

## FICTIONAL TECHNIQUES IN ANITA DESAI'S SELECTED NOVELS

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### ABSTRACT

The phrase "technique" is derived from the Greek word "techniko techno" that means an art. Technique in novels consists of almost the whole thing that goes into making the novel. Simplistically speaking, technique includes the whole thing that the novelist uses for narrating her story. On finer level it means imagery, symbolism, point of view, chronological order of events, stream of consciousness, schematization of chapter division or some other basis of division of the novel, etc. Dialogue, language, characterization, and plot are some different factors of fictional technique. Some novelists are intentionally aware of technique and rely on technical improvements and some are at ease with the mere fundamentals.

**KEYWORDS:** Technique, Imagery, Symbolism, Chronological Order, Stream of Consciousness, Schematization, Dialogue, Language, Characterization, and Plot

### INTRODUCTION

Dealing with the thoughts, emotions and sensation at various levels of consciousness, Anita Desai discovered the method used by D.H Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner and Henry James to be quite suitable for her motive of character delineation. Hence, we have use of flashbacks and the stream of consciousness technique in some of her novels, in most cases in her first novel, 'Cry, the Peacock'. This article is to reflect on her use of symbolism in portraying the inner realities of her characters.

A psychological portrayal of characters, the use of symbolism and dream are some of the important fictional techniques that have been used by Anita Desai in her novels. Psychoanalysis is an interpretive art. It seeks to find meaning in the behaviour of people and in the art they create. We can apply the psychoanalytic concept by understanding how the human psyche works and how to interpret the hidden significance of what humans and characters in fiction do. Psychoanalytic criticism argues that literary texts like dreams, express the secret unconscious desires and anxieties. Symbols play an important role in analysing the hidden motives of the characters portrayed by the author. They provide us a deep insight into the inner psyche. Symbols can be an object, an institution, an idea or a thought. In a psychological text, characters are often portrayed symbolically. In reality, symbols are messages from our subconscious.

Anita Desai is regarded as one of the pioneers of psychological fiction in Indian English fiction writing. Her novels are replete with the use of symbolism. Symbolism is the use of symbols to signify ideas and qualities by giving them symbolic meanings that are different from their literal sense. Symbolism can take different forms. Generally, it is an object representing another to give it an absolutely distinct meaning that is much deeper and more significant. Symbols do

shift their meanings depending on the context they are used in. It explores the inner world of human beings, and demonstrates the reasons of their peculiar conduct and fear. Since she is concerned with the depths of the inner self, she employs symbolism to express their actual feelings and thoughts. Obviously, the novel abounds in symbolic situations, episodes, scenes, characters etc. But these symbols are no longer limited to any specific sphere of life; they are drawn from human life and nature, particularly from trees, animals, birds, seasons, surroundings etc.

'Symbol' in Anita Desai's novels is a sign of something else, in two different ways 'literal and suggestive'. In the first sense it may be a literal sign of some definite idea or object which it denotes. In a 2nd sense it can be an implication or a sign that suggests any other message. It is in this sense that the second term is related to art. Desai's style or technique of delivering the thematic thrust is the fundamental agent; Language is the essential element of her narrative style. Her use of language and dialogue is one of the features of her artistically conceived novels.

Her first novel '*Cry, the Peacock*' (1962) is a poetic novel with dense imagery. The writer makes use of each the previous and the present symbolically to exhibit the depths and motives of the protagonist's anguish, despair, dread and final tragedy. The novel opens with the demise of Maya's pet dog, Toto. The end of the dog symbolizes the constant presence of the loss of life in human life. She is childless, and her dog stands for her as a child, fulfilling her want for the love of a baby. Her husband Gautama sends away the body of the dog in the Municipal van. His cold indifference to the loss of life of a pet is symbolic of his unawareness of the feelings of his wife. The different reactions of Maya and her husband to the dying of a pet dog represent two different approaches to life. While Gautama takes death to be a normal event, Maya is greatly disturbed by it. It suggests that he is wholly aware of the realities of life and does not worry the presence of death, but she loves life so much that she always has hysterics at the sight of death. The death of the dog is also symbolic of her approaching tragic end.

Gautama's detached and insensitive nature is symbolically depicted through "an opal ring" given by him for her to wear. Gautama's unaware of the changing colours and the beauty of the opal ring is suggestive of his unawareness of the altering moods and sentiments of his wife. The opal ring is the symbol of her iridescence i.e. her different moods, her emotions of love, fear, despair and longing, and her beauty and loneliness.

*Cry, the Peacock* is also a psychological novel, probing the workings of the Maya's psyche. The narrative is not chronologically straight. There is a steady to and fro movement between the previous and the present in the mind of Maya. The novel begins with the death of her pet dog Toto but thereafter the reader is taken from the present of the novel in the past of the heroine's life. Because of her lonely existence, childlessness, emotional deprivation, and want of reciprocity of feelings, she is almost on the verge of a neurotic breakdown. She does it by making use of the bizarre animal imagery which suggests her disturbed state of mind.

The novel '*Fire on the Mountain*' centers on the character of Nanda Kaul, the widow of a vice-chancellor who is compelled both by desire and situations to live in seclusion in an old bungalow in Kasauli. The novel also makes use of fantasy and it is Nanda Kaul, who lives in the world of fantasy. In order to engage the attention of her grand-daughter Raka she spins a number of awesome memories about her father. It is interesting to be aware that it is a grown-up person and not the baby who goes into the world of fantasy. The use of fantasy in the novel has attracted critical attention and one of the critics has found that Anita Desai has used myth, not solely in this novel however in her other novels too.

In the very first chapter nature imagery has been used to portray the character of Nanda Kaul. She has had such a

busy family lifestyle that in the evening of her existence she desires to have nothing to do with family or society. She prefers her lonely remote existence guarding her privateness fiercely and the news of Raka's arrival, conveyed to her through a letter, unsettles her. What she wanted was total withdrawal from society. She hated human society so much so as to yearn to be a tree, a part of nature. In the authorial description in Chapter 1 a parallel has been drawn between her and a tree: She was grey, tall and thin and her silk sari made a sweeping, shivering sound and she fancied she should merge with the pine timber and be mistaken for one. To be a tree, no more and no less, was all she was organized to undertake. But human beings cannot be bushes, however they might also yearn for it. This is the only novel of Anita Desai in which nature performs such a critical role on the degree of symbolism and imagery and it has to be well-known that she makes high quality use of this approach to portray one-of-a-kind characters. The title itself deals with nature. The Fire and the Mountain both are natural phenomena. However, in this occasion the fire is man-made, to be more specific Raka made.

'*Where shall we go this Summer?*' is once again a novel centered on a family, focusing on Sita, a housewife who is pregnant but hates to deliver the baby. She is hypersensitive and is emotionally so charged and so irrational that she turns into a burden and a source of annoyance to her children. Sita is notable to come out of the fantasy world of her childhood. The island city dichotomy is symbolic of the world of fantasy and reality. The novel also makes use of poetry in a very significant manner.

The narrative technique or approach employed by Anita Desai in '*Clear Light of Day*' is fairly complex, and also most interesting. Anita Desai attaches as much significance to the inner life of her characters as their outer life. This means that Anita Desai describes not only external occasions and happenings, but also the inner working of the minds of the characters. She is more interested in the inner landscape of the world. In this novel, therefore, we find her not only giving us an account of what takes place in the outer lives of the various characters, but also of the thoughts and the ideas which pass through their minds, and the feelings which they inwardly experience. In this way, psychological analysis becomes a crucial part of Anita Desai's narrative strategy.

In depicting the inner states of thought of the characters, and more particularly of the protagonist Bim, Anita Desai has made use of the approach of the interior monologue and the method of what has come to be acknowledged as the stream of consciousness. In literature, stream of consciousness is an approach of narration that describes in phrases the flow of thoughts in the mind of the characters. It aims at expressing in phrases the drift of a character's ideas and feelings in their minds. The method aspires to provide readers the impression of being inside the mind of the character. Interior monologue, strictly defined, is a type of stream of consciousness. As such, it gives a character's thoughts, emotions and fleeting sensations to the reader.

Then there is another necessary reality about Anita Desai's narrative approach in this novel. Anita Desai has not followed the sequence of events in their chronological order. In the opening section of the novel she has described what is taking place in the present; but in the two sections which follow she goes back to the events of the previous including the childhood and the years of youth of the Das children; and then, in the final section, she returns to the present, picking up the thread which she had left off at the end of the first section. Sections 2 and 3 are an example of the device of the "flashback".

It has been remarked, perhaps rightly, that '*Clear, Light of Day*' does not contain such considerable imagery and symbolism as certain different novels of Anita Desai. We do not have in this novel any sustained or continuous symbolism.

However, we do have a wide variety of separate and individual symbols in the novel. The opening sentence of this novel is as follows: “The koels began to call before daylight”. At this point in the novel, of course, we do not realize that the koels serve as a kind of symbol in the story. The koels will sing again, and there will also be pigeons whom we shall hear cooing. Both the koels and the pigeons are a symbol of the rhythm of the life of Nature. Then there is Tara’s feeling delighted and thrilled to see a snail crawling through the grass, when she is a child, and even later when she has become a mom of two children. The snail too is a symbol of the life of Nature; but Anita Desai invests the snail with extra symbolic importance by remarking that Tara’s finding a snail in the grass represents life—“a snail found, a pearl lost”. One sees a snail, but soon the snail disappears; and life too has the equal quality.

The cow’s death by drowning in the dis-used well in the garden is symbolic of the different deaths which are to follow soon in the residence of the Das family. In the final episode of the novel the songs of the disciple Mulk and one of his aged Guru symbolize the continuance of the essence of things.

Anita Desai’s characters are in an adult stage in the opening of the novel, but then she goes backward to describe their childhood and its associations. In fact, it is like digging up a tunnel in a sense like going back. This procedure is one of trying to relive the past. She makes use of flashbacks and interior monologues in order to build up a situation. Her novels are a psychological release. Anita Desai’s narrative approach has a pattern in so far as there are journeys into the past and into the world of childhood and one is a modified being at the end of the journey. Anita Desai’s excellence lies in nature’s description, flashback scheme, unmasking the mental trauma of the female psyche etc.

Anita Desai uses different fictional methods according to the demands of the story. From the point of technique what is vital is how effective the approach in conveying the meaning and narrating the story effectively. Anita Desai is in a position to narrate the story, to portray the characters, to convey the mood, to evoke the atmosphere, to probe the psyche of her characters successfully. And for this she makes use of flashback techniques, stream of consciousness technique, use of contrasting characters, use of symbolism and effective use of language either to evoke an atmosphere or to transcribe the pronunciation of characters or to use the rhetorical talent for harangue. And to create realistic effect she also uses Hindi words, however in moderation.

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