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Symbolism in Anita Desai's Novels

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Abstract: Symbols have a vital role to play in displaying different states; generally, symbols used by Anita Desai are a part of circumstantial details of the narrative. In order to present submerged psychic truth she uses the technique of symbolism thoroughly carefully chosen a cluster of images, myths symbols are most prominently amongst the devices deployed by her. These symbols are capable of objectifying the inner psychic layers of the characters.

Keywords: Symbolism, Anita Desai, Social Perspective, and Novels.

INTRODUCTION

Every story needs a storyteller who in modern terms is called the narrator and the narrator is appointed by the author. The narrators control all the characters of the novel and build up the plot realistically. The author's perspective shapes the narrator i.e. the author's vision, judgments, feelings, and emotions create the narrator. A narrator narrates the story from inside the mind of the character. When a writer writes he uses the narrative style, where the various narrative techniques could be interspersed. The point of view is a significant part of any narrative technique. The point of view could be different from one part of the novel to another. The point of view can be classified into the first person narrator or the omniscient narrator. The first person narrator could be the author, the main character or the minor character. The first person narrator gives a close-up view of events. He narrates only what he hears or sees. The omniscient or third person narrator is one who surveys all the action and gives us a close view or far view of the action the omniscient narrator is objective analytical, unlike the first narrator. The novels of Anita Desai employs the protagonist to narrate the story (Dodiya, 33-35).

In this paper, a brief description of symbolism used by Desai is given. The word TECHNIQUE is derived from the Greek word "technique" meaning "an art". With Anita Desai, the technique becomes a matter of predominant concern. Novels are peopled by ordinary men and women whose internal lives are filled with conflict, doubt, confusion. These characters are not engaged in adventurous exploits or world-changing action. But their journey to self-awareness, a self-knowledge is as momentous as any thrilling adventure. To document this adventure Anita Desai experiments with several narrative techniques. This chapter focuses on these techniques employed by her in the narration of her stories. This chapter will underscore her use of both mimesis and diegesis that is showing or dramatizing and telling or relating which are essential to all narratives. Desai uses different fictional techniques according to the demand of the story. Some critics may not call her a technical innovator and, yet, who can be an innovator when the novel is being written in English for the last two hundred years. From the point of view of technique what is important is not innovation or novelty but how effective the technique is in conveying the meaning and narrating the story effectively. Anita Desai is able to narrate the story to portray the characters, to convey the mood, to evoke the atmosphere to probe the psyche of her characters successfully and for this she uses flashback technique, stream of consciousness technique, use of contrasting characters, use of symbolism and effective use of language either to evoke an atmosphere or to transcribe the pronunciations or the use of rhetorical skill of language. To create realistic effect she also uses Hindi words but in moderation. The distinctive feature of novelist's fiction is to focus on the interior aspect of life. Anita Desai's novel is called 'forte of poetic sensibility' because she employs 'the language of the interior' to delineate the inner tension in the lives of her characters. She expresses a uniquely Indian sensibility. Her exploration of sensibility and distinctive technique make her novels celebrities. Desai expresses her views on the skill of writing in the following words:

"Writing has become such a deeply ingrained habit, it is like chain smoking; I chain-smoke with words, with books."
(Dalmiya)

Another technique which is chiefly used in the novel is her technique of depicting human psyche from a feminine perspective. Her predominant concern is not with the social problems but the individual psyche of women. She sets herself seriously to voice the mute miseries and helplessness of millions of married women. Desai deals with the enigmatic and chaotic

fabric of Indian woman's life. She highlights the subtle texture of fleeting impulses, disappointments, frustrations, aims, transient feelings and distorted visions of a life of Indian women, all resulting in the fragmentation of her personality.

In order to understand and explain the versatility of her work has been categorized earlier novels, middle novels, and latest novel is necessary. Anita Desai is not interested so much in registering surface as in the probing of inner lining under the surface level. In order to present this submerged psychic truth she uses the technique of symbolism thoroughly carefully chosen a cluster of images, myths symbols are most prominently amongst the devices deployed by her.

Symbols have a vital role to play in displaying different states, generally, these symbols used by Mrs. Desai are a part of the circumstantial detail of the narrative. They acquire significance because of the appropriate correlation between the object and its symbolic meaning. Her symbolical meaning is the only semantic extra position. Yet they are capable of objectifying the inner psychic layers of the characters (Bhatnagar 257-258).

P.K.Pandey observes: "The central symbol to the feminine psyche, having religion-cultural roots that enrich the meaning by providing undertones to the symbols." (Pandey 86-88).

Pandey also comments on the hundreds of eyes on the peacock's feather Maya call these eyes the eyes of wisdom which is to be seen in relation to eye symbolic, the eye which is the window to knowledge. Saraswati, the goddess of wisdom is associated with Hansa (goose) Yet some Jain work on iconography mention the peacock as her mount (Pandey 86-88).

Anita Desai's use of symbolism has evoked critical writings. The title of her novel '**Cry, The Peacock**' is an important symbol of the novel. B.Ramachandra Rao finds the dance of peacock as both the dance of life and the dance of death (Rao 17).

In Anita Desai's novels at times, minor objects seem to attain symbolical overtones and effectively outlaw a particular shade of the mind. 'Tea' is linked with, day to day life and get togetherness is associated with Gautam and not with Maya in the novel

'Cry, The Peacock' after the death of the dog no doubt Gautam makes arrangement for its burial:

When the task is over for him he consoles Maya and says: "come and drink your tea and stop crying" (C-P 6). Gautam's readiness to have tea is clearly symbolical of his getting over Toto's death which becomes an obsession for Maya.

If symbols generally through their extra semantic impositions help Mrs. Desai to objectify the nuances of a character's subjective world, it enables the novelist to delineate the psychological depth of her characters.

For example **Cry, The Peacock** Mrs. Desai suggest the subconscious decision of Maya to murder her husband through the dust symbol "such storms had blown since the time when the earth was desert" (C-P 187).

This decision never comes to the surface of Maya's consciousness through the employment of the 'dust storm' novelist suggest the preceding psychic turmoil and the following peace. The subconscious decision remains only as something vaguely and dimly felt-never denied.

A few traditional symbols have been reinterpreted by Mrs. Desai to express the individualized psyches. The repeated references to a peacock as "brain fever bird", "a reminder of death and "ill-fated lover" are contrary to the traditionally popular image of the peacock. Its dancing image in the rainy season has been associated with love, romance, and beauty and not with fighting, mating and dying. By presenting the peacock in her arbitrary symbolical colors, Mrs. Desai is making an attempt to depict Maya's mental predicament – a deep love for life with a sure knowledge of death to follow. But it is true that this identification of the peacock with Maya's psyche gives the impression of being an unsatisfactory contrivance too many readers (Bhatnagar 254-259).

The statue of Shiva is also used as an important symbol. B.Rama Chandra Rao finds Natraj a symbol of liberation and observe

"The Natraj reinforces Maya's love of life. She feels that she has a great justification to live" (Rao19).

In Maya's memory the image of Shiva invokes in her a shloka about Natraj:

"The bronze Shiva, dancing, just a shade outside the ring of lamp-light, fixed. Calling by the beat of drum all persons engrossed in worldly affairs the kind hearted. One who destroys all fear of the meek and gives them reassurance and points by his hand to his upraised lotus foot as the fire and who dances in the universe, let that lord of the dance protect us....(C P 203-204).

Besides this, Natraj symbolizes the supreme aliveness. P.K.Pandey finds it as Maya's vision a sense of stillness and permanence.

"In the Hindu psyche of Maya this vision and the memory of shloka, about Shiva is pregnant and this gives her a sense of security as she say's, "supreme aliveness" (Pandey 91).

Desai has used different colours symbolically. What is still more interesting is her use of colour symbols, which convey "the awareness of a confusing duality of existence" (Bellipa 11).

As Wimsalt and Brooks suggest "every colour, sound, odor, emotion and every visual image has its correspondence in traits of human self" (Wimsatt & Brook 135).

In "**Cry, The Peacock**" there are two dominant colours black and white. Red is probably symbolic of Maya's craving for a colorful life. It also suggests the underlying streak of violence. As Maya herself admits "a thousand drops of blood, a thousand ruby red hammer show red across" her vision. The white colour is indicative of drabness and indifference on one hand and weirdness and fragility on the other (Pathak 101).

Sita who is pregnant but does not want to deliver the baby and instead goes to the island of Manori where she has spent her childhood thinking that the magical island would somehow stop the biological process of delivery. So Manori Island is symbolic of Sita's sea of unconscious mind. Her father's shady nature impinges on her consciousness and she fretfully tries to grasp the mystery of his life.

Her journey to Manori is like Yeat's sailing to Byzantium where there will be spiritual wholeness integration amidst the ruins of disintegration.

The city itself is symbolic of the world of reality. The city island dichotomy is so obviously symbolic that it has received critical attention, for example, T.S.Anand observes:

“Her desire to be the child and return with Raman to the land signifies her return to life community and society in spite of the debased dullness of life the calamity, the lies and moral buggery, the odium, the detritus of wrong and sorrow dropped on every heart for existence is not possible in an insulated stage of being, rather existence implies being with others” (Dhawan 100).

The turmoil, clash, and clamor of the devil city are depicted through the quarreling ayahs. She marks the important change as follows “it is like living in the wilds” she said to her husband at night “one may be attacked one’s children may be attacked in the streets” (WSGS 43-44). The violence of the menacing world, very usual with Mrs. Desai is narrated with an objective co-relative. Anita Desai’s novels are permeated with brilliant symbols. Quite a good numbers of symbols are extensively used by her to bring out the essence of life.

It has been observed by Kajali Sharma

“In fact, the compulsive and functional use of symbols in her writings is due to the fact that for her what is important to quote her own words, “is the movement of the wing one tries to capture not the bird. That is, it is the image that matters the symbols, the myth, the feat of associating them or relating them or constructing with them” (Kajali Sharma 147).

Sita had passed her carefree childhood on the island under the shadow of her legendary father. This is the basic reason that though physically grown up, she had a mind of a child and her adolescence was spent on the island with a limited expose. She regards island as a magic island. “She saw the island as a piece of magic mirror, it was so bright so brilliant to her eyes after the tension and shadows of her childhood. It took her some time to notice that this magic, too cast shadow” (WSGS 63).

The symbolic situation of an eagle, crows fight reveals very subtle personality clash between Sita and Raman. Sita and Raman are symbolized by the crows that attack the helpless eagle “On the ledge that jutted out below their balcony” (WSGS 38). Sita’s effort to save the eagle from the attack of the Crows whose “scimitar beaks” pierce the eagle in her fight against the masculine values represented by Raman. “Scimitar beaks” are a symbol of the phallus and the attack of crows with them is suggestive of male chauvinism unleashed against the feminine instinct. Her son gives a “long-handled brush” and “a toy gun” is symbols of mother-son incestuous relationship and the collusion of a mother with her son against the father. The scene of fight blood stains and the feathers sticking out of as crow’s beak and the disappearance of the eagle are an added meaning to the entire strength of the novel. The blood symbolizes rape it suggests Sita’s state of utter defeat. In the novel, the drift of feathers in the beak of crow is a psychological situation it shows the triumph of Raman over his son who fights on the side of his wife. Defeated Sita’s weak defense “perhaps it flew away?” clears that her eagle has been eaten by the crows. It suggests the future course of her action following her defeat and loss of identity (Bhatnagar 34-35).

K.P.Ambekar has observed the use of bird symbols in the novel. Sita sees herself as a wounded eagle. “Like Maya in ‘Cry the Peacock’ for whom the dance of peacock is the symbol of love and death, Sita sees herself as a wounded eagle. The crows represent the callous society of around her. In the first incident of the novel, Sita finds that crow is joyously screeching and pecking at something on the ledge below the balcony of her flat. It is an eagle injured and unable to fly. She is infuriated at the crows and tries to drive them away with the help of toy gun. But Sita knows that the wounded eagle has really no chance of survival against the attack of crows though she does not admit it openly” (Ambekar 203).

Sita’s habit of smoking is also symbolic of her desire not to give birth to the baby. In the beginning, she smokes to spite her in-laws yet later when she becomes pregnant the habit could be injurious to the fetus. Pregnant for the fifth time, Sita declares “I don’t want to have baby” (WSGS 34).

Her desire of not to give birth to the baby is not something extraordinary but the reason behind it clears her metaphysical desire not to commit an act of violence by giving birth to a child which is now safely contained in her womb into the world which is full of violence and destruction. The image of nappies and vests symbolizes her mental agony or depressed condition of her mind “Children.... Through her mind flowed a white flapping succession in nappies, vest.... that would have to be gathered together. She could see the express fewer faces of the night nurses on the gynae ward... in the greenish night light regarding her as she came in ravaged by the first pains. She could see the impassive faces of nurses who would stay by her in the theater now and then glance at her large flat watch bored by yet another woman’s panic-stricken labour” (WSGS 153-154).

The use of symbols and images also help the novelist reveals her protagonist psyche. The dark colour signifies the stifling atmosphere of her household and also a purposeless journey in life culminating in death. Black has been accentuated occasionally with streaks of white. “everything is dark”, clamors Sita in ‘Where Shall We Go This Summer?’ she finds her Manori house “pitch dark” with its “crowded darkness inside” and below them was the shifting sighing darkness of the palm leaves leading down to the sand dunes and the sea” the use of the symbol is thus an important aspect of Anita Desai narrative technique.

Anita Desai’s novels abound in rich and symbolic images of light and color of the sun, the room, stars, storms, river, sea, birds, insect, and animals. Different symbols and imaged are employed to reveal the inner nature of her character and illuminate their obsession changing moods and psychic aberration besides highlighting the dark and weird atmosphere of her stories. There is imagery which is related to callousness, cruelty, selfishness fear, irrationality and rapacity of human behaviors figure pre-eminently in her novels with a threat of discord and disharmony in a human relationship (Khanna 129-130).

Symbolism as Narrative Technique

Desai’s novels are often termed as musical. They are laden with symbols, so heavy in significance that they are sometimes difficult to interpret. In Village by sea Mr. Panwallah, stands for universal love. He has great regard for Jagu and understands his goodness to the poor and helpless. He stands for progressive thinking and accepting change as the way of life. He symbolizes universal love and oneness of humanity. He teaches Hari the art of watch mending so that it will help him earn his keep with dignity.

He firmly believes that life is a cycle of changes and one must adjust to it to live on. “Good!” cried Mr. Panwallah. “That’s what I wanted to hear you say. Learn, learn, learn-so that you can grow and change. Things change all the time, boy-nothing remains the same.....” (V S 129).

Her novel ***In Custody*** is also one of her symbolic examples of her use of symbols. This novel is a master craft where in spite of enduring conflicts, comes out a custodian to preserve the art in his custody. Carefully chosen clusters of images, symbols, and myths figure most prominently amongst the devices deployed by her.

The neem tree outside Deven's house has covered the entire courtyard with its branches like "a dusty canopy" (13). Shutting out the sun and the air. While traveling by bus to Delhi to seek an interview with Nur, Deven is beset with doubts as to whether this "rare opportunity would not also turn to dust" (26).

As in the other novels of Desai, the places and houses assume symbolic significance. Nur's house offers Deven, not the glories of poetry or the divine life of the poet but darkness, emptiness, secretiveness and death. The darkness of Nur's house signifies that his creative vision is gone into eclipse and that his entire life is darkened now with depravity and mediocrity. The predominant impression coned by the descriptions of Nur's house is that of gloom and darkness, even as dust symbolizes Airport.

"The room in which the poet lay resting..... was in semi-darkness..... the walls were lined with dark green tiles that added to the shadowy gloom.....solid cushion.....like objects carved out of this murkiness, heavy and palpable with gloom (I C 40).

The pictorial image is replete with words evoking an atmosphere of gloom like 'semi-darkness,' 'shadowy gloom,' 'murkiness' etc

Another impression evoked by Desai's descriptions of the locale of Airport is that of imprisonment and the descriptions abound in words like 'Prision,' 'cage,' 'trap' Deven regards Airport as a prison where he is doomed forever to live a dull and empty life.

Another aspect the novelist has used is color symbolism. Deven regards his life as "gray clay" and a "field, bare of grain." 'Grey' is the only prominent color in the novel in keeping with the drab world of the protagonist. This is colorless and meaningless. When he takes his son for a walk, is one of the rarely experienced happy moments.

"One brilliant feather of spring green fluttered down through the air" (I C 73). This is symbolic of the moment of laughter. The color 'Green' which normally represents prosperity seems to Deven to signify death and destruction, as 'Yellow' signifies dryness and lifelessness.

The sunlight dissolving the darkness of the night before is symbolic of the emergence of the new courageous 'self' of Deven dispersing his previous timid, vulnerable self. Towards the end of the novel, when everyone deserts him, Deven learns to accept his responsibilities with fortitude. Deven welcomes the 'grayness' of his life as it is better than darkness (Bhatnagar 64-69).

"The sky was filling with a gray light that was dissolving the dense darkness of night. It glistened upon a field of white Pampas grass which waved in a sudden and rustling through the grass with a live, rippling sound (I C P 204).

Moreover, the novel offers some exquisite symbols of freedom. Nur's flying pigeons and the passing singers 'shortly before dawn singing 'o will you come with us' presents a picture of liberated life (I C 201) Deven finally has a vision of freedom by accepting himself as the custodian of Nur's very soul and spirit.

Thus the novel ***In Custody*** is a fragment of art portraying symbolic freedom. Desai seems to be highly antagonized by the unhealthy and universal bondage of social customs and conventions, she tries to prepare a break-through from these problems, which still verify fetters and chains preventing people from inhaling air of freedom. Deven's part is presented as the keeper, who has a phantom of freedom by voluntarily accepting the responsibility of a keeper of Nur's psyche and art. The words of the song 'O Will You Come Along with Us' are touching, these are the words of the song, which advises and motivates the trifle way of life. Thus through constant conflict he emerges as a keeper to keep secure the art in his custody.

The novel ***In Custody***, on the whole, is a masterpiece where in spite of hard and long struggle and conflicting conditions Deven emerges a keeper to protect and conserve the art in his custody to keep it alive for posterity.

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