

Echoes of Compassion in the Short Stories of Manoj Das: A Philosophical Analysis

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Abstract

Manoj Das is a globally acclaimed bilingual fiction writer from India whose short stories are widely read and appreciated for their excellence from several perspectives. One of the remarkable perspectives that makes his narratives both impressive and impactful is the depiction of the theme of compassion. The aim of this paper is to explore the healing and transformative power of compassion. Das portrays the characters like animals and human beings in his short stories to highlight the interconnectedness of all living beings. Moreover, his very objective is to awaken a sense of love in human beings towards animals. The benevolent characters in his narration alleviate the misery of afflicted humans and suffering animals. The recurring theme of compassion in his short stories underscores the power of empathy to save one's life or to let one live a happy life. Das is a steadfast advocate of the societal reform by means of ethical value like compassion. Compassion in his short stories is found as the cornerstone of human connection, human-animal bond and societal reform. The study of Das's short stories from this ethical perspective is necessary in contemporary context as they give invaluable insights about how to combat societal degradation and depravity. Through his short stories, Das urges the readers to reflect on the significance of compassion in everyday life.

Keywords: action, animals, compassion, empathy, society, story

Introduction

Manoj Das is a prolific fiction writer of India whose short stories are renowned for multifaceted thematic aspects and the ethical perspective of compassion is one of them. Ethics is a major branch of philosophy that deals with moral values. Buddhist philosophy underscores the need of moral reflection in every thought and action. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan is one of the great exponents of Buddhist philosophy. Radhakrishnan says the following words in appreciation of Buddha's contribution to ethical world: "In the collapse of creeds and the disintegration of systems, it was the task of Buddha to provide a firm foundation of morality" (357). In addition, Radhakrishnan says the following words laying

primacy on Buddhist ethics: “The Psychology of Buddhism is elaborated in the interests of ethicsBuddhism analyses the moral personality of a man and finds the principles of moral causations operating in its growth” (418). Buddha explicates four sublime moods (Brahma Viharas): “compassion” (“karuna”), “cheerfulness” (“Mudita”), “loving-kindness” (“Maitri”), and “impartiality” (“Upeksa”) for the enlightenment of life. The present study explores the ethical dimension of “compassion” (“Karuna”) in the short stories of Manoj Das.

Compassion is an empathetic feeling and a selfless act of alleviating the suffering of others. In the elaboration of the ethical perspectives of compassion of Buddhist philosophy, Radhakrishnan states: “Compassion for the suffering of others is the impelling motive of altruism” (430). Manoj Das was influenced by Buddhist ideology and its reflection is found in his short stories. He portrays both the suffering characters and kind characters. The kind characters stand by the suffering characters during the latter’s critical time. Buddhist philosophy underscores the significance of ‘love’ and ‘compassion’ in the way that one can achieve perfection in life by nurturing love and compassion for others. While discussing Buddhist philosophy, Manoj Das also states the importance of ‘true love’ and ‘compassion’ as: “If one has love and compassion for all, one can be liberated from the cycle of birth and death and achieve nirvana” (212).

Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary defines the term ‘compassion’ as: “Approving a strong feeling of sympathy and sadness for the suffering or bad luck of others and a wish to help them” (302). There is no denying of the fact that Buddhist philosophy lays utmost emphasis on the values of compassion. In this connection, Pamela Bloom expresses following words:

“In the Buddhist teachings, compassion is universal... And yet there is a very special favour that the Buddhist teachings can bring to the understanding and experience of compassion, no matter what one’s religious affiliation may be” (1).

Rabindra Nath Tagore also talks about the need of humanity in the present world. He does not directly use the term ‘compassion’, but the very word ‘humanity’ that he has used is a clear indication of the feeling and act of compassion. In connection with the need of humanity and morality for a healthy society, Tagore says: “Society suffers from a profound feeling of unhappiness, not so much when it is in material poverty as when its members are deprived of a large part of their humanity. This unhappiness goes on smouldering in the subconscious mind of the community until its life is reduced to ashes or a sudden combustion is produced. The repressed personality of man generates an inflammable moral gas deadly in its explosive force” (65). R.N. Sharma says the following words about showing compassion towards the sufferers: “... Buddha has also stressed the adoption of friendliness towards everyone and sympathy towards suffering” (189). In addition, Boobalan Nagendran says the following words about the importance of *compassion*: “People with average intelligence but with tremendous compassion can make a massive difference in the world” (221). Chakravarty and Thenmozhi say the following words in the interpretation of *Karuna rasa* (compassion): “The term karuna in Sanskrit encompasses emotions of sorrow, pity, and sadness, and the highest expression of which is compassion. Genuine compassion arises from the ability to empathise with the suffering of others” (181).

In Das’s short stories, Kind characters are portrayed as offering moral support to those in distress, whether a suffering person, endangered animal, or victimized bird. The sufferers need compassion for the alleviation of their misery. The process of compassion starts with a

kind person's understanding about it. Dutton says the following words in this connection: "Noticing suffering is critical; without it, the compassion process ends" (283).

Literature Review: The researcher has reviewed all the secondary sources including books and articles available in printed and online format. After a careful and thorough literature review, it has been observed that ethical dimension of compassion in the short stories of Manoj Das remains unexplored. In light of this gap and relevance, the researcher has taken a keen interest in conducting research on it.

Research Methodology: This paper is theoretical in nature. The present research is philological in orientation and based on a qualitative approach. Text has been selected for conducting the research. Close reading, textual analysis, and biographical studies are the methods used in this research. This research further delves into understanding the intricate relationships between the characters and their environments, as well as the psychological and emotional complexities portrayed in the text. Through this comprehensive approach, the research seeks to offer ethical insights of compassion.

Research Objectives:

- I. To examine the lifestyles of various characters like human beings, animals and birds.
- II. To explore how the kind humans exhibit their sense of compassion.
- III. To analyse how the ethical value of compassion alleviates troubles of others.

"Return of the Cat," is one of the timeless short stories of Das in which Das highlights the sense of compassion of Mahendra Mishra's mother for a helpless cat. Mahendra, the central character of the story. Mahendra felt jealous of the cat well nurtured by his mother. But later, a moment came when he felt compassion for the cat. Sometimes he was chasing the cat. Later, when he was drawn into the difficulties in life, he felt the pain of the cat. To the utter amazement, Mahendra's stern attitude towards the cat was completely changed. The following words can be cited in this context to showcase Mahendra's empathy with the cat: "And he discovered suddenly the hidden similarity between the cat's plight when chased by him and his own movement in real life" (26). It is really so strange that the cat went suddenly missing after the demise of Mahendra's mother. After a long time, it was seen in Mahendra's kitchen. On seeing the neglected condition of the cat, Mahendra Mishra felt so embarrassed. The sense of compassion that arose in Mahendra is stated in the following words:

"Suddenly one day he heard a familiar mew on the wall of her kitchen, below the thatch. It was his mother's cat. The neighbours had taken over the dead woman's property all right, but nobody had cared to take charge of the cat" (28).

Mahendra's mother had much love and compassion for the cat. Mahendra once lost hot tempers at the cat because he failed to realise the very miserable condition of the cat. But his mother realised it well. His mother's sense of compassion for the cat is expressed with the following words: "Mother stood undone. First, the cat was not familiar with her son's temper. Secondly, it was pregnant. Mother alone understood its unseemly attraction for delicacies" (29). Animals should be treated with kindness as noticed in this story. Sarah C. Beasley says the following words: "Adopting an animal from a shelter (like a child from an orphanage) is one of the most karmically positive acts of generosity one can make" (28).

“The Bull of Babulpur,” is one of such short stories of Manoj Das which exhibits Boral’s compassion for a goat. Boral is portrayed as the central character in the story. He was a criminal lawyer by profession. On his way back from court to home, when he saw a speedy jeep hitting a goat, a sense of compassion arose in him for the goat. The narrator highlights the precarious situation with the following words:

“It was far from expected, but Boral, the well-known criminal lawyer, suddenly felt overwhelmed with melancholy on his way home from the court... The strange feeling came when a jeep speeding ahead of his car knocked down a goat that had strayed into the crowded street” (129).

The very incident shocked him. The death of the goat traumatised him. Boral’s compassionate feeling is expressed with the following words: “Boral looked at the goat again. It was dying. Its closing eyes gave out an expression of total disillusionment with the world” (129).

“Birds at Twilight” shows the sense of compassion in the central character, Roy for animals. At the very outset of the story, he is portrayed as a hunter but later, he is portrayed as an animal lover. He had once captured a parrot and encaged it. The very act of the encaging the parrot broke his heart. Under the spell of compassion, he decided to liberate the bird. His action made him delighted. The narrator casts light of the incident with the words as follows:

“He had captured an elegantly green parrot only a week ago. In the morning, he served it with breakfast, a banana, and opened its cage. It hopped experimentally and took to wings in no time. It circled twice or thrice over Roy’s head and then disappeared in a headlong flight towards the woods. Roy smiled and wished that he had many birds to free, or rather, he had the power to make every creature on earth run or fly to its heart’s content towards God-knows-where freedom” (11).

He even liberated a tiger from the cage out of utmost compassion being aware of the fact that tiger is a wild animal. At one point a very sad phenomenon occurred. The tiger died after killing Roy. Giloo is one of the characters in the story. Roy was his stepbrother, and they had too much reciprocal love. The tiger was brought up by Giloo. It’s said that Giloo must feel sad due to the deaths of both Roy and the tiger. Narrator’s sense of compassion towards Giloo is expressed with the words as follows: “Pity! Giloo will weep. Both were so dear to him” (14). Human beings should not remain indifferent to the healthy and happy life of the animals. David Perkins denounces the ill-treatment with the animals. He says following words: “Middle-class intellectuals in Robert Burn’s time waged a campaign for kindness to animals. The cruelties to be denounced were omnipresent in everyday life: dismaying practices in working, farming and slaughtering” (1).

“Mystery of the Missing Cap”, is such a story of Das which unveils unflinching love and profound compassion of Shri Moharana for a little monkey. Shri Moharana had brought up a monkey and her baby. For some days he was away from home. During his absence, Moharana’s servants had killed the monkey. On his return, when he came to know about the death of the monkey, he felt pity for the motherless baby monkey and looked after the baby monkey with the utmost care. The sense of compassion that Shri Moharana felt for the baby monkey is expressed with the following words:

“He was a monkey not in any figurative sense, but a real one. When he was an infant, his mother had taken shelter under Shri Moharana’s roof in order to save her male child from the usual wrath of the male leader of her troop. Shri Moharana had not been at home and his servants killed the mother monkey. Shri Moharana felt extremely upset, did not eat for one and half days, and, to compensate for the wrong done, nurtured the baby monkey, christened Jhandoo, with great affection” (7).

Marc Bekoff says the following words as a mark of kindness for the animals: “Because of our dominant position in the world, because we can freely speak and express our feelings about animals who do not have much say in the matter. It might seem as if animals exist for humans to use in any way we choose. However, ethical values tell us that animals should not be viewed as property, as resource or as disposable machines who exist for human consumption” (18).

The narrator portrays two major characters named Babu Virkishore and Shri Moharana in an exquisite manner. The entire story is based on their struggles in different dimensions. The narrator feels compassion for both the characters. At the very outset of the story the narrator recounts that he has no intention to make mockery of the two characters his very purpose is to share his sympathy for them which has been nurtured in his mind for many years. The narrator states the following words to express his compassionate feelings for both of the characters:

“It is certainly not my motive, in recounting this episode from two decades ago, to raise a laugh at the expense of Shri Moharana or Babu Virkishore, then the Hon’ble Minister of Fisheries and Fine Arts of my State. On the contrary, I wish my friends and readers to share the sympathy I have secretly nurtured in my heart for these two gentlemen over the years past” (1).

Babu Virkishore was the minister of Fisheries and Fine Arts. In order to climb the ladder of politics, Shri Moharana sought the blessing of Babu Virkishore. Shri Moharana once invited Babu Virkishore to his village. In an incident, Babu Virkishore placed his heavy hand around the neck of Shri Moharana. It was too difficult on his part to endure such a heavy load, so he felt so embarrassed and uneasy. The very incident generated a feeling of compassion in the narrator's mind for Shri Moharana. The narrator says the following words in this context:

“... The minister, double the size of an average man in our village, plodded through the street, it seemed to us, to the embarrassment of the poor, naked earth. And I still remember the look of Shri Moharana when the minister’s long, round arm rested on his shrunken neck, a look that I have seen only once or twice later in life on the faces of dying people who had lived a contented and complete life. Shri Moharana’s look suggested: ‘What more, what more, O mortal me, could you expect from life? My, my!’ ” (3).

The news of the sudden disappearance of Babu Virkishore’s cap made Shri Moharana so restless. He trembling out of extreme fear. The very body language of Shri Moharana evoked the feeling of pity in the narrator for Shri Moharana. The following words reflect the narrator's sense of compassion towards Sri Moharana: “I could see Shri Moharana literally shaking. He was sweating like an ice cream stick, so much so that I was afraid that, at that rate, he might completely melt away in a few hours” (4). Shri Moharana tried to conceal the fact that the cap

of the minster had been stolen by the monkey. He was to deliver a speech before a large number of audience. When he appeared on the stage, he looked so depressed and restless. The very sad appearance of Shri Moharana generated the sense of compassion in the mind of the narrator. The following words shed light on the precarious situation that made the narrator feel compassion for Babu Virkishore: “My heartbeats had trebled. Looking at Shri Moharana’s face I saw an extremely pitiable image – pale as death” (8). The story about the disappearance of the cap fabricated by Shri Moharana was proved to be a false story. At last, both Babu Virkishore and Shri Moharana wept due to the occurrence of the heart-wrenching incidents. The very incident made the narrator so upset. Both Shri Moharana and Babu Virkishore cut a sorry figure for each other. The incident is expressed with the words as follows: “But Shri Moharana was in no condition to say anything more. He broke into tears. Next moment I saw the Hon’ble Minister of Fisheries and Fine Arts weeping too” (8).

Snow lays emphasis on several emotions people feel for the sufferers: “Compassion, pity, sympathy and grief are all parts of the emotional landscape of our lives” (195). In the context of the story, the narrator also feels compassion, pity, sympathy and grief for both Babu Virkishore and Shri Moharana.

“The Owl” is such a short story of Das which reveals ample love and compassion of the villagers for an owl. The narrator’s following words recounts love of the villagers for the bird: “But all the adult villagers were familiar with the hooting and that itself was considered important. Nobody asked why” (23). On hearing a rumour that the owl had been shot down, the villagers felt so embarrassed. Finally, when the owl uttered the sound ‘T-whit!’, Balabhadra Das spoke out “O’ God! the owl is not dead, after all” (28).

Das’s short story "The Old Man and the Camel" illustrates Basu's sense of compassion for a suffering camel. On one occasion, Basu couldn’t even check the tears in his eyes when he heard a shocking narration from a jail mate about how the camel is mercilessly exploited by human beings. On hearing it, Basu’s eyes were filled with tears. The following words in the story reflect Basu’s sense of compassion for the camel:

“It was in his despair and desolation in jail that the camel returned to his memory. And when a jail mate narrated to him how the camel never showed any sign of protest against being mercilessly overloaded except through sighing and shedding quiet tears, Basu had to make an effort to check his own tears” (191).

. Compassion is feeling of sympathy that spontaneously erupts in mind for sufferers including man, animals, plants. In this light, Swami Raghaveshananda states the following words: “Compassion manifests as a spontaneous reaction or response to seeing or coming to know of another’s suffering—be it a man, animal or even a plant. It creates a feeling of sympathy and pity. It also results in an immediate urge to help the suffering person” (33).

In “Catching a Thief,” Raghunath is portrayed as the central character. The landlord another character of the story is popularly known as Mahasay. The landlord is portrayed as a kind-hearted person. During the drought, people were languishing due to an intense crisis of food. Old Raghunath was one among all those sufferers. During his adversity, the landlord stood by him and helped him a bag full of rice. This is an act of compassion on the part of the landlord

towards Raghunath. The very compassion of the landlord touched his heart and generated tears in his eyes. The narrator casts light on the very incident with the following words:

“No wonder that the old Raghunath should be moved to tears at the compassion of the Mahasay (a popular second surname assumed by landlords and other aspirants to aristocracy, the term meaning ‘great man’) who had granted him a full bag of rice. Certain terms assume a special connotation during crises. If only one gave away a bag or two of rice in exchange for a full acre of your land, one’s gesture constituted an act of compassion” (22).

In “The Submerged Valley” narrator’s parents showed their compassion towards Abolkara, foolish boy. Due to his stupidity, he was not able to understand the reality of several phenomena. When he was searched and not found, the narrator's parents became so restless. With the effort of the narrator's father, Abolkara was later rescued from a hillock which was to be submerged in water. On seeing him shiver like a wet squirrel, the narrator's father’s heart was moved. He felt compassion for helpless Abolkara and gave an order to give Abolkara some garments and blankets kept in the almirah. The very compassion of the narrator's father is put forth in the words as follows: “There stood Abolkara, shivering like a wet squirrel, but smiling. Give him clothes to change and a pair of blankets from the bungalow’s stock in the almirah” (33). The narrator’s mother was very kind and affectionate by nature. She showed her compassion for the sad villagers in general and the helpless Abolkara in particular. She procured food to feed the hungry Abolkara. She took pleasure in feeding the boy in his acute, desolate condition. While feeding him, she looked like a goddess in the eyes of the narrator. The following words show the narrator's mother’s sense of compassion for a foolish and helpless Abolkara: “While feeding Abolkara, Mother looked glorious as a goddess” (34). In the context of this short story, Dalai Lama’s words following words give better understanding about compassion: “Compassion naturally creates a positive atmosphere, and as a result, you feel peaceful and content. Wherever there lives a compassionate person, there is always a pleasant atmosphere” (30). Human suffering is always there in a society. Collins also sates the same thing with the words as follows “Human suffering is always present in society. Although it may take different forms in different historical and societal contexts. There are elements of suffering even in the most advanced and prosperous societies” (95).

In “The Murderer,” Binu is portrayed as the central character. He was falsely accused of being a murderer. After being declared a murderer, he was to abscond himself. He was to remain hungry. The narrator’s mother in the story shows compassion for Binu. Binu’s distress moved her heart. She shows motherly affection to Binu. Before serving food items to other members of the family, she had to keep some food items aside for Binu. The food items included dal, crushed potatoes, and boiled milk. This empathetic sense and the actual act of her kindness elevate her personality as a compassionate person. The narrator exhibits a sense of compassion in his mother towards a helpless person like Binu with the following words: “The moon rose rather late. We were still expecting the murderer. Mother had kept aside for him a quantity of rice, which ordinarily would have taken two men to finish, a matching quantity of dal and crushed potatoes, and even a cup of thickly boiled milk” (34). In this context, Dalai Lama’s following words on ‘compassion’ can be quoted:

“Genuine compassion should be unbiased. As I mentioned before, genuine compassion is based on the recognition that others have the right to happiness just like

yourself, and therefore even your enemy is a human being with the same wish for happiness as you and the same right to happiness as you. A sense of concern developed on this basis is what we call compassion; it extends to everyone, irrespective of whether the person's attitude towards you is hostile or friendly" (22-23).

Compassion can give instant solace to the sufferers. It is essential for any sufferers. In this context, Beasley says the following words: "Engaging compassion in simple ways brings an immediate sense of well-being for ourselves and others. Each time, it leaves us feeling more fully human and interconnected" (11). Moreover, following words of Strauss underscore the value of compassion in society" "The importance of compassion is recognized in many segments of society. Most of the world's religious traditions place compassion at the centre of their belief systems" (16)

Conclusion:

Compassion is a transformative force that goes beyond the boundaries of self-interest. The sense of compassion heals not only the sufferers but also showcases the greatness of the one who offers it. The theme of compassion is put forth in Das's stories through the kind words and selfless actions of the characters. Both the physical and mental sufferers including human beings, animals and birds receive selfless service from the generous characters. From Mahasay to Basu the characters in his narratives embody the essence of humanity through their selfless deeds. By virtue of this transformative force, Das's short stories gain aesthetic excellence. Through his poignant narratives, readers are reminded of the inherent beauty in the acts of compassion. The characters in Das's stories do not merely feel sympathy or pity, but deeply engages themselves in the process of alleviation of the pain of the sufferers. Through this lens, Das's work acts as a panacea for moral awakening and a celebration of the simple yet profound power of compassion. Moreover, his stories show how compassion can unite diverse beings in the shared experience of care. It apprises the readers that true empathy lies not just in understanding the pain of others but in actively doing something for its relief. In this way, Das invites us to embrace compassion as an essential quality of the human spirit, one that brings healing and renewal to both the giver and the receiver.

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