

LITERARY STYLE AND NARRATIVE FRAMEWORK IN ANITA DESAI'S CRY, THE PEACOCK AND VOICES IN THE CITY

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ABSTRACT

Anita Desai, a prominent contemporary Indian novelist, masterfully blends psychological depth with poetic prose. Her novels emphasize the complexities of the human mind, often using innovative narrative techniques to explore inner realities rather than societal reflections. Desai's narrative structure focuses on psychological states through vivid imagery, symbolism, and introspection. Desai employs techniques like stream of consciousness, flashbacks, and free indirect discourse to delve into the protagonists' psyches, revealing their internal struggles. Her poetic use of language crafts a subjective universe, where characters seek self-fulfillment amidst societal constraints. While her focus on psychological intricacy and aesthetic design distinguishes her work, Desai's narrative innovations remain rooted in the broader literary tradition, reflecting a balance between technical sophistication and emotional resonance. Her novels ultimately depict a poignant interplay between the inner rhythms of the mind and the external world.

Keywords: Stream of Consciousness, Symbolism, Imagery, Narrative Perspective, Lyrical Novel, Internal Narration

1. INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai, a distinguished contemporary Indian novelist, possesses a dual talent: a profound understanding of the complexities of the human psyche and the ability to compose prose of such evocative richness that it frequently attains the concise and artistic quality of poetry.

Her novels showcase the diverse dimensions of narrative craftsmanship. The term "technique" originates from the Greek *technikos* and *techni*, signifying art or skill. Its hypothetical Indo-European root, *tekth-*, means to weave, construct, or connect, which also gave rise to the Greek word *takton*, meaning carpenter.

In Latin, the term *texere* later came to signify "to weave" or "to construct." Consequently, in its original form, the word denoted a practical art, whether referring to the construction of a building or the weaving of fabric. The term, initially associated with practical arts, eventually extended to encompass literature. As a realm of imagination, literature relies on borrowing language from the "practical" world to serve its purposes. Just as an artisan or skilled craftsman employs specific tools, techniques, and methods to produce a tangible creation, such as a piece of furniture or a tapestry, a literary artist similarly utilizes various tools, devices, and methods to craft a literary work.

The term technique, in the context of literature, encompasses a broad range of meanings. When novelists create a novel, they communicate their central theme through a narrative composed of specific events involving particular

characters. As the novel is inherently a verbal medium, the story must be conveyed through narration. Storytelling, being a fundamental human instinct, is an integral aspect of literature across all languages, including those without a written script, where stories have been passed down orally through generations. The narrative approach employed in the context was rudimentary; however, it undeniably qualified as narrative. Over time, the art of storytelling and the craft of fiction underwent significant refinement. In the late nineteenth century, the French critic Gustave Flaubert articulated a renowned principle, stating that "the artist is like God, present everywhere but seen nowhere." This dictum implies that, while a writer exercises omniscience in creating characters, objectivity and artistic detachment necessitate refraining from overtly favoring or aligning with them. Another noteworthy evolution in narrative style was the emphasis on maintaining an uninterrupted flow, free from authorial commentary or direct engagement with the reader—practices favored by Victorian novelists and, later, by the otherwise exemplary novelist Thomas Hardy.

This disrupts the concept of make-believe and undermines what Coleridge aptly described as the "willing suspension of disbelief." Typically, novelists employ the technique of an omniscient narrator, wherein the author possesses complete knowledge of the narrative, delving into the minds of various characters and unveiling their thought processes to the audience. The term "technique in fiction" encompasses nearly all elements involved in the creation of a novel.

Technique encompasses all the methods and devices employed by a novelist to narrate their story. On a more detailed level, it refers to elements such as imagery, symbolism, narrative perspective, the chronological arrangement of events, stream of consciousness, the structuring of chapters, or other organizing principles of the novel. Additionally, aspects such as dialogue, language, characterization, and plot form integral components of fictional technique. While some novelists consciously focus on refining and innovating these techniques, others may adhere to more fundamental approaches.

At the turn of the century, numerous writers, including Andre Gide, Joseph Conrad, Herman Hesse, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Henry James, recognized that traditional novel-writing techniques—such as the use of point of view and narrative plot—could be employed not only to construct a plausible representation of the external world but also to create formal structures that mirror the internal, subjective experience. This notion was succinctly articulated by Irwin Howe, who expressed a similar perspective.

"In the past hundred years we have had a special kind of literature. We call it modern and distinguish it from the merely contemporary, for where contemporary refers to time, the modern refers to the sensibility and style, and where the contemporary is a term of neutral references, the modern is a term of critical placement and judgement."¹

The novels of Anita Desai are "modern" in the very sense of the word suggested above. Meena Belliappa writes in her book, *Anita Desai: A Study of her Fiction*: "The focus of interest has shifted from girlish romance to a more complex search for value in human relationship."² The primary focus is on depicting states of mind rather than reflecting societal realities. The narrative structure is typically vertical, aiming to convey the internal atmosphere of the mind and actively engage the reader in the stream of a specific consciousness.

Form and structure, in the novels of Anita Desai, 'take the shape of an exquisitely designed tapestry.'³ "The story and the novel, the idea and the form, are the needle and thread," says Henry James, "the cultivation of this success, the study of this exquisite process... is the beginning and the end of the art of the novelist."⁴

¹ Howe, Irwing, *The idea of the Modern in Literature and Art*. New York: Horizon Press. 1967, pp. 12-13

² Belliappa, Meena, *Anita Desai: A Study of Her Fiction*. Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1977, p. 52

³ Freedman, Ralph. *The Lyrical Novel*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1963, p.4

⁴ *Ibid*, p.57

Anita Desai's novels reflect her distinctive worldview while simultaneously aligning with prevailing trends in contemporary fiction. Her novels are technical innovations which "combine features of both novel and lyrical poetry and shift the reader's attention from men and events to a formal design."⁵ She herself prefers the word 'pattern' to plot:

"I prefer the word 'pattern' to 'plot' as it sounds-more natural and even better, if I dare use it, is Hopkin's, word 'inscape' – while 'plot' sounds arbitrary heavy-handed and artificial, all that I wish to avoid."⁶

For Anita Desai, the primary focus is not on the theme itself but on the interplay of the inner and outer rhythms of the human psyche, which she considers paramount:

“My novels don’t have themes – at least not till they are finished, published or read, do I see any theme. While writing, I follow my instinct, I follow flashes of insight, I veer away from or even fight anything that threatens to distort or destroy this insight, and somehow come to the end and look back to see the pattern of footprints on the sand.”⁷

According to Irwin Howe: “The modernists anticipate the preoccupation with Psychic inwardness, by means of which the self is transformed into a cosmic centre and mover, as this will later become characteristic of certain modernist writers, but they still seek to relate this preoccupation to transcendental values, if not sources, in the external world. For them the universe is still alert, still the active transmitter of spiritual signs.”⁸

In the light of the above observation, Anita Desai is a modernist who shares some common features with other prominent writers of our times. Some salient features peculiar to this kind of writing have been discussed in detail by Ralph Freedman:

“The main figure in the novel is the symbolic hero, a passive purveyor of visions, who in quest of meaning of life absorbs the external world and mirrors it in all its multitudinous manifestations. He is also an aesthetic image who wears the novelist’s mask and thus through his contradictory self, in the end, produces a picture of a unified or total self.”⁹

The romanticized hero, through their journey, attains a moment of profound recognition, allowing them to embody an abstract representation of universal ideals. This transcendental or romanticized hero symbolizes a spiritual connection between humanity and the universe, evolving from personal, subjective experience to a structured and formal expression.

The hero’s telescopic self operates through physical objects that act as catalysts, triggering hallucinations and dreams, which are conveyed through a sequence of vivid image-based scenes. The technique of ironic juxtaposition is employed to enhance the intensity of emotional expression. The prose poems may adopt various forms, ranging from ironic or passionate to brutally realistic, profoundly symbolic, allegorical, or parabolic. The protagonists’ past experiences play a pivotal role in shaping their present consciousness. Consequently, the plot progresses through the fluctuations of memory, with the hero assuming the role of a wanderer traversing both space and time.

These novels delve into psychological dramas, highlighting internal conflicts through an approach rooted in aesthetic objectivity. The poet-novelist reflects aspects of themselves within the narrative while maintaining a sense of detachment, ultimately crafting a spiritual self-representation. The interconnectedness of all living and non-living entities forms the central focus of the lyrical novelist’s work.

Lyrical novels can be described as extended prose poems characterized by a blend of subjective and objective perspectives. They are conveyed through a sequence of vivid imagery, where the symbolic hero or protagonist serves as a persona for the poet, facilitating a process of introspective self-analysis.

⁵ Ibid, p.1

⁶ Ram, Atma, “An Interview with Anita Desai”. *World Literature Written in English*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (November 1977). Reprinted in *Interviews with Indian English Writers*. Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1983, p. 101

⁷ Desai, Anita, “Replies to the Questionnaire” *Kakatiya Journal of English Studies*, Vol.3, No. 1, 1978, p.4

⁸ Howe, Irwing, *The idea of the Modern in Literature and Art*. New York: Horizon Press. 1967, p. 21

Anita Desai has adopted a controlled method of stream of consciousness. ‘Internal narration’⁹, a point of view within a character’s consciousness, manifesting his or her feelings about and evaluations of the events and characters of the story. It is used extensively in *Cry, the Peacock* and to a limited extent in *Voices in the City*. Major part of these writings include ‘free-indirect- discourse’¹⁰, indicating an internal perspective, in which the subjective feelings of protagonists

are transformed into third person narration and are interwoven with, and framed by the author's account of the character's inner state.

In *Cry, The Peacock*, the chief protagonist is Maya, who wears the poet narrator's mask and portrays the poetic vision through her public monologues.

The narrative of the novel flows seamlessly, carried by the ebb and flow of memory. Scenes from Maya's childhood are interwoven with her present circumstances and her preoccupation with perceived failures, influenced by the albino astrologer's ominous predictions. Maya emerges as a passive observer of her visions, her sense of self deeply intertwined with the objects and environment around her. The novel is marked by a lack of conventional action, with the sense of progression in the plot arising primarily from a continuous sequence of vivid images.

The novel opens with a vivid and symbolic scene in which the identities of the characters remain undisclosed until the conclusion of the chapter, subtly immersing the reader into the intricate inner world of Maya's psyche. Maya's symbolic self-portrait is meticulously constructed through the interplay of various characters and settings, including Gautam, Lila, Pom, Maya's father, Gautam's mother and sister, as well as through striking scenes such as the encounter with the albino astrologer, cabaret performances, dinner parties, and the climactic storm sequence. These elements collectively amplify the intensity of Maya's internal turmoil.

Maya, as the symbolic protagonist, assimilates both the animate and inanimate elements of her surroundings. Serving as the author's mask, she reshapes these experiences to reflect an aesthetic representation. The contrasting approach employed is evident in the two distinct realms between which Maya's consciousness oscillates—namely, the dreamlike world of her childhood and the tangible reality of Gautam's household and family. Maya vividly recounts her childhood days:

"The world is like a toy specially made for me, painted in my favourite colours, set moving to my favourite tune"¹¹

A doting father, who looked after this dream –child Maya, is remembered with special tenderness:

"He has looked after me alone and his beam is especially tender, his attention especially loving. I think, that he is like a silver oak himself, with his fine silver, white hair brushed smoothly across his bronzed scalp."¹²

Maya's after-marriage life is a complete change. Her husband Gautam holds:

"Reality and idealism are one and the same things. Life is

not a matter of distinguishing between the two, but of reconciling them."¹³

Maya's married life is juxtaposed with that of Lila and Pom, the self- contented beings, representing compromise in life:

"...what halted me was not a remembrance of Leila bitter, but a memory of Leila resigned. Had she raged, revolted, I should have rushed to her now."¹⁴

"It was natural, afterthoughts of Leila, to turn down a line of friends, sift them through my mind and come to Pom, the pink, plump, pretty Pom who did not speak of fate, who had never been ill, or overworked or bitter."¹⁵

Maya is rummaging through the cupboard, looking for the perfect sari to wear that day, her mind preoccupied with thoughts of her friends. In this poignant moment, she ultimately abandons her search, overwhelmed by the inner turmoil and her yearning for peace and comfort:

9 Fowler, Roger. Ed. *Essays on Style and Language*. London: University College. 1967, p. 135

10 Ibid, p.138

11 *Cry, the Peacock*, p. 35

12 *Cry, the Peacock*, p.37

13 Ibid, p.23

14 Ibid, p.53

"I ceased to hunt then, ceased to plan, merely laid my face into those cool cloths, odorous with camphor and lavender, that recalled mountain waters to me, ferns, and nights full of starts, for I found myself alone with them after all. There was not one of my friends who could act as an anchor anymore, and to whomsoever I turned for reassurance, betrayed me now."¹⁶

The very delicate vibrations of Maya's thought dominate the novel:

"Values were distorted in that macabre half light with its altering tints at an hour when those values could have been all important. What was true? What was lasting? What to believe in? What reject?"¹⁷

Maya has been shown as the aesthetic abstraction of the universal self:

"Lying here in the dark? He said, and drew a finger down my cheek. Fall, fall, long fall into the soft velvet well of the primordium, of original instinct, of first formed love."¹⁸

Maya reflects a spiritual image of man's relation to his universe:

"It was not only for his presence, his love that I longed for but mainly for the life that would permit me to touch him,... And not on Gautam alone, but on all the pulsating world around him,... – All that suggested life, and the great entrancing world to me who was doomed not to live."¹⁹

Just before acting on her unspoken decision, Maya experiences a profound sense of unity with nature, almost as if it's a transcendental moment:

"I continued to mount, step by step, to the roof, looking up to see the evening sky lowering itself to descend upon me till suddenly when I had burst out into the open we were one –the blue immensity and I."²⁰

This spiritual experience is the natural outcome of an inner conflict, which resolves itself gradually, through a series of probes and questionings and recognition of truth time to time. This poetic touch can be compared to Browning when he utters these following lines as a protagonist in "The Last Ride Together".

"Here lay the catalysis of my unrest I had grown too involved."²¹

"I entered a new vista of knowledge. I forced myself into believing that I could see now what must be the reason for my hating it so, for my hating it so, for Gautam's spurning it –visible to our subconscious only."²²

Maya detaches herself in order to reach this knowledge:

"Murder Shocked as though I had truly found a blemish in my unscarred skin. I drew away from mirror with a shudder I could no longer bear to see that clear, ignorant and insane face, and looked away."²³

Anita Desai not only adopts the style of a lyrical novel but also has her protagonist articulate words that embody this lyrical essence. Freedman says, "This process of telescoping self and world is based in the main on the idealistic epistemology of the time."²⁴

Maya redefines love and life in her own way. The lyrical point of view in this particular novel is the justification of the protagonists 'I'. Till the very end, she wished to be loved and understood:

"I was overcome with a desperate timidity,....

.. Less than that, he retreated to the outposts of his flat civilization and asked vaguely, half-interestingly, 'Toto? Who was that?' The words were as grim as any death sentence absolute and unredeemable."²⁵

¹⁵ Cry, the Peacock, p.54

¹⁶ Ibid, p.57

¹⁷ Ibid, p.75

¹⁸ Cry, the Peacock, p.15

¹⁹ Ibid, p.88

²⁰ Ibid, p.177

²¹ Cry, the Peacock, p.60

²² Ibid, p.91

²³ Ibid, p.91

²⁴ Freedman, Ralph. The Lyrical Novel. Princeton : Princeton University Press. 1963, p.20

²⁵ Ibid, p.164

The novel employs objects, scenes, and characters as visual figures to externalize and dramatize the protagonist's perspective. The meticulously crafted atmosphere of subjective objectivity elevates the work to the status of a true artistic creation.

Voices in the City, is a lyrical novel with a difference. The narrative's central focus is not embodied by a single individual but is represented collectively by three characters: Nirode, Monisha, and Amla, who offer contrasting perspectives that eventually converge towards the conclusion. The book is structured into four distinct sections. The first three sections explore the protagonists' individual quests, while the fourth serves as a broader spiritual synthesis, reflecting on the events and themes presented earlier. The storyline alternates between the past and present, with reflections on childhood and concerns for the future significantly influencing the protagonists' current lives.

In the opening section of the book, Nirode serves as the editor of a magazine and aspires to sever all ties with his family, in stark contrast to Maya, who is deeply troubled by memories of an idyllic childhood. Nirode is determined to free himself from any emotional attachment to his mother, whom he perceives as leading a life of dishonor. He tells Sonny:

"And you set about teaching me what to accept and what to reject ---after I've thrown off every stinking undergarment of family."26

Nirode seeks the meaning of life and aspires to live a life of detachment, yet at every juncture, he finds himself hindered and tormented by internal conflicts. Contrasted with Nirode's quest for truth are the depictions of Sonny, the former affluent landlord's son; Jit Nair, whose wife has absconded with her lover, David, a foreigner living in poverty while attempting to comprehend India; and Dharma, an unconventional painter. Each of these characters bears their own personal challenges, yet they strive to project an appearance of leading normal lives.

Nirode represents a rebellious spirit, embodying the inherent contradictions of human nature. As a passive visionary, he aspires to transcend towards an idealized version of himself. The subjective traits described in the novel find their objective parallels in external elements, such as the network of arteries within Nirode being metaphorically linked to the countless wires, telegraph poles, chimneys, and pigeon roosts in his environment. His tumultuous dreams, natural inclination towards anarchism, and inner turmoil are mirrored by the formless, bleak, and desolate imagery of old houses and slums.

A defining characteristic of lyrical novels is their use of a sequence of images to externalize internal experiences and render abstract concepts tangible. This novel is rich with imagery and image-based scenes that function as formal representations of an intimate, private world. Indeed, the entire work is constructed as a complex network of interconnected images.

The narrative commences with Nirode, transitioning to Monisha's introspective first-person perspective and public monologues, and later incorporates the experiences of Amla. The narrative is characterized by overlapping reflections, with Monisha reflecting the personality and experiences of Nirode, while Amla serves as a mirror to Monisha. In this lyrical novel, the protagonists assimilate objects and individuals to attain an aesthetic sense of objectivity. Nirode, Amla, and Monisha, as central figures, are engaged in a quest for meaning, recognition, and self-fulfillment, ultimately arriving at resolutions that converge with universal truths.

The lyrical process makes the protagonists distort the universe, or dissolve it into hallucinations or dream, to reveal the infinite and the organic. Nirode wishes to brush up with the past but is reminded, or rather gripped by it in his dream:

"Into Nirode's sleep the bright of the past came serenely winging, and the wide gestures of their wings ushered into his sleep the gemmed loveliness of a holiday home of his childhood...."27

Thinking of the empty miserable life of Bengali women, Monisha is lost in hallucination, when she sees the 'Bleeding Heart' Doves in the zoo:

Amla experiences perfect happiness in the presence of Dharma. She is translucent with joy and overflowing with a sense of love and reward, but in her subconscious, is scared of losing it, of being cheated:

26 *Voices in the City*, p.26

27 *Voices in the City*, p.27

"There were moments when Amla feared to touch a paint brush, feeling it might take wing and swoop out of the window, or the ring on her finger, half expecting to see a caterpillar crawl out of the Tibetan turquoise."28

The central theme of the novel is the concept of a journey. The narrative opens with a vivid image, where the very first line portrays a train in both subjective and objective terms. The symbolic framework of the story underscores the motif of journey at every stage. Nirode, the primary protagonist, consistently associates his thoughts and experiences with the metaphor of a train journey.

It is the recognition of losing the battle of instinct, the essential human in her, which leads her to her final resolution: "These people know and feel something I do not, they are all nodding in agreement with the singer, they understand what she is singing to them. If I won a war over mind, then they lost a war to their instincts, and it seems my victory has less value than their loss."²⁹

As Freedman suggests, in a lyrical novel, imagination transforms nature from a mechanism into a poetic whole. The artist thus renders an image of infinite nature and his own infinite self, the symbolic hero is the passive instrument of this process.³⁰

Monisha's sense of loss, stemming from her inability to experience the primal emotions of love and connection, offers a glimpse into the ideal self she strives to achieve but ultimately falls short of attaining. By the novel's conclusion, Nirode and Amla collectively embody the image of a transcendental or symbolic hero, representing an aesthetic abstraction of the universal essence. The protagonists' awareness of the universal represents the novel's point of highest intensity. At this stage, the quest concludes, and life's journey transitions from being reckless to being guided by an omnipresent, unseen force. A harmonious unity emerges, blending the animate and the inanimate into a cohesive whole.

Set against the backdrop of a vibrant, tangible city, this interplay of voices encapsulates the essence of a lyrical novel. The narrative features a passive protagonist, where action is supplanted by perception. It explores the quest for meaning in life and the internal struggle of the characters as they strive to realize an ideal self. The romanticized hero serves as a spiritual representation of humanity's relationship with the universe, articulated through symbols and imagery that encompass both the subjective and objective realms:

"A decisive difference between the conventional narrative and the lyrical novel is the treatment of the outer world. In the first, it is placed beyond both writer and reader, imposing between them and the theme. In lyrical mode such a world is conceived not as a universe in which men display their actions, but as a poet's vision, fashioned as a design. The world is reduced to a lyrical point of view, the equivalent of the poet's 'I', the lyrical self."³¹

An analysis of the structural elements in Anita Desai's novels reveals that their plot construction is not deliberately crafted by the author but rather arises naturally from the theme and perspective. As the narrative unfolds, the scenes, settings, and characters emerge effortlessly. Desai places greater emphasis on exploring the psychological dimensions of her characters than on external actions. Consequently, the narrative action serves as a secondary element, functioning primarily to deepen the reader's understanding of the underlying motivations and circumstances. The characters in these two novels by Anita Desai struggle to establish connections with the external world, retreating instead into realms of imagination, dreams, and neuroses. This inner turmoil often leaves them grappling with the search for meaning in their existence.

This is really appreciable for Desai to portray the neurotic character of Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*. However it is done through imagery. She searches for her individual identity around social forces but fails. She always hopes for fulfilment of love but fails and weaves a world of loneliness, isolation and desertion. This is the range of Desai's characters. In *Voices in the City*, Anita Desai reveals Nirode's constant struggle towards his search for existence. The unconscious mind of the protagonist combines past with present through successive events. Monisha is yet another instance of failures in this novel which leads her to the path of suicide. The novelist goes deeper inside the mind of characters and brings out the hidden motives for establishing their existence in the society they belong to.

²⁸ Ibid, p.208

²⁹ *Voices in the City*, p.237

³⁰ Freedman, Ralph. *The Lyrical Novel*. Princeton : Princeton University Press. 1963, p.20

³¹ Ibid, p.8

The perspective of the novelist is as significant as other elements when analyzing narrative technique. This perspective plays a pivotal role in ensuring the novel is depicted with the appropriate focus. It provides insight into the structure, as the narrative unfolds in alignment with the central theme. Anita Desai demonstrates a keen awareness of the specific demands of her novels when determining the narrative viewpoint. The techniques she employs in her storytelling reveal her adaptability, as she selects different narrative methods based on the requirements of each story.

While Desai employs poetic elements in her novels, she cannot be regarded as a pioneer of technical innovation. This is largely because the art of novel-writing is a time-honored tradition. From a technical standpoint, effectively conveying meaning and narrating the storyline take precedence over mere innovation or novelty. Desai excels in narrating stories, portraying characters, conveying moods, evoking atmospheres, and delving into the psychological depths of her characters. To achieve this, she skillfully employs techniques such as flashbacks, stream of consciousness, and symbolism.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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