

ISSUE OF INDIANNESS THROUGH MAHASWETA DEVI'S STORY-TELLING: A  
STUDY OF NYADOSH (*THE INCREDIBLE COW*)

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**Abstract**

*Mahasweta Devi's Nyadosh (the Incredible Cow) is a humorous children's tale in her one of the best collections Our Non-Veg Cow and Other Stories. In a light and playful tone Devi narrates the story of a non-vegetarian cow, her family pet, Nyadosh. The story is funny yet amazing as Devi's portrayal of Nyadosh in an unusual manner highlights the contrast between an ordinary behaviour of the cow and Nyadosh's boisterous nature. Apart from describing the devastating exploits of her family pet, Devi faithfully reflects some of the elements which make the story deeply Indian. Devi embraces the issue of Indianness by highlighting a world of innocence and humour through her narration of this apparently whimsical story with reference to Indian aesthetics (rasa theory), the setting of rural Indian family with all their traditions and rituals. Other important features include Devi's fantastic as well as sarcastic way of storytelling to deliver lessons about Indian values and morals with her strong denial of colonial oppression in British India. This research article attempts to find out all these elements to read this story as truly an Indian with a perfect blending of tradition (by following the conventional norms) and modernity (by strongly criticizing the British rulers even in colonial India).*

**Key Words:** Children's story, Indianness, Humour, Story-telling.

India has been the centre of excellence since ancient times. The glory and wide popularity of Indian philosophy, culture, art, literature, architecture, religion, rituals and practices have continuously influenced and shaped many facets of human life. All these can broadly be included into the umbrella concept of Indianness. Indianness - socio-cultural and national identity of India and the Indian - encompasses multiple aspects of our living, including cultural diversity, societal aspects, religious traditions and rituals.

Since the pre-independent period, this tradition has been reflected through the works of eminent writers and artists with the objectives of establishing a strong sense of root, identity, belongingness by preserving its past and maintaining a balance with the modern lives for promoting the status of the country with all the ideas of modernity, social mobility, equality and justice. This paper attempts to focus on the representation of Indian elements through Devi's narration of "Nyadosh, the Incredible Cow". This article is an endeavour to find out Indian elements as reflected in this short story through the concept of Indian aesthetics (rasa theory), culture, tradition and family engagement. Devi's teaching of moral lessons or values to the young children with a simple description of Nyadosh's boisterousness are also discussed here.

Mahasweta Devi's novels and short stories are well-known for focusing on issues like caste, class, human rights, gender, the challenges of marginalized community, especially the tribal people. Devi's voice of protest is often reflected through her works with a strong message of condemnation against social injustices. Apart from addressing such uncompromisingly direct issues, Devi reflects a tender and lighter mood in some of her stories in the collections like *Till Death Do us Part* and *Our Non-Veg Cow and Other Stories*. Here Devi portrays the stories of our everyday living embracing life's ups and downs with the elements of beauty, joy, warmth and humour. Moreover, she portrays the complications of human relations and attracts our attention to the facts of individual's courage and confidence even in the time of adversities. The approaches of her two different types of works mostly evolve around many issues and elements of India- one dealing with her concern for the tribes and underprivileged class of West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa and the others focusing on her sober attitude of representing life in a lighter vein. Devi's "Nyadosh, The Incredible Cow" is such a beautiful children's story with a simple delineation of some of the elements of Indianness.

Devi's story-telling approach showcases her extraordinary skills with her mastery lying more in the concise and dialogic method of story-telling rather than in longer novels. Her ability to capture the readers' attention can perfectly match with her focused narration of short stories.

As a story-teller Mahasweta's contribution is especially remarkable in the field of children's literature since she writes for the children's magazine like *Mouchak* and *Sandesh*.

All her stories in the collection *Our Non-Veg Cow and other stories* were initially published in *Sandesh*. In these, Mahasweta appears as Khuku. Nabaneeta Debsen says, Devi is here like khuku, the eldest of nine brothers and sisters in a close-knit family (Devi, Introduction iv). She recalls her childhood days and makes us all nostalgic by bringing the early memories back to life.

Her telling of a tale in “Nyadosh, the Incredible Cow” in an entertaining manner centers on Nyadosh, her family pet, who is a non-vegetarian cow. Her ridiculous representation of a non-vegetarian cow adds comic element and humourous twist, making the story unlikely to be true. Now this paper attempts to find out how such humourous scenes are described with the perspective of rasa theory of Indian aesthetics. Here I will focus on the use of hasya rasa through Devi’s narration of Nyadosh.

Rasa theory, propounded by Bharata in *Natyashastra*, has widely been used as a fundamental concept of Indian aesthetics to explain the aesthetic and emotional aspects reflected through works of art, literature, media and such others. To tell simply, rasa theory is used by the artists and the creative writers not only to entertain the audience but also to transport them into a world of parallel reality, where he becomes aware of his consciousness and thinks about the spiritual and moral issues. Satya Dev Chaudhary notes; “we read a piece of creative literature whether in lyrical or epical form or composed in any other genre like drama, story, novel or even essay written in an elegant style, we get pleasure out of that as a reader, and when we watch a drama or one act play on the stage or on the screen we enjoy that as a spectator. This sort of pleasure according to Indian poetics is termed as rasa which in English language is translated as aesthetic pleasure, aesthetic enjoyment, aesthetic bliss, poetic pleasure, poetic relish, poetic delight, poetic delectation etc. and technically the word rasa is termed as sentiment also.” (Satya D Chaudhary, 67).

Appropriate content in literature is an important element and it attracts everyone who writes, reads and translates any literary text. Hasya rasa or humour is one such element in any creative piece of writing. Representation through the lens of hasya rasa differs from the serious and sombre tone of narration. Despite of having multiple functions of hasya rasa, it generally creates laughter and amusement in every reader’s mind. The chapter VI of *Natyashastra* explains: *as for the comic rasa, it consists of the primary emotion of laughter. It arises from such vibhav as wearing clothes and ornaments that belong to someone else or do not fit (Vikrat), shamelessness (dhrstya), greed, tickling sensitive parts of the body, telling fantastic tales, seeing some (comic) deformity (vyanga) and describing faults* (Masson and Patwardhan, 48). The *Natyashastra* categorizes hasya rasa into two types- laughter within oneself and laughter in others. When one laughs at one’s self, the laughter is internal and personal and when one evokes humour in others, the laughter is external. The following part of this article attempts to represent Devi’s attempts to evoke humour, laughter and comedy by telling a tale of a common cow with an uncommon appetite.

Devi creates a playful and carefree atmosphere with her portrayal of some oddities in the description of Nyadosh’s body, her unusual manners and strange habits of eating. Devi’s narration evokes hasya rasa with her representation of the unusual physical characteristics of the cow. The distorted or exaggerated representation of the cow’s body creates laughter and

comedic effect. Devi narrates: “The cow came home. None of you could ever have seen such an ugly cow! A bloated belly, all four legsthin, disjointed and splayed outwards, a stiff tail. Her eyes had a fierce gleam” (Devi, 10).

By showcasing oddity in Nyadosh’s body, Devi adds a more unique and comical falvour to her story-telling technique. The exaggerated depictions of the eating habits of the cow serve as the source of comic material in this short story. Her habits of eating food are completely different from usual food habit of a cow. It chewed up clothes, barged into the house, ate up books. When the family receives the cow ceremonially by spreading new dhoti, Nyadosh “chewed up half the dhoti, tore the rest to shreds...” (Devi, 10).

Their family maid was absent for a few days and they took their meals on banana leaves instead of using dishes. They threw the leaves out and Nyadosh consumed those leaves and liked the taste of non-veg food items. Instead of eating the ordinary cow-food, she develops a taste for non-vegetarian dishes. She “ate up all the big fish, small fish, lobsters, prawns, crabs, meat- everything. However, she loved chicken and hilsa best” (Devi, 12). Naturally her love for non-veg items and her evolving taste for onion and garlic adds a new level of humour to Devi’s story-telling of Nyadosh.

Devi’s description of Nyadosh’s eccentric behaviour enriches the element of hasya rasa, encouraging the readers to laugh at absurd and exaggerated situations. The non-vegetarian cow develops a distaste for hay, husk etc and moreover she seems to be offended if the family prepares a vegetarian dish for a particular day. She furiously kicks the earthen bowl of hay,

husk and oil-cake . She goes straight into the kitchen and takes away a few hilsa pieces that has been kept for dinner. Her strange nature is revealed in her attempts to push the policemen in the Ganga when they are trying to climb out after their morning bath in the river. Devi narrates this episode with bitter sarcasm and irony: “Fighting the British police was no joke! Nyadosh is possibly the only cow in British-ruled India to have police cases lodged against her.” (Devi, 13). Another unusual behavior of the cow is reflected during winter time. She goes outside in the morning and returns home in the evening in an intoxicated state. She spent an entire day by drinking the date-palm juice. By employing rasa theory as a part of Indian aesthetics, this paper thus attempts to look back at the strategies of arousing emotion and how it is presented and communicated to the readers. This research article now focuses on the different aspects of Indianness as represented through Devi’s prose narration of “Nyadosh, the Incredible Cow”.

This story is a delineation of the traditional image of an Indian family system where authority lies in her father’s head following the structure of patriarchal society. As a senior of the family Devi’s father holds a revered position and his decision is always important in resolving the individual and family matters. Devi’s family follows the Indian philosophical

principle of ‘vasudhaiva kutumbakam’(Maha Upanishad, pp. 71-73), focusing inter-connectedness not only in family relations but also in broader aspect of generosity and care for others. Devi’s father maintains a cordial relationship with office gardner, rickshaw puller and a mango-vendor. He always gets help from these people and Devi’s maa is being advised by the household assistants- Satyanarayan, the cook, Menoka and Naran.

Devi’s family maintains Indian culture of welcome ceremony to receive any cow or calf. The family arranges new piece of cloth, vermilion and fresh water to ceremonially mark the moment of the cow’s arrival in their place. The ceremonial welcome of the cow refers to the custom of Hinduism to denote the presence of the cow as a sacred symbol. The ancient Indian texts including the Veda, Purana, and Gita refer to the sacred image of a cow. In the last chapter of the Bhagavad Gita Sri Krishna’s saying “krsi-go-raksha-vanijyam Vaisya-karma” dictates the duties of the Vaisya is that of giving protection to the cows and encouraging agriculture. (Prabhupada, 730).

Food, one of the basic needs of human, defines people and culture. Different types of food and eating practices can essentially reveal one’s identity and are important in defining the belief systems, cultural codes, religious rituals, family practices of an entire society, community and culture. This view is expressed in Claude Fischler’s convincing remark in “Food, Self and Identity” which notes, “that food constitutes the self.... The saying, “You are what you eat’, bespeaks not only the biochemical relationship between us and our food but also the extent to which food practices determine our systems of beliefs and representations” (7). Devi’s story-telling of Nyadosh can significantly reflect the popular eating habit of a Bengali family. The family engagement, rituals, traditions and food habits of Devi’s family reflect the issue of Indianness through her comic representation of Nyadosh. The final part of this article attempts to find out the moral and ethical principles of Indian philosophy through Devi’s story-telling method.

India’s story telling tradition shows a great deal of variety. Originating in ancient India with the oral tradition and followed by the theme of epic, folklore, mythology, Jataka Tales, Indian story telling has significantly been evolved in recent times. This evolution from oral to written form has often been considered as a tool for presentation and discrimination of Indian culture, heritage and tradition (Sharma and Balhara, 231). Mahasweta Devi (as a story teller) focuses on the instrumental role of storytelling. Her narration of a family pet in “Nyadosh, the Incredible Cow”, reflects the theme of Indianness, passing down family tradition, and thereby reinforcing the moral and ethical values. Devi’s narration of the family pet has played a significant role in reflecting different aspects of India and thereby preserving India’s culture and traditions. Her prose narration in “Nyadosh, the Incredible Cow” has played an instrumental role for entertainment and education.

Devi's story-telling of Nyadosh in a fantastic way, like in the way of magic realists who delineate the real-life story as having an undercurrent magic or fantasy. In the same vein, Devi leaves Nyadosh's magical activities unexplained to normalize it as for much as possible by reinforcing that it is a part of everyday life. The cow's unbridled nature symbolically refers to the unrestrained desire of the children, Nyadosh's uncurbed spirit influences her to break the cowshed every day. By the same way children fantasized about an adventurous life and without parental vigilance and restraint.

Nyadosh eats up books and it is hinted that most of the children wish the magical disappearance of all the books from their world instead of spending their lives with a heavy burden of books and baggage. Devi's humorous as well as ironic tone is expressed through Nyadosh's voracious habit of eating books: "This is the quickest way to study, Look! With what determination she's eating up the books!" is what Devi's father tells (Devi, 11). Devi seems to indicate the carelessness of the children for not taking care of their books. Nyadosh's manner of devouring up the books suggests Devi's way of instructing the young children as to search for the lot of knowledge with a satirical tone of criticizing the tradition of learning by rote. Nyadosh playfully shoves policemen back into the water just as they try to step out after a morning bath—a secret revenge any child might enjoy, especially when they are warned that the policemen are to be feared. Nyadosh returns home intoxicated; to a young mind, drinking is part of that hidden, grown-up world—both intriguing and mysterious. This can influence the young minds by sparking fascination and tempting eavesdropping. Even when it is implied that her fall into sickness may be related to this boisterousness, the narrator does not offer any stern reprimand. Instead, she gently suggests that too much excitement can be harmful.

Nyadosh's deep-rooted hostility towards the British rule makes her an amazing family pet. Through this funny yet sarcastic narration of Nyadosh's activity Devi presents another important element of Indianness, i.e. the love for the country, during the dominance of the British Raj: "Fighting the British police was not a joke! Nyadosh is possibly the only cow in British ruled India to have police cases lodged against her (Devi, 13)". The profound and intuitive observation of Aneesh and Abu- "Nyadosh is like a scientist, Ma, she wants to get to the root of everything. She doesn't like the hay in her shed, she wants to get to its source" (Devi, 13)- highlights Nyadosh's independent individuality in colonial India. Nyadosh's rejection to tradition and conformity help her to emerge as a strong resistance that defined many Indians during colonial rule.

Though her prose-narration in "*Nyadosh, the Incredible Cow*" has played an instrumental role for entertainment and education, it reflects different aspects of India and thereby preserving India's culture and traditions. Devi presents the issue of Indianness with reference to Indian aesthetics by a humourous representation of an ordinary family pet, a setting and background

of rural India embedded with family engagement and traditional values, and last but not the least with a fantastic way of Indian storytelling to deliver lessons to children. With a perfect blending of humour, ethics and resistance Devi's "Nyadosh, an Incredible Cow" is a tale truly Indian- not in setting or characterization- but in thematic representation. The cow becomes Devi's mouthpiece to challenge the colonial rule. By doing so, Devi presents Indianness strongly rooted in tradition and firm in resistance.

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