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Superstition and Myth-Making in Manoj Das's "Farewell to a Ghost"

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Abstract:

The present paper is an attempt to re-read Manoj Das's short story "Farewell to a Ghost" from the myth making perspective in rural background. It also looks upon the prevalence of superstitions from socio- cultural points of view. The author's narration sets the background of the story in a remote Indian village where there has been a traditional superstition bordering on belief that there lives a ghost of an orphaned Feringhee girl child. The story traces the narrative of the root of the girl's birth, her apparent transition from a human into a ghostlike figure, the beliefs of the community around her legend, and her emblematic repositioning. This paper puts forth the argument that Das neither simply approves nor does he entirely reject superstition. Instead, he shows how myth and ritual create communal meaning, encode postcolonial memory, and negotiate the boundary between empathy and exclusion.

Keywords: Superstition; Myth; Myth-making; Postcolonial; Socio-Cultural.

Introduction

"Farewell to a Ghost" presents a narrative of a village's deep longing with a supernatural presence: the ghost of a girl of mixed origin whose life and death become the centre for traditional stories and ritual which form the basis of daily life of the residents of the community. The story is narrated by a child-narrator's perspective blending curiosity, devotion, and an adult's ironic distance. The narrative forms the background for investigating how superstition and myth are created, daily reproduced, and finally mobilized to make sense of historical trauma and social difference. The moonlit imagery, repeated ceremonies, and the portrayal of folk expertise like pundits, mendicants, exorcists produce a vivid account of myth-making that is embedded in social conditioning of the community. The rural setting used to reflect upon deeply rooted beliefs and mechanisms actively participates in the making

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of myth and its survival. This paper seeks to (1) establish the narrative facts and the story's formal features, (2) identify and analyse recurring superstitious practices and ritual motifs, (3) read the ghost as a site of postcolonial memory and social exclusion, (4) examine the ambivalent ethics of communal myth-making, and (5) situate Das's story in critical conversations about rural belief, liminality, and narrative voice.

Plot Sketch and Narrative Frame

The story opens with an image that sets the tone for a haunting and curious narration: "It was on moonlit nights that the deserted villa looked particularly fascinating" (Das 1). A group of village boys watch the empty villa from the riverbank and create a shared fascination for the girl who resides in a room upstairs. The rural setting used in the story acts as an active force which creates the cultural and social environment necessary for superstition to sustain. The ghost becomes the centre of the village ritual life and ceremonies as the villagers offer food and priests sprinkle holy water before entering the villa. The villagers treat the ghost as a living entity as the head pundit addresses the ghost as "unhappy girl" while offering food. The narration unfolds the story about the girl's origin and the violent betrayal that results in her death. The tale moves forward voicing the death of a love-struck lad who tries to kiss the girl in the villa. The narrative is presented from the perspective of a young narrator who later leaves the village for his education and returns to close the tale with both nostalgia and a sense of ending.

Table 1. Narrative timeline and symbolic resonances

Episode	Text reference (Das, pp.)	Symbolic resonance
Moonlit fascination with villa	1	Liminality; fairy-tale/phantom atmosphere
Lad climbs banyan, faints, dies	1–2	Desire that transgresses social/supernatural boundary
Origins of girl (Feringhee heritage)	3	Colonial encounter; racial/ethnic otherness
Killing and burial; potful of Ganga water	4	Pollution/purification; colonial violence
Offerings after feasts; head pundit's rituals	5	Ritual inclusion; social maintenance
Exorcism and tying to palm tree	10	Relocation/containment of haunting
Palm tree struck by lightning; narrator leaves	11	End of an epoch; changing beliefs

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Superstition as Social Practice: Rituals, Experts, and Objects

Superstition is one of the inseparable components of Indian rural life and it is clearly visible in the short story. The superstition about the girl's ghost is shaped by oral tradition, collective consciousness, and cultural practices of the villagers. Das provides the details about ritual gestures and the social roles that keep superstition alive.

Superstition decides the ordinary as well as auspicious tasks in the life of the villagers. The villagers and the priests entering the villa do not arm themselves with sticks but "had sprinkled on their heads the sacred Ganga water and hidden pieces of iron under their girdles" (Das 2). Here, purification (Ganga water) and protective talismans (iron) ritual action are collectively accepted as holy things which can protect the men from the ghost. The "head pundit," the mendicant who "could understand the languages of crows and cows" (Das 1), and the priest who "tied" the ghost to a tree (Das 10) are figures of folk knowledge whose authority lies in tradition rather than empirical efficacy.

The persistence of superstition in the rural setting is further fuelled by illiteracy and geographical or social isolation from modern societies. Limited access to formal education system also bars the villagers from exposure to scientific or rational explanations of natural phenomena, leaving traditional belief system unchallenged. Isolation from urban centres and modern institutions also adds to the ignorance towards rational thinking among rural communities and the exposure to scientific or rational knowledge is viewed with suspicion. Traditional and ingrained beliefs gain authority over empirical knowledge system as there is no or little access to modern education. When the narrator comes to the village after starting his modern education in a nearby town school, his views about the ghost change and there is a significant change in the narrator after coming into contact with modern institutions.

Table 2. Ritual elements and performative effect

Ritual/object	Text citation	Performative effect
Ganga water	Das 2, 4	Purification; communal reassurance
Pieces of iron	Das 2	Protective talisman; material boundary
Earthen lamp and food pots	Das 5	Offering; ritualized inclusion of ghost
Head pundit's incantations	Das 5, 10	Mediates between living and dead; grants legitimacy
Priest's bone, magic skull	Das 9–10	Staging of authority; theatrical mastery over myth

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The presence of objects-earthen pots, iron pieces, and the bone used by the priest-reveals how superstition is materially embedded. Such objects make invisible relations visible and provide a sensory schema for social action.

Myth-Making and the Ethics of Imagination

Das's tale is explicitly about shared imagination. Das avoids providing any concrete evidence of the ghost's existence rather he describes the ghost as a product of collective imagination of the village community. The ghost is a picture of collective imagination rather than a real entity. The villagers create an image of a ghost to externalise their feelings into a comprehensible form.

The boys "would have done anything to help her in some way. But we knew we could do nothing" (Das 1). Though incapable of doing anything regarding the matter, the boys imagine how they can help the ghost in some manner. The village community and the priests offer the ghost food as a ritual during a feast in the village. The repeated action of offerings and the practice of ritual feeding bind the community to the imagination of helping the ghost and make it feel loved.

The myth of the ghost gradually evolves through collective imagination and retellings among the villagers. This development uncovers the myth formation process in traditional societies where belief is shaped over time through collective acceptance towards any narrative by adding personal information to it.

Scholars reading Manoj Das have noted that his ghost stories often function as communal laments or repositories of local memory. As one critic observes, Das's village "normally accepts a ghost as its co-dweller. The ghost's departure, the farewell she receives … is no less realistic than it would be". That is, ritual myth-making becomes a way of remembering violence (the girl's murder) and preserving a moral claim on the past.

However, myth-making is ambivalent. While offering sustenance, the village also perpetuates exclusion: the girl is "of alien blood" and "it was out of the question for our women to approach a girl with Feringhee blood" (Das 3–4). The ghost's foreignness both heightens the villagers' fascination and keeps her at the edge of human communion. Myth in Das's text both humanizes and objectifies.

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Table 3. Functions of myth in the story (benevolent and exclusionary)

Function	Example from text	Effect
Communal care	Offerings after feasts; head pundit's ritual (Das 5)	Creates social cohesion; honours memory
Moral pedagogy	Warning about kissing ghost; death of lad (Das 2)	Social caution; boundary maintenance
Historical memory	Story of Feringhee masters and poisoning (Das 3–4)	Keeps colonial trauma in local myth
Exoticization/Othering	"Alien blood"; women avoid her (Das 3)	Reaffirms social hierarchies; distance

The Ghost as Postcolonial Sign

One of the richest aspects of "Farewell to a Ghost" is its layering of the supernatural over colonial history. The girl's parentage ("the illegitimate daughter of a Sahib by a tribal woman") (Das 3) makes her a living trace of colonial contact expressing an embodied archive of unequal relations. The narrative relates how three Feringhee masters brought her, later, "three outraged Feringhees … forced the villagers at bayonet point to bury the girl's body" (Das 4). The colonial forces play crucial role in creating the ghost. The village ritual life is a local afterlife to that history.

Critics of Manoj Das have remarked on how his use of ghosts often preserves or rearticulates traces of historical violence. The ghost thus becomes an image of unresolved trauma: she is fed, tamed in ritual, and ultimately tied to a palm tree—actions that domesticate and contain the memory of colonial violence within a folkloric frame.

Quotation for analysis: "Potfuls of Ganga water had to be secured on loan from the neighbouring villages to purify the houses thus defiled" (Das 4). The phrasing- "secured on loan"-is telling; purification here is transactional, bureaucratic, and communal. The story refracts colonial brutality through the folk practice of purification, suggesting the economy of symbolic remediation in rural life.

The Ghost as a Superstitious Construct

In 'Farewell to a Ghost', the ghost occupies a central position as a construct produced by the psychological and cultural conditions the village community. Manoj Das consciously avoids providing any concrete evidence of the ghost's existence, instead he describes the ghost as a product of collective imagination of the village community by shifting the focus from the supernatural to the human mind that perceives and sustains it. In this sense, the ghost is a picture of collective anxiety instead of being a real entity. The villagers externalise their feelings into seemingly tangible form by giving it the name of ghost. The villagers' fear plays a decisive role in creating the ghost. Later, they maintain the presence of the ghost for

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centuries by passing the knowledge to coming generations. Initially, the fear appears undefined arising from rumours, unexplained sounds, and isolated incidents. But the moment fear is shared and articulated within the community, it begins to take control over the consciousness of the villagers.

Narrative Voice, Childhood Perspective, and Epistemology of Belief

Das chooses a child-narrator with adult reminiscence. This frame produces an oscillation between credulity and ironic distance. The adult remembers the communal convictions whereas the child's viewpoint supplies immediacy and wonder. The child's perspective provides a crude experience of the action taking place in the story. The narrator frequently expresses his private feelings: "I felt the urge to steal into the villa, for no other reason than to give the girl a moment's silent company" (Das 6).

Das's narrative techniques confirms that first-person, child-centred narration is common in his stories and produces "simplicity and clarity" while allowing panoramic vistas of social life. The child's experience to various incidents that he witnesses also uncovers how superstition is learned. The belief among the new generation is formed through overhearing, imitation of rituals, and the practice of the narratives.

Table 4. Narrative techniques and interpretive effects

Technique	Example	Interpretive effect
First-person retrospective	"we boys …" and adult recall (Das 1–2, 11)	Mixture of immediacy and reflective distance
Child's viewpoint	Desire to sit in villa (Das 6)	Empathetic humanization; learning of belief
Panoramic narration	Historical recounting of Feringhees (Das 3–4)	Blends micro-scene and community history
Repetitive imagery	Moonlight, riverbank, banyan tree (Das 1–2)	Creates liminal mood; ritual cadence

Superstition, Social Order, and Moral Economy

Superstition in Das's story functions as social glue. Superstition is supported by leaders and authorities of the village community. They do not want to change the tradition and try to maintain the status quo to keep the things going smoothly. The priests and pundits play their part in the rituals even if they are unable to see or take a hold or control over the ghost. The rituals arranged around the ghost are not innocent as these are ways for organising the community and to make them oblige to do specific tasks.

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The ghost's presence regulates play: "We played on till late in the night, happy to be near our lonely ghost" (Das 10). Superstition becomes the part of daily routine and modifies the behaviour of the masses. Superstition regulates leisure, ritual, and memory.

Superstition serves as an effective tool for maintaining social order and conduct in the community. The ghost becomes an epitome of moral justice and discipline who might punish the behaviour that might disrupt communal harmony. The young lad who tries to kiss the ghost is given the punishment for his action. Instead of punishing dissent openly it is neutralized through fear. Consequently, the village appears orderly and cohesive. But this order is achieved at the cost of intellectual freedom and rational thought.

But superstition also mediates moral claims. The lad who kisses the girl pays with his life; the villagers interpret this as the price "one must pay for kissing a ghost" (Das 2). This moral reading explains the ways of social control to limit the behaviour of the community. In case of the breach in social regulations, the punishment decided for the rule breaker is death symbolised in the punishment for the young lad. Superstition helps to modify behaviour through fear and prevents moral breakdown within the community. Superstition bars the structural injustice and converts history into a moral story to make aware the future generations about the deeds unacceptable for a particular audience.

Symbolism: Trees, Water, and the Built Ruin

Das uses recurrent symbols of trees, river, lamp and villa as metaphors filled with deep meanings. The banyan tree and the palm tree are central to the structure of the narrative. The banyan tree serves as a symbol for desire and means through which the lad climbs to look into the villa. Another symbol is the palm tree which serves as the home for the ghost, the priest beats the tree with a bone to stop the girl's ghost from changing its place while saying, "beat the tree with the bone … 'So, from now on this will be your dwelling … She can never leave the tree. I have tied her to it!'" (Das 10). The priest pretends to control the spirit's movement. Trees are used in the narrative to convey about mobility and containment representing the sites where the living and dead meet.

Water also functions as a significant symbol. Water creates as a boundary between the village and the deserted villa and maintains a safe distance between the two. The villagers look at the villa from a distance "from the river-bank" (Das 1). The river works as liminal space between village life and the villa's deserted otherness. The use of Ganga water for purification is a deeply religious symbol embedded in culture combining local faith with the wider symbolic reach of pan-Indian ritual purity.

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Table 5. Key symbols and interpretive readings

Symbol	Common reading in story
Deserted villa	Colonial legacy; spatialized past
Banyan tree	Desire; vantage point between worlds
Palm tree	Containment; ritual relocation of haunting
Ganga water	Purity; ritual authority
Earthen pots and lamp	Ritual sharing; communally distributed memory

Comparative Perspectives and Critical Conversation

The ghosts in Das's story can be compared with Toni Morrison's *Beloved* where ghosts are used as memorials to violence. Das's use of ghosts is more inclined towards South Asian literary logic where the supernatural often reflects social memory. Indian critics see Das's stories as both nostalgic and sceptic about rural culture where he questions the rootedness and irrational behaviour of village communities. The story blends the familiarity and distance at the same time inviting readings that count on both the villagers' devotion and their social limits seriously.

Recent studies focus on how ghost narratives can be ethically generative. The rituals preserve memory and create obligations. At the same time, the stories may consider social exclusions and exiles taking place without forcing anyone and making them part of rural life. Das is aware of the fondness of the narrator towards the ghost and his critique of voyeurism ("we would all know by evening that he had caught a glimpse of the girl" [Das 1]) suggesting about his authorial indecision.

Conclusion

"Farewell to a Ghost" offers a nuanced commentary meditation on superstition and myth-making process as deeply ingrained into rural contexts. Manoj Das explores how communities give definition of injustice and assume punishment for the violation of unsaid rules. Das uses ritual details, symbolic objects, and a child-narrator's voice to present a realistic picture of Indian rural life. Superstition functions as an invisible power that regulates and controls the social behaviour and connects people residing in close proximity. The story ends with a symbol of the lightning-struck palm tree reflecting on the temporality of mythic economies even as it mourns their passing.

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