Chapter 7
TECHNIQUE AND STYLE

It is widely accepted that, "the novel is the readiest and most acceptable way of embodying experiences and ideas in the context of our time." The manner in which to write a good novel, however, remains highly debatable. Many modern critics believe that in the past too much attention was paid to the story or plot overlooking the importance of psychology. Some modern novelists have written novels that are experimental and far removed from the traditional story telling methods. According to Somerset Maugham these writers, who are dubbed anti-novelists, "consider the telling of a story for its own sake as a debased form of fiction." The principal features of the anti-novelist according to Paul Verghese are, "lack of an obvious plot; diffused episode; minimal development of character; detailed surface analysis of objects; repetitions; experiments with vocabulary, punctuation and syntax, variations of time sequence, alternative endings and beginings."
The narrative technique employed by the novelist is also gaining importance, considering the gradual increase in the different methods of storytelling. Plain narrative or story telling is still the most common method employed by the novelist, who is omnipresent and omniscient in this type of writing. The first person narrative is usually employed by the novelist to make his story appear more realistic and more credible. While novels written in such a manner have a ring of authenticity to them, they do not enable the novelist to look deep into the minds and motives of the rest of the characters. Shashi Deshpande overcomes this problem by using a combination of the first person and third person narrative coupled with flashback devices to lend force and realism to the novel.

A chronological analysis of Deshpande’s development as a novelist requires a keen study of the narrative techniques employed by her, beginning with her first full length novel, Roots and Shadows. The novel essentially deals with the protagonist Indu’s painful self-analysis. The author also tries to encompass several other themes in this slim novel. Apart from the obvious and central theme of the Indu’s relentless probing to discover herself, there is the theme of bohemianism in the person of Naren in a stark contrast to the middle-class values of Indu’s family. There is the theme of woman’s fate in general which is brought to the reader’s notice, unobtrusively, in the form of Indu’s observations. There is also the theme
of the old order giving way to the new — symbolised by the demolishing of the old house to construct a hotel. Shama Futehally in a review comments that “.... this slender novel attempts, in a way, to encompass too many themes, and is unable to develop them beyond making reflections on each which are almost in the nature of asides.” Other reviewers like Madhu Singh, however, are highly appreciative of her skill in interweaving myriad themes into a coherent whole. Comparing Roots and Shadows with That Long Silence, Madhu Singh says that the former “is the more powerful of the two. In its succinctness lies its strength and the punch.”

To capture the interest of the reader, Deshpande avoids the simple technique of straightforward narration and instead employs the flashback. While the first chapter deals with the present, the later chapters move backwards in time, culminating in the final chapter which again ends in the present. This convoluted narration has come in for some criticism by reviewers who feel that it has only contributed to creating confusion in the minds of readers. Shama Futehully feels that:

This is a device which is useful either when some element of suspense is needed, or for a novel with a non-narrative structure. For this novel chronological clarity is essential, as the reader already has to cope with an abundance of characters and their complex interactions. The first chapter, where we are faced with all of them simultaneously, and without introduction, is rather confusing.
The entire novel is written in the first person, the narrator being a young woman writer who returns to her childhood home and finds herself caught in the whirlpool of family intrigues. Seen through the eyes of a young woman with liberated and progressive ideas, ordinary everyday incidents acquire a new meaning and highlight the gross inequalities in society. The first person narration also allows the author to probe deep into the mind of the protagonist, exposing her fears and frustrations with admirable candour, inviting the praise of reviewers like C.W. Watson, who compares Deshpande to the master story teller Chekov:

Other South Indian writers have been compared to Chekov, but Shashi Deshpande, in this novel at least, comes closest to that writer, and the tragi-comedy of The Cherry Orchard is constantly recalled in the description of the crumbling house and the squabbling of the family. The writing is beautifully controlled and avoids the temptation of sentimentality which the subject might suggest and again the control is reminiscent of Chekov.

The Dark Holds No Terrors, Shashi Deshpande's second novel is commendable for it's honest portrayal of the psychological problems faced by the protagonist, Sarita, a career woman. The novel, perhaps, achieves a rare level of authenticity because of the use of a double perspective — the shifting of the narrative from the first person to the third person in every
alternative chapter. When asked by Lakshmi Holmstrom in an interview as to how she had hit upon this technique, Deshpande replies that:

The present is in the third person and the past is in the first person. I was doing it throughout in the first. But that’s often a perspective I use in my short stories. I wanted to be more objective. So then I tried it in the third. But it wouldn’t work at all. Yet I really needed to distance myself from the narrative in the present, otherwise it was going to be far too intense. And then I read an American novel by Lisa Alther where she uses this method. And the minute I came across her novel I thought — let me admit it freely — Oh god, this is how I am going to do my novel.  

This way the novelist has managed to tell the story objectively and at the same time has made it seem like it has poured out from her heart. Meenakshi Mukherjee, considered to be an authority on Indian writing in English, in a review of the novel, comments that:

No summary will do justice to the intricate web the author has woven through the superimposition of the past over the present, through dreams, nightmares, flashback, introspection and simple straightforward third person narration.  

The Sahitya Academy Award winning novel, That Long Silence, is a complex novel of despair and triumph, of suppression and freedom, all played out for the better part in the heroine’s mind through memories and recollections. The narrative with it’s slow unknotting of memories and
unravelling of the soul reads like an interior monologue quite similar to the stream of consciousness technique employed by the likes of Virginia Woolf. A particularly bad patch in the narrator's life makes her bring alive her past through ruminations. Prema Nandakumar in a review maintains, however, that the novel "is not a forbidding stream of consciousness probe in the Virginia Woolf tradition. It is very much a conventional tale full of social realism evoked by links of memory. Not misty recollection but clear-eyed story telling." The narrator achieves a kind of catharsis by an objective analysis of what went wrong with her marriage and why she had failed as a writer. According to a reviewer Rita Joshi:

The method is reminiscent of Samuel Beckett in plays such as 
That Time where the character sits center stage while three voices go over his past.

The technique is, perhaps, best described by the narrator Jaya herself, who is telling own story:

All this I've written — it's like one of those multicoloured patchwork quilts the Kakis made for any new baby in the family. So many bits and pieces — a crazy conglomeration of sizes, shapes and colours put together.

The Binding Vine, Deshpande's last novel differs in it's mode of narration from her earlier novels. The narrative structure in Roots and Shadows, The Dark Holds No Terrors and That Long Silence does not
progress chronologically, but instead moves back and forth thematically, gradually relating one incident after the other until the entire story is revealed. In The Binding Vine, however, individual plots of three different stories are interwoven bringing together three women separated by age, status and education. The entire story is narrated in the first person by Urmi. To offer deep and intimate glimpses into the life of the narrator's mother-in-law, Mira, Deshpande uses the poetry and writing in her diary and note books. Urmi is able to brilliantly recreate the story of Mira — her unspoken anguish and outrage at being subjected to rape within marriage.

In all her novels, it can be said without doubt that Deshpande seeks to faithfully interpret life as it is without resorting to any personal commentary and explanation. Her novels which deal with women's oppression are highly susceptible to feminist harangue. But, it is a rare achievement that she has not fallen prey to this temptation. She prefers to avoid sermonising and instead presents facts as they are. Unlike Mulk Raj Anand, who thinks that no Indian writer can afford to write fiction without a social purpose, Deshpande protests against her work being labelled 'propagandist'. She vehemently denies any attempt on her part to moralise as is evident from what she says in an interview to Sue Dickman:

Somebody once asked me if I have a social purpose in my writing, and I very loudly said 'No', I have no social purpose, I write because it comes to me.¹³
In another interview to Stanley Carvalho, she once again emphatically states:

I hate to write propagandist literature. I think good literature and propaganda do not go together. Any literature written with some view point of proving something rarely turns out to be good literature. Literature comes very spontaneously and when I write I am concerned with people.14

She takes pains to explain that her writing merely mirrors the world. She finds that a lot of men are unsympathetic to her writing while a lot of women are sympathetic. The reason for this, according to her, is not difficult to analyse because in her writing, “women see a mirror image and men see, perhaps a deformed image of themselves”.15

But as she matured as a writer, Shashi Deshpande has undergone a change of outlook regarding the place of committed writing in literature. This is made clear when she has most recently admitted:

There was a time when I was scornful of what is called committed writing. I considered such writing flawed because its being message oriented diminishes its artistic worth. But now I know that all good writing is socially committed writing, it comes out of a concern for the human predicament. I believe, as Camus says, that the greatness of an artist is measured by the balance the writer maintains between the values of creation and the values of humanity. 16
It must be observed that Deshpande makes a sparing use of irony, satire or even humour which are the ingredients of great works of art. Flashes of irony are evident in one or two incidents in a couple of novels but they do not seem to be included intentionally by the writer. The most obvious example which comes to mind is that of the scene in That Long Silence where Mohan Jaya's husband accuses her of avoiding him during the crucial period when they are in hiding because of the fear of corruption charges being levelled at him. It is during this period that Jaya herself is facing a traumatic time and needs support. Her husband's accusation, therefore, seems highly ironical and throws her off balance for sometime. She keeps telling herself:

I must not laugh, I must not laugh.... even in the midst of my rising hysteria, a warning bell sounded loud and clear. I had to control myself, I had to cork in this laughter. But it was too late. I could not hold it any longer. Laughter burst out of me, spilled over, and Mohan stared at me in horror as I rocked helplessly.  

She is able to regain her sanity only after she decides to break her silence and record her story.

Another example of Deshpande's attempt at irony is her creation of the character called Priti in the novel The Binding Vine. Priti who at best can be called a pseudo-feminist provides a foil to the ever serious Urmi. Urmi's compassion for her long dead mother-in-law, Mira, makes her want
to set Mira’s random writings to order and publish them. But Priti is more interested in the sensation which Mira’s story is likely to create and plans to adapt her life into a film. Her reaction to Kalpana’s tragedy also borders on hypocrisy because she is more concerned about the publicity which the case is sure to generate. One reviewer, Shreya Cheravuri, however, feels that Deshpande’s novels could do without such devices because as she says, “Deshpande’s style is essentially too straight forward for satire and thus in parts, the book lacks a certain elegance.”

Deshpande also, by her own admission, steers clear of sentiment and romance. Speaking at a seminar, she expresses her annoyance at not being taken seriously by publishers. One publisher happened to reject her story and advised her to send it to a woman’s magazine instead. This irked her and she began to wonder:

Why did the editor say that? It was a good story. I knew that. I was pretty confident about it. It was not a sentimental, romantic love story either, the kind that would fit smugly into a woman’s magazine.

Deshpande probably feels that romance, sentimentality, humour and other such features merely diminish the serious concerns of a novel.

The use of myth is also recognised as an important literary device. While English poets and writers have relied heavily on Christian, Pagan and Classical myths, Indian writers in English have derived inspiration
from the wealth of material available in the form of stories from The 
Ramayana, The Mahabharata and The Puranas and also local legends 
and folk-lore. The most often used symbol from Indian mythology, of 
course, is Sita, who is considered to be the ideal woman — patient and 
submissive. Many other parallels are also drawn liberally from Indian 
mythology by Indian writers in English and other languages.

In The Dark Holds No Terrors, Deshpande draws a parallel 
from the Dhruva story to highlight the sense of neglect experienced by Saru, 
whose parents show a blatant preference for her brother, Dhruva. Saru’s 
father also tells her how on her deathbed her mother had made him repeat 
the episode of Duryodhana’s hiding in the lake at the end of the battle, 
waiting for the Pandavas to come and kill him. Saru identifies herself and 
her mother as Duryodhana figures — both lonely, unloved, defeated and 
filled with a sense of rejection.

In That Long Silence Jaya recollects the fable of the foolish 
crow and the wise sparrow which she had often heard as a child. She does 
not repeat the story to her children because of the fear that they might store 
it in their subconscious and eventually turn out to be like “that damnably, 
insufferably, priggish sparrow looking after their homes, their babies.... and 
to hell with the world. Stay at home, look after your babies, keep out the 
rest of the world, and you’re safe." Deshpande hints at the way in which
the seemingly harmless bedtime stories influence children at a tender age to believe that a women's job at all times is to protect her family even if she has to resort to treachery or deceit.

In That Long Silence, Jaya also recalls the *pativrata* — Sita, Savitri and Draupadi — mythical symbols of ideal wifehood, ironically comparing herself to them. "Sita following her husband into exile, Savitri dogging death to declaim her husband, Draupadi stoically sharing her husband's travails..."\(^2\) She feels that she has unconsciously emulated their example by following her husband into hiding when he is faced with the threat of corruption charges. There are quite a few mythical allusions in Deshpande's novels but she does not believe that myth is used as a literary device. In reply to Lakshmi Holmstrom's question if myth is a kind of language she uses, Deshpande says:

> I think so. I think a number of us do that in India all the time; we relate a great deal of our personal lives, our daily lives, to the myths. We find parallels as a matter of course. And we do this with all the myths, any myth that seems appropriate, whether they were originally about men or women. In that sense it is a part of a language, a grammar that one knows and understands, rather than a conscious literary device. \(^2\)

Narrative techniques apart, the most obvious challenge — peculiar only to the Indian writer in English — is, using the English
language in a way that will be distinctively Indian and yet remain English. In spite of a wealth of Indian writing in English the propriety of Indian fiction writers using English is still debated upon. Raja Rao in his 'Preface' to Kanthapura declares that, “We cannot write like the English. We should not”. The problem of the Indo-Anglian novelist is indeed unique. He or she writes about people who do not normally speak or think in English. In order to overcome this problem novelists have tried different experiments with language. According to Meenakshi Mukherjee, these experiments can be classified under three heads, “experiment in diction (literal translation of idioms), experiments in syntax (changing the structure of sentences) and imagery”. 23

Literal translation has been most conciously tried by Mulk Raj Anand, who has no inhibitions of taking liberties with the English language in spite of the disapproval of reviewers and critics. Literal translations of Hindi and Punjabi phrases like “Are you talking true talk?” or “to make one’s sleep illegal”, are generously spread across his stories. Meenakshi Mukherjee in her book The Twice Born Fiction has made a list of some of the Punjabi and Hindi idioms used by Anand in his works, some of which may sound atrocious to those not familiar with either of these languages, for example, ‘eating the air’ (to take a stroll), ‘breaking the vessel’ (to expose a secret), ‘black in the pulse’(something wrong) etc. Anand’s works
are also liberally sprinkled with swear words and abuse, which of course are not out of place in stories mostly about the Punjab peasantry.

Kushwant Singh also translates many Punjabi phrases and proverbs into English. Bhabhani Bhattacharya’s novels are full of literal translations of Bengali proverbs, while Raja Rao’s novels are full of translations of Kannada sayings. R.K.Narayan, perhaps, is the only one among the older generations who did not feel the need to use either any Indian translations of words and phrases nor original English text-book phrases like Nagarajan and Venkataramani. Among the later novelists, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal and Kamala Markandaya have managed to use the English language to their purpose without distorting it with unseemly translations of words and phrases or coining of new compound words like Raja Rao’s ‘that-house-people’ or ‘next-house-woman’s kitchen’. Shashi Deshpande belongs to the new breed of English writers who suffer from no complexes about using English because most of the them do not even consider it a foreign language. According to Meenakshi Mukherjee:

Earlier English was the language of public discourse, of higher education. It is only for a section of those born in the 1950s and after that English is a first language, sometimes their only language. They display a careless intimacy with English, which enables them to play with it.24
Deshpande’s writing is unplanned and quite spontaneous. Replying to Vanamala Vishwanath’s observation that her writing is not obviously Indian and does not draw attention to itself, Deshpande replies that:

No, I don’t believe in making it obviously Indian. But all this is basically because I’m isolated — I’m not part of any movement and not of conscious of readers to impress. To get wider recognition here and abroad, you have to be in the university and places like that with the right contacts. I’m an ordinary woman who writes setting at home. None of these things are within my reach. This has, I believe, done me good. It has given me great freedom. I’m happy with this anonymity. Once you get publicity-conscious, your writing becomes affected. I’m truly happy with this freedom.25

Deshpande, however, feels that writing in English in this country is a drawback because it alienates the writer from the mainstream. She seems to solve this problem by considering English, not a foreign language, but one of the Indian languages. She says:

I believe that English writing in this country is a part of our literatures; I consider English as one more of our bhashas as Ganesh Devy calls them. I know that our writing comes out of an involvement with this society, out of our experiences here, our readership is now here, and happily, our publishers are here as well. Yet, I am disturbed by the recent trend in English writing which in its pursuits of role models outside, is alienating itself from its roots.26
She feels that by writing in English she belongs to a small circle like the regional language writers and therefore, does not feel that it makes her non-indian in any way. She does not approve of being categorised as Indo-Anglian. She says:

I am an Indian writer. My language just happens to be English, which cannot be called a foreign language at all because it is so much used in India. 27

Deshpande also very categorically rejects the use of Indian translations in her works to provide an Indian flavour, which was considered so essential by most of the earlier writers. She says:

I do not use Indianisms to make my writing look Indian. I never try to make India look exotic. I do not think of a western audience at all. I belong to Indian literature. I would not like ever to be called an Indo-Anglian writer. I feel strongly about that. 28

Deshpande feels that she is different from other Indians who write in English because she was never educated abroad and so her background is firmly rooted here. Emphasising this fact, she says:

My novels do not have any westerners, for example. They are first about Indian people and the complexities of our lives. Our inner lives and our outer lives and the reconciliation between them. My English is as we use it. I don’t make it easier for anyone really. If I make any changes, its because the novel needs it, not because the reader needs it. 29
Shashi Deshpande is aware of the problem faced by the Indian writers in English but feels that writers should work out their own language. She expresses happiness with the present breed of Indian writers in English whose writing seems to be aimed at Indian readers more than western. She is also happy that the present day writers seem to have got away from the obsession with the East-West conflict which has little relevance today. Deshpande however, admits to failure at times to express the right emotion in a language alien to the characters she creates. She says "I lose the range of nuances which are available in Marathi, for example, the richness of the phrases that make up that language." Deshpande's mind is ever alert to the issues related to contemporary society and she has evolved literary skill in a manner which enables her to present these issues in a realistic and interesting way. It is to her credit that the Times Literary Supplement has deemed it fit to shower praise on her use of language. Its reviewer Maria Couto says that:

Deshpande eschews linguistic pyrotechnics and formal experimentation, but has sufficient command of her tradition to give the lie to the belief that the English language is incapable of expressing any Indian world other than a cosmopolitan one.
NOTES


3. Ibid, 80.


7. C.W.Watson, “Some Recent Writings from India”, Rev. of Roots and Shadows, Wasafri, Spr. 1995, No.21, 75.


10. Prema Nandakumar, “Every Woman in Bombay”, Rev. of That Long Silence,


12. Shashi Deshpande, Rev. of That Long Silence (New Delhi: Penguin India Ltd. 1989), 188.


15. Ibid.


22. Shashi Deshpande in an interview to Lakshmi Holmstrom, Wasafri.


