

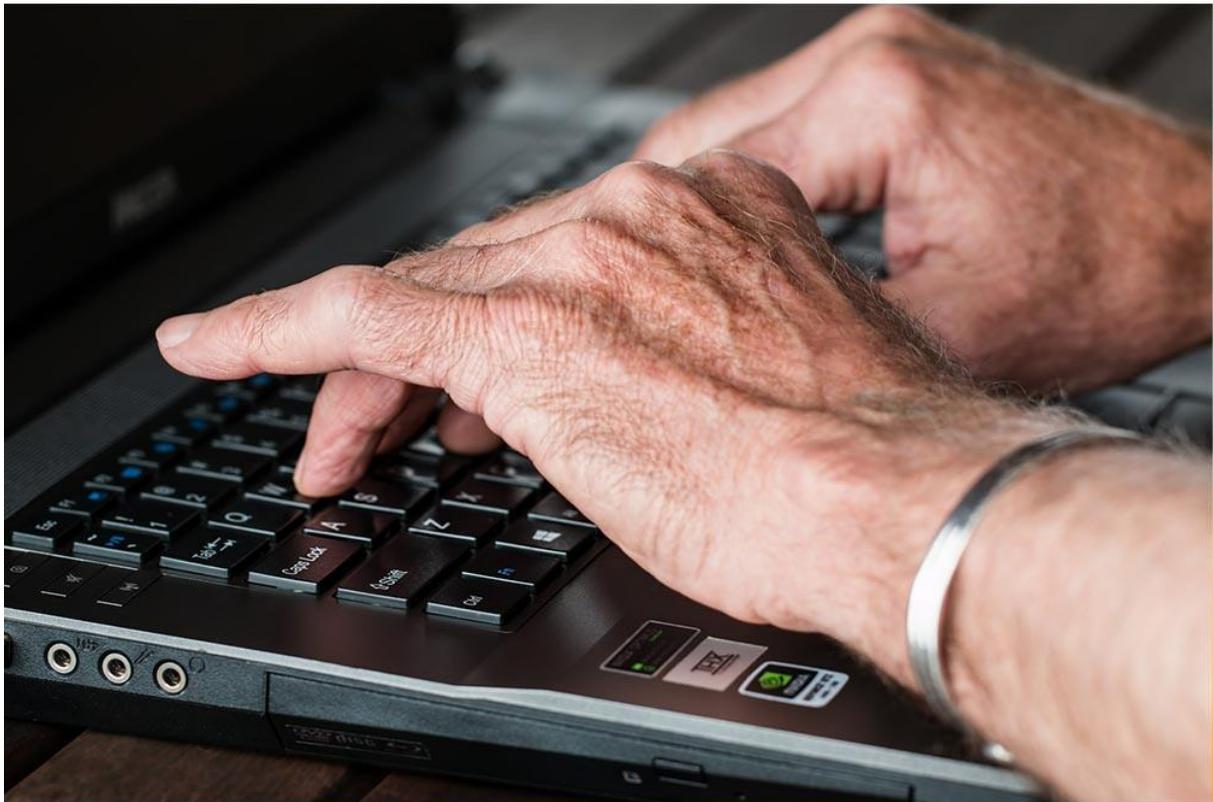
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Narrative Techniques in Anita Nair's Novels

Abstract

Anita Nair is one of the prominent Indian writers whose fictions capture the sensitivities of the soil in the most unique fashion and this uniqueness entirely is because of the panache of her narratives. The techniques that she employs grips in such a manner that her tales are no longer ordinary tale but a saga to be constructed in an epic stature. She has her roots spread from Jane Austen to Mikhail Bakhtin to Skaz.

Key Words: Anita Nair- Narration- Shashi Deshpande- Mikhail Bakhtin- hidden polemic- dialogic imagination- feminine – feminism - writings from the margins.

Narration makes any form of art into an art of exemption or just an ordinary piece of work. Anita Nair in this is categorised to be an excellent exponent in the art of balancing “showing” and “telling”. The author believes, “trust not the teller nor the tale, but the telling of it.” In this she is, like most woman writers, following, with a few variations, the Deshpande quoted Droupathi dictum “tell it with a slant”. Slant is not exclusive to women's writing alone. It is found in any mode of expression where constraints imposed by established institutionalized authority seek a disguised outlet.

Women writers, even if they disavow being feminist, but profess being only feminist critiques, have exemplarily carried out, like Jane Austen, a long time ago, the art of masking ones intention or disguising ones motives in what Mikhail Bakhtin calls, the language of *skaz* which is “a mode of narration that imitates the oral speech of an individualized narrator” (Holquist 22); in simple terms, parody. *Skaz* becomes double voiced in the novel because it is a representation of two voices, the one represented (character’s) and the one representing (author/ narrator/ real or implied). *Skaz* exemplifies a “hidden polemic” or “the word with a sideward glance” present in the barbs and the digs which characterize our everyday discourse.

‘Slant’ according to Bakhtin is a form of “stylization” or “verbal masquerade” (Dialogic Imagination, 275). It is the *borrowing* by “one voice the style and timbre of another; it is an “artistic image of another’s language” (DI 362). Stylization is one example of hybridity, which is a mixture of two social languages separated from one another by an *epoch* by official differentiation or by social differentiation. The special quality of slant in fiction is that it orients towards what is called “a word with a loophole” (Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics 236). This is the case when a character leaves himself a loophole in case the other person should agree with him/her.

Another aspect of *skaz* identified by Bakhtin is “the word with a sidewise glance”. Uttered with a “halting style”, it has its eye constantly on the reader literally cringing in the presence or anticipation of someone else’s word. For example, Akhila seeks the support and sympathy (a term feminists will object to here) through the slant of the ‘innocent’ woman victimized by the social norms of a sense of duty towards her family and yet feels helplessly defenceless and claustrophobic: “So this then is Akhila. Forty-five years old. Sans rose coloured spectacles. Sans husband, children, home and family. Dreaming of escape and space. Hungry for life and experience. *Aaching to connect*” [emph. mine](2); or painfully humorously: “ the aubergines, coated with Amma’s need to prove her esteem for Appa, would hiss, splutter

and then settle to become golden brown relics of devotion. Succulent quivering insides, with just a crunch of spice to tantalize his appetite. Feast, feast, my husband, my lord and master. On my flesh, my soul, my kathrika bhajis.” (M49). Akhila’s ironic humour over the “wifely devotion’ over a mechanical unfeeling husband is an attempt to show the need for satisfying the palate of the man; Amma becomes the “kathrika bhajjis”; her act of wifely servility and sacrifice masquerades as ‘suffering-virtue’ and also boils within, like the “bhajjis” of inner turmoil that she mostly is; a case of substitute gratification ; an existential transference of a woman’s troubled and spluttering inner world and the transformation which cannot be and should not be “proclaimed aloud” in the presence of her ‘lord and master’.

Again, in *Ladies Coupe* Akhila’s “sense of escape” (LC1) raises a self-doubt against her impulsive and outrageous “hunger for life and experience. Aching to connect.”(LC2) to the level of panicking (LC39) against a fairer common sense of herself as a woman and the demands of how a woman should “behave”, but immediately masks the ‘unwomanly’ impulsive desire for her escape into “unrestricted disorder” with a self conscious and self assertive mimicking of the “organized person” (LC3) she is. The author / the third-person limited narrator/ Akhila says: “Akhila was not a creature of impulse. She took time over every decision” (LC3). This is a case of slant the speaker may be both extremely dependent on, and extremely hostile to, the other’s consciousness (PDP 230). Freeing from the other’s word is impossible, as all discourse is dialogic. This constitutes ‘the word with a loophole’ should be the final word about oneself but it is forever taking into account what the “other” may have to say or respond, evaluate about the speaker.

Shashi Deshpande, in her book *Writing from the Margins*, under the title “Masks and Disguises” focuses on this “sin of self proclamation”. Why should not women express themselves in the way they want without coming into censure from the malevolent [usage mine] eye? What stricture on self proclamation has also been the hidden, sometimes blatant,

polemics of mainstream literatures on upcoming fledgling literatures not in the least considering that the fledgling may be a better navigator of the sky and the winds than the parent? So has been the case and concern over the use of the English language and writing in the creation of a new life and a new way of expressing it. Deshpande quotes Draupadi [sic] from the Bagavath Geeta advising Krishna's wife, Sathyabama, on how to manage men says, "clever women know many ways . . . I put aside my ego, I try not to be jealous, I strive to be modest and gracious . . . [and] "be silent about what you think". The salve for womanly survival technique was "Be Silent". The point under contention here is "Don't Think" versus "Don't Think Aloud". This dictum, in fact is echoed in the first phase of women writers that Showalter categorizes in her *A Literature of their Own*. The first phase, feminine phase, is one that drills the women writers to Not to Think but "toe the line of the male order". The second phase (feminist) decides to think but not aloud; in Deshpande terms of interpretation "don't think aloud", resists the toeing of male text dictums and resolves to be self expressive. But, at the same time, being conscious within, the feminine self wants to but somewhere, somewhat also hesitates to establish that self-assertion. This is where Anita Nair's Karpagam of *Ladies Coupe* comes in; the widow's unrestricted flaunting of her female identityand her parting shot to Akhila, advising her to "Damn it! Think aloud", and not only think aloud but throw age old, biased enforcements on women with a "cock-a-thumb-laugh. The third and the female phase with the suggestion of Helene Cixous's "Medusa laugh" attached to it.

To think aloud but not let know others that you are thinking aloud is Deshpande's suggestion to women writers, through the appropriate use of "slant" or "masks" or "disguises". If we observe closely, the shift in application and realization of woman's expression moves from "restrained freedom" to "freedom restrained" to "freedom in freedom" ; i.e., freedom in the choice of freedom. To give it a more literary application, it is

the shift from the “zenana” factor to the “Lakshman Reka” to Sylvia Plath’s driving of the stake into cultural vampires in her poem “Daddy” or her “Mirror” factor which tells us of how freedom and self-actualization can be won through either “being liberated through self” [like Akhila and Radha with respect to their margins either self made or socially imposed] or “being liberated through others”. This feeling of entrapment is what both protagonists attempt to break away from a condition which Margaret Atwood, in her excellent critique on the nature and function of Canadian writing remarks in her book *Survival*: “The Canadian protagonist often feels trapped inside his family. He feels the need for escape, but somehow he is unable to break away” (25). Anita Nair tells about the conservative society-drawn modern “Lakshman Rekas” that the marginalized (men or women) have to carry or counter, especially from the zenanas each occupies.

The Better Man (1999), *Ladies Coupe* (2001), and *Mistress* (2005), form a remarkable literary trilogy in contemporary Indian Literature revolving along the pre-emptive lines of “personal freedom” and “respecting the other as one would want to be respected oneself” (a little biblical like her oft cited scriptural quotes in *Mistress* often used but seldom appreciated) Anita Nair’s reading of history and gender suggests individual and collective fall in the overlapping of myth and ancestry.

Mistress is a three-part novel in several voices, of disturbing memories and demanding passions in life and art, matter and spirit, love and lust of a woman, her husband and her bachelor uncle, telling their stories in the Faulkneresque fashion of interior monologues and with the mode of “heterodiegetic” narrator. Three generations are linked by the memory of Koman, a Kathakali exponent whose half-hearted acceptance to be written about by Christopher Stewart, a rakish musician and columnist of a travel magazine, leads him and his beloved niece Radha, trapped in a stifling marital and social existence, to be swept along the tide of life and racked by passion and guilt, falling prey to half-baked

assumption that truly turn out to be the threateningly illusory rope than the factually feared snake, and lose much rare human dignity and self-esteem as much as cause emotion injury and pain to others in this phobic phase of self-realization. The past is very much in the present and the novel demands close attention when scenes decades apart jostle each other in successive pages of interior monologues and analeptic narrations and scenes rich in resonance. What has happened is linked with what is happening in the principal landscape of the mind where myths dramatically related in Kathakali become symbolic narrative triggers in the unraveling of character and action. Uncle's external life as Koman is unraveled to Chris directly and indirectly by selective recollection, but his inner life of conflicts and pain can only be laid bare through the emotional subtleties and passionate dramatic moments mythicized through art as in "Vali Vatham", Keechaka Vadham or Nala Charithra. As Koman the Veshakaran sees it "here are no heroes or villains, only characters" (M121)

Anita Nair uses the heterodiegetic narration of multiple points of view in individual interior monologues (unlike the homodiegetic mode of narration as is in *The Better Man*) and the art of Kathakali itself as two narratives and mythical slants to unravel the complexity of *Mistress*. Anita Nair lays bare complexity as being an "enactment of depth" or "purely pretentious" as revealed by the *veshakaran* /actor really acting an illusion to make it real (pretends to be real) or as in the drama outside all drama, people wearing different masks to escape into the world of mendacious reality. A *veshakaran*, in spite of his masks, is shown to be less mendacious, for life enacts "willing suspicion of disbelief". All are "wearers of disguises"; artists wear to express that which is not there but must be shown and seen; characters wear it to hide, that which should not be shown or seen, for personal reasons. The true *veshakaran* in life lives by proxy and in pain; but the power within him becomes him. Artistically structured along the *navarasas* of art, especially Kathakali's "language without words", the novel looks into "the nine faces of the heart" as would a prism split and show the

captivating seven basic colours embedded within the too familiarly margined white light; within these *rasas* dwell the interior monologues of the principal characters who perform their own “dance of emotions” wearing their own “masks” of mendacity, lying themselves while hiding the lies of those close to their hearts..

That nature is intricately and inevitably woven into the emotional grain of human life seems to be Anita Nair’s world view, especially the inter-mingling of baser elements with the nobler ones in everyman. That deceit and desire are an inevitable part of all human composition, even as dignity and morality of creative stasis are an essential part of equilibrium, is symbolically structured in the introduction to each *rasa*. The respective seasonal cycle is associated with or shown in dissociation to the conflicting emotions and feelings in each of the character-narrators and their sense of guilt and the meaning of life that they deliberately embrace.

Opening with *Sringaram* (love) and closing with *Shantam* (peace) the novel is an exhilarating experience into areas of memory and desire that every human being would have longed to explore and retrace but dared not being scared of looking at the “skeletons in the cupboard” he/she would have had to face. The chapters are inter-connected by emotive triggers rather than intellectual/logical ones where Love transcends seasons as does wonder, emotions. *Haasyam* (laughter) is really less the mockery of life than life’s mockery of man (and the author’s most serious and profound writing on faith and hypocrisy) and the “condemnation and contempt for convention. *Karunam* (sorrow) reveals “remorse’, *Raudram* (fury) reveals the dormant “furies” of passion, *Veeram* (daring and courage) is more in the will to survive and safe-guard one’s beliefs, *Bhayaanakam* (fear) brings forth the doubts of desire’s after effects and self-knowledge, resulting in *Beebhalsam* (disgust) that lies deep within one’s soul as a result of self-scrutiny, the sight of the man and beast within (310), *Adhbutham* (wonder) and *Shaantam* (peace) an absence of desire in detachment, a freedom.

Anita Nair's novels poses the question, "how can one be content with what one has or knows" strikes at the very foundations of male-text morality of "being content is not to suffer". Faulkner faced critical recriminations when emerging as novelist and Anita Nair, when looking into her unabashed treatment of the "finer appetite" of human fundamental needs, in no sugar-coated form, may raise a few supercilious eyebrows in the real world of masks and disguises. But that essentially is what she does through her writing – throw harsh light on the dark corners of life that every human possesses but self-righteously disdains not to see. Anita Nair employs a nouveau narrative that is characteristic of post-modern fiction in making her character's point of view neither exclusively internalized nor provide the absolute externalized authority of omniscience. Nair, like the titles of her novels, mixes and blends the conventional with the radical even in her narrative strategy. The older cry of "*Art should spread sunshine*" has been replaced by "*Art should throw harsh light on dark corners!*" This cry for looking into the self-made safe havens of mankind's mask against exposure of his own evil is that which is foremost in Williams' concern as a novelist: "I don't accept modern sociological theories of evil being environmentally caused. There is something dark and destructive in me that I have to keep watch on. There is something destructive in all of us" (McCracken 36).

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