

The Past as Recollection in the Form of Presence: The Interiority of Experience

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ABSTRACT: *This paper offers an account of the past as recollected in the form of presence with an emphasis on the interiority of experience as articulated in Anita Desai's novels. As we know experience in general means the understanding of or skill of something or some event that is gained through participation in or exposure to that thing or event. If a person has an exposure to a particular field with considerable experience, he/she can be called to be an expert in that field. We as human beings undergo a lot of experiences in our day-to-day life. Depending on the situation, experience can be physical, social, emotional, spiritual, etc. Similarly the characters in the fiction of Anita Desai undergo many experiences in their day to-day chores. The central concern of this paper is to analyze how Anita Desai has delved into the inner selves of the characters through her creative spirit. In addition to this the chapter also highlights how the past is recollected in the form of the present. In order to establish this, adequate attention is paid to the details of the texts.*

Key Words: *Anita Desai's novels, Interiority of Experience, Experiences, Physical, Social, Emotional, Spiritual.*

I. Introduction

The past does not pass away. Its presence is felt in the present. It takes on many forms such as memories. Texts, ruins, and monuments. To put it simply, the traces of the past can be found in the present. These traces have the potential to shape inter-subjective relations [1]. Sometimes experiences in the present produce unwanted and anxiety-provoking flashbacks. It is observed that the immanent can influence the reproduction of knowledge and subjectivity, as much as the present concerns can shape the past.

In this paper I have made an effort to highlight how memory actively constructs the 'selves' of characters in the fiction of Anita Desai, The constant recalling of the

past helps to construct the identities of the . characters. There is a connection between the actions and events of the past and the experience of the present which is fundamental to a sense of individual identity.

Memory is the ability to recall past occurrences. It is the process of recovering intonation by reflection, which may be voluntary and involuntary [2]. To be precise, it is something recalled to the mind by the mind, To put it simply with an analogy; as eyesight is a function of the eyes, recollection is a function of the mind, Undoubtedly memory appears to answer such questions as: who are we and how do we relate to the past and the present as well as to the future" How is what we wish for the future grounded in the past and the present? Recollection is implicated in these fundamental questions.

The concern here is not only with on the phenomenon of the past influencing the present but also with the present which leads to a certain meaning being ascribed to the past. The characters in the novels of Desai seem to undergo such experiences of retracing and repetition. They reinterpret the events of the past experience in the light of what has followed in its wake. It is worth mentioning here that the events of the past encourage our will to recreate the values with which we negotiate with the world [3]. The past gives us an opportunity to refashion ourselves. And this is a continuous process; The events of the past enable us to accept the present. Memories of the past are used as a method of evaluating the character's

individual's relationship with the present in Desai's fictional world [4]. The backward movement acts as a mode of self-knowledge to acknowledge the realities of present life, Her characters relate their past to the present, reshape and restructure it with a hope forward to live.

Since human consciousness is historical, it can be measured only in terms of "the vague background of (human) experience or as it enters into the texture of human lives" In the context of such experiences the meaning of time can be discovered/ There is no past that is complete and distinct from the present or future. So past, present and future are inextricably linked to one another. These are the different dimensions of time flowing into one another. Living in the present one cannot be indifferent to either past or future. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer emphasizes that "there is no escaping the past, for the past is not contiguous but continuous with the present." (*Truth and Method*. Mark Freeman, an American professor of Psychology observes that the present, as it appears to us, is only a flux with no definite structure [5]. We can make sense of the present and discover patterns in its occurrences only in the act of recollection. It can be said that remembering or retracing the past constructs the identity of characters.

II. Classification of Anita Desai Characters

The most prominent feature of Anita Desai's art is the delineation of character. She is primarily interested in the portrayal of female protagonists as living in separate, closed, and sequestered worlds of existential problems and passions. Almost all her novels portray female protagonists as hypersensitive, solitary and introspective. They are the people who are always quite aware of living on the brink and who exhibit a marked tendency towards neurotic behavior.

It is pertinent here to mention here that Anita Desai's characters can be classified into two distinctive groups - those who fail to adjust to the harsh realities of life and those who compromise. The premise which provides the basic to her creative activity is the 'basic human condition' where the characters are trapped in their psychological makeup and struggle to get out of the network of frustration, depression and anxiety. How does the mind of these characters work? How does Desai as a novelist show the movement of consciousness within the character?

In a novel, as it happens in life, there are those who always remain 'outsiders' because they fail to accommodate themselves to the world of realities. In order to describe their illusions, fantasies and fabrications, Anita Desai discards the traditional, worn-out realism and deliberately focuses her attention on the disintegrating forces in their inner and outer lives. How does the past constitute the character as a range? The character is not an entity, it is a change.

It is not a product, it is an open project. It is not a targeted one, How does memory, desire, dreams, disappointments work in shaping a character in its social ethos, milieu and situate the character within" How does the interior movements move in responding to a particular situation" Why do the characters of Anita Desai are not in a position to accept the familiar norm? Why do they fail to cope with day-to-day situations? What prompts them to brood over certain things and incidents" Why do their familial ties suffer') regarding their behavior Sunaina Singh observes:

“There exists a large dichotomy in their relationship with each other, Where women are eager to be close and attached to their husbands, the husbands either preach or behave in a detached, indifferent manner in such a situation there is bound to be depression, If the women are

particularly sensitive the depression could well result in mental, break-down-who could then be responsible for this?"

Failed conjugal relationship might be one of the reasons for their cause of depression, As S. Indira observes:

"All Anita Desai's heroines gloat over the fact that they are different from others, condemning their husbands and others as insensitive, unimaginative people living only for money. Sex and food, They do not realize that it is they who, with their heightened imagination and sensitivity have become complex, confused, irrational individuals. They are aggressively unrealistic about human limitations and extremely intolerant of others"

Desai projects her characters to the vulnerability of human conditions where they go. Through tremendous human social pressure. They fail to coalesce, the personal self with the public self. The interiority of the characters gets exteriorized through her fictional odyssey, in an increasingly complex society she highlights the predicament of the isolated female characters and how they fail to adjust with the societal way of living in harmony both inside and outside the family. We can see the reduction of social contacts in the characters of Desai.

In the psychosocial plane they are not able to meet the challenges of life; they are unable to meet the social, emotional biological, spiritual needs of life due to various circumstances. Their emotional barrenness further leads to the failure to achieve harmony and wholeness of life, in a certain sense. Desai's fiction underlines the inner tensions and the fractured consciousness of individual characters.

III. The Past as Recollection in the Form of Presence

Anita Desai gives a beautiful comparison of Raka and Nanda Kaul:

"If Nanda Kaul was a recluse out of vengeance for a long life of duty and obligation, her great grand-daughter was a recluse by nature, by instinct. She had not arrived at this condition by a long route of rejection and sacrifice-she was born to it simply".

It can be observed here that Raka is not born as a recluse rather circumstances have made her like that. She has experienced bitterness and distraught being a victim of a broken home. Her father and mother do not love each other. Her parents have no time to cater to her emotional needs. Consequently, she is deprived of many other psychological and emotional needs for which she loves to stay in solitude. Even Nanda Kaul's past is reflected. She is just performing her duties and responsibilities as the wife of a vice-chancellor. Same was the case with her children. She is reminded of her busy life when these children were small and she had to grow them up:

"She seemed to hear poignant shrieks from the cane beds in the garden- a child had tumbled off the swing, another had been stung by a wasp, a third slapped by the fourth-and gone out on the veranda to see them come wailing up the steps with cut lips, bruised knees, broken teeth and tears, and bent over them with still, ironic bow to duty that no one had noticed or defined."

Nanda Kaul does not cherish her past rather, she thinks the past as present "like the gorge, cluttered, choked and blackened with the heads of children and grand children". She says: "Discharge me- She groaned, I've discharged all my duties. Discharge".

She never enjoyed while nurturing the children rather she performed her duty and obligation. She is completely unhappy, upset and perturbed when she opens Asha's letter. "Have I not done enough and had enough? I want no more. I want nothing. Can I be left with nothing" But there was no answer and of course she expected none".

Though she is away from her home, she looks for someone to take care of her; she seeks to get help from the outer world. She longs to love and to be loved. She does not want to encounter with her own self. She now wants to get attracted to Raka to have a fulfilling life ahead. Time has a great bearing on the characters. In the first part of the novel, Nanda Kaul would like to "drift along the flow of time" (Kamara 92). But traces of her past life still affect her mind, she can see the plains which in a sense remind her role as a wife. "Nanda Kaul unconsciously seeks to freeze time into a motionless constancy, but

Time keeps moving through her past which she recapitulates as she reacts to her present surroundings" (Sharma 120). Nanda is not in a position to deal with the passing of time as she wants a static life: "Till [the first cool stir of breeze] came, she would lie still, still-she would be a charred tree trunk in the forest, a broken pillar of marble in the desert, a lizard on a stone wall. A tree trunk could not harbor irritation. nor a pillar annoyance. She would imitate death, like a lizard" (Desai FM 23). She tries to reconstruct herself "a process where she must necessarily both remember and re-imagine her past" (Ho 30).

Ila Das is killed and raped by a man who wants her daughter to marry a young man but Ila tries to convince that guy not to do so and she - finally agrees to "accept the inexorable otherness of time that [she] desperately seeks to disown" (Kamara 93). Ila Das opposes the evil practice of the society which allows child marriage; she wants her society to progress. Her fighting was to survive but in the hands of time she is killed in a violent way. It was she who became instrumental in discovering the past life of Nanda as a wife. In a way the complexities of female psyche is reflected through the characters of Nanda Kaul and Ila Das.

In a true sense Fire on the Mountain dramatizes the reality of a modern Indian household through the character of Nanda and Raka who have different vision and approach to the natural world of Kasauli. Here Nanda Kaul, is presented as a "recluse of vengeance", (52) an old woman who has got tired after taking the burden of the household throughout her life. For this she refuses the social life where responsibilities and duties never end, where she has suffered with the disintegration of family life. In order to avoid it she has abandoned such life to stay on the mountain.

Desai has an inborn gift to peep into the inner recesses of the consciousness of her characters rather than the external scene of action. She has enormously contributed to the growth of Indian fiction in English by incorporating psychic aspects of her female protagonists who have suffered adversity and embarrassment, neglect and silence, detachment and isolation as seen in case of Nanda Kaul. "Have I not done enough and had enough? I want no more.

IV. A Comparative Study of *To the Light House* and *Clear Light of Day*

In both these novels the threefold effects of time is presented: "the passing of moments or hours, the voyage from youth to age, and the historical time. or time in relation to nationwide events". As Asha Kanwar points out: "In Woolf, inner time is not in contradistinction to outer time, for she decried the isolation of the Self (a defect she finds in Joyce). To her the external and the internal are complimentary. Both Woolf and Desai use inner time without ignoring its relation to the outer." The main theme of *Clear Light of Day* is time as the creator and as the destroyer. In *To the Light House*, time functions as the central motif.

Bim comes to realize that time has destroyed her talent whereas time disrupts the family happiness of the Ramsays by taking away Mrs. Ramsay, Prue and Andrew. The

childhood dreams of the Das children of becoming hero or heroine is shattered with the passage of time due to various circumstances. Bim's dream ends up in becoming a college lecturer and Tara's dream come true in the form of becoming a mother to nurture her kids. Death is a common element in both the Ramsay and the Das family.

Andrew's death in Ramsay's family and the Das parent's death suggest this point. In a sense both these novels end on an affirmative note as Bim reconciles at the end and Lily gets her vision. Out of some momentary existence man is able to extract some heroic act Nancy Ramsay creates an imaginary world of her own while she plays on the seashore: "She changed the pool into the sea, and made the minnows into sharks and whales. And cast vast clouds over this tiny world by holding her hand against the sun, and so brought darkness and desolation like god himself." (To the Light House.

She is caught between the emptiness of human life and the creativity she had while she is playing with the little puddle, In CLD after so many years spent abroad Tara returns to her childhood and asks, "Why had nothing changed? She had changed- why did it not keep up with her in To the Light House similarly Uly thinks: "There is coherence in things, stability. Something, she meant is immune from change and shines out.. in the face of Howing, the Heeting, the spectral, like a ruby".

Tara's fascination for snails is still there. In both these novels characters love to revisit their past and praise for it. Das children specially Tara still revisit the rose walk in the garden and mars Ramsay observes how in her grand mother'S day people were meticulous and took great pains" and "Mrs. Mc:\ab remembers her past. .. Things were better then than now", Tara rejects Bim as "Bim. grey and heavy now and not so unlike their mother in appearance. only awake,

watchful, gazing at her with her fullest attention and appraisal" where as Lily reflects about Mrs. Ramsay, "She was astonishingly beautiful, William said" In Ta The Light HOLLse light house is a symbol of eternity in the midst of the changing waves; in Clear Light of Day, it is the old Das house, steeped in memories that stands as a staid bulk walk in the turbulent lives of the characters in a world of swiftly changing values"· claims Asha Kanwar.

V. Conclusion

Thus Desai has shown how the past experiences of the characters are presented in the form of present and how the inner workings of these characters function in different situations and they reconstruct their present life. The next chapter makes an attempt to study memory in Desai's fiction. The study has been done in the light of Paul Ricoeur's perspective on time and narrative.

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