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Understanding Point of View: A Study in the Select Novels of Anita Desai

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Abstract

Ample of research scholars have examined different aspects of Anita Desai's versatile writing. They include areas such as psychological approach, feminist approach and philosophical one. They have explored her fictional works in grand detail highlighting both the strong point and weaknesses of her writing. This article is an attempt to explore critically her three novels, Cry the Peacock (1963), Fire on the Mountain (1977), Clear Light of Day (1980) from both Rhetoric form in general and Point of view in specific. Rhetoric in ordinary language can be seen as a set of principles or guidelines for getting things done by means of language. According to Leech & Short, 'Pragmatics and rhetoric are ways in which users implement the cognitive or ideational code of language'. Wayne Booth considers rhetoric as the 'technique of non-didactic fiction-viewed as the art of communicating with readers. David Lodge states that rhetoric is the vehicle of an argument. Form and idea are inseparable in any literary writing and as Henry James puts it in his essay the 'Art of Fiction': 'questions of art are questions (in the widest sense) of execution'.

Keywords: Rhetoric, Point of View, Anita Desai, Pragmatics, Discourse Analysis

Point of View

'The slanting of the fictional world towards reality as apprehended by a particular participant or set of participants is the fictional point of view. The person whose point of view is represented is the reflector of the fiction. 'A fiction writer, although not compelled to take one person's point of view, can voluntarily limit, his omniscience to those things which belong to one person's model of reality. He can also vary the fictional point of view, sometimes claiming authorial omniscience, sometimes giving us one character's version of events. Sometimes that of another. He can even take the point of view of an animal, or of a man on the point of death, bypassing the problem of authenticity.' Fictional point of view, by the standard authorial omniscience can be regarded as a selective withholding of omniscience. Roger Fowler distinguishes three senses of the phrase, point of view – ideological, psychological and spatial-temporal. Temporal point of view refers to the impression which a reader gains of events moving rapidly or slowly in a continuous chain or isolated segments. It also includes disruptions of the natural flow of time by, for example, flashbacks, previsions or interweaving of stories which concern different time spheres. Spatial corresponds to the viewing position in visual arts. Represents objects, people, buildings, landscapes etc. Focus on certain point i.e., the viewing position of the narrator. Ideological point of view concerns a set of values, a belief system communicated by the language. A novel may have one ideological system or plural ideological systems. These plural points of view may be in conflicting relationship. A single set of values is not so interesting as opposed to different values in a work. In major novels the underlying values are complex and ironical. Different points of view are distinct and are complex and ironical. Different point of view in distinct and contrasting linguistic styles, constantly challenging and contradicting each other give the novel an argumentative and dynamic structure. Ideological point of view may be expressed directly or indirectly. In the first case a narrator or a character may directly indicate his or her judgments and beliefs by the use of variety of modal structures. Modality is the grammar of explicit of commitment to the truth of the propositions they utter and their views or desirability or otherwise of the states of affairs referred to. The forms of modal expression include Modal Auxiliaries They are may, might, must, shall, should, need to, ought to etc. These words signal caution or confidence to various degrees: something might happen, something will happen, must happen. Modal adverbs or sentence adverbs they are certainly, probably, surely, perhaps etc. Also adjectival versions in such constructions as 'It is certain that. Evaluative adjectives and adverbs They are Lucky, luckily, fortunately, regrettably, and many others Verbs of knowledge, prediction and evaluation They are seem, believe, guess, foresee, approve, dislike etc. Generic sentences they are generalized propositions claiming universal truth. A writer thus may employ the above device to make explicit a character's or his own beliefs and ideas. The writer may also choose to develop a certain ideological point of view as the book progresses.

Psychological or Perceptual Point of View

This concerns the question of who is presented as the observer of the events of a narrative, whether the author or a participating character: and the various kinds of discourse associated with different relationships between author and character. Fowler envisages two kinds of perspectives, internal and external. Internal perspective is further divided into Type A and Type B. Internal narration, Type 'A' is entirely from the point of view of a character's consciousness. It is subjective in nature and is generally a first person account. It follows third person narration consistently. There is reference to the character narrator's feelings and thoughts by the use of 'verbascendi'. (A term used by Uspensky, meaning words denoting feelings, thoughts and perceptions, primary signals of a subjective point of view.) In this writing, author's ideology is more prominent. External perspective, Type 'C' – The narration is purely from an external point of view, there is no depiction of private feelings or emotions. External perspective, Type 'D' – A single person/character controls the telling. The narrator may use first person pronouns with explicit modality and has definite views on the world. Type A and B internal perspective combined result in – Free Indirect Discourse. This kind of writing combines character's subjective feelings with authorial commentary about the character's inner state. In such writings the author juxtaposes two sets of values. Anita Desai's world is a world of subjective reality. She deals with 'primordial patterns of human experience'. As Usha Bande observes, "Through an artistic way of projecting life as it is – chequered emotionally as well as spiritually – Anita Desai shows the ability of her narrative art to maintain contact with life". Maya, in *Cry the Peacock*, Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain*, Bim, in *Clear Light of Day*, all are engaged in search of meaning of life, of understanding life, not concerned with immediate problems of bread and butter but involved with the abstract human condition of love, hate, attachment and detachment. The stance taken in these novels is that of third person subjective perspective and hence these novels combine a multiplicity of values. As Friedman observes, "Every (modern) multivalent novel partakes of two determining characteristics (1) a self-conscious awareness of itself as artefact, as product, and (2) a counter pointing of conflicting ethical stances, a process in which one or more protagonists participate or serve as object". From the spatial temporal point of view, the novels of Anita Desai give the impression of slow motion pictures with sharpness and perspicacity. The movement is in full control by the recurring monologues and implicit dialogue very frequent in these novels. Disruptions in the natural flow of time can be marked in almost all the novels except, *A Village by the Sea*. In the words of Friedman, "We follow not only the actions of the past but also mind of the protagonist narrator as it seeks to recapture and depict, and therefore create, the past in the image of the present". The narrator takes a vantage point from which the characters are viewed clearly with the vivid physical background of flora and fauna, the earth and the sky, and if it happens to be a city, as in *Voices in the City*, the entire gamut of the teeming millions, the throbbing, pulsating life around the protagonist is considered essential for depicting their various moods and reactions and yet the locus is the inner world of feeling and thoughts of these individuals. The progression of time is more marked in *Cry the Peacock*, the action is limited mostly to Maya's house, in *Fire on the Mountain*, Carignano, in *Clear Light of Day*, it is the old house in Delhi. The ideological stance outwardly varying in different novels has certain common features. All the novels of Anita Desai are based on multiplicity of values, which are often conflicting with each other and are placed in a complex and ironic juxtaposition to each other. For e.g., Maya and Gautam represent two different value systems. If Maya is all attached to life Gautam is the epitome of detachment. Bim and Raja in *Clear Light of Day*, wish to be hero and heroine when they grow up, while Tara was content to be happy with the love and security of human contact and the natural life process of becoming a wife and mother. Raja ends up as a property dealer, alienated from the family, and Bim an aging spinster full of bitterness and regret. Tara alone retains her balance and normalcy and is the medium of bringing about reconciliation and understanding between the alienated brother and sister. Raka, Nanda Kaul and Ila Das represent three sets of values contrasted in the novel, *Fire on the Mountain*. Nanda Kaul is a recluse by pretence. Raka is a recluse by choice and Ila Das a recluse by circumstance. All three trying to cope with life in the best manner possible. Besides the above personal values the novels display social values. The values of the Indian milieu described in the novels, dominate. Indian community is by and large theistic. A belief in Almighty and different forms of worship are an integral part of Indian life even today. References to religion and worship are found in *Cry the Peacock*, in *Fire on the Mountain*, refers to the Buddhist text, *The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon*, *Clear Light of Day*, does not refer to holy books or worship, but is full of quotations from poems suggesting a divine presence (*Clear Light of Day*, p. 100). Male female roles and relationships are revealing the Indian social values. As a necessity, communication or passionate attachment between husband and wife is not considered a must for marital harmony. We have the example of Maya and Gautama. A woman if she is married should consider herself fortunate enough. A proof of her womanhood is her child bearing faculty. Maya being childless is subjected to social derision and develops guilt feelings. Indian male has always a dominating role to play and feels little responsible for the satisfaction of emotional needs of their wives or other women of the family. The Vice Chancellor husband of Nanda Kaul feels unconcerned about his wife's needs and is content to live in his own paradise. Maya's story begins and ends with emotional starvation. Raja in *Clear Light of Day*, feels little concerned about the affectionate attention Bim demands. Social hypocrisy is another favourite topic of discussion for Anita Desai. The gap between appearance and reality surfaces in almost all her major novels. The worst part of it that in the Indian society it does not evoke social derision but has a calm acceptance. Judgements and beliefs pertaining to the above are directly expressed by various modal structures including modal adverbs, sentence adverbs evaluative adjectives and generic sentences. The examples are not difficult to find. Generic sentences with evaluative adjectives "Gautam's reaction was exactly what I might have predicted, had I thought before speaking." (*Cry the Peacock*, p. 40) A single sentence like the above contains a

modal adverb, exactly, a modal auxiliary, might, a verb of prediction predicted, and another verb group denoting evaluation had I thought.

Psychological and Perceptual Point of View

Anita Desai's writing gains in depth and intensity mainly due to her psychological perspective. The various kinds of discourse at different levels are the result of the combination of internal and external perspectives. An example of internal narration Type A, in which the narration is from the point of view of a character's consciousness is given below: "And then Gautama made a mistake – his last, decisive one. In talking, gesturing, he moved in front of me, thus coming between me and the worshipped moon, his figure an ugly crooked grey shadow that transgressed its sorrowing chastity 'Gautama!' 'I screamed in fury, and thrust out my arms towards him, out at him, into him and past him saw him fall then, pass through'. (Cry the Peacock, p. 208) Here in this passage, the first-person variant is distinguished deictically by the use of first-person singular pronouns. The judgements and opinions of Maya are foregrounded. She calls Gautam's step 'a decisive mistake'. There is a reference to character/narrator's feelings and thoughts. Worshipped moon, his ugly figure, crooked grey shadow, and sorrowing chastity, indicate that. The choices of diction also indicate Maya as a certain psychological type. Internal perspective Type B is based consistently on third person narration by an omniscient author who claims knowledge of the character's ideas, motives and feelings. Example – 'Tara collected a bunch of velvet brown and purple pansies in the garden to take to school next day. But next day Miss Singh was gone. She had left with her bags, without a word, without a 'good bye' to a single girl, not even to Tara who stood at the open door of her room, rolling the bunch of pansies with their wide-eyed step-child faces. Tara was hurt, offended.' In this passage, prominence is given to the mental processes, feelings and perceptions of Tara. Her intentions, emotions and thoughts are highlighted. The above examples prove the multi-dimensional approach of Anita Desai, but her major writings are based on Free Indirect Discourse, i.e., a combination of Type 'A' and Type 'B' perspective. Example Perhaps she ought to have refused to have her (Raka). Perhaps she ought to leave the house to Tara who needed shelter, a cave to crawl into and die. Perhaps, perhaps...the alternatives were as many and as bothersome as flies. Nanda Kaul brushed them aside. (Fire on the Mountain, p. 103) In the above passage the character's subjective feelings given in Type A narration are interwoven with and framed by the author's account of the character's inner state (Type B). The author juxtaposes two sets of values. Nanda Kaul wishes to leave the house to Raka but then thinks of Tara, her mother. The character is distanced from the reader and hence a critique of her (character's) views is possible without direct judgement. The novels of Anita Desai considered under different subheadings in this chapter afford a wide spectrum of narrative perspectives. They are multivalent in their approach as Alan Warren Friedman says, 'almost invariably self-conscious and pluralistic, because they are simultaneously both a series of discrete parts and a unity and necessarily create and define a context, a pattern for themselves'. The discussion in the preceding pages is evidence enough that the understanding of prose fiction, like other literary works is aided through objective analysis. To conclude with the words of Wayne Booth: "Narration is an art not a science, but this does not mean that we are necessarily doomed to fail when we attempt to formulate principles about it. There are systematic elements in every art and criticism of fiction can never avoid the responsibility of trying to explain technical successes and failures, by reference to general principles."

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