

Anita Desai's Use of Interior Monologue in Characters: A Special Study of Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*

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ABSTRACT

Anita Desai is a significant and prolific woman novelist of modern Indian fiction. She is one among those who have handled the recent kind of novel, 'stream of consciousness novel'. She has undoubtedly given a new outlook to the Indian English novel. She deserves a special mention for her treatment of women in her novels, with the focus on her women characters undergoing mental struggles. Though the technique she applies is more of what is called 'stream of consciousness' which at some places looks like 'interior monologue' that is often interchangeably understood for the former. This paper focuses on the use of interior monologue by Anita Desai with a special study of one of the women characters, Maya, in the novel *Cry, the Peacock*.

KEYWORDS

Interior Monologue; Anita Desai; *Cry, the Peacock*.

Considered an art form the novel is comparatively recent in origin and the novel may be roughly defined as a long story in prose meant primarily for entertainment and to present a realistic picture of life. A novel exhibits the author's views and criticism of life.

Though there are various kinds of novels, coming to the modern times, one finds a new kind of novel; '*the stream of conscious novel*' carries this probing into mental processes, a step further. It depicts the flux of emotions and sensations passing through the consciousness of a character. It is concerned with the pre-speech level of thoughts and emotion. The novelist places us within the mind of the characters and shows what is happening in his soul at the subconscious or even the unconscious levels. It depicts the chaos and incoherence, the welter of sensations

and emotions that constitute the human consciousness.

A stream of consciousness is to describe the unbroken flow of perceptions, thoughts, and feelings in a wakeful mind and it has been adopted as a narrative method in modern fiction.

As it has been refined since the 1920s, stream of consciousness is the name applied specifically to a mode of narration that undertakes to reproduce, without a narrator's intervention, the full spectrum and continuous flow of a character's mental process, in which sense perceptions mingle with conscious and half-conscious thoughts, memories, expectations, feelings, and random associations. (Abrams 298-299)

Interior monologue, whereas, is the conversion of thoughts, feelings, and emotions of a character into grammatical sentences or into a logical or coherent order by the author who does not intervene very minimally. Such narrative conventions, where the author puts his perceptions and philosophies as the interior monologues, are attributed to characters in the narrative.

The interior monologue, in its radical form, is sometimes described as the exact presentation of the process of consciousness; but because sense perceptions, mental images, feelings, and some aspects of thought itself are non-verbal, it is clear that the author can present these elements only by converting them into some kind of verbal equivalent. (Abrams 299)

Indian English literature is a by-product of the British in India. At first, the verse was more popular than fiction. Indian fiction in English can be said to have come of age in the nineteen-thirties. Indo-Anglian writing has made significant strides chiefly in fiction. Our society – its rich and varied customs, the independence struggle, caste-based conflicts, and such contemporary issues were taken up by great writers like R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, and many others who enriched Indian fiction in English. However, the share of the women novelists is not at all negligible in this creative task. In this context, one cannot but think of Anita Desai.

Anita Desai was born in 1937 to a Bengali father and a German mother. Writing is an obsession with her. She is a novelist deeply concerned with 'the changing rainbow' of human relationships in all their colours and shades. Her novels offer us artistic and absorbing pictures of the relationship between man and woman, parent and child, individual and society, and so on. The sense of frustration

that troubles her and her tireless search for the truth of existence is the motivating factors behind her creative effects. The recurring themes of her novels are human relationships, alienation, loneliness, East-West encounter, violence, and death. Since most of the writers confined themselves generally to the portrayal of outward reality, the credit for exploring the inner reality goes to Anita Desai. Regarding her novels, K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar aptly observes:

Since her (Anita Desai's) preoccupation is with the inner world of sensibility rather than the outer world of action, she has tried to forge a style supple and suggestible enough to convey the fever and fretfulness of the stream of consciousness of her principal characters. (Iyengar 464)

Cry, the Peacock is her first novel and in it, she has depicted the theme of marital relationships and ruptures poignantly. The married life of Maya and Gautama results in a rupture because the two are not temperamentally different, but mutually opposed. Maya is full of life and wants to enjoy life to the utmost. She is interested in all the good things of life, in the life of birds, and animals, poetry, and dance. She loves in enjoying beautiful sights and sounds. She is an epicurean to the core. In contrast, she is married to Gautama, a friend of her father very senior to her age and a prosperous middle-aged lawyer. He is kindly, cultured, rational, and practical, too much engrossed in his affairs and of prosaic personality. He looks upon her love for good things as nothing more than sentimentalism and once makes a disparaging remark about her that she has the mind of the third-rate poetess. Maya is touched to the quick and responds:

Because when you are away from me, I want you. Because I insist on being with you and being allowed

to touch you and know you. You can't bear it, can you? No, you are afraid, you might perish ... (*Cry, the Peacock* 113)

On another occasion, despite her seductive postures, Gautama remains rigid and cold; Maya herself describes her predicament in these words: "I turned upon my side, close to him, conscious of the swell of my hip that rose under the white sheet which fell in sculptured folds about my rounded forms" (*Cry, the Peacock* 41-42)

There is an identification of Maya with the Peacocks that represent her cries of love which simultaneously invite their death. Like her, they are the creatures of exotic wild and will not rest till they have danced to their death. For her, they represent the evolutionary instinct of struggle for survival. She describes how they dance and the remarkable impact produced on her mind:

Peacocks searching for mates, peacocks tearing themselves to bleeding shreds in the act of love, peacocks screaming with – agony at the death of love. The night sky turned to a flurry of peacocks' tails, each star a staring eye.

Maya's preoccupation with death had been planted long ago in her childhood by the albino astrologer's prophecy foretelling the death of either of the couple after the marriage. She being intensely in love with life, turns hysteric over the creeping fear of death.

Am I gone insane? Father, Brother, Husband. Who is my saviour? I am in need one. I am dying, God, let me sleep, forget, rest. But no I'll never sleep again. There is no rest anymore. Only death and waiting (*Cry, the Peacock* 98)

Maya's other causes of suffering are her marriage to Gautama, a man of her

father's age who is detached and reserved even to an extent of not fulfilling her physical and emotional needs. Also, the indifferent behaviour of the members of her husband's family, the solitude and silence of the house after her marriage, and the death of her pet dog accentuate her sense of loneliness which gradually develops into an actual sense of alienation. In her own eyes she is one doomed already and throughout her life there hovers an uncanny oppressive sense of fatality.

One day there is a dust storm followed by a few drops of rain. Unaware of everything, Gautama accompanies Maya on the roof of the house at her request. The pale moon rises and Maya is fascinated and bewitched by it. Both of them are at the low parapet's edge and he casually moves towards her and hides the moon from her view. Maya waxes into a sudden frenzy and pushes him over the parapet to "pass through an immensity of air, down to the very bottom" (*Cry, the Peacock* 208)

Three days later Gautama's mother and sister take Maya to her father's house at Lucknow to put her in an asylum. But in the course of the night, they hear a cry of horror and they rush upstairs and one could watch the other elderly "the heavy white figure go towards the bright, frantic one on the balcony, screaming." (*Cry, the Peacock* 218)

In the end, Maya is not saved from becoming insane, a fate far worse than the one thrust on Gautama. Having tried, in vain, to transfix all that she experienced, she becomes once again, a part of a fairy tale, a toy princess in a toy world.

Anita Desai is more specifically concerned with the hysterical mind of the Indian housewife, Maya. Maya's distraught mind, her mental agony, her fear of fate, and her eventual fall into the labyrinth of insanity form the core of the novel, *Cry, the Peacock*, and her actions are read by others in the light of traditional beliefs

and customs. In his book, *Indian Writing in English*, K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar aptly states:

Maya is at once the centre and the circumference of this world. Her

sanity – whether she is sane, hysterical or insane fills the whole book and gives it form, as well as life. (Iyengar 468)

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