

Immigrant Writer ‘Anita Desai’ - Her Contribution to Indian Fiction

B.Chandana

Since Independence the Indian Immigrant writers have been making contributions to the literary world. Immigrant writers are prospering in the national and international market. The thinking pattern of Immigrant writing which is substantial, significant and complex, makes it necessary to revise the cultural theories of nation, race, and identity that has been termed, in recent times. It covers the writers of Indian origin settled in countries such as the US, Canada, England, Australia, Caribbean, Africa, from east and other parts of the world.

Today the immigrant writing has to be viewed in a global context, and it includes writers of both old and new generation who have left India and settled abroad. Right from the dawn of Indian writing in English, talented Indians have been going abroad and reaping a rich literary harvest out of coming ling of cultures and languages.

Anita Desai was born on June 24, 1937 in Musoorie, India. Her father was D N Mazumdar, a Bengali businessness and her mother Toni Nime a German. Since she grew up in India and did most of her writing in India, one may wonder at her inclusion among Indian immigrant writers. Two of her novels deal specifically with the predicament of immigrants. Indian’s in Britian in Bye-Bye Blackbird (1971) and German’s in India in Baumgartner’s Bombay (1998).

Though Desai grew up with English, German and Hindi, English was the first language she learned to read and write at Queen Mary’s Higher Secondary School in New Delhi. Hence, when she began writing at the age of seven it was in English.

“We spoke German at home, it was the language in which I learned nursery rhymes and fairy tales. We spoke Hindi with all our friends and neighbours. I learned English when I went to school”.

Desai went on to earn her B.A. in English Literature (1957) from Miranda House -an elite college of Delhi University. At an early age of seven she began her literary career and her first story was published at the age of nine. She married Sri. Aswin Desai, director of Computer Software Company. They had four children. She was a visiting fellow at Girton College, Cambridge University in 1986. In 1987-89 she taught at Smith College.

Desai’s first publication was a story in an American Children’s magazine. She published twelve books of fiction and numerous essays, reviews and articles. Except for Games of Twilight (1978), collection of stories the rest of her books are novels, three of them for Children.

She is often considered as a “Psychological Novelist” and a “Feminist”. She deals with the themes of alienation, philosophical quest and sociological identity in her novels. As a modern and post independent woman, she portrays contemporary crisis and conflicts between two poles of human experience, social and spiritual quest. Desai describes the major theme of all her fiction as *“the terror of facing, single handed, the ferocious assaults of existence”.*

Anita Desai’s novels are clearly directed towards western readers and her text is peppered with digressive reference to English and American writers and Critics. Most of her writing refers to Indian culture and tradition explaining the behavior and the character’s motive. Desai’s treatment of women characters and her feminist analyses of gender, sexuality, subjectivity and colonialism are seen in most of her novels.

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Cry, The Peacock (1963), her first novel traces a passionate young woman's degeneration into insanity. Maya is the protagonist of the novel. She is obsessed with death and haunted by an astrological predication that her marriage is going to end in its fourth year with the death of either wife or husband. Maya, childless and trapped in a joyless marriage to Gautama, an older man fails to communicate her emotional needs to him.

"How little he knows of my misery or how to comfort me, but then he knew nothing that concerned me. Giving me an opal ring to wear on my finger, he did not notice the translucent skin beneath, the blue flashing veins that run under and out of the bridge gold.... Telling me to sleep while he worked at his papers, he did not give another thought to me.... It is his hardness – no, no not hardness, but the distance he coldly keeps from me".

Desai skillfully transforms the physical landscape into a psychic one that reflects Maya's increasingly distraught mind. Listening to the cries of Peacocks in the rainy season, she realizes that she could never sleep in peace. Maya suffers from headaches and experiences rages of rebellion and terror. Her dark house appears to her like her tomb and she contemplates in it over the horror of all that is to come. Her favourite dog Tito's death reminds her of her loneliness which had been repressed by her. Her unfulfilled longing for a congenial atmosphere and relationship leads her to utter devastation.

"Their marriage was broken repeatedly and repeatedly the pieces were picked up and put together again, as of a sacred icon, with which out of the prettiest superstition we could not bear to part".

Finally of insanity she kills Gautama and commits suicide. Maya echoes the trembling passion of the peacocks, the mortal agony of their cry for love and death.

Throughout her novels, Desai focuses on personal struggles and problems of contemporary life that her Indian characters must cope with. She portrays the cultural and social changes that India has undergone, her thoughts on the incredible power in Indian families, society and the relationships between family members and focus on women suffering and suppression in the Indian society. Her next novel

Voices in the City (1965), is a pessimistic novel like Cry, the Peacock. The protagonist's of this novel are detached, self centered and remain aloof from others just as Maya in Cry, the Peacock, who alienates herself from the rest. In this novel the life of Calcutta has been portrayed. Anita Desai portrays the trio of sensitive characters and the gloomy and apathetic members of a family who came to Calcutta from a Himalayan Hill station. Nirode is a congenital failure. He finds himself alienated from his family and from society and engrosses himself in a life of nastiness and dissipation. Monisha, an expert of Russian and English literature is betrothed into a colossal and conventional family of Hindu Bengali Brahmins with *"generations of Bengali woman hidden behind the barred windows of half dark rooms, spending centuries in washing clothes, kneading dough and murmuring aloud verses from the Bhagavat Gita and the Ramayan in the dim light of sorty lamps."*

Amlatries to find fulfillment involving herself with the life and art of a middle aged painter. Amla's approach of life is different from Nirode and Monisha. She wants to enjoy the city life with youthful excitement. She is an intelligent and liberated woman. She learnt a good lesson from the life of her sister. She looks forward to a happy life and career in the big city. But, her experiences of the hallow city life frustrates her in so many ways. Amla worries about her brother and sister. Many a times, she tries to change their life style by giving advice, but she is shocked to see that they are the victims of the ruthless society. She is disillusioned to see the depressed and corroded psyche of her sister and brother. The two characters, Nirode and Monisha are quite different from each other in their attitude. Nirode and Amla are depicted through representation of their psychic reality and Monisha has recorded her pathetic thought and experiences in her diary. Another character developed by Desai in contrast to Monisha is Sarala, the well fashioned wife of Nirode, who is fond of drinks. Desai portrays the role of Sarala as a woman of questionable character. Nirode, one of the main characters, is obsessed with the relationship of his mother with Major Chadha and considers her a cannibal. Nirode's relationship with his mother is a love-hate relationship. Nirode goes in his own way, living the life of an intellectual in a metropolitan city.

"On all sides the city pressed down alight aglow, and stirring with its own marsh bred, monster life that, like an ogre, kept one eye open through sleep and waking.... The city was as much atmosphere as odour, as much a haunting ghost of the past as a frenzied passage towards early death".

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He rebels against the world of security and routine. He is disorderly emotional even from his childhood. He wants to live in the shadows and silence. He is a congenital failure and he becomes permanent companion of it. He fails to make even the necessary compromises that life demands.

The unlucky mother of the trio suffers from the violence of non-communication. The theme of alienation is treated in terms of mother –children relationship which itself is a consequence of dissonance in husband –wife relationship. Manisha also lives an equally unhappy and starved life. She is alienated and psychologically isolated both from mother and her husband. The pivotal instinct of love which ties the conjugal bond light is invisible in her life and eventually she kills herself. Her suicide reflects that she is unable to come out successfully from the duality that life had imposed on her. The novel ends with the funeral of Monisha on arrival of her mother from Kalimpong.

Desai describes the corrosive effects of city life upon Indian family. Nirode, Monisha and Amla become the prey of modern civilization. Their efforts to compromise with life leads to failure. However, Monisha's death is symbolically predicted by the novelist. Ultimately, her death gives Nirode the knowledge of reality

Bye-Bye, Blackbird (1971), Desai's third novel is set in London and deals with problems confronted by Indian immigrants.

"Bye-Bye Blackbird is the closest of all my books to actuality and practically, everything in it is drawn directly from my experience of living with Indian immigrants in London"

It shows the social and political realities. It depicts the picture of the east-west encounter as revealed in the lives of Indian Immigrant to Britain. It juxtaposes two friends Adit Sen, well settled and culturally assimilated who still feels alienated and finally returns to India and Dev, who despite the blatant racial prejudice he encounters, decided to stay on because he wants to live in the land of the Romantic poets.

Desai sensitive psychological analysis of the immigrants who suffer mixed feelings of love and hatred towards the country of their adaptation. It also portrays the effects on Sarah, Adit's Anglo-Saxon wife. Sarah, in her effort to acculturate herself to her husband's way of life grows virtually alienated from her own people. Desai thus presents both Adit's and Sarah's points of view – if Adit's feeling of alienation in Britain leads him to return to India, Sarah's desire to assimilate Indian culture means leaving a part of her identity behind when she embarks on the sea voyage to India.

"These English wives are quite manageable really, you know. Not as fierce as they look . . . very quiet and hard working as long as you treat them right and roar at them regularly once or twice a week"

The novel deals, at great length, with the numerous adjustments which a married couple is compelled to make or fails to do so.

Where shall we go this Summer (1975), In this novel, again the theme of alienation and lack of communication in married life is discussed and re-assessed by the writer. Sita finds herself alienated from her husband and children. She is the product of a broken family. Even after marriage, she remains lonely. Her husband cannot comprehend her boredom, her frustration with her existence.

".....she herself looking on it was stretched and so vast, so flat, so deep that in fright scrambled about it, searching for a few of these moments that proclaimed to her that she is still alive, not quite drowned and dead"

Sita, an unhappy twenty year married explains why another pregnancy brings not joy but despair. Sita seeks refuge on a forsaken island where she goes for the summer with two of her four children. The derelict house, the barren surrounding and memories of a childhood spent on the island with a basically selfish father provide no relief. She realizes that she cannot escape reality and returns to an indifferent husband and a meaningless existence. This realization is brought out beautifully in the novel. Though the novel is a story, the way in which it is written is serious and realistic.

Fire on the Mountain (1977) is relatively brief and uncomplicated. The significant action occurring within the psyches of Nanda and to a lesser extent Raka her great granddaughter. Nanda, who after her unfaithful husband's death retires to Carignano, an isolated house on a quite mountain ridge in Kasauli. She is disenchanted with everything and wants nothing to do with any of the people in life. Even a daily visit from the postman is an unwanted intrusion. The novel examines her attitude towards her great grand daughter, Raka and her old friend Ila Das, both of who she considers intrusions into

her privacy where she wants nothing more from life than to be left alone. “ Desai recognizes that Nanda’s present aloofness is a result of her bitter past and, in this light, examines her relationships with Raka and Ila, thus exploring and analyzing Nanda’s interior self.

“ *All she wanted was to be alone, to have Carignano to herself in this period of her life when stillness and calm were all that she wishes to entertain*”

Clear Light of Day (1980) has presented us with this dual nature of time. Here time is depicted as both a destroyer and a preserver. The novel gives a new dimension to the theme of the disintegration and reconciliation of human ties by bringing into focus the part played by time. The story describes the psychological stresses and tensions undergone by the members of a post-partition Indian family with the passage of time. The theme of the novel is the brother-sister and sister-sister relationships, and the stress and strain which these relationships undergo. The story of Bim from whose perspective we see the break-up of her family which also symbolizes their disintegration. Her brother Raja and Sister Tara leave the family home and see to what’s left of her father’s business. Tara is younger sister who marries a man in the Indian foreign service and visits the house every three or four years when her husband comes to India. The story of the novel runs parallel with the history of the nation. The partition of India is a concrete reality that is concomitant with Raja leaving, Tara marrying, the deaths of the Das parents as well as Aunt Mira, and the separation of the Das family. This is the only novel of Desai with a happy ending.

The Village by the Sea (1982) though classified under children’s literature is equally enlightening and enjoyable as adult fiction. The novel can be perceived in the genre of a Hansel and Gretel story, with a fairy tale ending, it is a grim comment on the life of the village poor. The story is based entirely on facts dealing with the construction of Thushaishet Fertilizer Complex in a sleepy village on India’s west coast near Bombay. It is a colourful verbal picture of a family in fishing village Thul, which shows how the family is pressed down by several serious issues and how they manage to emerge victoriously in the end. It is seen without much effort that the key to this victory is none other than their learning to adapt to change. Not only the family but also all successful people we see in the story are constant learners from life and from the situations they face. They make changes in their outlook and approach to better adapt themselves to situations. Therefore it seems the most important theme that is prominent throughout the story is change and its adaption.

Her eighth novel **In Custody (1984)** presents the world of Deven Sharma. He is a poorly paid lecturer in a provincial town. He is a teacher of Hindi who loves sister language Urdu which has been rejected in India after the partition and made the national language of Pakistan.

The ups and down of human mind is illustrated in a beautiful way. The protagonist’s dream project of interviewing his dream man ends in disaster and he remains deserted at the end of the story. A novel of shattered emotions and scattered dreams in custody reflects the intricacies of relationships. Desai switches from female centric to male centered narrative in the novel.

Desai’s ninth novel **Baumgartner’s Bombay (1988)**, Hugo a German Jew as the protagonist born during Hitler’s reign, His father is a prosperous furniture dealer who loses all his wealth under the Nazi rule. He is tortured and humiliated, and is reduced to the status of psychological devastation and he ultimately commits suicide. He is left alone with his mother. Anxious to build a safe haven for himself and his poor mother, he decides to try his luck in India. The warm people and numerous opportunities offered in a developing country, does give him some joyous moments, including a little bit of rename in the night club of Calcutta.

The absolute unpredictability of life is displayed in Hugo’s attempt to abide in a particular location. He is dragged from one predicament to another. His dream of setting up home for his mother in India remains futile, and he ends up a ‘Nobody’ and ‘outsider’. Life continues in spite of the blankness and vacuum created by war in the lives of the surviving dear ones. The consequent meaninglessness of life is poignantly portrayed. Although the mother’s death creates a deep void, Hugo continues to live in her memory. He accepts the fact and continues with life.

Her next novel **Journey to Ithaca (1995)** exhibits her spiritual leanings. Actually, the title refers to three journeys in the novel. Journey of Sophie, Malteo and the mother. The novel derives its title from *C P Cavafy’s* poem “*Ithaca*” translated by *Reo Dalven*. The novel’s theme also mirrors the poem’s message as it describes Odysseus’s return to Ithaca after the long war with Troy. One’s divided selves and the conflict between tradition (destiny) and renunciation or

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abandonment – as a way of protest against this. The urge to leave the past and family bonds behind, to become a seeker and an ascetic is what drives Matleo in a different way. It moves in time from 1920's to the 1970's from Italy of Matleo's childhood and Europe between the wars, into India where hippies and flower children seek an ill defined spirituality. It is a story about seeking the all consuming urge to go on a pilgrimage, in the hope of finding spiritual union with a greater spirit or truth. But Desai's point especially in this novel, is that renunciation – though it appears a contract to all kinds of binds and ties – is also a total devotion to an ideal and this it forms a kind of bondage.

Her last novel *Fasting Feasting (1999)* is divided into two parts, as it is implied in the title itself, is a novel of contrast between two cultures. One, Indian known for its pious and longstanding customs representing fasting and the other American a country of opulence and sumptuousness epitomizing "feasting". Anita Desai deals with the operation of patriarchy on the lives of Indian women with emphasis on how it limits their opportunities for happiness and self development and traps them in marriages that are almost a form of slavery. But in certain other ways this novel presents a striking deviation from her work both at thematic level and the structural level.

Anamika's narrative line is perhaps the most chilling condemnation of arranged marriage in the book. Intelligent enough to win a scholarship at Oxford, instead she is married off and maltreated and perhaps even killed by her husband. The protagonist, Uma deeply wishes for education and independence but ends up in a bad marriage. She manages to escape that however, she still ends up in her parents home as a middle aged woman, acting as a sort of servant to her father and mother. There is also huge family support and involvement related to times of sorrow. The rituals for both these happy and sad occasions are marked with tradition and purpose. These elements seem to be sorely lacking in the Patton household in America. Two cultures are explored in this text, the Indian and the American, with its freedom and strangely self denying attitudes to eating. In both it is ultimately the women who suffer.

In addition to her writing, she has been member of the Advisory board for English, and of the American Academy of Arts and letters, as well as a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, She has worked as educator at colleges including Mt. Holyoke, Smith, and Girton college at Cambridge University.

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