



Quest For Self In Manoj Das's Novel The Escapist

Anil kumara S R Research Scholar DoS in English, Hemagangothri University of Mysore Email: anilkumarsr978@gmail.com

Abstract:

The present paper tries to unveil the concept of 'self' in Manoj Das's novel The Escapist. The novel's focal point is the protagonist, Padmalochan Pracharya's changing nature of self and his journey to understand the true self. Manoj Das believes in the evolution of the human self or consciousness. Human consciousness, as it is, is always confused by chaotic motions of many types of vibrations emerging from man's egoistic self, from his desire, greed, envy, rage, and other undesired parts of the mind. However, Manoj Das is still optimistic about human inner evolution as he believes every individual longs to be free of all such entanglements in the depths of his heart. Thus, the author's real intention behind the novel is to impart the message that a funny or farcical beginning to an individual's life can lead him to discover his spiritual truth. The paper also attempts to understand the writer's effective use of well-known concepts such as Chance, fate, faith, the quest for self, the cooperation of coincidences, cursed diamonds etc.

Keywords: Self, Chance, fate, faith, identity, ignorance, and inward evolution.

Intorduction:

Manoj Das's exposure to Aurobindo's philosophy has prompted him to focus on the quest for self, eternal abode and evolution of human consciousness. "It is not that I chose Sri Aurobindo; it is he in his infinite Grace chose me, like so many others! But answering your question in a less mystifying way, I should say that I 'evolved' into Sri Aurobindo's world", states Manoj Das in an interview with P Raja. His understanding of Aurobindo's philosophy appears to have made him realise that every action of the human being is a process of inward growth. Sri Aurobindo writes in The Life Devine,

... the self-opening of the individual to the universe and to God as the means of that supreme fulfilment to which egoistic life is only a prelude even as animal life was only a prelude to the human. We have the realisation of the All in the individual by the transformation of the limited ego into a conscious centre of the divine unity and freedom as the term at which the fulfilment arrives. And we have the out flowing of the infinite and absolute Existence, Truth, Good and Delight of being on the Many in the world as the divine result towards which the cycles of our evolution

move. This is the supreme birth which maternal nature holds in herself; of this, she strives to be delivered. (p. 64-65)

As Aurobindo states, every tragedy, joy, misery, suffering, and action contributes to an individual's "evolutionary movement." Therefore, human beings must undergo "the transformation of the limited ego into a conscious centre of divine unity and freedom" and self-realisation of "the infinite and absolute Existence, Truth, Good, and Delight". Perhaps the influence of Aurobindo on Manoj Das prompts him to portray the novel's central theme; a funny or farcical beginning to an individual's life can lead him to discover his spiritual truth through an inward journey and progression.

The novel, *The Escapist*, was published in 2014. It spins around the protagonist's fate or a complex predicament of circumstances, bringing a sense of seriousness and humour. Padmalochan is known for changing his identity according to the immediate context. For years Padmalochan Pracharya had worked with Sharmji, his mentor, minister and a prominent candidate for chief minister. As it happens, an ironic twist of events, Shramji passes away while fasting for his political agenda. Caught by fate, Padmalochan is forced to meet the eccentric self-centred businessman Jayant Thakore while searching for a job. As he says, "Thus spoke some wise man; Chance was the pseudonym of God which He used when He did not wish to put down His signature" (p.13). The peculiar situation made him do Uthkatasana which he has practised for years. In this paradoxical situation Rangita Devi, wife of Jayan Thakore, assumes him to be a Godly man and attributes a new identity to him: "What's the name by which people address you, Baba?"

" Padma..."

"Padmananda, swami Padmananda. I know."(p.20)

Padmananda, to escape from his bizarre situation, behaves according to the new identity given by Ranjita Devi. One can say that "identities are the traits and characteristics, social relations, roles, and social group memberships that define one" (Web, *The Oxford English Dictionary*). But the protagonist, to escape from the predicament he is exposed to, accepts the new identity given by Ranjita Devi.

However, Padmananda's quest for self begins in the hands of Natabar sir, the English teacher in the village school. Natabar sir gives up his teaching profession to become a politician. For his political upbringing, he persuades Padmalochan to announce a false or superficial dream that the stone boulder, situated under a banyan tree, has divine power. If the villagers allow the tree-cutting, the divine power will seek revenge against them. But his strategy has failed with the interference of a Brahmin who claims that his dream is the latest dream that divine power asks him to protect the stone boulder. However, Natabar Sir's unconscious offering of a new self has been deeply rooted in the heart of Padmalochan, and this identity gives him a new personality at Thakore's house.

Ranjita Devi offers shelter, a library and Ashrama. Padmalochan, who has recently lost his job, adapted to the situation given by Chance. Padmalochan's sense of wit inherited from his teacher Natabar Sir and former employee Sharmji's library positively impacted his future life as Padmananda Swamy. One can perceive his wit by the quality of the answer he has given to one of his seekers,

"How to get over sex?"

"By growing old."

"How does one get over it when old?"

"By dying." (p.58)

Like the answer mentioned above, he gives a meticulous and mesmerising answer to a young businessman in love with an actress, chief minister Mohith Sahib and his guru Natabar Sir who aspires to become a politician and other seekers effectively.

Nevertheless, Padmananda has been surrounded by ambiguity and dilemma. On the one hand, he is pretending to be a Godly man; on the other hand, his physical aspirations are urging for Sushie's everlasting beauty and tender nature. He admits, "But I knew that I was deceiving myself. Her dignified gait, her dutifulness accompanied by a serene detachment, last but not the least, her dazzling beauty bereft of jewellery and cosmetics, were simply irresistible" (p.92). The two contradictory worlds, sainthood and worldly aspirations dominate the protagonist's life.

Self-proclaimed Godly man Padmanada Swami creates a bundle of falsehood to survive his new identity given by Ranjita Devi. Ironically he holds both sainthood and worldly pleasures, which are entirely contradictory. His thoughts and ideas vacillate for both physical longing and spiritual salvation. But Sushie is a more mature and formidable character in the novel. She stands constant in her decision and understands the reality of her situation. She proclaims when he intends to escape with her,

Escape?"

"How far one can escape - and with whom? Maybe for a few months or a few years. What after that? When the enabling moment truly arrives each person has to follow his or her own escape route. (p.125)

Sushie's answer and firm decision shock him. In a way, she is the one who made him realise the bootless wish of Padmananda. It appears that Padmalochan is using the faith of Ranjitha Devi and desires Sushie. However, Manoj Das believes that there is an inner evolution in every action of human beings, and there are occurrences in human existence that are predestined by eternity. Although Padmalochan is an escapist, he attempts to be "true" to his inner commands and worthy of Ranjita Devi's simple but profound faith after taking on the role of Baba Padmananda. He commits himself to a form of penance by taking a three-month vow of silence with only one meal after sunset. He has built a charming cottage with a view and a sound library in Ranjita Devi's garden.

Padmananda attempts to move inward and establish inner silence. It is difficult at first since he has a chattering mind, but with his prayer to Goddess Durga and keeping a vigil on his mind. The following description paints a vivid picture of his mind during meditation:

Following the little I knew about meditation, I closed my eyes and imagined that mother Durga was not outside but inside me, not in the portrait but in my heart. I concentrated on it. I tried to catch by their forelocks and hurl out of me the arbitrary thoughts which made my mind a market-place. I then tried to keep the doors of my mind tightly shut. But the expelled thoughts would impishly sneak in, never letting me know the precise moment when they did so and I would find, to my horror and disgust, that the tranquility I had achieved for a moment had once again given way to the chaos and hullabaloo of a forenoon fish market. I never reached even the brink of Samadhi or any other kind of trance but after repeated efforts and diving deeper and deeper, I had an occasional feel of the serene and I knew for certain that there was a vast calm under the turbulent surface of my mind and its activities, though the moments when I had such experiences were lamentably brief. How much I wished that I could cling to them. Only if I could, I was sure, all sorts of fear and guilt would be reduced to a fading memory (p, 61-62)

Regardless of how much he is aware of his inner being, he has remained consistent in his aspirations, kept vigil on his mental activities, and turned inward when faced with an outer challenge. As Sri Aurobindo puts it, "Aspiration, constant and sincere, and the will to turn to the Divine alone are the best means to bring forward the psychic" (The Psychic Being, 114). Padmalochan, as one can see, is never short of it.

Even though there is perpetual growth in Padmalochan, his worldly aspirations make him ignorant of the inward truth. To remove this mask, Manoj Das introduces the novel's final twist. Manj Das is an admirer of great Indian tradition and moral stories such as Katha-Sarit-Sagar, Panchatantra, Jataka Stories and Hithopadesha; to an extent, one can say that he might have taken the primary source for this twist from these great works. Once Padmananda mentions, "Sushie, I read somewhere that several famous diamonds of the world carried a curse with them, and they leave a trail of tragic events" (p. 162). Ironically, after the death of Ranjita Devi, that curse falls on him. Ranjita Devi's intimate friend Maheshwari Devi hands over the diamonds to Padmalochana. But Jasmine, the secretary and secret lover of Jayanth Thakore, has switched the diamonds into glass pieces, forcing Padmananda to flee from that place. Jayanth Thakore believing that the diamonds are with him sends his stalwarts to recover those valuable diamonds. They have captured and tortured him to return those diamonds, and then he is abandoned at midnight on the river bank, assumed to be dead. The farcical situation has turned out to be a life-changing moment for Padmalochan. He has rediscovered

himself in this critical and suffocating situation. He understands the uselessness and materialistic perspectives of human life. He admits, looking at the infinity through the sky, stars and the Milky Way,

How long had the sky remained spread out like this? O my river, O my sky and stars! Will you teach me how to convey my unfathomably deep feelings for you –my gratitude to you? You've always been above me, be it night or day. You've always been within and around me. But how little I knew you! O my sky! O my Milky Way! (p.207)

Padmalochan finds himself in this predicament situation. He compares himself with infinity. His realisation of the transient nature of desire, comfort, and worldly aspiration shape him as a new human being. He goes nearby the goddess Kali temple; he sheds his tears till his sins float away from him, till his soul rehabilitates from his damnation, till his heart attains spiritual rejuvenation, till his mind transfer to the undisputable determination to seek Sadhana.

The novel's last scene is essential to understand the evolution and inward revelation of Padmalochan. P. Raja views it in its true perspective:

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

Inner growth is a silent process; a certain situation is needed to realise this inner evolution in human beings. The situation could be either farcical or brutal, as in the case of the protagonist, Padmalochan. He is brutally assaulted before he realises the inner truth of life. When the rowdies demand the 'truth' from him, he responds in silence as follows:

It was the most significant moment. I experienced in the fellow my most intimate friend, a fellow-seeker, and senior to me in our common quest. I was a mere creature of circumstances pushed into a seeker's role. But looking for the truth seemed to be this gentleman's conscious vocation. Indeed, what super-soul had taken charge of my budding soul just now! I was experiencing the crescendo leading to the finale of an existing orchestra. I also had a feeling parallel to it of walking along a razor's edge but about to reach the goal and breathe to my lung's fill (Das 148)

Conclusion:

In sum, human consciousness, as it is, is always confused by chaotic motions of many types of vibrations emerging from man's egoistic self, from his desire, greed, envy, rage, and other undesired parts of the mind. In the depths of man's existence, he longs to be free of all such entanglements. Padmalochan's life is also covered with ignorance as he has acted as an escapist and opportunist. However, Manoj Das looks at it from a different angle as he considers there is always a far more sophisticated reason behind every human's action. One may not be able to contemplate it, but it is a silent preparation for inner growth or liberation. When an individual is bound to face certain situations, even if it is farcical, he tastes a great sense of freedom. That is what happened in the case of the protagonist Padmalochan Prachrya.

Bibliography

Primary Source:

- Das, Manoj. *A Tiger at Twilight and Cyclones*. Penguin Books Ltd, 2010.

Secondary Sources:

- Aurobindo, Sri, and The Mother. *The Psychic Being: Selections from the Works of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1989.
- *The Life Divine*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1939-40.
- Chrouinord. Caroll, et al. *The American People's Encyclopedia*. Spencer Press INC, Volume 10, 1962.
- Halyn, Paul. *Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*. Batchworth Press Limited, 1959.
- Simpson and Weiner, editors. *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Clarendon Press, Volume 10, 1989.
- Leary R. Mark. *Handbook of Self and Identity*. The Guilford Press, New York, 2012.