Of the several creative elements which enter into the building of a novel, the one which comes closest to the personality of the novelist is style. Buffon's old dictum "le style est de l'homme même" (The style is the man himself) may have been quoted ad nauseam, but it is as relevant today as it was when he said it in 1750, because nowhere is the writer's individuality more intimately, or more unmistakably, reflected than in the way he uses his language. Alexander Pope's description of style as "the dress of thought" was merely one of his clever superficialities, but centuries earlier, the Greek rhetorician Demetrius (345-283 B.C.) appeared to have successfully perceived the near kinship of style and personality when he classified the former into four kinds: 'plain', 'stately', 'polished', and 'powerful'—adjectives which could well be used to classify personalities! When constructing his plot, the writer draws on the story-teller's art; in characterization, it is his intellectual power and psychological insight, but in his style, so to say, he epitomizes himself, and expresses his very being. It is style, more than all else, which imparts to a
work of art its distinctiveness and individuality—its "recognisability". As a familiar face or a well-known voice would immediately register itself on our senses, so a passage, written by an author with well-developed nuances of style, would make an experienced reader declare that it "must have been written by --.

II

The Indo-English writer has been "accused" of writing in a language not his own. It has been argued that English is an acquired language for him, not his mother-tongue; the popular notion is that English is the living speech of people in only such countries as the United States, Australia etc. As regards the Indians, "English is perhaps in the brain of the Indian, but not in his blood and bones." The complex fate of an Indian writer in English, is thus inevitable. As Raja Rao says in his preface to the Kanthapura:

One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks mal-treated in an alien language. I use the word 'alien', yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as Part of Us....

It is ironical that while Indian writers in English have received praise from many Britons and Americans, they are often condemned by their own countrymen. The American scholar, Thomas Pyles accords the same place to Indian English as to any other variety of English in any part of the world. He observes, "There are, of course, in addition to American English, Australian English, Canadian English, South-African English, Indian English, among others — all as legitimately English as that form of the language which happens to be spoken in the mother-country."  

"The Indian", says Professor Quirk, "usually speaks a form of English that is 'full' in a very obvious sense."


At the other end of the scale, a writer like John Wain says that Indian English, being a lingua franca, "lacks the fineness of the nuance that makes literature possible..." David McCutcheon reacts against the Indian writer's use of English for an entirely different reason -- "English as a medium of expression works as a barrier against real insight into the Indian mind and circumstances."  

Unfortunately this kind of attitude towards the use of English by Indians is sometimes carried to fanatical extremes. For example, an eminent Hindi writer angrily asks: "Why can't the Indian writer write in his mother-tongue? Why must he choose an alien language which hardly two per cent of his own countrymen understand and which is very soon to go the way all Englishmen went thirty years ago?" He continues, "To be Indian as a writer is first and foremost to write Indian, to write in an Indian language. ... To be Indian must

---


mean giving expression to what is unique in our experience... India cannot have a literature -- I mean a great literature and one in which her spirit will find expression -- except in an Indian language."

The implied insinuation is that by writing in a foreign tongue, the writer gives a distorted, deformed and inadequate picture of Indian life. But as Sri Aurobindo puts it, "It is not true that one cannot write first class things in a learned language." In an interview published in Indian and Foreign Review (November 15, 1971), Mulk Raj Anand has recalled that Mahatma Gandhi once advised him: "The need today -- is to say your "say" in any language that you can command sufficiently well. You will find the echo of your mother-tongue will come into this if you are honest and do not imitate other writers." In the words of Kanta Charan Srivastava: "Any tongue that obeys one's call is a fit medium for creative self-expression. Some Indians write in English because it answers to their creative urge better than the tongue in which they imbibed their mother's milk." English

---


is as good a language for Indians as their mother-tongue.

"After all when we delve a little into the concept of the
mother-tongue we find that it is nothing but a language in
which we are brought up, not necessarily the language spoken
by the mother. It is the language in which a man can express
himself freely and without any inhibitions and the fact that
so many talented Indian writers and even geniuses have taken
to English as the medium of expression of their innermost
thoughts and struggles, goes to show the extent to which
English has established itself as one of the Indian
languages."\textsuperscript{11} Says Amarjit Singh in his review on
contemporary Indo-English literature: "The Indo-Anglian
writer's choice of English is a natural one in the multi-
lingual Indian situation."\textsuperscript{12}

Bhupal Singh deems Indian writing in English as
being inferior and inadequate says he --

Indian writers and story-tellers, on the whole,
do not compare favourably with Anglo-Indian
writers. That they write in a foreign-tongue
is a serious handicap in itself. Then few of
them possess any knowledge of the art of
fiction; they do not seem to realise that prose-

\textsuperscript{11}A. R. Wadia, \textit{The Future of English in India} (Bombay:

\textsuperscript{12}"Contemporary Indo-English Literature: An Approach,"
\textit{Aspects of Indian Writing in English}, ed. M.K. Naik (Delhi:
fiction, in spite of its freedom, is subject to definite laws. In plot construction they are weak, and in characterization weaker still. Their leaning towards didacticism and allegory is a further obstacle to their success as novelists. As writers of short-stories, they have occasionally achieved success. But with very few exceptions, their contribution to Anglo-Indian fiction is of little importance, we have to learn much before we can 'surprise the world with native merchandise' or with 'bright divine imagings' in prose fiction.  

No doubt now this astonishing 'native merchandise' has actually come of age. And there is no denying the fact that Indo- Anglian literature has acquired a distinct standing amongst the literatures of the world. Says Nalk Raj Anand: "The richness and variety of this writing alone ensures it a permanent place. I am convinced that what is available of the work of the younger writers can compete, in the quality of attainment, with any of the other literatures of the period before the second world war." According to M. B. Darrett Indo- Anglian writing in recent years has attained distinctiveness of style and enjoys international appeal. She observes, "No longer is Indian English bookish and freely garnished with phrases and turns of expressions taken from the great


A large number of Indo-Anglian writers have shown a remarkable skill in bending the English language to their own artistic purposes for the delineation of Indian life and sensibility. Indo-Anglian writers themselves have asserted that they found this foreign tongue the most suitable medium of expression — a medium they could mould according to their respective requirements. R.K. Narayan, speaking at the Commonwealth Literature Conference held at Leeds in 1964, said:

English has proved that if a language has flexibility, any experience can be communicated through it, even if it has to be paraphrased sometimes, rather than conveyed, and even if the factual detail ... is partially understood. We are still experimentalists. ... We are not attempting to write Anglo-Saxon English. The English language, through sheer resilience and mobility, is now undergoing a process of Indianisation, in the same manner as it adopted U.S. citizenship over a century ago, with the difference that it is the major language there, but here one of the fifteen.16

Another noted Indo-Anglian writer, Mulk Raj Anand says, "I

---

15 The Modern Indian Novels in English: A Comparative Approach (Brussels: Editions de l' Institut Sociologique, Université libre de Bruxelles, 1966).

hope that my experiments in writing the new language, Indian English, along with the works of many other colleagues, will come to be read by Indian students of the English language. This may help to show why Indian English, different from the sister languages of our country as well as from English, is yet an attempted fusion of both. It is a kind of metamorphosis, which is as significant as Irish English, or Welsh English or Australian English."

Thus, at present, Indian English can no longer be regarded as an "inferior sub-standard version of English." Due to its resilient nature, it has come to claim an important place in India. Says B.S. Goyal, English is a flexible language and as such "it can accommodate the experience of diverse people belonging to diverse races and cultures. Therefore, though English is not an Indian language, it occupies a privileged position in India even today, not only because of historical conditions, but also because of its resilient flexibility, that makes it possible to be a medium of expression of Indian experience and sensibility." Conrad, Pound and many other writers have shaped their literary tastes

from languages other than their own, and have attained remarkable success in their literary careers. Such is also the case with an increasing number of Indo-Anglian writers, their choice of the English language seems natural and inevitable.

III

The output of Anita Desai is, as yet, by no means prolific, but it must be admitted that she has already succeeded in evolving a distinctive and "recognisable" style of her own. She discovers "a marvellous elasticity and expressiveness" in the English language, though she was expected by the critics to write either in Bengali or German (her father was Bengali and mother German), she chose neither of those two tongues, but rather found English to be a suitable link language, a compromise. She states unequivocally that her choice of English was not a deliberate and conscious act. It was perhaps the language that chose her! She is not aware of any act of selection whatsoever, she started writing stories in English at the age of seven and has been

doing so since. The English language satisfies every need of hers. She says, "...I am very glad 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...I do believe it is even capable of taking on an Indian character, an Indian flavour, purely, by reflection." To her, the English language is analogous to a plant that one would like to raise in one's garden—a beautiful but difficult one. If it is planted in the sun, it does not do well. If pulled out and planted in the shade—it has a tendency to droop. And if this plant is moved to a damp or a dry spot—the result is fatal, indeed. She regards it as a refugee in the land. And, like a refugee, it is, she feels, "astonishingly tenacious." Desai thinks that she has learnt how to live with the English language, how to deal with the problems it creates—mainly by ignoring them. She finds comfort in the words Henry James wrote to a French student of English—"One's own language is one's mother, but the language one adopts as


21Ibid., p. 31.
a career, as a study, is one's wife, and it is with one's wife that one sets up house. English is a very faithful and well-conducted person, but she will expect you too not to commit infidelities. On those terms, she will keep your house well.\textsuperscript{22}

So much for her commitment to the English language. She feels that she has simply side-stepped the problems created by this language. This she has done, not deliberately, but unconsciously and intuitively -- "by not writing the kind of social document that demands the creation of realistic and typical characters and the use of realistic and typical dialogue.\textsuperscript{23} Her novels have been classified as psychological and the language employed by her, is therefore, of the "subjective" kind. Even when two characters meet, it is this particular type of language they make use of -- the language of their thoughts, their interior selves -- which is devoid of geography and can be written in any language whatsoever. She states, "It has been my personal luck that my temperament and circumstances have combined to give me the shelter, privacy, and solitude required for the writing of such novels, thereby avoiding problems a more objective writer has to deal with, since he depends

\textsuperscript{22}\textit{The Indian Writer's Problems}, op.cit., p.31.

\textsuperscript{23}\textit{Ibid.}
whether one writes in one's native or in a foreign tongue, is not essentially important. It can be done, according to the writer, in any language. Only it must be done spontaneously, compulsively, and subconsciously.

Anita Desai treats writing as an art that requires silence and privacy. It cannot be practised in the centre of a busy, sociable studio, or in a loud, well-populated home. She does not actually enjoy writing, sees it as a tremendous strain -- lovely, exacting, and unrewarding. But she is not averse to writing, rather she feels that it gives the day a point, some value, some reason. Not writing, is for her, far, far worse. Then she feels, one is as if dead, life has no meaning left, the day is nothing but a hole into which one has fallen. "Writing is hell, but not writing is infinitely worse." says she, "I write out of a compulsion, I wouldn't be whole if I didn't write. Ever since I was little, I've been writing stories which stretched and stretched and became novels on a small scale. This could become self-indulgent -- writing only for yourself -- but a novel has rules, a form, and one has to submit to its discipline. At times it can drive you to utter despair ... at other times it is pure joy -- there's no other

24 "The Indian Writer's Problems", OP. cit., p. 32.

feeling to match it." She writes, she says, because "writing gives a form, a significance to my experiences. Nothing is real till I write it. It is an exploration of scenes I have seen of life flowing by. Through my writing, experiences crystallise, and can be conveyed to others." She feels that creative art is a secret skill, and that to make it public, to scrutinize it in the cold light of reason, is to commit an act of murderous violence. It is something that must remain "secret and silent".

IV

Anita Desai possesses the gift of a very minute and searching vision. This is her forte. Whether we consider Adit's gradual homesickness and his urge to go back to his own native land, or Sita going to the island of Memori after a lapse of many-many years, or such trivial incidents as a tea-party, an evening-walk -- we are always struck by the writer's fidelity to life. It is keen observation that

27 Ibid.
provides her with plots and situations from the immediate surroundings of real life. Her third novel *Kite* depicts the story of the Indian immigrants in England -- there is a realistic attempt to render the hard times of those people in an alien environment:

There are days in which the life of an alien appears enthrallingly rich and beautiful to him, and that of a homebody, too dull, too stale to return to ever. Then he hears a word in the tube or notices an expression on an English face that overturns his latest decision and, drawing himself together, he feels he can never bear to be the unwanted immigrant but must return to his own land, however abject or dull, where he has at least, a place in the sun, security, status, and freedom. (p.96)

Her latest novel *Clear Light of Day* records, in her own words "the tremendous changes that a Hindu family goes through since 1947." These changes that occurred during partition are depicted through impressions that are marked by a realistic touch: "The city was in flames that summer. Every night fires lit up the horizon beyond the city walls so that the sky was luridly tinted with festive flames of orange and pink and then a column of white smoke would rise and stand solid as an obelisk in the dark" (p.44).

---

Anita Desai infuses in her style a vigour and vitality rarely found in the world of her predecessors. It is elevated with deep observation and insight. The gift of close and powerful observation serves as an instrument for presenting realistic details in concrete terms. As a result, her details are revealing, vivid, and life-like, "Sita pushed hysterically through a battery of them till she saw Karen, standing with his head bowed to the blows flying above his head, his knees rubbing together, his mouth wide-open and tears trickling out of the corners of it." (p.28). Notice how dexterously an appropriate and perceptive picture has been drawn: "Baba was already asleep on his bed... one leg stretched out and the other slightly bent at the knee as if he were running, half-flying, through the sky, one hand folded under his chin and the other unsnared beside it, palm upwards and fingers curved in... a finely composed piece of sculpture in white" (Clear Light of Day, p.40).

The writer weaves the matter of her fictional work from the known world, closely observed and penetrated. This camera-like observation and recording of concrete and specific details, helps her fictional characters come alive: "Then the woman came slowly, clumsily out of the back seat, sighing, shaking out the crumpled folds of her sari... she stood staring across the sea at the island... with eyes she shaded with one hand, and her face, too, drawn up into a lined frown...
of perplexity." (Where Shall We Go This Summer?, p.8). Again, in Fire on the Mountain -- "the grainseller -- an elderly whiskered man in a singlet and very clean, white cotton pyjama -- sat idly sifting pulses through his fingers, occasionally twisting his moustaches as he took in the bustling scene" (p.136).

V

Anita Desai's writing abounds with her deep and passionate love of natural beauty -- green grass, flowers, meadows, birds, the moon, the sky. There is a zest for the beauties of nature in the external world. Many examples can be quoted from her work to show that nature appeals to her as keenly as it does to Virginia Woolf -- who seems to have exerted an intense influence upon Desai. Some illustrations culled at random from her work, are given below:

... there were always glimpses to be had ... not only of the rolling fields but of bits of the New Forest erading in dips of the green-downs, aquatically deep and still, hill-tops with blank white cliffs, of an expanse of lustrous sky in which clouds grazed lazily, of streams and rivers criss-crossing.... (Eve-Eve, Blackbird, pp.190-91)

Again

... drumstick trees with their long beans and twisted garlands of small orchid-like flowers, tattered palms and palmyras, bushes of hibiscus and lantana in bloom. (Where Shall We Go This Summer?, p.86)
In *Fire on the Mountain*, the very spirit of the environment is conveyed to us through nature — description. The first chapter begins with the heroine, Nanda Kaul, living in Carignano in Simla Hills, surrounded by natural beauty — pine trees in their scented sibilance, cicadas fiddling invisibly under the mesh of pine-needles. The rocks, the pines, the light and air of the place, the sun shining on the white walls of the house, the apricot trees nearby, short dry grass — everything seems to fascinate her with its piquancy. And in all the succeeding chapters, the environment and, at times, the state of mind of the character, is revealed through an intimate depiction of the natural surroundings, with a Wordsworthian eye for detail: "The parrots dared. A sudden quarrel broke out in the tree-tops, for a moment they all screamed and scolded together, then shot off like rockets, scattering pine-nuts, disappearing into the light, disintegrating in the heat" (p.23). In the last chapter, it is still so lovely at Carignano — the blue shadows of night spilling across the garden like cool water, the crickets putting up their song one by one. Even the personal appearance and the attire of Nanda Kaul seems to blend with the pine-trees — "She was grey, tall and thin and her silk saree made a sweeping, shivering sound" resembling the sound of the flutter of pine-needles. The heroine is deeply fascinated by the encircling sterility and barrenness
of Kasauli. And the scenery around her is rendered by Dessai in an effortless and easy manner reminiscent of Thomas Hardy.

In her latest novel *Clear Light of Day* the knack of graphic description of natural scenes continues:

The rose walk was a strip of grass, still streaked green and grey, between two long beds of roses at the far end of the lawn, where a line of trees fringed the garden—fig and silver oak, mulberry and eucalyptus. (p.7)

Again

In the small silence, a flock of mynahs suddenly burst out of the green domes of the trees, and in a loud commotion of yellow beaks and brown wings, disappeared into the sun. (p.6)

Mita Dessai's style also gives an evidence of her love for colours. And occasionally the beauty of the natural world is intermixed with the fascination of the colours:

... in the shade of the bougainvillea arbour, where the light turns from lilac to mauve to purple, from peach to orange to crimson, as the small whispers of breeze turn and turn against the heavy load of blossoms upon the air. (*Cry, The Peacock*, p.36)

And, in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*:

The earth seethed with weeds and the weeds with minute wild flowers in brilliant tints -- waxy white stars, curled yellow ones, small blue eyes. ... Butteryellow and kingfisher-blue butterflies. ... (p.86)
And here, in the fifth novel *Fire on the Mountain*:

The hills . . . seemed to be covered with a golden fuzz and melted into soft blues and violets in the distance. (p. 27)

Desai is one of those writers who, with their gift of picturesque description, can manage to keep us in close company with nature. She introduces the ordinary and wild flowers by their actual names -- iris, geraniums, hydrangeas, agaves, primrose, lichen, laurel, emma, bougainvillea, lantana, hibiscus, nasturtiums, oleander, and many more. It is as if she had a special feeling of responsibility for truth in handling words. Such use of well-selected proper names helps to lend sonority to the narration. A writer like Anita Desai who has a sensitive eye and ear for nature, has the power to perceive what we either do not see or see only in part. She also has the ability to make us aware of what she has seen, or thought, or felt. It is this perception and the resultant writing that gives rise, within her, to a constructive and creative force, and the written expression is conveyed to us in vivid terms. It appears that she has seen in a more intense way than the common observer -- the winds billowing up and throwing the pine branches about; the leaves of palm trees rustling one against the other, rubbing, scraping and fighting; the yellow rose blooming youthfully; the sun shining on the white walls; a silver haze in the summer heat; birds screaming, scolding, and quarreling in
the tree-tops, she has heard more intensely than the common ear 'a cuckoo singing in the chestnut tree, with its low, domestic call'; 'the running feet of children'; 'the cry of an aching and offended child'. She has seen and heard and understood the tears of the world.

It is this perception, rather, inspiration of hers, that results in a style precise and valuable. In her childhood, she was greatly influenced by Emily Bronte's novel Wuthering Heights. Says she, "I was nine years old, when I first read Emily Bronte's Wuthering Heights, and although obviously I couldn't have understood half of it, it struck me with the force of a gale and still I vibrate to it." Such early influences added to her innate vision, and her imaginative power enabled her to "vibrate" to the sights and sounds of Nature, and impart a special brand of excellence to her narrative style.

VI

There is a happy blend of emotive and descriptive prose in Desai's writings. Descriptive prose is that which the writer

---

uses to recount an event or action, while emotive prose is employed in the portrayal of emotions and to make us feel gay, mournful, or angry. The art of apt description has been rightly regarded as one of those elements of literature which help to make it a mirror of life. The excellent descriptions render Anita Desai's work palatable, interesting, and picturesque. In the first novel CRY, THE PEACOCK, Maya is deeply distressed to find that Gemtana cannot differentiate the smell of lemon from the smell of petunias: "The blossoms of the lemon tree were different, quite different, of much stronger, crisper character, they seemed cut out of hard moon shells, by a sharp knife of mother-of-pearl, into curving, similair petals that guarded the heart of fragrance. Their scent, too, was more vivid — a sour, astringent scent, refreshing as that of ground lemon peel, or crushed lemon leaf" (p.19).

Such beautiful descriptions and glimpses pervade almost the whole of her work. But in the novel cited above, the descriptive passages, instead of conveying the density of the physical world, enable the writer to create a character. The highly sensual descriptions suggest the state of mind of the character. "The loving visions of the world of nature suggest a sensibility clinging to the beautiful and picturesque

---

things of life.\textsuperscript{31} Hence, it is 'language' here that is used to reveal the personality of the character. The writer's aptitude for effective description of things and people is so tangible that it runs like a thread of gold in all she writes. Through its use, she actually conveys an exact and vivid impression of what she has observed, felt, or imagined. In \textit{Ewe-Ewe Blackbird}, London -- with its crowds and bazaars is beautifully described:

\begin{quote}
with its open-air booths, its leisurely crowds and loud brass bands, Portobello road has the air of an Indian bazaar though not its appearance, and Dav, accustomed as he is to the Indian trader's obsession with the newest, the "novelties" -- in plastic and tin and nylon -- vendors glaze-eyed at the profuse manifestation of the young English people's obsession with the past -- the collections -- in crowded bow windows, in booths and on barrows, of trumpet-earred gramophones, Victorian posters, bird-cages, painted porcelain jugs, crystal marmalade jars, bent toasting forks and poker tea-pots, yellowed christening gowns, charred and grimed fire-arms from the First World War -- period pieces which the British covet and cherish like fetishes, as though they believed that as long as they kept their grandmother's silver polished and their grandfather's pistol safe from the rust, the world will continue to be as cosy and secure as it is at present. (p.79)
\end{quote}

If we read the following passage carefully, we shall be struck by the precision with which the details prominent in the view are pictured in their right relation to one another,

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
and in the order in which they are noticed by the observer:

"Over their tea, they watched the clouds drop from the sky, swollen and heavy with cold, like a great polar bear crouching, hurrying over the hill-tops, its white fur settling on rooftops, brushing the hill-sides, enclosing the pines. Then it was upon them. With it, the rain. What rain! the house shook, the roof crackled, long raindrops slanted ... the downpour drummed on the taut tin-roof, deafening ..." (Fire on the Mountain, p.82). Note, in the above account, the fine blend of imagination and verisimilitude, the description maintains the precise sequence in which the things naturally happen, lending the narration a smooth and pleasant flow. It brings to light the writer's consummate mastery of detail. Such descriptions leave an indelible impression on the reader's mind. The concrete details excite us and appeal to our imagination. In Where Shall We Go This Summer? when the writer wants to give us the condition of the house on the island, after a lapse of twenty years, she is not content with merely informing us that it was untidy and disordered -- she makes us almost see it: "... Dust lay as casually as sand on a beach, spider-webs spanned the corners of the unfurnished rooms like skeletal palm leaves. The odour was of bats and mildew; and silence boomed like the silence of underwater caves. ..." (p.18) Notice how the striking details help us to visualize the scene with uncanny precision. Again, it is Dessa's talent for observation that provides her with the capacity to react more sharply and fully.
But sometimes, in the writer's work, particularly in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, there is an over-generous piling up of visual details, which though individually excellent, seem to weary the ear. It is just not possible for the reader to synthesise such a profusion of detail into a unified mental picture. But, on the whole, the individual pieces of description put us in a position to see things not merely with our own eyes but with the keener eyes of the skilled observer. Such like intensity bespeaks an intellectual perception of a high order.

VII

As stated by K.C. Namdiar in his 'Stylistic Studies in Indian writing in English': "One of the most serious problems of a writer who uses a second or foreign language for creative purposes is the range of the language he commands -- in modern parlance, the registers, or the appropriate choice of words and sentence types, including manner of delivery, for specific social and intellectual activities." Some of the Indo-Anglian writers show a remarkable ease and confidence in the use of English in their novels. And Anita Desai is one

---

amongst such writers — Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sehgal, Sudhin Gose, and R.P. Jhabvala.

In Desai's work there is a relentless search for the artistic control of her medium — the written word. The diction selected by her is invariably informed with puissance, perspicacity and precision. Several examples can be cited from her work to illustrate this point: "So he scrambled to his feet and walked along the river, crossing it by log foot-bridges, wading through banks of meadow-sweet bending low under the willows that washed their green hair in the stream perpetually till he came upon a grove of old and crooked pine-trees" (Bye-Bye, Blackbird). And in Where Shall We Go This Summer? notice how the writer relates with competence that Sita's visit — imaginary as well as real — to the island of Manori, remains futile; "On this island, strange experiences and strange sensations made her think and grow too large for the chrysalis of childhood and so she slowly, unwillingly emerged. She felt this strangeness in the atmosphere not altogether comfortable, as a moth that has emerged from its cocoon not into sunlight, but into a grey non-light that does not warm the damp wings or give them strength for flight" (p. 55). The accuracy in Desai's writing comes from a faculty for minute and photographic observation, and the vividness from a knack for the right word and an unusual talent for presentation.
One fundamental principle in any literary composition is that of 'clarity'. Force, eloquence and variety are all ineffective until they are founded on the hard core of clarity. Anita Desai has her own manner of putting an idea and expressing it with clarity, gusto and liveliness. Matthew Arnold's dictum "Have something to say and say it as clearly as you can. That is the only secret of style," fits well with Desai's prose. She is constantly striving for the clearest and the most arresting way to tell the story. Henry James aptly differentiated between experience and art when he commented that life is "all inclusion and confusion" while art is "all discrimination and selection." Desai selects the right word to create the right effect. The words used by her give us the sense of properness and rightness in their context; their sound and suggestiveness evoke in the reader a certain aesthetic and emotional delight: "The Monsoon flowed — now thin, now dense; now slow, now fast; now whispering, now drumming; then gushing ... the roar and sigh of the tide, the moan of the casuarinas in the grove below, tossed and hurled about in grey ... the clatter of palm trees..." (Where Shall We Go This Summer?, p.75). We can see how each individual word is effective in its own context, fitting perfectly into the texture of the sentence. The writer chooses words from an ample lexical store and is careful not to weary

33The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1947), p.120.
the ear by repetition of similar sounds. The use of
colourful and moody words suits every impression she
wishes to make. Her skilled construction of the edifice
of words and phrases makes her style fluent, easy and
lucid. She has assimilated the influence of her literary
ancestors — Virginia Woolf and Emily Bronte, and
represents the kind of writer (like all great writers)
who has something to say. The clarity and beauty of the
language add greatly to the power of what she has to say:
"They had been blown towards the island that first time on
the waves of a silk smooth sea, rippling with enthusiasm,
bounding with anticipation, sparkling with hope" (Where Shall
We Go This Summer?, p.43). Words seem to flow from the
writer's pen with absolute certainty and limpidity, making
the picture crystal clear and giving to the utterance a
piquancy and charm of its own. Each word is weighted and
nothing is used which could create an impression of superfluity.

Moreover, her style and expression remarkably suit
the character in whose mouth the speech is put, and this
adaptability and suitability of speech to character and
situation is one of the specialities of her art. In Where
Shall We Go This Summer?, the very speaking pattern of
Raman fore- shadows his sanity and rationality. And the
speech of Sita shows that she is an acutely sensitive,
nervous and emotional type of women. The rich vocabulary holds testimony to the writer’s immense erudition, as that words are poured on to paper with astonishing ease. "Her hand shot out of the folds of silk and slapped at a pair of humbling flies on the page ..." (Fire on the Mountain, p.55). The vast vocabulary at her command and the skill in the arrangement of words enable her to clothe each thought in the best possible attire. Though grandiloquent words are to be found here and there in her writing, her language, by and large, is so pallid that the meaning and the sense are grasped without much effort on our part.

Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, who has laid a great emphasis upon the importance of a precise and clear style, says: "... As technically manifested in literature, it (Style) is the power to touch with ease, grace, precision, any note in the gamut of human thought or emotion."34 The evident qualities of Desai’s style --- the delicate simplicity that often makes for subtlety and lucidity --- appeal to us profoundly and appear to answer to the standard visualized by Quiller-Couch. Desai’s voice is as keen as that of a person who is noticing everything. In Fire on the Mountain, the rich texture presents a blend of the past with the present, of mind with memory. The writer here speaks in an even voice,

[34] Peter Westland, Literary Appreciation (London: The English Universities Press Ltd.,1950), P.84.
she never raises it, nor jerks the reader into attention. Nanda Kaul, the chief character of this novel, greatly fascinated by her solitary life, finds all the years she has survived and borne, as not bare and shining, but "cluttering and choking and blackened with the heads of the children and grandchildren, servants and guests, all restlessly surging, elmouiring about her." The very thought of those busy and noisy days brings hell on earth. Her past life seems to her to be a hundred times more dreadful than her present state where she is living all alone away from family, friends and relatives. Desai here appeals largely to the eye, to the delicacies of sense, and the memory of sensations and feelings.

Some of the Indian writers in English like Mulk Raj Anand, have a tendency to translate Indian words into their equivalent in English. This device of literal translation appears very rarely in Desai's work, e.g., in the second novel *Voices in the City* — "My golden son" (p. 37). But one feels that words like rosogollas, lungi, chelas, langurs, benders, memsahib, chalo-chalo, saris, salan-kames, sehra, khud, thana, badmash etc. should have been explained by the writer in foot-notes or reference section for the benefit of the foreign readers. Moreover, like Habani Bhatacharya, Desai occasionally resorts to making an assertive sentence into an interrogative one only by ending
it with a question-mark: "But you are leaving for such small incidents, site?"— (Where Shall We Go This Summer?, p.24). "Perhaps it flew away?" — (Ibid., p.27). But such cases are very rare, and her prose seldom has a jarring effect.

One of the most striking features of Indian English, according to K.C. Nambiar, is "its tendency to compounding, the preference for pre-modification rather than post-modification." 35 Adds he, "this accounts for the most characteristic features at the lexical level in Indian English." Several examples of compound words can be quoted from Anita Desai’s text: "sleep-washed." — (City, The Peacock, p.8); "a gigantic salon," "ruby-red" (Ibid., p.162); "dust-heavy", "heat-heavy air" (Ibid.,p.161); "one-rupee profit"— (Voices in the City, p.97). "Ghost-grey," "sweat-soaked" — (Fire on the Mountain, p.25); "mango-green", (Where Shall We Go This Summer?, p.14). The writer's works are replete with such compound and loan words. Ramesh Mohan points out that such compound words are formed by creative writers to express Indian ways of life and thought. 36

35 Stylistic Studies in Indian Writing in English", op. cit., p.168.

Sometimes, the writer indulges in repetition — either to emphasise a particular point or to create an eloquent effect. Walter Raleigh believes that "repetition is the strongest generator of emphasis known to language." In *Cry, The Peacock*, there are certain deliberate repetitions of words to emphasize the coming doom of the heroine. Certain images are repeated a number of times. And one such image is the figure of the Kathakali dancer, that is associated with evil: "... a demonic creature, the fierce dancer that had all day been trying to leap the threshold of my mind and home, accompanied by the deafening roar of silent drums. It was the mad demon of Kathakali ballets, masked, with heavy skirts swirling, feet stamping, eyes shooting beams of fire" (p. 26). The writer again and again refers to the sound of the drums beating at a distance, to signify approaching disaster. Then, in *Bye-Bye, Blackbird*, the writer emphasises (lest the reader should miss the point) the reversal of roles of Adit and Dev by repeating towards the end: "Somewhere at some point that summer, England's green and gold fingers had let go on Adit and clutched at Dev instead. England had let Adit drop and fall away ... and caught and enmeshed his friend, Dev" (p. 261). In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* the device of repetition is used to create a rhetorical and magical effect: "... and swung forwards to the sea, swung back-wards to the white house on the..."
knoll, swung out to the dazzling sea, swung back, swung forwards, swung, swung -- swung herself dizzy, swung herself sic., swung herself down in a tumbled heap of the weeds (p.89). It is a far more effective sentence than an awkward substitute, say, "she swung forwards, backwards till she became dizzy and sick and fell down in a tumbled heap of the weeds," would have been. The repetition of the words helps to create, so to say, a rhythm of reality. The playful mood of the person is presented better by the repetition of these movements. The effect created is eloquent. A large number of instances of repetitive words can be quoted from the writer's work, that have an intensifying and emphasizing function:

"I was filled, filled to the point of destruction" - Cry, the Peacock, p.23.
"God, God, I gasped," - Cry, the Peacock, p.23.
"May Day, May Day" - Eve-Eve, Blackbird, p.70.
"I don't care, I don't care, I don't care for anything!" - Fire on the Mountain, p.73.
"Oh Bim, Bim," - Clear Light of Day, p.66.

VIII

Mita Desai uses her words largely to create sense-impressions -- images and pictures -- and such words embrace impressions which stir all the senses. This kind of diction,
which gives us a steady stream of sense-impressions, answers well to the needs of a sensitive mind. In the words of Simon O. Lesser: "Like our dreams and fantasies, fiction is really composed of a series of scenes, episodes, happenings. It shows us individual human beings doing specific things against a given background." Such scenes and happenings are given in the prose of Anita Desai, through a steady stream of sense-impressions: "She saw the island as a piece of magic, a magic mirror -- it was so bright, so brilliant to her eyes after the tensions and shadows of her childhood. It took her some time to notice that this magic, too, casts shadows." *(Where Shall We Go This Summer?, p. 46)*.

The writer's words have the power to make us see or hear, feel, smell, or taste. She catches the vividness of the experience and invokes similar sensory impressions. In *Fire on the Mountain*, she gives the reader a valuable experience by writing about the domestic life of Nanda Kaul (pp. 17-19), evokes memories of sound, smell, taste, and consciousness so brilliantly as to give all domestic life a new meaning. The gift of minute description is of great use in realistic characterization. When Nanda Kaul describes Raka -- "she

---

looked like one of those dark crickets that leap up in fright but do not sing, or a mosquito, minute and fine, on thin, precarious legs," — the reader sees her (Raka) and even from this brief description, guesses some of her characteristics. Then, in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* too, the writer manages to convey to us a clear profile of the heroine, Sita, simply by describing in minute detail her sensory reactions.

Similarly, sensory impressions of all the five senses aid in the delineation of dramatic action. Notice how in the scene of the strife between the eagle and the crows, the writer combines sight, sound and feeling to describe how Sita sees this quarrel and how she reacts to it. "The situation objectifies for Sita, the conflict in her own life," described through simple details. Likewise, sensory impressions are vital in portraying moods and emotions. Close examination reveals that our feelings are aroused by the writer's appeal to one or more of the senses. It is in this way that the reader is made to share Adit's homesickness, for instance: "He stood in the middle of Oxford street, watching the traffic that kept him trapped on an island. Bus, taxi, car swept by ... with a monotony, a predictability that made him burn

with longing to see one bullock-cart wander into the fray ... he prayed ... anything, he prayed, anything different in colour, tempo, sound, flavour; anything individual and eccentric, unruly and unplanned, anything Indian at all" (pp.21c-19).

Thus, sensory impressions have an important place in her writing and insure her stories, so to say, against ever becoming tiresome, stale or flat. She gains in vividness, immediacy and emotional force by rendering material in concrete sensuous terms. It appears that like any other writer, she has realised the fact that the concrete sensory language of fiction is highly congenial to our minds. Desai's language is also an ideal instrument for objectifying and externalizing desires, fears and inner conflicts. Thus, the state of fear of the two children in Where Shall We Go This Summer, is rendered exquisitely thus: "So they sat, in silence, hollow-eyed in the quavering shadows cast by the lantern like a pair of owls..." (p.19). In Clear Light of Day, Bibi is haunted by internal conflict when she and her younger retarded brother, Baba, are left all alone. She is the sole guardian of Baba -- their parents having been dead, their sister Tara married off, and brother Baja, having left for Hyderabad to 'begin his life'. Bibi herself so young, has to shoulder responsibility for running
the household and looking after her younger brother, and
the language used to convey this burden of hers, is clear and
forceful; "Bim sank down onto the steps beside him, sat there
in a slumped way ... her arms hanging limply over her knees
and her head drooping, she watched Baba's pebbles scatter and
fall, then his long fingers reach out to gather them together
again, and began to talk more to herself than to him" (p.101).

IX

The figures of speech (similes and metaphors etc.)
used by Anita Desai, possess the qualities of aptness and
precision, and fulfill the central function of clarifying
and illuminating the subject to which they are applied. Imagery
is one of the most useful tools for any writer, and Desai uses
it, both carefully and effectively. She offers a good example
of an Indo-Anglian novelist whose "imagery reveals her individual
mode of perception."40 Though the first reading of her stories
may sometimes give the impression of a superabundant use of
images, a close study soon shows how essential they are to the
design, and how well they fulfill their proper functions in the
stories.

40. Meenakshi Mukherjee, "The Language of the Indo-
Anglian Novelist," Indian Writing in English, ed. Ramesh Mohan
Some writers like R.K.Narayan write in language almost devoid of imagery. On the other hand, there are writers like Anita Desai whose writing is strewed with similes and metaphors. "An examination of the texture of their style," says Meenakshi Mukherjee "often reveals a great deal about their response to life." Writing by passages and pages, her language rises from the page not in words but in a series of images. These images are not only apprehensible, but are possessed of more vividness and immediacy than is usually attached to words. They are thick with meaning, and succeed one another rapidly through the gamut of her work. There is an extravagance of imagery even in the first novel _Cry, The Peacock_. "... his words cutting my thoughts away like a surgeon expertly removing a boil" (p.20). And here, "... my thoughts of anguish which rose, every now and then, like birds that awake from dreams and rise out of their trees amidst great commotion, circle awhile, then settle again, on other branches" (p.21). The images employed, are nearly always fresh and vivid. They are used to intensify, clarify, enrich, and to make us feel her grasp over the subject or situation being dealt with: "... a great copper red moon that swelled

But at times, her work, especially the first story Cry, The Peacock is cluttered up with images which are sometimes bizarre and over-fanciful — 'The luscious water oozed out of the bath-tap', 'The curtain fell in tragic folds', etc. etc. These, however, are exceptional. On the whole, the stuff of which her images are made, is not remote from our experience, but is immediately felt by us as belonging in one way or another to the very fabric of our lives. Animal imagery which is used for introducing the animal nature in man, is an expression of the corruption and degeneration, and the bestial aspect of human character: "like langurs, the boys swung around her, long-armed, careless, insulting ..." (Fire on the Mountain, p.107). Again, the jealousy and malignant hate of Nanda Kaul for Naka, is stated when she refers to the child as "a mosquito flown up from the plains to tease and worry" (p.40). The writer has made use of flower-imagery, too, in Where shall we go This Summer? — she was "like a persian lily, or tobacco flower at night". Here, the meaning is not merely connotative but also evocative and emotive. It is rich in emotional significance. The word 'lily' does not merely connote a flower, but also evokes the image of
beauty and innocence. The flower is imaginatively perceived. Here -- "I saw her face lying in those black folds like a flower -- a dead white flower" (p.106), the flower-imagery carries with it the emotional overtones of pity resulting from suffering. Colour-imagery is also frequently used -- "... seemed to wander in a field of grey thoughts" (Fire on the Mountain, p.93), "she saw tiredness like a grey web across that aged face" (p.120). Grey, in these sentences, is the symbol of an attitude — sad, dull and sombre.

Metaphor, according to Herbert Read, is "the synthesis of the several units of observation into one commanding image; it is the expression of a complex ideas... by a sudden perception of an objective relation."\(^{42}\) The nature and importance of metaphors was clearly perceived by Aristotle, who stated in The Poetics: "It is the use of metaphor alone which cannot be acquired, and which, consisting in a quick discernment of resemblances is a certain mark of genius."\(^{43}\) Through the use of these figures of speech, the writer is able to convey a particular thing with maximum vividness. Similes and colour and tone to what she says.

\(^{42}\) Metaphors and other figures of speech, "Modern Essays on Writing and Style, OP. cit., p.115.

\(^{43}\) Thomas Twining's Translation, Part II, XXVI.
when she comes to describe a feeling or a state of mind, she often resorts to the use of similes. As in *Where Shall We Go This Summer* when she wishes to describe the feeling of the heroine (a woman who is introverted and sensitive -- who finds it difficult to cope with the ordinary problems of life), she says that Sita feels as if she were "living in the wilds," where people around her are uncivilized, and to her, utterly devoid of human feelings. Words are stretched to the utmost limit of their meaning. Things utterly unlike, in fact, alike by an effort of the imagination, are merged together: "... white pillars, like so many painted leafless palm-trees" (*Where Shall We Go This Summer*, p. 17); "... the eyelids slipping down like two marine shells" (*Fire on the Mountain*, p. 47). Nanda Kautil's thought of Raka as "a mosquito, minute and fine, on thin, precarious legs", conveys the impression with an accuracy which might otherwise take hundreds of words. This type of simile has the effect of giving us a snapshot picture.

As a matter of fact, the very language of Desai's stories seems to grow by a process of metaphorical extension. The comparison helps to convey the total thought with accuracy. It seems to grow naturally out of the subject and contributes effectively to it; it seldom gives the effect of artificiality. Her dexterous use of these figures of speech contributes
significantly to creative successes. Metaphorical language seems to blossom naturally from the writer's thought and is woven into the texture of the composition. It is also used for the purpose of adornment. According to Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, "The artistic use of metaphor is to provide a pleasing decoration like an attractive wallpaper pasted on the wall or like a silk ribbon tied around a box of candy." And Dines's florid style dazzles us with its elegance: "... the sky filled with a soft tawny light in which the sun floated like a lighted balloon, making the pine-needles glisten like silk, like floss" (Fire on the Mountain, p.26). The following passage is a good example of how a scene can be proficiently recreated in our imagination through an adept use of the figures of speech: "She had acquired the silence of a piece of log submerged in a water meadow, of a scarecrow in a cornfield" (Bye-Bye, Blackbird, p.163).

Metaphor has been regarded as the primary device by which we 'say' what we want to say. It provides the only means by which a thing can be 'said'. It is by the use of these figures of speech that the prose of the writer attains
freshness and vividness which could not otherwise have been attained. As observed by F.i.lucas, "I will own at once that a style without metaphor and simile, is to me like a day without the sun, or a woodland without birds." And this can well be the statement of Anita Desai, whose style, without images and metaphors, would have been stale and tiring. Besides, the use of symbolism makes her style poetic. Whenever she writes in the fervour of emotions, her prose verges on poetry. In the first novel, the dance of the peacocks — "They 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 monsoons came to an end ... living, they are aware of death, lying, they are in love with life. "Lover, lover," you will hear them cry in the forests when the rain-clouds come, "Lover, I die..." (pp.95-96) — "symbolically suggests the heroine's love of life and obsession with death which lead her to the final crack-up." Anita Desai says somewhere, "I do not

---


consciously aim at using symbols in my novels, but I find that certain things of themselves gain such significance that after having employed them -- perhaps repeatedly, I find that they have indeed turned into symbols. The figure of the Kathakali dancer and the dance of the cabaret girls -- become a symbol of the inescapable fatality of the heroine.

X

Amita Desai's use of the rhythms of everyday speech gives us the impression that her style is a kind of cultivated conversation. Most of the distinguished Indo-Anglian writers make use of everyday speech as a medium to express their ideas and present them in fictional works. This colloquialism is used by Desai chiefly through contraction, e.g., "don't" for "do not", "can't" for "cannot" etc. This helps to impart a natural tone to the dialogues. Apart from this, humorous elements occur very rarely in the writer's work. The fourth novel where Shall We Go This Summer? is fairly deficient in humour, as the author seems to share Sita's seriousness to a

great extent, we come across perhaps only one comic strip and that also by a minor character, Joseph (pp. 4-5). But in *Fire on the Mountain*, the touch of spicy humour lends a rare charm to her style: "... and she went into peals of laughter that rang like a fire engine’s fatal bell, so that two doves, amazed, shot out of the trees and vanished, and even Baka took a startled step backwards." (p.114). And elsewhere, one is impressed by the humorous use of similes: "He had a very honest face she decided, painfully honest like a peeled vegetable." (*Clear Light of Day*, p.69). Again, "Dr. Ziswas stirred and stirred his tea with a crazy clatter, frowning with concentration, making the spoon spin round and round the cup like some mechanism gone out of control." (*Clear Light of Day*, p.69).

Meenakshi Mukherjee calls Anita Desai’s style "her main weapon": "... she is not afraid to bend the language in her attempt to express the subtle nuances of perception and complex states of mind." 48 It can be said that her style

possesses a free, unaffected movement, grace, and lucidity. Against almost all her predecessors, she stands out individual, full of force. This is chiefly on account of the beauty of her style that her work stands high in Indo-Anglian literature. It is not surprising that she has already been characterized as one of the best of the Indian novelists writing in English.