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Anita Desai: The Novelist at a Glance

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ABSTRACT: Anita Desai, born Anita Mazumdar (born 24 June 1937) is an Indian novelist and the Emerita John E. Burchard Professor of Humanities at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. As a writer she has been shortlisted for the Booker Prize three times. She received a Sahitya Akademi Award in 1978 for her novel *Fire on the Mountain*, from the Sahitya Akademi, India's National Academy of Letters. She won the British Guardian Prize for *The Village by the Sea*. *The Peacock*, *Voices in the City*, *Fire on the Mountain* and an anthology of short stories, *Games at Twilight*. She is on the advisory board of the Lalit Kala Akademi and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, London. Anita Desai is a very popular Indian novelist. She is known as the Mother of the Indian psychological novel genre. Her meticulous depictions of modern Indian life have secured her a place of honor in the pantheon of Indian authors. Winner of the Sahitya Academy Award, Desai has authored as many as sixteen works of fiction. Over the years, Desai won many awards and recognition for her work and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize thrice. Apart from writing, Anita has been actively involved in teaching as well. She continues to be an inspiration for many young aspiring writers today.

KEYWORDS: Anita Desai, novelist, sahitya, booker prize, teaching, awards, recognition, honor

I. INTRODUCTION

Most of her plots deal with her personal experience of life. She never patronized a single theme or message. She believed in citing the truth as it is. Her sensitive portrayal of the inner feelings of her female characters is excellent. Many of Anita Desai's novels explore tensions between family members and the alienation of middle-class women. In her books, Anita has managed to deal with topics ranging from anti-Semitism to western quintessential ideologies of India and the death of Indian traditions and customs. Desai's works deal with contemporary Indian life, culture clashes between the East and the West, generational differences, and practical and emotional exile. *Cry, the Peacock* was published in 1963.[1,2] The suppression and oppression of Indian women were the subjects of this novel. This work immediately established her as a major voice in Indian literature in English. Here she delves into the mind of a hypersensitive young urban wife. Her name is Maya. She is an enthusiastic and sensitive young lady married to Gautama. He is a practical man. Maya is completely different from him. Maya needs a beloved spouse with broad understandings, extremely conscious, creative and susceptible disposition. Gautama lacks these qualities. She belongs to an orthodox Brahmin family. She trusts in astrology. Gautama and his family comprise the intellectual face of living. Maya's sadness is a product of her own belief. She's not able to face the trivial truths of living.[17] The novel concludes with the death of Maya. And after killing her husband, she mentally gets back of her secure and spoiled childhood. The issue of female is addressed by Anita Desai with sensitiveness. By Maya's role, Anita Desai carries a new aspect of feminist publishing. Her *Voices in the City* encompasses the author's experiences in the city of Calcutta. In *Bye-Bye, Blackbird*, Desai captures the immigrant's dilemma. Here nostalgia and alienation, rejection and acceptance are the major themes. The clash between East-West has been presented suitably.[3] *Where Shall We Go This Summer* deals with the situation of the middle-class Indian wife in a contemporary urban setting. Her *Fire on the Mountain* is praised for its poetic symbolism and use of sounds. It featured three female protagonists each subdued or damaged in some way. *Clear Light of Day* is praised for its highly evocative portrait of two sisters caught in the lassitude of Indian life. Its characters are revealed not only through imagery but through gesture, dialogue, and reflection. It is a study of Delhi that combines fiction with history to explore the lives of a middle-class Hindu family. Baumgartner's *Bombay* explores German and Jewish identity in the context of a chaotic contemporary India. Other novels by Desai include *In Custody* and *Journey to Ithaca*. *Fasting* takes as its subject the connections and gaps between Indian and American culture, while *The Zigzag Way* tells the story of an American academic who travels to Mexico to trace his Cornish ancestry.[4]

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II. DISCUSSION

Anita Desai's novels reveal certain recurring patterns in plots, settings, and characterizations. The plots of her novels fuse two opposing propensities—one toward the gothic mystery and the other toward the philosophical novel. The gothic orientation is evident in varying degrees in all her novels. Fire on the Mountain comes closest to being purely a psychological thriller; in Cry, the Peacock, Maya, the neurotic heroine, kills her husband, thereby fulfilling the prophecy of an albino sorcerer; in Voices in the City, Monisha, an unsettled, manic-depressive housewife, pours kerosene over herself and burns herself to death.[5] On the other hand, most of Desai's novels also contain a deep-rooted, philosophical concern about the meaning of life. Most of Desai's protagonists are dissatisfied with their routine existence. They search for a more meaningful life. Desai's novels evolve a typical setting of their own. Most are set in the city. At the hearts of the novels are usually big, old houses with several verandas, green shutters, gardens, servants, and pets. The garden is extremely important in Desai's world because her characters show an unusual sensitivity to it. Trees, creepers, tendrils, flowers, fruits, seasons, pets are more vividly perceived in Desai's novels than anywhere else in Indian English fiction. The characters belong to the upper class.[18] The city, the hill station, the big house with a garden, a decadent family, an obsession with the past—these make up the typical world of a Desai novel. In her pursuit to find out the true meaning of existence, Anita Desai makes her characters her mouthpiece. They are not simply representatives or cardboard creatures. They do not simply stand for a certain society or a certain moment in history. Anita Desai's elementary concern in her novels is to explore and to expound human psyche and self. In the contemporary socio-political set up the predicament of the modern man does seem to be one of the dominant interests of the novelist.[6,7]

Desai's female characters are generally neurotic and highly sensitive. They are unwilling to adjust with the reality. They live in an alienated world of dream and fantasy and stand separated from their surroundings. Maya is a suitable example. Being a sensitive woman novelist Anita Desai creates a striking picture of characters, both male and female. Her characters are rebels. Anita Desai is expert in delineating the problems of her protagonists which are not corporal but mental. In short, to Anita Desai characterization is as important as plot-construction or story-telling. Desai's protagonists can be divided into essentially two types: One type possesses a neurotic, hypersensitive, artistic sensibility; the other is cynical, tough, and acerbic. Maya, Monisha, Sarah, Sita, Tara, and Matteo belong to the first category, while Nirode, Amla, Dev, Nanda, Bim, and Sophie belong to the second. Desai's characters are usually in a state of conflict, either with themselves or with their environment. The results of this basic conflict are murder, insanity, suicide, compromise and death.[8]

III. RESULTS

Anita Desai's work is a part of new style of writing, Anita Desai once said, 'My style of writing is to allow the story to unfold on its own. I try not to structure my work too rigidly'. Her distinct style of writing, her original characters and her realistic subject-line is what made her writings so endearing. Desai's descriptive skill is widely acclaimed by critics. Her novels are quite short. Her use of image and symbol is sophisticated. Her writing style is praised for its poetic symbolism and use of sounds. Desai's novels demonstrate her constant experimentation and progressive maturation as a writer. Thus Anita Desai is a great novelist. She is popular in the entire world. She has made a solid path for the coming generations. In 1993, her novel In Custody was adapted by Merchant Ivory Productions into an English film by the same name, directed by Ismail Merchant, with a screenplay by Shahrukh Husain. It won the 1994 President of India Gold Medal for Best Picture and stars Shashi Kapoor, Shabana Azmi and Om Puri.[9,10]

Desai was born in 1937 in Mussoorie, India, to a German immigrant mother, Toni Nime, and a Bengali businessman, D. N. Mazumdar. Her Bengali father first met her German mother while he was an engineering student in pre-war Berlin; and they got married during a period when it was still unusual for an Indian man to marry a European woman. Shortly after their marriage, they moved to New Delhi, where Desai was raised with her two elder sisters and brother.

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She grew up speaking Hindi with her neighbours, and only German at her home. She also spoke Bengali, Urdu and English out of her house. She first learned to read and write in English at school and as a result, English became her "literary language". She began to write in English at the age of seven and published her first story at the age of nine.[11]

She was a student at Queen Mary's Higher Secondary School in Delhi and received her B.A. in English literature in 1957 from the Miranda House of the University of Delhi. The following year she married Ashvin Desai, the director of a computer software company and author of the book *Between Eternities: Ideas on Life and The Cosmos*. [12,13]

They have four children, including Booker Prize-winning novelist Kiran Desai. Her children were taken to Thul (near Alibagh) for weekends, where Desai set her novel *The Village by the Sea*. For that work she won the 1983 Guardian Children's Fiction Prize, a once-in-a-lifetime book award judged by a panel of British children's writers.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Desai published her first novel, *Cry The Peacock*, in 1963. In 1958 she collaborated with P. Lal and founded the publishing firm Writers Workshop. She considers *Clear Light of Day* (1980) her most autobiographical work as it is set during her coming of age and also in the same neighborhood in which she grew up. In 1984, she published *In Custody* – about an Urdu poet in his declining days – which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. In 1993, she became a creative writing teacher at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The 1999 Booker Prize finalist novel *Fasting, Feasting* increased her popularity. Her novel *The Zigzag Way*, set in 20th-century Mexico, appeared in 2004 and her latest collection of short stories, *The Artist of Disappearance*, was published in 2011. Desai has taught at Mount Holyoke College, Baruch College, and Smith College. She is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and of Girton College, Cambridge (to which she dedicated Baumgartner's Bombay). [14,15]

Awards

- 1978 – Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize – *Fire on the Mountain*
- 1978 – Sahitya Akademi Award (National Academy of Letters Award) – *Fire on the Mountain*
- 1980 – Shortlisted, Booker Prize for Fiction – *Clear Light of Day*
- 1983 – Guardian Children's Fiction Prize – *The Village by the Sea: an Indian family story*
- 1984 – Shortlisted, Booker Prize for Fiction – *In Custody*
- 1993 – Neil Gunn Prize
- 1999 – Shortlisted, Booker Prize for Fiction: *Fasting, Feasting*
- 2000 – Alberto Moravia Prize for Literature (Italy)
- 2003 – Benson Medal of Royal Society of Literature
- 2007 – Sahitya Akademi Fellowship
- 2014 – Padma Bhushan [16]

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