CHAPTER I
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Anita Desai is among the first Indian English novelists who has added a new dimension to Indian English novel by providing an insight into the enduring human situation. Her preoccupation with the agony of human existence distinguishes her from other women novelists like Ruthprawar Jhabvala, Kamla Markandaya and Nayantara Sehgal. Anita Desai is perhaps the only Indo-Anglian novelist who lays stress on the inner landscape - the psychic state of her protagonist, combined with their vivid awareness of the outside world and environment. In Jhabvala the clash between traditional norms and modern aspiration find exposition; Nayantara Sehgal gives a vivid account of what happens in the corridors and lobbies of political establishment as well as the suffering produced by the upper class aristocracy; Kamla Markandaya explores the social change in India in all its complex manifestations whereas Santa Rama Rao and Attia Hussain have portrayed the variegated facets of Indian life

Anita Desai's novels reveal her persistent concern with the themes of anxiety, anguish and psychological adaptation impelled by a danger to the individual's identity in context with the world around. Therefore, she delineates the inner lives of those individuals who suffer from a nagging sense of insecurity and futility in search of means of living in this unsympathetic world. She also reveals their keen struggle to keep alive their individuality while searching some means of relating to the hostile milieu. Their incapacity of reaching out to the wider world is localised to a narrow setup - within family and daily chores. Therefore, family, marriage and parenthood intrude necessarily to reveal how and where they affect the characters, resulting in their withdrawal and isolation. Assessing her critically, R K Srivastava comments
Unlike a photographer concerned with the portrayal of surface reality, she is a painter of moods, of wills, of conflicting choices and inner experiences.

But she delineates the social phenomenon necessarily as a projection of the mental make-up of the individual. The shift from the external to inner world portrays the flux of a particular consciousness that determines her vision of life. Consequently, she discards the traditional form of realism and explores the turbulent emotional world.

Anita Desai has shown admirable psychological insight while creating her women characters. Her concern is to probe, analyse and delve deeper into the secret recesses of her characters and present them in flesh and blood. Inclined to turn inwards, her characters take refuge in their inner worlds when confronted with uncongenial surroundings and insurmountable hurdles. Their sharp sensitivity makes them vibrate, respond and react pulsatingly to every minute of insignificant happening. Their unnatural obsessions preclude them from objective reality. Baffled, battered and bruised by the hostile realities that situate them, they seek their shelter in dream-castles that they are constrained to fabricate; however, like all dream-castles these soon crumble and crush them all.

Anita Desai was born in Mussorie on 24th June, 1937 of a Bengali father and a German mother. She received her early education at Queen Mary's School, Delhi and later studied in Miranda College, University of Delhi. She started writing short stories, poems and letters for children's magazines from the tender age of seven. The literary career of Anita Desai began with the publication of her first short story 'Circus Cat Alley Cat' in 1957 in Thought Her second short story - "How Gentle Is the Mist" appeared in the year 1958 in the Illustrated weekly of India. It was followed by "Tea with the Maharani" in 1959 in Envoy. Subsequently, other stories like "Grand


Akademi Award for English for the year 1978 for her novel *Fire on the Mountain* (1977). She has also won the award for Excellence in writing (1979) for her novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* from the Federation of Indian Publishers and the Author’s Guild of India. Her *Clear Light Of The Day* was considered for the Coveted Booker prize - the English Literacy Award which she lost to William Golding for his novel *Rites of Passage*. Mrs Desai’s first novel for children *The Village by the Sea* won her the Guardian Children’s Fiction Award in 1982. She has been a member of the Advisory Board for English of the Sahitya Akademi and has the distinction of being a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, London.

A close study of Anita Desai’s novels reveals that almost all her characters ranging from Maya (*Cry, The Peacock*), to Baumgartner (*Baumgartner’s Bombay*) experience feelings of isolation, frustration and insecurity. They are in search for a viable alternative. Failing to find such an anchor, they are affected by a growing feeling of vacuity and meaninglessness. Maya, (*Cry, The Peacock*), Sita (*Where Shall We Go This Summer?*), Raka (*Fire On The Mountain*) and Hugo (*Baumgartner’s Bombay*) belong to this category. Speaking about the choice of characters Anita Desai says:

I am interested in characters who are not average but have retreated or been driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against, or made a stand against the general current. It is easy to flow with the current, it makes no demands, it costs no effort. But those who cannot follow it, whose heart cries out “the great No”, who fight the current and struggle against it, they know what the demands are and what it costs to meet them.

All her novels, except *In Custody* and *Baumgartner’s Bombay* focus on women as victims in a world of male-dominations threatening their integrity. With social pressures
and demanding expectation, their worth and potentiality are suppressed resulting in a threat to their existence. Sita, Maya, Monisha (Voices in the City), Nanda Kaul (Fire on the Mountain) and Bim (Clear Light of Day) suffer from a want of personal fulfillment. These women characters are sensitive to their quests and are disappointed owing to indifference of their partners. To Maya, Gautama (Cry, the Peacock) is impractical and far-away; to Monisha, Jiban (Voices in the City) is no encouragement to personal aspirations and ideals; to Nanda, Mr Kaul is no faithful or devoted husband and to Bim, Raja (Clear Light of Day) is not alive to poetry and family responsibility.

Desai's characters build a large spectrum constituted by men of multifarious dimensions. We come across Gautama - the detached and practical being, Nirode (Voices in the City) - a rebel, Dharma (Voices in the City) - an artist and Deven (In Custody) - a College Lecturer. Failing to find an easy access to their goals, they resort to uncertain ways. Self-alienating forces work on their mind, and in their weaker moments, they resort to a life of resignation. Maya and Monisha are therefore victims of the feel of inadequacy which disintegrates them totally. To some like Bim, Sita and Sarah, self-awareness of their strength and limitations become rescuing forces. Desai's preoccupation with Indian women is sincere and scintillating.

Unlike most Indo-Anglian Novelists, Anita Desai regards each of her individuals as an unsolved mystery. Since her characters belong to the affluent sections of the Indian society they never really have to face the hardships of survival. Their emotional deprivation constitute their tragedy. The female protagonists are either motherless like Maya and Monisha or products of a broken home like Raka, Bim, Sita or Nanda Kaul. By keeping themselves detached, they strive to preserve their sense of personal decorum. They discharge their duties effectively but resent the circumstances in which they have to perform their allotted work. Bim, Sarah, Sita and
Nanda Kaul are dutiful wives and daughters who long for a release from the load of responsibilities given to them. Seema Jena rightly comments:

In the character portrayal again, she is primarily interested in the projection of female protagonists living in a separate, closed, sequestered world of existential problems and passions, love and hatred. She portrays her characters as individuals facing single handed, the ferocious assaults of existence.¹

A glance into the works of Anita Desai would reveal that her characters are highly sensitive, sequestered on a world of dreams and imaginations and detached from their surrounding as a mark of protest, a consequence of their failure or refusal to adjust with the reality. Sarah although a White keeps herself away from the natives for fear of being peeped at her marital life with the black Indian husband Adit; Monisha avoids her in-laws for fear of being reminded of her incapacity to bear a child. On the other hand Nanda Kaul tries to get in solitude the independence, denied to her during her days as the Vice-Chancellor’s wife. Anita Desai’s protagonists always show a tendency of a runaway. Sometimes the character seeks to flee from the unhappy life into a self-imposed exile as Nanda does by seeking refuge in Carignano or as in the case of Sita, who seeks protection from the world of violence in an illusory world of Manori Islands

Anita Desai’s women are all reflective about their condition. Their protests are not for mere equality with men but protestations of women for the assertion of their natural and human dignity. They do not ask to be let free simply outside the four walls of their ‘homes’ but to be free within. For e.g. Bimla in Clear Light of Day takes up endless labour in her quest for identity and dignity. She refuses to confine herself to her role as a mere female - an insignificant animate structured for others
use and pleasure. It is her extreme sense of responsibility for the family and for Baba (Clear Light of Day), which makes her feel strong and in control of herself.

The predicament of Nanda or Maya is not a private and exceptional case. The present study explores the textual strategy that locate their assigned roles. Whether it is Monisha or Nanda, the problem leading to their incapability of each an intricate is one. The enormity of their problem lie not simply in their failure to cope with their immediate environs or people around, but in their increasing self-reflection, which is a new phenomenon in the depiction of Indian women. What is predominant in Anita Desai's emerging woman is the desire to harmonize her distinctive self as an individual, wife and mother.

Anita Desai's concept of characterization is in concurrence with her conception of a theme. Her themes are homogeneous structures enabling characters to fully reveal and unfold themselves, mentally & emotionally. The main ingredients of her novels are interpersonal relations, detachment from the environs, obsession with death and violence, mental disequilibrium, fear of harsh reality, conformity and non-conformity with place and time. The interpersonal relations have been dealt with in terms of husband-wife, parent-child, brother-sister and individual-society relations. Of these the often disquieting husband-wife relationship occurs quite repetitively and prominently as in Cry, The Peacock, Voices In The City and Fire On The Mountain. Mother - children and individual - society relationship has been treated in Bye, Bye Blackbird and Voices In The City. Theme of death occurs forcefully in Cry, The Peacock colouring all events with a shade of morbidity with the exception of Fire On The Mountain. It hovers in the background asserting the idea that Nanda's detachment from all associations and Ilia's (Fire On The Mountain) heroic fight against all odds.
would end in vain, as death would consume them. The way the two characters - Nanda Kaul and Ila meet their end also bring out the absurdity of their attitudes to life. Ila is raped and mercilessly murdered and the news of Ila's death kills Nanda who realises that her isolation from the world of activity and association is a forced state. Her death is equally pathetic for she lies with her head hanging encircled by the raging forest fire.

Mrs. Desai's characters are highly emotional, intellectual and freedom loving. They find it difficult to mutely play the duties entrusted to them. Any intrusion in their private worlds is bound to affect their sensitivity. They find society and community wreathed with hypocrisy, violence, untruth and meaninglessness - all of which work for negation of human worth. They tend to be non-conformists. Conformity versus non-conformity appears powerfully in Where Shall We Go This Summer?. Sita, the protagonist finds life monotonous, full of violence and as a show of her non-conformity to such a life, takes to smoking openly in her family. Scared of the violence around, she goes to live on the Manori Islands to protect her fifth child from being born in this violent world. Through the suggestive illicit relationship between Sita's father and Rekha (Where Shall we go this Summer?), Desai suggests that extra-marital relations are considered sacrilegious in Indian community. Another figure who conforms to the prevailing moral codes and social norms is Mira Masi in Clear Light of Day. She was twelve years old when she married and a virgin when she was widowed at the age of fifteen. Mira-Masi is symbolic of the plight of the helpless widow who are the victims of the evil practice of child-marriages. She is a self-effacing woman doomed to pine in silence, with nothing to alleviate her unhappiness.

Withdrawal contrasted with involvement is another aesthetic problem of modern life which Anita Desai narrates in a number of her novels like Cry, The Peacock,
Voices in the city, Where Shall We Go this Summer? and Fire on the Mountain, Clear Light of Day and Baumgartner's Bombay. Nanda Kaul, wife of the late Vice-Chancellor abandons her role of a mother and a grand-mother out of her annoyance, revenge and a feeling of failure as the loved one of her husband and her children. To have a life of privacy, and freedom, she comes to Carignano at Kausali, a picturesque barren place. Nanda in her withdrawal is contrasted to Raka - her great-grand child, a perfect model of what Nanda strives to be. Raka appears not to exist and is fascinated by appalling objects. That she is a perfect model of morbid withdrawal is revealed by her setting fire to the world around. Nanda's withdrawal is also contrasted to Ila Das - a minor character in the role of a bold, energetic social welfare officer. She is brutally raped and murdered. Involvement proves as futile as withdrawal.

These are some of the themes Mrs. Desai is often preoccupied with and are repeated in most of her novels though in different perspectives. Seema Jena writes:

.. in all her novels the same themes recur again and by which she tries to project the reason for her protagonists behaving in a peculiar manner. By using these basic themes as the foundation of her work, she tries to assess the need for an individual to have communication, understanding, forgiveness and mutual acceptance and through these to discover one's own identity. This discovery will bring an end to all the miseries which confront them - their lack of human bond, their being left out and feeling lost, and their sense of futility and despair.4

The major thematic concern of Mrs. Desai's last four novels Clear Light of Day, The Village by the sea, In Custody and Baumgartner's Bombay are different from those of the earlier works Clear Light of Day reveals the power and force of time and paints what the bondage of time does to people. In Custody on the other hand is all about Deven's oscillations between realism and fantasy. The Village by the
sea, written for children does not deal with the philosophical or psychic disturbances but with poverty and misery at the physical level; Baumgartner’s Bombay deals with the misery of Hugo, a German Jew who suffers from rootlessness.

To embody her themes Desai uses a number of devices to evoke the essential atmosphere, fathom the character’s psyche and to pin-point their various attitudinal reactions and responses. Images, symbols, sounds, words and phrases have been deployed in the interest of thematic expression to lend a textural density and impart structural unity to the novels. For e.g. Maya’s obsessive thoughts are recorded by the novelist thus:

Wild horse, white horse, galloping up paths of stone, flying away into the distance, the wild hills. The heights, the dizzying heights of my mountains, towering, tapering, edged with cliff-edges, founded on rock. Fall, fall gloriously fall to the bed of racing rivers, foaming seas. Horrid arms, legs, tentacles thrashing, blood flowing eyes glazing. Storm-storm at sea, at land! Fury. Whip. Lash. Fly furiously. Danger! Danger!

A list of nouns and verbs in quick succession structures Maya’s subconscious fear of death and a wish to escape again into the fairy world of her childhood. Like Raka in Fire on the Mountain notices:

Bunches of balloons sighed and swayed to the music, then suddenly shot up and squeaked with alarm as a lady mouse ran out from under them her whiskers trembling like antennae and a long tail losing handfuls of fur across the floor.

This asserts her abnormality and her inclination to interpret beauty in a neurotic way. In the following lines rhythm is used to objectify Monisha’s joy of escape from her prison-like home

Rumble, rumble creak jolt and tumble. Down the street we go.
This light rhyme shows the intensity of her child-like happiness. The aesthetic value of Anita Desai's art, therefore, lies in her skill to express experiences in metaphors and symbols. Amina Amin writes:

"Her novels abound in objects and images through which she tries to capture and concretize a wide range of experience. She has a large variety of these images and symbols which she uses with consummate skill. They lend a vividness to the situation she tries to describe, the characters she delineates and the events she narrates. Because of her use of the condensed or sharpened image, her art comes close to a painter's or a cinematographer's." 

Repetition of words and phrases is also used as a tool to emphasise the helplessness on the part of her characters. Dev's (Bye-Bye Black bird) dilemma and spiritual agony of his hellish experience in London tube has been worked out by repetitions:

"The menacing slither of escalators strikes panic into a speechless Dev as he is swept down with an awful sensation of being taken where he does not want to go. Down, down and farther down - like Alice falling, falling down the rabbit hole, like a Kafka stranger wandering through the dark labyrinth of a prison."

The above sentence creates effectively the atmosphere of fear which Dev has to face in an alien country. Such features highlight the sensitiveness of Mrs Desai's characters, lending an air of credibility and vividness to their experience. In addition, they aid to the crystalization of moods and concretization of emotions. Seema Jena observes:

"As a novelist her distinguishing qualities are many, the chief among them being the subordination of the background to the characters and the deft handling of language, imagery and syntax in order to convey an intimate expression of the inner world of her characters."
Anita Desai's excellence also rests in her evocation of motion and sound through the description of natural phenomena or the inanimate world in animate terms. A passage from *Where shall we go this summer?* will show how the natural phenomenon impinges on the consciousness of her characters and produce adverse effects by causing a sense of hostility and desolation:

The palms reared up in their path, hissing and clattering their dry leaves together harshly, like some disturbed vigilant animals... geese rather than trees, mere vegetables.

Here nature is presented through images which are characterised by a sense of harshness of sound that grates on one's ears to express the ferocity of the vegetative world. Through 'hissing' and 'clattering', the fear of an evil force lurking around is suggested. The fear of 'the mysterious' and 'the unknown' is suggested through the image of the moon, which Tara observes in *Clear Light of the Day*:

The light of the full moon was so clear, surely it could illuminate everything tonight. Like snow or whitewash, it fell upon the house and the veranda, the garden, covering everything with its white drifts, except where the shadows lay on the trees reared up, black as carbon... She could not free herself of them, of this shabby old house that looked like a tomb in the moonlight, a white-washed tomb rising in the midst of the inky shadows of trees and hedges, so silent—everyone asleep, or stumped by the moonlight.

Here, 'the moon' appears weird to Tara - cold and white like marble for she is guilty at heart. The atmosphere and the environment to which she left Bim all alone creates a sense of eeriness. She nourishes a sense of accusation against herself at being irresponsible and callous towards her sister, Bim Her anguish at being dishonest to her own loving sister, hurts her deeply. Similarly the moon is not soothing to Raka (*Fire on the Mountain*) but a great copper red-one. The sinister
colour of her moon has originated from the degrading standards of her alcoholic father and crashing and thrashing of her mother. Madness of civilized living bewilders her. The grotesque structure of her maternal house colours and shapes the moon in weird mould to create a weird flow of ideas. Mrinalini Solanki writes:

The use of images and lyrical phrases testify her poetic genius. Her poetic descriptions of the scenes and object provide a sense of relief to the reader in the same way as comic interludes help in resolving the tension in a tragedy. Instead of going into the incomprehensive details, she chooses objects from the surroundings and breaks the monotony of psychic illustrations.

Anita Desai uses imagery even for character delineation. Adit (Bye-Bye Black bird) is likened to a monkey, Gautama to a horse, Sita to a jelly-fish, Nanda to a lizard, Raka to a cricket, a mosquito and an insect. The animal images specify the peculiar trait of these characters and ascertain their uniqueness. The protagonists of Anita Desai are haunted beings, and animal imagery underspins that.
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4. Ibid., PP.61-62.


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12. ...Clear Light Of The Day (England: King Penguin, 1980), P.158.