
Themes and Techniques in Anita Desai's Major Novels

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Abstract

Anita Desai is considered to be one of the most distinguished novelists in Indian English literature. She is different from other contemporary women writers in Indian writing in English in terms of her perception and of her unique style. Anita Desai has emerged as a very serious, skilled and promising novelist in India. As an uncrowned queen by the inner-emotional world, she dexterously transcribes the subconscious, the phantasmagoria of her highly sensitive protagonists. Desai has tried to present her themes originally with appropriate adjustment and adaptations in spheres of style and point of view. Desai is no doubt a great artist with a remarkable and astounding technical efficacy. Her technique enriches the novel by lifting it above the mere narration of a story or depiction of a character and provides it the very life, blood and the soul. She is interested in exploring life and illuminating the depth of visible world.

Keywords: Technique, narration, theme, style, language, nostalgia, symbolism.

Introduction

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. 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. The foregoing study of the theme and technique in the novel of Anita Desai leads us to draw certain inferences. The aspects of theme and technique in Anita Desai's novels are not isolated elements. They are inter-related at many levels of structure and texture. In order to convey her theme, the novelist judiciously uses character, situation, dialogues, and other element in relation to the plot. 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 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. In different novels Desai has adopted different narrative strategies in keeping with the demands of her themes. In all her novels, Anita Desai uses the memories of the past as a method of evaluating the individual's relationship with the present. Nostalgia thus becomes a narrative technique in her novels. The journey backwards is both a medium of self-knowledge and a mechanism to confront the harsh reality. Her protagonists are caught in adult life and it is from a particular stage in their life that they try to relate their past to their present.

Cry, the Peacock

Her first Novel *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) is a poetic novel with dense imagery. Her descriptions are poetic. Over the last thirty-seven years since the publication of her novel, Desai's vision of life has also undergone a marked transformation. *Cry, the Peacock* is a novel the theme of which may be described as an incompatible marriage with the focus on the heroine's psyche. Since primarily it is a psychological novel, probing the workings of Maya's psyche, the narrative is not chronologically straight. There is a constant to and fro movement between the past and the present in the mind of Maya. In this novel she does it by making use of the weird animal imagery which suggests her disturbed state of mind. Such imagery is to be seen in contrast to the majestic image of the peacock which is the central symbol of the novel as suggested by the title. *Cry, the Peacock* is a psychological study of the hypersensitive, childless, young protagonist Maya who, haunted by a childhood prophecy of disaster, kills her elderly detached husband in a fit of frenzy. Finally, she goes completely mad and commits suicide. This novel 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 inquiring of Maya's psyche. Thus the novel is rich in technique using language in poetic manner and thus the novelist is able to explore 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.

Voices in the City

Desai's 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. A striking feature of Desai's narrative technique in *Voices in the City* is her use of the city of Calcutta. Calcutta portrayed as an oppressive city not only forms the backdrop to the action but also becomes a character in the novel, exercising a powerful influence on all the major characters. Desai describes Calcutta at least twenty times in order to accomplish the difficult task of

integrating it into the plot. In this novel, as in Desai's most other novels, symbolism and fantasy are used as significant narrative techniques. The city itself is used as a powerful symbol. Calcutta conceived as a force of creation, preservation and destruction is ultimately identified as a symbol of Mother Kali, the goddess of death and destruction. 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 disenchanted both her sister and brother (Desai *VC* 150).

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.

Bye-Bye, Blackbird

Anita Desai's third novel, *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* (1971) deals with the theme of coloured immigrants in England. It presents their difficulties of adjustment and explores their fragmented psyche. Desai employs the flashback technique to narrate the situation leading to the marriage of Adit and Sarah. The division of the three parts of the novel and the titling of the second and third parts as 'Discovery and Recognition' and 'Departure' respectively also involves clever narrative technique. This has helped Desai to express her themes and execute her ideas systematically and effectively. Nostalgia is also used in this novel as a narrative technique. But it is used here a bit differently. Adit's nostalgia for the hilsa fish and the Bengal atmosphere is an expression of a need to belong and to bridge the gulf between London and Calcutta. For both Sarah and Adit reality exists at two schizophrenic planes, the two contrasting planes of the two cultural traditions and the merger takes place only with Adit's decision to return to India.

Where Shall We Go This Summer?

Anita Desai's next novel, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975) is structurally akin to Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Both trace the flux of the protagonist's consciousness through three successive stages of perception, memory and dream. 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 (Rao 176-177).

Apart from using fantasy, flashback and symbols, Anita Desai uses poetry as a narrative technique in this novel.

Fire on the Mountain

Desai's 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 novel also makes use of fantasy and it is Nanda Kaul who lives in the world of fantasy. This novel demonstrates the novelist's basic technique of fiction as montage. It is indeed a subtle technique as a process of discovery, a mode of projecting a vision. In fact it is a craft which cannot be dissociated from the constituents of the art of fiction, such as the rhythm, the prophecy, the portrayal of individual and social reality, and the visionary quality of imagination. This is a distinctive novel primarily because it is a mosaic of many patterns. In no other novel of Desai's has this mosaic of the human and the natural, the past and the present, the individual and the social, the inner and the outer, the transient and the eternal, been portrayed with such great power and poignancy. Thus technique becomes a mode of discovery through contrasted conditions of human consciousness pitted against an apathetic social reality. Here also Desai employs the technique of presenting two contrasting characters together so that each is defined in terms of the other.

This is the only novel of Anita Desai in which nature plays such a vital role on the level 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.

Clear Light of Day

Anita Desai's fifth novel *Clear Light of Day* (1980) is once again a family drama. This novel is, as Desai has herself said in an interview:

A four-dimensional piece on how a family's life moves backwards and forwards in a period of time (*INDIA TODAY* 142).

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. The novel is divided into four parts. Each of these deals with distinct periods in the lives of the principal characters, the first and the last of them being set in the present. Desai too, feels that her novel is about:

Time as a destroyer, as a preserver,
and about what the bondage of time
does to people (*INDIA TODAY* 142).

In this novel Anita Desai also makes use of flashback technique which is appropriate, since the novel covers a long period of time, a generation as observed earlier.

In Custody

Anita Desai's seventh novel *In Custody* (1984) employs that third person omniscient narrator to tell the story of Deven Sharma, a temporary lecturer in a private college in Mirpore, a suburb of Delhi. 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 achiever is Deven but all his Anita Desai's Fictional Techniques. In this novel also fantasy is a significant part of the narrative technique. It develops the theme of adventure. Deven, a weak romantic incapable of facing crises, seeks relief in fantasy and in the rich promises of Urdu poetry. The title of the novel is also a significant aspect of the narrative technique. It throws a flood of light on the message of this novel : in taking somebody into custody, one has to surrender oneself to the other's custody. 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.

Baumgartner's Bombay

Baumgartner's Bombay (1988) deals with the modern phenomenon of immigrated persons. This novel is a moving account of a homeless, nation less man. He has nowhere to go to regain his lost identity. More poignant than the other novels, it narrates the story of Hugo from his affluent childhood days in Germany to the horror of his murder in India by another German. The series of calamities – losing his home, business and finally his mother makes him mute and accepting.

Defeat was heaped on him whether
he deserved it or not (Desai *BB*
135).

Hugo Baumgartner, the protagonist, is a simple honest German Jew who is forced to flee his native land following the rise of violent anti-Semitic feelings in Hitler's Germany. The technique of flashback is used first to focus on a period shortly before Baumgartner's death and establish the circumstances and relationships affecting Baumgartner and Lotte late in life. Desai very suggestively underscores the new identity that Baumgartner assumes in India late in life. The use of the past is a significant narrative technique in this novel. Thus, the technique Desai employs in this novel is a perfect vehicle for projecting the themes of alienation and isolation.

Journey to Ithaca

Anita Desai's ninth novel, *Journey to Ithaca* (1995) marks a departure from the Desai canon in more ways than one. It is not as much concerned with inadequacies of interpersonal relationship or quest for an authentic existence in a hostile world as some of her previous novels. Here for the first time Desai deals with a theme that may be called spiritual. In this novel Desai employs chiefly the third-person narration. The omniscient narrator gradually unfolds before us the story of multiple journeys. There is a fine blend of showing and telling. Desai uses the flash-back technique with remarkable skill to illumine the past and the present of Matteo, Sophie and the Mother. Desai deftly weaves the journey motif into the pattern of the novel. The spiritual odysseys of the three protagonists run parallel to each other, intersecting each other only at significant junctures to illumine their paths and clarify their vision. Thus, in this novel also Desai's narrative technique proves to be a perfect tool for projecting her complex vision of life.

In *Journey to Ithaca* Desai employs chiefly the third-person narration. The omniscient narrator gradually unfolds before us the story of multiple journeys. There is a fine blend of showing and telling. The author shows us more than he tells. There is also a clever juxtaposition of the past and the present. Desai uses the flash-back technique with remarkable skill to illumine

the past and the present of Matteo, Sophie and the Mother.

Fasting, Feasting

Desai's latest novel *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) examines family life in two contrasting cultures and draws two different worlds-Indian and American. Appropriately the novel is divided into two parts. The novel is a third-person narrative. The omniscient narrator 'shows' as well as 'tells' while projecting the themes. Desai does not use the chronological narration. In this novel Desai uses quotes from the Bible, Hindu devotional songs, American catchphrases frequently to lend local colour to her narrative. These enable her to capture the very spirit of the atmosphere she wants to create. Thus language is an important component of Desai's narrative design in this novel. She uses it adroitly as a tool to serve her thematic purpose and project her vision.

Through the technique of contrast Desai builds up images of two worlds, in every sense poles apart. Melanie who is cloyed with rich food is obviously intended to be a foil for Uma who hardly gets to eat any delicacies. While Melanie "feasts", Uma obviously "fasts". Uma is shackled by traditions and obligations but Melanie is free as a bird. These contrasts are, however, merely superficial. Deep down, they are both famished. Fasting and feasting, as Arun learns, are merely the two sides of the same coin. *Fasting, Feasting* is a carefully balanced novel of contrasts : between foods; between Indian family life and American family life; as well as between East and West in a broader sense, between lack and excess; and, between lack of ambition (for Uma and Melanie) and too much ambition (for Arun and Rod). But, what the novel ultimately reveals are the similarities rather than the differences.

The Zigzag Way

The Zigzag Way (2004), Anita Desai's latest novel, is the story of twentieth century Mexico, through the turbulence of the revolution and personal calamity; of the exploitation of the Mexican Indians, and their dubious saviours, such as the formidable Dona Vera, widow of a mining baron, and Eric's own grandmother, a young Cornish girl whose grave lies in a hillside cemetery. The novel is set in Mexico, with not an Indian character in sight. Anita Desai had previously written in *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* about Indians facing the reality of an England that did not want them; she had looked at foreigners coming to India in search of enlightenment in *Journey to Ithaca*, and of course the marvelous isolation of a German Jew stuck in Bombay in *Baumgartner's Bombay*.

Conclusion

The above survey of fictional technique of Anita Desai in her different novels shows that she uses different fictional techniques according to the demands of the story. 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. In her style, Anita Desai is very much occupied with the skill of communication, irrespective of 'the nature of experience', embodied in her novels. Anita Desai's penchant for sound of words persists in all her novels. She is carried away

by the music in words. It is, therefore, quite clear that in this novel also Desai's narrative technique is an apt vehicle of her themes. There is a harmonious balance between the form and the content of this novel, which, as in Desai's other novels, contributes significantly to the projection of a unified artistic vision. It is therefore quite clear that Desai's technique in an apt vehicle of her themes. There is a harmonious balance between the form and the content of Desai's novels, contributes significantly to the projection of a unified artist vision.

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