

# THE PERCEPTION AND CONFLICT BETWEEN FANTASY AND REALITY: FANTASY AS A TECHNIQUE IN THE PROMINENT NOVELS OF ANITA DESAI

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## ABSTRACT

The fantasy genre is not uniform, but has rather developed distinct varieties over time as authors have innovated on and responded to the traditions established by previous works. Fantasy is a work that evokes a sense of wonder in the reader; that has some relationship with traditional tales, myths and legends: that evokes the belief that is presented as real, not a dream, vision, or possible hallucination and that usually takes place in a secondary world with the inner consistency of reality. This paper focuses on the perception between fantasy and reality in the prominent fiction of Anita Desai. As a genre, fantasy seeks to validate the unconscious world of dreams, to insist not merely on its existence in the human psyche, but on its essential, vital presence.

**Keywords:** Fantasy, dream, hallucination, reality, unconscious, presence.

## INTRODUCTION

In the predominantly realistic novels of the twentieth century, fantasy is pervasively used. A work of fantasy begins, typically, with the implicit or explicit suggestion of preferable modes of reality and moves towards the characters' integration of previously unconscious elements of the self. The narrative structure mirrors that movement: at the heart of fantasy is a journey toward a goal and the subsequent return home. This mixture of realism and fantasy has resulted in the style of magic realism, a style which is used to great advantage by writers like Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Toni Morrison.

The term magical realism refers to the amalgamation of realism and fantasy in art, film and literature. It combines realism and fantasy in such a way that magical elements grow organically

out of the reality portrayed. According to the *Dictionary of Twentieth Century Culture: Hispanic Culture of South America*, magical realism involves “fiction that does not distinguish between realistic and non-realistic events, fiction in which the supernatural, the mythical or the implausible are assimilated to the cognitive structure of reality without a perceptible breaking the narrator’s or characters’ consciousness” (Standish, 1995). That is, in magical text, characters encounter elements of magic and fantasy with the same acceptance that they meet those settings and figures commonly associated with reality and fact.

African American novelist, Toni Morrison deploys magical realism to the very ends. Her novel *Beloved*, published in 1987, stands out particularly strong example of the trend. Set in Ohio during the years surrounding the civil war, *Beloved* tells the story of Sethe, an ex-slave who fled the South with her children 18 years earlier. Because of her act of infanticide, Sethe has been ostracized by the community, and so she has withdrawn into an isolated existence shared by her remaining daughter Denver and apparently, by a ghost that haunts the house they live in. One of the characteristics of magical realist fiction is that in magical realist fiction, individuals, times and places have a tendency to transform magically into other individuals, times and places. This slippage from the individual to the collective to the cosmic is often signaled by spectral presences. In these premises, in Morrison’s novel, the character of *Beloved* can be seen as a symbolic and historical embodiment of both. Sethe’s personal past and the past of slavery which Sethe has to reclaim. The figure of *Beloved* can be seen as on the one hand as a kind of mirror character who reflects the inner lives of characters with whom she makes contact. Thus in the case of Sethe, *Beloved* acts to reflect her mother’s fears and hopes surrounding the killing of her child. Brenda Cooper explains that “magical realism arises out of particular societies- postcolonial, unevenly developed places where old and new, modern and ancient, the scientific and the magical views of the world coexist (Cooper, 1998).

Magical realism expands the categorization of the real so as to encompass myth, magic and other extraordinary phenomena in nature or experience which European realism excluded. Gabriel Garcia Marquez uses the technique of magical realism in his novels as well his short stories. Marquez uses magical realism to blend reality and fantasy so that the distinction between the two erases. An example of this technique comes from the story “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings” where an angel falls to the Earth because of a violent rainstorm. When the angel is found by Pelayo and Elisenda, they are shocked to see an angel, and yet they never question its existence. The reality of the situation is never mistrusted; however, the angel itself is an astounding manifestation. Thus, “A Very Old Man

with *Enormous Wings*” demonstrates Marquez’s ability to tell a fairy tale or a folk tale in a realistic manner while incorporating the magic of the angel.

The overwhelming success of J.K. Rowling’s recent book *Harry Potter* and the *Goblet of Fire* in this context, is truly fantastic. Julia Segal in *Phantasy in Everyday Life* views fantasy as a liberating experience which gives the person concerned a great degree of freedom. She points out: “With the concept of phantasy we have a word which takes away many of the problems of talking about what is reality: phantasies can be more or less realistic and we treat them as if they were real and true”(Segal, 1985).

This tendency to view fantasy as homogenous genre may result from the critics’ limited acquaintance with the genre. The greatest amount of critical attention goes to a handful of well - known authors such as Tolkien, Lewis and Le Guin. The studies of fantasy by Cathi Dunn MacRae, Sheila, Egoff and Karen Patricia Smith are objective, thoughtful, appreciative of the genre and quite useful for insights into adult fantasy.

## DISCUSSION

Eric Rabkin in *The Fantastic in Literature* is of the view that the fantastic is comprehensible only in relation to reality (Rabkin, 1976). This is constantly kept in mind in Desai’s novels where fantasy is never a total structure as in the world of a fairy tale, and it does not necessitate a complete shifting of the total structure and is constantly juxtaposed with other worlds and does at some point merge with the normative, commonly acceptable world view. In almost all Desai’s novels we find the facility of projecting two or more different perspectives. In *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) fantasy becomes an important technique of exploring the inner world of Maya’s fears; in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975) and *Clear Light of the Day* (1980), she uses fantasy as a means of reinterpreting reality whereas in *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), it is consciously projected as part of the total structure to enable the characters to relate to each other. The detailed study of her novels will show her use of fantasy in a praiseworthy manner.



In *Cry, the Peacock* fantasy is used to expose Maya's inability to grow out of the confines of her world in order to merge with the larger whole. Maya clings to fantasy because she is unable to relate to reality. *Cry, the Peacock* is the only novel in which Desai works through the consciousness of the central character. In her other novels, partly because the narrative techniques are different, the authorial consciousness signals the use of fantasy, but this does not happen here. Here the three parts of the narrative form a natural division. Maya's relationship to reality passes through three phases which are elaborated upon in the second and third sections. The first section forms a prelude to the narration, and emphasizes a happening from which events move simultaneously towards the future and the past. As for Maya's relationship to reality, the first period is that of her childhood when she is cosseted within a protective setup, the second of her life with Gautama when she makes abortive attempts to recede into her past and equality abortive ones to reach out to others, the third and the final phase is her total surrender to the world of her fears and to insanity. The collapse of reason is a natural consequence of the clash between the real and the fantasized. Desai is fond of working on the internal human psyche, especially women psyche.

She lurks deeper into the unconscious layer of human psyche and reveals existential trauma of man. She speaks the essentiality of human interaction as a way of self-disclosure. In Carl Rogers' view-point, "Man lives essentially in his own personal and subjective world and even his objective functioning is the result of subjective purpose and subjective choice" (Rogers, 1908). Often her protagonists appear mere pigmies in front of the gigantic powers of the city. Maya, the protagonist of Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), is also drawn on similar line with innumerable problems and stress.

The novel *Cry, the Peacock* is a remarkable attempt to fuse fantasy with perceptual experience. It is the faithful description of psychosomatic growth of a female character, which cannot cope up with the practical world of the husband and feels dejected, forlorn and demoralized. Desai looks into the reasons for marital discord and illustrates how such discord affects the family. Sometimes, the inability of an individual to be responsive to the behavior patterns of her partner leads to strain and tension in the relationship, while sometimes it is on account of varied levels of sensitivity, that relationships become strained.

In this novel, Maya and Gautama have been projected to live in a sharp contrast. Maya, the central figure, is alive through all she senses and lives intensely for each moment. Her husband Gautama is remote, detached, intellectual and somewhat bewildered by his wife's hypersensitiveness. Both of them are poles apart in their nature. Maya is dreamy, sensitive and emotional, while Gautama is realistic, insensitive and rational. Maya has tenderness, softness and warmth while Gautama is hard and cold. In this way they are plagued with the virus of strained relationship because of their incompatible temperaments. Gautama is unsympathetic and it is but natural that she is lost in her childhood memories.

The conflict between fantasy and reality is perceptible in many of the earlier happenings. Right at the beginning of the novel when Maya looks upon Toto's (her pet dog) dead body she "screamed and rushed to the garden tap to wash the vision from her eyes, continued to cry and ran, defeated into the house" (*Cry, the Peacock*, 1963). Death as it intrudes upon her imagination rakes up other sorrows and pushes her back into her childhood and "I had soon turned to remembrance of a lullaby that was crooned to me as a child, a gentle poignant lullaby that I murmured to myself" (*Cry, the Peacock*, 1963). Descending back into childhood she feels comfortable for a little while but when reality looms large over her, projecting her inner fears she is nagged by a feeling of unease.

Maya's fears of the actual are projected through her recoil from her surroundings. She imagines them as having a power and a vitality they do not have and closes herself within a private world, which she discovers is incapable of being transformed into an anchor. It offers no magic charm and is bereft of fairy revels and love ballads instead it is a demoniac one of fear and terror, a "phantom gone berserk" (*Cry, the Peacock*, 1963).

She is throughout conscious of living through a nightmare even when she goes out for dinner, or spends an evening at a cabaret. The exposure of the human form and human lust in the half-lights of the hall send her memory back

to the bear dance she had viewed as a child. Behind the dancing bear are the cruel trainers; behind the dancers is the exploitative society. Fantasy is used here to project social criticism in an oblique manner. At the same time, it reveals the transience nature of her dreams, the manner in which they quickly dissolve into a nightmare. The imagine of pursuit haunt her, she imagines herself being pursued down “the corridor of Years.” But through this world of dreams and fantasy and nightmare, the fact of the astrologer’s prediction surfaces, over and over again making it impossible for Maya to free herself from her fears.

Unable to regain the world of her childhood she thwarts and stems the world of everyday life by her inner consciousness. Emotional involvement becomes the testing ground for all action. She views Gautama as an “unreal ghost”, a body without a heart.” When he appears to her, she pushes him off the terrace to his death. The delusive fantasy of Maya ends terribly. She attempts to subvert the male-dominated world even if it means facing self-destruction.

In *Cry, the Peacock* fantasy also works at another level; it questions the nature of reality. The quotation from the Bhagwad Gita (*Cry the Peacock*, 111–112) which forms a base for communication between Gautama and Maya also serves as a demarcating point between the two worlds where one questions the other. Who is involved, and who detached in a true sense?

A similar questioning is contained in *Voices in the City*, but here it takes place within a single consciousness, *Monisha’s Fantasy* is used here quite differently. The beginning is in a lie, in ‘pretence’. Whereas Maya does not know the difference between falsehood and truth, Arun and Nirode in their farewell meeting hide their true selves behind a façade of pretence. Nirode is aware of his love-hate relationship with Arun of the envy which corrodes his very being, and is also aware that this is a final parting, yet the pretence is maintained that it is not so.

Throughout the novel nobody admits the truth; confessions, for whatever they are worth, are confined to moments of delirium, to the pages of a diary, to the indirections of art. The whole structure is built on lies, on the suppression of truth, on the need to hide until Monisha’s death forces a final confrontation and then the pretences are dropped. Fantasy here does not so much exist at the level of character as it does at that of imagery and even language.

Fantasy finds an expression in art. Amla sits down to draw the insects that cling death-real ants, real grasshoppers and then the ones with crazy legs and

gigantic eyes. It is almost like entering the world of Alice in Wonderland where Amla is concerned, giving her a sense of joy and relief. Fantasy does not draw a circle around them as Maya has done in *Cry, the Peacock*. But it enters Amla's world who maintains contract with reality; it also enters it for she still cherishes and creates dreams unlike the other two who destroy them.

Amla's relationship with Dharma has a surrealistic dimension, and it requires a great strength to terminate it. But while it had lasted it had sucked her whole being in, invading her mind and thoughts. Monisha does not experience any such thing; However, she projects it on to the singer and the dancer she watches from her window, in the tie between the two, the 'bewitching' quality of that romantic relationship and the wildness that pervaded the dance. For Nirode the two comes together very briefly, in the merging of the mother-figure into that of the goddess Kali, in his own realization of his doom. Both Monisha and Nirode have held away from others for so long, that at last when the final moment of internal reckoning arrives, reality has to be blown up just as much as fantasy.

Sita's journey to Manori in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is one undertaken consciously in search of a miracle. She expects the island to help in an entirely unexpected way. Manori stands for her father's magic. She sees an entirely unexpected way. She sees the island as a piece of magic, "a magic mirror- it was so' bright, so brilliant to her eyes" (*Where Shall We Go This Summer?* 1975) a place where she could be sane. The situations become very difficult and at last it's Raman who saves Sita from island, and from her inner world of fantasy. The past is shelved and she realizes like the villagers, that she is not like her father.

In *Fire on the Mountain*, fantasy is used in an entirely different way. Nanda Kaul lives in the world of fantasy. In order to engage attention of her granddaughter Raka, she spins several fantastic notes about her father. It is interesting to note that it is a grown up person and not the child who goes into the world of fantasy. Two kinds of fantasy worlds exist side by side; one which is consciously and deliberately woven by Nanda Kaul to interest her great granddaughter Raka, the other which is shared by Raka and Ram Lal and is based on his belief in the supernatural. There is also a third world of fantasy which thrusts itself on Raka's imagination, a world which reflects her alienation from the disjointed world of her parents.

Nada Kaul's efforts at the creation of fantasy are partly motivated by jealousy which Raka's dependence on Ram Lal arouses in her and partly by a

desire to communicate. While Maya and Amla were at a stage of self-questioning and Sita at one of personal assessment, Nanda Kaul has left all that behind, and Raka has yet to begin it. But they are brought together under the same roof by a set of circumstances which are perfectly natural and acceptable. Forced into a kind of companionship, they try and avoid each other as much as possible, until one stormy evening the usual outlets are closed.

Nanda Kaul's fantasy about Tibet has a profound atmosphere of poetry, dream world and almost fairy like connotations. The magic of Tibet brings about a willing suspension of disbelief for a time and the reader is hypnotized into believing what is said, even if only for a short while:

“He saw them dredge gold from their rivers and salt from their salt springs. This is dried and shaped into cakes that are almost as precious as gold. In fact, forty or sixty cakes of salt could buy coral, silver and gold. In fact, forty or sixty cakes of salt could buy coral, silver and gold. The women are loaded with them as the men with furs, ermine and sable” (*Fire on the Mountain*, 1982).

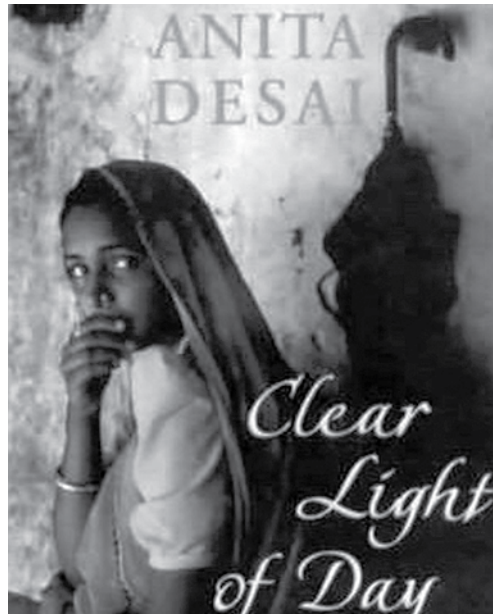
The difference between the fantasy worlds of the two-Raka and Nanda Kaul lies also in the degree of freedom fantasy offers. For Raka it is perhaps a move towards liberation from her childhood fears and a violent realisation of the future, for Nanda Kaul it serves as a mirror of the hollow self she has created and shocks her into the present.

In *Fire on the Mountain*, fantasy also exists purely at the level of imagery as part of the authorial attitude or as part of the self-analysis which some of the characters carry on. Nanda Kaul compares herself to a worm, Raka behaves in a lizard-like manner, and the crickets sing in “some difficult tongue she had not met before-not in Geneva, or in New York, nor anywhere in that polyglot world she had once been through” (*Fire On the Mountain*, 1982).

In *Clear Light of Day* the world of fantasy acquires new dimensions: it is no longer a manifestation of the collapse of all internal defenses as in *Cry, the Peacock*, nor a gesture of communication as in *Fire on the Mountain*. The worlds of individual fantasies are juxtaposed until in the end their boundary lines are questioned and shifted and they merge in some measure with the world of normative reality. The family house is an enclosed world over which looms the influence of the dead parents who had led a club-going and bridge-playing life cut off from everyday relationships. While the mother had gradually sunk into ill-health the father had reduced all business activities to a mere signing of papers.



The inheritors of this decadent way of life were four children of the family each nursing his own world of dreams and aspirations. Raja's dream is of romantic heroism of Haroun- al-Rashid, and his ideal is the life represented by Hyder Ali Sahib. Bim aspires to be a heroine and Tara expects" to find treasure, to make fortune, to discover herself as a princess.



Nanda Kaul in her confrontation with reality is pushed into an emptiness which signals an end, but Tara and Bim in *Clear Light of Day*, move towards a rehabilitative process. Their conscious realization of unconscious fantasies has the effect as Jung puts it: Firstly of extending the conscious horizon by the inclusion of numerous unconscious contents, secondly of gradually diminishing the dominant influence of the unconscious; and thirdly of bringing about a change of personality. There is an unconscious working towards the realization of their dreams where the Das children are concerned. Except for Baba, the other three had woven different dreams, and without quite knowing it they have followed those dreams, changing and altering them as they move towards their realization.

Fantasy has not only to be discarded but often to be destroyed, or accepted, before relationships can be extended beyond the self. In *Clear Light of Day* the violence of emerging from the fantasy world is regenerative. In *Fire on the Mountain*, fantasy sustains life, and when it is destroyed, it brings about death; in *Cry, the Peacock* it leads to murder and insanity and in *Voices in the City* to suicide. In *Clear Light of Day* Bim's anger paves the way for an adjustment.

Reality, once it is touched by the fantastic, emerges as a new realization of some inner truth bringing about a change of perspective.

In *Custody* takes up a different, aspect of fantasy altogether. It develops the theme of adventure. Deven, a lecturer in Hindi in a college in Mirpore, is suddenly pushed into a different world by his friend Murad, and is exposed to a totally new experience. Deven acquires qualities he had never possessed some shrewdness, a great deal of courage, and manages to find ways and means of meeting the expenses and comes through the experience a different man.

Fantasy lies here in the narrative technique which combines the realistic and the romantic modes. It is not character which is important, but incident or situation. It reminds one of Hawthorne's 'Preface' to the *House of Seven Gables*, where Hawthorne observed that the word 'romance' allowed the writer some latitude "both as to its fashion and material", it also gave him the right to present the truth of the human heart "under circumstances, . . . of the writer's own choosing or creation"? (Hawthorne, 1983). What Deven undertakes is not merely a journey from Mirpore to Delhi, but, a journey akin to an adventure, a challenge which calls forth all his ingenuity. On return to Mirpore he wishes for a return to his former life "of non-events, non-happenings . . . empty and hopeless, safe and enduring. That was the only life he was made for, although life is not perhaps the right term." He is relieved to be out of it all, "the grotesque work of hysterics, termagants, viragos, the demented and the outcast" (*Custody*, 1984).

Fantasy here is parallel in time and not prefaced by the phrase "when we were children." It is not a division in perceptions but one in conceptualities, in thought processes and not in responses. The romantic becomes accessible but loses its romance in the process, the make belief stories, the fairy tales have now to be preserved, not dismissed. Fantasy occupies a central position, having created a moat like world which will feed it and sustain it. The relationship between fantasy and reality, in *In Custody* has come a long way from what it was in *Cry, the Peacock*.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, Desai uses different fictional techniques to the demands of the story. In the context of Anita Desai we have no hesitation to say that she is able to narrate the story, to portray the characters, to convey the mood, to evoke the atmosphere, to probe the psyche of her characters successfully. And for this she uses flashback

technique, fantasy as a technique, stream of consciousness technique, use of contrasting characters and use of symbolism to evoke an atmosphere. We sympathize with the characters like Maya, Nanda Kaul, Monisha, Raka because they are in search of deeper, fuller meaning of life and through the power of her work, Anita Desai has made them reverberate the very impulse we feel within ourselves. Desai's use of fantasy lies in the narrative technique of realism and romanticism, the relationship between fantasy and reality, the conscious and unconscious realization of fantasies and fantasy as technique used for the growth of characters within the novel, Desai like Virginia Woolf reveals the twentieth century preoccupation with flux and the centres of personal identity and have tried to emphasize a personal subjective sense of reality.

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