CHAPTER I

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Anita Desai, prize-winning Indian short-story writer and novelist, is born in the north Indian town of Mussoorie. Her father is an Indian and her mother is a German. Born to a Bengali father and a German mother, she is brought up in an otherwise typical middle-class Indian environment. As a result, much of her writing has been an examination of how East meets West and how traditional Indian society has collided with modernity. The New York Times praises Desai as having 'a remarkable eye... for the things that give life its texture... [Desai is] a superb observer of the human race.'

Dianna Moeller says, “Desai's writing also is somewhat unique in that her main characters are women, children, adolescents and the elderly.” Praised for her penetrating views of the inner lives of Indian middle-class people, she is also highly regarded for her vivid language and skilled writing technique. Hindustan Times praises her as 'one of India's best known writers and says, “Anita Desai has been among the voices that defined the post-independence

1 The New York Times.
literary scene in India - not just as an author, but also a chronicler of events that shaped the nascent republic, though more often at a micro level than her contemporaries.” She has not faced any tension as a creative writer in English as she comes from an English-speaking family.

Desai attended Queen Mary's School and University of Delhi. Married in 1958, she has four children. She began to write in English at the age of seven and published her first story at the age of nine. Desai began to publish stories in the late 1950s and became one of India's most prominent post-independence novelists. In 1993 she became a creative writing teacher at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Desai is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in London.

Since the 1950s Desai has lived in New Delhi, Calcutta, Bombay and other Indian cities. At 67, Anita Desai says she is becoming something of a drifter. She didn't leave India until she was 45 but now lives between Boston, Mexico, England and Delhi. Interestingly, Desai says the place she now feels most like an outsider is India. She visits India less and less, just once a year and "briefly" at that. "Modern-day India is slipping away from me," Desai says. At an age when

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3 Hindustan Times.
most writers are descending deeper into their own fictional worlds, into meditations on age, identity and the bankruptcy of the modern world, Desai is exploring lives increasingly remote from her own.

Desai was interested in the non-political colonial view of India, of mystery, exoticism, and the spiritual fascination. Indians take it for granted. It is as down to earth as eating and drinking. But Europeans approach it on a different level, so there is constant misunderstanding and distortion. Yet she rejects the "mediating" role sometimes ascribed to her, insisting she has no answers. "To me, fiction is exploring; if you felt you'd arrived, you'd give up." While Desai has expanded her fictional territory with each book, Fasting, Feasting's return to the Indian family hearth has surprised even its author. "I swore I'd never write about the past again, that sense of always being within closed walls," she says. "I was determined to open the door and break free - but it's the first thing I felt the urge to write in America. I've gone back to my roots; but then one doesn't really leave them behind. I could write about them forever."

A recipient of the Padma Shri, Desai recently delighted audience in Delhi by reading excerpts from her novels and speaking about her experiences as a writer. Far from discoursing, she adopted a question-answer approach,

5 Ibid. 3.
providing the answers from her own works and personal experiences. The graying coiffure, the unostentatious cotton saree worn with matronly grace and the soft voice suggested the maturity of the novelist.

Being in the forefront of the contemporary crop of Indian writers in English, Desai is widely read. She draws a distinction between her kind of writers and her predecessors. She herself has not faced any tension as a creative writer in English. "It is very interesting to see change in the Indian literary scene," she says. As Melissa Culross says, "Desai's work is part of a new style of writing to come out of India which is not nearly as conservative as Indian writing has been in the past."6 One concern that is part of her work, especially the novel Baumgartner's Bombay, is that about foreignness and dividedness. Desai grew up during World War II and could see the anxiety her German mother was experiencing about the situation and her family in Germany. After the war when she realized, the Germany she had known was devastated, her mother never returned there, nor had any desire to return. Anita herself did not visit until she was an adult.

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6 Melissa Culross, A Brief Biography of Anita Desai '92 (EL 34, 1991).
Desai began her journey into the world of fiction in 1963. Her literary journey has begun with *Cry, the Peacock*. During the 1960s, Desai attracted attention with a series of lyrical novels and today has more than a dozen books and several short stories. "You won’t find any linguistic gymnastics or flights of poetic whimsy here, she simply tells a tale….but boy, she tells it well!"  

Desai has consistently chronicled the lives and aspirations of India and has created enduring characters who linger on long after the story has ended. First published in the early 60s, Desai is widely praised as the finest of her generation of Indian writers in English and one of the few who had an international reputation, alongside R.K. Narayan, before the post-Rushdie wave of the 80s and 90s. She was shortlisted three times for the Booker prize. But literary big time has always eluded Anita Desai, though thrice she came within a hair’s breadth of winning the Booker. She was shortlisted for the award in 1980 for *Clear Light Of Day*, in 1984 for *In Custody* and in 2000 for *Fasting, Feasting*. But awards are not the only measure of success because at the end of the day stories speak for themselves. Desai’s work stands in a league of its own and she can more than hold her own against

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those beautiful, young one-book-wonders who walk away with all the glory and all the headlines.

Throughout her novels, children's books and short stories, Desai focuses on personal struggles and problems of contemporary life that her Indian characters must cope with. She maintains that her primary goal is to discover "the truth that is nine-tenths of the iceberg that lies submerged beneath the one-tenth visible portion we call Reality". She portrays the cultural and social changes that India has undergone as she focuses on the incredible power of family and society and the relationships between family members, paying close attention to the trials of women suppressed by Indian society. "She doesn't dazzle the reader with her brilliance but lures them gently into an intricate web of lives that are frayed, fragile and so finely detailed that they are almost tangible."

Her primary interest has been the mental and social struggles of middle-class Indian people. She has regularly produced novels and stories that skillfully depict the difficulties of modern life.

In her fiction - 12 novels, two collections of short stories - Desai has explored the lives of middle-class Indians, the encounter between India and the West and in particular, the lives of Indian women. The novels of Anita Desai provide

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8 Desai, "Replies to the Questionnaire", 4.
9 Preface, iv
a significant forum for voicing the personal and political concerns of women. Anita Desai, often brings into her work upper class settings and politics. "After all these years, she is leading the life she wanted for her characters, and which for years she thought could only be a man's - a life of adventure, chance and risk."\(^\text{10}\)

Her novels seem to portray the historical development and the social changes that have taken place in post colonial India. At the same time they explore the emotional dilemma and alienation experienced by her protagonists as a result of colonization and gender biases. Born to a German mother and an Indian father, Desai’s work focuses on the quest for identity and the positioning of women. Major emphasis is on the struggles and problems of everyday living while paying close attention to marginalisation of middle class Indian women.

\textit{O.P. Budholia} says, "As Desai explores the hidden motives of man, the untrodden and unvisited regions of human psyche, she becomes symbolic and suggestive in dealing with the predicament of man vis-à-vis the social forces that subvert the protagonists progression in society."\(^\text{11}\)

\(^{10}\) The Guardian, Thursday, September 2, 2004.

\(^{11}\) O.P. Budholia, Anita Desai: Vision and Technique in Her Novels (New Delhi, B.R., 2001, x) 276.
Almost all the protagonists of Desai have been entrusted with a Herculean task to work for their identity in society they belong to. They meet failures and disappointments while waging war against the negative and cruel social forces. But the failures and disappointments do not deter them from the persuasiveness of their objectives. The defeat, failure and disappointment make them suffer but they suffer with tragic dignity. Thus, their sufferings, their indefatigableness and their ceaseless strivings to exist in society make the novelist use the poetic and symbolic language almost in all her novels.

The protagonists of *Cry, the Peacock* and *Voices in the City* include young urban married women. Desai's breakthrough novel is *Fire on the Mountain* which centers on the conflicts between an older Indian woman and her mentally ill great-granddaughter. Both *Clear Light of Day* and *In Custody* deal with Muslim-Hindu relationships. *Baumgartner's Bombay* and *Journey to Ithaca* explore conflicts between East and West. Desai also wrote children's fiction, *Village by the Sea* and two short story collections, *Games at Twilight* and *Diamond Dust*. The Zigzag Way her new novel showcases her unique ability to view a new world through an outsider's eyes.

*Gyan Marwah* says, “Writing for her is no meteoric burst or a stylistic flash. She believes in an 'idea'. A scrap of
news or a face seen in a bus is enough for her to weave a story."\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Anita Desai} says, "Each of my stories has taken years to take shape. I keep turning them over and over in my mind, choosing and discarding bits, till a pattern and design emerges."\textsuperscript{13}

Desai writes ‘instinctively’ carried away by her compulsions, allowing the novel to sprout and grow freely like a 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—"leaf dipping under a rain drop, a face seen on the bus or a scrap of news read in the papers."\textsuperscript{14} The idea like a magnet drags around it a great mass of subsidiary material, some remembered dialogues, a flashing thought, an incident which together form the novel. She does not believe in a preconceived plot. For her the plot is just an ‘idea’ occupying one’s subconscious mind. She had started to write short stories regularly before her marriage. \textit{R.K. Gupta} says, "Anita Desai employs in her novels, the varied images, metaphors, symbols and myths for bearing out the interior regions of

\textsuperscript{12} Gyan Marwah, Anita Desai-4 Decades of Prose.

\textsuperscript{13} Anita Desai, "Replies to the Questionnaire," 3.

\textsuperscript{14} Atma Ram, "An Interview with Anita Desai," World Literature Written in English, Vol.16, No. I (April 1977) 100.
human psyche, obsession, inner motives, latent desires and dormant impulses of human mind. It is an endeavour to bring out the structural and visionary aspects of Mrs. Desai’s novels in order to make it more interesting and useful to scholars and students alike.15

Several of Desai’s novels explore with Chekhovian sensibility tensions between family members and the alienation of middle-class women.16 She is especially noted for her sensitive portrayal of the inner life of her female characters. In her later novels Desai has dealt with such themes as German anti-Semitism, the demise of traditions and Western stereotypical views of India. It is usually argued that the protagonists of her novels are more often women than men. Her women characters are identities that rebel against the patriarchal oppression even if it is only a silent upheaval.

Desai captures moments and emotions high in delicacy and measures an exact number of words to draw them up - one word less and the sketch is left wanting, one word more and it is already redundant. Her expression is the language of fragility itself and she tackles the most discreet of subjects with effortless poise. Her stories move between a whole range of moods- from exuberant to mellow, from exultant to crest-

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16 Anita Desai Litweb.net.
fallen, from delight to ennui, from expectant to disappointed. Her word, like the stroke of the seasoned artist, is sure of itself, it never wavers or falters and fits in its place like a jewel.

Desai continues her peerless exploration of the tensions between social obligation and personal independence, the complex dynamics of families and the clash between the old and the new. Travelling from India to Canada and on to Mexico, she deftly captures the struggles against cultural and emotional constraints.

Her married women characters like Maya in *Cry, A Peacock*, Monisha in *Voices in the City*, Nanda in *Fire in the Mountain*, and Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* become depressed, violent or self-destructive. They either lose their sanity and kill others, or they kill or destroy themselves. "The nemesis of these women is not a private one but an outgrowth of the complex social context, immediate family environments and the relationships with their men."\(^{17}\)

As a novelist Desai made her debut in 1963 with "*Cry, the Peacock*". The painstakingly perfected chiselling is perhaps the secret of her three and a half decade-long success. It was hailed by *London's Daily Telegraph* as "a poetry-novel,

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from a highly original, intense and perceptive artiste."\textsuperscript{18} It can be considered a trend-setting novel as it deals with the psychical rather than with physical aspects of its characters in sheer poetic terms. Maya suffers from father-obsession and looks for the typical father image in her husband. Maya is an Indian and her thoughts have an Indianness about them, despite their disturbed state. Desai, however, has refrained from commenting on the novel as it belonged to a period of her life when she was still growing up and had not yet broken free of restraints. Maya is her first fully developed female character. In the words of Atma Ram she exemplifies Desai’s concern with “thought, emotion and sensation.”\textsuperscript{19}

It was followed by "Voices of the City" (1965), a story about three siblings, Amla, Nirode and Monisha and their different ways of life in Calcutta. Amla sees the city as a monster, Nirode sacrifices everything for her career and Monisha cannot bear her stifling existence in the household of a wealthy old Calcutta family. The novel effectively demonstrates Desai’s technique in terms of a complex mix of urban consciousness and individual consciousness, both of which eventuate into a unity of existential experience and artistic vision.

\textsuperscript{18} London’s Daily Telegraph.

\textsuperscript{19} Ram, “An Interview with Anita Desai.”
Her third novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird* (1971) depicts the plight of Indian Immigrants in London. It deals with the theme of East-West encounter. Like many of his fellow immigrants in England, Adit has developed a love and fascination for England right from his schooldays in India. Despite all this love and regard for England, it does not accept him. All that England offers him is a petty clerical job. The theme has a rich significance. The title of the novel refers to England’s bidding farewell to an Indian—“a blackbird”. Desai talks about the novel as "a piece of truly objective observation" - almost as social documentary - and dismisses it for its "lightness."  

In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975) the traditional function of the psychological novel is enlarged in theme and application. Sita, pregnant with her fifth child, takes refuge from her marriage on the magical island homestead of her deceased father. She insists on fleeing from the mainland to the island of her childhood. Sita is alienated from her husband Raman because of incompatibility of temperaments and lack of communication. *Shyam M.Asnani* thinks that “her loneliness is symbolic of the loneliness of a

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woman, a wife and mother-the loneliness conditioned by familial and social constraints.\(^{21}\)

She has received the 1978 National Academy of Letters Award for *Fire on the Mountain*, the first of her novels to be brought to the United States. The story is of a remote, isolated woman and her equally withdrawn great-granddaughter as they are forced together in hills surrounded by violence and fire. The novel, set in Kasuli, a hill station, focused on three women and their complex experiences in life. This book is unusually written and tells their sad tale. Nanda Kaul withdraws into a private world of self-willed isolation. As Blanchard says, “However the sadness is not in your face and it does not make you despair for the characters. Enjoyable and memorable and can be read again.”\(^{22}\) The novel is described as ‘a fictional Metaphor of Existentialist Philosophy.’

In *Clear Light of Day* (1980) she reveals anxieties about the status of Urdu poetry in the wake of the subcontinental partition. Such self-reflexive crossings into the vernaculars in order to discover and recover their significance, then, not only produces a new range of


\(^{22}\) Blanchard, (Caribbean, March 19, 2004).
meanings and their social, historical, and linguistic significance. It imparts a socio-political depth to literary works that provides us with yet another reason to celebrate the arrival of Indian writing in English. The novel is concerned with the anguish of a sensitive woman Bim, the eldest child in the family, who wishes to live in the world of fantasy and past. Her younger sister Tara too is obsessed by her childhood memories and cannot forget the impression that her father had killed her mother. Rob Stout says, “Desai’s fiction shows the plain face of truth.”

In 1983 she was awarded the Guardian Prize for Children's Fiction for The Village by the Sea, an adventurous fairy tale about a young boy living in a small fishing village of Thul in India. This is a novel about everything in Indian culture. The author successfully blended Indian's traditions, environment, politics and bunch more problems that surrounded the poor Indian family. The children of the family Hari and Lila work and fight to keep their family together. The children in this family are not only struggling to survive, they are trying to be happy at the same time by adapting to the new things that come into their lives. With their mother ill and their father permanently drunk, Hari and Lila have to earn the money to keep house and look after their two younger

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sisters. In desperation, Hari runs away to Bombay, leaving Lila to cope alone. Desai shows her clear understanding of rural life and contrasts it with the mechanical life in Bombay.

*In Custody* published in 1984, is Desai’s ironic story about literary traditions and academic illusions. It is woven around the yearnings and calamities of Deven, a small town scholar from Mirpore in the north of India. Deven’s obviously essentialistic conception of women inevitably leads to his failure. As George P. Landow says, “Anita Desai places major emphasis on examining women’s lives within the context of Indo-Pakistan culture.”24 Deven, the sad, hopeless protagonist of the novel embodies the modernist anti-hero – a protagonist with little of the heroic in him. The unhappily married, unadventurous, Deven goes to a big city to interview a great poet and is disillusioned. The central characters are Nur, an Urhi poet, who has fallen on hard times and Deven, a professor of Hindi, who realizes that the beloved poet is not the magical genius he has imagined.

In *Baumgartner’s Bombay* (1987), Desai also looked at the German side of her ancestry, by writing about a Jewish man who had escaped from Nazi Germany and settled in Bombay. It was the tale of Hugo Baumgartner, a Jew who

24 George P. Landow, Women’s Lives in Desai’s *In Custody*,

Professor of English and Art History, Brown University.
fled from war torn Germany and settled in Bombay with a retinue of stray cats. Growing up in India, he is unsure of his identity, and unable to commit himself to either culture. Baumgartner is a lifelong wandering Jew. From his agonizing childhood in pre-war Berlin, through his spell in business first in Calcutta and then Bombay, he simply doesn't belong. Too dark for Hitler's Germany, too fair for India, he remains a foreigner wherever he goes. The central theme was homelessness and acceptance in another place and time. Explains Desai, "As a young girl, I had known people like that. They were strangely eccentric, obvious foreigners, not belonging to Indian society." The author's own German half of the parental heritage is in the background. A German hippie enters Baumgartner's life and his reclusive existence is shattered and the hidden Nazi hatred surfaces.

In her first novel since the widely praised Baumgartner's Bombay, Anita Desai brilliantly evokes spiritual India in all its endless complexity and examines the nature of pilgrimage through the aspirations and adventures of three superbly realized characters in Journey to Ithaca (1995). Desai examined the nature of pilgrimage to India through three characters - Matteo, Sophie and Mother. In

telling what happens to Matteo and Sophie and the mother, Anita Desai gives us a novel of great richness, an extraordinary vision of a country and a compassionate portrait of people struggling to find a spiritual home. Her novel started in Italy where an Italian boy, Matteo and his German wife Sophie impressed by the writings of the eastern spiritualist, Herman Hesse, set off on a hippy trail of India. This is her most powerful and most involving novel.

Desai's 11th novel *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) short listed for the Booker Prize, is further consolidated Desai's international reputation showcasing her immense skill in handling complex inter-relationships. *Fasting, Feasting* takes on Desai's greatest theme, the family conflict. She has long proved herself one of the most accomplished and admired chroniclers of middle-class India. It is the moving story of plain and lumpish Uma and the cherished late-born Arun, daughter and son of strict and conventional parents. Here an unmarried woman is forced to care for her demanding, elderly parents. It is a brilliantly angry book, full of quiet rage about the pressures on women to marry and to serve. Uma is the eldest and plainest child in an Indian family. Her privileged, American-educated brother becomes involved with a Massachusetts family whose luxurious lifestyle contrasts starkly with the life of Uma and her parents back in India.

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26 Editorial Reviews, garamchai.com
Told first from Uma's point of view, then from her brother's, this novel illuminates both cultures.

Her latest novel *The Zigzag Way* (2004) is set in Mexico and Cornwall and is narrated by a young American writer, a man, who travels to the Sierra Madre. Desai departed from her familiar territories and set the story of identity and self-discovery in Mexico. In the novel the complexities of forced immigration and the exploitation of workers, migrant and otherwise, are certainly part of Desai's larger theme, but so is something deeper, darker, and more ancient. It tells the story of Eric who follows his somewhat overbearing girlfriend to Mexico and then embarks on a mission to find evidence of the lives of his grandparents in a 'ghost' mining town. In the course of his quest, Eric meets a succession of local characters. The last section of the book provides the setting for the various strands of the novel to come together.

One striking feature we notice in all her novels is that the story revolves around three main characters - two female characters and one male character. We have Nirode, Monisha and Amla in *Voices in the City*; Bim, Tara and Raja in *Clear Light of Day*; Uma, Aruna and Arun in *Fasting, Feasting*; Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das in *Fire on the Mountain*; Raman, Sita and her father in *Where shall we go this Summer?* Gautama, Maya and her brother Arjuna in *Cry, the Peacock*; Adit, Sarah and Dev in *Bye-Bye Blackbird*; Mattoe, Sophia and Mother in *Journey to Ithaca*; Eric, Dona Vera and
Betty in *The Zigzag Way*. Typical of Desai’s imagery is the use of the house as a place of confinement for women. Like Bim in *Clear Light of Day*, Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain*, Lotte in Baumgartner’s *Bombay* and Uma, her mother and Mrs Patton in *Fasting, Feasting* rarely walk through the streets of their cities and towns.

*Richard Bernstein* says, “Desai writes with intelligence and power. She has a remarkable eye for substance, the things that give life its texture. Nothing escapes her power of observation.”*27* "Finishing one book is like leaving one stage of life, or else one goes on endlessly, repeating the theme." Desai’s perspective on India is more European than in her earlier works. However, it is one-sided to argue that Desai lacks compassion for the Indian people or has not adapted Indian oral storytelling forms into her work. Desai goes beyond public or social themes and national literary traditions. Her focus is on the female psyche and on the interior lives of individuals, through which she portrays the reality in contemporary India. However the author is on record saying her characters were “no reflection on Indian society, politics or character. They are my private attempt to seize upon the raw material of life.”*28*

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28 Srivatsava, “Anita Desai at Work : An Interview.”
In the mid-1980s Desai started to look more closely at the life of the unprivileged. The change-over in her later novels, Desai says, was the break-off from those shackles. Most of her earlier work however is deeply immersed in humdrum Indian life, exploring everyday experiences with rare sensitivity and acuity. Desai's earlier work concentrated on writing about India's upper middle and upper classes, exploring their angst and choices, their marriages and movements. Desai, says, "My earlier books were born out of great isolation. I was a young woman with no experience of an outer world." Desai is praised for her broad understanding on intellectual issues, and for her ability to portray her country so vividly with the way the eastern and western cultures have blended there.

The richness of the subject matter depends upon the richness of experience. Being a woman novelist, Desai has her limits. Occasionally her themes are abstract because the accumulated material gives rise to abstract ideas, one of which acts as a running thread to bind all the material together. Since Desai believes that "literature should deal with most enduring matters, less temporary and less temporal than politics", she is opposed to the immediate use of contemporary material. There may be occasional references

29 Anita Desai, ‘Replies to the Questionnaire’, 2.

30 Ibid.
to contemporary incidents in her novels as in *Clear Light of Day* which refers to the partition-riots and the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. Desai has said that narrative is a socially symbolic act that tries to affect the world indirectly. We try to make sense of the world we live in by telling stories. The narrator's view of reality is transmitted to the reader through the created narrative, and can influence how the reader perceives and thus constructs her own reality.

Desai's stories are short, concise and could be considered slim novels or plump novellas. Regardless, they never fail to convey the tangled complexities of Indian traditions with an economy of language that is clean, simple and elegantly straightforward. From her debut, *Cry, The Peacock* to *The Zigzag Way*, her story lines rarely stray from the emotional tribulations of women whose independence is still suppressed within Indian society. Her heroines - urban and rural, young and old - stand as lasting reminders of the traditionally male-dominated institutions of marriage, camaraderie and literary art. There have been many women writers before Desai, but none has been gifted with such a fine feminine sensibility as Desai's and consequently her female characters have been vividly portrayed, even though she is occasionally blamed for having created rather unrealistic male characters.

Desai has consistently chronicled the lives and aspirations of India and has created enduring characters who
linger on long after the story has ended. Her characters in many novels are members of the Anglicized Indian bourgeoisie, whose marital problems are in the forefront. Her characters often adopt escapist ways to cope with the boring everyday life or world outside comfortable living. She prefers to delve ‘deeper and deeper in a character or a scene, rather than going roundabout it.’

"With her inner eye she saw how her own house and its particular history linked and contained her, as well as her whole family... giving them the soil in which to send down their roots... always drawing from the same soil, the same secret darkness. That soil contained all time, past and future... It was where her deepest self lived, and the deepest selves of her sisters and brothers and all those who shared that time with her."

In the words of Dashini Ann Jeyathurai ‘Anita Desai is a wonderfully subtle writer who achieves her powerful and poignant effects by stealth rather than by direct action.’ Desai is an accomplished writer.

32 Voices from the Gaps, BIOGRAPHY – CRITICISM.
33 Dashini Ann Jeyathurai, Teen Correspondent, Delves into the Inner Sanctum of an Orthodox Indian Family from BlueJeanOnline.com
Her narrative skills combine with smooth, elegant prose to produce a pleasant reading experience. But the distillation of character and plot feels more like an extended outline than a full rendering of the material's inherent ambition.

As a young woman, Desai says she felt her own life was not big or broad enough to feed her writing. "My whole life was about family and neighbours: it was very difficult for a woman to experience anything else. I was bored and I needed to find more range, which is why I started to write about men in books like Baumgartner's Bombay and In Custody. Men led lives of adventure, chance and risk. It just wasn't possible to write that from an Indian female perspective." In both of these books Desai has ventured into the material squalor and poverty of India, in the middle of the mud and filth, dust and debris. In both of these books Desai has given her answer to critics, who have concluded that her characters are usually Westernized middle-class professionals and therefore their problems are more close to those of Western readers than to majority of Indian people. It is interesting that when she herself steps out of her Indian surroundings to travel to London, the result of the stimulation of her imagination by the unfamiliar should be exempted from this invasive model. Dr. Gupta shows how Anita Desai

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34 Srivastava, “Anita Desai at Work: An Interview.”
has depicted the depths of human consciousness and sub-consciousness in her existential concern which makes her writings uniquely powerful through feminism."

In 1990, Desai wrote a controversial essay for the Times Literary Supplement, *A Secret Connivance*, in which she argued that Indian women connive at their own subordination by aspiring to mythic role models, in the form of Indian goddesses that "keep her bemused, bound hand and foot". It was a polemical overstatement. Yet Desai insists: "Indian women have made enormous strides into the professions and taking control of their lives since my generation and my mother's, but they have a long way to go."

Of the single working women in her books, she says: "They have all paid a price; they're not, according to some, living happy lives. There's always a choice one makes."

*Meena Shirwadkar* claims that, following the changes in Indian society, novels have started to progress from depicting women characters solely as epitomes of suffering, womanly virtue to portraying more complex, real characters. Tradition,


36 Srivatsava, "Anita Desai at Work: An Interview".
transition and modernity are the stages through which the woman in Indo-Anglian novel is passing.37

Desai says she believes that Indian society has changed since then, although not necessarily at a radical level. "Women are now actively encouraged to work, but the reasons are chiefly economic - it is recognized that women have earning power, too. The pressure to marry is still huge and so in some ways there are increased pressures." The American students she taught are no less obsessed by marriage, she says, but for almost opposite reasons. "They are very much on their own from a young age, from the minute they learn to drive. And while Indian family life can be suffocating, the American family can be a lonely place."

Desai arrived in America too late to catch the "second wave" of the feminist movement in the 60s and 70s and left India too soon. "I don't think feminism reached India till the 80s and 90s. Really it was something that affected my daughter's generation. Women were involved in politics when I was growing up because Gandhi and Nehru were keen that women be a part of the independence movement. These women were looked upon as heroines, but they were also great exceptions." 38

38 Ibid. 123.
Amrit Anand says, "While the male writer is often inhibited while expressing the agony or ecstasy of the female, the woman in the writer pours out her heart fluently. It is time the creative voice of the Indian woman writer was heard clearly and an objective assessment was made to appreciate the problems of native women." 39

Women authors write under pressure of various kinds, the main one being the need for an audience. They cannot afford to say anything that may antagonize male readers. At the same time, they must address issues that will appeal to their female readers. The female writers' search for the self, for their creativity, is a struggle for self-definition. Virginia Woolf has advised women writers to "kill the angel in the house" (the angel being the drudge who cooks, cleans and looks after all family members' needs) before they start writing. But is it always possible? Desai has not done this. Her female protagonists, at least the Indian ones, function within the parameters laid out for them by society. Mama and Uma kill all their needs to look after Papa and Arun. And her American female protagonists, though they seem to have broken out of the traditional format, do not seem happy. But then, the ubiquitous question - what is happiness? And, how happy are her Indian female protagonists? Is Desai trying to

39 Amrit Anand, "Anita Desai: Sense of the Fabulous in Her Novels".
tell readers that happiness is illusory, regardless of culture or the place in which one lives?

Desai is a close observer of what she has called "the web of family relationships, sticky and sweet, clinging and trapping." But here she has unsheathed her rapier, skewering the lingering mores that make drudges of wives and unmarried daughters, or reserve education - like the choicest morsels - for sons. Nor is she too genteel to hint, say, at fathers lusting after their pubescent daughters. "Leaving India frees one's tongue," says Desai. "Within India you hold back so much. And being part of that life, you're too involved to look with objectivity." The remark seems extraordinary from a novelist so praised for her cool gaze. As one reviewer wrote, "Her achievement is to keep the shock of genuine freshness, the eyes of the perpetual outsider." Or as an Indian critic wrote more perceptively, "Insiders rarely notice this much; outsiders cannot have this ease of reference."

Her characters may be driven by dark forces, but they are often depicted within static and even claustrophobic situations as in the island of Where Shall we go this Summer? or the Old Delhi of Clear Light of Day or the hilltop retreat of Fire on the Mountain or Mexico in The Zigzag Way. As Paul

40 Molly Yancovitz, "Reading Anita Desai '98", ENGLISH 27 (1997).
41 Ibid.
42 A Reviewer.
Sharrad says, "She does, however, have a view of writing that corresponds closely to the processes depicted in the other fiction already mentioned, and an interestingly anomalous novel that corresponds remarkably well to the dynamics - fictive and sociological - of diasporic experience."³

In the past, she has been criticized for choosing to write about India's "failures and wrecks". She counters this with the quiet assertion that 'it is easier to write about an unhappy person. With unhappiness, one has a feeling of going deeper. You become more aware of the shadows.' As Desai herself admits, her novels are not populated by heroic characters, whether male or female, at least in the traditional sense. Her protagonists are marked by a certain passivity and have been criticized as being swept away by historical and social forces rather than being able to face and control them. Yet, Desai claims, "My characters who appear like losers, victims show a kind of heroism, of survival. I think if you can come through the experience of life with the heart and mind intact, without compromising yourself, that to me is a heroic act that needs to be celebrated."⁴⁴ In spite of the heroic

³ Paul Sharrad "Blackbirding: Diaspora Narratives and The Invasion of the Bodysnatchers."
⁴ Yasodhara Dalmia, "An Interview with Anita Desai", The Times of India (April 29, 1979).
nuances of these survivals, Desai’s characters often meet tragic endings.

Asked why she is repeatedly drawn to "failures and wrecks" as characters, Desai says: "I remember being very lost at school, not being popular or successful. It was always a great struggle to belong. It was an immense relief to come home to books, to be alone. I had a great need for privacy that was unusual for a child but not at all for a writer." While she recalls the "remote literary triumvirate" of R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand and knows of isolated women writers - Attia Hosein, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal - she says: "When I started I suffered from a great sense of being utterly alone. I would have loved the society of other writers, or even readers. I was working in a vacuum, turning out words with no echo." But she met Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, whose mother was also German, her father Polish and who had married an Indian architect who lived down the road. "I saw you could live in Old Delhi and write books. She was very encouraging - a woman with two small children - while I was a schoolgirl." 47

Desai has been compared to European women writers of the last century or early 20th, hankering for a room of one's

45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
own. "People are very threatened by the idea that you go away and in secrecy and silence do something mysterious," she says. "I don't think I felt like a writer till I first came to England, where people had read my books." While family friends recall Ashvin as a proud and supportive husband, Desai insists: "My writing career was entirely subservient to being a wife and a mother. I lived the life of the typical Indian housewife; wrote in the gaps and hid it away, kept it secret."

Her early novels mirror tensions in her own life as a woman and a writer. The tensions between women and society also run through *Fire On The Mountain*, where the elderly recluse Nanda Kaul vainly seeks solitude in the hills after a lifetime of child rearing and *Clear Light Of Day*, where the unmarried college lecturer Bim wrestles with family bonds while resenting her brother and sister who have both moved away. Desai's novels have been attacked for emphasizing the constriction of women's lives. Aamer Hussein says, "They explore the position of the isolated within the family, especially an intelligent, sensitive woman lamenting lost creativity, or counting the cost of being creative. It might be held against her by feminists that her characters are constrained. But how many women do break out?"

48 Ibid.

49 Aamer Hussein, The Novels of Anita Desai.
Salman Rushdie once described Anita Desai's subject as solitude. Her characters tend to be outsiders, torn between privacy and the powerful family and social bonds that both stifle and unite them. No doubt her dual heritage gives Desai an 'outsider' status. Rushdie admires Desai's books as "private universes, illuminated by her perceptiveness, delicacy of language and sharp wit". Her subtle, unsentimental and elegantly structured novels pulsate with nature and sensuous imagery - from tropical blooms to betel-stained teeth. The illumination of her characters' inner lives has prompted comparisons with Virginia Woolf.

Aamer Hussein says, "Anita's work belongs to two traditions. Her sensibility is deeply rooted in Delhi's mixed culture, but she appropriated the language of English modernism and Woolf, as well as Japanese, Russian, and existentialist literature, to convey something very Indian." Now there's a multiplicity of voices, but then she was working pretty much alone. As for her "outsider's" eye, he adds: "There's a whole class of people educated in a language that wasn't their parents' who see with detachment: there's always a process of translation going on."

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51 Ibid.
Anita Desai is justifiably renowned for her keen, subtle eye and her calmly elegant prose. She is also a mistress of synecdoche, a writer whose delicate portraits of the quotidian resonate outwards to convey tumultuous swathes of history. Hers is a miniaturist's gift, precise, deft and powerful.

What is most remarkable about Desai’s work is its sheer variety. Almost all authors succumb to the temptation of duplicating themselves, so while the first book stuns people, by the fourth and fifth they often run out of steam or sound painfully repetitive. But Anita Desai’s work refuses to be pigeonholed. The death of Urdu, the trauma of Partition, the immigrant experience, or a child’s adventures-she comfortably straddles different styles, genres and themes. The total effect of her novels has earned Desai the acclaim of critics. Her works are delightfully pleasing because of the fragility and vulnerability of the main characters.

Anita Desai’s works occupy a unique place in Indian fiction in English for their richness, depth and sophistication. Coming years may show some new aspects of her flowering genius.