Stream-of-Consciousness Technique: A Prose into Anita Desai’s Fictional World

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Abstract

Among the Indian writers writing in English, Anita Desai has secured an eminent position for herself. She is the novelist who is said to have introduced the psychological novels to the Indo-English literature. She employs the language of the “interior” landscape of her novels to depict the terrain experienced by the women in India because of their ability to share their feelings, dispositions and a sense of alienation. Her area of exploration is the dimensions of human behavior.

Keywords: Stream-of-consciousness, Psycho-analytical, Diasporic, Interior Monologue

Introduction

Stream-of-Consciousness, in the literary context, is a common technique in the modern novels - the attempt to convey all the contents of a character’s mind-memory, sense perceptions, feelings, intentions, and thoughts in relation to the stream of experiences as it passes by, often at random.

William James coined the term, stream of consciousness in his ‘Principles of Psychology’ (1890) to characterize the unbroken flow of thoughts and awareness of the waking mind. Now, it is used in reference to writing that records mental activity ranging from the complete consciousness to the unconscious.

"Stream-of-consciousness novel," defines Robert H. Remphey, "is a type of fiction in which the basic emphasis is placed on the exploration of the pre-speech levels of consciousness for the purpose, primarily, of revealing the psychic being of the characters.”

Thus, stream of consciousness takes the reader to the hidden recesses of ever changing consciousness of the characters and reveals what is happening inside the character’s mind cutting down the old barrier between the reader and the novel’s character so that the reader plunges into the characters pre-speech level of consciousness to see what is happening there.

Stream-of-consciousness as a modern development, reflects recent interest in the psycho-analytical school of Jung, Freud and the “true association” used by psychiatry. By the first decade of the twentieth century the psychoanalysts had developed the idea of subconscious mind as repository of the suppressed elements. Freud postulated, in this context, two areas of the mind, the waking state subject to order, and below it the layer of the subconscious, which is a dirty little corridor full ofSurname, dirt, moronic vapors — fixations, regressions, obsessions and complexes. Karl Gustav Jung postulated in this context, that in every individual, conscious is present at a plane low down which contains the taboos developed by the tribal ancestors. It is here that the myth is created but suppressed or repressed elements alone need not be enoced in the sub-conscious. Myriads of ordinary impressions belong to different time channels may co-exist in the consciousness.

Stream of consciousness novelists aim to provide a textual equivalent to this stream of experiences in the character’s consciousness in their fictional world.

Although one can find examples of stream of consciousness techniques in the novels written during the last several centuries, it is writers like James Joyce, Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf, who have most often cited examples of the stream of consciousness technique of the twentieth century.

Still few writers are there in Indo-English writing dealing with the stream of consciousness technique. Also, the technique as employed by such writers is just a tentative experiment with this new form and has yet to go a long way before to enter the mainstream fiction. However, novelists like Shohur Dammel, Anita Desai and Anur Joshi can be said to have successfully paved the way in employing the stream of consciousness technique in their novels.

Main Thrust

Anita Desai, among the Indo-English novelists handling stream of consciousness technique, occupies a significant position. She is often called the novelist of the inner world. She seems not to be interested in the outer world of reality. Instead, she is interested in the inner dimensions of human mind which interest her more. K. R. Nirmala’s ‘lyngjeerighty’ puts it: “Her forte, the exploration of sensitivity – the particular kind of modern Indian sensibility...since her preoccupation is with the inner world of sensibility rather than the outer world of action, she has tried to forge a style suitable and suggestive enough to convey the fever and futility of the stream of consciousness of her principal characters.”

Desai herself says: “...I have too great a need for secrecy and silence.”

It can be easily made out that it is this cautiousness for privacy which has led Anita Desai, part of a new literary tradition of Indian writing in English, to probe the inner layer of meaning in solitary individuals. Her strength lies in highlighting the reader’s awareness to the consciousness within her lonely characters. And in doing so, which undoubtedly suits her material, she seems to be following the footsteps of masters like James Joyce, Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf.

Anita Desai says “In my writings when I first began to work seriously and consciously on my novels it was D.H Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Henry James and Proust that influenced me more strongly.”

It may not be out of context to mention here how Virginia Woolf and Anita Desai have used the stream of consciousness technique as an integral part of their fictional craft. "Virginia Woolf and Anita Desai: A Comparative Study" (1989) of Asha Kanwar explores how Virginia and Desai use time and memory in their novels for thematic and formal purposes. As Virginia Woolf, Desai too seem to be interested in the inner depth of a character rather than going round about it.

Desai, a great master of creating inner reality seems to be brilliantly capturing moments of truth by delving deep into the consciousness of her protagonists, especially female. Although one can find considerable shift of emphasis in her novels written in India and those written while she stay abroad, her love for the inner self and past experiences remains a passion which she openly manifests in her later novels too.

Anita Desai’s first novel “Cry, the Peacock” has very little conversational episodes and is mostly written through the stream of consciousness method.

Maya, the chief protagonist in the novel records the memory of her life with her father and with her husband Gautama and his family.

Maya, throughout the novel, is found experiencing and feeling more than is discrete and desirable. Both, past and the present, has been used to show Maya’s anguished, despair, dread and ultimate tragedy. To quote Vimal Dasgupta, “the past and the present are juxtaposed to highlight the temporary incompatibility between Maya and her husband Gautama.”

The plot in “Cry, the Peacock” got unraveled through the feverish consciousness of Maya who has just murdered Gautama, her husband. She recalls the past that led to her murder and remembers how the emotions of hate, visible only to the subconscious, remained like a mark on her forehead.

"I tried to define this mark...was it an arrow? A coffin? A cross? Was it between the eyes? At the temple? Was it dark? Was it pale? And what made God reach out and touch it with his cold fingers...as they considered the prospect of a murder?"

Shuddered by the thought of murder she draws out a sudden awareness:

"I was aware of a great, dead silence in which my eyes appeared through the curtains of the years, one by one falling back till I saw that shadow...it was remembered now. Fate..."

Slowly the incident of the encounter with the ‘abino’ appears in her mind which...
has become the basic problem of her psyche. "To make a friend walk away in darkness."

The image of death, in the form of Peacock's dance entices her mental frame, "Pia, Pia... Mio...", "Lover, lover, I die, I die!" And becomes so significant that unconsciously she starts equating her fate with that of the peacock who dies after making, killing, and leaving no traces of her death. Maya's subconscious mind decides she "will take Gautama too with her when she dies." And these streams of thought and past experiences lead to the final tragedy - she kills Gautama, her husband, before committing suicide.

Anita Desai's 1978 Sahitya Academy Award-winning novel "Fire on the Mountain" too has all the elements of the stream of consciousness as in her earlier novels like "Where Shall We Go This Summer", "Voices in the City" and others.

"Fire on the Mountain" depicts Nanda Kaul, an old lady, living an isolated life at Cagirnago in Kassauli. She suffers loneliness, alienation and the resultant anguish.

The whole novel is presented through various experiences of the past. Nanda Kaul's past is intertwined in the form of long interior monologues punctuated by aural interruptions. Kaw, who has witnessed only a marriage and a wife in life before her retirement to Cagirnago, is now happy without any outside contact and is satisfied and "to be a true, no more no less was all she was prepared to understand."

Rakai, her great-granddaughter, visits her to place a basket on her totally "...have I not done enough and had enough? I want no more. I want nothing. Can I not be left with nothing?"

The arrival of the young inquisitor Rakai disturbs Nanda Kaul's carefully composed and guarded existence, revealing its strengths and dignity, but ultimately opening up the pain and weakness at its core, its hidden truth. Though soon Kaw discovers how Rakai too, like her, is a long and she feels the urge to connect with her. But Rakai has no need of her.

Ila Das, Nanda Kaul's childhood friend's arrival brings in another change. However, Nanda stops herself from showing any kindness to her as it would shatter her solitude and she leads her unfortunate friends walk away in darkness. And this time as she is left to cry out in the end when the tragic news of Ila Das's death breaks "No, no it is a lie. No, it cannot be..."

"Fire on the Mountain," thus does not deal with the large movements of history but with the smaller losses and gains too out of love. Maya's subconscious mind decides she "will take Gautama too with her when she dies." And these streams of thought and past experiences lead to the final tragedy - she kills Gautama, her husband, before committing suicide.

Anita Desai's "Clear Light of Day" nominated for the 1988 Booker prize, too is marred by the solitary disposition of the individual. It portrays the unhappiness and loneliness prevailing in the middle class Das family wherein each member wanders into his/her inner self instilling being a member of a close-knit group of family. The family, the novel is a lament for what was lost. But, it does not stop merely at lament, which echoes and circles around itself endlessly; the real significance of the past here is the vexing question it poses of how to live in the present that has been constructed from it.

Though the novel turns on two people - the four siblings in the House and four Misra siblings next door; the parents, Mira Misra, Hyder Ali, and his wife and his mother, Bakul - with different storylines emerging and subtracting, but at the centre of it all, simultaneously intersected, sometimes shifting away from each other, are the two sisters: Bim and Tara. The novel unfurls through the stream of thought rising in the minds of the sisters. Tara, who falls into marriage to escape the atmosphere of her childhood house of Delhi, remembers "...it was the kind of atmosphere that used to fill when father and mother were away, always away, always leaving me out, leaving us behind... Then the mind became so strange and Raja so ill, till it seemed that the house was ill, illness passing from one generation to the other so that any who lived in it was bound to become ill and the only thing to do was to get away from it, escape..."

Bim the exact opposite of Tara chooses to stay at the house and nurse her retarded brother Baba. She has her own

grudge which unfurls as the novel proceeds to quite one...

"Youth... I never wish it back. I would never be young again for anything."

Desai successfully delves into the inner psyche of the grudge, the trauma and the conflict that appears and reappears throughout the novel in the minds of Bim and Tara through the window of their own memory and psyche.

Anita Desai moved to America early in the nineties. Her work since then reveals all the characteristics of a diasporic fiction: a concern with the fate of immigrants and a growing distance from the Indian reality, which is viewed from the outside. Yet, Desai could not part from her artistic excellence of delving into the psyche and inner-dark realm of characters.

Her "Journey to Ithaca" (1995) beckons man to wander and quest for the heart's truth - the inner-self: the quest of three protagonists - Matteo, Sophie and Laila - in the novel, who quest for truth and self actualization, is in fact a journey to the inner-self. Desai successfully probes into the quest of her protagonists by entering into their mind.

Desai's "Fasting, Feasting", the runner-up for the 1998 Booker Prize, is a novel of contrast between two cultures - India (the country of fasting) and America (the country of feasting). Desai deals with every-day things in this novel by unveiling the plot through the perception of Uma in the first part (in India) and Arun in the second part (in America). While doing so Desai very neatly opens the layers of conscious and subconscious mind of her female as well as male protagonist - Uma and Arun - in the novel. She dwells the readers in the present and smoothly takes them to the past and again brings them back into the present where in Uma recognizes her own needs and Arun gets an understanding of his elder sister's situation. This is the mastery of Anita Desai and an area where very few, other than her, can excel.

Anita Desai's latest novel "The Zigzag Way", set in Mexico and Cornwall, is narrated through a young American writer, Eric, who travels to Sierra Madre. The history of Mexico's silver mines is the main focus, in the novel. Desai uses ancient memory technique in the novel - Donna delving into her past and Eric discovering his past through various adventurous subplots - which is nothing but hallmark of consciousness technique. Illustrations of the stream of consciousness can be seen in this novel too.

Conclusion

Anita Desai's novels probe into the inner recesses of the character's mind - be it female or male, protagonist, memory, nostalgia, perception and ancient history are the various ways by which she uncovers the story in her novels. Thematic content, though, may vary, but exploration in the depths of human behaviour remains her main thrust.

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