



Anita Desai

“

With her inner eye she saw how her own house and its particular history linked and contained her, as well as her whole family . . . giving them the soil in which to send down their roots. . . . always drawing from the same soil, the same secret darkness. That soil contained all time, past and future. . . . It was where her deepest self lived, and the deepest selves of her sisters and brothers and all those who shared that time with her.

— Clear Light of Day

”

Quick Facts

- * Born in 1937
- * Indian author, and she writes her novels in English
- * First published novel was *Cry, the Peacock*

Biography

Born to a German mother and an Indian father on June 24, 1937, Anita Desai spent much of her life in New Delhi. Growing up she spoke German at home and Hindi to friends and neighbors. She first learned English when she went to school. It was the language in which she first learned to read and write, and so it became her literary language. When asked why English remains her literary language, she said, “I think it had a tremendous effect that the first thing you saw written and the first thing you ever read was English. It seemed to me the language of books. I just went on writing it because I always wanted to belong to this world of books” (CLC).

Desai received a BA in English Literature and graduated with honors from the University of Delhi. She started publishing her work shortly after her marriage to Ashrin Desai on December 13, 1958.

This page authored and submitted by Rebecca Julik. It was updated by Lauren Curtright on 1/5/05.



Anita Desai

Biography continued

Desai is part of a new literary tradition of Indian writing in English which dates back only to the 30s or 40s. She explains that this is because “at one time all literature was recited rather than read and that remains the tradition in India. It is still rather a strange act to buy a book and read it, an unusual thing to do” (CLC). Her new style of writing is also different from that of many Indian writers, as it is much less conservative than Indian literature has been in the past. For these reasons, she says, she is not widely read in India, mainly in Indian universities if at all.

Throughout her novels, children’s books, and short stories, Desai focuses on personal struggles and problems of contemporary life that her Indian characters must cope with. She maintains that her primary goal is to discover “the truth that is nine-tenths of the iceberg that lies submerged beneath the one-tenth visible portion we call Reality” (CLC). She portrays the cultural and social changes that India has undergone as she focuses on the incredible power of family and society and the relationships between family members, paying close attention to the trials of women suppressed by Indian society.

Desai is praised for her broad understanding on intellectual issues, and for her ability to portray her country so vividly with the way the eastern and western cultures have blended there. She has received numerous awards, including the 1978 National Academy of Letters Award for *Fire on the Mountain*, the first of her novels to be brought to the United States. The story is of a remote, isolated woman and her equally withdrawn great-granddaughter as they are forced together in hills surrounded by violence and fire. In 1983 she was awarded the Guardian Prize for Children’s Fiction for *The Village by the Sea*, an adventurous fairy tale about a young boy living in a small fishing village in India. She was awarded the Literary Lion Award in 1993, and has also been named Helen Cam Visiting fellow, Ashby fellow, and honorary fellow of the University of Cambridge.

In addition to her writing, Desai has raised four children: Rahul, Tani, Arjun, and Kiran. She has been a member of the Advisory Board for English, and of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, as well as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. She has also worked as an educator at colleges including Mt. Holyoke, Smith, and Girton College at Cambridge University.



Anita Desai

Selected Bibliography

Works by the author

The Zigzag Way (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2004).

“When on Route 80 in Ohio” in *Away: the Indian Writer as an Expatriate*, ed. Amitava Kumar (Psychology Press, 2004).

“Bicultural, Adrift, and Wandering” in *The Writing Life: Writers on How They Think and Work*, ed. Marie Arana (Public Affairs, 2003).

Diamond Dust (Mariner Books, 2000).

Fasting, Feasting (Chatto and Windus, 1999).

Journey to Ithaca (Knopf, 1995).

Baumgartner’s Bombay (Knopf, 1988).

In Custody (Heinemann, 1984).

The Village by the Sea (Heinemann, 1982).

Clear Light of Day (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1980).

The Peacock Garden (Mammoth, 1974).

Where Shall we go this Summer? (Vikas, 1975).

Games at Twilight (Heinemann, 1978).

Fire on the Mountain (Heinemann, 1977).

Bye-Bye, Blackbird (Delhi Hind Pocket Books, 1968).

Voices in the City (Orient Paperbacks, 1965).

Cry, the Peacock (P. Owen, 1963).

Works about the author

Baena, Rosalía. “The Condition of Life and Art in Anita Desai’s *In Custody*” (*Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, 2000).

Ball, John Clement. “‘A City Visible but Unseen’: The (Un)Realities of London in South Asian Fiction” (*Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics*, 1998).

Bazin, Nancy Topping. “Alcoholism in Third-World Literature: Buchi Emecheta, Athol Fugard, and Anita Desai” in *The Language of Addiction*, ed. Jane Lilienfeld and Jeffrey Oxford (St. Martin’s, 1999).



Anita Desai

Selected Bibliography continued

Works about the author continued

- Chakravarty, Radha. "Figuring the Maternal: 'Freedom' and 'Responsibility' in Anita Desai's Novels" (*ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 1998).
- Chanda, Geetanjali Singh. "Mapping Motherhood: The Fiction of Anita Desai" (*Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering*, 2002).
- Chapman, Jeff, Pamela S. Dear and John D. Jorgenson, ed. *Contemporary Authors New Revision Series 53* (Gale Research, 1997).
- Chatterjee, Chandra. "The 'Unfettered Vacuum': A Postcolonial Reading of Anita Desai's *Journey to Ithaca and Fasting, Feasting*" in *Convergences and Interferences: Newness in Intercultural Practices/Ecritures d'une nouvelle ère/aire*, ed. Kathleen Gyssels, Isabel Hoving, and Maggie Ann Bowers (Rodopi, 2001).
- Choudhury, Bidulata. *Women and Society in the Novels of Anita Desai* (Creative Books, 1995).
- Fludernik, Monika. "Cross-Mirrorings of Alterity: The Colonial Scenario and Its Psychological Legacy" (*ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 1999).
- Gee, Maggie. "Anita Desai in Conversation with Maggie Gee" (*The Transnational Journal of International Writing*, 2004).
- Hassan, Khwaja Moinul. "Anita Desai's Confrontation with the Question of Identity in the 20th Century" in *Contributions to Bengal Studies: An Interdisciplinary and International Approach*, ed. Enayetur Rahim and Henry Schwarz (Beximco, 1998).
- Kapur, Usha. "A Probe into Female Individuality: Anita Desai's Successful Attempt at Viewing an Introvert Heroine against the Social Backdrop of Calcutta" (*Panjab University Research Bulletin (Arts)*, 2000).
- Lee, Kyungsoon. "The Discourse of Nationalism and Gendered Subjectivity: Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*" (*Studies in Modern Fiction*, 2001).
- Liotard, Corinne. "Otherness in Anita Desai's Baumgartner's Bombay" in *Flight from Certainty: The Dilemma of Identity and Exile*, ed. Anne Luyat and Francine Tolron (Rodopi, 2001).
- Khanna, Shashi. *Human Relationships in Anita Desai's Novels* (Sarup and Sons, 1995).
- Kohli, Devindra. "The Embrace of Recognition: Landscape, Memory and Identity in Anita Desai" in *Crabtracks: Progress and Process in Teaching the New Literatures in English*, ed. Gordon Collier and Frank Schulze-Engler (Rodopi, 2002).



Anita Desai

Selected Bibliography continued

Works about the author continued

- Matin, A. Michael. "Anita Desai (1937-)" in *British Writers: Supplement V*, ed. George Stade and Sarah Hannah Goldstein (Scribner's, 1999).
- Nandan, Jyoti. "The Complicity of Colonised Women in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*" in *Resistance and Reconciliation: Writing in the Commonwealth*, ed. Bruce Bennett, Susan Cowan, Jacqueline Lo, Satendra Nandan, and Jennifer Webb (Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (ACLALS), 2003).
- Parker, Michael and Roger Starkey, ed. *Postcolonial Literature: Achebe, Ngugi, Desai, Walcott* (St. Martin's, 1995).
- Pathania, Usha. *Human Bonds and Bondages: The Fiction of Anita Desai and Kamala Markandaya* (Kanishka Publishers, 1991).
- Peacock, J. Sunita. "Nanda Kaul's Departure from Patriarchal Indian Society in *Fire on the Mountain*" (*Commonwealth Novel in English*, 2001).
- Salgado, Minoli. "Anita Desai" in *A Reader's Companion to the Short Story in English*, ed. Erin Fallon et. al. (Greenwood, 2001).
- Sen, Sharmila. "Urdu in Custody" (*South Asian Review*, 2001).
- Stanley, Deborah H., ed. *Contemporary Literary Criticism 97* (Gale Research, 1997).
- Valjento, Jenni. "Staying, Leaving, Returning: The Interconnectedness of Female Identities in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*" (*Atlantic Literary Review*, 2002).



Anita Desai

Works in languages other than English

Czech

Hry za soumraku: Sbírka povídek, trans. Helena Nebelová (Odeon, 1986).
Nebelová (Odeon, 1986).

French

Un héritage exorbitant, trans. Paulette Vielhomme-Callais (Stock, 1985).
Le jeûne et le festin, trans. Anne-Cécile Padoux (Mercure de France, 2001).
Jeux au crépuscule: nouvelles, trans. Anne-Cécile Padoux (Denoël, 1995).
La claire lumière du jour, trans. Anne-Cécile Padoux (Denoël, 1993).
Un village près de la mer, trans. Paulette Vielhomme-Callais (Gallimard, 1987).
Où irons-nous cet été, trans. Anne-Cécile Padoux (Denoël, 1995).
Le feu sur la montagne: roman, trans. Paulette Vielhomme-Callais (Stock, 1986).
Le Bombay de Baumgartner, trans. Paulette Vielhomme-Callais (Stock, 1991).

Hebrew

Avak yahalom: ve-sipurim aherim, trans. Ziva Yavin (Matar, 2001).
Ta`aniyot, ta`anugot, trans. Shaul Levin (Kineret, 2003).

Hindi

Sulagata parvata (Sahitya akadami, 1992).
Moron wala bagh, trans. Vimala Mohan (Sahitya Akademi, 1993).
Samudra tata ka eka gamva (Vimala Mohan, 1991).

Japanese

Deri no shijin, trans. Akira Takahashi (Mekon, 1999).

Persian

Atash dar kuhistan, trans. Azar Alipur (Yasaman, 1994).



Anita
Desai

Works in languages other than English

Spanish

Viaje a Ítaca, trans. José-Luis Fernández-Villanueva (Destino, 1997).

Ayuno festín, trans. Gian Castelli (Alianza, 2000).

Clara luz del día, trans. Gian Castelli (Alianza Editorial, 2001).

En custodia, trans. Jesús Zulaika (Alianza Editorial, 2003).

Polvo de diamante: y otros relatos (Alianza Editorial, 2002).