



ANITA DESAI AND HER LITERARY WORLD

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Abstract

Anita Desai, an incorrigible optimist and a well known literary figure in Indo-Anglian fiction is essentially a novelist who has also written short stories, born in Mussoorie on 24th June, 1937, began her literary career quite early at the age 26. Throughout her novels, Children's books and short stories, Desai focuses on personal struggles and problems of contemporary life that her Indian Characters must cope with. She maintains that her primary goal is to discover the truth that nine tenths of the iceberg lies submerged beneath the one tenth visible portion we call reality. She portrays the cultural and social changes that India has undergone as she focuses on the incredible power of family and society and the relationships between family members, paying close attention to the trials of women suppressed by Indian Society.

The aim of this paper is intended to look for cultural, psychological perspective and a critical estimate of Anita Desai's literary world.

Keywords: Culture, Social changing, Psychological perspective, Struggle.

In the line of Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Kamala Markandaya and Nargis Dalal, Anita Desai shines as one of the great novelists and short-story writers India has ever produced. Anita Desai is a remarkable woman novelist and short story writer. She began her literary career quite early at the age of 26 and wrote many novels even amidst her house wifery, born in Mussoorie on 24th June 1937. She had a Bengali Father and a German mother. When she 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. Like all other Indian English novelists. Desai is a prolific writer. Like Jhabvala, she is a novelist as well as a short story writer. Her novels offer a satirical view of social change in post independence India, with a strong sense of waste, limitations, failure and frustration. Some of her novels are *Cry, the Peacock*, (1963), *Voices in the*

City (1965), *Bye Bye Blackbird* (1971), *Where shall we Go This Summer ?* (1975), *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) and *Clear light of Day* (1980). Her gentlest short stories are collected and published in *Games at Twilight* (1978). She has also written works for children including. *The Village by the sea* (1982). There is no doubt that with these works Anita Desai has made significant contributions to Indian English Fiction. Throughout her novels, Children's books and short stories, Desai focuses on personal struggles and problems of contemporary life that her Indian Characters must cope with. She maintains that her primary goal is to discover the truth that is nine tenths of the iceberg that lies submerged beneath the one-tenth visible portion we call reality. She portrays the cultural and social changes that India has undergone as she focuses on the incredible power of family and society and the relationships between family members, paying close attention to the trials of women suppressed

by Indian Society. Anita Desai, like Jhabvala and others does not go beyond the line of her sphere. Prema Nandakumar says, "She has in her fiction sensibility adhered to the Lakshman-rekha culture and created her own distinctive imaginative world" (174). Desai is praised for her broad understanding of intellectual issues, and for her ability to portray her country so vividly with the way the eastern and western cultures have blended there. She has received numerous awards, including the 1978 National Academy of Letters Award for *Fire on the Mountain*, the first of her novels to be brought to the United States. The story is of a remote, isolated woman and her equally withdrawn great granddaughter as they are forced together in hills surrounded by violence and fire. In 1983, she was awarded the Guardian Prize for children's fiction for *the village by the sea*, an adventurous fairy tale about a young boy living in a small fishing village in India. She was awarded the Literary Lion Award in 1993 and has also been named Helen Cam visiting fellow, Ashby fellow and honorary fellow of the University of Cambridge. Anita Desai's first novel *Cry, The Peacock* was published in 1963 and it can be considered a trend setter. It deals with the psychical rather than with physical aspects of its characters. Her second novel *Voices in the city* depicts the miserable plight of Nirode, Monisha and Amla in the city of Calcutta. In this novel Desai portrays the failures of a Bengali youth, Nirode, the troubled life of Monisha and the commercial art of Amla and the indifferent attitude of their mother. *Voices in the City* has a larger canvas than *Cry, the Peacock*. Desai's third novel *Bye-Bye, Blackbird*. Published in 1971, portrays the plight of Indian immigrants in London. The novel is in three parts: 'Arrival', 'Discovery' and 'Recognition and Departure'. In this novel Desai projects the chains, physical and psychological and explores the difficulties of adjustment with an immigrant individual of England. Her next novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer* (1975) describes the tension between a sensitive wife Sita and the rational Raman. The story of the novel is about Sita who has four children and is now reluctant to deliver or to abort the fifth one even though with seven months pregnancy. Desai dramatizes two opposite conflicts

in this novel. The protagonist is a nervous sensitive, middle aged woman who finds herself alienated from her husband and children. Her sense of alienation is because of her emotional imbalances.

Anita Desai's fifth novel *Fire on the Mountain* was published in London in 1977. It won the Royal Society of Literature's Winifred Holtby Memorial prize and in the 1978 National Academy of Letters award. In this novel Desai describes Nanda Kaul's motherly feelings of humiliation and desolation for a life time alienation. Her clear light of Day was published in 1980. This novel is four dimensional as it is about time as a destroyer as a preserver and about what the bondage of time does to people. In *Clear Light of Day* Desai paints the backdrop of the major incidents exclusively with the support of her characters-Bim, Meera Masi, Tara and Baba, who form the major action? Desai's *Village by the sea* was published in London in 1982. It is the story of Lila and her brother Hari. Having bad days they look after their younger sisters. With their father unemployed and dipsomaniac and mother ill, they find it difficult to manage the household. While Lila stays at home, Hari goes to Bombay and works as a boy servant in a hotel. Mr. Panwala a watch mender inspires him and trains him in repairing watches. Lila transforms her father's old habit of drinking. Her father starts looking after his ailing wife. On his return, Hari plans to set up a watch mending shop in Thul. The novel describes the situation how Hari survives in Bombay city and how his sisters suffer silently the problems at home.

In her novel *In custody*, Anita Desai transcribes the madness of Deven and his search for the safety of his little world. Deven a lecturer in a small town Mirapore in Northern India. "has mediocrity and empty dreams. On persuasion of his friend Murad, he interviews a great poet Nur in Delhi. Between his boyish expectations and Nur's grim reality, he discovers a new lease of life, dignity and the way to fulfilment of his dreams. In Desai's novels, the novel is not a sociological phenomenon rather it is psychic. The plot of her short stories is rather sleek, but it does not lack in coherency, symmetry and organic quality, though there are deviations here and there. In the story "Games at

Twilight”, she creates an intense moment of psychological struggle in the mind of Ravi to explore deep into it. In the story “*Studies in the park*”, we find another kind of withdrawal, from material pursuits, from participation in the rat race. Suno, in a bid to get first in his examination, finds a suitable place in a park and sticks to his books. But books are like parasites they suck him dry. Under the overwhelming pressure of study, he gradually loses his ability to function suitably, both physically and psychologically. Desai describes Suno’s state of hopelessness. The short story “*A Devoted Son*” is based on the generation gap and attitudinal clashes between a doctor son and his aged father. Dr. Rakesh, a devoted son fulfills the dreams of his parents. He gives his ageing father the full benefits of filial duty and medical Science. He prescribes many medicines, pills and powders and a restricted diet to his father. But the father is impatient to give up his old food habits. He complains of his son’s callous behaviour to his neighbour Bhatia. This story is both touching and comic in the insight it reveals of human psychology of the old man and dutiful doctor son. *Surface Textures* is an in – depth study of a person who shirks his immediate responsibility and is indifferrent to his normal duties. Harish, a poor clerk in a supply office, becomes intensely preoccupied with the textures of objects. He finds himself incapable of enduring the burden of his family any longer. He wants to become a sadhu as he considers the life of a sanyasi for better than that of a poor clerk. Here Anita Desai attacks the evasiveness and irresponsibility of people like Harish. It is also a satire on pseudo sadhus. In *‘The Accompanist’*, Desai delineates the emotional state of a Tanpura player Mr. Misra. The company of ustad Rahim Khan makes a street urchin an accompanist. But once, he recollects and confesses, how his calm has been destroyed his devotion shakes when his *child hood* had mocked at him. But he is convinced after some soul – searching that he can never become Ustad in his own right and feels. ‘Does a mortal refuse God’. This story deals with the life of those devoted characters who feel happy to pursue the path of virtue righteousness and commitment. This story

gives the germinal idea of the theme to Anita Desai’s novel *In custody*.

In *Pigeons at Day-break*, Desai takes up the same theme as in *‘Devoted son’*: the theme of old age and the unreasonable claims of a patient. Asthmatic Bose always feels uneasy about something while his generous and devoted but too talkative wife, though irritates Bose with her talk, does all her best to provide some comfort to her husband. Here Desai tries to depict the dutifulness of a devoted wife. In *‘The Farwell Party’*, Desai presents both the hollowness and want of social life. The Cinderella like friendliness that pervades in the society is well revealed in the party. Through this story, Desai mocks at the snobbery of highbrows. In the story “*The Private Tuition by Mr. Bose,*” Desai presents the hardships of a middle class private teacher. It is a punishment to a teacher to be asked to teach an unwilling learner. Mr. Bose in the midst of domestic chores tries his best to teach Sanskrit to Pritam, who coughs imitating his favourite screen actors and shows little interest in studies. It is a psychological short story which deals with psychology of a poor teacher engaged in private tuitions. In the story *‘Pineapple Cake’* Desai presents a glimpse of westernized parties and pomp and show associated with them. Mrs. Fernander who is a worldly wise lady having a great appetite takes her son to a wedding party. She provides her son victor with a pineapple cake on the condition that he should not misbehave there. But at the time of wedding, a gentleman dies. This shocks sensitive victor and he cannot enjoy the pineapple cake. But his mother eats a lot. She is not at all sorry for the death of a man. The son finds his mother’s strange conduct at the party quite inconsistent with her utterances.

‘Scholar and Gypsy’ is a story about the clash of cultures, about redefinitions of meanings in life. It presents on American couple’s reaction to their experiences in India. The psychological revelation and analysis in which Anita Desai shows a keen interest gives a new dimension and direction to the themes of her stories as well as novels. In the story, each event acquires importance and it directly or indirectly debunks the protagonists of their old selves or outer poses and moves them towards

some kind of self-revelation and assessment. Conclusion: Despite all these limitations. Anita Desai has immense potential as a short story writer. As in her novels the Weltschmerz outlook characterizes the whole treatment likewise, in her short stories, her outlook on life is one that resembles into the Greek view of life which clearly means that she has an unflinching faith in the inherent goodness of man and has nothing to do with the bestiality hidden in him. *She is an incorrigible optimist. Since she is used to see life steady and as a whole which the Greeks were usually want to. Her final vision of life seems to dictate "Live Naturally". Which means that we should try to develop our adaptability as much as possible so that in the struggle for existence, we may survive for long.* Sita's character precisely synthesizes what Anita wants to convey by natural living. Sita compromises between *what is and what is right* to be the struggle before us and the efforts which we should harness to surmount the struggle: "Life had no periods, no stretches. It simply swirled around, mudding and confusing, leading nowhere."(p.30)

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