

POETIC REALITY OF ANAIS NIN

Dr. Rajiv Ranjan

M.A., B.Ed., Ph.D., P.G. Dip in Human Rights

Principal

Simultala Awasiya Vidyalaya, Simultala (Jamui, Bihar)

Anais Nin was born on February 21, 1903 in Neuilly, France under the sign of Pisces. Her mother Rosa Culmell Nin was French and the father, an artist, was Spanish. She was followed by two brothers – Thorvald and Joaquin. Her parents separated in 1912 when Nin was only nine years old. In 1914, she sailed to America with her mother and brothers. Though Nin was used to an exotic and glamorous living while being with her father in Paris, she had to face poverty and to live a deserted life in America. In New York, her mother was compelled to run a boarding house in her apartment, in order to run the family. Her childhood was unhappy for two reasons – one was poverty and the other was the desertion by her father to whom she was attached very much. In the absence of her father she felt alienated, which is well expressed in her literary works, times and again. Nin was first admitted to P. S. No. 9, but could not continue her study and at the age of sixteen she joined hands with her mother in running and supporting the family. She became a dancer and also started working as an artist's model. In 1922, she went to Cuba to meet her mother's relatives, who lived in Hawana. There she developed an interest in Spanish dancing. She came in contact with Hugh P. Guiler, who was an artist, film-maker and a financial consultant. In due course of time, she married Hugh P. Guiler, who was later known as Ian Hugo.

The modern writers refers to encounters made not only in everyday social world but also to confrontations in the world of literature. The need for such a personal stock-taking emerges from the modern artists' awareness in the twentieth century science and psychology rather than the belief in religion and ethics upon which man relies. Consequently, the old moral and aesthetical values no longer correspond to one's practical experience, while the new cultural environment provides inadequate sanctions for either art or life. This results in a conflict. The same conflict we find in the writings of Anais Nin, too. This conflict is between realism and reality. Here, realism is a general literary term, whereas reality, for Nin, is the philosophical perspective related to its poetics.

In 'a ritual to usher a new life' Rango and Djuna, the lovers in Four Chambered Heart, participate in a ceremonial destruction of contemporary novels. As the books burn, Djuna explains the reasons for the destructive act:

All these novels, so carefully the truth about the characters, about the obscurities, the tangles and mysteries. Words, words, words, words and no revelation of the pitfalls, the abysses in which human beings found themselves.

Let him burn them all; they deserved their fate ... Novels promising experience, and then remaining on the periphery, reporting only on the semblance, the illusions, the costumes, and the falsities, opening no wells, preparing no one for crisis, the pitfalls, the wars, and the traps of human life. Teaching nothing, revealing nothing, cheating us of truth, of immediacy, of reality.¹

Although Djuna does not name the offending artists, Nin's views are very clear about these writers and she treated them as her opponents. She admires Henry James and James Joyce much because they are designated as realists in true sense. She expresses affinity for Lawrence because he relies upon realistic techniques. Thus, she distinguishes the rightful claimants from the usurping artists.

Realism comprises a literary technique and a philosophical position as well, because these two elements are inter-related. By realism, Nin refers to the documentary style of Dreiser and also to the philosophical naturalism of Zola. She holds the view of Philip Rahv:

One might sum up the objections to it (naturalism) by simply saying that it is no longer to use this method without taking reality for granted. This means that it has lost the power to cope with the ever growing element of the problematical in modern life, which is precisely epoch. Such artists are no longer content merely to question particular habits or situations or even institutions; it is reality itself which they bring into question.²

Nin is confident of the validity of her view. Henry Miller says, 'The artist is never defending art, but his own pretty conception of art'. And Nin is doing the same. She wrote "realism and reality" particularly in self-defense, following unsympathetic criticism of her early fiction. Her violent reaction against the realists is an inverse defense of her own highly subjective, highly poetic style. This way, the artist can arrive at the basic principles of his theory of reality by examinations of his objections to the theory and style of his opponents.

Realism refers generally to the attitudes associated with the empirical mode of perfection and specifically to the literary practice founded upon it – the novel of social criticism. Literary Realism refers to the fiction in particular, which espouses objectivity on the part of the author, verisimilitude in terms of his techniques, and social relevance with respect to theme. It is based upon some form of determinism and is concerned with socially representative figures; it portrays them either as products or victims of environmental conditions. Since it denies transcendental reality, it stops at the visible world. Its appropriate symbol is the mirror, which reflects the blue sky and the mud-puddle. Then it blames either the natural scene or the inspector of roads if the picture is shoddy.

Against such endless book-keeping of existence, Nin like one of her characters, violently rebels: 'Let me touch something warm. Save me from reflection'. She finds 'all the elements to compose a story. A volcano, Mayan ruins, Mayan costumes, mysteriously silent people. Yet none of these compiled, tabulated, would create a story. They would only produce travelogue'.

Her objection to fact and statistic goes deeper than a mere concept for them as elements of an interior form of art. As a result there is a fall from a natural state to a civilized one, and there is a discrepancy between appearance and reality. Facts and figures may be utterly false as an index to the human condition. 'Since modern man has learned to prepare a face to meet the faces that he meets, appearance is often a disguise'; therefore, 'Men are their own impersonators'; and thus, 'the so called realists who believed they were copying natural man were only copying man's impersonations, the protective personae by which he carefully concealed his deepest self'.

Her next objection is to the subject-matter of the realistic novel. If man is an actor, the type of the action in which he is externally engaged, is also pretence. Civilized society and the performance that this society requires, are artificial in the pejorative sense of the world. Thus, the sociological novel avoids depicting man in his actual form: 'Most novels today are inadequate because they reflect not our experience, but people's fear of experience. They portray all the evasions'.

Nin attacks the realists not because she is an aesthetic who is arguing for the autonomy of art; she does this because she is concerned with the question of the proper stuff of action that arises from her emphasis upon the educative power of the novel. Like Matthew Arnold, she wants that literature should assume the role that dogmatic religion is not capable of fulfilling. She believed that 'the lost generation' in America emerged only because America lacked a literature of this quality:

I believe that the experience of war might have been less disastrous to the mental and emotional life of young Americans if they had been prepared by an honest literature for all the deep primitive experience with birth, sex and death.³

But literature is not supposed to prepare for war only. The daily life also requires the vision of an artist. Since loss of identity has become the major characteristic of the twentieth century life, the artists have to play both the roles: to reveal the cause and to repair the damage caused by asserting the value of the personal and subjective. In order to meet the purpose, the artist must turn his focus from the realist's concern with external and social forces to the analysis of the individual's inner or psychological motivations. Joyce proposed the development of the artist as a progression from the lyric-subjective to the dramatic- objective. Nin also thought that a similar progression is required to be adopted in modern life. The realists committed mistake by emphasizing the objective and neglecting the subjective:

While we refuse to organize the confusions within us we will never have an objective understanding of what is happening outside. We will not be able to relate to it, to choose aides, to evaluate historically and consequently we will be incapacitated for action.⁴

By 'outside' she means all observable actions, stylized relationships and mechanical modes of communications, including the social and political institutions. By 'within' she implies the spontaneous and instinctual level of response, 'the irrational, the unconscious', which despite decades of suppression, is still 'the most powerful element in our character'.

Nin discards realism because she considers it the philosophy of determinism. She is repelled by its tendency towards pessimism. She rejects this outlook because she is a

transcendentalist. Like Lawrence, Nin emphasizes the unconscious, and in this respect, comes closer to Freud than to Emerson. Her insistence on the emotional and spiritual content of every act and every object around us clearly distinguishes her from the American philosopher. Emerson says: 'Nature is the symbol of spirit', whereas Nin says; "it is the decoding of this content which should become for us a marvellous stimulant to our intelligence'.

Proceeding forward in her experiments, Nin uses the complex term reality to label her approach. Realism is cognitively related to reality. But, according to her, Realism is partial, whereas Reality is the compressive expression. Reality includes the realistic dimension, but goes beyond it whereas Realism is an end in itself. She does not deny the empirical world, rather she considers it as sacramental, that is, an outward sign of an inward meaning. It is not important what the facts themselves demonstrate, important is what they portend: 'The significance is the drama. The meaning is what illumines the facts, coordinates them, incarnates them'. By this process she arrives at the definition of fiction: 'This creation of a story is a quest for meaning'.

Nin is opposed to realists; she finds their 'mirror' not being able to convey the real, rather being it 'the perfect symbol of unreality and refraction'. Mirror reflects only the external, the mask; not the essential man. The artist, who only records what is reflected, is more a historian and less a philosopher or a prophet; for all he can see is what has happened, what is happening, or what may happen. In one of her stories, the narrator speaks:

*To watch she must pause, and so what she caught was never the truth – the woman painting, dancing, weeping – it was only the woman who paused. The mirror was always one breath too late to catch the breathing.*⁵

According to her, the role of an artist is to reveal the quintessential man (past, present, future, inner and outer); not the two-dimensional theme (time and place). Reality is expressed through the dynamism of the symbol. Realism is necrophilia – a type of death in life:

*I saw the mirror, not my death but the image of myself in the tomb. I was wearing a brooch without stones, a crinoline with all its silk covering eaten away.*⁶

Reflection in the mirror is two-dimensional, static and stylized. It is indicative of the many varieties of artificial behavior and meaningless conventions that have come to be associated with modern civilization. In Ladders to Fire there is an example. Lillian, the aggressive woman, who demands reticent femininity, finds that 'the mirrors were scarred from the exigent way she extracted from them a satisfactory image for herself'. Conventions are taught. Artificial behavior is learned. So, children are not concerned with mirrors. The actress, Stella, who unnecessarily tries to become her screen (mirror) image nostalgically, reminisces:

*She could not remember what she saw in the mirror as a child. Perhaps a child never looks at the mirror. Perhaps a child like a cat is so much inside of itself it does not see itself in the mirror. She sees a child... The child is one. At one with himself. Never outside of himself.*⁷

Neurosis is a pattern of unnatural behavior, for which again the mirror is an appropriate symbol. In Seduction of the Minotaur, we find use of a mirror symbol that underlines the difference between the 'native' and the 'modern'. The native sees with a physical, naked vision; the modern white man sees with dark glasses.

Nin has used symbolism for all her three levels and this mirror had been taken as symbol on all these levels. On metaphorical level it refers to the empirical world, on aesthetic level it refers to realism, and on the psychological level it refers to neurosis. On the other hand, she takes garden as a symbol of reality, which provides a more satisfactory experience:

The garden had an air of nudity. Djuna let her eye melt into the garden. The garden had an air of nudity, of efflorescence, of abundance, of plentitude.

The salon was gilded, the people were costumed for false roles, the lights and the faces were attenuated, the gestures were starched – all but Lillian whose nature had not been stylized, compressed or gilded, and whose nature was warring with piano.

Music did not open doors. Nature flowered, caressed, spilled, relaxed, slept. In the gilded frames, the ancestors were mummified forever, and descendants took the same poses...

And then, as Djuna's eyes followed the path carpeted with detached leaves, her eyes encountered for the first time three full-length mirrors placed among the bushes and flowers as casually as in a boudoir. Three mirrors.

The eyes of the people inside could bear the nudity of the garden, its exposure. The eyes of the people had needed the mirrors, delighted in the fragility of reflections. All the truth of the garden, the moisture, and the worms, the insects and the roots, the running sap and the rotting bark, had all to be reflected in the mirrors.⁸

Nin used the garden symbol for natural and positive expression. The garden recalls the place in which man and nature were in harmony, as well as the time when man was able to preserve the meaning directly, before his vision was darkened. All these traditional implications are accepted and have been used for all these three levels. Nin's garden is the equivalent of Emerson's nature as a symbol of reality. Whoever reads the symbolic text becomes like Emerson's poet. Henry Miller rightly suggested that 'Nin was influenced by American Transcendentalist and his disciples, Thoreau and Whitman'. We may consider the lyrical passage from House of Incest:

Significance stares at me from everywhere like a gigantic underlying ghostliness. Significance emerges out of dark alleys and somber faces, leans out of the windows of strange houses. I am constantly reconstructing in a pattern of something forever lost and which I cannot forget. I catch the odours of the past on street corners and I am aware of the men who will be born tomorrow. Behind windows there are either enemies or worshippers. Never neutrality or passivity. Always intention and premeditation. Even stones have for me druidical expressions.⁹

Emerson considers nature to be an essential attraction and subject for the poet. Nin also shapes her concept of the desired literature being based on the theory of reality. Coleridge, too, rightly mentioned that symbol partakes of the reality. Nin affirms the idea saying: 'Modern art is a return of the symbol'.

Nin's imagery is very original, accurate and concrete. Her writing is concerned with feelings more than the actions. She depicts weariness: 'Greyness is not greyness, but a vast lead roof which covers the world like the lid of a soup pan'. Her concrete image provides her writings the maximum economy and intensity. Concreteness establishes her realistic and poetic quality and adds to her qualification. As a result, she joins the class of D. H. Lawrence and Matthew Arnold. Literature is filled with this reality and only poetry can guide the 'Lost Generation of America' as 'The significance is the drama. The meaning is what illuminates the fact, coordinates them, incarnates them. The creation of a story is a quest for meaning'.

The symbols in Nin's writings are positive, creative and healthy. On the metaphysical level they refer to transcendental reality; on the aesthetic level to the poetic style and form; and on the psychological level to the naturalness, spontaneity and creativity.

According to Nin, a true artist visualizes both, himself and his time, objectively. Then only, he projects himself, not impulsively onto nature, but deliberately onto art. She speaks of Lawrence:

However much he puts himself into his books, he is above all an artist, since he can stand off from and observe critically even his most passionate feelings and convictions.¹⁷

References:

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5. Anais Nin, Under a Glass Bell and Other Stories, (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1966), p. 41
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