

Unit: 13**Anita Desai: Life, Works and
Narrative Techniques****STRUCTURE****13.0 Objectives****13.1 A Biographical Study of Anita Desai****13.2 Anita Desai's Major Works****13.3 Outlines of Anita Desai's Major Novels****13.4 Narrative Techniques in Anita Desai's Novels****13.5 Let Us Sum Up****13.6 Key Words****13.7 Books Suggested****Answers**

13.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit students will,

- Learn a biographical study of Anita Desai.
- Study the discussion on the major works.
- Comprehend a brief discussion on Anita Desai's writing style.

13.1 A BIOGRAPHICAL STUDY OF ANITA DESAI

Anita Desai is one of India's best modern English novelists. She is an Indian writer, short story writer, screenwriter and short story writer. She is a writer who has influenced generations of writers.

Growing up in a house full of books led her to the first decision that writing would be her life. While studying English at the University of New Delhi, Anita Desai dedicated herself to writing. At a tender age of nine, she had studied *Wuthering Heights*. Her career started with short stories which got printed in leading Indian magazines. Her first story was *Circus Cat*. Then she wrote one after another stories followed by her first novel *Cry the Peacock* in 1963 and many more.

The novelist was born in 1937, to an Indian (Bengali, Hindu) father and a German mother. She grew up in old Delhi and was exposed to the German language at home and Bengali, Urdu, Hindi and English languages outside home. She was formerly known as Anita Mazumdar, a daughter of Dhiren N. Mazumdar, a Bengali business executive, and the former Toni Nime, a German expatriate, a teacher, while an engineering student in pre-war Berlin, of German origin. This mixed parenting of complex origin offers Anita Desai the advantage of having a double perspective when she writes about India and Indians, as well as migrants to India and Indian immigrants to the west.

Desai has been deeply influenced by literature and music of the West. She said in an interview with Magda Costa on 30th January, 2001 that as a young woman seriously into writing, she “was influenced by British literature and British writers. Novelists such as Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence and E.M. Forster, were my models in writing”. Desai said that she “later discovered and started revering the Russian writers, amongst whom Chekhov and Dostoevsky topped the list because she wanted to emulate their usage of language and achieve its gravity, compression and intensity”.

Awards and Prizes awarded to Anita Desai

- 1978 - National Academy of Letters Award for *Fire on the Mountain* novel.
- 1978 - Winifred Memorial Prize for the novel *Fire on the Mountain*.
- 1980 -- Booker Prize (short listed) for the novel *Clear Light of the Day* in 1980.
- 1983 – Guardian Children’s Fiction (for the novel *Village by the Sea*)
- 1984 – Booker Prize for Fiction (short listed) for the book *Fasting and Feasting*
- 2000 – Alberto Moravia Prize for Literature (Italy)
- 2003 – Benson Medal of Royal Society of Literature
- 2007 – Sahitya Akademi Fellowship
- 2014 – Padma Bhushan

Last but not the least; Anita Desai is a proud mother of Kiran Desai, winner of the Bookers award for her novel *Guava Orchards*. She is currently busy in teaching in the United States Department of Computer Science and Cambridge, and also writes for the *New York Book Review*.

13.2 ANITA DESAI’S MAJOR WORKS

Novels

<i>Cry the Peacock</i>	New Delhi: Orient, 1990
<i>Voices in the</i>	New Delhi: Orient, 1990
<i>Bye Bye, Blackbird</i>	Delhi: Hind Pocket Books, 1971
	Delhi: Orient, 1985
<i>Where Shall We Go this summer?</i>	Delhi: Vikas, 1975
	Delhi: Orient, 1985
<i>Fire on the Mountain</i>	London: William Heinemann, 1977
<i>Clear Light of Day</i>	London: Heinemann, 1988
	London, Penguin, 1980
<i>In Custody</i>	USA: Harper and Row, 1984
	London: Heinemann, 1988
<i>Baumgartner’s Bombay</i>	Penguin Books, 1989

Short Stories:

- “Games at Twilight” William Heinemann, 1978
- “Village by the Sea: A Long Story” 1982

For Children

- “The Peacock Garden”, Bombay: Indian Book House, 1974.
“Cat on a Houseboat”, Bombay: Orient Longman, 1976.
“Circus Cat, Alley Cat, Thought”, 1957.
“How Gentle is the Mist”, The Illustrated Weekly of India, 1958.
“Grand Mother” Miscellany, Calcutta: Writer’s Workshop, 1960.
“An Examination,” Miscellany, 1960.
“To Seal a Picture.” Miscellany, 1960.
Tea with the Maharani, Envoy, 1959.
“Ghost House,” Quest, 1961.
“Mr. Bose’s Private Bliss, Envoy, 1959.
“Private Tuition by Mr. Bose,” Indian Literature, 1970.
“Descent from the Rooftop,” The Illustrated Weekly of India, 1970.
“Surface Textures,” Femina, 1974.
“The Accompanist,” Quest, 1975.

13. 3 OUTLINES OF ANITA DESAI’S MAJOR NOVELS

Cry, the Peacock (1990) represents the story of Maya; the most sensitive woman is suffering from neurotic fear and marital disharmony. Her growth, development and neurotic crisis are depicted in all three parts of the novel. Maya's marriage to Gautama leads to the tragic tone of *Cry, the peacock*. Maya’s infatuated visions and her unfulfilled fantasies reveal the most intimate sanctuaries of the human heart.

Voices in the City (1990) is a novel which discusses the idea of freedom in life. The novel is set in Calcutta. The novelist makes Nirode's mother and her two sisters, Monisha and Amla, like Kali who unleashes his evil powers. Monisha kills herself because she can't stand the tension of her marriage to Jiban. Most of the novel is devoted to Nirode's transition from one failure to another. Amla, who has not been to Calcutta for a long time, resists the influence of the city. The narration is in the name of the characters after whom the chapter is titled.

Bye-Bye Blackbird (1971) is a novel, written by Anita Desai. The story shows the lives of immigrants, who suffer from a mixed feeling of love and hate towards their adopted country, in a foreign society. The novel reviews the plight of Indian immigrants in London. The author had divided the story into three parts: arrival, revelation and perception and finally abandonment. The author describes beautiful London and the busy life of the people there. The characters in the book are not so real, but they really experience the real problems that immigrants face in the country. The story revolves around three characters: a recent immigrant who refuses to adapt and look at those who do it with contempt, an immigrant who tries to belong and loves everything related to the new place and a "native" who marries an immigrant. The story is not that interesting, but it still contains a wonderful meaning.

Where Shall We Go This Summer (1975) is an intense story of a sensitive young wife divided between the desire to abandon the boredom and hypocrisy of her middle class and her existence apparently at ease, and the understanding that the bonds that they bind it cannot be easily destroyed. The protagonist Sita is involved in a joyless marriage with Raman. She goes to an abandoned place, Mansori, an island in Marve, to escape the banal reality of her husband and four children. She also wants to avoid giving birth to her fifth child. She feels that it is inhuman to bring another life into this cruel world. The island brings back childhood memories of her time spent with her selfish father. She realizes that the island is not the place for his problems. She concludes that it is better to return to reality. Therefore, he returns to his family.

Fire on the Mountain (1977) explains psychological reality. It's about loneliness and isolation, as well as the resulting anguish and agony in the deserted life of an old widow. The novel tells the story of Nanda Kaul who lives in Carignano, a desolate and haunted house in Kasauli. Nanda Kaul's happy isolation is threatened by the irritating letter from Asha, her daughter announcing the arrival of Raka, Asha's granddaughter and Nanda Kaul's great-granddaughter. Raka's unexpected arrival stands in the way of wanting to live like a recluse, away from society. She no longer wants to be involved in any responsibility, since all she wants is to be alone. But Asha's letter has made her fearful and she ponders painfully: "Now, to bow again, to let that noose sleep once more round her neck that she had thought was freed fully, finally, how to converse again when it was silence she wished"(59).

In Custody (1984) deals with Deven Sharma. The novel is set in India. The story spans the period from the 80s to 1999, a time when habits and attitudes were changing in India. Deven lives a discontented life with his wife Sarla and their young son. He teaches Hindi literature in a school, but the Urdu language is his true passion. Deven has established himself, not having been able to become an Urdu poetry writer, but like his compatriots, he is still looking for a source of meaning in his life. Something wonderful will happen. His friend, Murad, asks him to interview Nur, an old Urdu poet for a magazine that he edits. This simple project becomes very complicated as the novel progresses and, instead of an interview, Deven takes responsibility for writing a complete biography of Nur. During the implementation of this project, Devan faces a series of disasters. He loses his job. But from his experience he learns everything about human limits and gains a better understanding of life. Finally, through a series of events he becomes the custodian of Nur in his poetry.

Baumgartner's Bombay (1988) is Anita Desai's classic novel of the Holocaust era, a story of profound emotional wounds of war and its exiles. Hugo Baumgartner is the central character. He is a German refugee who arrives in India before the Second World War to escape persecution. While in India, Baumgartner gradually falls into a routine

life. He has no family. During his fifty years in India, he hardly connects to anyone. Eventually he meets a young German in a cafe. Baumgartner, cultivate this strange hospitality for him. The central irony of the novel lies in the fact that the protagonist is killed by this strange German drug addict.

Fasting and Feasting (1999) depicts intricate family relations in two countries, India and the United States. The main characters include a family that lives in a small village in India, where provincial customs and attitudes dictate the future of all boys. Girls must get married and boys must have the best education possible. The story focuses on the life of the main and unique character, Uma, a spinster, the eldest daughter of the family, with Arun, the son and child of the family. Uma spends her life submissive to her most demanding parents, while enormous efforts and energies are spent to ensure Arun's education and placement in a Massachusetts university. Aruna gets married. In part two the reader is introduced to Arun in America. Therefore, we can compare and contrast between the Indian and the American culture.

13.4 NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES IN ANITA DESAI'S NOVELS

The word "technique" comes from the Greek word 'technos tehni' which means art. It is an imaginary art that includes everything that goes into creating a novel. It serves as a medium that a novelist uses to tell the story. Technique is an important aspect of the novel. A novelist uses some devices to create a work of art, such as images, symbols, language, point of view, just to name a few.

During the continuous process of reading a literary work, one encounters various methods applied by the novelist to model the novel. When a novelist is kept at a great distance from the imaginary material in the novel, the reader encounters some difficulties in obtaining adequate information on the devices he has used. Otherwise, the reader becomes aware of some technical aspects used in the novel when reading.

Indo-Anglian novels have been influenced by developments in terms of themes and techniques adopted by Western writers. As Meenakshi Mukharjee asserts, now writers; "were less concerned with the larger social world than a strict fidelity to the individual vision of their central characters" Among the Indo-Anglian novelists dealing with different perspective of life, Anita Desai was no exception.

She has been one of the leading luminaries in the genre of Indo-Anglian imaginary world. Her strength lies in inclination towards subjective experiences. She exposes the conflicts of human existence that lead to a state of total anguish and despair. She projects a new orientation to Indian English writing through her introspective and psychological setting of novels. Anita Desai emerges on the literary scene as an innovator of technical skills regarding her use of stream of consciousness methods in her novels in the most explicit way.

Shifting her attention from the superficial reality to the psyche of her protagonists, Desai has paved the way for a new genre, the

psychological novel, in Indian English. She prefers to delve deep in a character or a scene and explore the truth hidden inside. She declares:

Writing is to me a process of discovering the truth-the truth that is nine-tenths of the ice-berg that lie submerged beneath the one-tenth visible portion we call Reality. Writing is my way of plunging to the depths and exploring this underlying truth. All my writing is an effort to discover, to underline and convey the true significance of things.

Her masterful use of the important modern techniques of fiction enables her to uncover most poignantly their existential tensions and dilemmas, angst and anguish, fears and fantasies.

Desai often uses simple plot elements to propel plot development, and depends on images and symbols for the creation of meaning and atmosphere in her novels. She frequently quotes from other writers producing intertextual echoes, and juxtaposes contradictory experiences for the reader by using techniques such as value reversal and surrealistic effects.

In several novels, Desai has adopted different narrative strategies based on the needs of the themes. While in her previous novels she was worried about the existential problems of her hypersensitive protagonists and the exploration of her psyche, in her subsequent novels she showed a greater awareness of social reality.

In all her novels, Anita Desai uses memories of the past as a method of assessing the individual's relationship with the present. Nostalgia thus becomes a narrative technique in her novels. Traveling backwards is both a means of self-knowledge and a mechanism for dealing with harsh reality. Her protagonists are trapped in adult life and it is from a particular phase of their life that they try to relate their past to the present. Nostalgia, therefore, is not simply a look back at Desai's novels.

In *Cry the Peacock*, Maya's various psychic states, however chaotic and disordered, have been unified into a pattern through a series of iterative motifs and symbols. These in turn externalize Maya's internal crisis and give narrative the qualities of a tragic poem. In reality, Desai uses a language heavily saturated with symbols and images to project Maya's consciousness as she struggles to realize and distinguish truth from fantasy.

Voices in the City is divided into four unequal sections: I "Nirode", II "Monisha: Her Diary," III "Amla" and IV "Mother". Apart from the usual means of the medium, letters, diary, magazine, paintings, dream and vision are used as narrative devices to simplify communication among the principal characters. These also help the novelist to project her vision of life. In the first section, Desai embraces the stream-of-consciousness technique to discover Nirode's grudges and grievances, his existential dilemmas and his search for meaning in Calcutta, "a monstrous city". In the second part, the diary technique gives a note of anguish and immediacy to Monisha's account of her miserably sterile and suffocating married life. A drastic change of point of view achieves a dramatic effect.

Therefore, the images play an important role in the narrative design of the novel.

Desai carefully divides her main and secondary characters into two groups. The main characters represent an elite group of challenge and suffering, while the minor characters represent boring and anemic people such as Jit, Sony Bose, the father of Nirode, Monisha's in-laws who live insignificant lives. Nirode, Monisha and Amla are in stark contrast to these victims

In *Voices in the City* Apart from using fantasy, flashback and symbols, Anita Desai uses poetry as a narrative technique in this novel. There is extensive use of poetry and other literary works in *Clear Light of Day*. There are quotations from English and Urdu poetry and such diverse poets as Tennyson, Byron, Swinburne, D. H. Lawrence, Eliot and Iqbal. The most significant quotation from Iqbal comes at the end and strikes the key-note of the novel much like Lawrence's poem in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*

In *Voices in the City*, in addition to using fantasy, flashbacks and symbols, Anita Desai uses poetry as the narrative technique in this novel. There is widespread use of poetry and other literary works in *Clear Light of Day*. There are quotes from English and Urdu poems and different poets such as Tennyson, Byron, Swinburne, D. H. Lawrence, Eliot and Iqbal. Iqbal's most significant quote comes to an end and plays the keynote of the novel and Lawrence's poem in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* In *Custody* Desai uses poetry to convey her themes on the juxtaposition of art and life.

Anita Desai's next novel, *Baumgartner's Bombay* deals with the themes of alienation and displacement. The use of the past is a significant narrative technique in this novel.

The next novel *Baumgartner's Bombay* addresses the issues of alienation and displacement. The use of the past is a significant narrative technique in this novel.

Desai also exploits the lexical and syntactic variants of language with great skill to suggest the difference in culture and lifestyle of the two worlds represented in the two parts of the novel. Indian characters speak in Indian English using the Indian language, words, sentences and even interjections, like "oof "Are! Are'!"

In her novels Desai uses quotes from the Bible, Hindu devotional songs, American catchphrases frequently to lend local colour to her narrative. These enable her to capture the very spirit of the atmosphere she wants to create.

In her novels, Desai uses Bible quotes, Hindu devotional songs, American phrases frequently to give local color to the narrative. This allows her to capture the spirit of the atmosphere she wants to construct.

It is, therefore, quite clear that in this novel also Desai's narrative technique is an apt vehicle of her themes. There is a harmonious balance between the form and the content of this novel, which, as in Desai's other novels, contributes significantly to the projection of a unified artistic vision.

It is therefore quite clear that in Desai's novels narrative technique is a suitable vehicle for her subjects. There is a harmonious balance between the form and content of her novels which contributes significantly to the projection of a unified artistic vision.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS-1

Answer The Following Questions.

1. Prepare a biographical sketch of Anita Desai and with reference to her choice of English as medium of writing.
2. Write a detailed note on Anita Desai as a novelist with her contribution in the field of Indo Anglian literature.
3. "Anita Desai's narrative technique has made her unique among Indian English writers". Justify this statement with reference to the select novels of Anita Desai.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS-2

Select The Appropriate Option From The Following:

1. Which is not a correct combination?
 - (a) Fire on the Mountain-1977
 - (b) Voice in the city- 1990
 - (c) In Custody-1984
 - (d) Cry, the Peacock-2003
2. The character of Maya appears in _____
 - (a) Bye Bye Blackbird
 - (b) Where shall we go this summer?
 - (c) Clear light of day
 - (d) Cry, the Peacock
3. The main characters represent _____ of challenge and suffering.
 - (a) boring and anemic people
 - (b) proletariat people
 - (c) an elite group
 - (d) feminist group
4. The character of Sarala appears in _____
 - (a) Fire on the mountain
 - (b) Cry, the peacock
 - (c) In Custody
 - (d) Bye-Bye, Blackbird
5. Anita Desai achieved Padma Bhusan in _____
 - (a) 2000
 - (b) 2014
 - (c) 1998
 - (d) 1983

13.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have studied Anita Desai's biographical details that include her multicultural origin and selection of English language as her medium of writing. The background study of Anita Desai's major novels has helped us to understand her contribution in the field of Indo Anglian literature. Her narrative technique makes her unique from other Indian English writers. She has aptly used stream of consciousness technique, intertextuality and surrealistic effects in her novels.

13.6 KEY WORDS

- Indo Anglian Literature:** It refers to the body of work by writers in India who write in the English language and whose native or co-native language could be one of the numerous languages of India.
- Stream of consciousness:** the person's thoughts and conscious reactions to events, perceived as a continuous flow. The term was introduced by William James in his Principles of psychology (1890).
- Psychological novel:** It is a fictional work in which the characters' thoughts, feelings and motivations are of equal or greater interest than the external action of the narrative.
- Intertextuality:** the relationship between texts, especially literary ones.

13.7 BOOKS SUGGESTED

1. Anita Desai, "Anita Desai's Comments," Contemporary Novel, ed. James Vinson (New York : St Martin Press, 1972)
2. Anita Desai at Work," Perspectives on Anita Desai, ed. R. K. Srivastav (Ghaziabad : Vimal Prakashan, 1984)
3. Agrawal, Krishna Avtar. Post-colonial Indian English Literature. Delhi: Book Enclave, 2007
4. Bala, Suman and D. K. Pabby, eds. The Fiction of Anita Desai. 2 vols. New Delhi: Khosla Publishing House – Prestige Books, 2002.
5. Bande, Usha. The Novels of Anita Desai. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2000. Print.
6. Bhatnagar, K. Manmohan and Rajeshwar, M. The Novels of Anita Desai: A Critical Study. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2000. Print.
7. Edgar, Andrew and Peter Sedgwick, eds. Cultural Theory. London: Routledge, 2004. Print.

ANSWERS:

1. Cry, the Peacock-2003
2. Cry, the Peacock
3. an elite group
4. In Custody
5. 2014