About Stream of Consciousness

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Various terms and styles are used to convey meaning of the written text to its reader. There are many literary devices that have been used for centuries by authors, and these literary devices have certainly enriched their writings. These devices maintain curiosity of the reader, keep expectations alive, create suspense and also manage to astound them at the end of the work. Special terms are awarded to characters to give unique identity to a particular character. Many writers use allegory to make a person, place or setting stand for something totally different from how it has been represented in the piece of writing. Allusion is another popular device with which a reader can identify his previous knowledge with. This knowledge could be that from history or mythology etc. Ballads were songs sung in praise of heroic deeds, they even narrated tragic tales and at times they entertained listeners with mythological stories.
Stream of Consciousness is a popular literary device used by Indian authors writing in English. This method of narrating a fictional story is also referred to as ‘interior monologue’. By monologue we understand that while one person speaks all others listen. When one communicates with oneself in his thoughts, all his conversation is with himself. In his book The Principles of Psychology, William James used the term for the first time. From 1890 till date, the word has been used time and again by writers from all over the world. Interior Monologue helps to present the subject of Stream of Consciousness.

Deepest emotions of an author find an outlet on the blank pages through this particular tool for writing. Soliloquy was used by characters on stage. Whenever a character happened to speak his thoughts aloud for himself, it was considered to be a soliloquy. It did not matter whether other people overheard him or not during this exercise. Aside on the other hand were words spoken aloud by a character for the benefit of the audience, these too were thoughts spoken aloud. Robert Browning, the famous Victorian Poet often uses dramatic monologue to give vent to his own personal beliefs, viewpoints and feelings through the mouth of his characters. In his famous poem Fra Lippo Lippi, the main character is conversing with other characters on different issues that are disturbing to him in this world. Other characters are mentioned but none is as vociferous as Lippi. Browning gets a chance to satirize various practices that were in vogue during his times. According to William James:

“Consciousness, then, does not appear to itself as chopped up in bits…it is nothing joined; it flows. A ‘river’ or a ‘stream’ are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described. In talking of it hereafter, let’s call it the stream of thought, consciousness, or subjective life.”

Fiction writers, who delve into the psychological aspect of their characters, are fond of using this particular style for introducing us to their characters. Anita Desai, winner of Sahitya Academy Award and Guardian Prize, wrote novels of great psychological worth. Cry, The Peacock was her first published novel in Stream of Consciousness Stream. This device has been fully used by Anita during the course of her novel. Other writers too have used it, but have done so marginally. Anita as an Indian has used a very common practice of Indians, i.e. consulting an astrologer to foretell future, and especially future related to married life. This very practice warns us of her
protagonist’s fate that awaits her at the end of the novel. Her introvert heroine, Maya, was told that either she or her spouse will die during fourth year of their marriage. Maya is haunted by this prediction and becomes more and more depressed as years pass. Her inner turmoil is clearly followed up by Anita. All through the story, Maya talks aloud about things that are disturbing and frustrating to her. Her fear and loneliness is reflected in her speeches. Maya’s behaviour is certainly not like that of a sane woman. Though she has been cosseted is a loving daughter by her father, Maya feels alienated from the world because her husband who would have substituted her father for her, after her marriage, has little time for her. Anita has cleverly interwoven a tale where the heroine feels claustrophobic in a world full of breathing beings.

Anita Desai is not interested in writing about tragedies, comedies or other great events that take place in the big outer world. Her women characters hold her novels together as she herself moves the story forward; performs her surgery and dissects their thoughts, values, hopes, joys and sorrows etc. Though the characters live an almost normal life according to living standards, there is something missing from their life which would have made them complete and satisfied otherwise. Her characters in Voices in the City are pessimistic. Self-centred people find it difficult to survive amidst a community. Anita has fully understood the dilemma of present day Indian families and this is what has been reflected in her novel. Children are brought up on old values but they have to survive in surroundings which are totally modern. Edmund Fuller states that a life without any kind of purpose to it is what makes people suffer intensely. Sita, a character from Where Shall We Go This Summer, is another character carved out by Anita who has everything that is desired by women of this world, but is still unhappy with her lot to the point of madness.

Arun Joshi is another remarkable novelist who has done justice to theme of Stream of Consciousness in his fictions. He has been successful in exploring the turmoil ridden inner world of the Protagonist’s mind in The Foreigner. The main character Sindi Oberoi never feels comfortable anywhere. Arun not only reveals inner agitation of Sindhi, but on a larger frame he is able to tell us about all those who are staying away from their place of birth, he talks about their feelings of being alienated in a world full of men. Even though all is well in life, yet there is a feeling of being incomplete, such a feeling does point to some kind of psychic disorder in human mind.
Arun once again triumphed in his psychological writings when he gave to the world The Strange Case of Billy Biswas. He hears voices from nature, and nature seems to be one one with his feelings. Wind seems to tell him that life is the same everywhere and there is no need for him to move away from his present residence. Stream of Consciousness theme is carried forward by Arun Joshi in form of flashbacks, internal dialogues and soliloquies.

The Apprentice and The Last Labyrinth are other two novels that make Arun Joshi a master of Stream of Consciousness theme. The two protagonists, Ratan and Som Bhaskar respectively, are unhappy and voice their unhappy state of mind through their words.

Arundhati Roy traces mental process of her characters in The God of Small Things (1997). This technique though not totally modern, yet is used by many modern novelists. Characters of The God of Small Things move on in search of their true inner identity. During the process they use all tools that are available to them. These tools are namely their dreams, past experiences, faded memories, their likes and dislikes, what they see and perceive on looking at people/things around them and also whatever they are able to recall from their past. Arundhati Roy’s Stream of Consciousness has resulted from all that went around her in her social circle and also from the politics of her time.

That Long Silence is Shashi Deshpande’s way of exploring Stream of Consciousness device to look into its protagonist’s, Jaya’s, inner mind. Here we say a woman’s soul bared for all to see how from being a loving submissive wife, loving mother and fully satisfied woman of the world, Jaya suddenly wants to find her real inner self, her true inner Jaya.

Novels like That Long Silence explore the world of Indian women who fulfil all duties in life, they are good daughters, good students, good workers, good wives, good mothers and good daughter-in-laws, yet there is something missing in their lives. This missing link is what is being sought after through Stream of Consciousness. Life is complicated for a modern woman. She is fighting to be All in One, a modern woman and a traditional woman at the same time. But all is not that simple in real life. One has to forsake something to give place to another. Shashi Deshpande has managed to
bring forth inner thoughts of Indian woman from all wakes of life. Any woman reading her novel will feel herself reflected in it in some manner or the other.

Modern literature is influenced by Sigmund Freud’s and Ernst Mach’s theories. According to these theories mind is always busy and all that goes through it, helps to perceive the outer world. Protagonists are always driven by what goes on in realms of their minds in Stream of Consciousness fictions.
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