INTRODUCTION

Back in 1963, the Indian English novel in the hands of Anita Desai showed a marked deviation in terms of both theme and technique from the then existing modes of fiction which was by and large traditional. A brief outline of the emergence of the Indian novel in English may help in elaboration of this point.

As a literary phenomenon the novel was new to India. In fact it was only in the later half of the nineteenth century that the novel proper first appeared. Again, the Indian novel in English emerged long after its establishment as a genre in other Indian languages. Meenakshi Mukherjee, in her book, The Twice Born Fiction has this to say about the emergence of the Indian novel in English:

The Indo-Anglian novel made a diffident appearance in the nineteen-twenties, then gradually gathered confidence, and established itself in the next two decades.¹

Meenakshi Mukherjee mentions three stages in the full development of the Indian novel as a whole - “(1) historical romance (2)social or political realism (3)psychological novels showing an introspective concern with the individual”². One may rather say the themes of Indian novels varied around these aspects.
While Meenakshi Mukherjee has observed that there were “hardly half a dozen Indo-Anglian novels until the year 1920”, Gobinda Prasad Sarma, in his book *Nationalism in Indo-Anglian Fiction* has however discussed more than “two dozen novels and more than a dozen volumes of tales and stories written and published before 1920”. These novels and stories expressed different aspects of Indian nationalism in them. Sarma cites works such as *Govinda Samanta* (1874) by Reverend Lal Behari Dey and *The Young Zaminder* (1885) by Sochee Chunder Dutt to support his view, pointing out the socio-political themes in these and other works of the time. As regards the historical romance, Meenakshi Mukherjee views Indo-Anglian fiction to have its beginnings in such historical fiction as S. K. Ghosh’s *The Prince of Destiny* and S. K. Mitra’s *Hindupore* - both published in 1909. However, Gobinda Prasad Sarma points to other historical novels as well such as K. K. Sinha’s *Sanjogita* (1903), A. Madhaviah’s *Clarinda* (1915), A. S. Panchapakesa Ayyar’s *Baladitya* (1930) and *Three Men of Destiny* (1939), S. Gopalan’s *Old Tanjore* (1938) and Joseph Furtado’s *Golden Goal* (1938) which are also of socio-political nature.

Again, Meenakshi Mukherjee finds the history of both *The Prince of Destiny* and *Hindupore* to be romantic instead of factual. But Sarma through detailed analysis has shown it to be otherwise. In fact, these historical romances have been shown by Sarma as only historical novels based firmly on contemporary socio-political reality.
The second mode of fiction, namely of social or political realism, in the development of the Indian novel is seen very clearly in the Indian novel in English in works such as Venkatramani’s *Murugan the Tiller* (1927) and *Kundan the Patriot* (1932). This phase continues up to Mulk Raj Anand and the early work of Raja Rao.

Similarly, the third mode of psychological novels is reflected in the novels appearing in the fifties and beyond:

The serious Indo-Anglian novelist no longer seems interested in simply documenting or hopefully improving the country, but in trying to depict the individual’s groping towards self-realization.

This attempt at individual self-realization becomes generally visible in the much discussed theme of the East-West encounter. In the novels that appeared during the Gandhian era, the East-West theme was projected “as the conflict between pre-industrial modes of life and mechanisation”.

However, after Independence, this theme takes on a more personal note:

... the conflict between the two cultures is not on the social but on the personal level, whose theme in broad terms may be called an individual’s search for identity in a changing India.
This search was often a “quest for a satisfactory attitude towards the West, and for a realistic image of the East that would at the same time be emotionally valid”⁸. Meenakshi Mukherjee cites five examples of novels which basically deal with the theme of an individual’s “quest for the self”⁹. At the same time, these novels also touch the East-West conflict at various levels of meaning. The novels cited are Santha Rama Rao’s *Remember the House* (1956), Nayantara Sahgal’s *A Time to be Happy* (1957), Kamala Markandaya’s *Some Inner Fury* (1959), B. Rajan’s *The Dark Dancer* (1959) and Attia Hosain’s *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961).

With the exception of *Some Inner Fury*, the other novels portray the triumph of the East or the Indian values as represented by the East.

Other variations of this East-West theme belong to the novels of Manohar Malgonkar, D. F. Karaka and Raja Rao. While for Malgonkar, the conflict is between the respective qualities of the Indians and the British in India, for D. F. Karaka the confrontation between the East and the West does not result in any conflict and for Raja Rao in *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960) the East is “Brahminical India”¹⁰ while the West is considered in more general terms.

Another recurrent motif—apart from these three modes—in the Indian novel in English is the ideal of asceticism. The ascetic however, generally remains in the background and influences the other characters.
In novels like Raja Rao’s *The Cat and Shakespeare* (1965), Kamala Markandaya’s *Possession* (1963) and Sudhindra Nath Ghose’s *The Flame of the Forest* (1955), this influence is positive. However, the novels of Mulk Raj Anand show the influence to be negative as they reveal the hypocrisy of the pseudo-spiritual man. Other writers like Desani and Nagarajan have in different ways made use of the ascetic as a charlatan in disguise and have thereby explored the comic possibilities arising out of it. In R. K. Narayan’s *The Guide* (1958) and Bhabani Bhattacharya’s *He Who Rides a Tiger* (1952) the characters initially use holiness as a convenient disguise. However, they undergo a gradual transformation and thereby no longer remain frauds.

It is against this thematic background that Anita Desai’s first novel *Cry, the peacock* (1963) can be termed as a deviation. In the words of Meena Belliappa, “there is evidence of a departure from current modes of fictional writing in India, and of an earnest effort to break new grounds”.

Thus, in terms of both theme and technique, *Cry, the Peacock*, was different from the modes prevalent till then. Thematically, it deals with an individual’s alienation and isolation arising out of existentialist concerns. There were of course other causes as well. Technically, it adopts the stream-of-consciousness method along with a very fluid handling of time. Thus, Anita Desai chose to portray the psyche
or the inner world of her protagonist. It may be said that this was in keeping with the modernist novel of the West.

Thereafter, in nearly all her novels, Anita Desai focuses on the inner world of her characters - workings of their minds - thereby studying them and their worlds. For her, the action of the novel is not presented externally but only as what is seen and felt through the mind of the character or characters. In other words, there is no external action or linear development of the plot with a beginning, a middle and an end like the traditional novel. Instead, by exploring the psychological sphere of the characters, Anita Desai has shown a distinct leaning towards the modernist tradition of the West. Hence a majority of her themes differ from the traditional thematic concerns ranging from existentialist isolation and alienation, to a pre-occupation with death through the status of art and artists, time, memory and consciousness. Even the city and its influence on individuals, the vacillation between illusion and reality and the modernist belief in the manifold plurality and complexity of individual identity come to the novels as major concerns.

This brings to mind the thematic concerns of such modernist writers of the West like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. In fact, Asha Kanwar, in her comparative study of Anita Desai and Virginia Woolf, comments that “Woolf and Desai have some similarities that are too strong to be ignored”\textsuperscript{12}. 

According to her, both share similar views on the concept of time, give primacy to the depiction of female characters, use the "Camera-eye" technique which includes frequent use of flashbacks, cuts, change of focus, the author moving in and the narrative proceeding at different levels of consciousness"\(^{13}\) as well as in their use of sensuous imagery.

Four of the novels of Anita Desai, viz., *Bye-Bye Blackbird* (1971), *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1989), *Journey to Ithaca* (1995) and *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) also touch the East-West theme. But it is worth noting that the first of these four novels, *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, is also a "trendsetter of sorts"\(^{14}\) in that for the first time psychological states like schizophrenia have been projected in the characters who are emigrants in foreign soil. Likewise, *Baumgartner's Bombay* focuses on the isolation faced by a lonely Jew all throughout his life. Part of the action takes place in India. The East here, is India painted however in not quite a positive aspect. This will be elaborated later. In *Journey to Ithaca*, the East which is spiritual is pitted against a materialistic West. However, this is only on the surface level. Like E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* which has a symbolic significance by being a passage to more than India, *Journey to Ithaca* also has a symbolic basis. Moreover, the major protagonists here are not Indians either. *Fasting and Feasting* is another variant of the East-West motif. The theme however has a note of universality as it deals with human hungers – gastronomical as well as emotional – which are the same everywhere across the world.
Thus, even when Anita Desai uses a recurrent theme of the Indian novel in English, she tends to deviate from the standard norm of its treatment. Generally, the emphasis is not so much on the conflicts of the different value systems of the East and West as it is on the psychological effects the conflicts have on the minds of the protagonists as in *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* and *Journey to Ithaca*. Again, unlike the five novels mentioned earlier as dealing with the East-West theme, there is no attempt by Anita Desai to either sentimentalize or idealize the value system of the East.

N. R. Gopal’s observation with regard to the novels of Anita Desai is worth noting here. While observing that Desai’s main thematic thrust is in the “analysis and portrayal of human relationship” he comments:

The comparative achievement of Anita Desai becomes clear when we notice that her fellow writers like Kamala Markandeya, Ruth Jhabwala, Nayantara Sehgal, Shanta Ramarao and Atiya Hussain seldom try to portray the psychic elements involved in these themes in their fullness ... Anita Desai adds a new dimension to English fiction by concentrating on the exploration of this troubled sensibility ...

On the other hand, M. Rajeshwar has commented that apart from Anita Desai’s *Cry the Peacock* and *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, Bharati Mukherjee’s *Wife* (1960), Shashi Deshpande’s *That*
*Long Silence* (1988), Ruth Prawer Jhabvala’s *Get Ready for Battle* (1962), Nayantara Sehgal’s *The Day in Shadow* (1971) and Nergis Dalal’s *The Inner Door* (1973) also portray “sensitive individuals in their moments of intense struggle and in their efforts to seek neurotic solutions to their problems”¹⁷.

However, the point to be noted is that whereas these writers deal occasionally with the “labyrinthine depths of the Indian psyche and showing its relation to society”¹⁸, this inner psychic exploration is a consistent pre-occupation with Anita Desai throughout all her novels. Even when such novels as *Bye-Bye Blackbird, Clear Light of Day, In Custody, Baumgartner’s Bombay, Journey to Ithaca* and *Fasting, Feasting* contain some degree of external action, the emphasis is always on the inner psyche, how the external world of events has a “devastating influence on sensitive, average individuals”¹⁹.

Ramesh K. Srivastava has very aptly observed thus:

… Anita Desai goes to explore the inner reality, or to use her own words, not “the one-tenth visible section of the iceberg that one sees above the surface of the ocean” but “the remaining nine-tenths of it that lie below the surface”… She prefers the private to the public world.²⁰

It will be worthwhile here to mention the observations of a few critics with regard to the thematic concerns of Anita Desai. Ramesh K. Srivastava has commented thus:
The themes persistently and recurringly used by Anita Desai in her novels are: human relationships, particularly that of man and woman, alienation, loneliness and lack of communication, East and West encounter and violence and death.²¹

He further mentions that in the frequently occurring “theme of withdrawal, alienation, loneliness, isolation and lack of communication”, these problems “exist as a corollary of good human relationships”²². N. R. Gopal too, has commented on similar lines:

The central theme of man-woman relationship with which Desai deals has been treated by several other Indian writers like Nayantara Sehgal, Nargis Dalal and Kamala Das. But in Desai the themes are governed by existential tones.²³

Shashi Khanna further comments on the treatment of human relationships in the Indian novel in English:

In so far as the treatment of human relations is concerned, the Western novelists lay emphasis on the individual while the Indian English emphasizes the importance of the family. Western civilization is predominantly individualistic, but in the social value-system of India renunciation of the individual ego is regarded as the most desirable thing.²⁴
It is in the light of this remark that Anita Desai's treatment of human relationships assumes significance as the novelist all through elevates individual existence over the social one. At the same time, unlike these critics who have considered human relationships to be the central theme of Anita Desai's novels, this study has not concentrated on human relationships as these will come any way to a discussion of other concerns.

As nearly all critics are unanimously agreed on Anita Desai’s "exploration of consciousness... turning toward, probing deeply into the innermost depth of human psyche to fathom its mysteries, the inner turmoil, the chaos inside the mind", this study has attempted to interpret the themes of Anita Desai's novels against this background, thereby taking into consideration her techniques in the novels. This exploration of the psyche - as has already been mentioned - was the special forte of the modernists and hence many of the themes here have been attempted to be interpreted from the modernist angle of vision.

As for the technique, the Indian novelists have not been very innovative or concerned with craftsmanship, barring a few. R. K. Narayan, Bhabani Bhattacharyya and Manohar Malgonkar were the practitioners of the traditional novel in the Indian novel in English. However, a few writers like Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and Sudhindra Nath Ghose made some experiments with their techniques. Anand has in his *Untouchable* (1935) adopted the stream-of-consciousness technique in a limited way. Here the entire action takes place in a single day and
actions of the day, though external, create waves of internal reaction through which the theme gets unfolded. In *The Big Heart* (1945) too, the entire action takes place in a day.

Although not a very prolific writer, Raja Rao is clearly a symbolist, stylist and philosophical novelist. Each of his four novels is unique in its own way. These four novels range from the fervent nationalism of *Kanthapura* (1938) through the irony of *Comrade Kirillov* (1976) and the serious philosophical speculation of *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960) to the mixture of farce and philosophy in *The Cat and Shakespeare* (1965).

The narrative technique of *Kanthapura* follows the style of the Indian puranas or the “Harikatha mixing freely narration, description, reflection, religious discourse, folk-lore” and so on. Another experimental work with form is *The Serpent and the Rope* which shows a successful blend of both Indian and Western modes. Moreover, whatever happens in the story happens mostly in the inner world of the protagonist.

The novels of Sudhindra Nath Ghose (1899 - 1965) point to another experiment in the writing of the Indian novel in English. The novels have a firm base in the ancient native tradition of story-telling. The four novels — *And Gazelles Leaping* (1949), *Cradle of the Clouds* (1951), *The Vermillion Boat* (1953) and *The Flame of the Forest* (1955) — form a tetralogy held together by the central figure of the protagonist who is also
the narrator. The central theme in them is the growth of the narrator's mind.

Ghose does away with the Aristotelian concept of plot and uses instead the "ancient device of framing the story interpolated with inserted tales by different characters". The sources of these tales vary from the legend, folk-lore, history to the ancient epics and puranas. Most of the tales are not merely digressions but are used to illustrate some point. Ghose mixes prose and verse as in the practice in Sanskrit "Campu Kavya". He even introduces into the narrative songs in Bengali with musical notations.

Apart from the works of these three experimentalists, G.V. Desani's *All About H. Hatterr* (1948) is again another overtly experimental work blending western and oriental modes of narration.

Against this background, Anita Desai's consistent attention to craftsmanship throughout her novels puts her on a plane quite different from that of any other Indian-English novelist before her. Technique in the hands of Anita Desai reflects an innovativeness that was hitherto quite absent in the Indian English novelists barring the experimentalists just referred to in the earlier paragraphs. There is thus, the frequent use of flashbacks, a stepping back and forth in time, the use of interior monologue and a sustained use of imagery and symbols that elevate her novels to the poetic level. In fact, it is through this use of images and symbols that the act of "literary externalization of internalized
experience" is carried out. Incidentally, these aspects of her technique once again reflect Anita Desai's leaning towards the modernist tradition.

Another noteworthy aspect that should be considered while discussing Anita Desai's technique is her use of language. Desai's easy natural flow yet highly felicititious language can be termed as her special contribution to the Indian novel in English.

Anita Desai, till date, has ten novels to her credit along with one short novella for children - The Village by the Sea (1982) – and a collected work of short stories Games at Twilight (1978). The ten novels are Cry, the Peacock (1963), Voices in the City (1965), Bye-Bye Blackbird (1971), Where Shall We Go This Summer? (1975), Fire On The Mountain (1977), Clear Light of Day (1980), In Custody (1984), Baumgartner's Bombay (1988), Journey to Ithaca (1995) and Fasting, Feasting (1999). There are of course, other uncollected short stories, two more children's books as well as essays, articles and reviews by the novelist. These have been mentioned in the Bibliography.

While Anita Desai's works have yielded many studies and critical works covering many aspects of her fiction such as her art, use of symbolism, some thematic concerns and so on yet the fecundity of the novelist leaves scope for newer and more varied interpretations to do justice to her richness in creation. This thesis therefore aims at the first place to study the varied nature of the themes of Anita Desai's novels thereby highlighting her special achievement.
Coming to her technique, apart from a few brief references to her fictional technique and the inclusion of a chapter or two on her technique in various books on her, no attempt has been made so far to make a detailed analysis of her techniques in the context of her themes. This study therefore, also makes an effort at a detailed analysis of the techniques of her novels in relation to her themes.

This study has taken up for detailed interpretation of the themes and techniques all the ten novels published till date. It has not taken up however, for detailed interpretation her short novella for children as well as her collected work of short stories. After all in them, the novelist has a limited scope for the full expression of her distinct thematic and technical concerns. However, those stories that do have a bearing on some of the novels have been touched upon wherever required. The novels have been taken up in the chronological order for our study here.

This study has been divided into eleven chapters along with this Introduction. Chapters I to X discuss the themes and techniques of the ten novels respectively in chronological order. Chapter XI constitutes the conclusion in which the earlier findings in the chapters on each novel are analysed to come to a final conclusion on Anita Desai - the woman and the artist.

The different books, journals and other critical works that have been consulted for the purpose of this study have been mentioned in the Bibliography. In the context of citation, the directions prescribed in the
MLA Handbook (3rd ed. Wiley Eastern Reprint, 1989) have been followed. Parts of those consulted books and journals which have been quoted in the different chapters have been mentioned in the endnotes which occur at the end of every chapter.

Certain quotes from the novels taken up for interpretation here have sometimes been repeated in the same chapter. However, this has been done so in different contexts and with a view to showing the appropriateness of those contexts.

Notes

2. ibid., p. 19.
3. ibid., p. 19.
5. Meenakshi Mukherjee, op. cit, p. 23.
6. ibid., p. 66.
7. ibid., p. 66.
8. ibid., p. 79.
9. ibid., p. 79.
10. ibid., p. 91.


13. ibid., p 67.


16. ibid., pp 3-4.


18. ibid., p 7.


21. ibid., p xxvi.

22. ibid., p xxvii.


27. ibid., p 225.

28. ibid., p 225.


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