CHAPTER - 5

ANITA DESAI - A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH
Anita Desai represents a blend of Indian and European sensibilities. One of the most promising novelists writing in English today in India, was born of a Bengali father and a German mother in Mussorie on June 24\textsuperscript{th}, 1937. She was educated in Queen Mary's School and later at Miranda House, Delhi. She started writing since she was seven but received attention with her first novel \textit{Cry, the Peacock}, published in 1963. Her sensitive handling of the craft of fiction has brought her both popular appreciation and critical acclaim. She was awarded certificate of excellence from Author's and Publisher's Guild of India for her novel \textit{Where shall We Go This Summer?} \textit{Fire on the Mountain} made herself established as one of the significant voices in Indo-Anglian fiction. The novel brought her the Winifred Holtby award for Regional literature of the Royal Society of Literature, London and the Sahitya Akademi Award for English, for the year 1978. She was elected a fellow of Royal Society of Literature, London in 1978. Married Ashvin Desai in 1958, and has four children.

Desai comments

"I have been writing, since the age of 7, as instinctively as I breathe. It is a necessity to
me : I find it is in the process of writing that I am able to think, to feel, and to realize at the highest pitch."¹

Her modernist novels have received wide publicity and favourable critical response for their formal coherence and lyrical texture. The lyrical texture of her novels unravels the complexity associated with women burdened with the problems they confront in negotiating with a network of animal relations. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, two women novelists, Shakuntala Shrinagesh in her *The Little Black Box* (1955) and Anita Desai in her *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) and *Voices in the City* (1965) have made intelligent views of the stream of consciousness method of narration. She is gifted with a sensibility which suits her aesthetic goals. She is perhaps the most self-conscious artist, forging an unique world out of the mundane things of the day to day existence of an Indian female. We observe in her writing a conscious attempt to bring this waywardness to a definite aesthetic end, to turn it into a pattern and a design. In this respect, she is quite unlike writers like Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and others, whose concerns are larger and whose skills consist in externalising what is implicit in social reality. She creates a private world

of her own. She claims that her "novels are no reflection of Indian society, politics or character."\(^2\) Her works are different from the works of other Indian women novelists in English like Nayantara Sahgal and Kamala Markandaya, who mainly concern themselves with politics and East-West encounter respectively. Anita is interested in the psychic life of her characters. In her own words it is "depth which is interesting, delving deeper and deeper in a character on a scene rather than going round about it."\(^3\) She writes almost with the skill of a Painter. Things and objects, however small and insignificant, acquire large importance in her novels. There is a sustained effort in her writing to evolve a set of symbols, images or myths but they really do not have the power and intensity we generally associate with them. The symbolism of dance, for example, which appears in all her novels in some form or the other, does not have the same intensity in all the novels. Instead of plot, her emphasis is on pattern and rhythm as these imply a balance, a synthesis and proportion.

The poetic quality of Anita Desai's fiction has now been acknowledged and is apparent that her reading of novelists like D.H. Lawrence, Raja Rao, Kawabata and Virginia Woolf

\(^2\) Ibid., p.19

has had a great impact on her technique and style. Though not admittedly a feminist, Anita Desai is aware of the peculiar predicament of the Indian woman writer. Her fictional world, however, has the quality of evanescence that she herself thinks to be true characteristic of a created world. Within her limited canvas, she always strives to achieve something new and different. Her desire for innovation and experimentation is apparent in all her novels and this lends her work a touch not to be found in other Indian writers.

Her first novel *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) is a fascinating psychological study of neurotic fears and anxieties caused by marital incompatibility and disharmony, compounded by age old superstitions. It is in the direction of psychological fiction in the Indian novel in English. Familial disharmony results in self-alienation, which in turn forces Anita Desai's protagonists to subject themselves to a search for an emotional centre within which they can cling to during crisis.

*Voices in the City* (1965) presents the inner dissonance in Nirode's family which is a result of his mother's indiscretion. Nirode's wounded self transforms itself and manifests as a cynical irrelevance for all the traditional norms of social behaviour.
Bye-Bye, Black Bird (1971) like Kamala Markandaya's The No-where Man, converges on the theme of Indians abroad. It is only in this novel, that we have an East-West encounter. The novel incorporated the impact of an East-West marriage on the psyche of Sarah. According to Meenakshi Mukherjee, Sarah is the most successful and a typical Desai character. The major concern of the novel is the alienation and accommodation of the immigrant in a society which is both alluring and appealing.

The narrative in Where shall We Go This Summer? (1975) is routed through the consciousness of Sita and the chronology is collapsed in order to facilitate a composite vision of Sita and her familial life. But her revolt against the structural compulsions of society fails. Her plight is similar to that of Savitri in R.K. Narayan's The Dark Room (1938).

Nanda Kaul in Fire on the Mountain (1977) suffers from an intense awareness of the loss of privacy and the self's eagerness to rehabilitate it. She struggles hard to forget the wound caused by her husband.

The Protagonist of Clear Light of Day (1980), Bin is a study of the self in transition. The novel presents the anguish of a sensitive woman trapped in the pattern of movement
and stillness. In Desai's own words, the novel is a "four dimensional piece".


Anita Desai tells us that the creative act is a secret one and to make it public, to scrutinize it in the cold light of reason, is to commit an act of violence, possibly murder.

HER PUBLICATIONS

Novels:

1. Cry, the Peacock
   London : Peter Owen, 1963,
   188 p.

2. Voices in the City
   London : Peter Owen, 1965,
   265 p.

3. Bye -Bye, Blackbird
   Delhi : Hind Pocket Books, 1971,
   266 p.

4. Where Shall We Go This Summer?
   Delhi : Vikas Publications, 1975,

5. Fire on the Mountain
   London : Heinemann, 1977,

6. Clear Light of Day
   New Delhi : Allied Publishers (P) Ltd., 1980,
   183 p.

7. The Village by the Sea : An Indian Family Story
   Bombay : Allied, 1983,
   156 p.

8. In Custody
   London : Heinemann, 1985,
   156 p.

9. Baumgartner's Bombay
   Penguins India, 1989,
   195 p.