

## Pen Prints of the Literary Legend Anita Desai - An Overview

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Anita Desai is one of the few remarkable Indian writers in English, whose works have been greatly praised both at home and abroad. Anita Desai presents women as not totally cut off from family or society but women who remain within these orbits and protest against Monotony, injustice and humiliation. Anita Desai has shown her brilliance like other creative writers in fiction. She was not disturbed by male writer dominance in the field of writing fiction in English, as she has had the upbringing by a German mother and Bengali father. Her entry into the Indian writing in English, that too, in fiction has done much to popularize the Indo-English novels internationally.

Anita Desai, like other women writers of the fifties and the sixties would have witnessed the erosion of human values. She has, therefore, wholeheartedly given vent to the degrading nature of the society. In her novels she has focused on life, tenderness, beauty and creativity. She has tried to explore in her own way “the anguish of the human and personal in modern society, dominated by processes, machines and speed – by the tyranny of the impersonal” (Williams 83).

Anita Desai, born in India in 1937, for a mixed German and Bengali blood, was educated at Delhi University. She achieved some success with short stories before publishing her first novel, *Cry, The Peacock* (1963). It has been acclaimed as a disturbing novel in Indian writing in English. As a female writer, she occupies a unique position in India. She mainly illustrates the internal drama of human life in her fiction, but concentrates on its basic and urgent issues. She devotes her creative faculty to exploring the deeper psychic and mental states of the protagonists in her earlier novels. According to Rao, her works, are very distinguished Indo-Anglican novelist, discovers a marvelous elasticity and expressiveness in the English languages.

When Anita Desai was a child, her parents, sisters and brother used German for conversation. At the age of seven, she began to write prose, mainly fiction and they were published in children’s magazines. After her graduation in English Literature in 1957, she worked for a year in Max Muller Bhavan, Calcutta, she married Ashvin Desai and has four children: two sons and two daughters. Since they are well settled, now Anita Desai travels a lot. She did not leave India till she was forty five years of age.

Anita Desai says “My whole life was about family and neighbours: it was very difficult for a woman to experience anything else (The Hindu supplement dated 3 Oct 2004 p.3). She has lived in metropolitan cities – Calcutta, Bombay, Delhi, Poona and Chandigarh in India; but now she lives in Boston, Mexico, Cambridge and Delhi. She visits India less and less, just once a year. She has now taken her creative writing to an international level. To her credit, she has brought

about eleven novels and two collections of short stories. Her novels are as follows: *Cry, The Peacock*, *Voices in the City*, *Bye-Bye Black Bird*, *The Peacock Garden*, *Where Shall We Go this Summers*, *Clear Light of Day*, *In Zigzag Way*. Her short story collections are: *Games at Twilight*, *Cat on a House*.

Mrs. Desai explored the lives of middle class Indians, the west and in particular, the lives of Indian women. She had the fortunate encouragement of her literary neighbour, Ruth Prawer Jalvala to emerge as a creative writer.

In the fictional world, Anita Desai, unlike her predecessors, does not cope with the traditional pattern of novel writing, she is a novelist who involves herself creatively in communicating and basically. She is more concerned with the routine life and with the predicament of human relationship on the basis of the actual realities of human existence.

Anita Desai got the much coveted Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel, *Cry, The Peacock*, thus establishing her name in the annals of Indian writing. Maya, the heroine is a neurotic young woman whose sanity is fast disintegrating under the pressure of marital discord and also owing to certain vague but frightening childhood memories which slowly crystallize into terrifying mental pictures. The heroine, like the peacock is intensely in love with life; but Gautama, her husband, has callous attitude towards her. Thus Maya is naturally kept away from the normal human love thus suffering neurotic disease caused by the loneliness of soul and lack of human warmth. She suffers from an inexplicable belief in the early prediction of an albino astrologer which leads her to die thus forcing a tragic end to the novel. *Cry, The Peacock* is one of the most remarkable products of the Indo-Anglican imagination.

Mrs. Desai's second novel, *Voices in the City*, analyses the psychic changes occurring in the three characters Nirode, Monisha and Amla. The two sisters and the brother constitute an autocracy, not of wealth, but of sensitivity of suffering. They naturally react against the monstrous banality of everyday life. They feel the city, Calcutta, as a force to be reckoned with. Due to the pressure of the city, these characters are mortally scared of the black dark of Calcutta. Thus the theme of the novel is the clash between unequal forces and the three voices need all their resources, cleverness and even deceptions to combat the city. H. M. Williams writes of Mrs. Desai's craft: Anita Desai's tortured characters are robbed of traditional consolations Each man and woman has to make his own life and face upto his inevitable fate. Each is alone in the terrible city of death.

*Voices in the City*, like *Cry, The Peacock* narrates about a journey through the minds of these three main characters. Incidents are relegated to secondary importance. Dissolution and disintegration of these characters occupy the focus of the author. Calcutta, the great city plays the fourth character threatening their lives. To others this city is a poised city and progress cannot be possible for then as long as they live in it. The painter says. "It is almost dead to me" (53). Almost all the images of the city are those of oppression of decay and a death. Rao crystallizes the essence of *Voices in the City* in the following lines:

It is too much concerned with the business of narrating, rather than dramatically enacting, the spiritual crises of the three main characters... Mrs. Desai is at her best which satirizing the lost and the damned... The mother of three main characters who is supposed to be influencing the destinies of her children is vague and unreal. (45)

*Voices in the City*, a carefully written novel by Mrs. Desai is another milestone in her creative career. She is at her best in polishing the novel with economy, careful planning, formal perfection and neat manipulation of material. Williams sums up:

*Voices in the City* remains primarily a tragic exploration of personal feeling and suffering which is the consequence of the feverish sensitivity of young intellectuals who have lost their way in contemporary India. (91)

Another theme of the clash of the east with the west can be seen in *Bye-Bye, Black Bird*. It deals with the dilemma of three expatriates, Adit, Dev and Sarah. The intense longing of the exiled hero's emotions towards his native land is pictorially unfolded by the author. Adit comes to England for higher studies, but he does not like the pomp and show of English life. His main purpose of visiting England was to become an 'England-returned' teacher in India. Adit becomes nostalgic about his childhood experiences in India. Dev and Sarah also undergo a compulsion change in their lives. Dev now begins to love England dearly and decides to settle down there, whereas Sarah resigns for the sake of her husband, all claims of being an English girl and submits fully to the wishes of her husband.

*Fire On The Mountain* has been divided into three parts: Nanda Kaul at Carignano, Raka comes to Carignano, and Ila Das leaves Carignano. Nanda Kaul is shown as a forced recluse in the first part of the novel. She struggles to lead her own life as the lady of city sensibility. Her husband, a Vice-Chancellor, has bought this house at Carignano role on all the three parts of the novel. The house on the mountain, thus becomes symbolic as the island of the city of Calcutta, revealing in a way the process of creation and destructor.

In Part II, the character of Nanda Kaul is shown as being affected by her earlier memories. She is not happy to receive her great granddaughter at the mountains and finally agrees to share her presence in the house. The arrival of Rakha unfolds the nostalgia of Nanda Kaul about her past events.

The third part of *Fire On The Mountain* deals with the story of Ila Das, a childhood friends of Nanda Kaul. While analyzing this character, Mrs. Desai displays the vision of multiple movement in her novels. She does not understand the symbolic importance of the house at Carignano. She leaves the house for the village where she was used to do the reformist activities as a social reformer officer. On the way to the village, she is raped and finally murdered. Rekha narrates their vision of total destruction, when she observes the fire on the mountain. Mrs. Desai thus presents an unsolvable problem to the protagonist at the end.

Mrs. Desai in her next novel, *Clear Light of Day*, presents a world of memories and a vision of timelessness in time. The story is divided into two parts: the first one dealing with the partition of the country between India and Pakistan and the second part dealing with the partition

of the house between Bimala and her brother. Bimala, the heroine, swings in between observer-relative phenomena. Bimala's brother, Raja and her sister Tara realize the movement of time within time. Raja finally marries and settles down at Hyderabad. Tara follows her husband to Ceylon. The house in *Fire on the Mountain* becomes like all Mrs. Desai's locations, that is, the city of Calcutta of *Voices in the City* and the old house in Delhi of *Clear Light of Day*. They are symbolic of the author's explorations of the psychic depth of the personalities.

Bimala, the central character of the novel undergoes a self-schooling process which leaves an indelible impression on the reader's mind. She develops unaired relationship and store each and every experience of time in her consciousness as a passive onlooker: when the novel ends, one understands that Bimala is shown as a being who realizes all times through the flux that makes a residue of time past in time present.

Mrs. Desai's next novel, *The Village by the Sea* has been narrated through the outlook of children. The struggle of Hari and his elder sister, Lila is revealed in a psychological way by the author. Hari, being the only male child, is aware of the economic scarcity, the ailing condition of his mother and the necessities of his three sisters, Lila, Bela and Kamal. Hari is concerned about the future of his three sisters:

They would have to marry one day and he would have to see to it since his father would not. He would have to find them husbands... and arrange their weddings to which the whole village has to be invited. The Bridegrooms might demand a dowry....He has heard of the fantastic demands that bridegrooms made and that parents had to meet. (45-46)

Hari was forced to seek a job owing to the exigencies of the family. To find a way out of his poverty, he came to Bombay and found the manual job of a vendor in Shri Krishna Lodge. In his spare time, he learnt the job of a watch-repairer with the help of Mr. Pan Wallah, a Parsi. All the time he was conscious of his village and his sisters, and finally returned to it. Hari somehow overcomes the evil of poverty and gives a new hope to his entire family. Unlike her other novels, this one ends happily.

Mrs. Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer* unfolds the theme of irreconcilability of temperaments of two diametrically opposed attitudes to life. A nervous, sensitive, middle-aged woman alienated from her husband and children, becomes the protagonist of this novel. She considers that the majority of the members of the society lead their lives full of dullness, boredom and deadness. To her "They are animals nothing but appetite and sex. Only food, sex and money matter; animals" (32).

When she goes to live with her in-laws she finds them too much intolerable and leading inauthentic existences. She considers their colourless and soulless existence as threat to her own existence. Sita starts provocatively towards them to shock their complacent lives, by smoking and speaking in a sudden rush of emotion. In her own home, the fiery fight between her sons infuriates her. She also suffers from marital discord in her life. Melwani emphasizes Mrs. Desai's talent in exploring the individual consciousness: She enriches it with deeper probing in

*Where Shall We Go This Summer*. Her leading is being accepted, and the problems of the individuals are receiving more attending (114).

Like Maya of *Cry, the Peacock*, Sita too has her own recollections of her past life. Her innocent days spent with her father reverts her consciousness very often. When bored with the present predicament, she is questioning herself as to where to go this summer. She goes to the Manori island second time after twenty years to relieve and to recreate the past. Mrs. Desai subtly suggests that the quest for a lost beauty and innocence is doomed to fail, because it never really existed. The novel ends with a defeated and despondent Sita being unable to discover the passion of life. Melwani sums up, “(the novel) studies the loneliness of a married woman. Her husband becomes increasingly engrossed in his work. Even her growing children do not need her” (3).

In her next novel, *In Custody* Mrs. Desai delineates the psychological imbalance of Deven Sarma. He has developed poetic qualities in his young age. When he comes to Mirapore village as a lecturer in Hindi, he decides to concentrate willingly on urban poetry. This is her first novel where she has failed to write upon feminist problems. The hero tries to interview the famous Urdu poet, Nur. Mrs. Desai unfolds gradually the psychic conditions of the hero.

Nur, the famous poet is also another character in the novel. He is depicted as an avatar of Urdu poetry, but his behaviour towards Deven appears somewhat cruel and inhuman. At the end of the novel, Deven checks himself and decides to interview Nur thus to become a neutral critic of his favourite author. Deven in his individual way is aware of the continual deception of this own people.

Again in her next novel, *Baumgartner's Bombay*, Mrs. Desai voices the routine problems affecting the commoners' life. It is a sheer outcry against human deceptions, problematic relationships, narrow walls of national boundary and the usual revelation of the hidden motifs of human psyche. She goes deeper into the inner regions of consciousness, motives and impulses of human mind. A deeper analysis of the hero's unconscious mind is the essence of the novel. Hugo, the hero, is all the time after a quest for self-preservation and self-identity. This novel reveals with courage not only how humanity suffers and inflicts upon itself damage but how it eventually repairs itself.

Hugo, the hero, suffers in a different way. He has been deprived of fatherly affections but he has an over protective mother. In the war he is captured and put into an internment camp where he thinks of the dangers that might happen to disturb the peaceful life of his mother in Germany. In a way, she has gradually evolved a theme from the calm atmosphere of a homely life to a totally and mentally disturbed western life.

Anita Desai's next novel, *Journey to Ithaca*, rewrites the progress of Indian English fiction. It revolves round the heroine's journey to the east. In her previous novels, female characters have been presented as suffering from neurotic illness, but here they are fighting against their social environment. Laila, the heroine as a mother is a fierce fighter for her family's

rights. She has been sent to historical places like Cairo, Paris and Milan for studying the Arabic language. She unfortunately joins the revolutionary group of students at Alexandria.

Lala has to forego her studies and joins the troupe of dancers. Her performances are enacted in America and India. No peace of mind comes to her through her dancing performances. She resists her master and disobeys his suggestions for peacock-dance. Like all sanyasis, Laila too comes to the Himalayas to seek blessing of Pramanandji and with his initiation, she becomes his ardent disciple. Thus the novel presents a curiosity of the westernized characters to know about the secrets of the spirit.

Mrs. Desai's next novel *Fasting, Feasting* (2001) proves her skill as a talented creative writer. She unfolds the conflicting views of the eternal theme of the east and the west and also her acquired knowledge of the different levels of human relationship. She outlines here the tradition of the eastern world and the modernity of the western side also. She has shown her maturity in creative writing with the self-willed reticence and volubility.

How parents react to sons and daughters in different circumstances has been the main theme of these novel. Mrs. Desai gives vent to the fast advancing modernism of the West. Mr. Dutt reflects his partial attitude towards Uman and Arun. Uman, being a dim wit, is constrained to be at home for the help of her brother instead of pursuing the progressive way of equal rank. On the other hand, Arun is entitled to better facilities for his career and sent to the west for higher studies. He is to be trained and equipped with modern outlook of freedom and individuality. Uma is neglected by the family and moulded in the family to shape and reshape her personality in the traditional orthodoxy of Indian society. Through *Fasting, Feasting* Mrs. Desai has tried to explore the possibilities of Coalescing the best of the West and the East in order to create an impression of the world as a unit of varied human relationship.

The art of Anita Desai has thrown new flash-light into the evolving Indian writing in English. She has been acclaimed as a trailblazer with regard to the new concept of feminine angle to look at the men's world in Indian fiction in English. Prasad, writes in *Alien Voice*:

The novels of Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Nargis Dalal and Arun Joshi portray characters who are uprooted, alienated condemned on a self-exile. Maya in *A Time To Be Happy* is a slab of marble, dead in emotion, looked in isolation of marriage. In *This Time of Mourning* Nita is a lost girl, not sure of what she wants from life. Anita Desai's *Cry, The Peacock* is almost a tragic tale of an Indian woman. (215)

Anita Desai, unlike her predecessors does not bother about the traditional pattern of novel writing. She is a novelist who involves herself creatively in communicating. And she is basically more concerned with routine life and with the predicament of human relationship on the basis of the actual realities of human existence. With regard to involvement with the female angle of perception, Tripathi comments:

Although Anita Desai does not write with a conscious social purpose yet her works have unconsciously contributed to the feminist cause, an expression of inner preoccupations

and of the modern ideal of building a male dominant free society. The cases of Maya in *Cry, The Peacock* and Monisha in *Voices in the City* at least support this view. (68)

Anita Desai has the least concern for unraveling the social and economic problem in her novels. She devotes her entire creative energy into the psychological state of her protagonists. She in fact, makes an inroad into the innermost regions of human psyche from where the original ideas of human mind come into operation. She creates complicated problems in her characters and allows them with a free choice for their solution. Sometimes they feel isolated and alienated amidst their self centered problems. Prof. Harish Raizada's *Indian English Novelists* calls their loneliness as an inherent flaw which leads them to the tragic ends:

Their attempts to seek refuge in their loneliness worsen them still more, for their solitary musings and to their disintegration. Desai's novels like those of Franz Kafka, are thus about human fate, human bewilderment and human suffering. Their suffering grows deeper as her characters discover that their efforts prove more and more intangible and elusive, as they struggle towards their vague objectives. (129)

Sometimes, she, like Hardy, uses the inorganic force of society with all organic powers in her pattern. She thus shows her superiority over her contemporaries in balancing the linguistic and literary perspective in her novels.

Another notable aspect of her novels has been her different attitude from other novelists, male or female, in Indian Writing in English. She makes her creative inventions rather out of instinct than of observation. This revelation does not denigrate her skills as a meticulous portrayal of minute incidents in and around her surroundings. Though she has denied that she has been influenced by her contemporary society, yet she feels that she cannot ignore it.

Mrs. Desai seems to be well-acquainted with the inner life of the women of upper middle-class and that is why she efficiently depicts in her novels the complications and compulsions of the intelligent and sensitive ladies of this class. Moreover, she probes deeply into the social forces which decide the development of a woman in male-dominant family. Her family surroundings have shaped her English style and views of Indian women. Mukherjee, Meenakshi says of her:

Anita Desai is a rare example of Indo-Anglican Writers who achieves that difficult task of blending the English language to her purpose without either a self-conscious attempt of sounding Indian or seeking the anonymous elegance of public school English. (191)

Anita Desai has written her novels to discover, to underline and to convey her individual perceptions of Indian women. She considers that writing makes life worth living; otherwise the mere existence would prove meaningless. Owing to the conducive atmosphere at home and the planned upbringing by her elite parents and the right type of schooling, she has been able to equip herself with a perfect command over English. While at the job of creative writing, she has not taken to the resource of borrowed sensibilities.

Mrs. Desai creates in her novels a private world of her own. Her creative process is not for the public show. She herself feels that to scrutinize the creative process in the light of reason is to commit an act of violence. Perhaps she follows James Joyce's style of silence, exile and cunning. This means that a writer should keep his eyes open and mouth shut. Her novels, she thinks, are not written to proclaim some of her theories. She accepts that a creative writer prefer the flashes of individual vision and depends on a kind of instinct that tells him what to follow and what to avoid. To her, writing is a matter of instinct, silence and waiting. Her temperament and circumstances have combined to give her the shelter, privacy and solitude needed for her creative process.

By adopting the technique of stream-of-consciousness, she has dealt with the thoughts, emotions and sensations at various levels of consciousness. This method makes her task of character-delineation easier. She has aptly used the flashback and stream-of-consciousness techniques in some of her earlier novels.

Mrs. Desai still goes on churning out memorable novels and consequently remains an outstanding novelist. Most of her novels affirm her feminist-consciousness. The readers are led to look at the world from female point of view. Her protagonists are mostly women, comprising school-girls to grandmothers. They are shown as fragile introverts longing for their existence. Most of them suffer from psychic deficiencies like schizophrenia, frigidity, hyper-aesthesia, mental dissociation, introversion and inferiority complex. They are, of course, unsentimental, monotonous, philosophical but quite practical and prudent. On her novels, Mrs. Desai brings to fore the following facts of life: marital discord, incapacity of facing the hard realities, revolt against fate, inner fears of the characters, conflict between the conscious and unconscious mind and personal diffidence. Her male characters suffer from too much egoism and she pictorially provides the indifference of husbands towards their wives. Moreover female characters suffer from parents-fixation, aimlessness, homelessness and other psychic ailments. All these negative aspects develop a sense of alienation and aloofness in the life of the protagonist.

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