CHAPTER – VI

CRAFTED ART

The logic of everyday world is replaced by forms of contradiction and discontinuity, racial shifts of context which suggest that “reality as well as “fiction” is merely one more game with words….¹

Anita Desai gains maturation as an artist of excellence, significance and relevance. This Indian Writer in English and a genius-artist has struck maturation only through hard labour, commitment to writing well and cerebration. It is through hard labour and sweat that she has attained the higher level of sophistication in writing. Understandably, only when elitist readers could delve deep into her mature art products, they could glean at the purpose sense underlying her fictions.

Anita Desai’s fictions are governed by the best traditions of Gestalt. It becomes necessary to have a clear idea of what is meant by the term, Gestalt. Gestalt is the German word for a pattern for a total configuration.

In literature the totality of the art product is based on the configuration of a perfect form – genre – and conforming to the best traditions of the chosen genre, and introducing perfection in structure, and ensuring tightness in organization, with all loose ends tied up cohesively
and fittingly into a perfect whole. In fine, form, structure and organization promote the totality of effect in literature – the *Gestalt*. And in Anita Desai’s fiction there is perfect *Gestalt*.

The form – genre – that Anita Desai has masterfully employed to express her thoughts feelings, and experiences is fiction. The structure is perfect with a story line, plot development, narration, description with the sense of place and time, characterization, focalization, dialogue writing, and argumentation. All these elements and components of fiction are perfectly structured. The organization is tight.

With the perfect *Gestalt* introduced in her fictions, Anita Desai projects herself as a demanding artist. She expects reader participation on her own terms and not on the terms of the readers. And the readers cannot afford to be casual browsers to grasp at her studied level of argumentation. Only perceptive and critically oriented readers could better appreciate the mature literary works of Anita Desai.

The goal of Anita Desai, has been to turn into a mature artist, and an astounding creative self. She has achieved a great measure of success in this regard. She could achieve literary pre-eminence and strike maturation at thematic level and characterization only by applying her mind with the single minded purpose of creating great works of art.

Yet again, Anita Desai could turn into a mature artist because she has been able to employ her powers of imagination, inborn talents,
inspiration and apt modes of expression in a combined manner for creating aesthetic artifacts.

Understandably then, a high level of technical achievements marks the art products of Anita Desai. In fact, she has employed her art tools with functional valuations and functional variations. In fine, through verbal mastery, language manipulation, linguistic experimentation, innovative forms, and technical devises she has gained recognition as a creative self.

Anita Desai, the women genius-artist thorough innovative ways and contextual excellence has enriched Indian Writing in English and Women literature, and by extension World literature. In this context, one takes into account the pertinent statement of Richard Chase, which is work quoting here:

... the health culture depends upon its recurring impulse to experimentation, its search for radical values, its historical awareness, its flexibility and its receptivity to experience...

In the case of Anita Desai it can be safely argued that all of her knowledge starts with her private sensations, ideas, feelings and experiences and sense data for her individual mind. It is her ego-centric predicament. To begin with, her knowing mind operates within the closed circle of her private sensations, ideas, experiences and sense data.
In fine, Anita Desai’s individual mind is subject to sensations, ideas, attitudes, feelings, emotions, and beliefs as received by it and felt by it. As such reality is reduced to her mind as governed by her private sensations, ideas, feelings and experiences and sense data.

But Anita Desai matures as an accomplished and talented artist to acknowledge the fact that to be a creative artist she has to emerge from her personal self and accept the transcendental self. Yet again, she finds reason in her personal ego being cancelled by the corporate ego.

All the same, Anita Desai argues that if sense qualities are private and relative to the knowing subject, then the ethical and aesthetic values of goodness and beauty are resident in perceive notions and works of art, and they turn out to be similarly subjective. Ethical questions, therefore, have tended to be framed in terms of individual emotional response to a moral judgement rather than in terms of objective rightness or wrongness.

Anita Desai, the woman writer, realizes that the social self or ego, has the strength of its own, and motives that are sociably desirable and ethically tenable, and therefore the social self does not depend upon the primitive id or source of instinctual energy for its strength.

On a higher level of personal development, Anita Desai, the Indian Woman genius-artist of maturity, sees to it that her private hostile feelings and ideas find exact expressions in righteous indignation over social injustices and evils. And for putting into effect, Anita Desai admirably and
adequately employs the medium of fiction. In this context, the pointed observation of Paul Cobly deserves mention:

.... The novel form has had a formidable influence within the field or narrative in the West. Among many theorists there has been a broadly held view that the many complexities of the novel form, its devise and recurrent characteristics, have had a profound impact on the way that literate human seek to represent the world…³

And in fiction there is the tradition, valorized in extant epics, which intersperses imitative mimesis with the voice of the author. Fictions employ this device at length, although it is palpable in relatively minor details such as the peopling of narratives with characters whose names would reveal their attributes. But to a large extent Anita Desai endeavours to distance herself from the constructedness of her mimetic fictions.

Once again, in this context, the pointed observation of Paul Cobly warrants quoting here:

The voice of the narrator or even the voice of the author was obviously important to novelists: this was the means to tell the public about moral imperatives or issues of the day. But imitative mimesis was indispensable: the novel audience increasingly wanted narratives, which were neither parables nor allegories whose outlandish nature was to be decoded
into everyday terms. Instead, the novel was to be **realistic**, in a general sense, with characters broadly imitating the speech of people with situations broadly resembling real situations in the world and with events tending to follow the logic that they would in life. A depiction can never be that which it depicts, of course: it follows, then, that the **realism**, which readers might demand of narrative is always an approximation or a compromise (Italics as in the Original)....

In such a context, the importance of the omniscient narrator is felt. In fact, an omniscient narrator can use a narratorial voice to say what he or she likes without fear to it being out of character.

The cutting from person to person, from utterance of utterance, and finally to another scene is one example omniscient narration in that the choices about what is presented are made for the audiences by a narrating agency who can, potentially, take the perceptive reader to any scene. Moreover, the pertinent observation of Paul Cobly is demands quoting here for its reveals another interesting perspective:

Indeed, if it is the case that narrative is bound up with the establishment of identifies associated with nationality, class, gender, occupation, or even a sense of opinions, or one’s place in the world in relation to others, then the novel, as a **dialogic** form, cannot escape an orientation to be *historical*. It
cannot avoid recoding the relations of signs top other sings or voices to other voices, rather than simply depicting individuals (Italics as in the original)…

From the point of view of structural analyses it ought to be stressed that structural analyses aim at systematically describing the conditions governing the production of meaning in a fiction, which is to a articulate a particular interpretation of that fiction. The argument of Roland Barthes becomes relevant:

A literary work is a very special semantic system, whose goal is to put meaning in the world but not a meaning…

In this kind of analysis structuralism focuses on the fixity of relations within synchronic systems at the expenses of the temporal diachronic dimension of literature that involves history. Moreover, since one never transcends culture one can never examine it from outside. There is no standing free of structures of meaning, no natural state free of the structural interplay that constitutes meaning.

After discussing the characteristic features of *Gestalt* it becomes necessary to concentrate on narration, story, plot line, characterization, description and argumentation, which are the main elements or the principal components of fiction.
Generally, the term, narrator, is meant to stand for a person who tells a story in the first person, “I”. This kind of a narrator is an authentic “I” or an imaginative “I” or a combination of both as in Herman Melville’s magnum opus, which runs thus: “I am Ishmael”…

But by and large, in particular connotation, the word, narrator stands for the ‘recording consciousness’ that an author creates who may or may not be a participant in the events of a story. When the narrator is cast as a participant in the events of the story, he or she is a dramatized character, who says, “I”. Such a narrator is either the protagonist or the mere observer standing a little away, to one side, watching a story unfold that mainly involves someone else. A narrator who remains a non-participant does not appear in the story as a character.

Viewing the characters, perhaps seeing into the minds of one or more of them is another device; such a character refers to them as “he”, “she”, or “they”. Thus the all knowing – omniscient – narrator sees into the minds of the characters, wherever moving when necessary from one to another.

The narrator turns into an editorial conscience and begins to comment on the nature, character and activities of characters, approvingly or disapprovingly. The narrator as the impartial omniscience present the feelings, thoughts, and actions of the characters, but does not judge them or comment on them.
When a non-participant narrator sees events through the eyes of a single character, whether a major character or a minor character, the resulting point of view is sometimes called limited omniscience or selective omniscience. The author, of course, selects which character to see through; the omniscience is his and not the narrator’s.

In the hierarchical structure of narration, the highest level is the one immediately superior to the first narrative and is concerned with its narration, and is known as extradiegetic level. The second degree narrative is the hypodiegetic level, which is below another level of diegesis.

Narration is always at a higher level than the story it narrates. Thus, the diegetic level is narrated by an extradiegetic narrator, and the hypodiegetic level by a diegetic – intradiegetic – narrator.

A narrator who is, as it were, “above” or superior to the story he narrates is extradiegetic. On the other hand, if the narrator is also a diegetic character in the first narrative told by the extradiegetic narrator, then he is a second degree, or intradiegetic narrator.

Incidentally, the observation of Shulimath Rimmon Kennan deals with the various functions of hypodiegetic narratives in relation to the narratives within which they are embedded. These functions are sometimes present separately or sometimes in combination
hence it is quoted in extenso:

1. **Actional Function**: Some hypodeictic narrative maintain or advance the action of the first narrative by the sheer fact of being narrated, regardless (or almost regardless) of their content. *A Thousand and One Nights* is a classic example. Scheherzade’s life depends on her narration, and the only condition her stories have to fulfill is to sustain the Sultan’s attention.

2. **Explicative Function**: The hypodiegetic level offers an explanation of the diegetic level, answering some such question as “What were the events leading to the present situation?” In this case it is the story narrated and not the act of narration itself that is of primary importance. In Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), Thomas Stupen’s narration of his childhood to General Compson, especially of the insulting confrontation with the Negro servant (a hypo-hypodiegetic level), explains how Stupen lost his innocence and came to be the self-reliant, a moral person he is.

3. **Thematic Function**: The relations established between the hypodiegetic and the diegetic levels are those of analogy, that is, similarity and contrast. This function predominates in Nabokov’s *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. To give one
example out of many: the story of Sebastian’s last novel, The Doubtful Asphodel (a hypo-hypodiegetc level), is strikingly analogous to V’s quest for “the real life” of his half-brother…

At this juncture it becomes necessary to examine the relations between narration and the story. Since narration is like an event like any other, it can maintain and entertain various temporal relations with the events of the story.

In the first place ‘ulterior narration’ concerns itself with the events that are narrated after they have happened. Secondly, there is the distance maintained between the narration and the events that have taken place. But a narration after the event (normally in the past tense) is not the only possibility.

Much less frequent, for obvious reasons, is a narration, which precedes the events – ‘anterior narration’. It is a kind of ‘predictive narration’, generally using the future tense, but sometimes the present. Whereas examples abound in Biblical prophecies, complete modern texts written in the predictive view are rare. Instead, this type of narration tends to appear in narratives within narratives in the form of prophecies, curses or dreams of fictional characters.

A third type of narration is simultaneous with action, namely, reporting or diary entries. In Butler’s La Modification, translated into
English by Shulimuth Rimmon-Kennan, the narrator addressing himself in
the second person, seems to be verbalizing his actions while performing.

When telling and acting are not simultaneous but follow each other
in alternation, narration is of the fourth type, namely, ‘intercalated’. Classic
example of this type is Alice Walker’s The Color Purple, in which the
writing of letter often serves to narrate an event of the recent past to trigger
an event of the near future.

As central as plot to the meaning of a piece of fiction is ‘point of
view’; indeed ‘plot’ and ‘points of view’ are inextricably related. Like plot the
concept of point of view is very simple and yet capable of very complex
variations and development in practice, all of which affect the meaning of a
story.

Basically, point of view refers to the narrator’s relationship or
involvement in the event of the story and it is expressed in terms of
grammatical person. The story is presented in the fiction through the
mediation of some “prism”, “perspective”, “angle of vision”, verbalized by
the narrator though not necessarily is.

At this point it ought to be stressed, that language in a fiction
signifies without imitating. It is because language can only imitate
language, which is why the representation of speech comes closest to
pure mimesis. All that a narrative can do is to create an illusion, an effect,
a semblance of mimesis. The crucial distinction, therefore, is not between
telling and showing, but between different degrees and kinds of telling.

At this point there is the need to define the term, ‘character’, in
fiction short fiction, poem or drama. The term, ‘character’, refers to a
personage in fiction, short fiction, poem or drama. The term, ‘character’,
also denotes the essential qualities and personality traits of a fictional or
real individual. The ability to create compelling and believable character is
one of the hallmarks of the literary artist.

And characterization in literature is the presentation of the attitudes
and behaviour of imaginary persons in order to make them credible to the
critically oriented reading public. Characterization is a unique feature of
such fictional forms as the short fiction, fiction, drama, and narrative
poetry.

Criticism regards good characterization as an important criterion of
excellence in fiction. It ought to be stressed here that Anita Desai’s
characterization is perfectly and artistically handled and the characters and
superbly delineated. Thus, Anita Desai meets all these requirements of
fiction writing in her eleven fictions.

And when form, technique and theme blend well, a literary
masterpiece is born. Form and theme dictate the techniques and all the
three in turn enhance the central idea lending it distinct and unique texture
and tone. The pithy argument of Mark Schorer deserves recording here:

Technique alone objectifies the materials of art...⁸

Anita Desai gets easily bracketed with the outstanding prose stylists, such as William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Vladimir Nabokov and John Barth to quote the names of a few American intellectuals. Delighting in language she has used it as the means of the artist for creating a world and preserving it against time.

John O. Stark has the following observation to make in his context:

In literature this bliss usually takes the form of wonder at the adroit use of man’s greatest invention, language, and this wonder is most intense when the wonderer is the linguistic master.⁹

In fact, Anita Desai, the astounding creative artist, will continue to be read for the brilliance of her language and sharpness in rendering reality quite imaginatively. One comes away from the literary products of Anita Desai awed by many things but chiefly by the dazzling of verbal skill.

Anita Desai is justly renowned for her ability to introduce word pictures. To put it differently, like Walt Whitman, the Father Figure of American literature, she is a great image-maker. Yet again, Anita Desai, the astounding artist, happily marries memory with imagination and creates
a sense of a sunlit world, which is the hidden positive in her art products. She employs irony and paradox to great fictional advantage.

Moreover, in the art products of Anita Desai there is the perfect beginning, the gradual growth and development to the middle, and finally to the perfectly contrived and composed end. Each beginning is an entrance into a time and a place, and a culture and a faith and an eternity.

At the beginning of her literary works there is the voice, which comes out of nothing and through the printed matter Anita Desai creates, like Walt Whitman, the illusion that someone somewhere is speaking to the reader. Yet again, Anita Desai asserts that artistic perception and design can transcend human fortunes and misfortunes; and chaos can be ordered by transforming the world into significant aesthetic form.

Anita Desai adroitly marries the past with the present. In fact, like William Faulkner she hauls the past into the present and projects both into the future. Her literary products are edifices whose every corner deserves the closest attention, and such an examination is invariably a rewarding experience. Her art products yield and present to the aesthetic sense the peculiar hardness of a finished fully meant thing. Her sentences are beautiful out of context and doubly beautiful in it.

A beautiful building is made up of hunks of metal, concrete slush and other products of earth, air, and water. And yet when the builder has finished with these prosaic things, he has created something splendid. He
has arranged reality creatively. A literary product, too, is one of creative arrangement, achieved by the writer through selection of the material of real life and the real world, which he has acquired either directly or vicariously.

In other words, the literary work that is well crafted is both a window into a segment of the human experience and an interpretative record of it by one who has either lived it himself or who has somehow understood and experienced it vicariously.

Yet again, a good work of art takes the reader into another area of experience, which is the real world of the imagination. Moreover, a good literary product is perfectly contrived to be multi-dimensional and multi-layered in character. And the literary products of Anita Desai meet all these requirements.

Anita Desai is a conscious draftsman and works for her effects with caution and care. She builds her plots and people and style as to produce the effects she has in mind. It does not mean that the subconscious and the unconscious are not brought into play. However her art is not without blemishes. There is also a solid basis of thought working in her writings. The most redeeming point of her mind and art is a process of growth, that has not here to fore been traced.

Anita Desai resorts to the effective employment of imagery and symbolism in *Fire on the Mountain*. Her predilection for prey-predator
imagery abounds in this novel. Images of ugliness, loneliness, destruction and annihilation are consistently used in order to reflect the existential tone of the novel. An atmosphere of solitary introspection is created with the help of several images. For example, when she receives a call from Ila Das, Nanda Kaul “turned her head this way and that in an escape. She watched the white hen drag out a worm inch by resisting inch from the ground till it snapped in two. She felt like the worm herself, she winced at its mutilation.

Another important image employed recurrently is that of the pine tree that stands burnt and alone, which is often an object of attraction for Nanda Kaul: “She was grey, tall and thin... she fancied she could merge with the pine tree and be mistaken for one. To be a tree, no more and no less, was prepared to undertake”. Again, this image also contributes to the existentialism theme of the novel. “Nanda’s sense of identification with the pine trees suggests her desire for absolute stillness and withdrawal from life”.

Another important aspect of her narrative technique is symbolism. There are several symbols that deepen the philosophic implications of the novel. To start with, Carignano, Nanda Kaul’s present abode, is symbolic of the loneliness and barrenness of human life in general and Nanda Kaul in particular.
The lonely house is symbolic of the lonely life of Nanda Kaul and Raka. The barrenness and starkness associated with it symbolizes an essential human condition – alienation which is the key note of all existential philosophy.

The eagle symbol, like the house symbol, is repeatedly used in the course of the novel to highlight another aspect of existential philosophy, namely quest. The sight of the eagle flying high, makes Nanda long to be able to soar like the bird: “An eagle swept over…. Its wings outspread, gliding on currents of air without once moving its great muscular wings which remained in repose, in control, she (Nanda Kaul) had wished, it occurred to her, to imitate the eagle-gliding, with eyes closed”.

The forest fire scene has symbolic overtones. Like the “The Fire Sermon” in T.S. Eliot’s, *The Waste Land*, the fire in *Fire on the Mountain* is a destroyer. It is also a purifier. By making use of the universal fire symbol Anita Desai endows Raka’s character with allegorical implications. Raka, the invalid restless little girl who is the product of a broken home, becomes the symbol of the existentialist’s perception of the individual who finds herself in this hostile and futile world. Yet out of compulsion she strives to find or create values and significance for her existences. In his regard it has been observed that the symbolic implication of the forest fire is reinforced by the title of the novel, *Fire on the Mountain* is highly significant from the thematic point of view.
It is against such background study one examines how Anita Desai employs the elements of fiction, such as description, narration, characterization, dialogue writing and argumentation in her fictions. Significant, relevant and consequential passage and those that strengthen the argument that Anita Desai is a mature and an accomplished artist are introduced.

It must be said to the exclusive credit to Anita Desai that of all the Indian woman artists she alone excels in describing and creating a sense of time and a sense of place.

Anita Desai proves that she can blend her first-person "I" narration with that of the second-person "you" narration through the discussion that takes place between Nirode and Jit and the passage makes interesting reading:

“Do you think that a matter for congratulation?”

“Why not, Nirode?”

“Because I refuse to be caught by its success, Damn it all, that blasted newspaper I worked for had been successful for years, everything moved smoothly, it employed people to work for it like a lot of dumb cogs in an oily machine.

I don’t want mine to become like that, for God’s sake. It’s getting to be bad enough with Jit breathing down my neck and
panting “Why don’t you hurry the next issue? Hurry, hurry, this is your chance to break even at last”\textsuperscript{10}.

In the following textual passage taken from \textit{Cry, the Peacock}, Anita Desai projects herself as not only capable of excellent description but also in the process as a an image maker in the vein of a Walt Whitman. Anita Desai’s picture making talent lies so very much in the quoted passage:

Now and then she (Maya) went out into the verandah, and looked to see if he (Gautama) were coming up the drive, which lay shriveling, melting and then shriveling again, like molten lead in a rove cut into the earth, and out of the corner of her eye, could not help glancing, as one cannot help a tic at the small white corpse laying at one end of the lawn under sheet, under the limes. Later in the evening, when the sun hung pendant from the topmost branches of the tress swelling visibly like – she - thought – a purulent boil (not a pleasant image, of course), until it was ripe to drop, her husband came home…\textsuperscript{11}

In the following textual passage Anita Desai demonstrates her masterful ability to delineate characters. This is evident in her characterization of Leila in \textit{Cry, the Peacock}, and the passage reads thus:

They were always bare – she wore no jeweler. She laughed.

“I like that – considering my day is twice as long as yours,
and you’ve just caught me in the middle of my housework”. Yes, but her actions seemed as detached from her body as her words and her harsh, loud voice from her soul. The only work I ever saw her do that was in keeping with her personality was her ministration to her husband, who lay dying of tuberculosis, upon his still bed in one corner of their single room. He had been dying of tuberculosis when she fell in love with him, and she had marred the fatality of his disease as much as the charm of his childish personality of the elegance of his dark hair falling across his white brow.

*When I saw her hand him a glass of medicine or lift his body into comfortable positions, I saw in her movements an aching tenderness subdued, by a log sadness, into great beauty and great bitterness.* (My Emphasis)…

Like William Faulkner, in this fiction, *Cry, the Peacock*, Anita Desai employs the title as a Faulkner does in his Noble Prize winning fiction, *The Sound and the Fury*, with deep significance, and it is Anita Desai’s technical achievement and the relevant textual passage is given below:

And now I recalled that oil-slick sibilant tongue whispering poetry to me in the bat-tortured ark. “Do you not hear the peacocks call in the wilds? Are they not blood-chilling in their shrieks of pain?” “Pia, pia, they cry. “Love lover. Mio, mio – I
die, I die”. Go out into the jungles before the monsoons come – at the time when the first clouds cross the horizon, black as the kohl in your grave eyes. How they love the rain – these peacocks. The spread out their splendid tails and begin to dance, but, like Shiva’s their dance of joy is the dance of death, and they dance, knowing that they and their lovers are all to die, perhaps even before the monsoon came to an end. Is it not agony for them? How they stamp their feet, and beat their beaks against the rocks! They will even rasp the snakes that live on the sands there, and break their bodies to bits against the stones, to ease their own pain. Have you seen peacocks make love, child? Before they mate, they fight. They will rip each other’s breasts to strips and fall, bleeding, with their beaks open and panting. When they have exhausted themselves in battle, they will mate, Peacocks are wise (My Emphasis)....

In the following textual passage one is simply attracted by the charm, elegance, and verbal brilliance of Anita Desai’s prose, which approximates poetry. Like Edward Estlin Cummings who was the great exponent of prose poems, Anita Desai introduces an arresting prose poem in Where Shall We Go This Summer? Thus, Anita Desai gets bracketed with other prose stylists such as James Baldwin, Saul Bellow, John Barth,
Vladmir Nabokov and Ernest Hemingway, to quote a few. The passage runs as follows:

_The very gaiety and laughter and animation of that winter seemed magic and unreal because it was in such startling contrast to the life they had lived so far_ – this family with its father and band its band of disciples. As far as Sita could tell from her own experience, their lives had been lived inside jails, in crowded assemblies, in mobs, in slums, tenements, and village where life was not picturesque or calm, but harsh and barbaric. They had known all the tensions of political life, although only on the brink of it, and its cruelties. **There had been long separations, dark seclusions. There had been austerity and fear.** (My Emphasis…)\(^{14}\)

Thus, Anita Desai displays her mastery over the element of fiction. In fact, she puts them to optimum use in her fictions.
REFERENCES


4. Ibid., p.82.

5. Ibid., p.107.


12. Ibid., p.57.

13. Ibid., p.95.

14. Ibid., p.63