunts him to the very core. Manoj Das has a different kind of artistic form and style from other famous short story writers like Ruskin Bond, O’Henry, Guy de Maupassant, Anton Chekov and R. K. Narayan. His stories usually begin with innocence, and recreate credibly the distant horizons through folk, mysticism and divinity. In an interview with Sachidananda Mohanty, Manoj Das validates his fondness for Odishan background and indigenous art from:

Our indigenous can find appreciation in pastures new around the world, similarly, Indian literature, to whatever region it might belong, must remain Indian. With the knowledge about India growing in the world, it should find wider appreciation. The best Indian literature is to be found in regional languages.

Manoj Das’s *Tales Told by Mystics* is an accumulation of short stories and tales from different sources collected over the past four decades – told by Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, Sri Ramana Maharshi, Swami Vivekananda, Swami Nigamananda, Sri Vijay Krishna Goswami, Swami Ramdas, Swami Ram Tirth, Yogiji Maharaj and many others. These stories are the part of our culture and heritage. The collection is published by Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi. The significance of the stories lies in the fact that they are appreciated not just within the culture in which they are located, but also beyond it. The reason behind this is the universal significance of these stories, and the honesty and faithfulness maintained by Manoj Das when he writes: “To the best of my conviction, the theme and the spirit of the stories have been faithfully projected (xii).”
As we go on reading the stories, we can be sure of one thing that there was no dichotomy between mundane life and divine life in the Vedic era. The picture that Das presents seems to substantiate this contention. Everyone in this era performed yagna early in the morning. The ghee used for the yagna was produced by cow-rearing in each home. The cow was considered sacred, and her milk was considered auspicious. Even cow-dung was used as the most holistic element. Cows were an asset, property and wealth not only for common people but also for kings. The king possessed a number of cows. It was an era of honesty, simplicity and faith in human life. Sanctity and positivism prevailed everywhere.

This was followed by the tretaya yug in which one-fourth of the earth was only negative or devilish in nature. The Ramayana reveals that Lord Rama had taken birth to crush the evil attitude of mankind. He vanquished the rakshasa vamsa of Ravana and overrode his territory to restore peace in the world. In the dwapara era, God in his incarnation of Lord Krishna not only conveyed the message of love but also restored dharma (nobility) through the greatest war ever fought, the Mahabharata war. It is held that Krishna himself preached the lessons of truth and justice on the battlefield of the Mahabharata, and that the Bhagavadgita records all that he spoke. Half the population comprising inhuman and anti-social sections were completely destroyed in the war, and the rest of humanity was restored in continuation with the goodness. In the present era, the ratio between the good and the evil in society is skewed again, and just opposite to what it was in the tretaya yug. Goodness among people is almost non-existent as a result of the evil forces all around. Goodness and positivity are imperilled as there is no end to horror, terror, brutality, bloodshed, inequality, injustice, indiscipline, jealousy, intolerance and all kinds of inhuman qualities. In this situation, Manoj Das’s stories act as remedial measures. He says:

I must hasten to add that even stories with a strong ascetic orientation were designed not so much to inspire disgust for the mundane world as to warn man against attachment to false values, greed, lust etc. and his readiness to use even occult powers for satisfaction of blind desires. (xi)

It is the human stupidity and foolishness as revealed by seers, saints and monks that Manoj Das attempts to curb. He further clarifies:

But satire against stupidity (the first sign of stupidity is, it never suspects itself-says a mystic), inhumanity and exhortation to broaden the consciousness assume an equally great importance in many such tales and several of them reveal subtle mysteries of the spiritual world. (xi)

What Manoj Das intends through his stories is to simplify present human living and to lead readers into the depth of judgment and consciousness. He knows that all are one and grace is one. Unless one is showered with grace, it is impossible for him to grow. The truth is that there are experiences and inspirations, but without grace nothing is fructified. Life’s ultimate goal can be achieved through strong faith, confidence, labour and ceaseless effort, not by greed, vanity and pretention. Better understanding helps one grow in a holistic way. Similarly spiritual awakening gives the insight into problems of earthly life.

Our natural environment is our home. We can’t save ourselves unless we save it. Before an incident or accident, nature gives us ominous warning. We can therefore follow these omens of nature for our betterment. Karma (action/work) is what results in joys. The resolution depends on it: good acts lead to good results, evil acts to evil results. Pain, agony and suffering are all the result of karma. Indian mysticism lays a great emphasis on human consciousness behind the action. The stories Manoj
Das has written also present the same truth – that virtue is always rewarded and vice is definitely punished. The stories go through examining knowledge and ignorance, scholarship and innocence, faith and faithlessness, miracle and incessant labour. *Satsang* or befriending the truth and benevolent one, leads man to spiritualism, but there can be no attainment/salvation or purgation unless we surrender completely to God. It is this that gives man all kinds of happiness. Manoj Das, in certain stories, tries to show the distinction of body and soul. A body decays, not a soul – the soul leaves the body after death to dissolve in the super-soul or God. The satisfaction of the body never gives happiness unless the soul is satisfied. Realizing the truth is not knowing it. Rigorous discipline is needed for fulfillment in life. *Mantra* – the chant of holy lines – brings *siddhi* or success. For each success, a teacher/guru is required to guide life towards the right path. Again, success without divine grace is futile.

Manoj Das’s use of a number of images, symbols and allegories make the short stories an impressive exercise in addressing mental blindness or hollowness and directing it towards truth, honesty and reality. Another aspect of the story-writer that has a deep significance is that freedom of choice without wisdom is valueless and meaningless. This short story collection makes Manoj Das traverse a journey from earthly life to ascetic life, worldly life to spiritual life, esoteric life to divine life. The varied paths of mystic lore are laid before the reader as the author explores the path of renunciation to attain the goal.

What Manoj Das verily believes in is that one can change one’s fate by promise and determination. Human commitment is an important determinant. In one of the stories, the writer narrates about *maya*, which has two ways – *vidya* and *avidya*, deed and misdeed, acceptance and non-acceptance, action and non-action. The parables behind the stories are rare and immensely significant. Each story illustrated in this collection emphasizes two things – inner being and outer being, inner action and outer action, inwardness and outwardness. One can seek the inner self by prayer and meditation to reach the ultimate destination of life. Acquiring knowledge cannot alone help one to cross the river of life. What is necessary is to have strong faith in God. There is a difference between theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge. Practical knowledge is more important than the theoretical one. Thus to know the inner self and to work accordingly is the best remedial step for this world of crises. It is the inner self that always works like a true friend. It never allows ego and envy to live within and to ruin us.

**The Lady Who Died One and a Half Times and Other Fantasies**

Manoj Das’s *The Lady Who Died One and a Half Times and Other Fantasies* consists of twelve short stories. The first five are rooted in the Odia folk-story of the *Samant* and *Abolkara*, two folk characters – the former has an insatiable curiosity for travelling and acquiring a great deal of knowledge and the latter is portrayed as his assistant and a servant who accompanies his master on the condition that he will stop travelling the moment he is not satisfied with the answers he gets from his master to any query that he raises regarding a scene or sight that intrigues him. He would resume walking only after he had been convinced. There are volumes of *Abolkara* stories in Odisha, which perhaps influence Manoj Das to build up stories in this manner. Seven stories in this collection are almost a continuation from the *Jatakas* and the *Panchatantra*. The title story, “The Lady Who Died One and Half Times”, is an original creation of Manoj Das, and the twelfth story is quite novel – it narrates about how human beings today pursue name, fame and money by bartering even their bodies, and putting their lives at risk. In the blurb of this collection, the author says:
In this collection, I have made an experiment (it was in fact an inspired step) in reconstructing some of the stories from the *Panchatantra*, the *Jatakas* and the *Kathasaritasagar*. This is done through two characters from the folklore, Samant, the master, and Abolkara, the companion-cum-servant. They are indefatigable travelers. Whenever Abolkara sees something that intrigues him, he refuses to move unless his master reveals its mystery to him. This back ground helps me to let Abolkara sees something associated with one of the ancient tales. Samanta then not only reminds him of the original story but also narrates to him what happens after the point at which Vishnu Sharma or Somadev had stopped.

Manoj Das is drawn to nature, natural landscapes, trees, birds and animals, highlighting his ecological concerns in this era of environmental destruction. Besides, the plots, subplots, characters and incidents he creates in his stories elucidate his fondness for human values, spiritualism and divine blessing. Meditation clears the path to the ultimate destination of life, and this seems to be the motto behind the short stories of Manoj Das. A devotee of Sri Aurobindo, Manoj Das discusses and elaborates on the distinction between body and soul, soul and great soul, materialism and divinity. All these things categorize him as a seeker of divine path, a quester of God, and a staunch believer of prayer and meditation.

Manoj Das as a humanist and a short story writer is conscious enough of the reality in life and the fantasies around it. This is evident from the title of the volume. He is interested in the dichotomy between reality and fantasy:

These satires presented through an ambience of fantasy are few in the genre in which serious themes are presented in a satirical and humorous vein.” Similarly what Manoj Das says about his own words, story and characters: Characters follow the theme of a story, and the words are merely added by author to represent the thoughts of the character. (Web)

Bhabagrahi Maharana, in his article titled “The Locale in the Short Stories of Manoj Das”, states:

Manoj Das, the modern Vishnu Sharma of India is a wizard of words who wields his pen like the wand of a magician to take his readers to the land of his wonder and reality now in a ship in the heart of the sea of his fancy and fantasy and now in the chariot of realism to show the happenings of real world against the backdrop of fantasy. He is the only post-independent modern short story writer in India who has acclaimed international fame as a story teller par excellence. (60)

Indeed, in terms of technique, Manoj Das is superbly different from other contemporary short story writers from India and abroad. The stories have arresting openings, interesting plots, well connected subplots, flourishing structure, appropriate action, recognizable climax, satisfying ending, eye-catching atmosphere, effective images and imagery in colloquial language, interior dialogue, skillful exploitation, conventions of the genre, enhanced narratives, perfect and often chosen language to make the story charming in general. In addition to all this, one can expect the unexpected, gentle demonstration and neat setting of motives, celebration of local settings, nature, descriptions of the environment and the Odishan background. The storyteller never forgets his place, people and time, nostalgic reminiscences, numerous accounts of human misery, emotional country side folks, tradition, mythology, heritage culture, shrines, temples, and numerous other rural associations, both human and non-human. in this way, one finds that through his stories, Manoj Das restores the lost past, and in the process, delves into unexplored frontiers and writes insightfully about the stark realities of life. He is thus able to transport readers to a new and unknown realms of experience and perception.
Manoj Das almost always locates himself amid the ever green environment of rustic life which is often mysterious and adventurous. He is a master of subversion who can subvert for turns into misfortunes and vice-versa. His evocation of other worlds is not only comical and amusing but also magical and mysterious. He deals with common people with an uncommon touch which transcends both natural and supernatural elements. His sense of judgment is incomparable and more interesting than the *Arabian Nights* and *The Adventures of Aladdin*.

The title story of *The Lady Who Died One and a Half Times* opens with Abolkara’s question to Samanta, his master, about a tomb located at the centre of beautiful park where both have arrived after a long walk through an inhospitable forest. Samanta says that the tomb is of a one-and-half times dead lady. The story telling is continued therefore sitting under a banyan tree. Sage man’s brilliant disciple, Tanmoy is adept in yoga who falls in love with Susmita, the adopted daughter of tantrik, Chandra Gauranga. In due course, Susmita persuades Tanmoy to practice Tantra for *siddhis* or powers for performing miracles to achieve success. Here Manoj Das tries to distinguish the practice of Yoga (*Vidya*) and tantra (*Avidya*) in order to maintain *Swadharma* or true inner freedom. The story writer shows Tanmoy, a believer of karma or the Divine Grace whereas Susmita, a supporter of tantra occult practice for a change in one’s destiny. The next evening, the king’s massive decorated elephant pours fragrant water from the golden pitcher on Tanmoy and he is then received as the king to ascend the throne of the king in his death. He is also compelled to marry princess Haimavati as if is the custom and tradition of the province. After marriage, the queen is critically ill on the couple’s travel to kashi. Treatment fails and she dies. There appears Susmita’s vital being, the life force and air explosive reserve of her desires and passions. The queen gets life again with Susmita’s vital being but she becomes more tyrannical and terrific. The queen also takes revenge in the absence of the king by executing the prime minister on the charge of murdering Tantrik Chandragauranga and his daughter, Susmita. On meeting Sage, Dhimon at Badrinath, Tanmoy returns to his kingdom and continues to rule lonely and successively by suppressing the attack of the General that has already put the queen to death. Thus Susmita has received death for one and half times in her life once in her own body and later her vital being in the body of the queen. Now Abolkara is happy to resume walking.

The second story “The Last Demoness” is taken from *Jataka* Stories in which Manoj Das brings an association of human and non-human. Bodhisatva one of the incarnations of Lord Buddha being the son of a demoness leaves his mother in her absence and goes to a civilized society with his father. The demoness dies of grief in losing her husband and son. But she delivers a female baby before her death. If her son has been like her husband, her daughter is akin to herself, a demoness as she has properly followed the laws of genetics. Demon-kids are never feeble and helpless like their human counterparts. The baby crawls into a hut of *Rishi* while a flash flood sweeps her mother’s body in to the sea. She grows with the care of the *Rishi* till his death in her marriageable age. The *Rishi* appeals Vratarup, a local young resident to take care of the last member of the demon species on the earth. When Vratarup approaches different persons with marriage proposal of the demoness girl, none of them such as the radical youth leader, a handsome and affluent young visitor, a smart musician and a young landlord agrees to marry her. Vratarup has no other way to accept the girl in marriage as he has committed to the *Rishi*. And finally, he brings the demoness to home, which is strongly protested by the innocent peace-loving citizens. Both of them therefore leave for the forest to live like two hermits. Their vacation of the colony leaves fear, anger, depression and mistrust among other residents, which also shortens the lifespan of the citizens and the colony.
has now lost its attraction. The charming hill top town becomes a place of curse thereafter and it is therefore a pile of ruins now. This is narrated to Abolkara when he has asked Samanta about the ruins of the hill top town in the beginning of the story.

The third story, “The Lion Who Sprang to Life after a Century” is hailed from the Panchatantra of three young men reviving a lion who after getting life howls to eat them up all. This story is also formed in the pattern of question-answer between Abolkara and his master, Samant, a man of vast wisdom and knowledge. The three young princes of the local king want to attend the sick father for which the Guru, Sage Trichakshu allows them to go accompanied by Dhiman, a young brilliant and trusted disciple, who is also a spiritually awakened soul with a direction to the eldest one, the crown prince to make Dhiman minister when he ascends the throne. On their way through the forest next morning, they find some bones lying scattered on a rock. Curiously enough, the three brothers try to test the occult feats they have learnt beyond the knowledge of their Guru in the hermitage. Disobeying Dhiman, they chant mantras one after another by collecting the bones of a lion. Being alive, the lion roars to attack the three princes who are now trembling and grabbing one another as tightly as possible. Dhiman from his tree climbing stops the monarch of the beasts from devouring as he has mastered the art of talking to the beasts and birds. Manoj Das through this story discusses on one’s goal of life that is to go from darkness to life and from ignorance to knowledge. The story also teaches about one’s duty, sincerity, sacrifice and commitment. It is Dhimon now who earnestly gives up himself to the lion to meet its hunger in place of the three princes. Another important aspect what the story writer wants to highlight is the hypocrisy of man. The three princes give a slip away to alert to local hunters when Dhimon and the lion are engaged in conversation. The hunter kills the lion and escorts the princes to the kingdom. Dhiman returns to the hermitage and later takes up the charge of the hermitage that has been preserving the lion’s skin as his gurubhai, a fellow seeker because the lion wakes him up with a bang to the goal of his life. In this way, Abolkara’s question about the preservation and the show of reverence of the lion’s skin is neatly answered.

The fourth folktale between Abolkara and Samanta, “Jewels from the Sky” opens with Abolkara’s dream of a dagger, a dazzling one that has dangled before his eyes and blood is dripping from it accompanied by bizarre noises, a mixture of anguished groan and pathetic cries. Presently, the smiling Samanta is explaining the story. Manoj Das has taken the main plot from the source of one of the stories in Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales by employing Bodhisattva character from the Jataka. Manoj Das always tries to seek for two things in his stories-human welfare and the divine grace. Besides, his intention behind his stories intensifies that he is a true lover of nature because nature guides man well. Bodhisattva’s teacher, an old Brahmin pundit is capable of showering jewels from the sky by performing a few rites in a precious full moon night, when there is a certain auspicious planetary conjugation. The coincidence is fortunately taking place the very next night – a full moon night. While walking through the forest path, both the pundit and the disciple fall in the captivity of a gang of bandit. The Sirdar demands Bodhisattva a thousand gold coins in seven days to release the pundit for which Bodhisattva more confidently goes away to collect the same. In his absence, the pundit, by performing rites, rains jewels from the sky for the bandits, which also attracts another gang of bandits and they start quarrelling among themselves and in consequence, every one dies except two survivors. The unfortunate pundit is also not spared, who falls prey to the miracle’s temptation. Bodhisattva, after making him able to collect one thousand gold coins within three days, returns to the forest on the fourth day. Studying the
situation, he grieves for the death of the pundit and hands over everything to the king to be used for human welfare.

As there is no noble inspiration behind the pundit’s miracle except lust, greed and violence, therefore Abolkara is not able to sleep at the same place of treasure after a terrible dream. Abolkara is convinced but not the story writer because his real exploration of the story treasures within the divine grace. For him, wealth found through miracles and not through genuine effort or talent would never sanction happiness. In spiritual life, fondness for miracles is bound to create an immeasurable distance between the seeker and the divine.

The fifth story taken from the *Panchatantra*, “The Last Night”, in its opening, makes Abolkara agog with a dog trying to attack a cat outside Ahladpur village yesterday is so chummy with the other inside the village today. Manoj Das, while raising his voice against the dowry system in our society, seems to be more interpretative on other aspects such as the mystery of the sublime in the air of this village, soul and great soul, mystery of life cycle, prayer to the divine Mother to win a decisive victory over sex, violence against prudent laws of nature, etc in this story. Regarding Abolkara’s question about the dog and the cat, Manoj Das has a possible explanation of ‘vital spirits’ of the two dead gentlemen, father of a bride and her groom. Any father who auctions his son and demands dowry from the bride’s father becomes a cat in the next birth. Similarly, the vital force of the bride’s father, being tortured in his life time, becomes a dog in the next birth to take revenge on the other. So they quarrel with each other outside the village but live like chums inside the village due to the mystery of the sublime in the air. The mystery is that the air inside the village is filled with the occult power of ascetics of a Goddess who in her human incarnation marries an octogenarian at her tender age of only sixteen. The old ape after losing seven wives marries her for the eighth time. Though the young lady is non subservient of her age-old husband in the prime of her spousal life, yet she becomes kind enough to take care of her husband after receiving a warning from a ferocious bandit one night. On the other hand, the old man leaves his house for Himalayan valley to gain a youthful vigor at least for a year. The old man after going through some nauseating rites at his venerable age in order to give his wife a satisfaction returns home in a morning. The wife welcomes him, serves him properly during the day and sits in meditation, and then dies in her trance at sunset. Her death drives out all the passionate desires and yearnings from the old man who also breathes his last at dawn. The villagers cremate them together. The hermit who has been guiding both the couple earlier, now reveals that the lady is a highly evolved soul, almost a Goddess. Abolkara is happy enough to lift the luggage for later journey with his master, Samanta.

In the sixth story “The Tiger and the Traveller”, Manoj Das has been reminded of a picture when he was the student of primary education. It is one of the stories from the *Panchatantra* and written in the first person narration as if it is a personal experience of the short story writer. The story depicts how the traveller turns into a tiger when he shows his lust for the gold bangle. The traveller enters into the pond, not for the gold bangle, but to lose his life slowly but finally finds his human shape changing into a tiger, when he beholds the gold bangle. The moral of the story is that the traveller will have no liberation until he succeeds in handing over the bangle to some other traveller in this lonely forest.

In the seventh story, “A Turtle from the Blue”, Manoj Das fixes a limit for everyone. Crossing such a limit is not only a violation but also a great life risk and danger. Kambugriva, a turtle falls from the sky to death when he goes beyond his limitation
as his thirst for knowing the unknown is endless. The wisdom of his proposed venture evolves a technique to fly in the sky together by holding the centre of a stick, the two ends held by two swans, Sankata and Vikata. Kambugriva’s notion of breaking history as the first astronaut among the turtles is rather high in him. However, Manoj Das remarks that this invasion of the sky by a turtle surely marks the beginning of the end. Later Manoj Das makes his own point that life is meant for rising high up. But to rise higher can also lead to dangers, and this is evident as the turtle comes crashing down on the palace roof when he opens his mouth. Its meat is eaten with great relish.

“The Stupid Servant” is the eighth story in which Manoj Das wants to justify that man and monkey are two different species and there is no overlapping between the two. He also cites an example in this story how the monkey accidentally kills his master in a bid to kill the fly sitting on the forehead of his master. The latter phase of the story sees the death of the queen too in grief and the monkey never gets the chance to occupy the throne despite each effort and plan made by the Genius, who is an old monkey and a pundit. Thus the monkey in the story is received as a stupid friend of the king and what Manoj Das focuses in the story is that a conscientious foe is preferable to a stupid friend.

“Story of a Strange Last Journey” is the next story in this collection written in the first person narration and the narrator acts as a reporter reporting to his editor of his investigation. He hopes that he has done justice to the assignment. It is all about the animal’s revolution in the Luvurva forest. Manoj Das, as a true revolutionist, since his youthfulness, knows the anthem of revolution and therefore, he has created a revolutionary story, which shows his great love for performing art in this manner. This story also brings out a supplement on the epoch-making episodes in the Luvurva forest. Manoj Das also calls the story ‘a great supernatural journey’ and wants to prove jackal as the shrewdest animal among others in this forest. Because Jackal senior makes the president dead in his living state, and it is his cleverness that ousts the president from the forest. He finally rises to power and occupies the throne to become in Manoj Das’s terms, “the de facto boss of the Luvurva forest.” In connection with the story, Manoj Das likes to clarify in the preface.

By the way, I had not read Orwell’s Animal Farm when I wrote “The Story of a Strange Last Journey.” Even though the theme of my story is quite different – the development leading to the predicament of the ‘President’-probably I would not have used this technique had I read the former. (xi)

“The princess and The Story Teller” is the tenth story in which the story teller wins the hands of the virtual as well as beautiful princess in marriage who in a bid to marry an intelligent man, prince or pauper needs to be succeeded in answering three questions asked by her. A dozen of princes have not only failed but also have been humiliated earlier by the princess. Thus begins the question – answer session between the princess and the one-eyed story-teller. In her first question, the princess asks about his half-eye sight, half-visibility with a single eye. The story teller proves that he has the capability of seeing double what she sees because he sees two eyes of the princess with his one eye while she with her two eyes sees an eye of the story teller. Similarly, the princess in her second question tells him to carry the hill yonder on his head for a mile. Everyone goes to the hill along with the king and his daughter. The story teller humbly says to the princess there to lift the hill up and place it on his most willing head. Neither can the princess lift the hill up nor does the story teller carry it for a mile. Thus he gets success in his second answer. Now it is time for the third question when the princess asks him to tell twelve stories that are
never heard by her maids. More wisely the story teller continues telling new kinds of stories to the audience present there. However, the princess in her whisper compels the maids to say ‘yes’ before the twelfth story is narrated by the teller. In his story telling, surprisingly and cunningly, the story teller builds up such a story related to the personal anguish of the princess, which can never be agreed by the maids to have known before. His narration is that he secretly visits the princess with a lotus every night and gifts her the same. As he is not able to collect a lotus one night, he has sacrificed an eye as the gift. Thus they have already married without other’s knowledge. The king becomes happier with the last story to declare him his son-in-law. The story teller is not in fact, one-eyed and also opens his closing eye. The real marriage between the princess and the story teller is settled then.

In the next story, “He Who Rode the Tiger”, the short story writer describes about the show of false pride of the royal officials in connection with riding a tiger. What Manoj Das wants to elaborate in this story is that none is less arrogant including the king, his commander, minister and other officers. The event related to riding a tiger finally takes a dramatic turn. A tiger from the jungle has intruded the royal orchard and a mali (gardener) spreads this news all over the grand kingdom. Therefore, the king, the prince, other ranking officials and even common people gather in the royal orchard. The high officials not only enjoy there but also do not hesitate to show their false ability to capture the tiger. Besides, they take much credit in explaining each one’s forefathers with their bravery to domesticate tigers as their pets. However, no one dares to face and bring the tiger to captivity. Finally, the king, in a show of pride, announces that the prince would ride the tiger. The prince at last rides the tiger and the wild beast gradually lead in him to the jungle, never to return. When the king orders the commander to return his son, the crowd there melts away and after two hours the commander along with his soldiers return with only a piece of the prince’s garment. The story thus reveals how the pride and king unnecessarily loses his son and pays a heavy price for his own foolishness.

The last story of this collection “Sharma and The Wonderful Lump” is rather a long short story written in ten sections about the miraculous appearance and disappearance of the aboo, the wonderful lump. Sharma, a petty clerk, a dutiful employee of the Rooplal Textile Company, now holding the position of a senior executive after promotion, grows with an unexpected aboo or wonderful lump on his head. He has been admitted into the posh clinic in the states for a surgical operation of his aboo by Dr. Hardstone. What Manoj Das intends to write here is that the aboo is entirely a handiwork of the omnipotent. The tumor grows larger day by day, and Indian doctors do not dare to perform a successful surgery. Mr. Sharma is still surviving with the biggest ever tumor known in the medical history the world. However, the American doctors console Mr. Sharma to depend on them as they will remove the tumor as easily as one pluck might a fruit. Not even an iota of his precious life shall go with it. The aboo of Mr. Sharma is also feature or television networks in their programme. Mr. Sharma not only becomes popular in the States but also earns a handful of American dollars from the advertisement. Manoj Das’s interest in medical science not only decorates the story but also creates a lot of humour about the character of the aboo man, and other western characters. The theme of love associated with the story, the craving for power and money by making aboo as the capital for which the aboo man, Mr. Sharma is kidnapped and his life put to risk, talk on yoga and aboo, Indian folk of Tulsi, criticism of western women for their living style, the exploration of yoga, moksha and nirvana Manoj Das compares and contrasts India and America in the story. Sharma, the aboo man is finally so threatened by the kidnappers that he remembers his mother and motherland at the night moment and returns to India overnight. Here ends the name, fame, popularity, egoism, arrogance,
lust for money and power of an Indian. This is the ultimate motive of the short story writer who pays the highest regard to mother and motherland by reciting the Sanskrit dictum not written in this story, but probably must be on the writer’s mind: “Janani Janmabhumicha swargadapi gariyasi. Manoj Das writes: “Indian mothers are nonpareil” and invokes mother land as Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s patriotic song follows: “sujalam, sufalam, malayajashitalam”. It provides a national feeling and his heart is crying for the nationals of his own country as revealed in this story. The story sanctions much faith in Indian lore, folk and mysticism that the aboo of Mr. Sharma has dispersed’ when he falls prostrated at the guru’s feet along with his mother and the guru gives him a holy touch on his head. The guru’s blessings, a channel for divine grace, liberates Mr. Sharma from the aboo, the wonderful lump.

16.3 LET US SUM UP

Manoj Das’s stories tell their readers how to transcend the transitoriness of life and how to lead life to peace, progress, permanence and spirituality. He is a seeker of swadharma – true inner freedom – which has no conflict with the collective life. It requires only a transformation of human consciousness. Both the Mahabharata and Homer’s Ulysses are abundantly present in his novels and short stories. His vision is routed through his nativity – through Odisha, its landscapes, culture, heritage, and life patterns.

16.4 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS


16.5 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Note: Your answers should be in about 400 words.

1) What does Graham Greene say about Manoj Das? Justify his views in this unit

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2) Tales told by Mystics bases itself on rich indigenous mythological resources. Discuss.

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