



Crafting Fiction: Anita Desai's Narrative Prowess In Selected Novels

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Abstract:

Anita Desai stands out as a serious, skilled, and promising novelist in contemporary India. Among Indian English novelists, she is undeniably one of the strongest voices. Desai dedicates herself to articulating the silent struggles and helplessness of countless individuals grappling with existential issues. As the unrecognized queen of the inner emotional world, she effectively portrays the intricate illusions of her delicate protagonists. By shifting the focus from outer to inner reality, she has brought a new dimension to the Indian novel in English. G. Rai has aptly described her as a writer with a genuine voice. Desai is renowned for her exceptional narrative skill.

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The term 'Executive Ability' originates from the Greek word meaning 'an art'. The method a writer employs to depict life in its unfolding can be described as narrative executive ability. The capacity to articulate thoughts effectively, the most crucial quality of a novel, can be achieved when there is harmony between the narration and the narrative executive ability. This ability is of paramount importance to Anita Desai. She not only introduces innovative changes but also utilizes techniques such as flashbacks and stream-of-consciousness in her novels. Desai expresses her approach to the craft of writing with the following words:

"Writing has become such a deeply ingrained habit, it is like chain smoking, and I chain-smoke with words, with books".

Desai utilizes "the language of the inward" to depict the inner turmoil and crises in her characters' lives. This is why her novels are celebrated for their poetic delicacy of feeling. Her ability to convey deep sensibility and her distinctive technique have made her novels widely acclaimed. Desai employs the technique of contrast among diverse settings, situations, characters, and even different stages of the same characters. Her achievements lie in her ability to beautifully capture the serious conflicts and chaos faced by her deeply troubled protagonists with remarkable honesty and seriousness.

In her first novel, *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), Anita Desai presents a poetic narrative rich with dense imagery. The novel explores the theme of an incompatible marriage, focusing on the heroine's psyche. As a psychological novel, it delves into the workings of Maya's mind, with a narrative that moves fluidly between past and present. Desai employs strange animal imagery to reflect Maya's disturbed state of mind, contrasting with the majestic peacock, the central symbol of the novel as suggested by the title.

The story centers on Maya, a hypersensitive and childless young woman haunted by a childhood prophecy of disaster. In a fit of frenzy, she kills her elderly and detached husband. Ultimately, she succumbs to madness and commits suicide. The novel employs elements of fantasy to describe Maya's inner loneliness and her psychological state.

Remarkably, in her debut novel, Desai successfully probes the depths of Maya's psyche. The narrative captures Maya's regression to her childhood days after her husband's death, highlighting her return to her father's house in Lucknow, where she becomes lost in her toys and the happy memories of her childhood.

In her second novel, *Voices in the City* (1965), Anita Desai demonstrates her narrative skill with an intriguing title and an adept use of setting. Critics have noted the importance of the city in this novel, likening Desai's portrayal of Calcutta to Dickens's depiction of London and Hardy's Egdon Heath. A distinctive aspect of Desai's narrative technique in *Voices in the City* is her use of Calcutta as both a backdrop and a character, influencing all the major characters profoundly.

Desai describes Calcutta extensively, at least twenty times, to seamlessly integrate it into the plot. As in many of her novels, symbolism and fantasy play significant roles. Calcutta serves as a powerful symbol, conceived as a force of creation, preservation, and destruction, ultimately identified with Mother Kali, the goddess of death and destruction. The city is depicted in great detail, portrayed as oppressive and dying, yet it exerts a powerful influence on the three main characters. This is particularly evident in the section of the novel focusing on Amla. Desai effectively conveys Calcutta as a dominant and influential presence, a master city that shapes the narrative and the lives of its inhabitants.

“.....that this monster city that lived no normal healthy, red-blooded life but one that was subterranean, under let. Stealthy and odorous of morality, had captured and enchanted-or disenchanted both her sister and brother” [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.

Anita Desai's third novel, *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* (1971), addresses the theme of colored immigrants in England, highlighting their adjustment difficulties and exploring their fragmented psyches. Desai employs the flashback technique to narrate the circumstances leading to the marriage of Adit and Sarah. The novel's division into three parts—“Arrival,” “Discovery and Recognition,” and “Departure”—demonstrates a clever narrative technique. This structure enables Desai to systematically and effectively express her themes and ideas, providing a clear framework for the characters' experiences and developments.

Nostalgia is also employed in this novel as a narrative technique, but with a unique twist. Adit's longing for the hilsa fish and the atmosphere of Bengal reflects his need to belong and to bridge the gap between London and Calcutta. For both Sarah and Adit, reality exists on two contrasting planes, representing their respective cultural traditions. This duality is resolved only when Adit decides to return to India, merging the two conflicting aspects of their lives.

The novel '*Fire on the Mountain*' (1977) centers on the character of Nanda Kaul, the widow of a vice-chancellor who is compelled both by desire and situations 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 the attention of her grand-daughter Raka she spins a number of awesome memories about her father. It is interesting to be aware that it is a grown-up person and not the baby who goes into the world of fantasy. The use of fantasy in the novel has attracted critical attention and one of the critics has found that Anita Desai has used myth, not solely in this novel however 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 lifestyle that in the evening of her existence she desires to have nothing to do with family or society. She prefers her lonely remote existence guarding her privateness fiercely and the news of Raka's arrival, conveyed to her through a letter, unsettles her. What she wanted was total withdrawal from society. She hated human society so much so as to yearn to be a tree, a part of nature. In the authorial description in Chapter 1 a parallel has been drawn between her and a tree: She was grey, tall and thin and her silk sari made a sweeping, shivering sound and she fancied she should merge with the pine timber and be mistaken for one. To be a tree, no more and no less, was all she was organized to undertake. But human beings cannot be bushes, however they might also yearn for it. This is the only novel of Anita Desai in which nature performs such a critical role on the degree of symbolism and imagery and it has to be well-known that she makes high quality use of this approach to portray one-of-a-kind characters. The title itself deals with nature. The Fire and the Mountain both are natural phenomena. However, in this occasion the fire is man-made, to be more specific Raka made.

Anita Desai's novel *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) delves into family life across contrasting cultures, presenting two distinct worlds—Indian and American. The novel is appropriately divided into two parts to reflect these differences. Written in third-person narrative, the omniscient narrator both shows and tells the story while exploring the themes. In this novel, Desai departs from chronological narration, opting instead for a more fluid storytelling approach.

In this novel, Desai frequently incorporates quotes from the Bible, Hindu devotional songs, and American catchphrases to infuse her narrative with local color. These elements help her capture the essence of the atmospheres she aims to create. Language, therefore, becomes a crucial component of Desai's narrative design. She skillfully uses it as a tool to support her thematic intentions and convey her vision.

Through the technique of contrast, Desai crafts vivid images of two worlds diametrically opposed in every aspect. Melanie, indulging in opulent cuisine, serves as a stark contrast to Uma, who scarcely enjoys any delicacies. While Melanie "feasts," Uma notably "fasts," symbolizing their disparate lifestyles. Uma, bound by tradition and duty, finds herself constrained, whereas Melanie revels in freedom. Despite these apparent differences, both characters suffer from inner emptiness. Arun discovers that fasting and feasting are interconnected, representing two sides of the same coin.

"Fasting, Feasting" intricately juxtaposes various elements: food, Indian and American family dynamics, and levels of ambition. Uma and Melanie embody contrasting levels of ambition, while Arun and Rod represent extremes in ambition. Yet, the novel ultimately uncovers similarities rather than disparities, highlighting the interconnectedness of human experiences.

Anita Desai employs various fictional techniques in her novels, adapting them to suit the specific demands of each story. Rather than prioritizing innovation, Desai focuses on the effectiveness of these techniques in conveying meaning and narrating the tale compellingly. Central to her style is a keen emphasis on communication, irrespective of the nature of the experiences portrayed in her works. Throughout her novels, Desai demonstrates a profound love for the sound of words, allowing the music inherent in language

to guide her narrative. This narrative technique serves as a fitting vessel for her thematic explorations, ensuring a harmonious balance between form and content. Just as in her other works, this unity of artistic vision in Desai's novels underscores the profound alignment between technique and theme.

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