

A Critical Study of Stream of Consciousness technique in Anita Desai's Novels

Rajkumari Sudhir

(Asst. Professor in English)

Govt.Sarojini Naidu Girls P.G. College, Bhopal

ABSTRACT

Time has a powerful bearing on man's life, emotions, thoughts and experience. It makes its presence felt on both the physical and the psychic planes of human experience. As in Life, so in Literature, time asserts itself in one way or the other. The narrative form, be it the epic, the romance or the novel, has always concerned itself with man in action, i.e. man moving in time. As such in any form of narrative, time plays a crucial role at least in the structuring of events.

Introduction

At the turn of the century, we find an almost simultaneous change in the concept of time as enunciated by philosophers and in its treatment by the major novelists of the period like Proust, Woolf, Joyce, and Dorothy Richardson. But it is not a simple case of developments in philosophy influencing those in literature. One can rather look at the whole thing in terms of Goldman's "homologous relationship" between the current ideas and their expression in literature. Therefore a brief glance at the philosophic theories of time would not be amiss.

Time and memory are inter-linked concepts. Augustine thinks that the past can be defined only in terms of memories. Bergson makes a distinction between memory and pure memory. Memory, to him, consists of habits that are fixed in the body of the organism and is designed to adapt it to the situation it finds itself in. It is common to both men and animals unlike "pure memory" which is a specific human characteristic. Bergson contends that it retains the whole of our past. That we can be reminded of only a few things at a time is due to the fact that the brain acts as 'a filter for our memories allowing only those that are practically useful, to emerge on a given occasion'(Edwards).

Psychological time:

Hagdon's concept of barrier time can best be exemplified through sub-literary forms like fairy tales and T.V. scripts which prescribe a time limit within which a certain task has to be accomplished. The movement is not continuous but constitutes a series

of jerks and starts. Polytemporal time has the clock hands running berserk. The author deliberately shuffles time in such a way that a reader often loses track of all time references. There is a dialectical relationship between clock time and "psychological" time with no before and after connections. The narrative moves at various levels, for example, In *Cry, the Peacock*, Maya constantly delves into the past nightmarish encounter with the albino and breathlessly waits for the evil prophecy to fulfil itself. It is the polytemporal time shape that is predominant in the works of Woolf and Desai, as the present study will reveal.

The use of nostalgia, with its frequent references to the past, results in discontinuity indulging our 'tendency to reverie' as David Daiches would say and so drawing the reader into the very vortex of the narrative. These shifts are not artificial or superimposed but are a result of the novelist's desire to convey the substance of life, of experience. As a passive reader would be unable to grasp its essence, active reader participation is ensured by the structure of the novels. The reader is not passively watching 'that straight line from the first hiccup to the last gasp'(Golding 6) but has to bring into play all his faculties to be able to participate in the fictive world of the novels.

With the advent of Hardy and James, time starts to be used in more positive ways. The focus shifts from the present future juxtaposition to the past present one. The clock stops, while James explores the novel dimension of time created within

the mind of the individual. On the other hand, in Hardy, time is often dramatized as 'malignant Fate,' waiting to destroy humans.

It is, however, the Jamesian use of time that has affected modern novelists. While, undoubtedly, it had a bearing on the technique of the novels, it also helped in changing the concept of 'characterology.' For example, in Dickens, the characters are sketched with hard definite outlines, while later writers like Joyce, Proust and Woolf sketch blurred shadowy figures in the manner of the Post-Impressionists.

Technique other than the traditional one:

For Woolf, 'Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope' and as the writer's function is to represent life, a technique other than the traditional one would have to be adopted. The traditional novel, on the whole, concentrates upon: Outer events and acts taking place within a phenomenological universe, full of things and persons; it assumes the existence of a pattern or purpose. Events are so arranged that significance can be readily deduced from the structure (Goldberg).

The early twentieth century novelists felt a need for a different concept of time that would, paradoxically, release man from the limits of time itself. To quote Louis Gillet, 'whatever is most valuable in modern literature is a meditation on the nature of time, on the mystery of memory and personality' (qtd in Guignet). Lukacs thus accounts for the emergence of the change in the novelist's attitude towards time and memory:

Now once again the novel can express a kind of unity of meaning and life, but it is a unity thrust into the past, a unity remembered only. For in the present, the world always defeats the hero, frustrates his longing for reconciliation; yet when he remembers his failure, paradoxically he is at one with it. The process of memory has therefore drawn the resistant outside world into subjectivity, there, in the past, reiterating a kind of unity with it..... time is profoundly ambiguous in nature, a force both life giving and life destroying (Jameson).

Voices in the City is a series of pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that have to be pieced together in order to get a composite view of the four parts, each dedicated to the four major characters. Though the

major concern of the novel is 'the terror of facing, single handed the ferocious assaults of existence' (Prasad) to quote Ortegay Gusset, yet memory and nostalgia posit the past and present in a dialectical confrontation. Somy's father recounts incidents of his glorious but decadent past and contrasts them with the aridity of the present and the bleakness of the future. Here the preference for an idyllic past smacks strongly of similar sentiments expressed in Woolf's *Night and Day* and *Between the Acts*.

Bye-Bye Blackbird, though predominantly concerned with the existential problem of loneliness and adjustment in an alien land, is drenched in nostalgia. Adit, an Anglophile to begin with, ultimately succumbs to the pangs of nostalgia for his homeland. The far removes of space and time cannot keep him from visiting, at least in memory and imagination, the vast and wild landscapes of India. His nostalgia acquires a dreadful dimension of "an illness, an ache" in him and hounds him back to a search for his roots.

And as if this does not explain the concept sufficiently, Desai clarifies in an interview with Yashodhara Dalmia "I mean the human condition itself. It is only superficially affected by the day-to-day changes. We continue to live in the same way as we have in the past centuries with the same tragedies and the same comedies". The only way to create a sense of meaning in the face of such hopelessness is to relieve the past in the Proustian way.

The novels of Desai reveal their pre-occupation with Time. It informs both the thematic and the formal aspects of their novels. *Cry, the Peacock*, we encounter, to use Higdon's phrase, the polytemporal time shape. It is closely allied, in principle to the modern art of Cezanne, Picasso and Dali. In it, temporal boundaries, that had constituted the basic principle of narrative art since Aristotle, hardly exist. The narrative moves up and down through layers of time. As Durrell puts it:

The narrative momentum forward is counter-sprung by references backwards in time, giving the impression of a book which is not travelling from 'a' to 'b' but standing above time and turning slowly on its own axis to comprehend the whole pattern.... a

marriage of past and present with the flying multiplicity of the future racing towards one (Durrell).

It is difficult to imagine Dickens or Hardy writing a novel covering a time span of one day only. They needed several years to develop their characters and to conclude their narratives. In *Cry, the Peacock*, we have the spring to summer framework. The novel opens in a haze of April heat and ends soon after the summer “loo” stormily sweeps away Maya’s last tenuous link with sanity.

Past hopes and present achievements are sadly “out of joint” for the various characters. Maya, in *Cry, the Peacock*, had felt that marriage would be a continuation of her rosy childhood with Gautama playing the indulgent father-role. But time implies flux and to quote Southwell:

Times go by turns, and chances change by course from foul to fair, from better hap to worse (Southwell).

The time-dominated individual is set in contrast to the timelessness of the universe. The idea that men may come and men may go but the human race goes on forever is symbolized in the song of the old woman ‘ee um fah um so/foe swee too eem oo’ which is described as the voice of no age or sex. This voice seemed to be singing since millions of years and would continue to do so to the very end of civilization. And in *Cry, the Peacock* the ‘loo’ is described thus:

Such storms had blown since the time when the earth was desert and no living thing, no creeping, crawling beasts, plants or celis stirred upon that great plain. Such storms would sweep the earth and the last traces of these huge masses of creeping, crawling, toiling, struggling cell-conglomerations that now wracked the earth when the time came for annihilation. This life you speak of, this little flash-in-the pan, how insignificant and trivial it appears compared with the immortal cycle to which all humanity is bound....(Desai).

Desai seems to be referring to ‘the endless recurrence of things, night following day, season following season, the cycle of birth, growth and decay; in short the circular character of human and natural experience for which Nicholas Berdyaev’s words would be “cosmic time”.

Desai’s style can best be approached from her own statement:

It is the movement of the wing one tries to capture, not the bird. That is, it is the image that matters..... That is, what a writer’s existence is all about—he connects, he connects, all the time he connects. It is a process that does employ language but also transcends it (Desai, ‘The Indian Writers’).

Let us examine the following passage from *Cry, the Peacock*:

Thoughts come, incidents occur, then they are scattered and disappear. Past, present, future, Truth and Untruth. They shuttle back and forth, a shifting chiaroscuro of light and shade, of blood and ashes (Desai, *Cry*).

To match the disconnectness of thought and the sudden shifts in perspective, the sentences assume a staccato urgency as if moving in a rush. On the other hand, happier memories of long holidays spent in the hills are savoured in long winded poetic construction. Better still, my summer home in the hills, in Darjeeling and my little knock kneed pony that took me for rides.... bearing its load of juice-jammed fruit Could not ever end .

Desai’s prose may also be termed poetic. ‘Fall, fall, long fall into the soft velvet wall of the primordium, of original instinct, of first-formed love,’ very poetically sums up Maya’s longing for love that is the very base of human existence since the very beginning of time. The sentiment is rhythmically summed up in these alliterative lines.

The vision in *Cry, the Peacock* is undoubtedly tragic. It deals with the terrible isolation of the individual. On the other hand, in *Cry, the Peacock*, Maya hurls herself to death in the manner of Septimus. It is not her final end that signals her option out of the stream of time, but her very insanity that points out to time having no meaning for her. Clarissa, though firmly anchored to her past, is able to adjust to her present, but Maya is totally disoriented with her present and continually escapes to the past.

Conclusion:

From the study of *Cry, the Peacock*, it is clear that Desai didn’t believe in the linear, objective course of time. Her perception of time is subjective, coloured as it is by memory. Desai thus sums up her concept of time *vis-a-vis Clear Light of Day*, ‘Basically my

preoccupation was with recording the passage of time My novel is about time as a destroyer, as a preserver and about what the bondage of time does to people” (Desai, Interview by Seth). This is equally true of her other novels. The ‘existential’ concern of time in relation to eternity is throughout discernible in her works. To quote Lukacs:

Only in the novel..... does there occur a creative memory which transfixes the object and transforms it The duality of inwardness and outside world can here be overcome for the subject ‘only when he seeks the unity of his entire life out of the past life stream which is compressed in memory The insight which grasps this unity.... becomes the divinatory intuitive grasping of the unattained and therefore inexpressible meaning of life (Lukacs).

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