Chapter 5:

Conclusion

Analysis of Anita Desai’s language and style in some of her major novels:

Ralph Freedman says, “The lyrical novel (By contrast) seeks to combine man and world in a strangely inward, yet aesthetically objective form. This is not to say that lyrical writers are uninterested in the questions of human conduct that concern all fiction, but they view these questions in a different light. Their stages are not those on which men usually perform in the novel, but independent designs in which the awareness of men’s experiences is merged with its objects. Rather than finding it’s “Gestalt” in the limitation of an action, the lyrical novel absorbs action all together and refashions it as a pattern of imagery”(p26).

The wizardry of Anita Desai, with words, is once again established by the study of the beginnings of her eight novels. Each novel presents a unique aspect of life, handled in the peculiar manner the theme demanded. Mostly psychological studies, the narration are aimed at
delineating character through the objective world. She confirms to the tradition of the “lyrical novel”.

1. Cry the Peacock (CTP)
2. Bye-Bye Black Bird (BBB)
3. Where Shall we go this Summer (WSWS)
4. Fire on the Mountain (FOM)
5. Clear light of the day (CLD)
6. A Village by the sea (VBS)
7. Voices in the City (VOC)
8. In Custody (IC)

Anita Desai has made use of English language according to the situation and demand sometimes she has written her novels keeping the western readers in mind. Though all her novels are woven around India, its people, its social bindings etc. To make her stories sound realistic, she had made use of many Indian words from Hindi, Gujarati or Bengali language example hato hato (CLD p16) suar sala suar ka bacha (CLD p16) swamiji (CLD p31) farishta (CLD p33) zindagi o zindagi (CLD p31) chotu miya baremiye (CLD p31) ram dhun (CLD p94) lafanges (IC p50) sur ra hi (IC p70) wah-wah (IC p53) janum (IC p64) aacha (IC
In order to give a perfect Indian background as far as language is concerned Anita Desai has superbly made use of English language as spoken by the Indians. The way Hindi is spoken by the natives. Eg. Pulleece (BBB p28) sup-pecial or pullain (BBB p28). Mr. Pandey came to see them and said “Very damp, very bad here- how much are you paying? I can get you rooms in an ashram, nice ashram nice rooms, very cheap” (JI p420) fan-tas-tique (JI p60) en-tire-ly harmless (JI p 61) di-vine raga devotees are achieving the spiritual e-quiv-a-lent, yes? (JI p 103) ah Mato-t-eo from It-a-ly (JI p111). She murmured so beautiful so beautiful- but so sad, sad she went on “on the outside, rich and beautiful, but on the inside- death and grave death and grave” what is happen? Is murdering here? Is police not come- drunk man saying his wife
behaving badly with other man - - - don’t trouble sir, no good people (BB p8) the above words, had they being used in Hindi would be as follows bahot sundar, bahot sundar parantu bahot dukhi dukhi wah kehna lagii bahar se aamir aur sundar magar andar se mrityu-bhayanak mrityu. Kya huwa? Yeha khun huva? Police nahi aiyi? Sharabi. Uski patni ka bartav bura tha. Teklif maat lo sahab, log acche nahi hai. Here Anita Desai has exactly written English the way Hindi is spoken by a commoner which is grammatically incorrect and the sentences are incomplete. The words show the Indian culture of being highly curious and reactive to mundane happenings.

Other examples of English spoken in Hindi tune; yes, tea pliss, tea is nice (BB p9) vegetarian restaurant, vegetarian food is famous, you are liking vegetarian? (BB p87) chai, khana, baraf, lao, jaldi, joota, chotapeg, pani, kamra, soda, garee (BB p92) What I can do? Mr. Boumgartener, pliss go spik to him in his language- ask him what he want? Why he sit in the café when he have no money, why he not go? Please spich Mr. Boumgartener and tell him go (BB p140). Anita Desai uses declarative sentences which sound interrogative example he came from the ashram? (JI p2) your cats like masala spice chilly, turmeric, jeera, bayleaf (BB p10) what you can do (BB p10). Splitting the word in many syllables is another aspect of Anita Desai which she has done
deliberately, as spoken in Indian languages eg. In-comp-et-ent
swindelers (JI p119) Bee-ee-hunn-ee, lo-ove (JI p123) ex-pawt (BB p86). She has used her skill in forming incomplete sentences example oh no, Impossible, you wont. I cant- you don’t, really- it wont- no, no, no. I cant play miss Das, instead I will be so honored will you come- can you- a concert- you will heat- it will be I would like. Oh my, this wasn’t what I- Oh my, I never planned- Oh Christmas what am I. (BBB p91) The use of switch coding has been made by Anita Desai example she is good and she is evil. She is our knowledge and our ignorance- she is reality and illusion. She is the world and she is Maya - - - the amalgamation of death and life? Isn’t it perfect and inevitable that she should pour blood into our veins when we are born and drain it from us when we die (CTP p256)

The Use of noun as a verb is another style of Anita Desai example don’t baby him (CLD p66) the You is everything in use (VC p32). The art of showing haltered is a remarkable aspect of Anita Desai’s style example. We don’t really believe in watches and clocks, we are romantics. We want the time to fit in with our moods. The English are the clock-watchers. English mothers even feed their babies and put them in bed according to their clock (BBB p162). I suppose all Indian women like Christmas tress or perhaps like clowns because they wear sarees
and jewelry-you-you- English people and your xenophobia! (BBB p193) He had the unhappy sensation of being the 5th wheel on the carriage. (BBB 99)

Comparison with the living creatures is Anita Desai’s favorite style. She remains successful in characterizing a person by comparing him or her with an animal along with superb use of similes.

Eg: He looked like a fish that had snapped up a hook by accident (CLD p83)

She was being roasted like a chicken under the orange bulb (CLD p42)

They had come like mosquitoes- only to torment her and mosquito like, sip her blood. All of them fed on her blood - - - when they were full, they rose in swarms on her. (CLD)

Nur saheb, I am telling you. The time for poetry is over. To feed the Hindi-wallas with Urdu poetry is like feeding the cows with hunks of red meat. (IC p48)

Do you call that a poet or even a man. All of you- you have reduced him to that, making him eat and drink like some animal like a pig. (IC p60)

Do you think I entered this house to keep company with swine? (IC p61)
The use of animal imagery is to be noted:

So, this is where you have come to hide. She began in her hoarse exhausted voice “A tortoise that sticks its head in the mud at the bottom of the pond (IC p89)

Jackals don’t murder. She said coolly. “They want others to murder because they haven’t the courage. They come to feed on the flesh”. (IC p118)

Who would have thought that one-day, the bird, symbol of flight and song would cease to be a poet’s inspiration and become a threat. (IC p48)

What would it matter to him? It was I who screamed with the peacocks, screamed at the site of the raindrops, screamed at the sight of their disappearance, screamed in mute honor. (CTP p175)

Will the lizards rise out of the desert to come upon us either upon him or upon myself with lashing tails and sliding tongues, to crush us beneath their bellies. (CTP 179)

Nirode- an unshelled snail, a flightless bird on the iron bed, so uncharacteristically at the mercy of the syringe, the tubes, the cylinders and the deadly cheerfulness of the nurse (CTP p127)
Anita Desai ruthlessly shows a contrast in this description:

Mercy- deadly cheerfulness of the nurse. Can cheerfulness ever be deadly?

Men who fought like crows over every fresh carcass. (VC p185)

The love that made her swallow father, whole like a cobra swallows a fat petrified rat the spews him out in one flabby yellow mess.

The above description is nauseous hair raising and too ugly to read.

They stayed at the vomit coloured hair. (VC p244)

They are nothing, nothing but appetite and sex. Only food, sex and money matter – animals. (WSWS p47)

My pet animals are wild animals in the forest, yet but these are neither- they are like pariahs you see in the streets hanging about drains and dustbins, wanting to pounce and kill and eat. (WSWS p47)

The landlady who lived like some aged mouse in the attic of the house. (BBB p40)
She sat to work diligently on her husband like a bird with a long beak that knocks, knocks, knocks on the dead wood till the insect emerges and she can have it. (JI p20)

The mother was a monster spider who had spun this web to catch these silly flies. (JI p127)

She now became torpid, a motionless lizard on a ledge. (JI p153)

We can find the glimpses of Indian culture very clearly - Anita Desai has made frequent use of the word “lizard” of most of her novels.

She watched the white hen drag out a worm, inch by inch resisting from the ground till it snapped in two. She felt herself like the worm. She winced at its mutilation. (FOM p21)

Here the depiction of the protagonist- Nanda kaul in the novel “Fire on the Mountains” is done very skillfully while comparing her with a worm. No other women author would dare be so ruthless in such violent description as Anita Desai.

Anita Desai seems to hate the “Pan chewing” culture amongst the Indians. We have frequent mention of it.
Eg. Murad gave a laugh. Showing the betel-stained teeth beneath.

(CLD)

The soda water shop owner sat in the doorway, watching, chewing tobacco, spitting. (WSWS p21)

Where does the prostitute get her pan from. (BBB p91)

Sophie noticed in that non-professional moment that his teeth were stained red with betel juice. (JI p2)

Hirabai’s mouth was stained a deep red from the betel leaves and betel nuts that she chewed all day (VBS)

An example of vulgarity.

“Sat on its haunches, straining to defecate.” (BB p7)

Description of dirt

She was thoughtlessly placed into greater depths- murkier, blacker, depths and was coated with the scum of even greater guilt. (CLD 152)

With him he brought an overwhelming odour of smoked cigars, of whiskey, of manhood to me, all in inexpressibly attractive. (CTP)

Poems quoted by Anita Desai

T.S. Elliot’s “The Wasteland”

Who is the third who walks besides you (CLD p41)
Now sleeps the crimson petal, now the white and all thy heart lies open into me. (CLD p46)

Swinsburne

From too much love of leaving- - - wins somewhere safe to sea (CLD p46)

Iqbal

Thou doesn’t create night but I made the lamps - - - and it is I who turn a poison in to an antidote (CLD p50)

Byron

Place me on sunsum’s marbled steep, where nothing, save the waves and I - - - dash down your cup of simian wine.

Lawrence

Now launch the small ship, now as the body die, darkly for we cannot steer and have no pot.

Eliot- “Four quarlets”

Time the destroyer is time the preserver

Cavafy

To certain people there comes a day when they must say the great yes or great no (WSWS p37)

The Bhagwad Gita
He whose joy is within and whose light - - - he who is free from all attachments.

Anita Desai’s poems

The north wind doth blow
And we shall have snow

Every night when I go out

- - -

Half a pound of toppeny rice

- - -

For every evil under the sun.

German poem

Kommt ein vogel geffofer

Setzt sich nider mein fuss

Not ein brioflein in schneble

Vor der mutter ein gruss. (BB)

The above German poem makes no sense to the reader.

Besides these many other poems are quoted from “The journey from the east”, “Siddharta”, “Kathaupnishada” and many more. There is
an ample use of German poems. Unfortunately they have not being translated into English language.

Description of rains.

Anita Desai is a nature lover. Rains and storms have being compared with the moods of the characters.

For example:

That night a great storm broke over the Indian Ocean and lashed the city. It began with daggers of lightning striking through the black clouds baked in the sea and peals of thunder that echoed from one building to another. (VBS p120)

She heard an ominous rumble of thunder. All night lightning flashed and thunder boomed while the coconut tress cracked and swang dangerously over the hut. The sounds of the wind and the sea where so loud that the girls hid under their blankets, saying that ears ached, not admitting that they did it out of fear. (VBS p123)

Then Nanda Kaul went on raising her voices above the drumming of the rain on the roof and the booming and echoing of the thunder in the hills that followed the rain. (FOM)
Repetition of words:

This too seems to be a style of Anita Desai. Indians have a tendency of repeating words. Hence keeping this in mind she has used it in the English narration too. This shows Anita Desai, though living abroad at present, is still rooted in India and in Indian soil very firmly.

For example.

You think only of money-money-money. (CLD p38)

They are eating eating eating my hands. He challenged Deven aggressively. Worries worries worries (CLD)

Still, it was just a cage in a row of cages, cages, cages trap, trap (IC 131)

I could not have borne it now, I was filled to the point of destruction. God, god I gasped- enough, enough, enough. (CTP p24)

Pia- pia they cry “Lover lover, mio-mio. I die I die. (CTP p95)

From far, far run and hide run and hide- if you can miserable fool! Ha ha fool, fool, fool.

Calcutta, Calcutta like the rattle Calcutta Calcutta, the very pulse beat. (VC p41)
Hurry, hurry Mrs. Curry? (VC 104)

The shooting and the killing and the killing and the killing.

(BB p21)

Here is a beautiful way of using rhyming words

For example:

Nanda kaul on the stool with her hand hanging, the black telephone hanging, the long wire dangling. (FOM p145)

Yipping and Yapping. (CLD p3)

Singing and Slinging. (CLD p3)

Anita Desai’s narrative skill in exposing the blind faith of the Indians

Example:

But look, look at the horoscope. Stars do not lie, and so it is best to warn you, prepare you. (CTP p29)

She had come on a pilgrimage, to beg for the miracle of keeping her baby unborn. (WSWS p31)

His chelas called him a saint, his critics a Charlton, the villagers a wizard and each produced evidence to prove his theory (WSWS p75)

If the mother falls ill, it seems the devotee must fall ill too. (JI)
Go put one ash packet under her pillow. It will drive away the fever demon (VBS p52)

Anita Desai’s art in the study of human psychology, the mental traumas etc. are worth studying in the novel *Cry the Peacock*, before killing her husband, Maya thinks;

It had to be one of us, you see, and it was so clear that it was I who was meant to live, you see. (CTP p16)

Writers were always vain bunch from Kalidasa downwards. Blasted fools the lot of em. It’s only a waste. (IC p130)

Tell her to go shove it up that old major of hers, all her stinking cheques. (VC p134)

The creative impulse had no chance against the overpowering desire to destroy. (WSWS p46)

She felt tired, disheveled and vacant as she was like a player at the end of the performance, clearing the stage, picking up the costumes in equal parts- saddened and relived. (WSWS p152)

That night she dreamt she was squatting on a dark hillside and suddenly the baby came slithering out of her in a stream of blood. She picked up and spread out her skirt and placed the infant upon it. It lay there in coils, its hand buried within.
As she touched and tried to unwrap it she found it was a snake, cold and limp and drew back her hand in horror (JI p92)

Some examples of hatred

A drunkard- fit for nothing (VBS)

May be a poisonous snake will bite him. He may step on one and be bitten- then he would die. (VBS)

Crushed back, crushed down into the earth she lay rapped, broken, still and finished (FOM 142)

Anita Desai has nowhere mentioned and rape scenes except in the novel “Fire on the Mountain”. The rape of an old lady- rapped and crushed and killed by the corrupt political party. Anita Desai has stripped naked the Indian mentality of the male dominated world. Any women who tried not to abide by the social norms, had to be penalized. Another aspect of Anita Desai is her art of comparing the mental state of humans along with the nature.

Example

With the news of Iladas’s murder, she was grief stricken- her dilemma, her grief is compared with a forest fire, which her grandchild Raka had brought. Look Nani, I have set a forest
on fire”. The above sentence that concludes the novel “Fire on the Mountain is a master piece. It justifies the title too.

On the new generation:

Example

When we were young, we believed, we stood on the rooftops and shouted to the world that we would come and conquer it. But the young don’t do that anymore. How sad to be so realistic, so cynical, so without dreams. (VC p16)

On nature

Example

The birds are the last creatures on earth. Everything else has being captured and tamed and enslaved- tigers behind the bards of the zoo, lions in the safari park, men and women in houses like matchboxes working in factories that are prisons- only the birds are free. I love them for the freedom, perhaps I would also like to leave all. All these ugliness we have made on earth and fly with them - - - when it comes to people I don’t know anything Dr. Syedali. (VBS)

On urbanization and adaptation

Example
Adapt. That is what you are going to do- just like sparrows and pigeons that have adapted themselves to city life, on food left overs and rubbish thrown to them in the streets instead of searching for grains and insects in the field- he explained, so you will have to adept to you new environment. (VBS p155)

On the Indian house wife

Example

What makes a wife? (CLD p110)

She was a virgin when she was widowed (CLD 108)

Aunt Mira treated and drew out all her stings but Tara kept hers hidden. (CLD p108)

On the poets

Example

“Poetry?” He shot as Deven harshly, “Do you think a poet can be ground between stones and bled in order to produce poetry for you? You think you can switch on that mincing machine, and it will instantly produce or your length of raw, red minced meat that you can carry off to your professors to eat?” (IC p156)
Stylistic aspects of Anita Desai

Her characters are in an adult stage in the beginning of the novel but then she goes backward to describe their childhood and its associations. In fact it is like digging up a tunnel in a sense like going back. This process is one of trying to relive the past. She explores a very tiny section of this territory and this is an interesting technique then covering a large area. She uses flashbacks and interior monologues in order to build up a situation. Her novels are a psychological release.

Anita Desai’s narrative technique has a pattern in so far as there are journeys into the past and into the world of childhood and one is a changed being at the end of the journey. Chronology is of no significance, what emerges as significant is the focus, which to begin with is narrow, but gradually it widens until it begins to expand in space and time. She abandons the role of chronicler and contents herself by focusing the lens in an attempt to understand and define reality. Her technique is connected with her choice of subjective mode, a choice apparently made to avoid some of the problems likely to arise from writing about India and Indians in the English language, as a way of bridging the gap between cultural and lingual situations. In the case of an Indian writer the problem is not of lingual or cultural uncertainties but
one of political overtones. The need to look for and to relate to an Indian
tradition clashes in part with writing in English. Thus the need for
subterfuge or an apology, for a cautious effort to justify this pat of the
Indian experience. In this lie the roots of most of the controversy
centered around the use of English as a medium of expressing Indian
situations, and the question of the literary credentials of the writers doing
so.

Language relates a writer to one strand, culture and background
may relate to another; and sex again to a third. As Elaine Showalter has
very convincingly stated in “A literature of their own” (p14) there is a
feminine tradition, which frequently steps outside the main current as
defined but the masculine approach. In approaching the work of Desai
all three strands are equally important. While the literary tradition is the
lingual one- the British and American- the limits of language are
transcended when she relates to the European tradition and also to the
Indian cultural and social scene. Marriage, love-relationships, emotional
flirtations, economic independence all have to fall within this cultural
pattern and meaning has to be found within this context. Showlater
tracing the feminine tradition divides into three major phase of phases.
First, the prolonged phase of limitation, second, three phase of protest
and thirdly that of self-discovery. These phases correspond to (a)
emphasizing the feminine role and living up to it. (b) Refuting the role and rejecting it (c) moving towards a self-awareness. Chronologically Showalter divides these phases as roughly being applicable to the periods from 1487 to 1880, 1880 to 1920 and 1920 to the present. Desai’s work if examined against this framework falls into the third phase and directly relates to it. The earlier phases do not find a fair representation in the tradition of Indian writing in English. Her women-centered novels are not necessarily about women. They are search of a meaning, a search of something to complete their lives. Violence is a central metaphor in almost all her novels. Emotional violence, political violence, and physical violence are scattered. Desai focuses on the kind of violence women, as women are capable of exercising whether it is Dharma’s wife or Monisha’s mother-in-law men mostly stay on the fringe of a Desai novel yet at times they are the protagonists. Men are either marginally present or entirely absent. But this physical absence does not entail an absence from the minds and lives of their women relations. Fantasy is used at different levels- at the level of incident and imagination and also at the purely lingual level. Memory of the past in someway or the other is thus used as an important narrative technique there is hardly a happy marriage in her novels, other relationships are
unsatisfactory and one sided. Themes of escapism and flights are prominent. We find abundant use of animal images.

Anita Desai has used different fictional techniques according to the demands of the story. She has made use of poetry in German language. Many Hindi words have being used in order to give a perfect Indian background- the use of German language in “Baumgartner’s Bombay” is not offered in translation into English. Anita Desai’s excellence lies in nature’s description, flashback scheme, unmasking the mental trauma of the female psychic etc. She uses the stream of consciousness technique, contrasting characters and uses symbolism with highly effective use of language. The portrayal of the “misfit” female characters, who do not want to be heroic but are struggling all the time for what they do not have- all seem to focus the novels on the inner climate of sensibility, interplay of thoughts, feelings and emotions which is reflected in language syntax and imaginary aspects of existentialism that form the total frame work of a stories. After reading Anita Desai’s novel, we, as readers are left highly emotionalized. Her characters, the stark realities, the frustrated people, the social atmosphere etc show no solution towards the end of her stories. None of her stories come to a happy end. Nothing is shown to have achieved anything. Even so Anita Desai triumphs in ruffling the feathers of her readers. She maintains that her
primary goal is to discover “the truth that is nine-tenths of the ice-berg that lies submerged beneath the one-tenth visible portion we call “reality”. She leaves it to her readers to either accept or reject her characters.