

ANITA DESAI'S USE OF TIME AND PLACE AS NARRATIVE DEVICE

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Anita Desai is one of the prominent Indian English novelists, and a pioneer in probing in her novels the psychological stresses and strains of her protagonists. Her greatest contribution to the Indian English Novel lies in cultivating a profounder realism than the ordinary one. In her novels she studies the “inner climate” of her characters, particularly her female protagonists. She also professedly brings to her task as a novelist her “feminine consciousness.” Her novels go into the problem of loss of personal identity of her leading characters, and its etiology in their psyche.

In an interview given to Ramesh K. Srivastava in 1984, Anita Desai lays bare her intention regarding use of time in 'Clear Light of Day' (Already written, but not published by then). “I wanted Time” says she, to have as palpable an existence as the spatial world perceived by the five senses. I wanted 'Time' to be an element like light or darkness that is pervasive, and that is perceived by the characters as music is heard, scents smelled, food tasted, texture felt, sights seen—a part of their every day consciousness. “Mrs. Desai does make her characters in the aforementioned novel switch on their memory or forethought at will to envision their past or future with the same ease and readiness with which they perceive their present.

In the same interview, she takes note of the several implications that this kind of apprehension of time in a novel can have. Memory may be used to provide a foil to the present state of affairs. It may bring relief to a character from tension and anxiety, or fill his mind with regret or wistfulness or make a character neurotically withdraw into the past, snapping short his contact with other in the present. Memory may act as a bell invoking “Jubilee or Knell.” It may also enable a character to take a vista view of his past and indulge in self introspection, which may result in realizations of far-reaching value or significance. The character may come to review his attitude to people and places with whom he has been associated. One of the quotations Mrs. Desai toyed with for using as the frontispiece to Clear Light of Day is the following one from T.S. Eliot's 'Four Quartets':

See, Now they vanish
The faces and places with the
Self which, as it could,
Loved them,
To become renewed,
Transfigured, in
Another pattern.

From the critical analysis of her first two novels (*Cry, the Peacock* and *Voices in the City*), it is evident that in her earlier works, she emphasizes “inner action” rather than outer reality. Her depiction of life, though apparently impressionistic and subjective, is more deeply realistic than the ordinary one, which is restricted to the superficial details of the things. The materialistic trend in the modern India life, which is ridden with the consequences of the scientific and technological advancement, industrialization and Westernization, is widely causing complex psychological aberrations. This necessitates, on the part of the Indian English novelist, use of new techniques to delineate the contours of the psychic landscape of his or her protagonists. The interior monologue form of narration, stream of consciousness, and flashbacks are some of such techniques used by Mrs. Desai in the interest of a more comprehensively and profoundly truthful portrayal of things, people and events. These techniques importantly involve a constant awareness of time and place in the consciousness of her protagonists. The interior monologue necessitates the past and the present segments of time to subsist simultaneously in the mind of the speaker; stream of consciousness as a strategy to capture the goings-on in the mind of a character requires the narrator to follow truthfully all the changes of time and place involved in skipping and jumping of the narrative; and flashbacks involve a sudden switch of the narrative to a prior point in the past time. These, the more important of the measures used by Mrs. Desai to describe the aberrant, frequently neurotic (sometimes even psychotic), thinking of her protagonists and its tragic consequences, place her alongside of the modern novelists like D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Wolf, Henry James, etc., and make her one of the most noteworthy pioneering psychological Indian English novelist that she undeniably is.

In one of her novels *Clear Light of Day*, Mrs. Desai declaredly uses the dimension of time in such a fashion as to make it constantly as perspicuous in the consciousness of her characters as the sights that they see, the sounds that they hear and the objects that they touch. Mrs. Desai employs in both *Cry, the Peacock* and *Voices in the City* a whole variety of “times,” as theorized about in the works of thinkers like Henri Bergson, P.D. Euspensky and William James, e.g., “psychotically” times (where the writer takes a subjective view of time, relying heavily on his or her memory of things in the past time), as in *Cry, the Peacock*, when Maya recalls in her repetitive flashbacks the image of her father as he appeared to her in her childhood, and that of the garden in her father's Lucknow house' “existential” time (where the narrator glimpses his or her past subjectively and in its totality), as in *Voices in the City*, when the siblings Nirode, Monisha and Amla view their childhood as gravely unsatisfactory; and “polytemporal” time (where events, at places pertain to different points of time), as in *Cry, the Peacock*, when Maya the first person narrator speaks of objects, persons and places in the past, and suddenly shifts the narrative to the past-before-past in order to describe now she was treated by her father most indulgently during her childhood. Not that future is left out in the treatment of time in Mrs. Desai's earliest two novels. A variety of time involving the future, called “barrier” time is made use of by Mrs. Desai, where time is bounded by a limit, as, for example, when it is predicted by the albino astrologer in *Cry, the Peacock* that four years after Maya's marriage one of the spouses would die of “unnatural causes”, and what is superstitiously feared does actually come to pass, as in one-act play “The Monkey's Paw” by W.W. Jacobs, where it is foretold, Herbert does die by using the dreaded monkey's paw with a spell on it.

Time and place are treated in the present paper not completely in disjunction from each other, for that would have been not only evidently unnatural, but also wastefully repetitive of explanatory detail. Thus, when Maya's mind goes to her childhood time, her childhood home comes inextricably associated in her mind with that time. In dealing with the context of the related flashback the two may, in fact, be easily spoken of inter substitutively of each other.

Internal monologue is another important narrative device used in both of Mrs. Desai's first two novels in order. This device, in which the past and the present are telescoped together, enables the novelist to elucidate for the reader the character's position as regards his or her placement in time, and, at the same time, to avoid interruption in the narrative by the paraphernalia of the direct form of speech, as also to project the inner thoughts and feelings of a character without any loss of intimacy, of confidence, of directness, of utterance or the reader's conviction in what is said.

Mrs. Desai uses what is known as the "historical" time when, in both the novels *Cry, the Peacock* and *Voices in the City*, in trying to lend adequate meatiness to them, she puts in extensive details of the modern urban life in today's India of scientific and technological and industrial advancement. Take, for instance, the long catalogues of the typical details of Calcutta life in *Voices in the City* where Monisha watches from the barred window of the virtual prison-house of her first-floor room the street below. It is nevertheless, a legitimate criticism of *Cry, the Peacock* that Mrs. Desai does not altogether succeed in her endeavour so that the element of fantasy loom large there, leaving the novel in the air, as it were, and since it does not have even a modicum of plot, not fully inviting the reader's conviction in the happenings in it. Mrs. Desai repeatedly denies in her interviews that she consciously strives after lending national touches to her novels, but be it as it may, the Indian colouring in her novels is quite perceptible. Whether it is the mention of some real localities in Calcutta, or a protagonist in a dire moment, quoting *shlokas* from the *Bhagvad Gita*, or the vedantice transcending of attachments to the objects, persons, places or phases of life on the part of a protagonist, the Indian flavour is, in fact never missing. The Indian cultural patterns are sown so deeply ingrained in consciousness of Mrs. Desai's characters that, whether or not they are meant to be obvious, they show forth.

By using contrastive imagery, Mrs. Desai makes the past appear as a foil to the present. In *Cry, the Peacock*, the past is cheerful and refreshing as against the present, which is sordid, corrupt, mortality-ridden and far from being satisfying. The flashback technique is particularly significant because it puts the past and present in mutual contrast. In *Cry, the Peacock*, Maya is seen suddenly switching to the past when she feels sexually frustrated at the sight of the pigeons cooing in mood for mating. In order to alley her distress and restlessness in the present, she travels in her memory to the time when as a child she would immediately get from her indulgently affectionate father just anything she asked for. This kind of present past contrast enables the novelist to imply that Maya would not have slipped back on her past, had Gautama made the present satisfying enough for her. It is obvious that the deterioration in Maya's neurosis and her eventual suicide is, at least partly, wooing to Maya's perpetual attachment to her past, which is additionally accompanied by her father- fixation .

In *Voices in the City*, on the contrary, the past is ridden, for Nirode, coldness and neglect

in interrelationships, immorality, crudity, and hypocrisy, and it's very thought makes him regress into inactivity, anonymity and disinterestedness in others. Here is a case of Mrs. Desai making on segment of time influence another for good or for bad.

The presence of time is felt in Mrs. Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* and *Voices in the City*, as the story in them twines itself into a rhythmic pattern by repetitions of details or emphases appearing periodically, as in Maya's flitting between the narrative past and the present, or in Nirode's jealousy and agony at his mother's adulterous conduct emerging repetitively. The kind of rhythm that pertains in Mrs. Desai's two novels analyzed in the present study may be defined as periodic in an inter-chapter or inter-chapter way .

In *Cry, the Peacock* the unities of time and place are, more or less, duly observed. Of the three parts of the novel the first two have their events spread over three consecutive days, and the third is enacted three days after the murder of Gautama by Maya. All the three parts have the Delhi residence of Gautama as their venue. Thus, the unity of place is fully taken care of. *Voices in the City* too compresses its events into just a couple of days, and there is continuity in the action, which is compressed by means of flashback. There are both retrospective and prospective visions in the novel.

In *Cry, the Peacock* as also in *Voices in the City*, Mrs. Desai ties up reader's expected sense of passage of time with his perception of the structure of the novel. The principle that is involved is that of coherence. There are the three archetypal structural parts. There is an event in the past, figuring in the flashbacks, before which life for the protagonist' was of a kind diametrically opposed to what it is in the narrative present and then the plot moves further on to an event involving a dire change in the state of affairs. In the first novel it is Maya's marriage, and in the second, the departure of Nirode's mother for Kalimpong to live in close vicinity of Major Chadha that queers the pitch for the protagonists. The second, and the terminal, turning-points are Maya's death and Monisha's death in the first and the second novel respectively. Third, and final phase of the plot, which is extra-brief in both the cases, leaves a lesson for the survivors, Gautama's sister representing the younger generation in *Cry, the Peacock* and Nirode and Amla in *Voices in the City*. And the lesson is that of acceptance of the state of affairs in the present; of active endeavour involving communication with others; and of rising above attachment of the self to objects, places persons, and stages in life. Mrs. Desai clearly makes out that it is time that brings maturity and poise to human beings.

The protagonists in both the novels frequently revert to the *Bhagvad Gita* amid moments of crisis in personal circumstances but in neither of them do they interpret the message of the great Hindu scripture humanistically. Nowhere does the song celestial recommend withdrawal of the individual from active participation in social interest. By "detached action" the *Gita* does not imply abnegation of one ethical duty. It is the neglect of a husband's duty by Gautama and that of giving love and attention to rather than seeking them from others viz. Nirode that lead to the agony and torture gone through by these two characters. Acceptance of the present is held up by the novelist as the only way out of the protagonists predicaments, even though the present trends in large cities. In *Voices in the City* the protagonists fully sense the opposition involved between the drab Calcutta of their present adult existence and the refreshing Kalimpong hills of their childhood. And reader is not left guessing the novelist own preference she has for life, and not for

death, for the spiritual ideas of transcending of the self, and not for indulgence in it. But obviously she is not for a dissipative absorptive absorption in the past at the cost of one's discharge of duty in the present .

Modern urban life is presented by Mrs. Desai as bereft of love and understanding in interpersonal relationship. The life of Maya and Gautama in Delhi and Nirode, Monisha and Amla in Calcutta is represented as relatively loveless. Even the father–daughter relationship in *Cry, the Peacock* and the mother–son one in *Voices in the City* are predominantly based on self interest, and on desire for domination and power. The protagonists in both the novels have to make an agonized efforts to retrieve the sense of their identity amid modern urban conditions of life. There is seen no scope for them to seek the typical consolation that religion ideally offers. By the technique of applying her sense of distinction between times past, present and future, Mrs. Desai is able to give a turn to the course events which suits the semantic significance of the plots of her novels. Of course by raising contrasts of time and place she also succeeds in achieving greater intensity of feelings and passions, which is used by her to add greater clarity to the ideas intended to be propounded .

Mrs. Desai achieves these results by handling time and place suggestively rather than respectively, by enactment rather than “telling“ by implying things “subtly and obliquely, not obviously. The significances of time and place are to be felt sensed rather than seen or heard. Thus, the influence of place say of city is made to be felt by the reader through its atmosphere impinging on the day to day lives of the protagonist or through raising symbolic effects. A sense situation or landscape in Mrs. Desai's novels does not generally just stand for itself, but rather suggests the inner climate of the characters concerned their psychological state and motivations. It may be legitimately concluded in general that Anita Desai uses the sense of time and place of her protagonist, of the reader and that of her own for sheer artistic effects as a part of her technique as a novelist.

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