

Life and Systems in Indian Homespun: As Mentioned in the Writings of Manoj Das and Ruskin Bond

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Abstract

Society and culture are inseparable and this is best presented through literature. This research work informs about the same found in some of the short fictions of two Indian writers Manoj Das and Ruskin Bond and some of their magnum opuses. Both the authors generally portray India as it is. Their works and characters are fictional, but not the thoughts and feelings. The paper aims at exploring religion, race, politics, society, caste, pain and pleasure of particular homespun mentioned in two authors' works. All the works of Das highlight the life style, social custom and culture of India, especially the provinces of Odisha. Similarly, Bond's novella is a narration of Northern India, its people, their culture, home, nature and everything else. The paper is written on Manoj Das's short stories The Bull of Babulpur, The Hunger and The Strategy and Bond's short stories Angry River and Panther's Moon. These taken works present how beautifully they have understood countryside-India with all its flaw as well as beauty. Both the literary figures bring forth the concern and idea among the readers through authentic picturisation of Indian homespun. Though many have studied them individually, this particular work tries to explore rural India in their works comparatively.

Keywords: Homespun, Rurality, Illiteracy, Society, Culture, Superstition, Life-Style.

Introduction:

Provincialism is no doubt an important part of Literature. It helps us understand the world and its people from the grass-root level. By understanding every individual, his mindset, necessities, way of living, relationship with others, away from the hustle and bustle of modern world. and so on. Many have defined the concept in their own way. As Ruth Livesey (2020) in his article writes, "Provincialism denotes a place, style, and mode of existence that is away from, but still under the dominion of, a powerful metropolis". Homespun theory or Provincialism relates to some particular areas, the concept and activities of that place that is simple and out of modernity and urbanity. However, we find provincialism is related to the social as well as mental conditions of a particular rural and semi-urban location. If provincial novels are taken into consideration, then we can mark from John Plotz (2015)'s article. According to him in any provincial novel, the important factor is that the local or the rural triumphs over the cosmopolitan or the developed area. The readers feel their association with the regional and the detachment or semi-detachment from the modern world. Likewise, in the field of short story writing the protagonist as well as the characters are much concerned and associated with such areas, those are not so developed, not so obsessed with modernity, rather close to the nature, culture and

tradition of that place. Here Kercenna (2021) can be quoted, “One eminent example is that of Sangree in *The Camp of the Dog*; a young man who suffered a serious case of lycanthropy induced and precipitated by the strenuous rigid formality, absurd conventions, and cruel prejudice of city life. Besides bodily and mental ailments, the oppressing influence of the urban lifestyle had largely contributed to the social and moral decline ...” (Kercenna, 2). Such writings focus on the inhabitants and scenario of the regions and areas those are far away from the suburbs. There are many such writings in English literature which have the narration of such places, the people belonging to that region, their lifestyle, their thoughts related to their locality and so on. In literature, socio-cultural idea refers to the concerns related to the typical ways of life; rites and rituals; community living style; thought and tradition that governs the actions and reactions of the people of the community; beliefs, and association with the surroundings; and culture and ethos. Literature and society are connected too. According to Gupta (1980), “The study of Literature plays a significant role in moulding the society by purifying the minds of all the people from all sorts of impurities, evil tendencies, corruptions and superstitions” (V. D. Gupta, 53). Culture and society are inter-related, and it is culture that makes any group of people, community or society unique in itself. It is language that connects each people with one another and it is culture that connects communities. Quoting Johnson in her article *Constructing Socio-Cultural awareness from the EFL Classroom*, Yolanda (2017) says, “A socio-cultural perspective assumes that human cognition is formed through engagement in social activities....” (Yolanda, 155). Kramsch is the one who coined the term ‘Thirdness’, which is a medium to reflect the connection among thought, language and culture. It is culture of the particular society or country which shapes the life of any individual.

There are certain remarkable components of culture which are dealt by different writers from time to time. There are several authors like Chinua Achebe, Robert Tressell, George Orwell, Toni Morrison, Upton Sinclair and Ruskin Bond whose works such as *Things Fall Apart*, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropist*, 1984, *Beloved*, *The Jungle*, *All Roads Lead to Ganga* respectively have hugely highlighted social issues. Here we have instance of similar places as Elizabeth Gaskell’s Middlemarch, Thomas Hardy’s Wessex and R.K. Narayan’s Malgudi. Though some of these places are imaginary and some are real, yet the main focus has been given to provincial places either rural or semi-urban. In Gaskell’s *Mary Barton*, *North and South* and *Cranford* the treatment of old notions, stereotypical protocols against females and legal system of a particular region are seen. Likely, in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* the entire life in a province is displayed. The people of the locality of Middlemarch, their way of life, behaviour, career, love etc. are presented in this novel. Similarly, in Thomas Hardy’s novels like *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *Jude the Obscure* and others we find the expression of provinces and villages. Those semi-urban and undeveloped places of Hardy’s works are mentioned as Wessex, the provinces in the Western part of England. All his works are set there and everything related to those places are highlighted in his works. Anthony Trollope also talks about his imaginary province Barsetshire in his work *The Warden*. Then Edmund Spenser is there, whose *The Shepherd’s Calendar* is plotted in rural area. Not only English authors but also writers from various countries and languages also deal with provincialism in their writings. There are writers like Anton Chekhov from Russia and Nadine Gordimer from Africa who narrate the lifestyle of rurality. Alike the foreign authors there are numerous Indian writers, poets and story-tellers too who focus on the villages and such semi-urban places. In this list we can mention R.K. Narayan as all his works are rooted in Malgudi, a rural area of India. However, Manoj Das and Ruskin Bond both top this list of writers who focus on provincial

writings. Both of them have brought up and always been in close contact with rural surroundings. That's why no one can explain village life better than them. Quoting Rudyard Kipling, Bond in his story says, "And the last puff of the day-wind brought from the unseen villages, the scent of damp wood-smoke, hot cakes, dripping undergrowth, and rotting pine cones. That is the true smell of the Himalayas, and if once it creeps into the blood of a man, that man will at the last, forgetting all else, return to the hills to die" (*Friends in Small Places*, 141). His novels, novellas, short stories as well as poems describe rural India very neatly. His characters belong to rural and semi-urban places and understand sentiment and culture of those areas to extreme. So is the case with Manoj Das, who depicts the rural with a touch of semiurban expression. S.R. Puri (2020) proves it, when she writes, "Manoj Das uses gentle satire on contemporary social vices and individual follies...He comments on contemporary society particularly rural India for its changing values, impact of blind beliefs and superstitions, exploitation of weaker section, rural poverty and economic inequality, hypocrisy and arrogance etc." (Shaifali R. Puri, 1603). Keen observation of the cultural beliefs and ethos are rooted in his works. In spite of being a story writer for children he has layers of meaning with culture and tradition those are highlighted in his works. He has been greatly inspired by the ancient tales and books of Indian mythology. He extracts some of the stories from those books and gives it his own touch. Quoting from one of Das's interviews, Sharma (2013) writes, "Folklore was an intrinsic part of the rural atmosphere in my childhood. Their classic compendiums, the *Panchatantra*, the *Jatakas* and the *Kathasaritsagara* continue to fascinate me. Some of their stories would coax me to spin in my imagination a development beyond the points where they stopped. I cannot call that exercise inspiration- a force that had led me on to write most of my original stories" (*Ambuj Sarma*, 2). Likewise, Bond's love and weakness for valleys, hills and places, those are far away from urbanization is evident as well as obvious, because he lived in such rustic places of Shimla, Mussoorie and Dehradun. No one can ever have the idea and view of these areas more clearly than him. His love for the northern part of India, especially hamlet is reflected in his works. Various aspects of village life and atmosphere, such as earing livelihood, poverty, customs, traditions, food, beliefs, religion and so on have been highlighted in the above-mentioned works of both Manoj Das and Ruskin Bond.

Literature Review:

Ratti (2018) expresses the excellence of Das's writings, narrative style and realism by comparing him with the Indian trio R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. Taking into account some of Das's short stories and novel, he highlights environmental concern and ecological havoc. As well as the post-colonial impact on Das and his writings is also dealt here.

Similarly, Jaiswal (2019) discusses Das's love for India as a whole. She portrays Indian feelings, thoughts, philosophy, superstition and fiction. But she doesn't dive deep into the rural aspect authentically presented by the writer in his works.

Next is Chakraborty's (2022) research study on Bond. He throws light on the woman characters of Bond from stories like "The Woman on Platform 8", "The Coral Tree", "The Window" and "The Photograph". He shows the freedom given to women by Bond in his works.

Nandakumar (2020) in his study deals with several themes covered by Bond such as the setting of Dehradun and Kasauli, Bond's struggle as a writer, difficulties of relationships, struggles of an orphan's life and other things.

Homespun Idea in the Stories of Manoj Das:

As Thomas David DuBois's *The Sacred Village* has the theme of religious bent of mind, devotional perspective of people as well as the idea of deities, form of worshipping by the rural North China, so also Das highlights the spiritual and religious values of an Indian village, Babulpur in his story *The Bull of Babulpur*. There is no mark of modernity and novelty. The story narrates the village scenario of Babulpur and the devotion of people there. The instances of the village being far away from modern society comes from the very beginning. When Mr. Boral, the advocate enters Babulpur in his car, the village kids run behind it like crazy bees. They had not witnessed a car ever before. Das puts it in this way,

Babulpur had never experienced the advent of the wonder that was an automobile. The raw, sandy road, luckily, was broad and relatively smooth. Kids ran before and behind the car, celebrating the hair-raising event with ecstatic shouts. Folks gossiping and sharing the *hookah* on the middle of the road hurriedly cleared away, amazement writ large on their faces.

(Bridge in the Moonlit Night and Other Stories, 222)

In the above instance where we see the kids being too excited at the sight of a car is no doubt a clear reflection of rurality. They ran behind the vehicle and adults, too, looked at it with amazement. Here Rao and Mani can be quoted as they discuss about the village scene, "These aspects of drowsy dogs, village children gathering to see the automobile – reveal the rural aspect of the story and the writer blends the setting of the story and the events judiciously that they cannot be separated. Therefore, the rural atmosphere forms the very texture and structure of the story" (70). But next comes the focal point of the author as he displays the image of the bull in the village Babulpur. The bull sleeps on the road and blocks the way of advocate Boral. When he asks the villagers to side away the animal, they reply something that showed their spiritualism. They say that the Lord Shiva himself is the protector of that bull, the Lord Shiva of the village here is named as Sri Sri Babuleshwar. Towards conclusion we find another aspect of the villagers when they treat the bull as a divine being. They mention the animal as an inevitable part of Babulpur. Since when the village exists, the bull's presence co-exists too. They worship the bull and highlight the devotional thought of rural people. They have much value and appreciation for religion, belief system and other creatures. And more than the lives in city these simple villagers from countryside show important lessons through their deeds and concepts of everything. We see the villagers treating the animal as if it is a part or incarnation of God. They put sandalwood paste on his forehead, put garland around his neck and feed him watermelon and even bow down before him while hailing the deity of the village. Das writes, "From another house came some sandalwood paste which a Brahmin smeared on the bull's forehead, and the bull showed appreciable patience in letting him complete the ceremony. From the next house came a pair of water-melons. Again, the bull showed its understanding and obliged the devotee by munching them patiently and thoroughly" (*The Bridge in the Moonlit Night and Other Stories, 224-225*).

The story is a complete presentation of village life along with the devotion of rural people. It shows how the rural folk find a sense of divinity in every living creature. The transformation of the character of advocate Boral carries an impression of Das's flawless characterization. This story is a complete narration of religious mindset of village people. They feel the presence of divinity in every single object. Here they are worshipping the bull, sometimes they worship trees, rivers, mountains and what not. This religious bent of mind provides them confidence to go ahead in life. We see an unexpected transformation in the character of Boral, which is believed by the villagers, is by the grace of Lord Shiva. Here the villagers of Babulpur are the representative of every Indian rural folk.

In *The Hunger* too we find the picturization of an Indian countryside society that is suffering from lack of food as well as problems it faces. The life of the village people is portrayed here. It is seen in the scene where the food taken by those people is discussed. They don't have electricity or other forms of light, but only fire. They burn dry stick to prepare food and consume simple meal of rice and greens. "It is so dark here. Don't you have any more dry-sticks to burn. The exemplary lines are as such: "There isn't any, father", replied Shobha while giving the old man a little roasted saag to go with the rice preserved in water since the previous day" (Das, 168). This food is common among the rustic folks of Odisha. They eat *pakhala* (rice kept in water for a whole night) and due to lack of money, they collect green leaves from forests, fields or courtyard to have it with the rice as their big meal. However, the story continues to highlight the plight of the villagers and mostly of Shobha. Hadu Mallick's cousin Lala and Shobha leave their land like many villagers. In this context Satish Chandra (2012) can be quoted to show the painstaking conditions of rural people. If anytime there was draught or flood and some village go out of food, the dwellers were bound to leave their own land and migrate to some other places. "We have references to many cultivators or *pahis* moving to other villages, either on their own, or induced to do so by offer of better facilities, including a graduated land tax. These consisted both of those who had their own ploughs and bullocks, but did not possess proprietary rights over the lands they cultivated" (Chandra, 10). They face a lot of troubles and through their pain one can imagine the condition of rural people of the then time. We see how bare-footed Shobha's feet gets stuck by thorn. She takes shelter in a hut that is situated near the meadow. The owner of the house comes there only to get ripe palms. Similarly, the view of the ponds filled with lotus are also presented in the story:

The two lakes, one with white lotuses and the other with red ones, could be discerned only by their contours. Shobha stooped to remove a thorn from her foot... It was a small hut, dilapidated, erected by someone who must be spending his nights here, during the season, to collect the ripe palm fruit falling at night, before anybody else had reached the meadow. A tattered mat lay half-buried in sand on its floor.

(*Mystery of the Missing Cap and Other Stories*, 172-73)

This story gives glimpses of a particular rural society with all their bitter experiences as well as their style of living. Every society in itself is unique and at the same time different from each other. The society Das describes in his works is authentic because it is his own experience since childhood. It shows how modernization affected the people in provinces and deprived the people of their own land. This story highlights the everyday work of any rural Indian family and their food. There is no luxury, no show off, the people live on rustic things and still are the happiest. Thus, Das expresses the tragic events

that happen in the life of any homespun inhabitant. Similar description of food, lives and house in the homespun Indian can be found in Anita Desai's novel *The Village by the Sea*. Thakur (2009) in his thesis gives a complete narration of the novel. To justify Desai's words on rural atmosphere he writes, "The family's land is sold to pay debts; they have a small patch of land to grow vegetables; animals are sold. Father is workless drunkard, mother sick and bed-ridden, and children ill-fed and ill-dressed. The hero Hari's food consists of dry chapattis, a pinch of salt and chillies. This is a faithful depiction of life in the villages" (Thakur, 8).

Another story *The Strategy* too highlights the exploitation of rich over the poor and the helpless natives. It centers around the character Gouri who helps in the delivery of many pregnant women of the speaker's village. Gouri nani, as the speaker says, is a connecting bridge between a new-born baby's biological mother and the earth, because every baby of the village first falls in her hand. Such things happen in rurality, where doctor, nurse or any other trained people are not available, but *vaidyas* or women like Gouri do the treatment, especially in old days when there was no scientific instrument or treatment, Life was very usual then. However, the story has one more sign of rurality through the character of Vanbihari Sahu. He exploits the debtors and another person. Similarly, the zamindar is no better than the former. None of them cares for the poor and they are very self-centered. Even when Gouri Nani dies, it hasn't the slightest impact on the zamindar. When one of his servants tells him that Gouri, the midwife is going to die, the zamindar reluctantly and coldly asks, "Die? Was she alive?" The zamindar shut his eyes in order to relish the gulped down smoke better" (Das, 70). Such images are the reflections of the-then Indian villages. The exploitation of those so called rich and aristocrats used to spoil all the happiness of the poor. They were too greedy and self-obsessed and didn't care for any other soul. Das himself was always an eye-witness of similar incidents as he was born in rural Odisha. He has experienced all of these and that's why he narrates it perfectly to make his readers have an original picture of them.

Homespun Idea in the Stories of Ruskin Bond:

As Mukalel (2013) puts it, "Bond's love for India is more akin to the humanistic and liberalistic attitude of Forster. Forster's visit to India was to find a heritage that might have retained its old glory, a culture that was more vibrant and had a greater life" (Mukalel, 53). Indian family and their unity have always attracted many writers from time to time. In this regard there can be discussed Amitabh Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich like Us*. Similar theme has been treated by Bond in his numerous stories. *Panther's Moon* is such a story that explores a family in an undeveloped place in India. The love and union among the members lift up all the readers to a pleasant state of mind. The story revolves around the life of Bisnu, a village boy, who is the protagonist here. It has the images of belied system of his village. The spiritual belief is reflected in the scene where Bisnu worships Lord Ganesh and recalls the story related to the Lord's elephant head. Then an image of familial love is seen between Bisnu and his siter Puja. She asks him to buy her bangles and he teases her.

'I hope you have not forgotten', she said.

'Forgotten?' said Bisnu, pretending innocence. 'Is there anything I am supposed to remember?'

'Don't tease me. You promised to buy me a pair of bangles, remember?'

(*The Jungle Omnibus*, 27).

The small innocent village kids get all the happiness of the world in such little things, just as Puja is over-excited for mere bangles. The brother also takes care of his sister's happiness. Here is a beautiful and authentic presentation of relationships among family members in a rustic area. In village Manjari, there is no school and that's why he crosses five miles to go to his school in Kempotee. This is a typical village scenario, where a small boy is seen doing house-hold works, helping his family and having spiritual bent of mind.

There is the picture of another family that is of Kalam Singh. It is cited here about the social happenings of his family of everyday living. The story is about to mention here the food those people eat. "Sanjay had brought his father's cows home after grazing them on the hillside in the company of other children. He had also brought home an edible wild plant, which his mother cooked into a tasty dish for their evening meal. They had their food at dusk, sitting on the floor of their single room, and soon after, settled down for the night" (*The Jungle Omnibus*, 38).

Likewise, there is the description of rustic attire through which the poverty is also reflected. When Bisnu gets ready for school, his torn clothes are the example of suffering of countryside inhabitants. The story is a depiction of Bond's rustic characters, their unity as well as their problems. When the characters like Bisnu and others are in the dangerous situation of tiger attack, all the villagers gather and fight against it. It shows the pure love among the rustic people. Then Bisnu's spiritual belief is another aspect of rusticness. Unlike the townsfolk, the village folks have much faith in Gods and Goddesses. They start any of their works by worshipping them. The sign of illiteracy is marked, when Bisnu is sent to school, but his sister is not. The villagers don't think education is necessary for the girls. They don't understand the value of education. Ahuja in his book *Social Problems in India* points out the important thing regarding lack of education in India, as: "... Since adults in India are illiterate, they do not understand the importance of getting education for their children" (*Social Problems in India*, 313). Along, with that the story shows the country-side life-style, the simplicity, food, pets, livelihood and more.

Like Fakir Mohan Senapati Bond in his *Angry River* portrays social status and family. Sita's family includes only her and her grandparents. They live a simple life in their small mud-walled hut that has a thatched roof. They have goats that graze on that small island. The family takes shelter during the great flood on the only *peepul* tree that stands there. Sita's grandparents are rural people, who are unaware of reading and writing. When they have gone to the town for the health issues of Sita's grandmother, the small girl is left all alone with the pets and her doll, Mumta, with whom Sita shares her thoughts. They believe in Gods and consider the *peepul* tree as a sacred one which is the abode for Gods and spirits. Even the blind belief is seen here, when grandmother warns Sita of not yawning under the tree. "Don't yawn when you are sitting beneath the tree", grandmother used to warn Sita. 'And if you must yawn, always snap your fingers in front of your mouth. If you forget to do that, a spirit might jump down your throat!" (*The Jungle Omnibus*, 114).

Then the household chores are realistically displayed when she starts sweeping the hut, lights the charcoal burner and warms some milk. Then she recalls the stories related to Lord Krishna, Ganesh, Hanuman and it explains their belief in God. Her grandfather compares the *peepul* leaf with the body of Lord

Krishna. All these are the examples of Ruskin Bond's close observation and inclination towards rural people and their lives. The myth and spiritualism of India has always attracted Bond and that is reflected in his writings. When Sita recalls the elephant headed Lord Ganesh and other gods it is a reflection of Indian belief system and the everyday chores is the reflection of their way of life. To show Bond's presentation of such mindset, Bawane (2018) writes, "Ruskin Bond has consequently exhibited Indian culture dependably. His depiction about Indian traditions, celebrations and God is persuading, believable and satisfactory by any Indian" (Jagadish K. Bawane, 657). This is the description of Indian household chores as well as the natural havoc created in rural areas. The villagers are very much religious as well as depending on nature for their living. How brutally the provinces get affected by this and the village folks bear the pain after losing everything.

Comparison and Conclusion:

Both Manoj Das and Ruskin Bond have highly appreciated countryside India several times in their works as well as interviews. One belongs to the eastern side of the country while the other one hails from the northern part. That is why there are differences in observations, festivals, languages, attires. But there are similarities too. Both have immense love and inclination towards the customs of India as a whole. Equally they have presented poverty, illiteracy, plight and so on in their works. While one's works show the culture, tradition and living of one part of India, the other one displays the same of the other region of the land. The two writers are brought up in rustic places of India. While a large phase of Das's life has been passed in a riverbed village of Odisha, a state in India, Bond's life has been closely associated with rural places of Dehradun, Shimla, Mussoorie and Himachal. Being related to such provinces of India, both the writers understand people living there, their culture, tradition, social structure and so on. As per Hegishte's (2019) view expressed in her article, "He (Manoj Das) depicts various facets of human existence in his stories against the background of rural India. He glorifies traditional rural values and condemns the vices of urban culture. Manoj Das uses his childhood experiences and memories in his short stories" (Snehal Ratnakar Hegishte, 2).

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