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**The Guardian Profile: Anita Desai**

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## A passage from India

Twice Booker-listed for her novels chronicling the lives of 'failures and wrecks' in Indian society, she is shifting her gaze to the new world, where she sees parallel symptoms of dysfunction. Maya Jaggi traces a journey from provincial India to suburban America

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Anita Desai has taken to stealing across the border from the US, where she teaches, into Mexico, where she rents a hideaway in the mountain village of Tepotzlan. "It's such an Indian culture, it's the closest I can get to India when I'm in America," she says, her enthusiasm masking traces of homesickness.

It's an apt paradox that, at 61, the Delhi novelist, who has only recently found freedom in the life of the itinerant academic, should be escaping India - and rushing to embrace it. Salman Rushdie once described Desai's subject as solitude. Yet while her main characters tend to be isolates and outsiders - whether Indian or foreigners in India - her fiction probes the tensions between their desired privacy and detachment, and the powerful family and social ties that both stifle and sustain.

First published in the early 60s, Desai is widely praised as the finest of her generation of Indian writers in English, and one of few who had an international reputation, alongside RK Narayan, before the post-Rushdie wave of the 80s and 90s. She was twice shortlisted for the Booker prize for the novels many think her best: *Clear Light Of Day* and *In Custody* - the latter made into a film by Ismail Merchant. And thanks to the recommendations of the Macpherson report on Stephen Lawrence, Desai now has a place on the national curriculum beside the Nobel prizewinners Derek Walcott and Wole Soyinka.

Rushdie admires Desai's books as "private universes, illuminated by her perceptiveness, delicacy of language and sharp wit". Her subtle, unsentimental and elegantly structured novels pulsate with nature and sensuous imagery - from tropical blooms to betel-stained teeth. The illumination of her characters' inner lives has prompted comparisons with Virginia Woolf.

The fiction writer and critic Aamer Hussein sees Desai's subject as "the changing

through powerful imagery - of heat, bird cries, the brutal beating of a horse, or Nur surrounded by pigeons on the balcony, being preyed upon."

Desai's demeanour suggests little of this turmoil. Softly spoken, she moved the Times to remark on her first visit to London in 1965 that she belied the "public image of female novelists [as] an intimidating and often unfeminine species" with her "striking beauty, delicate figure and corresponding quietness of manner". Though she commutes between Delhi, Boston - as creative writing professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology - and Cambridge, where she was a fellow of Girton College, she makes an unlikely jetsetter. There is a self-contained stillness about her in the house she has in a tucked-away Cambridge terrace.

Later by the river Cam, in a summer dress, her grey bun neatly tied with black velvet, she is serenely immune to wind and rain. Describing how some of her MIT students ditch promising scientific careers to be writers, she says: "Of course, one does everything one can to deter them." Her mischievous smile tells another story.

Desai's "earliest, freshest impressions" of the America that struck her, in a neat reversal, as "exotic and bizarre" are there in her new novel, *Fasting, Feasting*. It casts a slyly ironic gaze at family life in provincial India and suburban America, with parallel symptoms of dysfunction erupting, from bride-burning to bulimia. While the American family is seen through the eyes of an Indian student, both families turn up carnivorous patriarchs and preening matriarchs whose force-fed values spawn vegetarian sons and convulsive or self-starving daughters.

"I've always been aware of food as an obsession," says Desai. "Indians love food. Family life turns around meal times: days are spent preparing and eating in an enjoyable way I never managed to share. America was a strange mirror image; the same obsession with food, but consuming it. I was staggered by the supermarkets, the cartloads of food. And curiously, people didn't want to enjoy it." Teaching at Mount Holyoke, a women's college in Massachusetts, she became aware of eating disorders. "It's strange in a land of plenty that there's also a fear of food."

The American family converges not at the dining table but around the TV; its magnet not the stove but the freezer. "The Indian family is still extremely closely knit; there's far greater individualism in America. Both have their ideal family, but the American family has a coldness at its heart because no one really believes in it any more. In India the family is more a hearth or a fire: it keeps you warm, but it consumes you, too."

Desai is a close observer of what she has called "the web of [family] relationships, sticky and sweet, clinging and trapping". But here she has unsheathed her rapier, skewering the lingering mores that make drudges of wives and unmarried daughters, or reserve education - like the choicest morsels - for sons. Nor is she too genteel to hint, say, at fathers lusting after their pubescent daughters. "Leaving India frees one's tongue," says Desai. "Within India you hold back so much. And being part of that life, you're too

involved to look with objectivity."

The remark seems extraordinary from a novelist so praised for her cool gaze. As one reviewer wrote: "Her achievement is to keep the shock of genuine freshness, the eyes of the perpetual outsider." Or as an Indian critic wrote more perceptively: "Insiders rarely notice this much; outsiders cannot have this ease of reference."

Desai was born Anita Mazumdar in June 1937 in Mussoorie, a Himalayan summer retreat. Her Bengali father had met her German mother, a teacher, while an engineering student in pre-war Berlin. They married when it was still rare for an Indian man to wed a European woman, and moved to the "neutral territory" of Old Delhi, then, Desai recalls, a "sleepy, provincial place". She grew up in its leafy lanes without an extended network of relatives. The youngest of three sisters with an elder brother, she describes hers as "a small and intensely close family. My family was an oddity; it didn't belong where it was. Going to school, I became aware of its difference, of things that set us apart."

They spoke German at home, and Hindi to friends and neighbours. She learned English at mission school ("It was always my literary language, my book language") and her father's language, Bengali, only after he died when she was 18, and the family moved to Calcutta. "Growing up, I wasn't even aware of my mother's being a foreigner; she dressed in a sari and cooked Indian food." But Desai adds: "Everyone in India has close affiliations to state, home town, religion, caste - all the things missing from my life. That leaves one feeling free to invent whatever kind of home you want. I do have all the passions one's supposed to have for one's home country, but I know I'm not part of Indian society - it perplexes and amazes me. I find myself reacting sharply, as my mother would have. I don't think I'm sentimental about India.

"My mother's not being Indian was so little a conscious part of my life that when she died I went with my sister to cremate her, and immerse her ashes in the river. It was only on the way back, when we passed some English graveyards, it struck me, maybe she would have liked to be buried. It never occurred to me to ask, nor her to tell."

Although her parents were effectively exiled from Germany and East Bengal by the upheavals of the second world war and Indian independence, for which Desai's Bengali grandfather and uncle fought and were imprisoned, they recalled mythic homelands that predated their twin partitions. Her father, "removed, remote and distant", spoke of Bengal as "a wonderful green and fruitful land", while her mother, with her "rich, warm, vibrant personality", quoted German nursery rhymes and tales of Christmas in Berlin.

As Desai notes ironically: "We had beautiful pictures of both these countries very little tainted by history or world events, which we had to learn as we grew up." While her mother never went back to Germany, Desai visited Berlin as a young adult. "I couldn't recognise a single thing; my mother hadn't known how totally it was destroyed and

rebuilt after the war. I felt a complete stranger, devastated at finding the dream didn't exist at all."

Asked why she is repeatedly drawn to "failures and wrecks" as characters, Desai says: "I remember being very lost at school, not being popular or successful. It was always a great struggle to belong. It was an immense relief to come home to books, to be alone. I had a great need for privacy that was unusual for a child but not at all for a writer."

She began to write aged six. While she recalls the "remote literary triumvirate" of RK Narayan, Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand, and knows of isolated women writers - Attia Hosen, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal - she says: "When I started I suffered from a great sense of being utterly alone. I would have loved the society of other writers, or even readers. I was working in a vacuum, turning out words with no echo." But she met Ruth Praver Jhabvala, whose mother was also German, her father Polish, and who had married an Indian architect who lived down the road. "I saw you could live in Old Delhi and write books. She was very encouraging - a woman with two small children - while I was a schoolgirl."

Jhabvala, now in New York and still a friend, recalls the 18-year-old she would go swimming with as "absolutely beautiful, very quiet, tremendously well read and sensitive, and self-contained; she had a halo of perfection around her. I see Anita's writing, which is very exquisite and beautiful, as a reflection of her."

Desai, who read English at Delhi university, met her husband Ashvin Desai, a businessman, at 19 and married at 20, moving to Bombay and bringing up two sons and two daughters. She wrote in term-time and put away her manuscripts in the school holidays. "It was a very domestic life," she says, and it remained so until her 50s, when she began to teach abroad. Jhabvala says: "Her mother was a very cultured lady who encouraged her, but when Anita moved to Calcutta and Bombay, she was surrounded by more conventional social circles, where they tell you, 'writing is such a nice hobby'."

Desai has been compared to European women writers of the last century or early 20th, hankering for a room of one's own. "People are very threatened by the idea that you go away and in secrecy and silence do something mysterious," she says. "I don't think I felt like a writer till I first came to England, where people had read my books." While family friends recall Ashvin as a proud and supportive husband, Desai insists: "My writing career was entirely subservient to being a wife and a mother. I lived the life of the typical Indian housewife; wrote in the gaps and hid it away, kept it secret."

Her early novels mirror tensions in her own life as a woman and a writer. *Maya in Cry*, *The Peacock* is driven to suicide after killing her stolidly insensitive husband by pushing him off a roof. In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Sita retreats into the past when she finds herself pregnant with her fifth child. Desai has long rejected these despairing narratives as sharing traits of the "slipper-dragging" genre of tearful women's fiction. "They were written by a different person; they're so overwrought I couldn't bear to look

at them now." She is equally harsh about her third novel, *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, set among Indians in Britain, which she calls "out of date and irrelevant".

The tensions between women and society also run through *Fire On The Mountain*, where the elderly recluse Nanda Kaul vainly seeks solitude in the hills after a lifetime of child rearing, and *Clear Light Of Day*, where the unmarried college lecturer Bim wrestles with family bonds while resenting her brother and sister who have both moved away. Desai's novels have been attacked for emphasising the constriction of women's lives. Hussein says: "They explore the position of the isolated within the family, especially an intelligent, sensitive woman lamenting lost creativity, or counting the cost of being creative. It might be held against her by feminists that her characters are constrained. But how many women do break out?"

Desai was taken to task for a 1990 essay in the *Times Literary Supplement* entitled *A Secret Connivance*, in which she claimed Indian women connived at their captivity by aspiring to the mythic role models of subservient Hindu goddesses that "keep her bemused, bound hand and foot". It was a polemical overstatement. Yet she insists: "Indian women have made enormous strides into the professions and taking control of their lives since my generation and my mother's, but they have a long way to go." Of the single working women in her books, she says: "They have all paid a price; they're not, according to some, living happy lives. There's always a choice one makes."

While her new novel is surely her most overt attack on the traditional limits placed on women in India, it hints at how US women, with their sun beds and supermarkets, are also in thrall to prescribed roles. "Working women in America are weighed down and circumscribed by the ideal of the feminine that's not that different from India," says Desai. "The universal mother figure is idealised by every religion and every country."

Desai, perhaps the first to acclaim *Midnight's Children* as a "masterpiece", is often contrasted with Rushdie. Yet it would be wrong to set her books in a staid English tradition. "My reading was so European: Woolf, DH Lawrence, Proust, Camus, Dostoyevsky, Chekhov, it had so little to do with the life I led," she says. "So I worked hard to bend the English language to bring in the sounds and tempo and rhythms of spoken languages around me, which are part of my world too. With English you can, it's so flexible and elastic, but you have to sharpen your ears, and not depend so much on reading." She is also aware of how much of Indian life eludes that language. "You're always having to select, to acknowledge your limits; you write only about those parts of life that have been affected by English."

Hussein, who feels Desai's experiments with language have not been duly credited, says: "Anita's work belongs to two traditions. Her sensibility is deeply rooted in Delhi's mixed culture, but she appropriated the language of English modernism and Woolf, as well as Japanese, Russian, and existentialist literature, to convey something very Indian. Now there's a multiplicity of voices, but then she was working pretty much alone." As for her "outsider's" eye, he adds: "There's a whole class of people educated in a

language that wasn't their parents' who see with detachment: there's always a process of translation going on."

Desai was 10 when India became independent. "As a little girl I lived in a Delhi made up of three communities. The Hindu was dominant, but the skyline was full of Islamic monuments. Urdu literature was in the air - poetry recited, ghazals sung - and the British still had a presence, affecting me through school and the books I read. When I was 10 these were all packed up and shipped away, gone. We were left with a new country to build. That sense of loss and drama have pursued me ever since."

As have the Hindu-Muslim riots of partition. "They're my most vivid memories of childhood, and the most violent and nightmarish. The British hauled down the flag and disappeared, and practically the whole Muslim population disappeared too, and were replaced with Punjabi refugees, who were foreign to us. Delhi has never been the same since."

Clear Light of Day, Desai's masterpiece of familial attachments, and avowedly her most autobiographical novel, evokes this transition through an anglicised family in Old Delhi in the 40s. While Raja has fallen in love with a Muslim woman and left for Pakistan, and Tara has gone to the west as a diplomat's wife, the English lecturer Bim remains with her child-like brother Baba in a riot-haunted Delhi amid Chekhovian atrophy and decay. "Perhaps I fused my sisters, both working women, one married, the other not, into one character, Bim," says Desai. "But what's mostly autobiographical is the atmosphere of that household and that house."

In Custody is set in the 60s, the tragi-comic tale of a small-town Hindi lecturer, Deven, sent to interview the legendary Urdu poet Nur. It also evokes a decaying culture, as Deven finds a drunken, gluttonous Nur surrounded by sycophants in the slums to which Urdu, the language of the Mughal court, has been relegated since partition. Desai describes this study of solitude and friendship, obsession and delusion, as "the big break for me, moving to a male world I didn't know much about. I wanted to step out of the interior I'd been living in, a female, almost a purdah, world that was so enclosed and oppressive even to me; I wanted a bigger world."

Yet even keeping the women in the novel peripheral makes a feminist point which Desai agrees was obscured in Ismail Merchant's 1994 film, for which she wrote the screenplay. "I was thrilled to see it in Urdu," says Desai of Shahrukh Husain's translation. "But it's Ismail's vision. I saw it as a gritty, black and white, neo-realist film; the darkness and shadows became lost in all that techni-colour beauty."

By showing how Hindi has swallowed up other languages in a new imperialism, In Custody was prescient about the Hindu nationalist drive to extinguish Islamic history, razing mosques to resurrect temples. "I'm not trying to idealise or romanticise the Mughal past," the author says. "There's a lot that's decadent, as well as beautiful. But it's wrong to pretend it never existed. It's reinventing history books in order to obliterate

traces of the past that I want to make a stand against."

Desai, who has admonished VS Naipaul for "dangerously feeding the Hindu fundamentalist agenda", drew on communal violence against Muslims in India to re-imagine 1930s Germany and Kristallnacht in Baumgartner's Bombay, her first novel written outside India. "I could only understand what was happening in Nazi Germany by recalling 1947," she says.

Her most solitary character, the German Jewish Hugo Baumgartner, is killed by a young German drifter whom he shelters. Desai, who remembers a tension in her home during the war, her mother (who was not Jewish) "waiting for news that never came", uses her mother's German nursery rhymes to paint Baumgartner's idealised heimat. But reality breaks into the myth: the curiously stilted letters from his mother are found to have been sent from Dachau. "Myth is a romanticisation of history, and Germany showed us what a dangerous thing it is," Desai says. "I don't know if we're not witnessing that in India now."

The novel was also a response to the British vogue for the Raj. "I wanted to write a totally non-exotic book about India, and Europeans in India, and to see the Raj from a different point of view than the British," she says. Ironically, Baumgartner is interned in India along with non-Jewish Germans during the war. But the author disagrees with critics who object to his passivity. "As a novelist you can only view history through individuals. But I see history as something that happens in spite of individuals; it gathers momentum and sweeps them away. What they choose to pick up when they flee, what they lose and what they take - that makes history real to me."

Journey To Ithaca further explores foreigners' encounters with India through Matteo, an Italian ascetic and disciple of "The Mother", and his more materialistic German wife Sophie, who prefers sybaritic Goa to the ashram. Spanning India, Paris, Cairo, Venice and New York in the 20s of Sri Aurobindo - the Indian yogi and philosopher - and the 70s of Hermann Hesse-inspired hippies, it stages a conflict between scepticism and belief, but ends ambiguously.

Desai was interested in "the non-political colonial view of India, of mystery, exoticism, the spiritual fascination. Indians take it for granted; it's as down to earth as eating and drinking. But Europeans approach it on a different level, so there's constant misunderstanding and distortion." Yet she rejects the "mediating" role sometimes ascribed to her, insisting she has no answers. "To me, fiction is exploring; if you felt you'd arrived, you'd give up."

While Desai has expanded her fictional territory with each book, Fasting, Feasting's return to the Indian family hearth has surprised even its author. "I swore I'd never write about the past again, that sense of always being within closed walls," she says. "I was determined to open the door and break free - but it's the first thing I felt the urge to write in America. I've gone back to my roots; but then one doesn't really leave them

behind. I could write about them forever."

While she still shares a house in Old Delhi with her husband, Desai spends most of the year abroad without him, mainly in the USA, where three of her children live. One of them, her youngest daughter, Kiran, has followed her mother into print. With her first novel, *Hullabaloo In The Guava Orchard*, published last year, Rushdie heralded "the first dynasty of modern Indian fiction". Desai is more than glad of the company: "It's been wonderful that my daughter understands the writer's life, and we share it." She adds: "More and more, my closest friends are ones like me who move from country to country and don't feel they belong anywhere."

Yet for many, Desai's finest and toughest fiction remains that set in India, a subject she still finds "utterly overwhelming", and from which she withdraws, the better to shape it. "I'm aware that I try to impose order on the chaos, especially of Indian life," she says. "One does retreat from the noise and clamour into solitude. But India is always on the verge of toppling into violence, which gives it an immense tension. Just as if I wrote about powerful women who were in control it wouldn't be truthful, if I wrote about a calm and benevolent place I wouldn't be telling the truth."

### **Life at a glance**

**Anita Desai:** née Mazumdar.

**Born:** June 24 1937; Mussoorie, India.

**Education:** Queen Mary's mission school, Delhi; 1957 BA Hons English literature, Miranda House, Delhi University

**Married:** 1958 Ashvin Desai (two sons, two daughters).

**Fiction:** *Cry, The Peacock*, 1963; *Voices In The City*, 1965; *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, 1968; *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, 1975; *Fire On The Mountain*, 1977; *Games At Twilight* (stories), 1978; *Clear Light Of Day*, 1980; *In Custody*, 1984 (Screenplay, 1994); *Baumgartner's Bombay*, 1988; *Journey To Ithaca*, 1995; *Fasting, Feasting*, 1999.

**Awards:** 1978 Winifred Holtby prize for *Fire On The Mountain*; 1979 Sahitya Academy award; 1982 Guardian children's fiction prize for *The Village By The Sea*; 1980 and 1984 Booker shortlisted for *Clear Light Of Day* and *In Custody*

• *Fasting, Feasting* is published by Chatto & Windus at £14.99. *Fire On The Mountain*, *Games At Twilight*, *In Custody*, *Baumgartner's Bombay*, and *Journey To Ithaca* are all reissued as Vintage paperbacks.