



About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>

Feminist Inclinations in Anita Desai's Narrative Art with Special Reference to *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and *Fire on the Mountain*

Rama Chowdhury

Assistant Professor in English,
Bir Bikram Memorial College,
Agartala, Tripura

The present paper attempts to identify a few features of narrative art in Desai's selected 02 (two) novels and tries to analyse them in the light of chiefly Feminist Narratology that holds the issue of gender as equally important in studies of narrative. The two novels selected for the study are *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, and *Fire on the Mountain*. In these works Desai, by her strategies of narration reaps the advantage of foregrounding women's issues as she let them project their experience and impressions. The theoretical framework of this study is formed by the relevant studies and critical works of Feminist narratologists Susan S. Lanser, Kathy Mezei and a few others.

In general structural theories and frameworks consider narratives in universal terms, denying often the cultural, historical, and geographical or gender specificity of narratives, authors, readers and narrators. Such unifying analysis and interpretation have been found lacking in expanse by the exponents of Feminist Narratology like Susan Lanser, Kathy Mezei and Moly Hite. According to them the discourse of arrangement of components in narratives and their narration through a fictional or real voice is more than often determined by the cultural, social, psychological and gender-based notions and experience of the author.

In her article *Gender and Narrative* (web,2013) Susan S. Lanser refers to the necessity of forging "a descriptive poetics of point of view that would accommodate both women's writings and feminist concerns". Kathy Mezei in her editorial introduction to *Feminist Narratology and British Women Writers* (1996) defines "feminist narratology" as "the study of narrative structures and strategies in the context of cultural constructions of gender" (p. 7). The underlying assumption of most of these proponents of Feminist Narratology appears to be that the dominant studies of Structural Narratology or Narratology 'proper' lack in their indifference to gender concern and they tend to totalise and universalise all narrative features. But if we analyze certain texts with a conscious sensitivity to feminist concerns, we can discern a narrative strategy which at once takes from and is subversive to the dominant narrative poetics. From this viewpoint we may search and find a few distinctive features of narration in Anita Desai's earlier novels which tend to foreground women's issues both in form and content. For the present study two leading texts of this phase, namely *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, and *Fire on the Mountain*, are selected.

Desai's narratives defy conventional linearity and story-centeredness of fictional narrative. She pushes the events and actions to margin in favour of inward thought and impressions of chiefly women. She does not crowd her stories with too many characters. No historical or contemporary monumental event takes the centre of her narration. Rather the inward mapping of few embittered, middle-aged or old married women and their intellectual and material predicaments remain in the focus at least in her earlier novels. In these novels women's sensibility enjoys a peculiar spatial prominence that is desirable but denied to them in social context.

Desai's narrative art subtly blends authorial mediation and character-bound subjective narration through internal focalisation, free indirect discourse, dreams, visions, diary writing and nostalgic time travel. Such attempt creates the impression of a deliberate narrative discourse embedded in Desai's art.

The women Desai presents are often found uncomfortably playing their designated conventional roles in their respective family. These women's inability to get communicated to their family members and relations and their stubborn unwillingness to conform are easily labelled a 'lack' and an abnormality by the codes of conventions. Instead of recording the great, dramatic events of human life, her novels captures the simple, unnoticed yet deep-delving struggle of women whose thoughts and emotions are not well channelized. These women are stuck in between. By exploring such individuals' responses to specific incidents in everyday life Desai increases the complexity of her female characters and reduces the risk of homogenization and essentialist representations of women. Desai does not allow them to revolt drastically; she rather gives them pavilion to unfold their boredom and frustration. She posits such apparently unheroic women as narrators/focalisers and as protagonists in her novels.

These technical and thematic aspects of Desai's novels hint at the creator's inclination to bring to focus some pressing issues in the lives of modern, educated Indian women and the next textual study attempts to locate such overt or covert discourse of narration in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and *Fire on the Mountain*. In these earlier novels Desai incorporates a number of narrative devices within the framework of conventional authorial and omniscient narration. In such intricate narrative pattern the narrating voice and the character's focalisation negotiate the narrative space. Here at one point the author/narrator's mediating voice provides contextual reference for the readers; on the next the leading women characters are allowed to project their experiences, impressions and desires through devices like FID and focalisation.

In *Fictions of Authority (1992)* Lanser speaks of the liberty of authorial narrative voice to manipulate the narrative discourse to his/her service when necessary. The generalisation or opinion and observation of the author, separate from that of the character/s keep the narrative's credentials high to the readers. On the other hand, the authorial narration still keeps open the space for strategic characters by employing the techniques like focalisation, mediation, direct narration and free indirect discourse etc. While dealing with the mentioned issues in her novels Desai is often found frequently shifting between authorial perspectives and that of the character itself. While the character's voice is used to express her apprehensions and her will to speak, the authorial voice points out the background or greater social contexts which are at work behind such inability.

The opening pages of *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* posit Sita, the leading female character, against the backdrop of Manori, the island and the unavoidable legacy of her father's charisma that apparently changed the place years back. The temporal, spatial and casual arrangement of the story material is done chiefly from the view point of Sita. Though both the devices of mediacy and immediacy (direct speech) of narration are employed in the narrative, the mediation more than often takes place in the likelihood of 'stream of consciousness' technique. The mediating voice merges with Sita's reflection and focalisation allowing her to give the version of her life as she sees and feels it.

At intervals the narrating voice interprets, generalizes through its commentary. But this voice does know the story events more than Sita. It is her internalized narration or

reminiscent focalization that unravels the unknown, enigmatic twists of the events of her life. We can observe a fine example of Desai's narrative art blending focalization, free indirect discourse and interior monologue within the scope of third person omniscient narrative structure.

The rubies and pearls shocked her...Sita found herself turning into a wanderer, always in search of the ghost. Who, what was she?

Women in Benares wore white and had shaven heads. With brass vessels in their shriveled hands, they stumbled, half-fell down the cracked stone stairs to the river at dawn and squatted up and down its flotsam-edged banks, muttering their prayers. What prayers did her mother pray- the ritual prayers to Dawn, to the Sun, to the Ganges, or personal prayers of accusation, bitterness and reproach? Then, as the steps grew more crowded and the river filled with the bobbling beads of the bathers, and as she heaved herself out, her soaked white widow's garments clinging to her shanks, where did she go with her lota filled with Ganges water? Up the stairs, down the narrow alley still blackened with night as with kohl, edging past a white bull that calmly chewed the garlands offered to the many altars of the city, hurrying up another, narrower flight of stairs through which the fine roots of a banyan tree silently insinuated themselves, through the arched doorway of an old, rimed house- whose house? What room? And why? (77-78)

So the narrating voice and the protagonist's thought process merge here in referring to the faceless, rootless and terrifying state of thousands of Indian women living in Benares.

One may make another observation on how Desai's narrating strategy in *Where Shall We Go This Summer ?* includes a noticeable use of narrative/non-narrative words and signs which themselves subtly denote the author/narrator's position against some conventional notions and practices associating a man or woman in our society. The authorial voice's mediation on the father more than often gives the impression of an aggressively imposing, clever and deceiving male figure who invaded and finally possessed the island Manori which is an extended symbol of both India and Indian women.

He looked very much a saint. (2)

The island belonged to him. (69)

His heavy –lidded eyes had only briefly, flashingly shown themselves...His body was pinguid, ponderous and might have been fleshy and obese had he not known how to move his muscles and move slowly, regally, like some lion in his lair.(81)

He had cast an illusion as a fisherman casts a net, with the faintest susurrations of warning, upon a flock of fish in the sea. (90)

Desai is so adept with the play of language that she leaves its imprint even in 'Direct Discourse' of narration where the character's words are produced ditto preceded or followed by traditional reporting verbs 'say' or 'tell'.

'Try my method,' he coaxed. (68)

'I shall call it Jeevan Ashram,' he declared. (57)

The reporting verbs of the quoted sentences are markedly mediated. Instead of 'say' or 'tell', we have such verbs as 'declare', and 'coax' which decisively speak disfavouredly about the character whose words are reported.

Anita Myles in her book *Feminism and the Post-modern Indian women Novelist in English* speaks on Desai that-

Desai's novels constitute together the documentation, through fiction, of radical female resistance against a patriarchally defined concept of normality. She finds the links between female duality, myth and psychosis intriguing; each heroine is seen as searching for, finding and absorbing or annihilating the double who represents the socially impermissible aspects of her femininity. (36)

Both as a daughter and a wife Sita experiences crudity, decisiveness and method in the male world in which she always remains an outsider. Desai projects in her a unique idea of protest, the courage to say no to the submissive acceptance of rules and dictum mostly laid and promoted by the patriarchal society. Sita, though ridiculously, denies giving birth to her 5th child who, she thinks, will be safer in her womb than in the hostile world outside. In the story world of Desai's novel Sita finally, and most probably unwillingly, follows Raman to enter into the normative world. But her perception of the working of male-domination in different forms and her temporary attempt to escape the normative world encases the above mentioned 'female resistance against a patriarchally defined concept of normality.'

The narrative of *Fire on the Mountain*, centring upon the isolation in the lives of three characters-Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das, is completed in a few summer days in the small Himalayan town. Like *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, *Fire on the Mountain* is also characterised by a textual struggle between the authorial control and the internal control of the characters over the narration. The musings/mediation and internal focalisation of the characters, dexterously weaved into the third-person omniscient narrative mode, unfold the entire panorama of the lives of the characters and the spaces they occupy in or are thrust into.

In the novel *Fire on the Mountain* narration swerves between subjective and objective within chapters, paragraphs and sentences too. The transition from external to internal descriptions is done in perfect control. The shift is smooth, showing the dexterity of the narrator, for example:

The postman seemed unable to overtake him- hypnotized by the boy's whimsical progress, he stopped and kept behind while Nanda Kaul, stint eyed burned on the knoll.

Hurry, man, she mentally snapped-get it over with.

Then, not being able to bear watching any more of such fantastic indecision, she turned around and gazed at her house instead, simple and white and shining on the bleached ridge...it seemed so exactly right as a house for her, it satisfied her heart completely. How could it ever have belonged to anyone else? What could it possibly have been like before Nanda Kaul came to it? She could not imagine (Desai, 1977.p.5).

If we look at the passage carefully we can see that the narrating voice, the gender of whom is unidentified, is more inclined to give away the space to one of the main characters in the novel. The approaching postman is shown to the audience through Nanda Kaul's eyes. His action, or rather inaction at the situation does not interest her and so she turns to her house and muses over its aptness as her abode. The use of verbs 'watching', 'gazed' etc. speak of the dominance of the focalizing agent who is none but an internal focaliser. Here Nanda Kaul is the character whose personal perspective or point of view orients the narrative perspective. Not only that, the initial narrator's voice becomes more diminished in the middle and towards the end of the passage as 'free indirect discourse' of narration is used instead of direct narration. In 'free indirect discourse' the narrator refers to the character in third person and narrative past but less formal syntax is used. Omission of quotation marks and use of exclamations, ellipses etc. are found common in FDI that enables the narrator to report a character's thought using his/her own mind style.

The omniscient narrator of *Fire on the Mountain* appears to be a summative, witty and distancing one whose account of the background and setting of the main story provides a separate, distinguished life-perspective. The clear indication of this can be found in Chapter-2 of Part-1 of *Fire on the Mountain*. This short chapter offers a historically temporal tour for the reader, giving selective but representative accounts of life or rather lives of British people in the much popular hill station of colonial India. Though summative, such segments of narration gives what Lanser calls 'public narration' in *Fictions of Authority*. The maiden English women of colonial era, brought from the native soil to entertain the mass of British employees, soldiers working in Indian continent met with lonely, discarded life when they aged. Kasauli used to shelter quite a lot of such maiden ladies for a long time. The last passage in this chapter clearly voices the perspective of the unidentified narrator whom we may accept as the author's mouthpiece.

Suddenly it was all over. It was 1947. Maiden ladies were not thought to be safe here anymore. Quickly, quickly, before the fateful declaration of independence, they were packed onto the last boats and shipped back to England- virginity intact, honour saved, natives kept at bay. A hefty sigh went up- of relief, of regret. A commonplace remark amongst them had been how like Kasauli was to English country towns of memory. Back in those English country towns, so unexpectedly and prematurely, they sighed and said no, these were like Kasauli, let alone Simla. But there was nothing to be done, no going back. Carignano was up for sale and Nanda Kaul brought it. The little town went native. Desai.1977.p.9-10

No better sarcastic tone can be achieved while referring to the malaises of colonial rule and the gender inclination can be traced in the satire the object of which was not the ladies, but the system, the cultural snobbishness of British people who, in order to save their men from mingling with native women, turned their own women to mere goods of necessity.

And Nanda Kaul's own story speaks of the same mechanical process of how the accepted and often appreciated norms of Indian society treats a woman as a mere sack full of useful items negating, obliterating the intellectual and psychological demands of that very woman. At this juncture Desai scrupulously makes use of 'internal focalisation' and mediation of character both of which enable the 'private narration' of Lanser. The following excerpts from Chapter-5 may testify to this.

Looking down, over all those years she had survived and borne, she saw them, noy bare and shining as the plains below, but like the gorge, cluttered, choked and blackened with the heads of children and grandchildren, servants and guests, all restlessly surging, clamouring about her. Desai.1977. p.17

Looking down at her knuckles, two rows of yellow bones on the railing, she thought of her sons and daughters, of her confinements, some in great discomfort at home and others at the small filthy missionary-run hospital in the bazaar, and the different nurses and doctors who wanted to help her but never could, and those slovenly, neurotic ayahs she had had to have because there was such a deal of washing and ironing to do and Mr. Kaul had wanted her always in silk, at the head of the long rosewood table in the dining-room, entertaining his guests. Ibid.p.18

The mythical roles of an Indian woman as a dutiful wife, a devoted mother and a dotting grandmother are fulfilled by Nanda Kaul but the mediating tone clearly states the degree dissatisfaction and bitterness with which she performed those duties. The device of 'internal focalisation', that holds the camera lens for the audience/readers from the angle of a character within the text, becomes visible in the verbs 'looking down...she saw' etc. At the same time verbs like 'she thought' posits Nanda Kaul as the mediating agent of the 2nd excerpt above. Such turns in a third person-omniscient narration lends subjectivity to the otherwise objective reality of the original form. The thickening of time and space in the above excerpts also gives a momentum to the narration and it can be further related to the poignancy and acuteness of suffering and loneliness in the character concerned.

The historical, social and psychological bearings of the author/narrator, communicated in the mediating passages of both the novels, may be seen as part of Desai's contextual discourse of fiction. The reflections, judgements, generalisations about the events beyond the storyworld, comments on the narrative process, allusion to other writers and texts etc. by the narrator may be related to the Desai's discursive status. Lanser calls it 'extrarepresentational' acts in the narrative art as a narrator otherwise can limit himself/herself only to mere representational acts, i.e., to 'simply predicate the words and action of fictional charaters'. (p.16)

In spite of her declining any association with an established theory or movement, one may find some sort of patterns in Desai's narrative art that work effectively to correlate the thematic, stylistic and structural aspects of her novels. In her early novels, namely *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, and *Fire on the Mountain* the delineation of middle-class, educated, unhappily married women's varied existential issues seems to be deliberately foregrounded by the author. The desperate, clueless and unorganised attempts of such women to tear them out from the boredom and unrecognised drudgery of familial and conjugal life are often proved self destructive or ridiculous in Desai's treatment. Yet, in their failure these women register at least some sort of protest. Feminist scholar Elizabeth Jackson also contends that most of Desai's female protagonists are "middle-class Indian women who are at odds with the cultural norms which shape their lives, and her fiction seeks to unravel their complex responses to the limitations imposed by culturally sanctioned codes of feminine thought and behaviour" (33).

Thus in Desai's earlier works textual devices and contextual references complement each other to speak about chiefly women's problematic status in our society. Though no

specific solution is suggested, the fictions positively draw our attention to the issues themselves for argument and for finding solution.

Works Cited:

- Desai, Anita. *Fire on the Mountain*. London: Vintage, Random House, 1999(ed.).Print.
- Desai, Anita. *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* New Delhi,Orient Paperbacks. 2007. Print.
- Desai, Anita. "A Secret Connivance." *The Times Literary Supplement*. 14-20 September, 1990: 972- 976. Print.
- Herman, David, Manfred Jahn,and Marie-Laure Ryan(eds.) *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*.London: Routledge,2005. Print.
- Jackson, Elizabeth. *Feminism and Contemporary Indian Women's Writing*. Basingstoke, [U.K.:Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. Print.
- Kumar, Ashok. "Women Empowerment through Indo-Anglican Literature." *Critical Responses to Feminism*. Ed. Binod Mishra. New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2006. 64-72. Print.
- Kumar , Brajesh. "Feminist Perspectives in the Novel of Anita Desai." *Critical Responses to Feminism*. Ed. Binod Mishra. New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2006. 147-67. Print.
- Lanser, Susan S. *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press,1992 .Print.
- Lanser, Susan S. Toward a Feminist Narratology, *1986 Style*,20, 341-63. Print.
- Lanser, Susan. "Gender and Narrative". September15.2013.web.17 June.2013. <www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/genderandnarrative>
- Mezei, Kathy(Ed). *Ambiguous Discourse: Feminist Narratology and British Women Writers*, Paperback. North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press,1996. Print.
- Myles, Anita. *Feminism and the Post-Modern Indian Women Novelist in English*. New Delhi, Sarup & Son, 2006. Print.