



## Narrative Techniques in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*

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### ABSTRACT

Anita Desai is a representative Indian woman novelist in English whose contribution to fiction is extremely significant. Anita Desai's writings present a fascinating study of human beings torn within and outside. She records the emotional turmoil, chaos and agonies of her oppressed protagonist in a very touching manner. Desai's novels lay stress on interior rather than on exterior characterization on motives and circumstances. The present paper analyses the narrative techniques used by Anita Desai in *Clear Light of Day*.

**KEYWORDS :** Narration, Imagery, Flash back, Psyche, Characterisation.

### Introduction:

*Clear Light of Day* was first published in 1980 in the USA. The title of the novel is a phrase used in the final section of the novel by the author by herself while describing the state of mind of the protagonist. According to the author this is a novel "about time as a destroyer, as a preserver, and about what the bondage of time does to people". The novel is a "four dimensional piece on how a family's life moves backwards and forwards in a period of time" At the same time, politics and history can be seen in the background throughout *Clear Light of Day*, as the Partition of British India in 1947 can be traced through the characters' various experiences. In that way we see in some detail how history has had an impact on people's personal lives. This is what makes the novel so interesting to read.

Anita Desai uses many narrative techniques in this novel. They can be examined one by one.

### The Division of the Novel:

*Clear Light of Day* is divided into four unnamed parts. The division often conveys symbolism and meaning. Desai takes liberties with chronology and 'there is a constant intermingling of the past and present with a hint of the foreboding future' in the novel.<sup>1</sup> (Sali, p. 148). The first chapter deals with the present time, and we are introduced to the characters as they are now. The two sisters are reunited after some years apart. Tara, who is married to a diplomat, is back in India to attend their brother's daughter's marriage in Hyderabad. Tara's first stop on her journey however, is in Old Delhi to visit Bim in their childhood home. The second and third chapters deal with the memories of the past, and through Bim and Tara we are taken back to the years around the partition. The relationships among the siblings are described here, as well as their relationship to their parents and their aunt. The political situation in India before, during, and after the partition can be traced through the characters and their different experiences. The third chapter also reveals the 'predicament of aunt Mira' through a series of events.<sup>2</sup> (Sali, p. 148). In the fourth and last chapter the characters find themselves in the present again, but now with a profound realisation which they lacked in the first chapter. Bim, who has struggled with anger and bitterness, now realises that she has to make peace with herself and the ghosts from her past in order to live a full and meaningful life.

### Flash back Technique and Memory:

Anita Desai also makes memory and flashback as the main narrative strategies in her novel *Clear Light of Day*. This is a novel about memory: about places and people who go through change and transformation in an attempt to find their true identities.

In *Clear Light of Day* we get to see an upper-middleclass Indian family and their everyday life. The characters struggle to find their place in the world, and with the memories of the past that haunt them in various ways. Desai has described *Clear Light of Day* as a 'four dimensional piece'<sup>3</sup> (Sali, p. 6). Inspired by T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* (1978) the novel shows how time can be both a destroyer and a preserver, and it also shows 'what the bondage of time does to

people"<sup>4</sup> (Sali, p. 6).

By making use of flashbacks and stream of consciousness Desai 'steers her story and unravels the hidden thoughts and feelings and emotions of her characters'<sup>5</sup> (Sali, p. 162).

It is said that characterization is what is most important for Desai: 'The portrayal of the woman, her emotional and psychological crisis, her status in the traditional Indian society, her responses to her surroundings, her physical and mental tortures, her ways to come out to surmount her calamities find the central place in Desai's novel'<sup>6</sup> (Sali, p. 148). Through the characters of Bim and Tara we see the choices women have and do not have, and we see their willingness or un-willingness to overcome the expectation of their society. Women are to some extent imprisoned by their surroundings and by themselves because they have accepted their place in 'a domestic milieu'<sup>7</sup> (Ho, p. 21). As the women's private spheres turn into prisons the characters must work with their own image of selfhood in order to liberate themselves from the positions in which society has placed them. As we will see from *Clear Light of Day* memory becomes an important key in doing this.

By shifting between present and past time, between what happens between Bim and Tara 'now' versus past memories, moments of importance are revealed slowly.

At the very beginning of *Clear Light of Day* we see that the first two pages are filled the images of singing koels, of ants, of a rose garden, of a snail. All images that bring Tara right back to her childhood and to bitter sweet memories.

In keeping with her theme and technique, Anita Desai uses imagery in order to point out different feelings in the characters, and they also function as symbols of what is going to happen in the future.

### Imagery:

*Clear Light of Day* abounds in imagery. Nature which includes animals, plants and birds has a strong presence in *Clear Light of Day*. Desai uses external landscapes to portray interior states of mind. The complexities of Bim's life is effectively brought out through the landscape. The recurrent images add meaning in the feminine world of Bim, Tara and Mira Masi. In the hands of the novelist imagery becomes a very powerful mode to represent the perception of a character. This novel is filled with symbolism, and colours, animals, smells, and sounds all serve a purpose larger than themselves.

Desai uses imagery and symbolism as a way of creating order in her novels. She often links her characters to something in nature or in history to give an indication to where the novel is heading.

In *Clear Light of Day*, one comes across a symbolic link between different images, which form an interface, a common bond. Imagery is primarily used to capture and crystallize a wide range of experiences. It lends clarity and vividness to the situation she

describes, events she documents and characters she delineates. Most of the images are so sharply condensed and chiseled that they resemble a piece of painting.

In *Clear Light of Day* Desai portrays her characters through various uses of symbols and images, and the language is often very poetic. Desai's protagonists 'associate their emotions and feelings with the buds, flowers, petals, birds, animals and insects around them'<sup>8</sup> (Sali, p. 125). At the very beginning of *Clear Light of Day* we see that already on the first two pages we are given the images of singing koels, of ants, of a rose garden, of a snail. All images that bring Tara right back to her childhood and to bitter sweet memories. In the hands of the novelist imagery becomes a very powerful mode to represent the perception of a character.

#### Portrayal of inward Psyche:

Anita Desai is chiefly concerned with the portrayal of inward or psychic reality of the characters. To use her own words, not "the one-tenth visible section of the ice-berg that one sees above the surface of the ocean..." (Replies to the Questionnaire, 1). She "probes deep into the inner recesses of the psyche of the character and delves deeper in a character or a scene rather than going round about it."<sup>10</sup> (Desai Interviewed, p.68)

For the first time in Indian writing in English, Anita Desai makes an associative use of landscapes and myths, symbols and images (esp. of birds and animals) for characterization. This animal imagery shows that we still retain in our nature a portion of that primitive animal identity. In the words of Dr. B. Ramachandra Rao, "Anita Desai evokes the necessary mood and elicits the right emotion from the reader through a series of objective descriptions."<sup>11</sup> (p, 10) Her feminine and domestic sensibility seldom strays beyond the narrow confines of family life. Working on such a limited canvas, she has been able to create masterpieces in Indo-Anglian literature that have won her the coveted Sahitya Academy Award. She records the psychic oscillations and tensions of her near neurotic characters and articulates them through hints and suggestions, symbols and images. In Anita Desai's novels, imagery lends a poetic, lyrical colouring to the problems of the estranged self and project reality through "artistic parallels more powerful and eloquent than common collocation of words"<sup>12</sup> (Prasad 1984:54). Besides enriching the artistic and aesthetic value of the novels, images in Anita Desai, enlarge the critical and interpretative horizon of her art. They suggest the protagonist's totality of experience and build up the overall tonality of the novel.

#### Use of Poetry:

*Clear Light of Day*, is also a story about a family covering two generations of Das family but mainly dealing with the second generation that is of the children – Bim, Tara, Raja and Baba. The novel covers two historical periods of India, one freedom struggle and another of independence. The story is primarily narrated from Bim's point of view that is the most important character in the novel. A significant technique employed in the novel is the use of poetry in the context of Raja and Bim. In Raja's case it is natural since he is very fond of Urdu poetry. At the end of the novel when two couplets of Iqbal, set to music, provide the ultimate vision of the novel and by implication this is the *Clear, Light of the Day*, that dawns upon Bim making her way clear, dispelling all her confusion and giving her a philosophy of life. She manages to write poetically about each individual character and yet tries to make them all as real as possible. Besides the use of poetry, music to which it is set makes it more effective.

#### Conclusion:

The theme and technique in Anita Desai's novels are not isolated elements. They are inter-related at many levels of structure and texture. The theme serves as the skeleton incorporating the whole life-perspective of the novelist through situations and scenes that are peculiar to her alone. From the point of view of techniques the most important thing about this novel is the effective use of poetry.

She also makes use of flashback technique, which is appropriate. She uses powerful imagery. Thus, she uses different fictional techniques according to the demands of the story.

#### References:

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- 3) Ibid, p. 6
- 4) Ibid.
- 5) Ibid, p.162
- 6) Ibid, p. 148
- 7) Elaine Yee Lin Ho, Anita Desai, Writers and Their Works, United Kingdom: North Cote British Council, 2006., p. 21
- 8) Sali, op cit., p. 125
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