



“Close To Mexico Than To India: A Study Of Anita Desai's Rosarita”

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Abstract

Anita Desai is one of the major Indian English women novelists. She belongs to the first generation of women novelists like Shashi Deshpande and Kamala Markandaya. She has published 17 novels and novellas and four collection of short stories. *Cry the Peacock*, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* *Feasting, Fasting* are her early novels. *Rosarita* is her eighteenth novella which succinctly reveals the relationship between a daughter and her mother who she remembers as a child. The narrative technique she adopts that she narrates in the second -person technique which is unique in itself. A stranger indirectly pictures her mother and finally she comes to know the truth of her mother being an artist.

Keywords: Desai, Indian English, Novella, relationship, daughter and mother., second-person narrative technique, unique,

Desai is a major novelist of India Diaspora in America. She, being born of a mixed cultural and racial heritage- of a German mother and Bengali father, was educated in Delhi and later migrated to USA. There she taught in university and later crept into the field of journalism. She has published lot of novels- *Cry, the Peacock*, *The Village by the Sea*, *Where Shall We Go This Summer*, *Fasting Feasting*, *Baumgartner's Bombay*, etc novels worth reading for long period of forty years or so. Along with Shashi Deshpande and Bharathi Mukherjee, she established her name as a major novelist. She is known as the 'psychological' novelist who analyses the feelings and thought of a characters. As a novelist, she gives equal importance to the description of setting and characters and the narrative technique, mostly third-person narrative technique.

'Rosarita' (2024) is Anita Desai's first novel in over 10 years and it is her 18th book, it is mentioned. Published by Picador India, the book released on July 7, 2024. (Image courtesy Pan Macmillan India). Another critic opines- "A tantalizing tale of memory, family and fantasy . . . evocative, subtle and enigmatic. Desai

revels in equivocation and possibility, embracing the ambiguity of memory itself to tell a shimmering, sometimes fevered tale in which a mother and daughter are pulled apart and fused together." - *Financial Times*

If you've ever wondered what your parents or grandparents were like as young people, Anita Desai's latest book 'Rosarita' might strike a chord. In this novella she made an experiment by using the second person narrative technique, which has marred the brilliance of the text by some measure; otherwise it would have been simply as great as *The Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad.

The story is of a young language student Bonita who travels to San Miguel in Mexico for higher education. It is mere chance that she meets a stranger in a Jardin public park. A run-in with a stranger leads to a surprise discovery: Bonita's mother Sarita/ Rosarita may have made a similar journey from India to Mexico, to train as an artist. The protagonist Bonita's almost-being reluctant desire to find out more about her mother takes her, and the stranger, across Mexico—to a remote village and then Colima, La Tenacatita Bay and La Manzanilla. Throughout the novella, Bonita—and therefore, the reader—is never entirely sure if this story about her mother coming to Mexico is true. Bonita's only clues come from the "Stranger" whom she meets in the Jardin (public park) near her school.

Just as Bonita begins to find resonances for the stranger's story in fragments of her own memories—a painting at her home that she'd never quite examined closely, invitations her mother got to attend lectures on art at the Mexican embassy, her mother's "box" store room with things and papers and signs of a life that no one had bothered to investigate—Bonita rechristens the old woman "Trickster" from the earlier "Stranger".

For a brief moment, it feels like even the "Stranger" might be a figment of Bonita's imagination - some part of her brain trying to make sense of the memories she has of her mother, or as the novelist writes in a different context in 'Rosarita', --"a charmed moment embroidered by recollection". Sample this passage where Bonita has been waiting for several days, to run into the old woman again after that first strange encounter: "There you sink down on a bench, so deep in thoughts that come from a great distance away that you only gradually become aware of someone beside you, as if your thoughts had conjured her into being, half obscured as she is by a vast straw hat and voluminous skirts of lace and cotton and tulle, umber, cinamon, saffron and indigo. Slowly a face turns to you with a great beam of yellowing teeth."(R, 55)

Another distinctive feature of the writing is that descriptions of landscapes often echo the characters' state of mind in 'Rosarita'. In that sense, Desai seems just as interested in the internal journeys Bonita and Sarita, before her, make as the actual sojourns through Mexico. Sample this passage: "An egret takes off from a still, reflective pool, trailing its legs like afterthoughts, and you feel it lift you with it into the hazy light."(R, 65)

As with many of Anita Desai's previous works, nothing much happens in 'Rosarita'. 'Rosarita' is also not the first *novella* to use an external journey as a way to explore interiority and unpack complex relationships. It is also not the first to examine the relationship between mother and daughter. What it is, however, is that rare piece of writing, is lovely in the first read and lovely 'Rosarita' explores themes of memory, sorrow, and loneliness, delving deep into the connections between people and the impact of their personal history...still the second time around.

" A critic says- "It's been over a decade since [Anita Desai's] last work of fiction. She's a writer I've loved since my adolescence, whose sharp observations and elegant sentences I admire increasingly as the years go on. Every new work from her is a gift Kamila Shamsie, *Stylist*

As taut and weird and entrancing as a story by Jorge Luis Borges. If *Rosarita* is to be her swansong . . . then it's a magnificent way to go out George Cochrane, *The Telegraph* (5 star review)

Rosarita illuminates migration as a catalyst for discovery and connectedness and captures the complexity of learning about those familiar to us yet shrouded in mystery through the memories of another narrator. For those with an unknown or estranged past, the challenge of piecing together one's own history is a daunting yet irresistible one. The three-times Booker-shortlisted writer is back with a poignant novella about one young woman's thwarted attempt to escape her past . . . a thoughtful read that will delight Desai stalwarts and send newcomers scurrying to her impressive backlist; leaving all hopeful this won't be her last piece of short fiction Susie Measure passes remark that 'it is a poignant novella fuelled by the family secrets'.

References:

1. Anita Desai *Rosarita*, New Delhi: Picador, 20024.
2. Susie Measure's review in *Times Literary Supplement*, London.