Chapter VI

Narrative Technique

“There is a method in his madness.” (Polonius on Hamlet)

Creative writers have their own conscious and unconscious literary agenda to project which they employ myriad narrative techniques. Buffon says: “The style is the man.” Same thing could be attributed to creative writings. An appropriate and original style elevates the status of a literary work. Both creative writers and critics have testified to his fact. Jame Joyce and Virginia Woolf chose the stream of consciousness technique for their novels. Faulkner created the literary locale of Yoknapatawpa and his own idiom. Hemingway too is famous for his narrative style. Henry James has discussed the nuances of creative writing in his “The Art of Fiction.”

As versatile Canadian writers, Margaret Laurence and Atwood have employed multiple narrative techniques which have added value and depth to their fiction. Following the path of these Canadian Literary Greats, Marian Engel has displayed depth and variety in her narrative technique of which this chapter makes a study.

In this first novel, Engel broke through the literary expectations that had involved her in writing undistinguished thrillers and novels in the Victorian mode. The young author summoned the courage to use the form that was so familiar to her: the notebook or cahier. As its title indicates, ‘Sarah Bastard’s Notebook’ is an adapted form of cahier.”
The notebook format followed by Engel in her first novel created a deliberately fractured and fragmented texture to the telling of Sarah’s story. But this approach did not receive a unanimously positive response. Several critics faulted Engel’s tactic, insisting that the novel’s fractured form reflected an “essential immaturity “and reduced the book to “a series of disconnected existential speculations”.

Subsequent developments in feminist and postmodern literary theory and practice suggest otherwise. From within these perspectives, “Sarah Bastard’s Notebook “represents a landmark event. More than merely innovative, Engel’s literary choice best expressed the content and purpose of her work. The text’s dislocation in time and space convey with uncanny and evocative just as the sense of confusion and contradiction that envelope the protagonist’s existence. Engel explores Sarah’s life by deliberately fracturing perspective, thereby allowing her to establish and reflect on the fragmented female self that Sarah represents.

*Sarah Bastard’s Notebook* represents an early dismantling of traditional notions of self. The Western liberal humanist model of the coherent, rational, centred, autonomous self has been challenged by new concepts of identity, including a vision of self as de-centred or marginalized, fragmented or multiple, “Other “experience of subjectivity have come into focus,foregrounding concepts of alterity and difference. This space of alterity, or otherness, has been coded as “female “and its exploration is a major theoretical project of modernity.

Modernity can be defined as crisis-in-narrative and one of its critical condition is putting into discourse of ‘woman’, the valorization of the feminine
woman, and her obligatory, that is historical connotations, as somehow intrinsic to
new and necessary modes of thinking, writing and speaking. In her study “Gynesis:
Configuration of Woman and Modernity “, Alice Jardine juxtaposes woman and
modernity against a backdrop of a contemporary crisis in the “master narratives “. In
Jardine’s words, modernity is the ‘historically unprecedented exploration of the
female, differently maternal body “. It configures a new space of representation, a
“womanized space “Modernity’s displacement of the “paternal fiction/s “is well
illustrated in Sarah Bastard’s Notebook. Once again the title is evocative. The
notebook is Sarah Bastard’s.

The reviews of Engel’s second novel underscore its commitment to
expressing female experience. For some, this was a weakness; for others, it was a
strength. For all, it made the novel radical. But the commitment to women’s reality
was not the only innovative feature of The Honeyman Festival. The novel’s form
was a swell. The author herself was impressed with the work. Engel devoted
considerable thought and energy to form and structure of the novel. She made an
advance in self-consciousness, in awareness of layers of reality.

The novel is an effort to demonstrate the discrepancy between the idealized
puritan ethos and female reality. It’s widened vision of the lives of women, a vision
that embraced the realities rather than the fiction of female experience. Engel was
interested in women’s realities of motherhood. Not men’s fiction about it. Through
the protagonist Minn, Engel explains that “Mothering lives at the root of reality,
along with other experiences in particular – female corporeality – constitute reality.
In the novel, Engel took up the task of revising the representation of women’s lives. She introduced the notion of “body – think”. An effort to break out of “phallago centism” and to ensure Woman’s representation in language, the female body is written into or inscribed in the text. The novel was also about artistic representation. Engel was strongly interested in the theory as well as the practice of art. In her notebooks, Engel long referred to the novel as “The Silent Companions”. This reference evoked an important scene towards the end of the novel. The silent companions were two-inch cardboard toy-theatre characters manipulable on wire slides. The protagonist Minn has learned this art from her neighbour Mc.Gregor to cut out photos of real-life people and attach their faces to the figures.

By pasting these real-life people’s faces she imagined herself that she was living with all those people whom she loved. But all those figures remained only as silent companions and did not console Minn in her loneliness.

Engel used this imagery to make her protagonist to realize and distinguish between the real and fiction. In Engel’s fictional universe, she cracks the egg. She had toyed with the idea of using “The texture of Women “as the title for The Honeymoon Festival. She texturized women’s lives, giving them depth and substance. In this novel Engel’s protagonist Minn was suffering from loneliness at the time of her pregnancy. She tried to get away from the troubling thoughts of her past and present. She tried to play and talk with the toy figures by creating an imaginative world that all the persons whom she loved were with her. But in vain, She was not succeeded. She realized that she was a grown up and she had to face the realities of the world:
Whatever happens, the universe will roll on some-how. It’s big enough to do with us, there’s a comfort. The tides will ebb and flow, the moon risi even if she isn’t cheese or snow. . . . There will be war and murder and long winters and hot summers. You will have to have strong legs. We will sit in a circle longing for the lights of Moscow. We will bite each other’s fingers out of boredom, to see the blood. We will continue to clean our houses. We will make artifacts. And the morning will come, and so will the night again. Won’t it?(THF 170).

With these words, the author made her protagonist to get strong in her heart to fact the world. Whatever happens she had to do the role of mother or wife, with smile.

One device which Engel used to break up the traditional form of the novel was “block-notes”. Other techniques included letters, postcards, “snapshots” and lists. Combined with more familiar devices for creating writing units, such as months of the year and days of the week, these produced a carefully constructed and tidy text. Monodromos’ final crafted form consists of ten chapters (longer ones alternating with shorter ones) each of which is subdivided by bloc-notes, letters, the occasional postcard and snapshot and lists.

Engel planned to “cut up “ Monodromos with the use of poems as well, Early drafts of this novel included several poems, intended to link the narrator Andrey Moore to her lover, the English poet Max. In the end, most were dropped Monodromo’s final version contains only an occasional poem, confined to letters
Audrey writer to Max. None of Max’s poems appears, though Audrey cites a line or two from his work. Poems, list bloc-notes, letters, postcards and snapshots all served in *Monodromos* to “cut up “the traditional form of the novel with which Engel had become impatient in the early 1970’s she had built the novel differently to reconstruct the genre. *Monodromos’* fragmented form was an attempt at new narrative representation.

The description of the Sunny Greek Islands city walls, buildings, arches courtyards, pillars and interiors reveals the interest of Marian Engel in literary form and architecture. Through her protagonist she distinguished Byzantine, Greek, Arab, Turkish, Roman and other architectural styles. According to her, in the Middle East there’s a little bit of everything, Arab, Turkish, Byzantine, Roman and Ancient Greek.

While her previous novels *Sarah Bastard’s Notebook* and *The Honeyman Festival* revolves around the protagonist’s personal, This novel differs from those two novels. The protagonist Audrey Moore was markedly different and she told more about her new island than about herself. Indeed she seemed to be bodyless. The “I “of Engel first two novels was whittled down in her third novel to an “eye “. This I/Eye was replaced from the familiar female framework of family and home to the foreign setting of a Greek island – or “eyeland”.

This visual imagery ‘throughout *Monodromos* reinforced the equation of “I “and “eye “. This I/Eye was silent and was seen only what she had learned to saw not what she wanted to saw. “I never see what I want to “, “I ‘m always stuck with someone else with something else in mind “(MD206) was Audrey’s meaningful
complaint. The protagonist Audrey Moore was scaled down to a “seeing eye“. As she was reduced in size, she was also reduced to silence. She moved out of the abstract realm of the mind and into the concrete, sensual world of the body. The women were not allowed to express themselves in that island. This was explained by a cock-fight scene in this novel.

The cock-fight is one of the several lushly descriptive passages in the novel. Audrey has ventured out for an exploratory walk and detailed her exotic surroundings when she came across a cock-fight. When Audrey moved towards the crowed to watch the cock-fight she observed that the men were playing with the chickens and not with fighting cocks. At that time, her presence was whispered. After that only she looked around her and found that there was no woman in the crowd except herself. This passage revealed a neat and definitive delineation of male and female realms. She discovered the position of women in that island and wrote to Max how she was handicapped by her feminity: “I can’t take an any male enterprise at all”(MD 80). Through this cock-fight scene Engel beautifully explained the limits imposed on woman in that society.

At the end of the novel, Marian Engel used a technique to make her protagonist to understand the world she introduced the figure of ‘Dancing boy’. The dancing boy was a child who is a combination of instincts and lesions. Audrey heard a strange music in the midnight and she found at a distance, her ex-husband Laddie was dancing with the dancing boy. In the dancing boy she glimpsed “the old, remembered thing, A long time ago someone decided the fractured intervals were not good for us, they remembered the disasters. They thought simplification was a virtue. They invented trinities and dichotomies to ease the strain of multiplicity. This
boy has been taught to remember the old –not wholeness, but chaos. He will be Laddie’s final disaster “(MD238). From this she understood that “it’s not that one doesn’t understand.... there is nothing to understand “. Combining instincts and lessons, the dancing boy represents a vision that is not based on dualism. “This is the image finally summoned from the remembered “(MD238). This dancing boy emerges as a dancing Bear in Engel’s next novel.

Audrey Moore came to the island in search of “a dog headed saint ikon. According to her lover, to know about the island she had to find the ikon. But whenever she asked about the location of the ikon the people ignored to answer and they behaved that it was not so important to them. After a long struggle Audrey reached the mountain on a donkey back where the ikon was situated. But this ikon turns out disappointingly to be “only a small ikon, a Christopher who prayed to the virgin because he was excessively attractive to women. In response, she endowed him with an endearing long hound’s head with a flaring nose like a Crocodile (MD 230).

To describe the tradition, customs and the beliefs of the Greek island, Marian Engel used these kinds of imagery and symbols. The protagonist Audrey Moore has learned to love books, to believe in logic, and to respect knowledge, she has not been taught to love herself, have faith in feelings, or trust her instincts. On the island everything becomes mixed. Lessons and instincts combine in a new vision of the world that is not based on dichotomy. Audrey glimpses it in the figure of the dancing boy.
Engel’s *Bear* elicited a lot of critical attention. The novel ventured boldly into territory long deemed off limits to women. It raised the issue of women’s eroticism and sexual desire. Despite its provocative nature, Bear rests firmly within the evolution of Marian Engel’s work. Engel insisted that Bear had a firm intellectual base. In *Bear* the dancing boy of *Monodromos* becomes an animal able to “rear up and dance." *Monodromos’s* Audrey Moore, one of life’s watchers, took belated, halting steps towards joining the dance of life. In *Bear*, Lou strides onto the floor and executes Audrey’s dream to “shimmer against the night “(MD 239). The novel takes its place in an artistic tradition where in women retreat to nature to escape a male culture that is inimical to female self development and expression.

Engel underwent severe emotional turmoil during the 1970’s, and her writings bore testament to these experiences. For Engel, these were difficult years. Emotional intensity built steadily until the tension finally burst, partly through the creative release that was *Bear*. The protagonist of Bear Lou is in a state of depression and undergoes several transformations, difficult to comprehend. The most concrete manifestation of the crisis was that Lou could no longer see her reflections.

Books took up a lot of space in Lou’s life.” In the winter, she lived like a mole, buried deep in her office, digging among maps and manuscripts “(B1). As she got an opportunity to catalogue a library in the Pennarth estate, she went there and met a Bear in that lonely house. At first, she was afraid but slowly they became close to one another. As she was alone for longtime without human contact the love of Bear consoled her.
She felt that she was comfortable in the world at last. As she was unable to get the love and care from the human being she did not feel guilty to have sex with the bear. By having relation with the bear she had broken the taboo.

In this novel, Engel used a real bear not an imagination or dream, to reveal the feelings and experience of a woman. Lou’s problem like all identity problems, are not simply personal but also social. Even in the present century, there are some limitations for women and they are afraid to cross the limitations of the society. But Engel through her writings made her protagonist to cross the boundary and break the taboo. This novel won the Governor General’s Award for best English-language Canadian novel of 1976. Marian Engel said that people make of it “what they want it to be “This was certainly evident in reader’s and critics ‘response to the work. The way she narrated the novel made everybody to read and accept the novel.

Bear is almost a stylized rehearsal for The Glassy Sea, a sort of stripped-down, condensed preview of the more expansive subsequent story. In both works Engel pursues her exploration of women’s struggle with dichotomy. The Glassy Sea fleshes out this basic theme of the author’s writing by exploring several new variations on it. The bare/bear bores version is filled in by the examination of additional tensions between the floral and the carnal, heart and head, Mary and Martha, life and letters. The convent setting and rose imagery add further texture to Engel’s continued investigation into the impact of dualism on women’s experience.

The Glassy Sea’s ‘distinctive epistolary format is the illustration of Engel’s sustained interest in, and experimentation with literary form. The novel has three parts: a prologue, “an envoie”and in between, a long letter that makes up the body
of the book. The letter written by the novel’s protagonist is an old literary form and at first glance it may seem an old or unfashionable choice for a “modern novel “. Moreover with their vaguely Chaucerian overtones, the prologue and envoie that bracket the letter underscore Engel’s departure from dominant modern literary norms. But, as usual, Engel’s choice of literary form is both strategic and effectual.

Letters have long been associated with a female writing tradition, women using letters and diaries as vehicles to express their feelings. Engel participated in this tradition, adopting an epistolary form for her book. The Glassy Sea’s ‘prologue and envoie further evoke a tradition of “belle letters “. Quite in keeping with the novel’s style, Engel reported that when she was writing The Glassy Sea, she found it easy to compose long, beautiful and rhythmical sentences. Indeed, she was surprised to discover that she quite like writing lyrical prose. Where Bear was lean and economical with strong narrative line, The Glassy Sea is lustily intricate in language and composition Rich in allusions, the text is multilayered in its modes of expression, from the religious to the psychoanalytical, from the confessional to the contemplative. With The Glassy Sea, Engel added to a way of literary form and experimentation in her writing. The book is yet another testimony to her versatility as a writer.

Engel used the term “Mary and Martha “in this novel “Mary and Martha “- the “heart and head “were perceived as two distinct identities. In life the Mary and Martha were ‘workers and shirkers ‘. The former workers (Martha) deserved recognition and reward and the latter shirkers (Mary) were “good for nothing “. Women encounter social resistance when they step out of their stereotypical roles. Engel explained this through her protagonist Rita Heber. When she was in the
Eglantine House as Mary Pelagia she obtained an acceptable position as a teacher, but when male colleagues discovered that she was an Eglantine she endured unwelcoming teasing. Though the Marys (Shirkers) willingly entered into the society to work they were not treated well as the Marthas (Workers) Engel steered her protagonist back into the society to examine this reality. Rita Heber after ten years of Eglantine service entered into the society and married Asher Bowen. But she can’t able to continue the worldly life as Martha. After giving birth to one child the husband and wife were separated and she lost her child too.

Engel made a remarkable change in her protagonist’s life. She brought back Rita to the Eglantine House. The re-entry of Rita to the Eglantine House, made her to discover a sense of self and certainty that has eluded her all her life. She realized the Mary in her and she entered the Eglantine House as Sister Superior, Rita’s experience have measured the possibilities that society offers to women.

The decision taken by Rita to re-enter the Eglantine House may be brought by the author through the story of ‘Pelagia ‘when Rita enters the convent the Sister Superior Mary Rose choose the more uncommon name ‘Mary Pelagia’ for Rita. In due course Rita discovered that there are two Pelagias. First there was St.Pelagia of Antioch, the prostitute turned holy person and later saint. “Pelagia was an acres who every night processed in splendour past Bishop Nonner’s fledging church, causing scandal among the Christians. Finally she sat herself and her splendid pearls at the feel of Bishop and asked to be converted “(TGL72). Her story earns Rita’s admiration for what she later described as its “obedience to form and the way it controls its temptations: the need to think in poverty, of luxury, in chastity of unchastity “(TGL72).
This Pelagia is another of the dancing figure who appears in different guises in Engel’s work. ‘Monodromos’s dancing boy and Bear’s bear both anticipate The Glassy Sea’s saint. In each case, the dancing figure is associated with (ambiguous)sexuality and an instinctive or emotional approach to life, as opposed to one founded solely on thinking and reason. After ten years as an Eglantine, Rita’s dancing self begins to emerge. “Martha in Rita waxes and “Mary “the spiritual in her wanes. Thus, she entered the worldly life. But there she was forced to face the heart-aches of everyday life. In the end as Pelagia she returned to the nunnery life.

Another symbol, Engel used in this novel is the Rose garden. “It was not faith that got me to the nunnery, “Rita states, “it was taste “(TGL58) “Oh, I was seduced early by roses and crowns “(TGL11). The first time Rita visits the Eglantine, she is enraptured by the roses cultivated by the members of the order, whose name in French means Wild rose, “I wanted roses and was willing to endure what I thought would be the thorns “(TGL16) Rita recalls. The rose is integral to the wreath of symbols in The Glassy Sea. With its long history and tradition, it is a particularly rich symbol, laden with meaning. In Engel’s novel, it operates in conjunction with other flower motifs. Thus the rose (in French, eglantine) combines with the marguerite (French for daisy and Rita’s full name) to create a floral setting that is irresistible to Engel’s protagonist. In the evolution of Engel’s work, Lunatic Villas displays more innovative features than sign of continuity. The novel conveys a discernible shift in the author’s writing. While Engel’s previous works focused on an individual’s experience – one woman’s voice, Lunatic Villas presents several voices, both male and female. This is a domestic novel.
In a 1973 interview, Graeme Gibson asked Marian Engel if she thought that writers knew something special about the world. “I don’t think they know anything that anybody else doesn’t know” – she replied. Engel did not think writers were special, like prophets, or had access to knowledge that was not available to ordinary people. She asserted, what writers could do was to take the ordinary data of daily life that is available to everyone and to “represent” it in other ways. The fiction writers could lay out the cards little differently with the combination of fantasy and imagination. For Engel, the writer’s job was one of seeing and “devising different methods of seeing “, the ordinary everyday world around us.

In this novel, Engel placed her characters smack in the middle of life’s chaotic realities, as represented by the Lunatic Villas of Rathbone Place. The title is suggestive when a little madness enters a determinedly rational and ordered outlook on life it is possible to view the world differently. Engel’s protagonist Harriet glimpses this possibility within the context of her crazy household. The major agents of “madness “at 10, Rathbone Place are the members of the extensive entourage that it Harriet’s family. Engel underscores by multiplying the number of children in her protagonists life. She used this technique in this novel to describe the reality of day-to-day life. This is a child-centred novel. As elsewhere in Engel’s writing, children and childhood are affirmed as vital links to the world of the imagination and fantasy where irrational reasons make sense and it is possible to see the “extra “in the ordinary. The text is receptive to instances of irrationality, moments of madness, and occurrences of the occult in ordinary everyday life.

Lunatic Villas’ prologue is a first and formal signpost of the novel’s intentions to capture the social- even socio-historic dimensions of existence. The
prologue provides historical context, sketching out the origins and development of Rathbone Place and framing the portraits of the people living there. This novel’s more pronounced social dimension called for a change in the way in which Engel’s presentation was made like all other novels of the author, *Lunatic Villas* was an experiment in literary technique. Its narrative perspective is multiple and fragmented. In this novel Engel’s narrative choice is purposeful and effective. More than one voice is heard in the novel. Indeed Engel herself described *Lunatic Villas* as a funny book, despite the seriousness of the subject matter. which ranges from child abuse to social dysfunction.

Through this novel Engel explained the new possibilities for women’s social survival. This involves a move beyond “patriarchal motherhood “. In this novel the protagonist Harriet Ross was the mother of seven children. Without a male support she nursed all the children as a writer. Harriet Ross is Lunatic Villas’ spokesperson for motherhood as it really is.

In this novel, Engel used the symbol of aviary. Harriet Ross’ neighbour Vinnie and Sylvia had no children and they raised birds. Sylvia was unable to walk due to an accident and she spent her life on a wheelchair. Her only consolation and happiness lies on raising birds. Harriet often goes there to help Sylvia though she was not much interested on birds. And also Harriet had sexual relation with Sylvia’s husband Vinnie Palmer. Because of this relation at the end of the novel Harriet was affected with parrot fever which was highly contagious. The neighbours treated her well and they looked after her carefully. The author explained the normal daily life of the people through this situation.
Another fantastical incident introduced by the author is the trans-Canada bicycle race in which Harriet’s son Mick and Harriet’s friend Mrs.Saxe participated. They were the youngest and the eldest of the participants and they won the race securing the first and second place. To celebrate the victory of Mick and Saxe and to enjoy the recovery of Harriet from parrot fever the Rathbone Place neighbours mount a sign over number 10 of Harriet’s House which reads “LUNATIC VILLAS”. Thus the author explained the reality of living. The ordinary everyday life, with all its complications, clutter, chaos and confusion. Life is untidy and people imperfect all in all living is a Lunatic business. But there is hope and dream and imagination.

As the name suggests, *Lunatic Villas* emphasizes two dimensions of Engel’s sustained exploration of women’s experience. The first evoked by “Villas” - the element of the social which Engel was increasingly compelled to examine in her re/presentation of individual and collective female reality. The second encompassed by the word “Lunatic” encoded another level of reality. a surreality that was a space of dream, fantasy and imagination. This was the domain of writing otherwise rooted in day-to-day reality. By using these combinations of imagination and reality, Engel marvelously demonstrated her view and belief in everyday life.