

FICTIONAL TECHNIQUES IN THE NOVELS OF ANITA DESAI

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The word “technique” is derived from Greek word “techniko techno” meaning an art. Technique in fiction includes almost everything that goes into making the novel. Simplistically speaking, technique includes everything that the novelist uses for narrating his 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 other aspects of fictional technique. Some novelists are deliberately conscious of technique and rely on technical innovations and some are satisfied with the mere basics. The word technique is derived from Greek word technikos techni meaning an art. Now we have to study her fictional technique in relation to her different novels. Curiously there is not a large corpus of criticism on her fictional technique and critics have addressed themselves to other aspects of her novels. Perhaps it is because she is not considered a technical innovator but it does not mean that she has no technique. As Mark Scorer has written no written can be without technique, as no painter can paint without brush and palette, so is the case with Anita Desai.

Desai’s experiments with non-traditional materials and technique give her a distinct position among the Indian English novelists. Her fondness for quotes from various writers serves a definite purpose. Desai’s style or technique of delivering the

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thematic thrust is the vital agent; Language is the main element of her narrative style. Her use of language and dialogues is one of the features of her artistically conceived novels.

Her first Novel Cry, The Peacock (1962) is a poetic novel with dense imagery. Her descriptions are poetic. Maya is not only emotionally starved but sexually also. Her frustration is of not getting physical pleasure; she expresses her dissatisfaction in the following manner. It is an act of delicate violence shown on jasmine buds:

In a damp, white handkerchief, gathered into a nest, lay a heap of white jasmine buds that the gardener had plucked from the dawn fresh hedges that morning, for me to thread into garlands for my hair and wrists, and which, for some reason, I had forgotten. There they lay, almost palpitating with living breath, open white, virginal. I plunged my face into them and kissed them with a wild longing to pierce through that unimpeachable immaculate chastity of whiteness, to the very soul of their maddening fragrance. What dreams they conjured in swirls of scent, what passions, what scenes of love and farewell.....? I tore myself away from them, having bruised them with my kisses, and trembling, flung them against the mirror, at that fleeting image to which they belonged, and backed out of the room which was now terrorized by the vast, purple shadows of a dreadful night.¹

Maya's overcharged sensibilities are described through animal imagery, on one hand there is the majestic image of the peacock, and on the other the grotesque. This is how her neurotic state is described through a vision:

“Wild horse, white horse, galloping up paths of stone, flying away into the distance, the wild hills. The heights, the dizzying heights of my mountains, towering, tapering, edged with cliff-edges, founded on rock. Fall, fall, gloriously fall to the bed of racing rivers, foaming seas. Horrid

arms, legs, tentacles thrashing, blood flowing, eyes glazing. Storm - storm at sea, at land! Fury. whip. Lash, Fly furiously. Danger! Danger! The warning rings and echoes, from far, far, far. Run and hide, run and hide, run and hide - if you can, miserable fool! Ha, ha. Fool, fool.

And we are informed later that this vision is caused by fever:

“I am in a fever. Stop me! Silence me! Or I will fly on, fly up, at you, through you, past you, and away. For I am ill. I am in a fever, God, in a fever.”

Cry, The Peacock, uses technique of fantasy. Desai describes the inner loneliness of Maya and the vision described above tells of her mental state. It is creditable that in her first novel Anita Desai has given such inner probing of Maya's psyche. The novel has earned good comments as “A poetry-novel, has a great sense of place.” (*Sunday Telegraph, U.K.*) Moon symbolism is also used in the novel. It is on a moon-lit night when Maya pushes Gautama off the roof. And the reason for immediate provocation was that Gautama came between her and the worshipped moon.

Thus the novel is rich in technique using language in poetic manner and thus the novelist is able to explore and portray femme the psyche of Maya who after killing her husband goes back to her father's house at Lucknow and retrogress to her childhood days, lost in her toys and the happy world of the childhood.

Her second novel *Voices In The City* (1965), is an interesting novel and the title itself is an example of technique. Some critics have observed that in the novel the city is important, and is skillfully handled by her, they have compared it with that of Dicken's London and Hardy's Egdon-Heath.

The city is described in much detail, an oppressive city, a dying city but all the same exercising a powerful influence on all the three characters. This has been amply made clear in the Amla Section of the novel. The city has been described as a monster city:

..... That this monster city that lived no normal healthy, red-blooded life but one that was subterranean, underlet, stealthy and odorous of mortality, had captured and enchanted - or disenchanting both her sister and brother.²

Anita Desai also uses the technique of symbolism in the novel. The city itself is symbolic but there is also nature symbolism in section III 'Amla'. She 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 externalises mental state of Amla.

The nature imagery here externalises the mental state of Amla, as though she too has been sucked out of vitality. The thrill and excitement of reaching a big city has disappeared and there is nothing but despair and exhaustion.

All the tingle and the thrill of entering the big city, of beginning a new career, all that now curled up inside her tired head and went to sleep. She was aware only of this giant exhaustion growing and swelling inside her, of a feeling of sick apprehension and despair.³

The above instance illustrates well Anita Desai's fictional technique because externalising the "inscape" of a character is not easy because emotions are abstract things and for a creative writer externalising inner feelings is an artistic challenge. In order to do this one resorts to different kinds of literary techniques.

Anita Desai's next novel is *Where Shall We Go This Summer* (1975), It is divided into three parts namely "Monsoon (67), "Winter (47)" and "Monsoon" (67)". The section division refers to the present and the past of the novel and thereby the childhood and the youth of the heroine Sita. The structure of the novel has received critical attention, and one of the critics finds the novel "strikingly familiar to that of Virginia Woolf's *The Light House*" Anita Desai's Fictional Techniques.

It is observed that the structure of the novel is co-related with the content of the story:

The triptych structure of the novel neatly forms the pattern of the thesis, anti-thesis, and synthesis. Sita's consciousness develops through the process of consideration, rejection and then acceptance of the terms of life within this structure. She makes a new life for herself and is eager to let the new life in her to be borne in this world. It is said that she has to give up her individuality to some extent in order to accept; but only in this gesture is sanity.⁴

Her next novel *Fire On The Mountain* (1977), is a novel in which she makes use of symbolism. She also makes use of the flash back technique in narrating the story. The novel centers around the character of Nanda Kaul, the widow of vice-chancellor who is compelled both by choice and circumstances 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 attention of her grand-daughter Raka she spins several fantastic tales about her father. It is interesting to note that it is a grown-up person and not the child who goes into the world of fantasy. The use of fantasy in the novel has attracted critical attention and one of the critics has observed that Anita Desai has used fantasy not only in this novel but 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 life that in the evening of her life she wants to do nothing with family or society. She prefers her lonely isolated existence guarding her privacy fiercely and the news of Raka's arrival, conveyed to her through a letter, unsettles her. What she wanted was total withdrawal from society and hating human society so much so as to yearn to be a tree, a part of nature. In the authorial description in the Chapter I a parallel has been shown between her and a tree:

She was grey, tall and thin and her silk sari made a sweeping, shivering sound and she fancied she could merge with the pine trees and be mistaken for one. To be tree, no more and no less, was all she was prepared to undertake.⁵

But human beings cannot be trees howsoever they may yearn for it. This is the only novel of Anita Desai in which nature plays such a vital role on the level of symbolism and imagery and it has to be accepted that she makes effective use of this technique to portray different characters. The title itself deals with nature. The Fire and the Mountain both are natural phenomena. However, in this instance the fire is man-made, to be more specific Raka made. Although at times forest is a fire on its own a happening called in Sanskrit Forest conflagration, why does Raka set the mountain on fire is a different question which does not come in the scope of the present chapter.

As in other novels in *Fire On The Mountain*, too Anita Desai uses poetry and this time it is a poem by G.M. Hopkins. Although here the use of poem is not so significant yet it has some connection with the character of Nanda Kaul who quotes it and the poem signifies her desire to be away from humdrum of life, to a heaven of nature far from the madding crowd.

A Critical Study of the Novels of Anita Desai vision which Deven finds himself hopelessly trapped. This vision may be compared with the neurotic vision of Maya in *Cry, The Peacock*, although Deven is no neurotic. In the last page of the novel Deven is wondering where the end of it if there is any end and then he has a vision:

He had a vision of Nur's bier, white, heaped with flowers, rose and marigold, bright blazing flowers on the white sheet. He saw the women in the family weeping and wailing around it. He heard the funeral music play. He saw the shroud, the grave - open. When Nur was laid in it, would this connection break this relation end? No, never - the bills would come to him, he would have to pay for the funeral, support the widows, and raise his son.....⁶

Thus the title of the novel is very significant but curiously enough no critic has addressed himself to this vital aspect of the novel which is a part of Desai's fictional technique. However, at least one critic has written about the use of fantasy in narrative technique of the novel, observing:

It develops the theme of adventure, the attraction of the unusual... fantasy lies here in the narrative technique which combines the realistic and the romantic modes. It is not character which is important but incident or situation.⁷

As in her other novels in *In Custody*, also there are references to poetry. This time the poems are recited by Nur himself but significantly Nur's own poetry is never quoted, rather it is Nur's favourite English poets who are quoted. And the quoted poets are the famous romantics like Byron, Shelley and Keats and the lines quoted are from *Ode To The West wind*, *Ode To A Nightingale* and *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*. The poems quoted have some bearing upon Nur's character as inferred by Deven:

The recitation was so long, so filled with finely timed pauses and gestures that Deven had begun to wonder if it did not have some bearing upon that aspect of the poet's private life into which he has unwillingly had such a terrifying glimpse, and had even begun to see certain psychological connections...⁸

The plot of the novel is intricately connected with the characters of Deven and Nur. In the beginning it is Deven through whose action the plot moves but as soon as Murad asks him to interview the poet, the actions are more controlled by the poet rather than by Deven or Murad. The central incident of the novel is the interview and all other actions are related to and subordinate to it. It is true that the main doer is Deven but all his Anita Desai's Fictional Techniques

Anita Desai's fifth novel *Clear Light Of Day* (1980), is once again a family drama covering a long period of time beginning from childhood of the Das children to their maturity and historically two periods that of colonial and independent India. The novel has elicited criticism but little on the technique aspect. Jasbir Jain comments on the use of fantasy in the novel. Anita Desai makes use of poetry in the novel but what is more important is that she quotes lines from two poems by Emily Dickinson and

T.S. Eliot as epigraphs to the novel. From the point of view of techniques the most important thing about this novel is the effective use of poetry. She also makes use of flashback technique which is appropriate, since the novel covers a long period of time, a generation as observed earlier.

Anita Desai's latest novel *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988) is a novel that deals with the modern phenomenon of displaced persons. Like *Clear Light Of Day*, this novel also covers a long period of time of almost fifty years beginning with the rise of Nazism in Germany to the late 1960s and 1970s. The locale of the novel is Germany and India. As in *Clear Light Of Day*, this novel too has an epigraph which is once again from T.S. Eliot. And this time from "East Coker" from four quartets: Anita Desai's Fictional Techniques "In my beginning is my end. In succession Houses rise and fall, crumble are extended, are removed, destroyed, restored...."

In the context of the novel what signifies is the first line: "In my beginning is my end," in the sense that Baumgartner's life, except for this short happy childhood is full of frustrations and misery. Since after leaving Germany she has neither a family nor familial relationship, therefore "Houses rise and fall, has no significance for him except in his memories. Significantly in the very first chapter Baumgartner thinks of his mother and her endearing words for him, 'Meine Kleine Maus, 'Mein Haschen, Liebchen... He has preserved on the letters and postcards that he had received from his mother after he had left his fatherland in Germany for good. The first chapter of the novel uses flashback technique from the present to past and what a difference between the two the past prosperous and cosy and the present almost a tramp somehow making the two ends meet. His childhood is recalled through many of German songs and poems which are scattered throughout the novel. Unfortunately, since no English paraphrase to German is given, we cannot make out the meaning. Yet we can make out that some poems are songs to his happy childhood and later in the novel when he is a POW in British India there are songs describing Nazi Germany. Fortunately, in chapter four there is an English rendering of Nazi song which, however, has the significance

for Baumgartner, because his race has been persecuted by the Nazis but he is compelled to participate along with other Germans. It is a song celebrating the fatherland along with description of the Rhine. The novel is full of German songs even though Baumgartner had forgotten his own mother tongue having been away from Germany for such a long time.

Thus, she uses different fictional techniques according to the demands of the story. Except for her use of poetry in her novels we may not call her a technical innovator, and who can be an innovator when the novel is being written in English for last two hundred years. From the point of view of technique what is important is not innovation or novelty but how effective the technique is in conveying the meaning and narrating the story effectively. We have novelists John Burroughs, but in the context of Anita Desai we have no hesitation to say that she is able 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 uses flashback technique, 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 rhetorical skill for harangue. And to create realistic effect she also uses Hindi words but in moderation. The only thing that irks us is her use of German songs and poetry in her novels without giving English paraphrase, as though English readers whether in India or abroad are supposed to know German.

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- 2 Anita Desai, *Voices In The City*, (Delhi, Orient Paperbacks, 1965), p. 150.
- 3 Ibid, p.149.

- 4 Vimla Rao, "Where Shall We Go This Summer, An Analytical Study,"
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- 5 Anita Desai, *Fire On The Mountain*, p. 1.
- 6 Anita Desai, *In Custody*, (London, William Heinemann Limited, 1984), p. 168.
- 7 Jasbir Jain, *Stairs To The Attic: The Novels Of Anita Desai*, (Jaipur, Prinwell Publishers), 1987, p. 53.
- 8 *In Custody*, p. 157.

