



NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE IN ANITA DESAI'S SELECTED NOVELS

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Abstract: Anita Desai has established herself as a novelist- as a psychological novelist, as a woman novelist, as a novelist of Indian Diaspora but she is also historically a major novelist. When she made her novelistic debut with her first novel *Cry, The Peacock* her thematic choices, technique and style, form and language represented a major shift. Much of the critical writings on Anita Desai centre around her preoccupation with urban sensibility and a style of what she herself called 'the language of interior.' The shift in sensibility from writer like R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao and, for that matter Kamala Markandaya and Ruth Praver Jhabvala to Anita Desai are indicative of the socio-cultural changes India underwent from the forties to the sixties and the seventies. While the major pre-occupation of R. Narayan, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and Kamala Markandaya is sociological in terms of hunger, poverty, superstition and dogma, the new generation of Indian English novelists with Anita Desai are basically concerned with deep cultural and psychological problems that inevitably emerge in a transitional society.

In his selection of women writers. R. Shrinivas Iyengar included a critique of Desai's fiction and stated that her first two novels, *Cry, The Peacock* and *Voices in the City* have "added a new dimension to the achievement of the Indian women writers in India." This dimension takes multiple forms and is true of both Anita Desai's early and later novels with some thematic changes especially in the later novels.

In Anita Desai's novels there is a shift from the collective to the personal, from the communal to the individual. Unlike Jhabvala's novels where the social dimensions are more important than the characters, and Markandeya's novels where the stress is on the economic and social background. Desai's novels highlight individual characters their inner worlds and sensibilities. Her first two novels namely *Cry, The Peacock* and *Voices in the City* are said to have ushered in the psychological novel in Indian English fiction.

Desai's heroines represent the "creative release of feminine sensibility" which emerge after World War II. Her women characters are not ordinary, mainstream women but are mostly from affluent families and do not have to worry about daily subsistence. They are more concerned with their emotional needs. Desai explores the inner world of her heroines and reveals the deeper forces at work in creating the feminine sensibility. Since Anita Desai's emphasis is on the inner world of her characters rather than the outer world of action, she uses the stream of consciousness technique to delineate her characters. The subtle nuances of the emotional world of her characters are reflected in syntax and imagery. Form, structure, style and language in Anita Desai's novels undergo gradual advancement and development with the passage of time in novel. In this paper an attempt has been made to understand the form and style and their application in her selected novels in the chronological order. Simplistically speaking, techniques include everything that a novelist uses for narrating a story. On finer level it means imagery, symbolism, point of view, chronological order of events, stream of consciousness, schematisation of chapter division or some other basis of division of the novel, etc. Dialogue, language, characterization and plot are some other aspects of fictional technique.

Keywords: Form, style, symbolism, fictional technique

I. INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai has established herself as a novelist- as a psychological novelist, as a woman novelist, as a novelist of Indian Diaspora but she is also historically a major novelist. When she made her novelistic debut with her first novel *Cry, The Peacock* her thematic choices, technique and style, form and language represented a major shift. Much of the critical writings on Anita Desai centre around her preoccupation with urban sensibility and a style of what she herself called 'the language of interior.' The shift in sensibility from writer like R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao and, for that matter Kamala Markandaya and Ruth Praver Jhabvala to Anita Desai are indicative of the socio-cultural changes India underwent from the forties to the sixties and the seventies.

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II. LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been an ample number of critical writings and research articles on the novels of Anita Desai, which provide us with diverse interpretations of her works. She has alternatively been appreciated as a novelist of new ideals and condemned as a mere imitator of European writers. She has been viewed as an existentialist, as well as a champion of feminist problems.

B.R. Rao has studied the novels of Anita Desai as portrayals of human tragedies in his treatise *The Novels of Mrs. Anita Desai: A Study* (1977). According to him the tragedy in Desai's novels arises out of the inability of the characters to establish any connection with the prose and the passion in their lives. They live only in fragments finding no meaning of their existence.

Meena Belliappa in her book *The Fiction of Anita Desai* (1971) has made an attempt to study the scope and nature of Desai's first two novels, evaluating the fictional mode and techniques of the novelist. She has traced in Desai evidence of a departure from current modes of fictional writing in India.

Narendra Kumar in his work *Fits Protagonists and Misfits: A Study of Anita Desai's* (1996) interprets her novels in terms of her relationship with the tradition of the Indian novel. The main focus of the study is laid on her art of characterization particularly the mode of individualizing of character. He writes that Anita Desai has never created common characters. Instead, she has written about individual men and women - the solitary beings who are not average but have retreated or been driven into sane extremity of despair and so turned against or made to stand against the general current of life.

III. STRUCTURE AND SEQUENCING OF ANITA DESAI'S NOVELS

Anita Desai's novels are technical innovations which combine features of both novel and lyrical poetry and shift the reader's attention from men and events to a formal design. She herself prefers the word 'pattern' to 'plot.' Fictional sequencing is a very important aspect of presentation in a novel. It can be chronological, psychological or presentational. While the first two are self-explanatory, the third, presentational sequence, requires some explanation. Leech and Scott have described it in the following observation: In presentational sequencing as well as in the other aspect of sequencing the author's artistic sense often shows in the way information is withheld, rather than in the way it is revealed. (Leech and Short 178)

She prefers not to draw on established themes, plots and people for her creative world. The story must develop to its own requirements, right from the humble start to its gradual climax. Her novels are usually divided into parts mostly as the quartet division. They don't have a familiar beginning where the novel begins with the childhood of the protagonist and concludes with his old age. There is a constant intermingling of the past and present with a hint of the foreboding future. Her novels are usually divided into three or four parts. One of the major fields of interest for Anita Desai is to show her readers how the characters in her novels, react to the various situations that confront them. Whereas she presents Monisha through the pages of her diary, for Maya, she erects a dramatic structure of three parts, showing the origin, development and culmination of Maya's neurosis.

Anita Desai follows the triptyche structure in four of her novels: *Cry, The Peacock, Bye-Bye Blackbird, Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and *Fire on the Mountain*. Part I and Part III of *Cry, The Peacock* are very brief. Part I works like a prologue to the novel which describes the conditions which make Maya neurotic. Maya, a childless woman after the death of her pet dog Toto thinks that

this is a prelude to yet another impending tragedy. This preoccupation with death had been planted long time ago when during her childhood she met an albino astrologer who predicted the death of either of the couple after her marriage. The other causes of her suffering are her marriage to Gautama, a man of her father's age who is detached and reserved even to the extent of not fulfilling her physical and emotional needs. The indifferent behaviour of Gautama's family members increases her sense of loneliness which gradually develops into an actual sense of alienation. In part III Maya regresses back to an infantile leap to death. *Bye-Bye Blackbird* begins with Dev's arrival in London and his frustration in a foreign country, but Adit has a deep-rooted liking for England. But in Part II the characters change their places. Dev's anglophobia changes to anglophilia and Adit's anglophilia changes to anglophobia. He realizes that his appreciation and weakness for England is only a pretence, and he must go back to India to let his son take birth in his homeland. The last part describes the return of the blackbird to its permanent nest which provides unity to the novel. In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* part I starts in the present and deals with Sita's abnormal thoughts of escaping the process of creation. This part is heavily loaded with image of brutality and violence seen not only in acts and incidents, but also in forms of behaviour, unable to reconcile herself to this violence, she takes the extra ordinary step of going to the island of Manori where her father had created magic. The story is about two journeys, one undertaken to escape from immediate surroundings, another to move towards something of the future created out of illusions we all hold of the past. It is followed by the second part which depicts the reminiscences of her childhood in Manori. Part III comes back to the present. Sita moves through three stages, thesis antithesis or doubt, rejection and acceptance. Vimala Rao, comparing the structure of this novel with Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* says: The action of the first section takes place on the island of Manori, in the present time in Sita's life, that of the second part in the past, and the third in what she has accepted as her future. The manipulation of time and space to depict the extra-ordinary inner consciousness of Sita is especially reminiscent of Woolf into *the Lighthouse*. (Rao 46)

This part of the novel deals with the psychological probing of Sita's mind who is pregnant but does not want to deliver the baby and instead goes to the Manori Island thinking that the magical island would somehow stop the biological process of delivery. Thus, Bombay represents the world of reality and Manori Island world of fantasy and Sita's return to reality. The city Island dichotomy is so obviously symbolic that it has received critical attention.

Anita Desai follows a triptyche structure also in *Fire on the Mountain*. Part I of the novel describes Nanda Kaul's life of a recluse in Carignano where she does not want anybody to interrupt her privacy. Anita Desai has very cleverly unfolded the theme by presenting Nanda amidst the pines, where she gets the news of the arrival of Raka. In part II Anita Desai depicts Raka's arrival and its impact on Nanda Kaul. It also describes the solitary experience of them similar in temperament though different in age. Part III depicts the violent rape and murder of Ila Das and the breakdown of Nanda Kaul's make-believe world.

IV. FICTIONAL MODE AND TECHNIQUE IN ANITA DESAI'S NOVELS

The use of fantasy is another important narrative method in Desai. It is by the use of 'disexpected' (Rabkin 1325) rather than unexpected that she creates an uncanny atmosphere in her novels. Desai uses fantasy in her novels as a narrative technique and also to reinterpret reality. Fantasy is projected along with and in contrast to the world of reality. In *Cry, The Peacock*, Maya clings to fantasy because she is unable to cling to reality. Her relationship to reality passes through three different stages, her childhood, marital life and finally when she totally surrenders herself to the world of insanity. The conflict between the two worlds of fantasy and reality is perceived when at the beginning of the novel, after the death of the dog, Maya rushes to the garden tap "to wash the vision from her eyes." To make herself free from the burden of the present Maya recedes to her past. She remembers her father's garden, the breakfast in the morning which was like a revel of fairies and elves, the fairy stories of the Arabian Nights, tales from Indian mythology, tales of prince and regal queens of jackals and tigers which have an element of fantasy in them. Maya lives in a state of fear and with hallucinations. She senses the cruel trainer behind the bear dance seen in her childhood and has nightmarish experiences during night. She considers Gautama as an "unreal ghost," a "body without a heart." There is a constant interaction between illusion and reality in Anita Desai's fictional world. In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Fantasy is used to interpret reality. The magic island of Manori, Sita's father who is a protective figure in the island like Prospero, her desire to keep the child unborn and many such other references have an element of fantasy in them. In *Fire on the Mountain*, Nanda Kaul, Ram Lal and Raka all have their own worlds of fantasy woven into their perception of reality. Nanda Kaul creates a world of fantasy by telling imaginary stories to Raka about her childhood. Her projected childhood is an attempt to create the bond of love between herself and Raka. Nanda Kaul thinks, "fantasy and fairytale had their place in life." (89) Raka listens to Nanda at the beginning but gradually she is bored and becomes suspicious and wants to be released from this disagreeable intimacy. She is "stifled inside the old lady's words, dream and more words. She yawned with boredom." (100) Ram Lal tells her about the fancy dress ball where ladies are dressed like queens and men like princes. But inside the club Raka finds "madmen and rioters." (69)

Desai portrays each individual as an unsolved mystery. Each individual lives in separate worlds of problems and passions. Desai employs stream of consciousness narrative mode in her novels. Her women characters undergo the traumatic experience of loneliness and frustration. They are suppressed by neurotic fears due to many obsessions. Desai's characters suffer from fear-consciousness. They are alienated from the world, society, families, parents and even from their own selves because they are not average people but individuals "made to stand against the general current, who fight that current and struggle against it." (Dalmia 13) In *Cry, The Peacock* Maya's mind passes through the stream of thoughts on deeper analysis, exhibits her feelings and the reasons for her abnormal behaviour. The Albino Astrologer's prediction that on her fourth year of her marriage either she or her husband would die becomes the cause of her neurotic fears. Incompatibility in marriage is another cause of Maya's fear psychosis. Maya loves Gautama, the very thought of being with him. She loves him too much to leave him separate from him even in death. Maya finds Gautama is preoccupied with his own self. Maya muses over Gautama's lack of love for her. Once in a fit of intense despair and agony, she tells him right on his face, "oh you know nothing, understand nothing. Nor will you ever understand." (112)

The second novel of Anita Desai is *Voices in the City*. It traces three characters Nirode, Monisha and Amla. In the novel Desai writes about the predicaments of various artists, groping for a vision, an aim, a path conducive to the development of healthy art in a city which destroys as it creates. The problem of Maya was one of attachment whereas the problem of Nirode, Monisha and Amla is that of detachment. The theme of detachment in the novel is conveyed by the words of Monisha as she reads the Gita. The city Calcutta affects the characters psychologically. It is presented as antagonist to the three major characters. The mother of the three characters is identified with the city, since she is attached to evil. Nirode suffers from oedipal fixation and has a love hate relationship with his mother. He is haunted by the fact his mother had relationship with Major Chadha. He thought mother belonged to him. But her illegal love makes him hate her and he becomes completely alienated from his mother. The psychic life of Monisha is revealed through the mood of alienation and the resulting bitterness that she undergoes in her short life. Her morbid inclinations can be collected from her stream of consciousness. She finds nothing in common with her, Jiban and his self-centred and self-complacent family. She feels trapped in her husband's house "there is no escape from it" (118) She cries, and reacts with such a hysterical intensity that even her emotionless husband is surprised. The brief soliloquy before suicide serves as an explanation of Monisha's frantic search for feeling which culminates in suicide. Amla like Nirode and Monisha is quick to sense the atmosphere of dissolution, and is temperamental like them she moves from revolt to surrender for love.

Anita Desai uses stream of consciousness technique to illustrate Sita's inner self and subjective temperament. Sita as a sensitive individual is pitted against the insensitive world. Sita leaves behind her business imprisoned husband Raman, and flees with two of her children to an island off the Bombay coast where her guru father retired after independence. Raman and Sita do not represent an ideal husband-wife relationship. The tussle between husband and wife is because one dwells in a world of illusion and the other in reality. She regards the colourless and soulless existence of her husband's family as a provocation and even threat to her existence. They lead inauthentic existence. Their subhuman placidity, calmness and sluggishness infuriate Sita. "They are animals nothing but appetite and sex. Only food, sex, and money matter. Animal." (32) Manori, the island objectifies Sita's desire to escape the madding crowd. It also symbolises Sita's illusion. The novel is a parable on the inability of human beings to relate the inner with the outer, the individual with society. Sita's final disillusionment comes when she discovers the island does not offer her even the bare necessities of life. Sita realizes that one cannot flee from the reality as she had attempted to do.

Fire on the Mountain, Anita Desai's fifth novel is all about withdrawal, loneliness and fatality emerged out of the story of Nanda Kaul, a widow, who lives all by herself away from the world of "bags and letters, messages and demands, requests, promises and queries." (4) As the Vice Chancellor's wife, Nanda has spent her life of duties and responsibilities. The crowd of the house, full of guests and people, stifle her. Nanda vacates the Vice Chancellor's house and comes over to Kasauli. She identifies herself with the lonely pine tree. Thus, she resents company, and despises anyone who tries to interfere with her life. The unexpected arrival of Raka unnerves her and disturbs her privacy. Raka, the great grand-daughter of Nanda Kaul, is a recluse by nature. The trauma of childhood had blunted the native thrust of Raka's soul. The traumatic experience she has had as a child, comes to her in dream or like a vision. Her father returns home from a party "stumbling and crashing through the curtains of night." (71) He abuses her mother in filthy language and beats her up which makes Raka cover under her bed clothes. She wets the mattress in fright. As the stream of urine passes through her legs, she feels like a stream of blood passing down her leg. Her mother lies down on the floor and closes her eyes and weep.

Anita Desai writes her novels in symbolic mode, as her sole concern is with the inner weather of the characters. Her novels fully exhibit her symbolist imagination. She employs symbolism to express the real feelings and thoughts of her characters. Her novels abound in symbolic situations, episodes, scenes, characters, etc. Her symbols are drawn from human life and nature, particularly from trees, animals, birds, season, atmosphere, etc. She uses both past and present symbolically to show the depths and causes of the protagonist's anguish and despair. In *Cry, The Peacock*, the story is not narrated in straight chronological order. There is a mixture of past and present in the narrative. Maya is haunted by the prophecy by albino astrologer. Since she belongs to a traditional Brahmin family her faith in astrology is but natural. The recurrence of memory of the incident is a device to show Maya's pre-occupation with the prophecy. The title of the novel shows the peacock and its dance as both the dance of life and the dance of death. Calcutta in *Voices in the City* is described as an oppressive city, a dying city but at the same time exercising a powerful influence on all the three characters. No one can deny the importance of the city in the novel. The blurb in the novel also mentions it based on the life of the middle-class intellectuals of Calcutta:

It is an unforgettable story of a Bohemian brother and his two sisters caught in the cross-currents of changing social values. In many ways the story reflects a vivid picture of India's social Transition- a phase in which the older elements are not altogether dead, and the emergent ones not fully evolved. (150)

Anita Desai uses nature symbolism in section III 'Amla.' Amla has arrived recently in Calcutta to begin her professional career of commercial artist. She is exhausted and the decaying nature in Monisha's house garden very well externalizes mental state of Amla. The thrill of reaching a big city has disappeared and there is nothing but despair and exhaustion. To Monisha, the house is a prison. She does not belong to her husband's house, does not relate to it. Monisha feels trapped behind the barred windows of Jiban's narrow-minded family. Her husband, on the other, continues securely in his own cage. To him, the house is a symbol of safety and shelter. The four-tiered balconies with mental railings were so intricately criss-crossed that one could not so much thrust one's head through them. "Enclosing shadows like stagnant well water" (109) it was enough to depress her. She longs to thrust her head out of the window but the bars are too closely set. Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is so much under control of her childhood memories that even after being grown up and having born many children she is not able to free herself from the spell of the magic island. She leaves Bombay for Manori Island because she thinks that it will solve her problems. Sita's habit of smoking is also symbolic of her desire not to give birth to the baby. Although in the beginning she smokes to spite her in-laws yet later when she becomes pregnant the habit could be injurious to the foetus. Another important technique that she uses in then novel is use of poetry. The poem comes as a revelation to Sita that if her husband Raman had the courage to face the realities of life and discharge his duties then "she reminded herself that she had the courage, too, the courage of being a coward." The poem is thus quoted: "He who

refuses does not repent. Should he be asked again, he would say No again. And yet that No- the straight No- crushed him for the rest of his life.” (139) Raman believes that life must be continued and that is why his children looked up to him and respected him. Desai in her next novel *Fire on the Mountain* makes use of symbolism and flashback technique in narrating the story. Nanda Kaul had such a busy family life that in the evening of her life she prefers to have a lonely isolated existence. She yearns to be a tree. This is the only novel in which nature plays a vital role on the level of symbolism. We also come across wild nature in the context of Raka’s character who is emotionally deprived and comes from a broken home. She is an unnatural child not interested in the fantastic tales of Nanda Kaul. She is attracted towards the unpleasant aspects of nature like, the barren spaces of the valley. This attraction is an externalization of her sub-normal nature. The cosy-civilized world does not attract her, rather it is the uncompromising and lawless nature that pulls her. This hill with its one destroyed house and one unbuilt one, on the ridge under the fire-singed pines appealed to Raka with the strength of a strong sea-current- pulling, dragging. There was something about it-illegitimate, uncompromising and lawless that made her tingle. The scene of devastation and failure some how drew her, inspired her (90-91)

V. CONCLUSIONS

Thus, it is evident that Anita Desai uses different fictional technique according to the demands of the story. Anita Desai’s stylistic alchemy, her use of varied imagery, suggestive landscape and locale, richly imaginative symbols, her use of stream of consciousness, her poetic style all are effectively used to externalize the repressions of her female protagonists. Anita Desai makes use of different fictional techniques for narrating the story effectively.

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