Introduction: Making of Anita Desai as a Writer

Anita Desai is one of the considerable voices in the modern Indian English Fiction. She announced a new epoch of Psychological realism in this genre with her debut novel Cry the Peacock in 1963. Anita Desai’s novels work out the mystery of the inner life of her characters. She repudiates all social concerns and affirms more than once that she is “interested in individuals and not in social issues.” R.S Sharma refers to her “anti Fiction”. (Sharma 166)

Anita Desai’s works are different from those of other Indian women writers in English: Nayantara Sehgal, Kamala Markandaya and Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, who mainly concern themselves with politics, East-West encounter and social theme. Desai is concerned with the psychic life of her characters. For her it is “depth which is interesting delving deeper and deeper in a character or a scene rather than going round about it”. (Jain 61-69) She has tried to understand minutely the predicament of her female characters. She represents the welcome “creative release of the feminine sensibility. Critics find in her, “evidence of a departure from current modes of fictional writing and of
an earnest effort to break new grounds.” (Bellippa 1) For this she has been considered as a “novelist of moods, of persistent states of mind and psyche”. (Sharma 166) Usha Bande observes:

Anita Desai disowns all social concerns and asserts more than once that she is interested in individual and not in social issues. Social issues intrude only where they affect the character. (Bande 12)

Kohli Points out: “No other writer is so much concerned with the life of young men and women in Indian cities as Anita Desai is”. (Kohli 3) Anita Desai’s involvement with Indian women and their reaction to the far changing situation in modern India distinguishes her from other female writers.

This Booker prize short listed novelist was born in Mussoorie on 24th June 1937 of a Bengali father and a German mother. At home she found Euro centric atmosphere for German was the medium of communication. The Congenial aesthetic environment at home contributed a great deal to fertilize her creative imagination. She was graduated from Delhi University. There is no formal training that has helped her in writing except for reading and
constant practice. At the tender age of seven, she started writing small stories, poems and letters for children’s magazines. While writing short stories, she “illustrated them diligently and sewed them into covers so as to make them look as proper books.” (Srivastava 217) While at college she had a few short stories published in the college magazine. She wrote for an English magazine called Envoy till her first novel was published in 1963. In her twenties she started writing novels on a small scale.

In her novels she follows her own instinct, which is a kind of compulsion, an inner urge. She writes down ‘the scenes and impressions, moods and emotions. Being a creative writer, she is conscious of its true value while writing. Desai says that 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 begin, as self-indulgence eventually becomes a self-deceptive. (Dalmiya, 1979)

Since her childhood, Desai was conscious of being a writer. Writing is a part of her character, temperament, nature and life. She has added to her genius by learning from other writers. When she was
nine years old, she first read Wuthering Heights. Although she could not understand half of it yet it was a thrill. The novelist remembers the experience:

It struck me with force of a gale and I still vibrate to it. Ever since; literature has seemed to me more interesting, more significant and overwhelming than the real world. Later, of course, other writers meant more to me. In my twenties when I first began to work seriously and consciously on my novels, it was D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Henry James and Proust that influenced me more strongly. (Srivastava 13)

Later the novels of Japanese writers Kawabata and more and more modern poetry—particularly that of Rimbaud, Hopkins and Lawrence, have left deep mark on her. She keeps no diaries and is not interested in autobiography because for her “creative act is secret one. To make it public, to scrutinize it in the cold light of reason, is to commit an act of violence, possibly murder.” Writing is totally self-indulgence for her.

Desai herself asserts that she has been influenced by European and American Literature. In an Interview she says:
Ruth Jhabvala always “inspired” and encouraged me although she did not help in any material sense, such as reading or editing my manuscripts. (Srivastava 210)

The artistic activity of Mrs. Desai began with the short stories. Of the two forms novel and short story, short story writing is less satisfying for her. Regarding novels she opines that they:

give a good deal of thought and time, get round it, see it from different angles and aspects, whereas a short story demands something quite different. You have the whole of it quite clear in your mind and just put it down at one throw. (Srivatava 15)

Her attempt to portray individuals unique in taste and behaviour, conveying a secret sense of life, draws a distinct line of demarcation from others. In an interview Anita Desai acknowledged that writing for her, “is an effort to discover and then underline and finally to convey the true significance of things.” (Dalmia, 1979) Her novels according to her, “deal with what Ortega Y Gasset called “the terror of facing, single-handed, the ferocious assaults of existence.”(Dalmia, 1979) Endowed with remarkable sensitivity, she can apprehend the emotional problems
of her fellow beings. The delicate sensitivity speaks for itself when she remarks:

I confess I am afraid of speaking out about the art of writing, mechanics of my craft. I have an intuitive and deep fear that by speaking of something subterranean and subconscious, I will destroy it– it is something so very frail. (Dalmia, 1979)

Anita Desai’s forte is “the exploration of sensibility - the particular kind of Indian sensibility that is ill at ease among barbarians and the philistines, the anarchists and the amoralists.” (Iyenger 464)

What distinguishes Anita Desai from other writers is her preoccupation with the individual and his inner world of sensibility – the chaos inside his mind. Concerned exclusively with the personal tragedy of the individual, Desai is not interested in social or political probing, the outer weather, the physical geography or the visible action. Her forte is the exploration of the inner world, plunging into the limitless depth of the mind and bringing into relief the hidden contours of the human psyche. She uniquely prefers the inner reality to the outer, insight to sight. In her review of Amitabh Ghosh
‘The Circle of Reason’, she exhibits her disfavour for the novelists who take interest in “the ‘outer’ rather than the ‘inner’ world”. (India Today 149) Preferring the psychological to social novel, she herself analyses:

It has been my personal luck that my temperament and circumstances have combined to give me the shelter, privacy & solitude required for the writing of such novels, thereby avoiding problems a more objective writer has to deal with since he depends upon observation rather than private vision. (Desai 255)

Anita Desai embarks to explore the inner reality, or in her own words she is not concerned with “the one-tenth visible section of ice berg that one sees above the surface of the ocean” – but with “the remaining nine – tenth of it that lie below the surface.”(Kakatiya Journal of English Studies 1) She prefers the private to the public world because for her, literature is neither a means of escaping reality, nor a vehicle for parading her political, social, religious and moral ideas, but an exploration and an inquiry. Desai feels that besides having a creative genius, a novelist must be sensitive and have a power of keen observation so that he could
give acute descriptions and “pick up the tiny details that others might not notice.” (Jain 68) Besides sensitivity and observation, a rich experience and a good training are also essential. It is not imperative, however, that a writer has all kinds of experience. For in a writer “lack of experience may be a handicap, but lack of sensitivity, thought, intelligence of memory would be far greater one.” (Srivastava 210)

The concept of exploring the inner recesses of a man’s heart to portray the inner reality instead of outward reality was unknown both to the pre-independence and the post-independence writers of Indo-Anglian fiction. Desai lays emphasis on interior rather than on exterior characterization. Her concern is the ‘why’ and the ‘wherefore’ of the external action rather than action itself, and on the invisible than visible life. In fact to quote the words of critic and writer Meena Belliappa, “An important phase in the growth of fiction in India, as elsewhere, is the gradual shift from the external to the inner word of the individual.” (Belliappa 1)
Desai unmistakably prefers the inner reality to outer. The object of her entire writing is to convey the truth. Desai takes Truth as synonymous of Art, not of reality. She finds no discrepancy between the terms Truth and Art:

Reality is merely the one-tenth visible section of the iceberg that one sees above the surface of the ocean – Art the remaining nine-tenth of it that lie below the surface. That is why it is more near Truth than reality itself. Art does not merely reflect reality – it enlarges it. (KJES 1)

Her writing is an effort to discover, underline and convey the significance of things. She seizes upon Reality and:

Try to discover its significance by plunging below the surface and plumbing the depth then illuminating those depths till they become a more lucid, brilliant and explicable reflection of the visible world. (KJES 1)

For Desai, the search for ‘truth’ consists in the life of the mind and the soul - the inner life – and not in the life of the body- the outer life. She is little concerned with the ordinary, traditional notion of reality, the physical facts of things. By shifting the fictional domain
from outer to inner reality, she has brought a great change in the Indian English fiction.

Anita Desai an Indian Jane Austen and Virginia Woolf blended together is not so much concerned with outer as with the inner weather. The inner workings of her characters are revealed with the help of outer conditions. She is a painter of moods, of wills, of conflicting choices and inner experience. The subjects of her novels are not poverty or riches, war, politics, social, evils but the incompatibility of marriages.

In order to place Anita Desai in proper perspective it is essential to compare her with the other women novelists, who have more or less the same thematic exposure. When we notice that her fellow women writers like Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Prawar Jhabvala, Nayantara Sehgal, Santha Rama Rau and Miss Attia Hosain rarely take effort to depict the psychic element in their themes it becomes clear that Anita Desai presents a new dimension to English fiction through the exploration of troubled sensibility. In
contrast to her, in Jhabvala’s work the social background is more remarkable than characters, in Kamala Markandaya’s works the stress is as much on character as financial, political, social and cultural matters. Nayantara Sehgal delineates social problems; she confines herself to a particular social class, namely the upper class and aristocracy. Anita Desai thus obviously stands ahead the group and throws light on the inner climate, the climate of feminine sensibility in her novels. A critic rightly observes:

Her novel is concerned with the emotional world of women, revealing a rare, imaginative awareness of various deeper farces at work & a profound understanding of feminine sensibility.

(Hariprasanna 81)

Anita Desai discards the traditional form of realism and focuses on disintegration in the inner and outer lives of her characters. In her novels “the inner climate, the climate of sensibility that lours or clears or rumbles like thunder or suddenly blazes forth like lightening, is more compelling than the outer weather, the physical geography or the visible action.” (Iyenger 464) Madhusudan Prasad discovers in her novels a skilful exploration of
the “emotional ecology, their rumbling turbulent inner world.” (Prasad 13)

The thought of bringing the unexplored recesses of a man’s heart was foreign to all Indian novelists till Anita Desai came on the scene. She added some sophisticated items and paraded them in equally sophisticated cartons.

R.S. Sharma considers Desai’s first novel Cry, the Peacock “the first step in the direction of psychological fiction in English.” (Sharma 24) Maya, a sensitive woman, suffers from neurotic fears caused by albino astrologer’s prediction about her possible death as also from her marital disharmony. All the three parts of the novel deal with the three stages of Maya’s neurosis’ growth, development and climax.

In Voices in the City Anita Desai is not concerned with the physical problem of Calcutta but as the city affects other characters psychologically, particularly Nirode or Monisha who are very sensitive. Madhusudan Prasad feels that, “Desai delves deep into
human psyche and tries to explore very adroitly the dim domains of the conscious and the subconscious of the major characters in this novel” (Prasad 22)

**Bye-Bye, Blackbird** portrays Indians and Englishmen in England with their problems – both physical and psychological.

Sita in **Where Shall We Go This Summer?** is sensitive, peace-loving and introvert. The tension in the novel is between a sensitive individual and an insensitive world conveyed through the most frequently recurring image of the predator and the prey.

In **Fire on the Mountain**, Desai penetrates deep into the psyche of Nanda kaul who has withdrawn from all movements and sounds. She wants no contact with outside world, either directly or indirectly through messages, requests and letters.

**Clear Light of the Day** is concerned with the anguish of a sensitive women Bim, who wishes to live in the world of past. Her younger sister Tara too is obsessed by her childhood memories. It also deals with time in relation with eternity- a domain of psychological novel.
In Custody deals with the existential dilemma, anxiety, unfulfilled ambitions and dreams of Deven.

Journey to Ithaca depicts the void in Communication between the partners Matteo and Sophie because of the divergent goals they seek- the one spiritual and other physical and emotional.

Fasting, Feasting shows how domineering parents suffocate Uma and Arun by their over-anxiety and solicitousness.

Being neither a critic nor a creative writer, Anita Desai has propounded no systematic theory of novel. To measure her literary creation she says:

I think theories of novel are held by those of an academic, or critical turn of mind, not the creative. A writer does not create a novel by observing a given set of theories - he follows flashes of individual vision and depends on a kind of instinct that tell him what to follow and what to avoid, how to veer away from what would be destructive to his vision. It is these flashes of vision, and a kind of trained instinct, that leads him not any theories. (Ram 100)

Anita Desai writes “instinctively”, carried away by her compulsions, allowing the novel to sprout and grow freely like, tree
under the blue sky, and then trimming its ugly branches and uprooting weeds growing around it. The object that triggers her imagination could be very insignificant “a leaf dipping under a rain drop, a face seen on the bus, or a scrap of news in the paper.” (Ram 100) Arya Ghosh comments about her novels, “They are torn (.....) her novels chart a peculiar path of circularity where texts only begin and rebegin and ‘end’ by coming back to the point of beginning once more.” (Ghosh 256)

Anita Desai rejects any linguistic boundary. Since she is a very careful and meticulous artist & since she can speak German, Bengali and Hindi, besides English, quite fluently, the choice of language is very important for her. She herself asserts: “Language is the universal whore whom I have made a virgin.”(Srivatava 210) An idea or an image, according to her, is seldom vital enough to set any-one on fire to write- there must be a passion for language as well, a familiarity and ease with words and also a conception of them as perpetually growing, changing, renewing themselves and
appearing in delightful and fresh forms, Her comments as to why she writes in English is:

My language (of the novels) is English and I find it answers all my needs. It is rich and flexible, supple and adaptable, varied and vital. I think it is even capable of reflecting the Indian character and situation. It is both the language of reason and instinct, of sense & sensibility. (Dalmia, 1979)

Anita Desai chose English as the medium for self-expression. The mixed parentage might be the reason of choice, she says:

According to the rules laid down by critics I ought to be writing half my work in Bengali, the other half in German. As it happens, I’ve never written a word in either language. Possibly I found English to be a suitable link language, a compromise. But I can state definitely that I did not choose English in a deliberate and conscious act. If it did not sound like a piece of arrogance, I’d say perhaps it was the language that chose me. (Dalmia 1979)

Anita Desai makes use of the language of the interior, which requires
a delicate and subtle handling with hints and suggestions, Srinivasa Iyenger says:

Since her preoccupation is with the inner world of sensibility rather than the outer world of action, she has tried to forge a style supple and suggestive enough to convey the fever and fretfulness of her characters. (Iyenger 16)

She herself asserts:

By writing novels that have been catalogued by critics as psychological and that are purely subjective, I have been left free to employ, simply the language of the interior. Even when two characters meet, they use this particular type of language - the language of their thoughts, their interior selves - that has nothing to do with geography and can be written in any language. (Desai 225)

Anita Desai feels that the medium, a novelist choose should be the one in which the writer is most fluent. She chose English or rather it was the language that chose her: “I did not pick English out, I don’t think a child of seven is capable of doing so. I must have simply picked the language which come most fluently and easily to me.” (Jain 62) There is absolutely no doubt that she has a
perfect command over English. It is so pliant and flexible, like the soft wet earth under a plough, that it yields not only to the pressure of her hand and the nod of her head but rises to poetic heights to synchronize with her visions and her dreams.

The most prominent feature of Anita Desai art is the delineation of character. She is primarily interested in the portrayal of female protagonists as living in separate world. They are portrayed as engrossed with the present, look backward in time and visualize future as well. Being a psychological novelist and concerned with the atmosphere of the mind of her character, Desai portrays character’s motivation, their consciences and consciousness. Rao thus observes:

Being a sensitive woman novelist and gifted with good observation, sensitiveness, a penetrating analysis and a skill to paint with words, Anita Desai creates a rich gallery of characters, both male and female, though dominated by the latter. (Rao 59)

Primarily interested in exploring the psychic depth of her female characters, Desai may be said to be doing something unique
among the contemporary Indian English novelists. She portrays her characters as individuals “facing single handed the ferocious assaults of existence.” (Dalmia 1979) Anita Desai herself points out, “To a novelist it is always the individual who is of primary interest & not the anonymous multitude, always the particular rather than the ‘general.” (Desai to Sheth 55-63) “Only the individual, the solitary being is of true interest. One must be alone, silent, in order to think or contemplate or write.” (Dalmia 1979)

In the fictional world of Anita Desai the creed is the value of the individual and individualism. Anita Desai’s characters can be classified in two distinctive groups- those who fail to adjust to the harsh realities of life and those who compromise. In her novels, there are always those who always remain outsider for they cannot accommodate themselves to the world of realities.

Her protagonists have defiant individualities. They fight against commonplace conformity and adhere to their own vision of life. Those, who manage to say the “Great No” and yet grow independent of their environment, are saved from a total disaster.
Others who say “No” but do not find the positive way to unburden their “self” are entangled in their own introspection, and fail to relate themselves to those who matter so much for them. Consequently, the desire to love and live: and the desires to withdraw are in serious conflict in Anita Desai’s novels. As Jasbir Jain remarks:

The world of Anita Desai’s novel is an ambivalent one: it is a world where the central harmony is aspired to but not arrived at, and the desire to love and live clashes- at times violently- with the desire to withdraw and achieve harmony. Involvement and stillness are incompatible by their nature yet they strive to exist together. (Jain 61-69)

In some of her novels abnormality and eccentricity find place. She herself affirms: “Naturally as a writer I have been interested in peculiar and eccentric characters rather than everyday ones”. (Jain 61-69) Anita Desai’s characters deny seeing themselves as a part of an impersonal mass of mankind at large. They believe that they have individual potentialities of their own and to distinguish
themselves from the multitude they say “Yes” or “No”. As the novelist herself observes:

I am interested in character who are not average but have retreated, or been driven into despair and so turned against general current. It is very easy to flow with current, it makes no demands, it costs no efforts, but those who cannot follow it, whose heart cries out ‘the great No’, who fight the current and struggle against it, they know what demands are and what it costs to meet them. (Ram 21-23)

Anita Desai’s characters reveal her vision of life; they share her perceptions. Like their creator they love solitude and privacy. He major characters are not from real life but “are entirely imaginary or an amalgamation of several different characters.”(Jain 68) Desai’s characters find an abysmal barrier betweens themselves and the world, consisting of others, the natural environment and its life. They are unable to relate to the space around them. Space in existential context does not mean the physical area but “the human environment, and every other that provides the setting in which human life is to be lived.” (Macquarrie 79)
The female protagonists of Desai are burdened with the awareness of their femininity. They wish to know, along with the other ontological issues, the psycho-biological significance of their being female persons.

As a writer interested in the individual only – whether men or women, young or old or children - Anita Desai displays a great creative ability. Being a novelist of moods and the state of psyche, her characters have a tendency to turn inward.

**Cry, the Peacock** is the story of hypersensitive young woman Maya, pitted against a taciturn husband. She lives a life of acute sensitivity and dies in her quest to find fuller life.

In **Voices in the City**, the three major characters, Nirode, Amla, Monisha undergo existential crises.

**Bye, Bye Blackbird** deals with the psychic turmoil of Sarah, who struggles to find her identity.

**Where Shall We Go this Summer?** is the story of a near neurotic heroine Sita.
Fire on the Mountain incorporates the story of Nanda Kaul and her great grand daughter Raka.

Clear Light of the Day is the story of Bim, who after a long period of frustration and anger comes to recognise the importance of forgiveness.

Desai switches from a woman centered to a male centered narrative in In Custody, which presents the world of Deven Sharma a poorly paid lecturer in a provincial town.

Journey to Ithaca depicts Matteo’s spiritual Journey. In it journey or search really matters.

Fasting, Feasting deals with travails of Uma, a daughter with neither looks nor intellectual brilliance, who is treated as a domestic drudge by her parents.

Anita Desai’s characters are burdened by their uniqueness. They want to exercise their liberty and refuse to compromise.

Anita Desai’s serious concern is with “the journey within” of her characters. Therefore the recurring themes that we come across in her novels are the agony of existence in a hostile society that is
conservative and taboo ridden. In an Interview with Yashodhara Dalmia, the novelist also admits of her preoccupation with the “essential human condition”. (Dalmia 1979) The most recurrent themes is all her novels are “the hazards and complexities of man-woman relationships, the founding and nurturing of individuality and the establishing of individualism” of her characters. (Narasimhan 23) The most common theme in her novels is the complexity of human relationships. This theme has been as old as the novel itself and can be found in Richardson and fielding on one hand, and D.H, Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Hemingway on the other. Emphasizing the importance of such relationship D.H Lawrence points out, “The great relationship for humanity will always be the relation between man and woman. The relation between man and man, woman and woman, parent and child, will always be subsidiary”. (Lawrence 130). What is so innovative in the treatment of this theme by Anita Desai is that she explores so minutely the depth of her characters that they were unimaginable among earlier Indo-Anglian novelists.
Another theme most frequently occurring in her novels is that of withdrawal, alienation, loneliness, lack of communication. Madhusudan Prasad observes: “Desai is always preoccupied by an eternal quest for meaning and value, freedom and truth that can sustain us in this chaotic and seemingly meaningless world.” (Prasad 2) Since Desai believes that “literature should deal with most enduring matters, less temporary and less temporal than politics,” (KJES 4) she is opposed to the use of contemporary material. A novelist should not write immediately about an incident but should allow it forth to settle down in order to develop a detached perspective. She makes no bones about the selection of her themes when she says:

My novels don’t have themes- at least not till they are finished, published or read, do I see any theme. While writing, I follow my instinct I follow flashes of insight, I veer away from or even fight anything that threatens to distort or destroy this insight, and somehow come to the end and look back to see the pattern of footprints, on the sand. (KJES 4)
This eminent novelist spends three or four hours at her desk every morning. The amount of work may vary from six words to six pages. Whenever she is working on a particular novel; its idea continues to haunt her even if she is busy with something else. Among her preparatory material, she to some extent keeps notes but chiefly she relies on her memory. Her writing is not irregular. Usually a year is taken to finish the first draft of a novel, which is followed by revision and rewriting because, writing, to her is an “intellectual exercise”. Like most of the writers, she needs a particular environment, especially a quiet room for herself as for her the “creative art is secret one”. May it be short story or novel, she usually starts with a vague idea, which grows clearer as the work proceeds. Most of her writings have been started with mere sketches.

Anita Desai’s world, like Jane Austen’s is a restricted one. She restricts herself to writing about people and situations that she knows or can understand by deep probing. Therefore, she is known as a pioneer in writing psychological novels or a writer of “inner
action”. Writing is not always a ‘pleasure’ but sometimes ‘compulsion’ because the idea of a novel grows in her mind:

as silently and unobtrusively as a grain of sand enters a shell. There it grows and develops ... Eventually this tiny grain grows into such a mass that it brings to exert pressure. (Srivastava 210)

The pressure is not certainly ordinary pressure. It usually rules her eye for a period of two years. Then, “the process of rewriting did, however, bring in the disciplinary power of discrimination and criticism and wrought further charges”. (Srivastava 216)

Cities or places, depicted in her novels, are particularly those that have left powerful impression on her. Calcutta, Delhi and Bombay become centers of description in her famous novels. Her experience and minute observation makes her novels vivacious, lively and glorious. The titles ‘teasing and meaningful’ usually surface during the writing of the novels. Particular incidents or characters encountered in real life are metamorphosed into different creations in her writings, sometimes without omitting any stage. Desai is regarded as the novelist of cities and places, very good at
catching fatigue and emptiness of characters caught in melancholic existence.

Mulk Raj Anand and Bhabani Bhattacharya were touched by miserable condition of the untouchables and devastation of the Bengal famine but Desai “might have been affected by domestic, man-woman relationships”. (Srivastava 212)

Anita Desai is a perfectionist. The situation and characters she has handled confirm this. If one has faith in life and individuality, one must compromise with it. Some of her protagonists, in spite of hardship and differences of opinion learn to be a part of existing life.

Mrs. Desai concerns herself with high aesthetic values of literature. Most important among these is, her artistic power of applying the basic values of her novels so successfully that they become unique in her achievements. This ability attains all the more perfection when these literary works are woven into the fabrication of a nation, which they present. As R.S. Pathak says:

These novels present, like the earlier ones the essential tragedy of modern India, which the novelist sees as the loss of the true
human beneath the welter of impersonal social forces. (Dhawan 33)

Desai clearly avoids commenting about the state of Indian English fiction and her position in it. She thinks it is fatal to become self-conscious. It is for the critics and scholars to interpret and evaluate not for writers.
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