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Contents and Conventions of Anita Desai's Novels

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Abstract:

Anita Desai is one of the most powerful feminist novelists of Indian English fiction. She holds a prominent place because of her colossal popularity. She has given a new dimension and variety to the Indo-English novel turning from the outer to the inner reality. Her thematic range is wider than most of her contemporaries and the treatment of her themes is both insightful and thought provoking. Her chief concern is the complexity of human relationships, particularly man-woman relationship. Her central theme is the existential predicament of individuals which she projects through the problems of self incompatible couples- acutely sensitive wives, callous and ill-matched husbands in an emotionally disturbed milieu. Her main concern is to incorporate in her theme of the psychological stresses, anxieties and worries experienced by highly sensitive persons confronting a world of tremulous, restlessness and uncertain values. In an age of social reforms and political upheaval after independence, it is natural that the social world in which the individual has his existence, should receive due emphasis. In this article, an attempt has been made to delineate the major contents and

conventions used by Anita Desai in her novels.

Keywords: Alienation, Diaspora, Existential, Identity, Interior Landscape .

Introduction:

It is significant that the recognition and acclaim that the Indian English fiction has received in recent years has attracted a lot of attention from the critics and readers in India and abroad. It is evident that the early writers of Indian English fiction have been widely read and analysed from various points of view. The present day novelists and especially Indian women novelists, in spite of the onus of the work produced by them have not been analysed in detail to bring out new insights of fictional art in their works. A few of them like Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Nayantara Sahgal, Kamala Markandaya are exceptions, whose works have been analysed and explored from various points of view but a number of recent novelists have produced works which need to be further analysed to focus on their relationship to tradition and innovation in contemporary art of fiction.

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Anita Desai is more interested in the interior landscape of the mind than in political and social realities. Desai's protagonists are persons 'for whom aloneness alone' is 'the sole natural condition, aloneness alone the treasure worth treasuring (Naik 241).' As a great social visionary, Anita Desai, is a keen observer of the society and the position of women in the contemporary society for which she has occupied a unique place in the history of Indian English fiction. In her early novels she has explored the family problems, which lead to the estrangement of the women from their family. In the later novels she has exposed the stereotyped Western views on India.

If Indian English novelists have an eye for the details and sense of contemporaneity, Desai with her broad vision is no exception. Search for identity and desire for freedom are the hallmarks of her fiction. Her novels clearly portray the psychological problems and social predicaments which the characters face in the contemporary society. Her forte lies in depicting the characters against the landscape of place and time and the fabric of society. It is to the credit of Anita Desai that in concentrating on the inner being of human individual. She has given a new dimension to the Indian English novels. Inevitably, her writings have a universal appeal and will surely stand the test of time.

Aim and Objective of the Study:

The present study on Anita Desai explores the art of her fiction and the significance of her contribution to Indian writing in English. It elucidates and evaluates the literary qualities which reflect her consummate art and vision as a writer of diasporic vision. In fact, due to large scale migration, of many Indian novelists, poets, and scholars to Western countries, diasporic fiction has got recognition as the most potent and powerful influence in the art of fiction in our global society. The chief purpose of the study has been to critically examine the new experimental technique that Anita Desai has employed in her novels with consummate skill. One of the most important aspects of her work is the intricate fusion of form and content.

Hypothesis:

The present paper analyses different aspects of Anita Desai's fictional technique. It includes her craft of plot construction, superb art of characterization and fine presentation of diasporic vision. These characteristics mark her ingenuity as an important novelist of the post-colonial period. This hypothesis is in my mind and I hope to exhibit the contribution of her to the tradition of fiction and its rejuvenation the twenty-first century. Thus she occupies a distinctive place in the arena of twenty-first century and emerges as a major influence in her craft of fiction.

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Literature Review:

Indian English literature has witnessed an all round development unprecedented in the literary history of our country. Indian English fiction writers have won world-wide acclaim during nineteen eighties and afterwards. The origin of the Indian English fiction can be traced back to Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's Rajmohan's Wife (1864). Indeed, this novel covered much ground as a picture of Indian panorama of characters and the art of fiction. In recent times, it has attracted worldwide interest, both in India and abroad. The period from 1864 to 1920 witnessed sparse publications like Krupabai Sathinandhan's Kamala, A Story of Hindu Life in 1894, Sarath Kumar Ghosh's The Prince of Destiny in 1909, S.N. Mitra's Hindupore, A peep Behind the Indian Unrest: An Anglo-Indian Romance in 1909, Bal Krishna's The Love of Kusuma, An Eastern Love Story in 1910, and T. Ramakrishna's The Dive for Death: an Indian Romance in 1911. In this context, Meenakshi Mukherjee puts it aptly, "Indo-Anglian fiction, the last to be born and to grow up among various branches of Indian fiction" (Twice Born Fiction 30-31) gained momentum after nineteen-sixties. The development of the genre as an independent body has faced two major impediments—"first, it endeavours to create literature in a language which in most cases has been acquired rather than spoken from birth: second, it seeks to establish a distinct

literature in a language in which great literature already exists (TBF 33)." However, the rich literary harvest produced by the big three (Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan and M.R. Anand) elevated Indian English fiction to new heights. The contributions made by several other highly acclaimed novelists along with these three masters firmly set the genre of fiction in world literature.

Apart from the contributions made by the male novelists, women's writing too occupies a distinctive place in enriching this genre. In the Indian context, the first woman novelist of this genre was Toru Dutt (1856-1877) who wrote both in English and French. In recent years, we come across a good number of novelists who have made their distinctive mark in this field; they include Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Manju Kapur, Arundhati Roy and Namita Gokhale, to name a few. The major themes explored by these women novelists include the gender issues, female exploitation and the concept of being 'other' in a patriarchal society. The themes of growing up from childhood to womanhood, liberation through self quest, sexual autonomy, human relationships, realism, magic realism, fantasy, the image of 'new-women' are also presented in these novels. In addition to these, Indian culture, urbanization, migration, east-west confrontation, clash between tradition and

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modernity, struggle for independence and the pangs of partition constitute the major themes of their writings. Indian women novelists in English have created a position for themselves which becomes clear from the coveted literary awards they have received in recent times. They were conferred with the prestigious awards like Man Booker Prize, Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book (Eurasian section) and the noted Sahitya Akademi Award.

Methodology of the study:

The study will follow the methodology of critical analysis, the nuances of fictional techniques, use of language, images and metaphors that sustain the interest of the reader. I have also kept in mind the canons of diasporic fiction while pursuing this study.

Analysis:

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*. Anita Desai is one of the major voices in the modern Indian English. She has

published a large number of novels. Anita Desai's Novels Include:

1. Cry, The Peacock (1963)
2. Voices in the City (1965)
3. Bye-bye Blackbird (1971)
4. The Peacock Garden (1974)
- 5 .Where Shall We Go This Summer? (1975)
- 6 .Cat on a Houseboat (1976)
7. Fire on the Mountain (1977)
8. Games at Twilight (1978)
9. Clear Light of Day (1980)
10. The Village by the Sea (1982)
11. In Custody (1984)
12. Baumgartner's Bombay (1988)
13. Journeys to Ithaca (1995)
14. Fasting, Feasting (1999)
15. Diamond Dust (2000)
16. The Zigzag Way (2004)
17. The Artist of Disappearance (2011)

Her first novel *Cry, The Peacock* is one of the most poetic and evocative efforts which deals with the internal landscape of the mind of an alienated protagonist and the harrowing tale of blunted human relationships. It is considered as a new landmark in the study of alienation of women characters in Indian literature. Here the novelist portrays a hypersensitive and cultured Maya, and dives deep into her trapped feminine psyche from childhood to her untimely death as a youth. She is the

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victim of many social and psychological predicaments. The novel is mainly concerned with the theme of marital disharmony, between Maya and Gautama. Desai has delineated the self-alienation, despair, death, desolation, and socio-psychic fragmentation of the protagonist, Maya. Their married life is punctuated by “matrimonial silences (12)”. What pains Maya most is her utter loneliness in the house. Thus Maya reflects:

How little he knew of my suffering,
or of how to comfort
me...Telling me to go to sleep while he
worked at his papers,
he did not give another thought to me, to
either the soft, willing body, or the lonely,
wanting mind that waited near his bed (9).
Anita Desai has acquired excellence in
writing psychological novels. The present
novel, *Cry, The Peacock* is a successful
psychological study since it deals with the
unexplored recesses of Maya’s heart and
her inner psyche. It aptly reveals Maya’s
search for her own identity.

Desai’s second novel, *Voices in the City* is existential in character, for it explores the inward subjectivity and hollow existence through its three major characters – Norde, Monisha, and Amla. The theme alienation treated in terms of mother-children relationship. The novel has been divided into four parts and each part deals mainly with the life story of four major

characters; Norode, Monisha, Amla and Mother. Desai reveals Norode’s constant struggle for existence. The novel is in fact, a tragic exploration of personal sufferings, which arise out of the feverish sensitivity of this young intellectual who has lost his way in contemporary India. It delves deep into the inner climate of youthful despair and existential angst.

Through these major characters, Anita Desai succeeds in her portrayal of not only the individual human relationship against the backdrop of a cosmopolitan consciousness of a big city in India, but also the growth of individual consciousness, and a cynical sense of loss of identity through the mystical realization of the meaning of existence. As a matter of fact, *Voices in the City* is Desai’s superb exploration of the world of reality, the urban consciousness of Calcutta, an image of realities of city-life. It is remarkable tour de force in its theme and treatment.

In Anita Desai’s third novel, *Bye-bye Blackbird* we notice her existentialist concern rooted in expatriate experience. The novel mirrors the problem of alienation and lack of adjustment encountered by Indian immigrants in England. Although on the surface level the novel is concerned with the lives of Indian immigrants, but beneath the surface there is the existentialist theme of alienation and search for identity which the novel presents through the

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different experiences and emotions of the three major characters – Adit, Sarah, and Dev.

She is sensitive in portraying the diasporic sensibilities in the characters of her fiction, *Bye-Bye Blackbird* and Baumgartner's *Bombay*. Though the novels vividly represent emigrant situations, and the treatment of different issues related to diaspora, they significantly contribute to diverse interpretations of postmodern fiction. The post-colonial phase of the Indian Diaspora differs from the earlier form of migrations. The migrants are from middle-class families, highly skilled and are settled abroad. Professional migrations into the USA, UK, Europe and Australia are common. *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, written on the Indian diaspora, revolves around two friends, Dev and Adit, in London. Adit has been in London for quite some time now and is married to Sarah, an English woman. Dev in England in search of a degree and subsequent employment. Adit was disappointed with his job in India. This has forced him to leave his homeland and settle abroad for a decent income. Adit, in the beginning, has a blind liking for English country and people like a colonized Indian who has internalized the colonial attitude and believes in the supremacy of the western culture. But soon he realises the fallacy of his supremacy and starts feeling 'un-homed' on the occasion of a party at his in-law's home where he faces the insult as a

coloured individual and gets disillusioned about his country and the people. He learns that an Indian is often considered an inferior being by the racially biased white people. Adit says:

My mother-in-law hates and despises me. They make fun of the life I lead and the ideals I profess. Therefore, I am angry I am hurt. These fleeting moods of anger are now to him and... faced with one, he was unable to deal with it – he merely stood still and felt his leaden feet sink in as though in quick-sands. (*Bye Bye Blackbird* 176)

Adit develops such hatred for England that he suspects everything English to be insulting and depressing. He loses control of himself:

---he stood staring, not at one of the poster she so delighted in but at a piece of that Nigger, go home graffiti on the walls that had previously nearly skidded off the surface of his eyeballs without actually penetrating. Now he is screwed up his eyes and studied it as though it were a very pertinent sign board. ---the eternal immigrants who can never accept their new home and continue to walk the streets like strangers in enemy territory, frozen, listless, but dutifully trying to be busy, unobtrusive and, however superficially, to belong. (*BBY* 181-182)

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Formulations of experiences of misunderstood frustrations burden the diasporic communities. The question of settling is a question to any diasporian unless one associates oneself with any of the two lands. This oscillating mind, the suffering and agog out of cultural changes are expressed by the diaspora. Adit realizes that he has to escape from England ‘and he began to tell Sarah of this nostalgia that had become an illness, an ache’ (183). He tells Sarah “Sarah, you know I’ve loved England more than you, I’ve often felt myself half-English, but it was only pretence, Sally, Now, it has to be the real thing. I must go. You will come? (204)” Sarah is happy that Adit has finally taken a decision and condescends. Under the pretext of the war between India and Pakistan, Adit resolves to return back to his homeland. When Sarah announces her pregnancy, Adit is delighted and tells her that the kid would be born in India.

When she migrates to India it is a challenge for her to merge her identity into the identity of another culture for reshaping it. Desai’s novel thus gives the message that inequality of class, race, and unrest brings stress upon relationships. In spite of this, plural identity inspires assimilation in him. Dev decides to stay in England and reap a rich harvest. It is he who finally succeeds in firmly establishing his ‘roots’ in England. He resolves to teach the English a lesson for the abuse that has to be borne. When

Adit and Sarah bid him goodbye, he calls out, ‘Bye-Bye –Blackbird!’

Baumgartner’s Bombay traces the journey of the Jew, Hugo Baumgartner, in India; his land of refuge from the Nazis. Desai has etched out the life of a Jew, whose escape from Germany during the Second World War has cost his identity and nationality. Suffering internal exile, the Jews stay in their own country and feel alienated. The novel brings out diverse interpretations on the Jewish diaspora and its problems like migrations, suppression, resistance, representation, difference, race, culture, gender nationality, and place. As the story commences, Baumgartner, who has been in India for fifty years, remains a firanghi to his friends. His only acquaintances, he claims his own are his homeless pet, cats and lotte, a run-away German Cabaret singer. He recalls the years he has spent in India and the desolation that he feels now is the result of his inability to assimilate the Indian culture. Anita Desai explores it as follows:

He had lived in this land for fifty years –or if not fifty then so nearly as to make no difference-and it no longer seemed fantastic and exotic, it was more utterly familiar now than any other landscape on earth. Yet, the eyes of the people who passed by glanced at him who was still strange and unfamiliar to them, and all said; Firanghi, foreigner. (19)

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This novel depicts the plights of Hugo Baumgartner who remained a wandering Jew all his life. He had no sense of belonging to anywhere or anyone, and finally died a tragic death. The quest for identity is the main theme of the novel. The protagonist's early life in pre-war Berlin and then, in India (i.e.; in Calcutta and Bombay) where he lived for fifty years, but could not solve the problem of his identity.

Anita Desai's *Artist of Disappearance* consists of three novellas. Each is about art and artist, and presents a problem or a predicament, and later its natural life-worn resolution. The three novellas are *The Museum of Final Journeys*, *Translator Translated*, and *The Artist of Disappearance*. The writing is exquisite; Desai creates unforgettable details, bringing out the hidden paths in everyday lives. Anita Desai's insight into human nature, portrayal of characters, use of the technique of stream of consciousness, feminine consciousness and command of language make her novels immensely popular.

The modern diasporic Indian fiction writers can be grouped into two distinct classes. One class comprises those who have spent a part of their life in India and have carried the baggage of their native land offshore. The other class comprises those who have been bred since childhood,

outside India. They have had a view of their country only from the outside as an exotic place of their origin. The writers of the former group have a literal displacement whereas those belonging to the latter group find themselves rootless. Both the groups of writers have produced an enviable corpus of English literature. These writers while depicting migrant characters in their fiction explore the theme of displacement and self-fashioning. The diasporic Indian writers' depiction of dislocated characters gains immense importance if seen against the geo-political background of the vast Indian subcontinent. They have generally dealt with characters from their own displaced community but some of them have also taken a liking for western characters.

Clear Light of the Day is one of the most important novels of Anita Desai. It centres round the protagonist, Bimla, the eldest child who takes care of her mentality retarded younger brother after their parents' death. Her younger sister Tara marries a man in the Indian Foreign Service and visits the house every three or four years when her husband comes to India. Raja, the elder brother, marries the landlord's daughter and inherits his property. Both Tara and Raja stay away from home, leaving Bimla all alone to take up the lunatic brother. Bimla is a new heroine in Anita Desai's fiction, head-headed and facing life's challenges bravely. She rejects the need of woman for

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a man for her spiritual and material happiness.

In her long distinguished career, Anita Desai has focussed her vision on questions of culture and identity. For instance, *The Zigzag Way*, brings her fiction to an unexpected region of the world: mythical, lush Mexico. In this seductive landscape, a young American stumbles upon an unlikely path of self discovery. This is a magical novel of elegiac beauty.

Her novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Depicts the inner-outer world of its protagonist. It tells the story of a middle-aged Sita, who is fed up with the mundane routine of a meaningless existence. In fact, here in the novel the novelist analyses the inner thoughts, sufferings and the existential trauma of Sita and her mother. The entire novel deals with the problems of human existence, the conflict of life - denying and life-affirming impulses, and the instinctive inability of an individual to conform or adapt to the social conventions.

Fire on the Mountain, has placed Desai's reputation as one of the best Indo-Anglian novelists. The title of this novel is taken from William Golding's famous novel, *Lord of Flies*, the second chapter of which is entitled 'Fire on the Mountain'. It has significant connotations. The fire indicates not only the forest fire, but it also

indicates the fire burning within the souls of the three major female characters of the novel – Nanda Kaul, Lla Das and Raka. The fire within them wants release through self expression, solitude, apart from family ties and beyond the periphery of the civilised world. The fire is also fed with the inner turmoil and violence added by patriarchal rules, infidelity, hassles of children, parental abuse and definitely the customs of society defined as 'tradition', and subjugation of the female society in post-independence era, and also looks for release in the form of a quest for identity and individuality.

The Fire on the Mountain presents Desai's tragic view of life which further implies that innocent people are bound to suffer and pay a heavy price for their goodness and innocence. In fact, the fire lit on the mountain becomes the emblem of destruction and purgation, the destruction of an unkind world of many Nanda Kauls and Lla Dases, of an unequal situation in which women suffer from the slings of misfortune, social inequalities and injustices committed on them by a savage society of men. The title of the novel is symbolic of the revolt of the new generation of women against the male chauvinistic society.

The novel, *The Village by the Sea* is the only novel which ends in unexpected harmony and total synchronized. It is

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considered as a children's fiction. Unlike her other novels it has little to do with philosophical, psychological and existential concerns.

In *Custody* marks a departure from her earlier novels in the sense that the protagonist in this novel is not a female but a male. He is Deven and not his wife Sarla. Here she presents before us a realistic picture of a trapped male character whose wife despises his inability to succeed financially and whose friend; Murad exploits him by casting his selfish ambition on him. There are three major protagonists in the novel – Deven, Nur, and Murad, who struggle hard to realise their respective ambitions. Desai has concentrated more on characters rather than social milieu.

Unlike the other novels of Anita Desai, *Journey to Ithaca* makes a tremendous beginning in Indo-English fiction. It carries the idea of internationalism a step further. The protagonists belong to diverse cultures, such as Italy, Germany, Egypt, and India. Moreover, the journey which ends in tragedy in Baumgartner's Bombay comes to its completion in journey to Ithaca. In the novel, India appears as a kind of Ithaca. From symbolic point of view, *Journey to Ithaca* is a novel about the soul's journey to enlightenment and awakening. It is a journey where Ithaca ceases to be a specific place. The theme of the novel deals with

one's journey within oneself, a journey which ends in India only; because India is the only country which identifies the significance of the journey within.

Anita Desai's novel, *Fasting, Feasting*, shortlisted for the Booker's prize, earns laurel to her. It deals with East-West encounter. As implied in the title itself, it is a novel of contrast between two cultures, the one, Indian, known for its pious and long-lasting custom, representing 'fasting'; and the other, American, a country of opulence and sumptuousness epitomising 'feasting'. The novel is divided into two parts, the first part is set in contemporary rural India, and the other is set in contemporary suburban Massachusetts. The protagonist Uma is in Indian setting. The American portion of the text, featuring her brother, Arun serves to reiterate and refine ideas presented in the Indian setting. The plot unveils through the perceptions of Uma, in India, and of Arun, in America. Both of them are entrapped, irrespective of the culture and enveloping milieu by oppressive bonds exercised by their own parents, 'Mamapapa'. They are just 'Mamapapa' or 'Papamama', but remain nameless throughout the novel. Yet, this namelessness does not indicate their anonymity, but signifies their universality. They are prototypical parents found everywhere in the middle-class families of India, who discuss, plan, plot, control, govern the activities of their children, be it

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marriage or going abroad for studies. And in their over-dominating concern, they tend to ignore the inadvertent possibility of entrapping their own offspring. Thus, the novel concentrates on the difficulties faced by women try to balance achievements of identity with family.

In fact, Anita Desai is clearly occupied with existential themes like search for identity. Throwing light on her thematic concern, K. R. Srinivasa Iyenger aptly observes “Anita Desai’s forte is the exploration of sensibility, the particular kind of modern Indian sensibility that is ill at ease among the barbarians and the philistines, the anachrists and the amoralists” (Indian Writing in English 55). The crisis in her fiction is born out of marital discord, lack of understanding between man and woman. As a matter of fact, this existential theme runs like a thread through all the novels of Anita Desai right from *Cry, The Peacock* to *The Zigzag Way*. Among Indian English novelists, such theme has extensively been dealt with by Arun Joshi and Anita Desai. Anita Singh aptly observes:

Indian English novels make a departure in the writings of Anita Desai and Arun Joshi, and catch up with the Modern Western World. These two novelists shift from the outer world to the inner side (Existential Dimensions in the Novels of Anita Desai 8).

Conclusions:

To conclude, it may be observed that Anita Desai is remarkably successful in managing her language and projecting her theme. The major contents are the sense of alienation, detachment, existential predicament, and human relationship particularly the man-woman relationship. In the present era, these kinds of themes have assumed special significance in the closer context of rapid industrialization, growing awareness, among women of their rights, individualism and the westernization of attitudes and lives of people. Her contents require deeper psychological probing and the subjective point of view of sensitive emotional and sensuous characters. As a result, she is at her best in making a poetic rendering of her contents. The contents of her fictions have been embodied in images and symbols. Her unquestionable existentialist concern has distinguished her from that of the novelists of her generation. Her novels are not only loaded with isolated elements but also they are inter-related at many levels of structure and texture. In order to convey the contents, the novelist judiciously uses characters, situations, and dialogues. Her novels cast deep impact on our minds and hearts as they bear social values and present the microscopic study of man-woman relationship in transformed atmosphere of the current time. Indeed, as an artist, Anita Desai’s central occupation is with the exploration and evaluation of the subjectivity of human individual. She

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voices forth the human predicament vis-à-vis the negative social forces that subvert man's progress. She devotes her creative faculty to exploring the deeper psychic and mental states of the protagonists. The corpus of the content of Anita Desai's novels is based on the experience which she has gained in India and abroad.

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