

Anita Desai as a Novelist and her Narrative Technique

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Abstract

Anita Desai is considered to be one of the most distinguished novelists in Indian English Literature. She is different from other contemporary women writers in Indian writing in English in terms of her perception and of her unique style. She has emerged as a very serious, skilled and promising novelist in India. As an uncrowned queen by the inner – emotional world, she dexterously transcribes the subconscious, the phantasmagoria of her highly sensitive protagonists. She has tried to present her themes originally with appropriate adjustments and adaptations in spheres of style and point of view. She is no doubt a great artist with a remarkable and astounding technical efficacy. Her technique enriches the novel by lifting it above the mere narration of a story or depiction of a character and provides it the very life, blood and the soul. She is interested in exploring life and illuminating the depth of the outside world.

Introduction

Anita Desai, originally known as Anita Mazumdar was born on (June 24,1937, Mussorie, India), English-Language Indian novelist and author of children's books who excelled in evoking character and mood through visual images ranging from the meteorological to the botanical. She received a B.A. degree in English from the University of Delhi in 1957. She began to write in English at the age of seven and published her first story at the age of nine.

She won the 1983 Guardian Children's Fiction Prize for her novel, "**The Village by the Sea**".

Desai published her first novel. **Cry the Peacock**, in 1963.

She considers **Clear Light of Day** (1980) her most autobiographical work as it is set during her coming age and also in the same neighbourhood in which she grew up.

In 1984, she published, **In Custody** – about an Urdu poet in his declining days – which was shortlisted for the Booker prize. In

1993, she became a creative writing teacher at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

The 1999 Booker prize finalist novel **Fasting Feasting** increased her popularity. Her novels, **The Zigzag Way**, set in the 20th century Mexico, appeared in 2004 and her latest collection of short stories, **The Artist of Disappearance** was published in 2011. She is a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and of Girton College, Cambridge (to which she dedicated **Baumgartner's Bombay**).

Her first novel, **Cry, the Peacock** published in 1963 is a poetic novel with dense imagery. The theme of the novel has been described as an incompatible marriage with the focus on the heroin's psyche. It is a psychological novel, probing the workings of Maya's psyche. There is a to and fro movement

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between the past and the present of Maya. In this novel she does it by making use of the weird animal imagery which suggests her disturbed state of mind. The image of the peacock is said to be to central symbol of the novel, as the name itself suggests. **Cry, the Peacock** is a psychological study of the hypersensitive, childless, young protagonist Maya who haunted by a childhood prophecy of disaster kills her elderly husband in a fit of frenzy and finally she goes completely mad and commits suicide.

Desai's Second novel **Voices in the City** was published in 1965 is an interesting novel. Some critics have observed that in the novel the city is important and is skilfully handled by her, some, compared it with that of Dicken's London and Hardy's Egdon – Heath. Calcutta portrayed as an oppressive city not only forms the backdrop to the action but also becomes a character in the novel, exercising a powerful influence on all the major characters. In this novel Calcutta conceived as a force of creation, preservation and destruction is ultimately identified as a symbol of Mother Kali, the goddess of death and destruction. The city is described as an oppressive city, a dying city but all the same exercising a powerful influence on all the three characters. This has been amply made clear in the Amla Section of the novel. The city has been described as a monster city.

...That this monster city that lived no normal healthy, red – blooded life but one that was subterranean, underlet, stealthy and odorous of mortality, had captured and enchanted – or disenchanting both her sister and brother (Desai VC 150).

The city itself is symbolic but there is also nature symbolism in section III Amla. She has arrived recently in Calcutta to begin her professional career of commercial artist.

Desai's third novel, **Bye-Bye, Blackbird** published in 1971 deals with the

theme of coloured immigrants in England. It presents their difficulties of adjustment and explores their fragmented psyche. Desai employs the flashback technique to narrate the situation leading to the marriage of Adit and Sarah. The division of the three parts of the novel and the titling of the second and the third parts as 'Discovery and Recognition' and 'Departure' respectively also involves clever narrative technique. This has helped Desai to express her themes and execute her ideas systematically and effectively. Nostalgia is used as a narrative technique of the novel. Adit's nostalgia for the hilsa fish and the Bengal atmosphere is an expression of a need to belong and to bridge the gulf between London and Calcutta. For both Sarah and Adit really exists at two schizophrenic planes, the two contrasting planes of the two cultural traditions and the merger takes place when Adit decides to return to India.

Her next novel, **Where shall we Go This Summer** (1975) is structurally akin to Virginia Woolf's **To the Lighthouse** (1927). Both trace the flux of the protagonist's consciousness through three successive stages of perception, memory and dream.

Fire on the Mountain (1977) is a novel in which she makes use of symbolism. The novel centers around the character of Nanda Kaul. Nanda Kaul is a character who lives in the world of fantasy. This novel demonstrates the novelist's basic technique of fiction as montage. In fact it is a craft which cannot be dissociated from the constituents of the art of fiction such as rhythm, the prophecy, the portrayal of individual and the social reality and the visionary quality of imagination

Clear Light of Day (1980) is a family drama. Anita Desai makes use of poetry in the novel but the most important fact is that she quotes lines from two poems by Emily

Dickinson and T.S. Eliot as epigraphs to the novel.

Time as a destroyer, as a preserver and about what the bondage of time does to people. (India Today 142)

Desai's latest novel **Fasting, Feasting** appeared in 1999. This novel examines family life in two contrasting cultures and draws two different worlds India and America. The novel is a third person narrative. The Omniscient narrator 'Shows' as well as 'tells' while projecting the themes. In this novel, Desai uses quotes from Bible, Hindu devotional songs, American catchphrases frequently to lend local colour to her narrative. Language is an important component of Desai's narrative design in this novel.

Melanie is a character who is cloyed with rich food is obviously intended to be a foil for Uma who hardly gets to eat many delicacies. While Melanie "feasts" Uma obviously "fasts". Uma is shackled by traditions and obligations but Melanie is free as a bird. These contrasts are however merely superficial. Fasting and feasting, as Arun learns, are the two facets of a same coin.

Fasting, Feasting is a carefully balanced novel of contrasts between foods, between Indian family and American family life; as well as between East and West in a broader sense, between lack and excess and between lack of ambition (for Uma and Melanie) and too much ambition (for Arun and Rod).

The Zigzag Way written in 2004 is the story of 20th century Mexico, through the turbulence of the revolution and personal calamity; of the exploitation of the Mexican Indians and their dubious saviours, such as the formidable Don Vera, widow of a mining baron and Eric's own grandmother, a young Cornish girl whose grave lies in a hillside cemetery.

Desai had previously written in **Bye, Bye Blackbird** about Indian facing the reality of an England that did not want them; she had looked at foreigners coming to India in search of Enlightenment in **Journey to Ithaca** and a marvellous isolation of a German Jew stuck in Bombay in **Baumgartner's Bombay**.

Conclusion

Thus we see that there is a harmonious balance between the form and content in Desai's novels and contributes significantly to the projection of a uniform artist vision.

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