



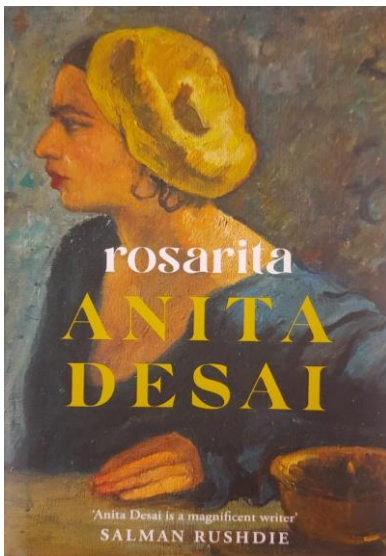
Book Review of Anita Desai's *Rosarita* by Yashasvi Srivastava

Memory, migration, identity, and self-discovery bear immense weight in literature as they probe the core of human existence, examining the intricate play between past and present, place and belonging. These motifs reverberate through time and across cultures, illuminating the universal quest to harmonize one's heritage with the ever-changing self. In Anita Desai's *Rosarita*, these elements are masterfully interlaced within a narrative that traces the protagonist's voyage through the lingering shadows of her Mother's concealed history,

providing a profound meditation on the entwined fabric of personal and collective identities.

A three-time short-listed for the Booker Prize, Desai's contributions have profoundly shaped Indian-English fiction and left an enduring imprint on the global literary canon. Her literary career, which began in the early 1960s, is marked by intensely exploring themes such as identity, memory, displacement, and the complexities of human relationships. *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) is Desai's debut novel, and her other vital works are *Voices in the City* (1965), *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* (1971), *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975), *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *In Custody* (1984), *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988), *Journey to Ithaca* (1995), *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), *The Zigzag Way* (2004), *The Artist of Disappearance* (2011). Her contribution to literature has been recognized through numerous awards, including the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Guardian Award.

Anita Desai's *Rosarita* is a radiant examination of memory's fleeting and mutable essence, where the lines between past and present, persons and places, dissolve into a rich tapestry of identity and belonging. This novel, released in July 2024 after a hiatus of over a decade, is a testament to Desai's enduring mastery of the literary craft, intricately weaving together the delicate strands of personal memory, cultural legacy, and generational bonds. Throughout a career that has spanned six decades, Desai has distinguished herself with her delicate yet penetrating depiction of emotional landscapes, often



exploring themes of displacement, memory, and existential unease.

In *Rosarita*, Desai embarks upon an elaborate exploration of the forces that intricately weave the fabric of our identity—ancestral legacies, long-forgotten landscapes, and the lingering echoes of time obscured by memory. The narrative is crafted with both vivid evocativeness and a subtle air of mystery, inviting readers to traverse the complex journey of the eponymous protagonist, *Rosarita*.

Here, the fragments of memory and the entanglements of conflicted identities are masterfully entwined, offering a contemplative reflection on human existence's profound minutiae and the past's inexorable pull.

The novel, both enigmatic and haunting, unfolds as an engrossing tale centred around Bonita, a young Indian woman who journeys to San Miguel de Allende in Mexico to immerse herself in the study of the Spanish language. Bonita finds herself quietly absorbed in the local newspapers, her tranquil sojourn disrupted by the unexpected appearance of a mysterious figure—an elderly woman adorned in the vibrant, traditional Mexican attire that is rarely worn except during festive occasions. This enigmatic stranger, bearing an unsettling sense of familiarity, claims to have known Bonita's Mother, whom she affectionately calls "*Rosarita*." She remarks, *"Of course you are, you must be, my beloved Rosarita's little girl. You are the very image of her when she first came to us, an Oriental bird!"* (p. 2).

Though Bonita gently corrects the woman, asserting that her Mother's name was Sarita, not *Rosarita*, the enigmatic stranger persists, her voice softening into a soothing murmur. *"But, my darling, I am Vicky. Vicky, you know, your mother will have told you about me - Victoria? What friends we were? What times we had together?"* (p.4).

Vicky proceeds to recount her memories of Rosarita, portraying her as an Indian woman who once came to San Miguel to hone her skills in painting. According to Vicky, Rosarita frequently occupied the very spot in the Jardin where Bonita now sits, lost in her artistic endeavours under the tutelage of a famed maestro named Francisco. The idea seems utterly improbable to Bonita, who has never entertained the notion that her Mother might have set foot in Mexico during her youth. This revelation leaves Bonita astonished; her recollections bear no trace of her Mother as an artist or any journey to Mexico. Yet, despite her doubts, Bonita feels an irresistible pull, drawing her into an unexpected quest to uncover the truth behind this mysterious connection.

As Bonita delves deeper into the puzzle, she is drawn into the hidden recesses of her mother's past, embarking on a journey where the boundaries between memory and myth, truth and illusion, begin to blur. A faint recollection surfaces in her mind—a "wishy-washy pale pastel" sketch, delicate and subdued, that once graced the wall above her childhood bed. The scene depicted *"a woman seated on a park bench—and yes, it could have been one here in San Miguel—with a child playing in the sand at her feet. She is not looking at the child, and the child is not looking at her, as if they had no relation to each other, each absorbed in a separate world and silent"* (p.11).

Bonita possesses no knowledge regarding the origins of the sketch nor the circumstances of its creation. As she reflects, she recalls a period of prolonged residence in her paternal grandparents' stern household, coinciding with her Mother's mysterious disappearance. A pervasive disapproval seemed to hang over her parents' union, casting her mother as 'unsuitable as a wife.' *"years no one mentioned again once they were over, the time when mother was absent, and you were taken to live in your grandparents' house in Old Delhi"* (p.11).

This faint recollection of a bygone time leaves Bonita wavering between skepticism and curiosity, drawing her further into the enigma of her Mother's concealed existence and obscure connections to this distant place. She also reflects on her life in India, overshadowed by her father's strict and domineering presence, which now awakens long-suppressed questions about her mother's obscure past and Bonita's own choices. Although initially defensive and cynical of the enigmatic woman, doubting that she could have ever known her mother, Bonita finds the once-buried mystery of her mother's hidden life resurfacing, demanding resolution. Gradually, she begins to entertain the notion that this stranger might hold the key to unravelling the puzzle. *"You had resisted her fantastical tale but now find you would like to believe it. Could she, like a wizard or a magician, bring your mother to life again, even if it is a life you never knew or suspected?"* (p. 40)

Compelled by an unescapable force, Bonita is drawn to seek out Vicky, and together, they retrace the enigmatic footsteps of Rosarita's journey through the Mexican locales her mother is said to have frequented. Their path takes them through an artists' commune, to Vicky's residence in Colima, and ultimately to the serene shores of La Manzanilla. In this coastal haven, Rosarita once sought solace and recovery. As The Stranger's tales resurface long-buried questions about her mother's past, Bonita finds herself ensnared by ever-deepening doubts. The further she ventures into Mexico, the more her comforting rationalizations about her mother begin to unravel. She even believes she glimpses her mother in a moment of fleeting, almost dreamlike clarity: *"It is so vivid that you are frozen in place."* Bonita then resolves within herself, *"This must end. Enough now. It is time to say: Enough!...This woman, this stranger, she is, after all, nothing else but a Trickster. A very, very canny one. She has taken up enough of your time and your gullibility, and now you must turn your back on her - firmly. You do not need more of her fantasies and falsehoods; they have caused you pain."* (p. 49)

The novella knottily weaves together the contrasting worlds of Bonita's upbringing in Delhi and Victoria's recollections of an old Mexico, capturing the distinctive social landscapes that moulded their existences. Desai evokes the spirit of San Miguel with its vivid hues, decadent cuisine, traditional garments, and the resonant echoes of its music and history. A poignant link is drawn between Mexico and India through the entwined destinies of the characters, their histories reflected in art that mirrors the tumultuous events of their nations. In her author's note, Desai underscores a compelling parallel between the cataclysm of India's 1947 Partition, which displaced millions, and the critical role of trains during Mexico's Revolution in the 1910s. As Bonita pieces together the fragments of her mother Rosarita's past, she meditates on her mother's frequent train journeys, a haunting echo of the trains that carried revolutionaries in Mexico. The Indian artist Satish Gujral, himself a refugee, studied in Mexico and vividly captured these shared experiences in his art, echoing the harrowing scenes rendered by his Mexican mentors, Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros. Bonita's inner turmoil deepens as she struggles to comprehend her mother's enigmatic existence:

"How could she have embarked on such an adventure without uttering a word to you, to any of her family, and then returned merely to resume the life she knew? How could it be possible to live parallel lives with no apparent connection? How could she have left no trace, save for the Trickster's tales, which have led you nowhere?"
(p. 67).

Desai's *Rosarita* stands out for its masterly use of the second-person present tense, a rare narrative approach that directly engages the reader as "you." This uncommon perspective effectively casts the reader into the role of the protagonist, creating an intense and immersive experience that pulls them

deeply into the unfolding story. By directly addressing the reader with pronouns like "you" and "your," the narrative fosters a heightened sense of immediacy and personal involvement, as though the reader is living the central character's experiences. Often employed in experimental or introspective works, this technique can evoke a weighty emotional connection, urging readers to reflect on their lives as they navigate the narrative. While its focus on the reader's perspective can limit the scope of broader contexts or multifaceted storylines, second-person narration remains a powerful tool for crafting distinctive and intimate literary experiences.

Anita Desai's *Rosarita*, while a notable literary work, is not without criticisms despite its considerable strengths. Some shortcomings include:

The novella suffers from uneven pacing, with the narrative occasionally dwelling excessively on descriptive passages or introspective reflections at the cost of plot advancement. This can engender a sense of stagnation, particularly for readers who favour a more vigorous and evolving storyline.

*Though *Rosarita* excels in crafting evocative settings and delving into complicated themes, several characters, especially secondary ones, lack sufficient development. These characters either require greater depth or more apparent motivations, which hampers full engagement with their roles within the story.*

While distinctive, the innovative and immersive second-person narrative may be perceived as alienating. This less conventional perspective can create a sense of detachment between the reader

and the protagonist, affecting emotional involvement.

Desai's exploration of themes such as memory, migration, and identity is reflective, yet the complex layering of these themes can become overwhelming. The blending of diverse cultural and historical contexts necessitates a level of background knowledge that not all readers may possess, potentially rendering the novella less accessible.

*Despite Desai's acclaimed sensitivity in portraying various cultures, the depiction of Mexican culture in *Rosarita* lacks the same depth and authenticity as her portrayal of Indian culture. This discrepancy may lead to a perceived imbalance in cultural representation within the novella.*

Rosarita's conclusion might be viewed as ambiguous or unsatisfying by those who favour clear and definitive resolutions. The story's open-ended nature may leave readers feeling unfulfilled, particularly if they seek a more conclusive end to the characters' journeys.

Though inherently subjective and shaped by individual sensibilities, these critiques do not overshadow the compelling nature of *Rosarita*, which stands as a testament to Desai's literary mastery. The novella delves deep into profound themes, skillfully drawing forth both emotional and intellectual engagement from its readers. Desai's prose, characteristically lyrical and evocative, displays an extraordinary capacity to convey emotions through refined and precise language. The vibrant portrayal of San Miguel breathes life into the town's rich culture and tranquil beauty, serving as the stage for a poignant journey of self-discovery. As Bonita moves from blissful solitude to the unsettling

revelation of her mother's concealed past, the narrative unfolds with a captivating tension that grips the reader. *Rosarita* emerges as a stunning exploration of love, place, memory, sorrow, loneliness, history, and the unspoken secrets shared between mother and daughter.

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Yashasvi Srivastava, a final-year student at the University of Lucknow, is currently pursuing her Master's degree in English Literature. She completed her B.Sc. in Botany in 2023. Her passion for literature began at the prestigious La Martiniere Girls' College, where her love for reading blossomed. She is an avid reader and writes short stories and articles expressing her creativity.

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