

# Anita desai

Profession, Writer



Apologies in case there's some overlapping between the two elements. I wrote it as a flowing piece - a profile-cum-interview - for Business Standard Weekend but since there isn't a word-constraint here I prefer to spread it out and play with the format. ]

Long before the publication of *Midnight's Children* brought alive new possibilities for Indian writers wanting to express themselves in English, decades before Arundhati Roy's Booker win, the advent of the big publishing houses, hefty advances, the elevation of the fashionable young writer to pop-celebrity status, and the occurrence, once highly improbable, of the words "author" and "glamorous" in the same sentence, there was Anita Desai - Anita Desai, contributing short stories to a literary magazine while still in college in the 1950s; writing diligently at her desk for a few hours each day; sending her manuscripts to England because Indian publishers at the time weren't interested in contemporary fiction; juggling the unsocial writer's life with some very social demands, such as those of raising four children.

Desai, who turned 70 earlier this year, has lived mainly in the US for the past two decades. She was in Delhi last week because the Sahitya Akademi has made her one of its lifetime fellows - and because Random House India has marked the occasion by reissuing three of her finest novels (*Clear Light of Day*, *In Custody* and *Baumgartner's Bombay*) in elegant, minimalist new designs perfectly suited to the work of someone who continues to live by the discipline of the writing process itself, rather than by the stardust that sometimes sticks to the high-profile writer.

Eventually all of her books will be collected in this format, conceptualised by Random House India editor-in-chief Chiki Sarkar; the concept resembles the Library of America's tradition of collecting the works of major American writers. ) Desai is only the third Indian writer in English to be honoured thus by the Sahitya Akademi - Mulk Raj Anand and R K Narayan were the others - and yet the very phrase " Indian writer in English", with its hint of the baggage that the acronym IWE often carries, sits uneasily on a lady who once said that her novels " aren't intended as a reflection of Indian society, politics or character - they are private attempts to seize on the raw material of life". Her work bears this out.

Though her concerns include the suppression and marginalisation of women, her approach is not a stridently feminist one (or especially directed at the treatment of women in conservative societies); if anything, it's too underplayed for the tastes of some readers. It's also part of a larger motif that can be seen in the three reissued books, that of the circumscribed life: people unable, or unwilling, to escape what many of us would think of as a trapped, claustrophobic existence, and who yet manage to find a measure of dignity even within those constraints. *Clear Light of Day*, which she has called the most autobiographical of her works, sets the lonely childhoods of two sisters, Bimla (Bim) and Tara, against their lives as adults - Tara having married a diplomat and moved to the US, thus escaping the family house where she had felt stifled, while Bim stayed behind, a custodian of old memories.

In *Custody* has small-town lecturer Deven resigned to a humdrum existence until he gets the opportunity to interview one of his idols, a once-great Urdu poet now leading a shabby, parasitic life in an old Delhi house. And Baumgartner's *Bombay* is about a perpetual outsider, a German Jew who escapes the Holocaust as a child and lives an unobtrusive, unremarkable life in India for decades. Desai's attention to detail, the carefulness of her descriptions and the fact that her fiction often deals with static lives means that her books have sometimes been accused of being static themselves ("pages go by and nothing happens" is a charge I've heard) by readers who are interested more in the progression of a plot than in the examination of minutiae.

But this would be to overlook the mastery with which she draws us into an interior world, showing us the layers that can exist beneath a life that might not, on the surface, appear to be very significant. In her hands, characters like Bim, Deven and Baumgartner come to stand for a small, modest form of heroism that doesn't get the press it deserves (see Q&A below). In a perceptive introduction to the new edition of Baumgartner's *Bombay*, Suketu Mehta calls it "a tribute to the also-rans of history". The book is my favourite among Desai's works and I love the final chapter, after Baumgartner's death, which shows us his squalid little room as seen through other people's eyes.

To them, he was a useless old man whose life and death had no relevance to anyone, but to the reader – who has been closely involved with him through the book – he is a very important literary character. We've been privy to Hugo Baumgartner's back-story, his crushed dreams, his quiet acceptance of

his destiny, his love for his crippled stray cats (which, in the hands of a lesser writer, might have become a too-obvious symbol); we know about the cruel whimsicalities of history but for which he might have led a very different life in a different part of the world. We can't dismiss him the way these people do. There are many examples in Desai's work of the use of a large number of carefully chosen words to make a scene more vivid, more alive.

Turning randomly to a page in *Clear Light of Day*, here's a description of Bim's cat descending a tree as Bim looks on fondly: She came slithering down the satiny bark, growling and grumbling with petulance and complaint at her undignified descent. Then she was in Bim's arms... cuddled and cushioned and petted with such an extravagance of affection that Tara could not help raising her eyebrows in embarrassment and wonder. Later on the same page, we have a corpulent, middle-aged character named Bakul sitting "flaccidly, flabbily" on a chair. A critic making a case for lucidity might argue that just one of those words could serve the purpose, but in Desai's best work adjectives and adverbs (carefully chosen ones, of course) accumulate to make a picture even more immediate.

At their best, her descriptions serve as a good counterpoint to George Orwell's celebrated rules for writers; they show us that good writing doesn't necessarily have to be spare and direct. Also, they sometimes convey the perspective of a particular character – a thoughtful character who is not a writer by profession and who doesn't have to feel conscious about using too many words. Seen out of context, "... growling and grumbling with petulance and complaint at her undignified descent" may seem like over-writing, but

consider how this word arrangement reflects Bim's perspective of her beloved pet, apart from adding humour and affection to the scene.