

## Contemporary Men and Milieu: A Critical Study of Vibrant Works of Anita Desai

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### Abstract

This research paper attempts to delineate and outline the Anita Desai as one of the most distinguished Indian novelists, short story writers, screenwriters, and children's writers. Desai is best known for her studies of Indian life and especially noted for her sensitive portrayal of the confidential verve of her female characters. A number of Desai's novels explore tensions between family members and the alienation of middle-class women. Desai is a contemporary indo-English writer, extensively acclaimed, not only in India but also in the world of fiction writing too. She appears on the literary horizon after independence, focusing on the contemporary issues. Desai has added a new dimension to the contemporary Indian English fiction. Desai explores the anguish of individuals living in contemporary society and she further deals with complexity of human relationships as one of her major theme, which is a universal issue, as it attracts worldwide readers to her novels. Above all, she demonstrates again and again how gender issues are central to politics and the nation as well as in the family. Consequently, Desai has academic severity and brilliant portrayals of world society, predominantly her assertion on the multicultural dimension of contemporary men and milieu.

**Keywords:** Contemporary issues, Indian English fiction, Indian novelists, indo-English writer, Middle-class women

### Introduction

Anita Desai is considered as one of the most towering contemporary Indian female author. She has been identified with a new literary tradition of Indian writing in English, which is stylistically different and less conservative than colonial Indian literature and concerns such issues as hybridity, shifting identity, and "imaginary homelands," a phrase coined by Indian novelist Salman Rushdie. Desai is one of the most distinguished Indian novelists, short story writers, screenwriters, and children's writers. Desai is best known for her studies of Indian life and especially noted for her sensitive portrayal of the confidential verve of her female characters. A number of Desai's novels explore tensions between family members and the alienation of middle-class women. Throughout her novels, Desai focuses on the personal struggles of Anglicized, middle-class women in contemporary India as they attempt to overcome the societal limitations imposed by a tradition-bound patriarchal culture. Set amid the cultural and social changes that have swept India since its independence from Britain in 1947, most of Desai's narratives validate the importance of familial bonds and explore the tensions that exist between different generations.

The most intermittent themes in Desai's novels are "The hazards and complexities of man-woman relationships, the founding of individuality and the establishing of individualism of her characters" (Narsimhan, 1976: 23). She is a contemporary indo-English writer, extensively acclaimed, not only in India but also in the world of fiction writing. She appears on the literary horizon after independence, focusing on the contemporary issues. Desai has added a new dimension to the contemporary Indian English fiction. She has secured a unique and significant place due to her innovative thematic concerns and deals in her fiction with feminine sensibility.

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In India where women have redesigned role, which does not allow any room for individualism, identity and assertion, Anita Desai talks of women who question the age old traditions and want to seek individual growth. Desai suggests that a balance between the conventional, pre-set role of women and the contemporary issues has to be struck.

Desai has initiated her vocation as a novelist in 1963 with the publication of *Cry, the Peacock*, which was subsequently followed by *Voices in the City* (1965) and *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* (1968). Desai's dynamic works engage the complexities of modern Indian culture from a feminine perspective while highlighting the female Indian predicament of maintaining self-identity as an individual woman. This chronicles the morbid dread, descent into madness, and suicide of Maya, a young Delhi housewife who is trapped in a loveless, arranged marriage to the much older Gautama, a misogynistic lawyer. The novel foreshadows several of the major recurring themes in Desai's works—the problems of independence and communication, the influence of the West, and the tensions between religious and domestic interaction. Desai looks in to the reasons for marital discord and illustrates how such discord affects the family. Sometimes, the inability of an individual to be responsive to the behavior patterns of her partner leads to strain and tension in the relationship, while sometimes it is on account of varied levels of sensitivity that strained relationships occur. Maya is dreamy, sensitive, and emotional, while Gautama realistic, insensitive and rational. Maya is poetic and high-strung Gautama detached, philosophical, and remote. Maya has tenderness, softness, and warmth, while Gautama is hard and cold.

*Voices of the City* (1965), is a sequence of events 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. Set in the late 1950s, *Voices in the City* illustrates Indian society still in transition more than a decade after India's independence from British rule. In this novel, Anita Desai's concern is primarily with human relationships and how in the absence of meaningful relationships the individual suffer.

*Bye-Bye, Blackbird*, — Desai's first novelistic foray into a country beyond India — Desai reveals the intense *xenophobia* and prejudice that manifested in England during the influx of commonwealth immigration in the 1950s and 1960s. *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, which moves out of India to look at wider postcolonial issues of displacement, is the most accomplished of Desai's early novels. Ostensibly a typical third-world immigrant novel focusing on the lives of Dev and Ajit, two Indians in Britain, and the racial discrimination with which they have to contend, it is ultimately more about the alienation Ajit's wife, Sarah, suffers in her own country following her marriage to an Indian and her changed position in relation to the (British) nation state.

The same as in *Cry, the Peacock*, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975) centers around a distracted wife looking to flee her marriage. The plot follows Sita, a housewife in her early forties, as she arrives on the rustic island of Manori after a twenty-year absence. In the third trimester of yet another pregnancy and convinced that the world is hopelessly marred by cruelty and violence, Sita has returned to the island because she believes that it possesses magical powers which can safely terminate her pregnancy. Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain* withdraws into a private world of self-willed isolation. Desai has commented on her work: "My novels are no reflection of Indian society, politics or character. They are my private attempt to seize upon the raw material of life." This novel reveals a definite sense of politics to her hitherto essentially family-focused dramas. It is another female-centered narrative that portrays the lives of three women — the elderly Nanda Kaul, her great-granddaughter Raka, and Nanda Kaul's lifelong friend Ila Das — who one by one retreat to Carignano, a small villa in the Himalayan hill station of Kasauli, to escape the brutal patriarchal worlds in which they have each lived.

In *Fire on the Mountain*, Desai reveals the feminine sensibility and a woman's intrinsic aspiration to know herself in terms of not only her relationship with her family but also in terms of her individual identity and its relationship with the world at large. This novel reveals Desai's tragic vision of life, in which the innocents suffer and they pay a heavy price for their sincerity and innocence, as ordained by an unkind fate. In *Clear Light of Day*, although the fires of Partition riots burn in the background, Desai's primary interest is again firmly focused on the difficulties facing a woman who attempts to assert her identity within the family framework. Set against the historical backdrop of Delhi before the Partition of 1947, this novel reveals the saga of the Das family, a Hindu clan from Old Delhi.

The story begins with Tara's visit to the now run-down family homestead in a suburb of Old Delhi, where Bim continues to live and to take care of their autistic younger brother, Baba. Tara has come to India to attend the wedding of Raja's eldest daughter, an event that Bim is boycotting, having long been estranged from her once beloved brother. "No one said Bim, slowly and precisely, 'comprehends better than children do. No one feels the atmosphere more keenly - or catches the nuances, all the insinuations in the air - or notes those details that escape elders because their senses have atrophied, or calcified". Accordingly, the serenity and aggravation of the central female character in *Clear Light of Day*, Bim Das, an apparently independent woman who is hostage of her past memories, are conveyed by zooming in on several details of the house where she lives, signifying decay and dullness. Desai's characters in many novels are members of the Anglicized Indian bourgeoisie, whose marital problems are in the forefront. The generational confrontation in *Clear Light of Day* is echoed in most of Desai's other works from the early *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), which considers the relationship between a recluse grandmother and her granddaughter, to the later novels *Journey to Ithaca* (1995) and *Fasting, Feasting* (1999). In the former, the spiritual pilgrimage to India of a young and wealthy European couple, Matteo and Sophie, is a later version of that of their ageing guru, the Mother, while the latter depicts the struggles of Uma, Aruna and Arun to strike a balance between their parents' expectations and their own personal realization. Typical of Desai's other fiction is also the use of the house as a place of confinement for women.

*The Village by the Sea* is the story of a family overwhelmed by misfortune in the traditional fishing village of Thul, on the west coast of India near Bombay. With the mother ill and bedridden and the father an unemployed, abusive alcoholic, the brunt of the family responsibilities devolve upon the elder children, the adolescents Lila and Hari, both of whom have stopped attending school in order to fulfill these duties and care for their two younger siblings. *In Custody* (1984) is Desai's paradoxical story about literary traditions and academic illusions. The central characters are Nur, an Urhi poet, who has fallen on hard times, and Deven. This novel mainly focuses on theme of marital discord and relationship problem. In this novel, Deven and Sarla lead an unhappy marital life. They are quite different from each other in their temperaments. Deven Sharma is a middle-aged man who once dreamt of becoming a poet but later was forced to take a job teaching Hindi in order to support his wife and child.

Based on Desai's own Eurasian heritage but narrated from a male perspective, *Baumgartner's Bombay* concerns themes of alterity and hybridity. The novel—Desai's first to feature a non-Indian protagonist—recounts the tragic life and violent death of Hugo Baumgartner, a Jew who has immigrated to India in the late 1930s from Nazi Germany. The story opens with Hugo's murder and the ensuing chapters alternate between scenes of his last hours and flashbacks that take us chronologically through his life. "Even though his cigarette stank—it was a local one, wrapped in a *tendu* leaf, fierce enough to make his head swim—he could smell the distinctive Indian odor - of dung, both of cattle and men, of smoke from the village hearts, of cattle food and cattle urine, of dust, of pungent food cooking, of old ragged clothes washed without soap and put out to dry, the aroma of poverty" (*Baumgartner's Bombay*, 1988). Hugo Baumgartner, is a Jew who fled from Nazi Germany to India, only to find that he cannot be fully accepted by Indian society either: he is first interned in a camp for Germans during the second world war, and then remains a stranger, in post-independence India.

In *Journey to Ithaca* (1995) Desai sharply scrutinized the temperament of pilgrimage to India through three characters, Mateo and Sophie, young Europeans, and Mother, a charismatic and mysterious woman, whose story is an earlier version of their own. Desai's perspective on India is more European than in his earlier works. This novel focuses on Matteo, an idealistic Italian, and his temperamental girlfriend, Sophie, a hard-bitten realist German. The counter-cultural pair marries in 1975 and immediately set off for India, chiefly in pursuit of Matteo's dream of enlightenment, which has been inspired by his reading of Hermann Hesse's *Journey to the East*. The various strands that can be traced through Desai's previous nine novels are brought together in near perfect synthesis in *Fasting, Feasting*. In keeping with her earlier novels, there is a return to a focus on the family, and in particular the lot of women trapped in traditional family structures in a rapidly changing postcolonial world. *Fasting, Feasting* contrasted American and Indian culture, and male and female roles. Arun studies in Massachusetts, his sister Uma lives in India in a small provincial city. This novel recounts the disastrous attempts of an Indian daughter to leave her parents' home and achieve independence without marriage. Her parents, referred to as the indivisible unit Mama Papa, barely notice their daughter's aspirations as they lavish all of their attention on their only son.

Desai's *The Zig Zag Way* (2004), is set in 20th century Mexico. In this novel Desai has departed from her familiar territories and set the story of identity and self-discovery in Mexico.

## Conclusion

Therefore, Desai has intellectual thoroughness and stunning portrayals of world community, particularly her insistence on the multicultural dimension of contemporary Indian society. Desai presents to reader her outlook with reference to complexity of human relationships as a big contemporary problem and human condition. So, she analyses this problem due to shows changing human relationships in her novels. Desai takes up considerable contemporary issues as the subject matter of her fiction while remaining rooted in the tradition at the same time. She explores the anguish of individuals living in modern society. Desai deals with complexity of human relationships as one of her major theme, which is a universal issue, as it attracts worldwide readers to her novels. She strives to show this predicament without any interferes. If Desai's reputation is established on her early portraits of domestic disharmony in traditional Indian families and the suffering of women in a largely patriarchal world, her later novels demonstrate that she writes equally well about the world of men, about Indians abroad, and about Westerners in India. Above all, she demonstrates again and again how gender issues are central to politics and the nation as well as in the family. Consequently, Desai has academic severity and brilliant portrayals of world society, predominantly her assertion on the multicultural dimension of contemporary men and milieu.

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