The most genuine and stable of all republics is the Republic of Letters. It is not created by legislative acts, nor based on man-made constitutions, but builds itself unobtrusively but surely on the achievements of the intellect and the triumphs of genius. This Republic encircles the globe, transcending, alike, the frontiers of States and the barriers of language, because literature, being a record of the thoughts and feelings of man, takes all humanity in its stride, regardless of race or colour. The denizens of the Realm of Letters are "citizens of the world" in the truest sense, because their interests, labours and achievements are not circumscribed by the limitations of nationality and speech, and the prestige and renown acquired by them are usually worthier and more durable than the fickle fortunes of political rulers. "Scholarship and kingship," says an ancient text, "can never be equal. A ruler receives homage in his own country only but the scholar is honoured everywhere." Scholars and writers, indeed, do as much to unite the world as politicians do to divide it. Genius takes everything in its sweep, and nothing is so remote as to be

*विद्वानं च नृपत्वं च नैव तुल्यं कदाचन।
स्वदेशे पूजयते राजा विद्वानु सवेत्र पूजयते॥ कौतिल्योऽर्थशास्त्रः.
out of its range. A German scholar\(^1\) may choose to delve deep into the treasures of ancient Indian lore and present them to the west through his monumental interpretations of the "Sacred Books of the East." An Englishman\(^2\) may produce a majestic blank-verse rendering of the "Bhagvad Gita" which is still acknowledged as the best. An Indian girl\(^3\) may create a Romance in the French language as well as poems and stories in English and win the praise of a British scholar and critic.\(^4\) A young woman, half German and half Bengali by descent, and a Gujarati by marriage, may adopt the English language as her facile medium and emerge triumphantly as one of the foremost among the Indo-Anglian writers of fiction.

Before discussing in detail the Craft of Fiction in Amita Desai, it would be desirable and appropriate to sketch the background by describing briefly the progress of what is known as "Indo-Anglian" writing from its beginnings to the time of Mrs. Desai's debut in 1963.

II

The literature produced by Indian writers using the medium of the English language is now so voluminous and has

\(^{1,2,3,4,5}\) The allusions are, respectively, to Max Mueller, Sir Edwin Arnold, Toru Dutt, Sir Edmund Gosse, and Amita Desai.
attained such a high quality that it is no longer a mere off-shoot of English literature (as it must have been regarded in the beginning), but has taken root independently as a distinguishable body of literature, with its own identity, individuality and its own distinct qualities. It has, as Mulk Raj Anand has pointed out, "come to stay as part of world literature," and qualitatively, it need not shun comparison with any other such body of writing in any modern language. From Rabindra Nath Tagore, through Mulk Raj Anand, R.K.Narayan and Raj Rao to Mita Desai, and Nayantara Sehgal, generations of writers have already won world-wide acclaim and attracted appreciative attention from readers and critics at home and abroad.

This steadily growing literature, born out of the "British connection" and deriving substance and nourishment from the impact, interaction, and fusion of two cultures, has been given various names at different times in accordance with the mood and the milieu, but the title at present favoured by consensus is "Indo-Anglian" literature — an exact reversal of the appellation "Anglo Indian" which was more favoured in the environment of the "Raj".

English today is regarded as one of the Indian languages. It is perhaps the one and the only language through which a writer can easily, so to say, traverse long distances and reach every
nook and corner of the country. Though it is not actually spoken by the entire population, it is widely used for literary expression by the Indians. Today, it is not something operating within a limited circle of society; increasing literacy has resulted in its use as a medium operating at all levels. For practical purposes, English is perhaps a more convenient and more acceptable "lingua franca" for inter-communication between widely separated parts of the country than the officially-prescribed "national" language. It must be admitted as one of the facts of modern history that the British connection had a fairly profound effect on the intellectual life of the Indian people. The Indian mind, too, has a peculiar capacity for assimilating foreign cultures and influences. So, English is no longer a stranger in India but has become an integral part of the Indian way of life. It was Lord Macaulay's historic minute of 1835 that further accelerated its development in India. His recommendation that English should be made the medium of instruction, that "the object of the British Government ought to be the promotion of European literature and sciences --- and that all funds appropriated for the purpose of education would be best employed on, English education alone," contributed much to the spread of English education in India. The need of and the demand for, higher education in India in the fields of science, medicine and technology, and the frequent interaction of the Indians
with the Britishers further aided this impact unavoidably, the English language came to be used in private and official matters, and ultimately, became the medium of intellectual expression. That is how Indians produced a new body of literature called the Indo-English literature. Mazzulay's minute in which he prophesied with exceptional insight that the British Empire would be succeeded by another kind of empire that would always remain there and would not perish, seems to have come true in the sense that the tongue of the westerners has been left behind for the Indians to take up as one of the powerful vehicles of their speech and communication.

During the "Raj", English became increasingly popular as a medium of social communication, and was adopted by many who wished to parade a "stylised speech." Kipling's Mr. Mukherjee shows this stylised language when he tells his British senior — 'Your honour puts yourself to much trouble correcting my English and doubtless the final letter will be much better literature but it will go from me Mukherjee to him Banerjee and Banerjee will understand it a great deal better as I Mukherjee write it than as your Honour corrects it."

III

In the beginning of the nineteenth century, practically
no attempt was made by Indians to write fiction in English, most of the effort at that time being restricted to verse. Writers like Henry Derozio, Michael Madhusudan Dutt and others were engaged in exploiting the 'verse' form of literary expression. Prose was occasionally used by national leaders like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, who were motivated by political concerns and social and religious reforms. In a way, the period from 1800 to 1850 was the period of social criticism and reform, followed by a few decades, 1850-1885, when many notable translations of ancient Indian classics appeared. After this, in the period through nineteen twenties to the Gandhian Era (1920-47), the prevailing stimulant was nationalism, because national awareness was often the central theme in their work. The writings immediately after independence were a continuation, in a more intensified form, of what had already been done in the period preceding it.

In the later half of the nineteenth century, there also appeared a distinct and interesting species of writing which consisted of sketches dealing with Indian domestic and rural life. The purpose of these sketches was mainly to expose the customs, the superstitions and the poor economic conditions of the Indian masses with a view to bringing about social and economic reform. Lal Bahari Day's Govinda Sasan (1874) was followed by Behramji Malabari's Gujarat and the Gujaratis (1882).
Then there was T. Ramakrishna Pillai's *Life in an Indian Village* (1891). These sketches provide pictures of Indian life though they cannot exactly be described as creative attempts in fiction. Some writers bent their literary talents towards retelling ancient legends, myths and tales. One may mention Lal Behari's *Folk Tales of Bengal* (1883), P. V. Ramaswami Raja's *Indian Fables* (1889), M. N. Dutt's *Glimpses from Indian Classics* (1893-94).

Apart from sketches and tales there were a few attempts in fiction writing also. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-1894) was the first Indian to write in English. His novel *Raj Mohan's Wife* (1864) was a romantic tale of domestic life in a village. The most important thing in Indo-Anglian fiction in the later part of the nineteenth century was the advent of women writers. Many of them dealt with the social prejudices women suffered in those days on account of the inferior social status accorded to them. There was Raj Lakshma Debi's *The Hindu Wife* (1895), and Krupabai Satthianandhan's two works — *Kamala: A Story of Hindu Life* (1894), and *Saruma: A Story of Native Christian Life* (1895). The most notable name among the women writers of that period was that of Toru Dutt, who in her short span of life, not only produced *A Sheaf Gleamed in French Fields* (1876) and *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* (1882), but also wrote one unfinished novel *Mansa: or The Young Spanish Maid* (1878), and a complete romance in French *Le Journal de*
Till (1879)* This variegated output in so short a time held a very lofty promise which, however, could not be realised, because Toru Dutt's genius was snuffed out by an untimely death. Snatched away in her early twenties by the same disease as John Keats, she became, like him, one of "the inheritors of unfulfilled renown."

In the last part of the nineteenth century, a number of Bengali novels were translated into English, but there was no significant Indo-English novel in the true sense of the word. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's five novels — Durgesh Mandini (1880), The Poison Tree (1884), Kopal Kundala (1885), Krishna Kunta's Will (1895), and Two Rines (1897) were translated from Bengali into English, thus reaching a larger readership outside Bengal. Some Bengali writers, in their desire for wider publicity and recognition among English-speaking circles, translated their own works into English. For example, Hemchand Dutt translated two of his six novels — The Lake of Palma (1902) and The Slave Girl of Agra (1909). There is a vein of social reform in these stories. Rabindra Nath Tagore, better known as a poet and the author of Gostbagali, was a great success with his novel Choker Bali (1902) translated into English as Himadini by Krishna Kripalani. It is a convincing psychological study of the actions and reactions of the individuals in the story, exploiting a theme
similar to that dealt with by Bankim. Still another writer
Sarat Chandra Chatterjee earned much popularity through his
writings like Srikanta, Grihastha, Father Dahi, Hirrods and
Sea Prama, some of which have been translated into English.
These stories have an element of realism, the writer identifying
himself with the downtrodden, the "have-not" sections of
society. This theme finds an echo in the best writings of
Mulk Raj Anand in the twentieth century. All these novels,
though they may not be treated as 'original' works in Indo-
Anglian writing, have a historical significance as precursors
of the Indo-English fiction of the present age.

IV

The Gandhian Era (1920-47) witnessed an unprecedented
growth in literary activity. The national awareness and the
social and economic problems of the age enthused a number of
writers to express themselves creatively through fiction. Of
these, K.S.Venkataramani, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K.Narayan, and
Raja Rao are worth mentioning. Venkataramani's significant
works are Kurnura, the Tiller and Kundan, the Patriot,
published in 1927 and 1932 respectively. Mulk Raj Anand also
became a spokesman of the spirit of the times through his
Untouchable (1935), Coolie (1936), Two Leaves and a Bud (1937),
Across the Black Waters (1940), The Sword and the Sickle (1942),
Bw Mi Heart (1945) • R.K. Narayan chose the anglicized Indian as his province, and published four novels and a collection of short stories in the period between 1935-47 — Swami and Friends (1935), The Bachelor of Arts (1937), The Dark Room (1938), Malgudi Days (1943), Creolen and Other Stories (1943), Deshu and Other Stories (1943). Raja Rao struck a slightly different note by weaving his thoughts, and feelings into his fictional works — Kanthapura (1938), The Cow of the Barricades (1947), The Serpent and the Rope (1962) was an aspiring success and is being translated into a number of languages.

The present literary scene in India presents a great variety of talent and interest with such writers as Bhambhui Bhattacharya (So Many Hungers, Music for Mohini, He Who Rides a Tiger); Kamala Markandaya (Some Inner Fury, Nectar in a Sieve); Khushwant Singh (Train to Pakistan); Santanu Rama Rao (Remember the House); Anita Desai and the rest. The conflict between the East and the West, between innovation and tradition are some of the most recurrent themes in present day Indo-English writing.

Anita Desai (b. 1937) is now one of the outstanding
notables among Indian writers in English. This gifted young
novelist — who often reminds the reader of Emily Bronte, Henry
James and Proust, and has been called "the Virginia woolf
among the Indian fictionists" — has discovered "a marvellous
elasticity and expressiveness" in English language. W.B.Yeats' 

advice to Sarojini Naidu — "Don't write in English. Write in
your mother-tongue" — seems to have carried no weight — either
with Sarojini Naidu or with other Indian writers. Many have
preferred English to their mother-tongue. Toru Dutt, Sarojini
Naidu and Sri Aurobindo wrote in English, though their mother-
tongue was Bengali. The same is true of Anita Desai who,
despite her German and Bengali heredity, adopted English as
her medium. She herself confesses that she revels in the use
of this tongue, "I am very glad," she says, "to be writing in
a language as rich, as flexible, supple, adaptable, varied and
vital as English. It is the language of both reason and
instinct, of sense and sensibility — it answers my every need."

Her father was Bengali and her mother, German. This, she says
"has brought two separate strands into my life. My roots are
divided because of the Indian soil on which I grew and the
European culture which I inherited from my other." This freedom
from regional identity confers a certain "observer" quality on
her writing. Says she, "I am conscious of this when I read
western reviews of my books, — Books set in a remote corner of
the world about people they don't know. I realise I have a bridge
between these two worlds ---- I don't share this /aspect/ with other Indian writers."

A novelist primarily of thought, emotion and sensation, Anita Desai has already won a significant niche in the edifice of Indo-Anglian fiction as representative of the "poetic novel" in the tradition of Melville, James and Conrad, and the "psychological novel" in the tradition of George Eliot. With profound understanding and penetrating insight, she is constantly concerned either with the problem of communication between man and woman, between the individual and society, or with the phenomenon of conflict — whether it is the conflict between a person and the world around him (or her) or it is the conflict between two cultures. Even her first novel was described as one of "the most poetic and evocative" of Indo-Anglian novels, and has drawn the comment that "she remains a disturbing and demanding presence in Indo-Anglian fiction."

VI

A writer of such performance and such promise is doubtless a fit subject for detailed critical appraisal. That is why a small but respectable body of critical literature about Anita Desai already exists. Besides a large number of articles, essays,
papers which have appeared in literary journals or in edited collections dealing with Indo-English literature, there are already a few full-length studies also.

It may reasonably be asked why another study is necessary about an author who has written merely half-a-dozen novels. It is true that Amrita Devi's output, to date, relatively small but even in this small output, she has given unmistakable evidence of a mind endowed with creative genius and a very high level of intellectual and imaginative power. The outstanding success with which she handles the medium of English and adapts it to the purposes of her expression has imparted, so to say, a fresh dimension to English writing in this country; and the maturity of a consummate artist which she displays, has added another facet to the craft of fiction. The scope of that craft, however, seems endless and with every succeeding work, a master artist reveals new features and lineaments of the art. That is why the process of appraisal, like the process of creation, is a continuing one. The aim of the present study is to deal thoroughly with her art as a whole, examining in full detail all her extant works—short stories as well as novels—with a view to discovering and identifying the ingredients of her technique in reference to all the elements of the art of fiction writing—like these, structure, characterisation, style,
Anita Desai seems to write "instinctively," as she comments somewhere: "I have been writing since the age of 7, as instinctively as I breathe. It is a necessity to me; I find it is in the process of writing that I am able to think, to feel, and to realize at the highest pitch." And elsewhere, she reiterates; "Ever since I learnt to write at the age of six or seven, I was simply following an instinct. It was a compulsion, an inner need. The scenes and impressions, moods and emotions that made up the world did not seem to find a final form till I had written them down. While writing, I could discover their true value in the scale of things. This has become such a deeply ingrained habit, it is like chain-smoking; I chain-smoke with words, with books. There is a difference of course, what begins as a self-indulgence eventually becomes a self-discipline." It is through writing that she attempts to go beneath the surface of things — "writing is to me a process of discovering the truth — the truth that is nine-tenths of the iceberg that lies submerged beneath the one-tenth visible portion we call Reality. Writing is my way of plunging to the depths and exploring this underlying truth. All my writing is an effort to discover, to underline and convey the true significance of things."

Not writing alone, Reading also forms the mainstay of her existence. It helps her mentally, emotionally and morally.
Indeed, books are her most precious belongings. Contact with the great minds of the past — "all the thinking that matters" as she puts it — has been to her a source of moral strength. And naturally, that contact has also had some effect on her own style and technique.