



Anita Desai

Anita Mazumdar Desai (born 24 June 1937) is an Indian novelist and the 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 Academy Award in 1978 for her novel *Fire on the Mountain*, from the Sahitya Academy, India's National Academy of Letters; she won the British Guardian Prize for *The Village by the Sea*.

Early Life: Anita Mazumdar was born in Mussoorie, India, to a German mother, Toni Nime, and a Bengali businessman, D. N. Mazumdar. She grew up speaking German at home and Bengali, Urdu, Hindi and English outside the house. However, she did not visit Germany until later in life as an adult. 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.

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*. 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.

Career: Desai published her first novel, *Cry The Peacock*, in 1963. 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 neighbourhood 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. 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*). In addition, she writes for the *New York Review of Books*.

Film: 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 Shahrugh Husain. It won the 1994 President of India Gold Medal for Best Picture and stars Shashi Kapoor, Shabana Azmi and Om Puri.

Awards:

1. 1978 – Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize – *Fire on the Mountain*
2. 1978 – Sahitya Akademi Award (National Academy of Letters Award) – *Fire on the Mountain*
3. 1980 – Shortlisted, Booker Prize for Fiction – *Clear Light of Day*
4. 1983 – Guardian Children's Fiction Prize – *The Village by the Sea: an Indian family story*
5. 1984 – Shortlisted, Booker Prize for Fiction – *In Custody*
6. 1993 – Neil Gunn Prize
7. 1999 – Shortlisted, Booker Prize for Fiction: *Fasting, Feasting*
8. 2000 – Alberto Moravia Prize for Literature (Italy)
9. 2003 – Benson Medal of Royal Society of Literature
10. 2007 – Sahitya Akademi Fellowship
11. 2014 – Padma Bhushan

Her Works:

1. 2011: The Artist of Disappearance
2. 2004: The Zig Zag Way
3. 2000: Diamond Dust and Other Stories
4. 1999: Fasting, Feasting
5. 1995: Journey to Ithaca
6. 1987: Baumgartner's Bombay
7. 1984: In Custody
8. 1982: The Village by the Sea
9. 1980: Clear Light of Day
10. 1979: The Peacock Garden
11. 1978: Games at Twilight and Other Stories
12. 1977: Fire on the Mountain
13. 1975: Where Shall We Go This Summer?
14. 1965: Voices in the City
15. 1963: Cry, The Peacock

Critical Studies: "I have been writing, since the age of 7, as instinctively as I breathe. It is a necessity to me: I find it is in the process of writing that I am able to think, to feel, and to realize at the highest pitch. Writing is to me a process of discovering the truth—the truth that is nine-tenths of the iceberg that lies 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. That is why, in my novels, small objects, passing moods and attitudes acquire a large importance. My novels are no reflection of Indian society, politics, or character. They are part of my private effort to seize upon the raw material of life—its shapelessness, its meaninglessness, that lack of design that drives one to despair—and to mould it and impose on it a design, a certain composition and order that pleases me as an artist and also as a human being who longs for order.

While writing my novels, I find I use certain images again and again and that, although real, they acquire the significance of symbols. I imagine each writer ends by thus revealing his own mythology, a mythology that symbolizes his private morality and philosophy. One hopes, at the end of one's career, to have made some significant statement on life—not necessarily a water-tight, hard-and-fast set of rules, but preferably an ambiguous, elastic, shifting, and kinetic one that remains always capable of further change and growth.

Next to this exploration of the underlying truth and the discovery of a private mythology and philosophy, it is style that interests me most—and by this I mean the conscious labour of uniting language and symbol, word and rhythm. Without it, language would remain a dull and pedestrian vehicle. I search for a style that will bring it to vivid, surging life. Story, action, and drama mean little to me except insofar as they emanate directly from the personalities I have chosen to write about, born of their dreams and wills. One must find a way to unite the inner and the outer rhythms, to obtain a certain integrity and to impose order on chaos." —Anita Desai.

If the male triumvirate—Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, and R. K. Narayan—can be seen as the first generation of Indian writers in English, Anita Desai, who published her first novel in 1963, might usefully be described as in the vanguard of the second-generation of Indian writers in English, and—along with Kamala Markandaya and Ruth Praver Jhabvala—among the first generation of Indian women writing in English. The daughter of a Bengali father and a German mother, her mixed background has enabled Desai to view India from something of an outsider's perspective, to see India both as Indians and as a non-Indians see it.

Desai has published novels, collections of stories, and books for young readers. In all these works, Desai has set about interpreting her country for outsiders.

The world of Desai's fiction is largely a domestic one. She is interested primarily in the lives of women in India since Independence, the lives of women in the modern Indian nation state, rather than the history or politics of the subcontinent on a more extensive scale.

Her early novels, to *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* focus in various ways on the disharmony and alienation women frequently experience in marriage. And although novels like *Voices in the City* and *Bye-Bye Blackbird* in particular give the impression of being about the lives of their male characters, the focus inevitably shifts to the female characters and the limitations the patriarchal world places on them (as daughters, wives, or mothers).

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.

Desai's exquisitely crafted fifth novel (and probably her most powerful work to date), *Fire on the Mountain*, brings 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. Criticism of *Fire on the Mountain* has tended to focus on Desai's detailed study of her three female characters—particularly her presentation of Nanda Kaul—without paying sufficient attention to her attack on patriarchal oppression, which, Desai forcefully suggests in this novel, not only limits the opportunities given to women in India, but mentally and physically damages them.

In *Clear Light of Day*, although the fires of Partition riots burn in the background, Desai's interest is again firmly focused on the difficulties facing a woman who attempts to assert her identity within the family framework, on the relationships Bim, the central female character, has with the various members of her family. It is about the fragmentation of a family played out against the backdrop of a fracturing nation.

In Custody, in many respects a delightful and sad comedy in a Narayanish sort of vein, marks a broadening of Desai's oeuvre. The novel plots the disillusionment of Deven, a young Hindi lecturer at a college in the small town of Mirpore, and the various calamities that befall him after he is persuaded to go to Delhi to interview his hero, India's greatest living Urdu poet, Nur—only to find himself being dragged deeper and deeper into Nur's unsavory world. For all its comedy, there is a certain despair in this novel, which presents the decline of Muslim Urdu culture in the North of India in the years following Independence and Partition.

Despair of a different hue characterizes *Baumgartner's Bombay*. Here, through a series of flashbacks, Desai looks at the life of a now-elderly German Jew who fled to India fifty years earlier in the 1930s to escape the Nazis, and who stayed on after Independence only to be murdered in Bombay by a German youth he tried to help. It is another brilliant portrait of alienation.

Desai continues her interest in Europeans in India in *Journey to Ithaca*. The novel focuses on Matteo, a guru-seeking Westerner in India, his wife Sophie, and the charismatic Mother that Sophie desperately struggles to keep him from. This incursion into territory so definitively mapped by Ruth Praver Jhabvala is Desai's least successful novel.

The various strands that can be traced through her 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. At the same time Desai extends her interest in the West in this cleverly structured novel. *Fasting, Feasting* is an almost plotless novel that looks at the lives of two daughters and the son of a traditional Indian family in the modern world. The novel opens with Uma, the eldest daughter now in her forties, still at home and firmly under the authority of her parents. Through a series of flashbacks, the first part of the novel looks at how Uma came to be in this position. It is a view of a traditional Hindu family, including arranged marriages. The second part of the book shifts abruptly to the United States. If in the first part India is presented for Western eyes, in the second part the tables are effectively turned and America is viewed through Indian eyes when Arun, in the U.S. on a college scholarship, finds himself living with the Patton family during summer vacation. It is a carefully balanced novel of contrasts: between East and West; lack and excess; lack of ambition (for Uma and Melanie) and too much ambition (for Arun and Rod). It further explores the gendered condition of the nation state, both in Indian and the U.S.

Desai is undoubtedly one of the major Indian English writers of her generation. If her reputation was 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. (Ralph J. Crane)

She never considered trying to first publish in India because there was no publisher in India who would be interested in fiction by an Indian writer (Jussawalla) and it was first in England that her work became noticed. U.S. readers were slower to discover her, due, she believes to England's natural interest in India and the U.S.'s lack of comprehension regarding the foreignness of her subject.

But Desai only writes in English. This, she has repeatedly said, was a natural and unconscious choice for her: "I can state definitely that I did not choose English in a deliberate and conscious act and I'd say perhaps it was the language that chose me and I started writing stories in English at the age of seven, and have been doing so for thirty years now without stopping to think why" (Desai).

She is considered the writer who introduced the psychological novel in the tradition of Virginia Woolf to India. Included in this, is her pioneer status of writing of feminist issues. While many people today would not classify her work as feminist, she believes this is due to changing times: "The feminist movement in India is very new and a younger generation of readers in India tends to be rather impatient of my books and to think of them as books about completely helpless women, hopeless women. They find it somewhat unreal that the women don't fight back, but they don't seem to realize how very new this movement is" (Jussawalla).

Also, she says, her writing is realistic: "Women think I am doing a disservice to the feminist movement by writing about women who have no control over their lives. But I was trying, as every writer tries to do, even in fiction, to get at the truth, write the truth. It would have been really fanciful if I had made [for example, in *Clear Light of Day*] Bim and Tara modern-day feminists" (in Griffiths).

Desai considers *Clear Light of Day*, her most autobiographical book, because she was writing about her neighborhood in Delhi, although the characters are not based on her brothers and sisters. What she was exploring in this novel, she has said, was the importance of childhood and memories as the source of a life. She had wanted to start the book at the end and move backwards, into the characters' childhood and further, into the childhood of their parents etc., but in the end: "When I had gone as far back as their infancy the book just ground to a halt; it lost its momentum. It told me that this was done, that I couldn't carry it further. But I still have a sense of disappointment about that book, because the intention had been different" (Jussawalla). The character of Raja is identified with her in the sense that he is so immersed in all different types of literature and culture, and is so concerned with protecting the multicultural heritage of India. His worries about the Muslim neighbor family is not just about them particularly, but rather worry about the loss of all that the Muslim culture and literature contributes to India.

While Desai has taught for years at Mount Holyoke and MIT, and spends most of the year outside of India, she does not consider herself part of the Indian Diaspora. Although she does not fit in the Indian box anymore (Griffiths) as she said, she considers herself lucky for having not left India until late in her life, because she feels that she has been drifting away from it ever since: "I can't really write of it with the same intensity and familiarity that I once had." Yet she cannot feel at home in any other place or society (Griffiths).

Fire on the Mountain

Anita Desai's novel *Fire on the Mountain* won the National Academy of Letters Award in 1978 and The Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize in 1977. While doing an online search for this novel, I discovered that it is shelved under *Fiction about Aging & Death* in at least one library. Another site, litweb.net has this synopsis of the novel: *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), set in Kasauli, a hill station, focused on three women and their oppressed life.

After suffering through many South Asian novels about women and oppression, I had sworn off any more such novels. I relented only because I had recently read Desai's *In Custody*, and I knew she was an exceptional writer with rare sensitivity and perspective. I was not disappointed.

The novel starts out slowly with a detailed description of Nanda Kaul's movements on one afternoon. Nanda Kaul, a great grandmother, has renounced her entire world, and has come to spend her remaining days in the peace of the Kasauli Mountains. She is disenchanted with everything and wants nothing to do with any of the people in her life. Even a daily visit from the postman is an unwanted intrusion.

A letter arrives from her daughter Asha, informing of her granddaughter Raka's arrival in Kasauli. Asha's daughter Tara's marriage is in shambles and Tara is suffering from ongoing bouts of depression. She is in no shape to take care of Raka, who is just recovering from a severe case of typhoid. So Raka is dispatched to Nanda Kaul's mountain retreat. Through a few small flashbacks, we see Nanda Kaul's life as a successful wife and mother. It appears that she was tired of being a caretaker for everyone, and has retreated to the mountains to lead a reclusive life. She appears to be a very strong determined woman, a person of very few words. She says, *I never cared for music myself. It makes me fidget. I greatly prefer silence.*

The sickly great granddaughter, Raka, arrives. *Nanda Kaul thought she looked like one of those dark crickets that leap up in fright but do not sing, or a mosquito, minute and fine, on thin, precarious legs.* Soon Nanda Kaul discovers that she and Raka have a lot in common.

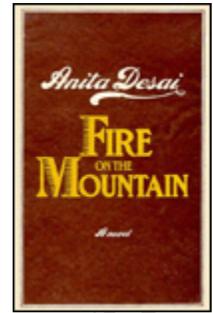
Raka is exactly like her. [...] So they worked out the means by which they would live together and each felt she was doing her best at avoiding the other but found it was not so simple to exist and yet appear not to exist.

But there is one fundamental difference: *If Nanda Kaul was a recluse out of vengeance for a long life of duty and obligation, her great-granddaughter was a recluse by nature.* Nanda Kaul has disconnected herself from her world, but Raka has never had a chance to build any connection with the world. A child who loves solitude, wanders about the mountain and ravines looking for jackals, and churails, peeks at the Nightclub dances, enjoys the wild fire on the mountain, is soon recognized as the *Crazy one from the Carignano* in the neighborhood.

The small interactions between Nanda Kaul and Raka are insightful, and a few short conversations foretell the events to come. I really enjoyed this minimalist approach throughout the novel. I think this novel is one of the finest examples of the 'show and not tell' style of storytelling.

A woman that Nanda Kaul has known since childhood comes to visit them on the mountain. Ila Das is not quite together, and is prone to harassment by the neighborhood hooligans. ... *but no matter what she had said, it would have made them bellow - that was the way her voice acted upon everyone.* Besides the unpleasant voice, Ila Das has suffered many other misfortunes in her life and has struggled to survive with some dignity, with kind assistance from Nanda Kaul at crucial times. She chatters nonstop about the times they have shared, bringing out some secrets about Nanda Kaul's life, although nothing is fully revealed until the end of the novel. There are clues: one is when Raka notices Nanda Kaul trying to silence Ila Das. On another occasion, Nanda Kaul is sharing her father's history with Raka: *He admired it, you see - he admired anything uncommon, extraordinary.* We get another clue when Ramlal the caretaker, is worried that the dust storm may knock over the Hamam and start a fire and Raka is simply enamoured of the idea.

What takes place in the last few pages of the novel catches the reader by surprise. All the signs of the end were present in the novel, in the descriptions, in the tone of the narrator, and in the few chosen words of the characters. This, to me, is the strongest feature of the novel. There is never a word uttered about the oppression



that these women have suffered through their lives. The book is a simple portrayal of three women who have found a way to live in content albeit in seclusion. The injustices and oppressions are for the reader to derive.

The plot of *Fire on the Mountain* is relatively brief and uncomplicated, the significant action occurring within the psyches of Nanda and, to a lesser extent, Raka, her great-granddaughter. When Ila Das is raped and killed, that violent action happens “offstage” at the end of the novel, almost simultaneously with Raka’s announcement that she has set the forest on fire. While there are few important “events” in the rest of the novel, Anita Desai prepares the reader for the horrific ending by carefully embedding violence in her imagery and in her symbolism. In effect, the “fire” metaphorically smolders within her characters before it literally ignites at the end of the novel.

Part 1 of *Fire on the Mountain* provides the geographical and psychological setting prior to the arrival of Raka, Nanda’s great-granddaughter. After the death of her husband, Nanda has apparently chosen to live an isolated life in her retirement. Except for an occasional telephone call and a visit from the postman, which she regards as unwelcome intrusions, only the presence of Ram Lal, her cook, disturbs her solitude. Carignano, her literal and metaphorical “retreat,” is perched on the side of a cliff, and its setting suggests the precarious nature of the life she has established there. That life, free from obligations to others, is threatened by the visit of the postman, who brings her a letter informing her of the impending visit by Raka. When Ila Das, a friend since childhood, telephones Nanda and also asks about visiting her, Nanda realizes that her “pared, reduced, and radiantly single life” is in jeopardy.

The second part of the novel concerns the interaction—and lack of it—between Nanda and Raka, who, despite the generational gap, are quite similar in behavior. At first, Nanda considers Raka an intruder.

Fire on the Mountain is a superbly crafted novel, known for its rich symbolic imagery and psychological insights. A winner of two prestigious awards, it tells the story of two older women and a young girl.

The first part of the novel takes the reader inside the mind of Nanda Kaul, the aged protagonist. The widow of a university vice chancellor and once at the hub of a large, demanding family and a hectic social life, she now lives in seclusion at Carignano, a desolate old house on the ridge of a mountain in Kasauli. Aloof, indifferent, and irritable, she wants no intrusion to violate her privacy. Her cloistered life is threatened when she receives a letter announcing an impending visit by her great-granddaughter Raka and when a telephone call comes from her childhood friend Ila Das, who wishes to visit her.

The second part of the novel shows the tense relationship between Nanda Kaul and Raka. A recluse, Raka has the habit of slipping away into her own private world, ignoring her great-grandmother completely. Haunted by nightmarish memories of a drunken, violent father and an unhappy, battered mother, she shuns human company and spends her time roaming the desolate hills and ravines like a bird or a lizard. This offers Desai an opportunity to weave symbolic nature imagery into the text of the novel. Challenged by Raka’s indifference, Nanda Kaul reluctantly comes out of her self-imposed quietude and makes a desperate, though futile.