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Portrayal of Women Through Stream of Consciousness

Narrative: A Study of Anita Desai's Selected Novels

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Abstract: The present research paper entitled “Portrayal of Women through Stream of Consciousness Narrative: A Study of Anita Desai's Selected Novels “ aims to explore how Desai makes use of Stream of Consciousness technique as a narrative mode in exploiting her women characters. It is a neurotic study of Desai Portrayal of Women. This study focuses on the select novels of Desai: *Cry the Peacock*, *Voice in the City*, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* *Fire on the Mountain* and *Clear Light of Day*. This research states that, psycho – neurosis as a common thread that under streams in all her works.

Keywords: Stream of Consciousness, Narrative Mode, Psycho – Neurosis, Psycho – Analyses, Neurotic Disorder, Alienation, Traumatic Experience, and Neurotic Chaos).

Introduction

This present research is entitled “Portrayal of Women through Stream of Consciousness Narrative. A Study of Anita Desai's Selected Novels”. It deals with Desai's novels *Cry*, *The Peacock*, *Voice in the City*, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* in particular *Fire on the Mountain*, and *Clear Light of Day* in general. The aim of this research paper is to examine how Desai has employed Stream of Consciousness narrative mode in her novels. It is a Psycho-Analytical Study Desai's of Women characters. Desai presents her critique in depicting neurotic characters like Maya, Monisha, Nirode, and Sita. These cited protagonists are alienated from families from parents and even from their own selves. These characters undergo the traumatic experience of loneliness and frustration. They are suppressed by neurotic fears due to many obsessions. In sum, they are conscious of their plight.

Portrayal of Women through Stream of Consciousness Narrative: A Study

The study of the steam of conscious mood, this research elaborates its features and captures the feeling of the major characters. “Desai delves deep into human psyche and tries to explore very adroitly the dim domains of the conscious and the subconscious of the major characters. (Madhusudhan Prasad, *Anita Desai: The Novelist*: Allahabad: New Horizon, 1981, 22) Shyam M. Asnani also stresses the same point: “Her forte is the exploration of the interior world, plunging into the limitless depths of the mind, and bringing into relief the hidden contours of the human psyche” (Shyam M. Asnani *Perspectives on Anita Desai* 5).

Desai portrays each individual as an unsolved mystery. Each individual lives in separate worlds of problems and passions. They suffer from fear-consciousness. At the surface level, a neurotic disorder is clearly depicted in the novels. But the neurotic disorder only isolates them from the real world. Desai presents her interpretation for depicting neurotic characters like Maya, Monisha, Nirode, and Sita. The protagonists

are alienated from the world, from society, from families from parents and even from their own selves because they are not average people but individuals “made to stand against the general current, who fight that current and struggle against it” (Yashodara Dalmia,13).

The novel *Cry, The Peacock* pictures the neurotic disorder and hence the fear-psyche of its heroine Maya. Her mind passes through the stream of thoughts on deeper analysis, exhibits her feelings and the causes for her abnormal moods. The Albino Astrologer’s prediction that either Maya or her husband would die within four years after their marriage was the cause for her neurotic fears. She is mentally perturbed with the astrologer’s prediction. She knows that she is haunted by “a black and evil shadow”, and her fate and the times has come: “four years it was now, we had been married. I know the time had come. It was now to be Gautama, (*Cry, The Peacock*, 32-33).

Maya’s fear psychosis is also based on the marital disharmony. Maya muses over her husband’s lack of love for her. Once, in a fit of intense despair and agony, tells him straight on his face: “oh you know nothing, understand nothing, Nor will you ever understand. You know nothing of me –and of how I can love. How I want to love. How it is important to me. But you, you’ve never loved. And you don’t love me.” (*Cry, The Peacock* 112). Maya is fond of the love thirst in her. She finds her husband Gautama is preoccupied with his own self. Gautama’s negative detachment is referred by Harish as: “Gautama remains so much lost in his work that Maya finds him even oblivious of the dust storm that has to the dust storm that has raged earlier in the afternoon. When she asks him to accompany her to the roof of the thoughts” (Harish Raizada, “The Haunted protagonist of Anita Desai” in Ramesh K. Srivastava’s *Perspectives on Anita Desai* 35) this shows how sensitive Maya is!

Maya’s stream of thoughts reveals her growing psychosis. The fact is established through the reference to the frightening memories and marital discord. Ramachandra Rao emphasizes the same thus, “Maya, the heroine is a neurotic young woman whose sanity is fast disintegrating under the pressures of marital discord and of certain vague but frightening childhood memories which slowly crystallise onto terrifying clarities” (B. Ramachandra Rao, *The Novels of Mrs. Anita Desai*.1).

Maya also suffers from father-fixation. For her Gautama is not a loving husband but a father substitute, a medium to reach her father in the subconscious level. She is a spoilt child. Gautama points this out to Maya: “He is responsible for this- for making you believe that all that is important in the world is to possess, riches, comforts, posies, dollies, loyal retainer luxuries of the fairy tales you were brought up on. Life is a fairy tale to you still” (*Cry, The Peacock*, 115). In another telling passage, Gautama openly speaks of Maya’s father obsession:

If you knew your Freud it would all be very straightforward and then appear as merely inevitable to you... taking your childhood and upbringing into consideration. You have a very obvious father – obsession. which is also the reason why you married me, a man so much older than yourself. It is a complex that, unless you mature rapidly you will not be able to deal with, to destroy your own father obsession”. (*Cry, The Peacock*, 146)

Perhaps Maya perceives the implication of what Gautama says about her father - fixation. She must destroy this father – fixation from her mind. Her

consciousness suggests that if Gautama is removed, her father – fixation will also end. Srivastava observes thus: “For Maya, freedom is not possible unless she removes the father in the unconscious, the father images, and the husband all in the personality of Gautama. To do so, Maya transfers the albino’s prediction about death to Gautama, strikes at his reflection in the mirror and then kills him” (Ramesh K. Srivastava, *Perspective on Anita Desai*. xxiv).

Maya wants to come out of her loneliness and very much desires to belong to the society. But her attempts divert herself by visits to her friends Leila and pom or to Mrs. Lal’s party or to the restaurant and the cabaret turn out to be futile. She enjoys her busy life in the company of Gautama’s mother and sister Nila. But, when they leaves her, she finds the house empty and herself alone with her “horrors and nightmares” (*Cry, The Peacock*, 162).

Maya has moments of lucidity in the process of disintegration. Her imagination of intense life makes her a sublime artist. She realizes her neurotic chaos and in moments of clarity utters “I am insane, insane”. She watches her insane self, which completely dominates at the end. The novel thus presents the hideous transformation of a sensitive and poetic young woman into an insane individual.

While the novel *Cry, The Peacock* treats the stream of consciousness on the part of Maya alone the novel *Voices in the City* traces it in three characters Nirode, Monisha and Amla. The problem of Maya was one of attachment whereas the problem in Nirode, Monisha and Amla is that of detachment. The theme of detachment in *Voices in the City* is conveyed by the words of Monisha while reading the Gita. The advice of the lord that a man of steady wisdom is satisfied with the self, by the self alone and has completely cast out all desires from the mind and that a self-controlled saint remains unmoved when desire enters into him, suggests the problem of the three main characters. They want to fulfil their own will what their self dictates.

The city Calcutta affects the characters psychologically. It is presents as an antagonist to the three major characters. It is a monster for them and their problem is to remain detached from the city. The mother of the three characters is identified with the city, since she is attached to evil. Hence Nirode, Monisha and Amla develop hatred towards Calcutta and their mother. Nirode suffers from oedipal fixation and has a love-hate relationship with his mother. He is haunted by the fact that his mother had relationship with major Chadha. He tells Amla: “Ask her love that made her swallow father whole, like a cobra swallows a fat petrified rat, then spews him out in one flabby yellow mess” (*Voices in the City*, 190).

Nirode grows jealous of his rival, since he thought Major Chadha began to possess her. He thought mother belonged to him. But her illegal love makes him hate her and he becomes completely alienated from his mother. As, Maya wants to remove the father in his mind, Nirode desires to remove his mother.

The theme of alienation is treated in terms of mother-children relationship which itself is a consequence of disagreement in husband-wife relationship. Nirode, a sensitive and talented artist, drifts from one person to another and experiences an emptiness, meaninglessness and alienation in life. Nirode knew “by instinct that he was a man for whom aloneness alone was the slow natural condition, aloneness alone the treasure worth treasuring”. (*Voices in the City*, 24) In his sensitive consciousness, Nirode feels suffocated and threatened by the city: “On all sides the city pressed

down, alight, aglow and stirring with its own marsh-bred, monster of life that, like an ogre, kept one eye open through sleep and waking... the city was as much atmosphere as odour, as much a haunting ghost of the past as a frenzied passage towards early death" (*Voices in the City*, 41-42). The city looks like a monster and it threatens to kill him.

Ramachandra Rao refers to the detachment of Nirode as he calls the "monstrous vulgarity of everyday life": "the characters react against the monstrous vulgarity of everyday life, the marriage-party on the railway platform, with its vulgar ostentation, its snivelling women and obscene men makes Nirode remark God, look at them" (B. Ramachandra Rao, 32). Nirode moves from one false solution to another. From a journalist he becomes a writer, starts a magazine with the aim of bringing together different intellectuals. But this project is abandoned just when the magazine is proving to be a financial success. He is obsessed with the desire to fail, because succumbing to the lure of success would be a compromise:

I want to fail-quickly. Then I want to see if I have the spirit to start moving again, towards my next failure. I want to move from failure to failure, step by step to rock bottom. I want to that depth. When you climb a ladder, all you find at the top is space, all you can do is to leap off-fall to the bottom. I want to get there without that Meaningless climbing. I want to descend quickly (*Voices in the City*, 40).

In all these thought processes of Nirode, the detachment lesson taught by Lord Krishna is quite evident. T.S.Eliot in *The Dry Salvages* summarizes the lesson of *Bhagwad Gita* in a single line: "Nor farewell, but fare forward". (T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, Delhi: Oxford University press, 1977, 4) Nirode is seen going forward. He turns to the editing of a magazine and just when it is about to succeed, abandons it, writes a play, then abandons it, and after a brush with death comes back to life, but this time with a different outlook.

Ramachandra Rao comments on Nirode's attitude of going forward: "Nirode's problem and his dream is that of escaping. But as he puts it, it is an escape from nowhere to no-where. He is not clear about his destination and hence in the beginning the only reasonable thing was to accept the journeying as meaningful in itself" (Ramachandra Rao, 43).

Nirode' view of absolute negation of life in the novel represents the attitude of the most principal characters of Anita Desai towards life: "Happiness, suffering- I want to be done with them, disregard them, see beyond them to the very end" (*Voices in the City*, 42). D.S.Maini concludes that "In Nirode, a psychic outlaw, Anita Desai has presented successfully the archetype of Bengali rebel in search of a cause. (Darshan Singh Maini, 'The Achievement of Anita Desai' in *Indo-English Literature*, ed. By K.K Sharma, Ghaziabad: Vimal Prakashan, 1977, 222).

Nirode undergoes a spiritual evolution after witnessing Monisha's a death. His stream of consciousness makes him reveal his own attitude to Monisha's death: "Monisha had died from an excess of caring, in a fire of care and conscience, and that they too must accept, with a like intensity, the vigilance of heart and conscience, allowing no deed of indifference or incomprehension to direct by, but to seize each moment, each person, each fragment of the world and reverence it with that acute care that had drive Monisha to her splendid death". (*Voice in the City*, 248). The

consciousness of Nirode awakens his desire to capture the intense moments of life. Nirode's uncompromising honesty is pictured in the novel. He is offered an insight into a personality grappling with issues of life and death. He comes alive in his fitful outbursts of irritation and denunciation.

The psychic life of Monisha is revealed through the mood of alienation and the resulting bitterness that she undergoes in her short life. The graph of her psychic life can be constructed from her long and searching and self-confronting entries in her diary. Her morbid inclinations can be collected from her stream of consciousness. She finds nothing in common with her and her husband Jibans self-centered and self complacent family. Shut up from all sides, she finds no place to get help from others. Tormented by her agonised self, she questions herself: "Is this what life is then, my life? Only a conundrum that I shall brood over forever with passion and pain, never to arrive at a solution? Only a conundrum-is that, then life?" (*Voice in the City*, 124-125).

Monisha is able to exhibit her mental reaction. She feels trapped in her husband's "there is no escape from it" (*Voice in the City*, 118) she cries, and reacts with such a hysterical intensity that even her emotionless husband is surprised. The brief soliloquy before suicide serves as an explanation of Monisha's frantic search for feeling which culminates in suicide. She sees the street singer and hears her song and realizes that she has never given herself completely:

I could not bear to have any one touch me While she is singing and humming and Swaying to this loud music. I cannot bear to touch however vicariously, this appalling exhibition of a passion that ravages the soul, body and being. I have never touched anyone never left the imprint of my fingers on anyone's shoulders, of my tongue on anyone's damp palate. (*Voice in the City*, 240)

Amla is sensitive like Nirode and Monisha, quick to sense the atmosphere of dissolution, temperamental like the others, but unlike them she moves from revolt, though love to surrender. Ramachandra Rao comments on the spiritual journey that one is able to detect in their stream of consciousness: "The three main characters make journeys – spiritual journeys. From doubt, frustration and disillusionment they travel through suffering and stumble their way to solutions of their own. It might be acceptance or abject self – surrender or self – annihilation" (Ramachandra Rao, 40).

Vyas finds an inner voice in the reaction of these characters raising certain problems of life: "Is there a hopefulness in human life?... Is there a fulfilment in the voices of the city? (B.O. Vyas, 'Viscid Voices of the Inner Kingdom' in *The Journal of Indian Writing in English*, January 1981, 7). Even if one does not find in the novel solutions to these questions, one may find the three main characters trying to unravel the riddle of life, to discover the essentials.

The stream of consciousness of Sita, the heroine of *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* illustrates her inner self and subjective temperament. Even in childhood Sita revealed a basic weakness in her character, her unwillingness to grow and to accept the responsibilities of an adult life. She constantly withdraws "the protective chrysalis of childhood far longer than is usual for most" (*Where Shall We Go This Summer?* 46).

D.S.Maini analyses Sita's psyche from her musings: "The mad idea of containing the baby in the womb for keeps is surely one of the classic cases of

regression and retreat from reality in Freudian psychology” (D.S.Maini, ‘*The Achievement of Anita Desai in Indo- English Literature*’. 228). Sita is sensitive, peace-loving and introvert. She, as a sensitive individual is pitted against the insensitive world. Hence she undergoes the agony of alienation. Shyam M .Asnani in his article, points out the symbolic meaning of loneliness of Sita:”. her loneliness is symbolic of the loneliness of a woman, a wife and mother- the loneliness conditioned by familial and social constraints”. (Shyam M. Asnani, “Anita Desai’s Fiction: A New Dimension”, *Indian Literature*, xxiv 2, March-April, 1981, 45)

Bored with her dull life she often sits alone smoking as if waiting for someone: “Bored? How? Why? With What? It could not begin to comprehend her boredom” (*Where Shall We Go This Summer?* 33). Sita’s inability to realize the cause for her meaningless life is effectively portrayed by her reaction to boredom. She wants to experience the moments of intensity in life: “She herself, looking on it, saw it stretched out so fast, so flat, so deep, than in fright she scrambled about it, searching for a few of these moments that proclaimed her still alive, not quite drowned and dead” (*Where shall we go this summer ?* 33-34).

Sita is infuriated by “the vegetarian, the solidity of the wellfed” (Ramachandra Rao, 52). The text corroborates the same thus: “She took their insularity and complacency as well as the aggression and violence of others as affronts upon her own living nerves” (*Where Shall We Go This Summer?* 33).

Sita regards the colourless and soulless existence of her husband’s family as a provocation and even a threat to her own existence. To challenge them, to shatter their complacency, and to shock them into a recognition of the reality, Sita behaves provocatively- she starts smoking and begins “to speak in sudden rushes of emotion, as though flinging darts at their smooth, unscarred faces” (*Where Shall We Go This Summer?* 32). The members of her husband’s family are leading inauthentic existences. They are incapable of introspection and are without that inwardness and capacity for self examination which are the signs of an authentic existence. Their subhuman placidity, calmness and sluggishness infuriate Sita.

The problems and the unhappiness in the life of Sita spring from her constitutional inability to accept the values and the attitudes of society. She finds that the majority of the members of society live lives full of dullness, boredom and deadness. These negative emotions run throughout her stream of thoughts, expressed and unexpressed: “They are animals nothing but appetite and sex. Only food, sex and money matter. Animals” (*Where Shall We Go This Summer?* 32).

Manori, the island in the novel objectifies Sita’s desire to escape the madding crowd. Ti also symbolises Sita’s illusion: “If reality were not to be borne, then illusion was the only alternative. She saw that island illusion as a refuse, a protection” (Ramesh K. Srivastava’s *Perspectives on Anita Desai*, 41). But she is disappointed with her. Each expects the impossible from the other. Moses, the caretaker, waiting for twenty years on the island is looking for something, perhaps a ritual enactment of the part- the return of the oldman, and the recreation of the world of magic, of superstition and the blind faith of the past.

Sita expects to experience moments of intense calm and sanity in the land of Manori. She expresses the reason for leaving for Manori to her husband, Raman: “I think what I’m doing is trying to escape from the madness here, escape to a place it

might be possible to be same again” (*Where Shall We Go This Summer ?* 23). Desai herself in her interview refers to Sita’s yearning for loneliness to explore human values. Her exile and loneliness can be compared to Sita’s in *The Ramayana*:

Srivastava: Sita is a rather uncommon name. In our part the name of Sita considered ominous...Did you have any such purpose in giving this name to your character?

Desai: Yes I did. To me, too, the name Sita Conjures up exile and loneliness (Ramesh. K. Srivatsava, 221-222)

Sita broods over contrast between her and her husband. Towards the end of her experience at Manori she begins to think of Raman’s rationality and his acceptance of the norms and values of society. She places Raman under the following category:

To certain people there comes a day when they must say the great yes or the great No. He who has the yes ready within him reveals himself at once and saying it (he) crosses over to the path of honour and his own conviction (*Where Shall We Go This Summer ?*, 101)

Sita on the other hand refuses to accept the authority of society and hence faces isolation and disappointment:

He who refuses does not repent. Should he be asked again, he would say No again. And yet that No- the right No...crushes him for the rest of his life. (*Where Shall We Go This Summer?* 101)

Rao epitomizes the tension between the inner and the outer experiences of Desai’s characters. “The tragedy arises out of the inability of the characters to connect the prose and the passion in their lives. They have lived only in fragments. Sita is unable to rediscover the passion of life and decides to accept the prose of life. (Ramachandra Rao, 60)

The novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is seen as a parable on the inability of human beings to relate the inner with the outer, the individual with society. Those who say ‘No’ to society’s purposeless, humdrum life undergo a deeper realization of life’s realities, provided their loneliness is productive. On the other hand a life of complete inwardness, of a neurotic subjective indulgence is not the solution to the problems of life. The other novels of Anita Desai also depict the stream of consciousness in their main characters and hence their varying moods. The novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird* presents Adit and Sarah suffering from the loss of identity, alienation and humiliation largely on account of racial and cultural prejudices. Dev, who migrates to England exhibits his love- hate relationship with England.

Sivaramakrishna pictures the anguish of loneliness and the loss of identity suffered by Adit and Sarah: “An anguish, it seemed to him, of loneliness, and then it became absurd to call her by his own name: She had become nameless, she had shed her name as she had shed her ancestry and identity and she sat there, staring as though she watched them disappear” (M. Sivaramakrishna, ‘From Alienation to Mythic Acceptance: The Ordeal of Consciousness in Anita Desai’s fiction in Ramesh K. Srivastava, 22)

Nanda Kaul, an old lady in the novel *Fire on the Mountain* withdraws herself from all movements and sounds. She sees in her consciousness the loneliness she had been suffering in the past:

Nor had her husband loved and cherished her and kept her like a queen... he had only done enough to keep her quiet while he carried on a lifelong affair with Miss. David... And her children... the children were all alien to her nature. She neither understood nor loved them. (Anita Desai, *Fire on the Mountain*, Bombay: Allied publishers Pvt Ltd., 1977, 145)

Raka, the great grand-daughter of Nanda kaul is conscious of the reasons for her self- imposed loneliness. She hates entertainments because they are occasions of crudity and crime. She perceives the lack of love in the family; her father maltreats her mother. These traumatic experiences coupled with her prolonged illness during which she listened to the stories read by her mother in her “sepulchral,” “martyred voice”, make her averse to any need “to socialize” (Anita Desai, *Fire on the Mountain*, 64).

The novel *Clear Light of Day* presents the anguish of a sensitive woman Bim who wishes to live in the world of fantasy and past. Tara, her younger sister is obsessed by her childhood memories and cannot forget the impression that father had killed her mother. Hari in *The Village by the Sea* leaves his village to participate in a protest march in Bombay and feels “deserted and friendless”. Alone in Bombay “he felt now that he belonged neither to one group nor the other. He belonged to no one, nowhere”. (Anita Desai, *The Village by the Sea*, New Delhi: Allied publishers, 1983, 81)

A prolonged attempt has been made in this chapter to capture the dominant moods of Anita Desai’s characters through the thoughts that run across their mind (The Stream of Consciousness), which are reflected in their utterance and actions. The major characters undergo the traumatic experience of loneliness and frustration. They exhibit their existential predicament in their hypersensitive assertions. They are suppressed by neurotic fears due to marital disharmony and various obsessions. In short, they are conscious of their plight. These moods of the sensitive characters are distilled by the novelist through different stylistic modes. The paper elaborately analyses modes and establishes the relationship between the moods and the modes.

Conclusion

In sum, this research elucidated that, Anita Desai’s Women are afflicted by neurotic disorder. It is a study of Desai’s Women characters. Psycho – neurosis and psycho – analysis are taken as approaches for this study. The literary technique Stream of Consciousness is explored as a narrative mode and as a literary genre. It is concluded that, Desai is the voice of her contemporary women. Her characters are examined psychologically. This study also concludes that, the genre Stream of Consciousness is writing style of Anita Desai.

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