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A CRITIQUE ON THE ART AND TECHNIQUE OF NARRATION IN ANITA DESAI'S NOVELS

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Abstract

The narrative technique or strategy employed by Anita Desai is highly appreciable and enchanting. She attaches as much importance to the inner life of her characters as to their outer life. She is more concerned and cares for the inner landscape of the mind than the outer landscape of the world. Indeed, psychological analysis is Anita Desai's forte; and she follows the stream-of-consciousness, interior monologue and flashback and flash forth technique in her novels. In describing the internal states of the characters, the novelist would naturally and inevitably deal also with the emotional aspect of their existence because this aspect is as important as the intellectual aspect, and in most cases only the emotional aspect is important while the intellectual aspect is very slight and almost negligible. In this article, an attempt has made to discuss the art and technique of narration in her novels.

Key words: Psychological, Interior Monologue, Stream of Consciousness, Flashback and Flash forth Technique

INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai indisputably holds a distinctive position among the diasporic post-colonial women novelists who have got a recognizable position in Indian English Literature. The new development of use of language, collocation of words, images, varied modes of narration, a right deal of code-mixing - all these techniques give a local habitation and a fame to Indian English Novel in the global scenario. As a result, the post-colonial women novelists enrich and establish special identity in Indian English novel both in theme and technique. Anita Desai is remarkable for fashioning a new form and creating creditably a

new sensibility in the art of novel writing. Her novels reveal the subtleties and nuances of fictional art that contribute to her growth and development as a major influence on the literature of Indian diaspora. Apart from the narrative mode of code-mixing, imagery, poetic license and also the stream of consciousness device are the hallmarks of her technique. Her forte is extraordinarily original and the psyche she prefers for the subjective mode of writing is interspersed with monologues, flashbacks, soliloquies, fantasy, memories of the past and the particular historical places where the individual is placed in a particular historical time. She is a part of

new literary tradition of Indian writing in English that dates back only to the 1930's or 1940's.

NARRATIVE DEVICE

The narrative devices employed by Anita Desai offer an analysis of the inner conflicts of an individual. One of the major devices is the stream of consciousness technique. The technique as a literary-psychological tool was coined by William James, the famous American psychologist in his book, *The Principles of Psychology*. He defines human consciousness "as a continual stream of thought. The time gaps are filled by the associations and reflections of the past experience in the present now" (*The Principles of Psychology* 224-225). A 'river' or a 'stream' is the metaphor by which it is naturally described. The rhythm of a language expresses mental states where every thought is expressed in a sentence. The perception of each moment in consciousness is a concrete image. Interior monologue relates a character's thoughts as coherent, fully formed sentences as if the character is talking to him or her. Stream of consciousness, in contrast, seeks to portray the actual experience of thinking in all its chaos and distraction. The pioneers of this technique are James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. A flashback occurs when the writer decides to insert details from the past into a present narrative in order to provide necessary plot information or insight into a character's motivation. A flash forth, on the other hand, is when some event that has yet to happen in the present narrative time intrudes. It gives clues as to what will happen later in the plot or story.

ANALYS OF NOVELS

Anita Desai has the distinction of making into the hall of fame with her first novel, *Cry, the Peacock*. It is remarkable that this novel, *Cry, the Peacock* which undoubtedly, is, next to Raja Rao's novel, *The Serpent and the Rope*, the most poetic and evocative Indo-Anglian novel. Viewed in a wider context, it is a critical study of man's predicament in a hostile universe. The novel is remarkable for its poetic style, interior monologues, vivid and colorful creation of the Indian landscape and not for its own sake, but as "objective correlative" to the state of mind of the characters. Desai deftly employs various

narrative devices in the novel which include the stream of consciousness technique, a world of memories and nostalgia, flashback and flash forth technique, symbolic and psychological language etc. If we closely examine some of the important passages from the novel, we can discern the distinguishing features of the stream of consciousness along with other devices well revealed in the inner mind and character of its protagonist, Maya.

The major conflict is between the soft, delicate and poetic feminine self of Maya, and the prosaic, philosophical self of Gautama, detached, yet duty bound. Maya's sufferings are brought into focus through the flashback technique of narration:

There was not one of my friends who could act as an anchor any more, and to whomever I turned for reassurance, betrayed me now. Whenever I laid myself, I could think only of the albino, the magician. It seemed real. I could recall each detail, and yet God, Gautama, father, surely it is not. I sobbed. And once the night of oneirodynia was over, I should be same again, and in the day light I should know all this to be nothing but a flagrant nightmare. Should I not? (54)

In the above passage, three major facts are implied which require our attention. Maya suffers from alienation and isolation and, she recalls the images of her past life with her father, husband and God. And in this process, she suspects the growth of insanity in her because of hallucinations. The 'night of oneirodynia' becomes symbolic of the prophecy that lies in her unconscious mind.

Another unique feature of Anita Desai's fictional technique is her rich poetic style, used to suggest the mood variation as well as the intensity of emotion of the main character. It is revealed through the monologue of Maya. She shouts, "Fall, fall, long fall into the soft velvet wall of the primordium, of original instinct, of first-formed love"(11). This monologue very poetically sums up Maya's longing for love which is the very base of human existence since the very beginning of time. The sentiment is rhythmically summed up in this alterative passage. In fact, Anita Desai's use of

interior monologues and dialogues reveals an attempt at realism, and also her concern for the exploration of feminine sensibility.

Voices in the City is a fascinating novel and the title itself is an example of technique. The pattern chosen for its narration is based on the use of images, metaphors, symbols, figures of speech and the repetition of meaningful words through the stream of consciousness device. The organic role of the city of Calcutta plays a pivotal part in the narration of this novel. The role of Calcutta is very important as it determines the flashback and flash forth technique of narration. In fact, the social setting in *Voices in the City* centres round Calcutta. But significantly it develops into a 'character' through the 'Voices' of Nirode, Monisha and Amla who are siblings of disintegrated parents. Therefore, they search for their personal identities in Calcutta. Consequently, the city becomes a major influence, on the lives of these three protagonists. Nirode's despair is fully reflected in the ugly features of Calcutta. The city acts as a debilitating influence on him. Anita Desai employs the polyphonic narrative technique in her novel, *Voices in the City* to reflect upon the theme of urban alienation in the post-Independence period. Through the failures of Nirode, Monisha, Amla and their mother, the novel deals with the dangers of isolation. In such a situation, the importance of communication cannot be overlooked.

Anita Desai works on the stream of consciousness device in her novel, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*. The novel presents an intense identity crisis of the central character, Sita, a sensitive woman in her early forties. This novel is, amazingly similar in structure to *The Lighthouse* of Virginia Woolf and it reveals the flux of time. Like *The Lighthouse*, it is also divided into three parts part 1, Monsoon 67, part II, Winter 47, part III, Monsoon 67. The three-part structure further illustrates the thematic pattern of the novel. Sita, the protagonist, symbolizes time as the preserver and destroyer. The division of the novel into three parts reveals the cyclic movement of time - past, present and future. The inner tumult of Sita's mind resembles the external monsoon. More significantly, the novel deals with the psychological probing of the mind of

Sita who is pregnant, but does not want to deliver the baby and instead goes to the island of Manori where she has spent her happy childhood, thinking that the magical island would somehow stop the biological process of delivery. In this context, Bombay represents the world of reality, and Manori Island denotes the world of fantasy and Sita's return to reality respectively.

Anita Desai's Sahitya Akademi Award winning novel, *Fire on the Mountain* is another exploration of her craftsmanship. The novelist makes use of symbolism and flashback technique in narrating the story. In *Fire on the Mountain*, the novelist's female characters bear their true, sane nature and take shelter in the safe haven that they have created amidst the male-dominated society. They aspire for freedom in spite of the shackles which the society has created for them. In fact, the novel deftly displays the unconscious alienation and isolation in the lives of three major characters - Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das.

Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* is considered to be one of her most successful novels. It is significant that this novel reveals Desai's brilliance in the art of fictional writing. It is a powerful novel, carefully constructed and beautifully written with subtle touches of humour. In fact, the novel is a landmark in Anita Desai's career as it marks a breakthrough in her use of language where she incorporates the rhythm and tone of Indian speech. Memory is the motivating force behind the germination of the novel.

Since the novelist aims at revealing the interior part of her characters through the stream of consciousness technique, she peeps into the hidden and untrodden regions of human psyche. Tara muses on her visit to the now run-down family homestead in a suburb of Old Delhi, where Bim continues to live and to take care of their mentally retarded younger brother, Baba. The narrative unfolds with the daybreak announced by the sound of birds in the trees and the blank white glare of the summer sun. At this starting point in the narrative, memory of experience centres round the smallest details of observation of the two sisters, Bim and Tara who struggle for their reunion. Based on the

flash of past memories with the present, the structure of the novel coalesces the past with the present, making the continuity of the events possible. When Tara enters her room in the old house, she feels nostalgic by recalling her past time as a child:

This room had been hers and Bim's when they were girls. It opened on the dense guava trees that separated the back of the house from the row of servants' quarters. Bright morning, sounds of activity came from them - a water tap running, a child crying, a cock crowing, a bicycle bell ringing... invisible parrots screamed and quarreled over the fruits (77).

Desai is the master of using the flashback technique in her novel. She makes the mingling of the present and the past. Desai has not followed the sequence of events in their chronological order. She has given us brief description of places like the Lodi Gardens, the neighborhood of the old house in which the Das family live. In depicting the inner states of mind of the characters and more particularly of the protagonist Bim, Desai has made use of the method of the interior monologue and the technique of what has come to be known as the stream of consciousness.

Anita Desai has freely used some compound words for making her language more and more functionary. The following compound words dexterously used in the text like "jungle of rag-ten", (122) "pink-flowered cushion", "birdboned. Wrists", "a fine-shelter egg", "the papal-tree lined street", "blue-tinged skin", "shell pink edged" (123) create a figurative and impressive language. The novelist has also used the Indian components deliberately in this novel. The Indianized lexical items like "Mausi", "Bhai", "Mithai", "Mubarak", display her significant contribution to Indianness in Indo-Anglian fiction. In fact, *Clear Light of Day* is a landmark in Anita Desai's career, as it marks a distinct command of her use of language where she incorporates the rhythm and tone of Indian speech.

The novel *Baumgartner's Bombay* is based on the shattering effects of the violent history of the holocaust, and partition of India and Pakistan on the

life of Hugo Baumgartner. In the novel, Anita Desai explores the psyche of a male protagonist outside the circumference of familial ties and obligations. In fact, she makes a departure from her earlier obsessive preoccupation with the interior landscape of hypersensitive and neurotic women. In *Baumgartner's Bombay*, the main focus is on the male psychology. The story of the novel is a depiction of loneliness, rootlessness, homelessness and detachment experienced especially by the exile and the immigrants. Desai makes a powerful and poignant dramatization of the peculiar predicament of a nationless wanderer in a foreign milieu. The narrative pattern of this novel is designed on different incidents that occurred the life of Hugo through the stream of consciousness.

It is remarkable that Anita Desai has used the various inter-textual devices such as letters, literary references, songs, nursery rhymes and travellers' tales in the novel. *Baumgartner's Bombay* is divided into seven unequal chapters without titles.

As Baumgartner is deeply influenced by his mother in moulding of his personality, the mother-consciousness becomes the best source of the narrative in this novel. Baumgartner always swings between two polarities German and Indian identities and finally fails to have either:

Their faces sneered "Firangi", foreigner, however good naturally, however lacking malice. Still the world, the name struck coldly and the winced, hunching his shoulders and trying to avoid the contact contaminated... In India he was fair and that marked him the firangi. In both lands the unacceptable (150).

The novelist has presented the flashback as well as the flash forth technique in the narration of this novel. The flashback technique runs in this novel in the form of memories and the stream of consciousness, and the flash forth device occurs in the form of dreams, nightmares and intuition.

Anita Desai's themes are thus original and entirely different from those of other contemporary Indian English novelists. Her themes tend to wedge off the tracks of other novelists. Each aspect merges

with the other and sometimes one finds a number of themes woven together. Using these themes as a foundation the writer is able to build up her characters into a significant whole. The special quality of Desai's literary voice is its ability to weave together several strands of feeling into a complex structure, affecting symphony. Desai is no doubt a great artist with a remarkable and astounding technical efficacy.

Conclusion

Anita Desai has a command of the novel as an art form which she handles brilliantly. She masters the art of using literary techniques to have a magic spell over the readers and it is this skill which has raised her fictional works above the limits of time and space. It has earlier been stated that Anita Desai has added a new dimension to the contemporary Indian English fiction. Having secured a unique and significant place due to her innovative techniques and thematic concerns, by and large, she deals with feminine sensibility. Her preoccupation is to explore the deeper psyche of her characters and lay bare the innermost recesses of their minds. In conclusion, we may affirm with confidence that Anita Desai's narrative strategy is really admirable despite what we have said above in disparagement of it. All her novels are successful because of character portrayal and the narrative technique.

To sum up, Desai's novels are technical innovations which combine features of both novel and lyrical poetry. Language is the main element of Desai's narrative style. Her use of language and dialogues is one of the devices of her artistically conceived novels. Desai also uses freely Indian components, hybrid terms, syntactic and linguistic deviations from one code to another. No doubt, the narrative pattern in her novels is designed to unfold the unconscious layers of human psyche an area in which she excels.

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