

14 June 1992



Sahitya Akademi



India International Centre

Invite you to

meet the author

Anita Desai



“He did not want the day to dawn. He had hoped to stretch the night endlessly by walking on and on. Day would bring with it the board meeting, an inquiry, an interrogation, exposure and blame...Nur—he tried to think of him as separate from his letters, his senile demands, to feel again for him as he had when Nur had first allowed him into his presence, in his still, shaded study. When he remembered the joy of hearing his voice and listening to him quote poetry, then quoting his lines back to him, binding them together in a web, an alliance, he knew that this was what he would have to recover to retrieve. If he could do that, it would give him a reason, and strength, to survive whatever came. He had to believe that.”

In Custody by Anita Desai



Anita Desai was born in Mussoorie; her mother Toni Nimé was from Berlin and her father, D.N. Mazumdar from Dacca. She went to Queen Mary's School for Girls, in Delhi, and took a graduate degree in English Literature at Miranda House College in Delhi. She is married, has four children and now divides her time between Delhi, where she does her writing, and universities in USA and UK, where she teaches.

A fiction writer who has earned an immense international reputation, as a rare and original voice, her work is, as Victoria Glenninning has described it, “Quiet writing”, which can be more impressive than stylistic fireworks. She has the gift of opening up a closed world and making it clearly visible and, by the end, familiar...”

Anita Desai began to write stories in English when she was seven. It was nineteen years later that her first novel *Cry, The Peacock*, dazzling in its poetic intensity, was published by Peter Owen, London, and Rupa, India. A richly symbolic, taut exploration of the inner world of a sensitive girl obsessed by a childhood prophecy of disaster, the work—described by the *Daily Telegraph* as “a poetry-novel”—instantly marked the author as an intense, perceptive, original, and yet controlled artist.

This was followed by *Voices in the City*, two years later. Four interweaving narratives, set in Calcutta, form the basis of the novel. The atmosphere of the city, which Anita Desai recreates into an almost palpable, visceral experience, is a fine reflection of her craftsmanship, her modulation of tension through understatement, imagery and subtle suggestion.

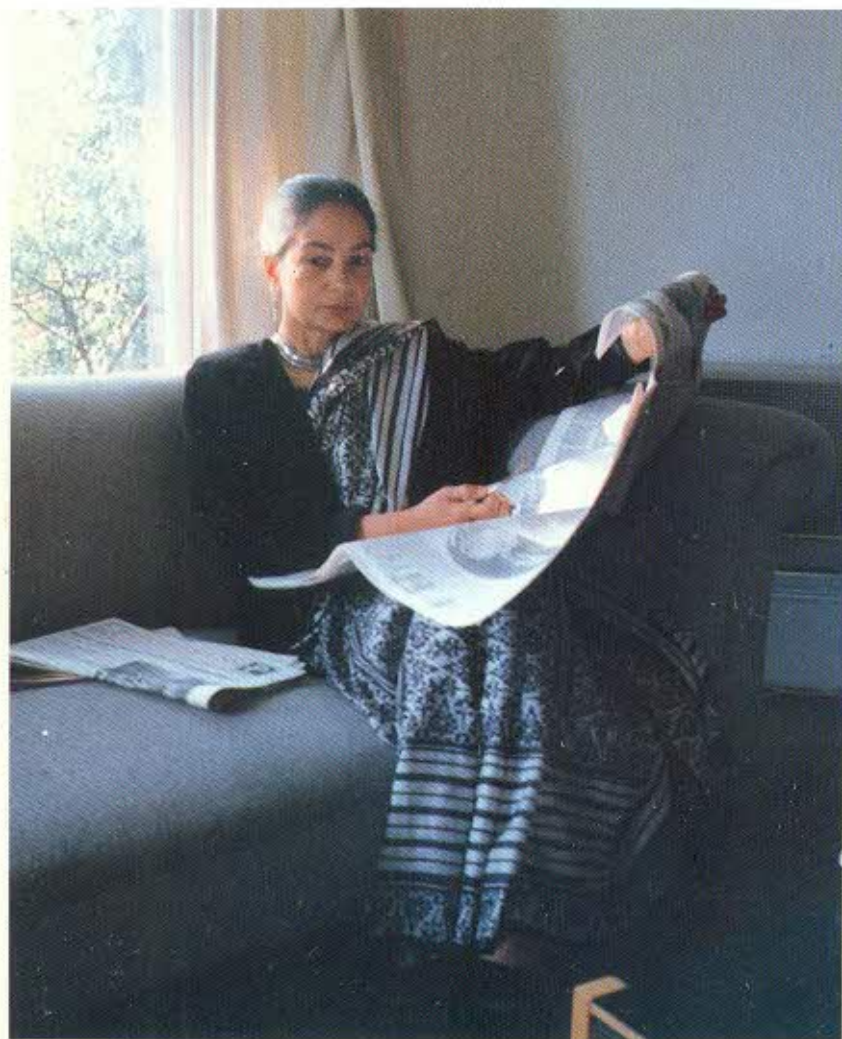
Bye-Bye Blackbird, set in England, and woven around the theme of relationships in a post-colonial context, came next. Replete with lively portraits of Indians and the English, it is the story of immigrants, and of the search for identity, both national and individual.

This novel was followed by *Where shall We Go this Summer?* the poignant, moving story of Sita, who is alienated enough from the middle class life she has, so far, led to seek a different reality in the island of Manori.

Widely appreciated, it won for the writer an award for excellence from the Federation of Indian Publishers.

Her first four novels had already established Anita Desai as a writer of rare sensitivity and technical finesse. Her fifth novel, *Fire on the Mountain* only added to this already remarkable record. Winner of the Winifred Holtby Prize of the Royal Society of Literature, London, and the Sahitya Akademi Award, it is the story of the quest for solitude, and the meeting of generations, in Nanda Kaul, who now lives alone in Kasauli, and her great-granddaughter, Raka. Keenly observed, subtle, and wonderfully evocative, the novel is an excellent example of Anita Desai at her best.

It was with *Clear Light of Day*, her next novel, which was shortlisted for the Booker-McConnell Prize, that Anita Desai became a well-known name, internationally, among readers of fiction in English. This sensitive, probing work, which has been described as "four-dimensional" for its treatment of Time as a destroyer, and preserver, has been described by Gabrielle Annan in the *The Times Literary Supplement* as "a carefully constructed, beautifully written, sensible, funny, atmospheric work." Critic Brijraj Singh compares it to "...an extended piece of music—subtle, sensitive, sensuous in its line and melody, but also complex, and richly integrated in its total effect."



Also shortlisted for the Booker Prize when it was first published, was Anita Desai's next novel, *In Custody*, a funny, touching story of the calamities that befall a mild-mannered, small-town college-lecturer, whose deepest ambitions seem realizable when he is asked to interview Nur, the greatest Indian Urdu poet. Then comes, as Joanna Motion reviewing the novel in *The Times Literary Supplement* has put it, the struggle "to come to terms with the recognition that great art is impure", that, "It comes in a messy package with weakness, crudeness, bullying and a passion for biriyani." The novel, however, re-affirms the validity of the bond between the artist and the lover of art, whatever disasters and demands this relationship may bring. A film is currently being made of this book by Merchant Ivory Productions.

Desai's most recent novel *Baumgartner's Bombay* has further consolidated her international reputation. It is the moving, unsentimentally told story of Hugo Baumgartner, a Jew who fled Germany for India before the second world war, and lives in Bombay with a family of stray cats. The novel's recurrent motif is homelessness, of accepting and not being accepted. This much-acclaimed work received the Harold Ribalow Prize of the *Hadassah Magazine*, New York.

An author whose works have provoked much literary study, Anita Desai's writing is distinguished by technical sophistication, control and economy; a concern with the inner being, intuitively apprehended and only suggested, not named. The eternal verities, are always present in her work, however muted they may be, or distilled through image or symbol—the transience of life, the certainty of death. The characters who populate her fictional world are also distinctive; of them she has said, "I am interested in characters who are not



average but have retreated, or been driven to some extremity of despair and so have turned against, or made a stand against, the general current."

All her novels have been widely translated into European languages; many of them are available to French, German, Dutch, Italian, Swedish, and Danish readers.

Anita Desai has also published a volume of short stories, *Games at Twilight and Other Stories*, which has received wide critical acclaim. Mary Hope describes the volume's "profound theme" as the "tension between convention and exploration, family solidarity and individualism, social requirements and the impersonal factors (like death and art) which transcend them. Not one...is merely decorative or arbitrary; not one allows for a simple solution to its conflicts." Some of these short stories have been broadcast by BBC and several were also published in *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, *Writers Workshop*, *Quest*, and *Envoy*.

Anita Desai's work includes three books for children: *The Peacock Garden*, *Cat on a Houseboat*, and *The Village by the Sea*. Of these, *The Village by the Sea* is perhaps the best known internationally. It received the Guardian Award for Children's Fiction, and

was filmed as a six-part serial by the BBC, London in 1992. It has been translated widely, including into Japanese, Russian and French.

A widely travelled writer, Anita Desai has given lectures and readings and attended seminars in Europe, America, Canada, Egypt, Ireland and Indonesia, apart from various parts of India. She was Helen Cam Fellow at Girton College, Cambridge University; Purington Professor of English, Mount Holyoke College; Elizabeth Drew Visiting Professor, at Smith College; Ashby Fellow, at Clare Hall, Cambridge University; Gildersleeves Professor at Barnard College, Columbia University; and, a Visiting Scholar at Rockefeller Foundation Study Centre, in Bellagio Italy. She holds an honorary fellowship at Girton College, and Clare Hall in Cambridge University and is an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

For all the recognition that she has received, and these include a Padma Sri from the President of India for her services to literature, Anita Desai remains the quintessential writer. Of the process of writing, the birth of a story she says, "I believe the idea—which may be no more than a leaf dipping under a raindrop, a piquant scrap of news casually read, a face seen in a bus—comes into being as silently and unconsciously as a grain of sand under an oyster. There it grows and develops, silently and unconsciously...." I know I have no control whatsoever over what I write—it rises upon its own. I suppress it for as long as possible, but its pressure overcomes me, and it flows out almost of its own volition. Once it is out, *then* I begin to exert my power of discrimination and my critical sense, and set to work to discipline this gross monster...."

A Select Bibliography

NOVELS

CRY, THE PEACOCK. Peter Owen, UK and Rupa, India, 1963.

VOICES IN THE CITY. Peter Owen, UK; Orient Paperback, India, 1965.

BYE-BYE, BLACKBIRD. Orient Paperback, India, 1971.

WHERE SHALL WE GO THIS SUMMER? Vikas, India and Orient Paperback, India, 1973.

FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN. W. Heinemann, UK; Harper & Row, USA; Allied Publishers, India; Penguin, UK Books, 1978.

CLEAR LIGHT OF DAY. W. Heinemann, UK; Harper & Row, USA; Allied Publishers, India; Penguin Books, UK, 1980.

IN CUSTODY. W. Heinemann, UK; Harper & Row, USA; Penguin Books, UK, 1984.

BAUMGARTNER'S BOMBAY. W. Heinemann, UK; A. Knopf, USA; Penguin Books, UK, 1989

SHORT STORIES

GAMES AT TWILIGHT AND OTHER STORIES, W. Heinemann, UK; Allied Publishers, India; Penguin Books, UK, 1979

CHILDREN BOOKS

THE PEACOCK GARDEN. Orient Longman, India; W. Heinemann, UK

CAT ON A HOUSEBOAT. Orient Longman, India.

THE VILLAGE BY THE SEA. W. Heinemann, UK; Allied Publishers, India; Penguin Books, UK; National Book Trust, India

A Chronology

- 1937 Born in Mussoorie
- 1957 B.A. English Honours
- 1978 The Winifred Holtby Prize and Sahitya Akademi, Award for *Fire on the Mountain*
Award for Excellence from the Federation of Indian Publishers to *Where shall We Go this Summer*
- 1980 *Clear Light of Day* nominated for the Booker McConnell Prize
- 1984 The Guardian Award for *The Village by the Sea* *In Custody* nominated for the Booker McConnell Prize
- 1989 The Harold Ribalow Prize, *Baumgartner's Bombay*
- 1990 Received Padma Sri

LECTURE TOURS

- 1983 Universities of Stockholm, Lund, Uppsala and Gothenburg, Sweden
- 1984 Universities of Columbia, Chicago, Iowa and Berkeley, USA
Universities of Jaipur, Mysore and the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages, Hyderabad. Universities of Cairo and the American University, Cairo, Egypt



ACADEMIC ASSIGNMENTS

- 1986- The Helen Cam Fellow at 87 Girton College, Cambridge University
- 1987- The Elizabeth Drew 88 Visiting Professor, Smith College
- 1988 The Purington Professor of English, Mount Holyoke College
- 1989 The Ashby Fellow, Clare Hall, Cambridge University
Gildersleeves Professor, Barnard College, Columbia University
- 1992 Distinguished Visiting Professor, the American University of Cairo
Visiting Scholar at Rockefeller Foundation Study Centre, Bellagio, Italy

APPOINTMENTS

- 1978 Honorary Fellow, Girton College, Cambridge University
Honorary Fellow, Clare Hall, Cambridge University, Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature
- 1992 Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters

