

# Memory and Indigenous Trauma: Reading Natural Disasters in the Select Works of Manoj Das

**Dr. Dharmapada Jena**

Asst. Prof. in English, Odisha University of Agriculture and Technology, Bhubaneswar

## Abstract

The paper sets to analyse the construction of collective as well as individual memories in the context of natural disasters happening around the pre- and post-independence era in Odisha, particularly in North-Odisha. The select works of Manoj Das, a notable bi-lingual writer of Odisha, negotiate to depict the vulnerability of the village folks in the wake of natural calamities like cyclone and flood, followed by a famine and epidemic. The caused irreparable loss and displacement feed to the psychological trauma to the recurrent victims of the natural calamities. The notion of trauma and traumatic memory, as present in Das's writings, contest the trauma models developed within a Western Freudian psychoanalytic framework as well as the contemporary trauma theories that advocate to scrutinize a different socio-cultural and geographical specificity. The context of natural calamities in Odisha and the indigenous traumatic experiences help raise an alternative non-Western framework through which the trauma can be viewed in a more pluralistic and inclusive meaning.

**Keywords:** Trauma, Memory, Manoj Das, Natural calamities, Indigenous traumatic experiences

## INTRODUCTION

Odisha witnesses periodic occurrences of flood, cyclone, draught and tidal ingression. All these life shattering phenomena make it as one of "the most disaster affected states in India" (Das 266). "Orissa has experienced around 952 small and big cyclones and 451 tornadoes between 1891 and 1970. From 1901 to 1981 there were 380 cyclones, of which 272 resulted from depressions in the Bay of Bengal. Twenty-nine of these cyclones were devastating." (Jena 1). In 13 major disasters that occurred between 1963 and 1999, Jena (2018) estimates, tolled the death of around 22,228 people (state government figure) and 40,000 people (non-government figure), and rendered 34,21,000 people homeless. The catastrophic events, that caused loss of life, property, and displacement, embed short- and long-term psychological consequences. The experiences of stress, depression and trauma seem apparent after the occurrence of a natural disaster. However, the traumatic experiences may be of geo-psychological, affecting differently to the people on different geographical specificity. Literature, which features all conceivable human actions and emotions, presents and represents the psychological ramifications of such calamitous events. The writings of Manoj Das happen to contain the traumatic experiences of the natural disasters perpetrated in Odisha at different points of time; thus, creating space to understand indigenous traumas. In this paper, some select writings of Manoj Das will be discussed to find how the disastrous events and the memory of such events lead to psychological trauma. The focus will also be on the construction of collective as well as individual

memories in the context of natural disasters happening around the pre- and post-independence era in Odisha, particularly in North- Odisha.

### **Traumatic Events and Memory**

Trauma, so as to say psychological trauma centres around an overwhelming event, the consequences of it and the memory of it. It occurs out of “tragic incidents mainly and initially contain despair” (AteşciKoçak 17). It can be understood as “a set of responses to extraordinary, emotionally overwhelming, and personally uncontrollable life events” (qtd. in Goodman, et al. 1219). Anderson (2012) sets to expand the scope of the traumatic experiences. She believes that the term trauma can be “applied more liberally to circumstances beyond those initially expected: such as war, natural disaster, abuse, and confinement” (6). Such pluralistic notion of trauma truly helps include diverse overwhelming experiences under the banner of trauma studies. Jaffe et.al. (2005) expands on the condition that leads to traumatization. He posits that the emotional or psychological trauma is caused due to unexpectedness, unpreparedness, and inability to prevent it from happening. Such notion of trauma can be experienced “when a sudden, unexpected, overwhelming intense emotional blow or a series of blows assaults the person from outside” (Terr 8). Terr (1990) believes that “traumatic events are external, but they quickly become incorporated into the mind” (8). Memory operates at the core of a traumatic event. It helps conceiving and comprehending the event, though in a fragmented manner, sometimes. However, the contemporary scholarship has started scrutinizing the construction and function of traumatic memory. It is claimed that “victims develop amnesia for trauma precisely because it can be so overwhelmingly terrifying” (McNally 817). Traumatic amnesia theorists believe that trauma leads to making dissociated memories. Van der Kolk (1998) opines that (i) “semantic representations may coexist with sensory imprints; (ii) unlike trauma narratives, these sensory experiences often remain stable over time, unaltered by other life experiences; (iii) they may return, triggered by reminders, with a vividness as if the experience were happening all over again; and (iv) these flashbacks may occur in a mental state in which victims are unable to precisely articulate what they are feeling and thinking” (552). All these features of traumatic memory will be explored in the select works of Manoj Das. How memory functions constructing indigenous traumatic experiences will also be analysed.

### **Indigenous Trauma and Memory in the Select Works**

The works of Manoj Das embodies indigenous experiences. *Cyclones* (1987), his first novel, explores the climatic patterns of the place, the cyclonic devastations followed by famine, a recurrent feature of the land. Das describes the havoc caused by a cyclone as: “the cyclone had spared no tree tall enough to respond to the wind in the village. The devastation had been stunning. There was no rustling of leaves, no human murmur either” (172). The writer here appears to be possessing secondary trauma of the cyclone. He functions, as Laub (1995) mentions, at “the level of being a witness to oneself within the experience” (63). While narrating his experiences of the past he seems distraught and traumatic. The after effect of the cyclone expressed in the sentence, “there was no rustling of leaves, no human murmur either” (Das 172), clearly contributes to the creation of trauma testimony, traumatic memory.

*Cyclones* (1987), set in Kusumpur, a small coastal village of Odisha, presents the devastation of that village and the pangs of its inhabitants. Besides, the novel throws light on the disillusionment of Sandip, the protagonist, with British temperament, the Eurocentric imperialism for destroying the natural wealth under the scabbard of urbanization. The prospect of losing the land, the river, the trees, the animals, and

the forests, that the rural life compounds, turns to be the stressors for Sandip in particular and the villagers in general. Under such stressful scenario, the onset of devastating cyclone immensely contributes to their traumatization. The villagers were panic stricken and sleepless, thus can be argued to be suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a set of reactions like sleeplessness, nightmares and severe anxiety that can occur to an already traumatized person.

In presenting nature's fury, during a devastating cyclone in the pre-Independence era in 1942 that had caused irreparable loss to North-Orissa, Das negotiates to create an indigenous traumatic scenario. Being partly a memoir and partly a surrealistic the novel voices the psychological tremor of the people in North-Orissa who appear to be the recurrent victims of this natural calamity.

"The Tree" is another short story by Manoj Das in which natural disaster plays a vital role. The plot of the story centres around the huge banyan tree that has been a part of the life in the village. The villagers share their emotion and sentiment with the tree. They take shelter under the banyan tree during the calamities. The connection of the people with the tree is presented as: "the leaves of banyan tree chattered incessantly their familiar language of hope and courage. Its innumerable boughs spread out overhead had been the very symbol of protection for generations, affording shelter not only to those who bore love and regard for it, but even to those who had proved impudent towards it, of course, so far as the latter were concerned, only after humbling to their knees" (57). The tree has been a symbol of protection and saviour from natural calamity for generations. But the real tragedy hits the villagers when a violent storm and a devastating flood uproot the tree; the germ of psychological or emotional trauma is precisely sown.

At the beginning of the story, Das navigates through the psychological ramification of the natural calamity. The beginning sentence "right from the time the season was on the brink of monsoon the village elders had begun to look grave" (Das 1). Here the word 'grave' can't be understood implying that they are serious. It may contribute to defining their condition in crisis. Their past experiences of the incessant rain causing flood can't be undermined. They happen to be traumatic while reflecting on the possible consequences of the rain and the flood as well. They are petrified of the "terrible days ahead" (63). This sense of apprehending dreadful consequences of the rain and flood put the villagers in the frame of Pre-Traumatic Stress Reactions (PTSR), a term used by Berntsen and Rubin (2015) to imply certain reactions that are characterized by helplessness and severe anxiety.

The sudden and unexpected nature of flood made them helpless and stressful: "it gave the sort of shock which one experienced when a domestic animal suddenly went crazy, behaving wildly and not responding to any amount of endearment. One just looked on helplessly" (64). At the end of the story when the tree collapses in the river, the villagers looked stupefied. The falling of the tree disturbs their peace of mind and becomes their traumatic stressors. They believe deeply in the tree as power affecting their life. Even Shrikant Das one of the characters of the story raises his voice and says:

"Hearken, you all! Not only the boys, but we all have our shares of sin. And if the tree has decided to collapse, it is because it can't bear the burden of our sins any longer. Let everyone of us confess his sins, addressing the spirit of the tree, silently in our hearts! Let us pray to be pardoned. Hari Bol! Glory to God" (68)!

The calamitous condition causing the fall of the tree traumatizes not one but all the villagers. This is apparently suggested when all start weeping at the time of the tree falling down. They were utterly emotional and "stood thunderstruck" (71). Helplessly they started crying, "Gone! The tree-god gone! Hari bol! Hari bol"(71)! Their tone here clearly shows how traumatic they were.

The construction of memory plays a crucial role in the narrative. Such construction is reinforced through

recollection of a past incident of a king daring to cut down a few branches of the tree to make room for his palace. Before he cut down the branches, a terrible storm had broken out. Then the palace collapsed. This collective memory seems contributing to their trauma. They are overtly panic of the consequences of the falling of the tree. They believe that if the tree is harmed, it will affect them badly.

### Conclusion

The select works of Manoj Das, namely *Cyclones* (1987) and “The Tree” negotiate to depict the vulnerability of the village folks in the wake of natural calamities like cyclone and flood. The caused irreparable loss and displacement feed to the psychological trauma to the recurrent victims of the natural calamities. The notion of trauma and traumatic memory, as present in Das’s writings, contest the trauma models developed within a Western Freudian psychoanalytic framework as well as the contemporary trauma theories that advocate to scrutinize a different socio-cultural and geographical specificity. The context of natural calamities in Odisha and the indigenous traumatic experiences help raise an alternative non-Western framework through which the trauma can be viewed in a more pluralistic and inclusive meaning.

### References

1. Anderson, S. *Readings of Trauma, Madness, and the Body*. Springer, 2012.
2. AteşciKoçak, Betül. *Traumatic Spaces in The Post-9/11 Novel*. PhD Thesis, Universidad De Salamanca, 2015. [hdl.handle.net/10366/128313](http://hdl.handle.net/10366/128313).
3. Berntsen, Dorthe, and David C. Rubin. "Pretraumatic stress reactions in soldiers deployed to Afghanistan." *Clinical Psychological Science* 3.5 (2015): 663-674.
4. Das, Manoj. *The Submerged Valley and Other Stories*: All India Press. Pondichery, 1986.
5. *A Tiger at Twilight and Cyclones*, 1987.
6. [www.goodreads.com/book/show/12399157-a-tiger-at-twilight-and-cyclones](http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/12399157-a-tiger-at-twilight-and-cyclones)
7. Das, Saudamini. "Economics of natural disasters in Odisha." *The economy of Odisha: A profile* (2016): 266-300.
8. Goodman, Lisa A., et al. "Homelessness as psychological trauma: Broadening perspectives." *American psychologist*, vol. 46, no. 11, 1991, pp. 1219-1225. [Academia,d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/43600557/Viewing\\_preferences\\_symptoms\\_of\\_psycholo20160310-12899-vx7awh-with-cover-pag](http://Academia.d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/43600557/Viewing_preferences_symptoms_of_psycholo20160310-12899-vx7awh-with-cover-pag)
9. Jaffe, Jaelline, et al. "Emotional and Psychological Trauma: Causes, Symptoms, Effects, and Treatment." *Mental emotional trauma*. 2005. [www.academia.edu/download/46990505/Trauma.pdf](http://www.academia.edu/download/46990505/Trauma.pdf).
10. Jena, Pragnya Paramita. "Climate change and its worst effect on coastal Odisha: An overview of its impact in Jagatsinghpur District." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 23.1 (2018): 1-15.
11. Laub, Dori. "Truth and Testimony: The process and the struggle." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth, Johns Hopkins UP, 1995, pp. 61-75.
12. McNally, Richard J. "Debunking myths about trauma and memory." *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* 50.13 (2005): 817-822.
13. Terr, Lenore. *Too Scared to Cry: Psychic Trauma in Childhood*. New York: Harper & Row, 1990.
14. Van der Kolk, Bessel A. "Trauma and memory." *Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences* 52.S1 (1998): 552-564.