The story Behind Anita Desai

"My novels are no reflection of Indian society, politics or character. They are my private attempt to seize upon the raw material of life."

-Anita Desai

Compiled by: Tamara Zaman



AS one of India's major living talents, Anita Desai is best known for her novels, children's books, and short stories. Having won a number of awards, including being short-listed for the Booker Prize 4 times altogether, she is praised for her portrayal of women suppressed by society, and her ability to portray India so vividly with the way the eastern and western cultures have blended.

Anita Desai was born on June 24th, 1937 to the Bengali businessman D.N. Mazumdar and the German Toni Nime in Mussoorie, in the north of Delhi. Desai grew up speaking German at home and Bengali, Urdu, Hindi and English outside the house. She acquired English in school, which consequently became her "literary language". Her interest in writing developed as early as at 7 years of age and she got her first story published at the age of 9. Desai obtained a bachelor's degree in English Literature at Miranda House, Delhi University. She married the Indian businessman Ashvin Desai, in 1958 and had four children with him.

1963 saw Desai make her debut as a novelist, with **The Peacock**. She had started to write short stories regularly before her marriage. **Voices of the City** followed 2 years later, a story about three siblings, Amla, Nirode, and Monisha, and their different ways of life in Calcutta. **Fire on the Mountain**, which won the National Academy of Letters Award and the Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize, is set in Kasuli, a hill station, focusing on three women and their complex experiences in life. Desai considers **Clear Light of Day** to be her most autobiographical work, as it is set during her coming of age and in the same neighborhood in which she grew up. She blends the history of Delhi in with a middle-class Hindu family. The central character is a history professor, an independent woman. Her book **In Custody**, about an Urdu poet in his declining days, was short-listed for the Booker Prize in 1984. Her latest novel published, in 2004, The Zig Zag Way is set in 20th century Mexico.

Most of Desai's novels centre members of the Anglicized Indian bourgeoisie, whose marital problems are placed in the limelight. Her characters often adopt escapist ways to cope with the monotony of regular life or world outside comfortable living.

In 1993, she became a creative writing teacher at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Desai has taught at Mount Holyoke 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 University.

Merchant Ivory Productions released the movie version of **In Custody** in 1993. It won the 1994 President of India Gold Medal for Best Picture, starring actors Shashi Kapoor, Shabana Azmi and Om Puri.

Anita Desai now resides in South Hadley, Massachusetts and is a member of the Advisory Board for English in New Delhi, alongside teaching at Mount Holyoke.