Commenting on Robert Louis Stevenson more than half-a-century ago, the late Sir Walter Raleigh* posed a pertinent question: "When a popular writer dies, the question which an admiring and inquisitive public asks is 'will he live?'"—a question even more relevant today, when the output of the printed word has become unprecedentedly voluminous, with a corresponding proliferation of interpretative and critical writing. With this plethoric over-supply of reading matter, it is becoming harder and harder for the reader to separate the grain from the chaff and to distinguish between the trivial and the significant, the ephemeral and the enduring, between what Ruskin called the books of the hour and books of all time. The mutability of literary reputations remains one of the intriguing issues in literary history; and it is incumbent on the discriminating student, after having read an author in detail, to try to determine whether the author has laid the foundations for a stable reputation and passed the criteria for lasting fame, and if so, to attempt an appraisal of the writer's particular contribution to his chosen field and his place among other artists of his class.

*(1861-1922) sometime Professor of English literature at Oxford, and author of a number of well-known critical works.
There is little doubt that Anita Desai has, even with her modest output of about half-a-dozen novels to-date, already acquired a secure niche in the hall of fame. Genius is often precocious, and, like Alexander Pope who even in early youth "lisp'd in numbers as the numbers came," she started writing at the age of seven and earned creditable recognition at the age of twenty-six. To develop ease of expression in any language, one must think in that language, but Anita Desai has gone one better by achieving an effortless merger of the process of thinking with the process of writing. The use of the English tongue comes to her with a sort of instinctive compulsiveness and has the unmistakable spontaneity of inspiration, evincing a command over the language, a felicity of phrase, which is virtually unmatched, and certainly unsurpassed, by any of her contemporaries.

Writers like Anita Desai represent, in one sense, the "coming of age" of Indian writing in English. The historical event of political independence in 1947 is related to Indian writing in the twentieth century in a manner somewhat similar to the relationship between the French Revolution of 1789 and European writing in the age of Wordsworth. To many who had been carried away by the abstractions of Rousseau, the Revolution broke over Europe as a "dawn" in which it was "bliss to be alive" and which promised to usher in a basis for
altogether new modes of life and thought. Those modes of thought rose through various stages of vehement expectation, blissful exultation, ecstasy and euphoria, and then fell through various stages of disappointment, non-fulfilment, frustration, and bitter disillusionment, till a pure poet like John Keats discovered that truth was to be found in Beauty, not in political rhetoric, and that Art need not look to man-made institutions for themes and inspiration.

The transfer of power to Indians in 1947 was a similar "dawn", accompanied by similar stages of enthusiasm, aspirations, hopes, and followed by frustration and disillusionment on many counts, till a pure novelist like Anita Desai decided to choose as her theme the immemorial human mind with its endless saga of emotional experience from exposure to its environment. So, unlike some earlier writing, the works of Anita Desai are completely free of any concern with politics or politics-based ideas, ideologies, doctrines, aspirations or problems. As Keats was a pure poet, devoted to the cultivation of Beauty with no strings attached, Anita Desai is a pure literary artist who revels in the exploration of the human mind, and in the portrayal of all the kaleidoscopic fears and phobias, aches and pains and anxiety states which are engendered in the sensitive individual when confronted by the exigencies of existence. By virtue of her mastery in
the art of analysing and precisely delineating the mental states of her characters in tense situations, she may — if classifications must be made and labels attached — be regarded as the founder of the "psychological" and "existentialist" novel in Indo-English literature — in the tradition of George Eliot, Henry James, and Virginia Woolf.

Anita Desai is concerned with the phenomenon of conflict, whether it is the conflict between an individual and the world around him (or her) or it is the conflict between two cultures with the background of a complex historical relationship. Her basic problem is the dilemma of existence, the crucial question of choice in life. And in following this theme in depth she strives to unravel the mystery of life. In her first novel Cry, The Peacock the main pattern is the contrast between a woman's response to the world through her senses and her husband's response through his intellect. So the author examines two contrasting outlooks on life and seems to plead for moderation. In Voices in the City, the conflict is between cultures and the author successfully delineates the dilemma of death-in-life and paints Calcutta as the heart of urban maladies. The third novel Bye-Bye, Blackbird is based on the experiences of the coloured immigrants from India (the "blackbirds" of the story) who find it hard to make their "nests" in an alien land. The "India vs. England" conflict of cultures is one of the perennial themes in Indo-Anglian writing,
end this theme receives in *Bye-Loe, Blackbird* a new locale and in-depth treatment. In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, there is a return to the theme of alienation and incommu-
cation in married life — the theme of her celebrated first novel. We feel for the unhappy heroine, Sita, who is obsessed with the meaninglessness of big-city life — a problem very real to us. *Fire on the Mountain* contains an extremely vivid and vibrant picture of Indian life as well as an unforgettable portrait of old age. *Clear Light of Day* is perhaps the only novel in Indo-Anglian writing that dwells on the theme of time. The remarkable treatment of time, depicting the emotional turmoils in the main protagonists, adds a new dimension in the sphere of Indo-Anglian writing.

The stories exhibit the art of careful planning. Kermode's conviction that the sense of ending is the major consideration of a novelist is not shared by her. She sees the ending in proportion to "beginning" and "middle" — each part of a whole balanced and complete. Like Henry James, she asserts that "when I begin a novel, I have only the vaguest idea how it will end, but as I write, this vague idea gradually becomes clearer and clearer so that, at last, the ending seems inevitable." There is an abundance of incidents, scenes, and characters. All incidents occupy an important place in the train of events, arranged with a due sense of
balance and proportion. There is a certain unity, a certain completeness carrying everything necessary to create a sense of organic wholeness and containing almost nothing that distracts the attention from the total effect. The writer's artistic maturity is to be found in the fact that she rejects everything that is irrelevant and superficial and concentrates on what is essential. The result is that in her novels, there is a happy "fusion of form with content, of texture with structure."

Desai depicts life as it really is -- life, as a rule, of the upper middle class which she knows very well and which she can treat sympathetically. She does not draw upon second-hand information for the groundwork of her plots. Rather by seeing life itself and depicting it in the stories exactly as she views it, she gives to her work an authenticity and a validity of its own. This ample knowledge of life is obtained through direct observation as well as insight. Events, actions, and men are reproduced before our eyes with scrupulous fidelity. "To write a novel," noted Dostoyevsky, "there must be one or more strong impressions that the author has really experienced to the depth of his being." Anita Desai states in an interview, "In countless, small ways, the scenes and settings certainly belong to my life. Many of the minor characters and incidents are also based on real life. But the major characters and major
events are entirely imaginary or an amalgamation of
several characters and happenings. One can use the raw
material of life only very selectively. It is common among
writers to pick out something from real life and develop their
situations around that while there are others who start from
some real experience which continuously grows in their
imagination. You can use it as a base but don't confine your-
self to it. Though primarily Desai's work is peopled with
the "upper crust" yet the faculty of creative and realistic
imagination enables her to attain substantial fidelity even
when she is handling people, scenes, incidents which have not
come within the range of her personal experience — for instance,
the world of the villagers, the shopkeepers, the servants, the
gardeners, and the like.

In the present age in Indo-English writing, like its
western counterpart, social and political realism has been
largely replaced by psychology. Psychological fiction has
come to dominate the scene, attempting to probe into human
thought and conduct for the reasons underlying human behaviour.
In Desai's stories also, action is subordinated to psychology.
The central themes revolve around the mental and spiritual
developments of the dramatic personae, and not on their physical
adventures. In this respect, she shows a close affinity with
Virginia Woolf who also entered the consciousness of her
characters and showed little concern for the actual outside action. We come to know of her profound understanding of child psychology as well as the psychology of the adult mind.

Besides psychology, her themes are governed by existential tones. The existential perspective on the theme of individual and society is evident in all the stories. Existential themes like alienation, loneliness, despair, frustration, pessimism, anxiety, etc. are present in her entire work. Today's thinkers speak more readily of "human condition" than of human nature. By condition, they mean, more or less definitely, the limits which outline man's fundamental situation in the universe. And in this respect, Desai is essentially an existentialist novelist as she is seriously concerned with this "human condition" and also shows profound skill in exploring the "emotional life" of the people in the stories. Says she, "Most things are so very ethereal .... They pass and they change so very quickly. To make a report on some general events is not of so much consequence. There are other elements which remain basic to our lives. I mean the human condition itself. It is only superficially affected by the day-to-day changes. We continue to live in the same way as we have in the past centuries -- with the same tragedies and the same comedies. And that is why it interests me." The label "existentialist" may thus be appropriately applied to the novels.
of Anita Desai, for many of her characters -- frustrated, lonely, and alienated -- come to realize the helplessness, the absurdity of their existence in a meaningless world. It is regarding her concern with this philosophy that a critic describes her world as a world in which one feels one is "lost among some dark forgotten city streets where the sun penetrates feebly between high-leaning old houses, full of shadows, ghosts, and skeletal cats. Streets smelling of generations of welcome death and regretted birth, loneliness, dread, old houses, and damp wood. And as you walk through, the lane usually ends in a cul-de-sac."

Anita Desai brings something new to the Indo-Anglian novel. Instead of portraying character in terms of the environment, or defining the individual in terms of his social or caste functions, she creates the characters, and the environment is important only in so far as it enables the reader to understand the character. She is more interested in making her characters live than in telling the story. And, confers on her work a certain individuality in Indo-Anglian fiction. She, perhaps for the first time in Indo-Anglian fiction, turns the searchlight inward and studies her characters with a profound insight. "Story, action and drama," she says, "mean little to me except in so far as they emanate directly from the personalities I have chosen to write about, born of their dreams and wills."
This predominant interest in character is one of the distinguishing features of her work, and "gives to the Indo-English novel a poetic depth, a psychological sophistication which were lacking."

Desai achieves in her style a striking fusion of vigour and vitality. Gifted with the faculty of deep observation as well as a beautiful diction, she gains in vividness, immediacy, and emotional force by rendering her material in concrete, sensuous terms. Most writers have sensed the fact that "the concrete, sensory language of fiction is highly congenial to our minds." Furthermore, her mastery over the nuances of words makes for a confident, triumphant style. Another striking characteristic of her style is the use of figures of speech. She is fully alive to the beauty of metaphor which gives strength, clarity and speed, and adds wit, individuality and a poetic element to her writing. Very often, she uses animal and flower imagery to reveal a character. The images have the sharpness and definiteness of original perception. Though sometimes, they seem somewhat bizarre and over-fanciful, yet on the whole they are felt to belong in one way or another to the very fabric of our lives. The apt use of figures of speech rescues the style from monotony.

Ever since stories began to be written, a debate has been going on as to the relative importance of "fable" and "manners" i.e. plot and character. This debate is not adjudicable
because, in the last analysis, these two elements are complementary, and of equal importance in their respective places. Both are indispensable to the craft of fiction, and always coexist; and whether the one or the other pre­dominates depends wholly on the preference and predilection of the individual craftsmen. Some craftsmen are more at home in describing what happens to their dramatis personæ, others in unfolding what happens within the minds of their characters. As the delineation of the psychological states of her men and women is Anita Desai’s forte, one may conclude that in her craft the element of character, rather than the element of plot, is pre­eminent.

Anita Desai’s facile command over the English language has already been noticed more than once. But one point which bears re­iteration is the remarkable adroitness of her “nature descriptions” -- of green grass, flowers, meadows, birds, the trees, the moon, the sky, the mountains and the elements. The close, personal observation, and the uncanny minuteness of detail, are truly Wordsworthian -- rarely met with in prose narratives -- and have the “picturesque quality” of Keats.

What is more, the natural environments are so closely associated with the psychic states of the characters that they become, like Egdon Heath in Hardy’s “Return of the Native”, not merely a backdrop to the human drama, but almost participants in it -- a kind of inanimate dramatis personæ!
The element of Humour is widely used by most writers of prose fiction. But, unlike plot and character, it is not an indispensable element, and there are many great works in which it is not an important factor. Humour and surprise are to the writer what sauce and seasoning are to the chef; they make food a little more savoury and pleasant, but food can exist, and serve its purpose, without them. The dispensability of humour is well-illustrated by the fact that the novels and stories of Anita Desai lose none of their gripping interest and intrinsic value despite a comparative deficiency of the ingredients of humour and surprise. Even on basic principles, it would not perhaps be illogical to surmise that that class of fiction in which the dominant interest is character-portrayal rather than plot-construction, has less use for the element of humour.

In conclusion, one may recall Saraswati Devi Singh's crisp observation that Anita Desai is a "disturbing presence" in Indo-English fiction, and add that it is also an exciting and edifying presence, because Anita Desai has brought this genre to such a level of maturity and stability, and conferred upon it such a prestigious identity, that when the history of this part of literature comes to be written, her contribution will have to be regarded as one of the things to reckon with.