



EMRS (PGT)

English

Eklavya Model Residential Schools

Vol – 3



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Modern Indian Writing in English:

- Anita Desai

Anita Desai (born 24 June 1937) is a major Indian English novelist and a prominent figure in American academia, currently holding the position of **Professor of Humanities at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)**. She is considered to be in the **vanguard of the second generation of Indian writers in English**.

Here is a detailed study of Anita Desai, covering her life, works, philosophy, and critical context:

1. Biographical Background and Language

Early Life and Heritage

Anita Mazumdar Desai was born in **Mussoorie, India**. Her father, D. N. Mazumdar, was Bengali, and her mother, Toni Nime (or Antoinette Nime), was German.

Her mixed heritage gave Desai a **multilingual background**. She grew up speaking **German at home**, and Bengali, Urdu, Hindi, and English outside the house. Her family moved to India two decades before the Nazi persecutions. Desai's background has allowed her to view India from "something of an outsider's perspective," seeing the country both as Indians and non-Indians see it.

Education and Literary Language

English became her literary language because it was the first language she formally learned to read and write when she went to school. She began writing in English at the age of seven and published her first story at the age of nine. She found English to be "rich and flexible, supple and adaptable, varied and vital," answering all her needs.

She graduated with a B.A. in English literature in 1957 from Miranda House at the University of Delhi. In 1958, she married Ashvin Desai. Her daughter, Kiran Desai, is also a Booker Prize-winning novelist.

2. Literary Philosophy and Style

Writing as Discovery of Truth

Desai views writing as an absolute necessity, something she does as "instinctively as I breathe". She believes writing is the process through which she can think, feel, and realise things at the highest pitch. She sees writing as her way of **discovering the truth**, which she describes as the **"nine-tenths of the iceberg that lies submerged"** beneath visible reality.

Rejection of Social Realism

Desai makes a clear distinction between her work and novels that aim to mirror society or politics. She states that her novels are **"no reflection of Indian society, politics, or character"**.

Instead, her work is a "private effort" to seize the raw, shapeless material of life and **impose a "design, a certain composition and order"** upon it, which satisfies her as an artist and a human being who longs for order.

The Psychological Novel

Desai is considered the writer who **introduced the psychological novel** in the tradition of **Virginia Woolf** to India.

- **Focus on Interior Life (The Subjective Novel):** Her early works were catalogued by critics as psychological or subjective novels. She employed a style that focused on the "**language of the interior**".
- **Style over Plot:** Style is paramount to her, signifying "the conscious labour of uniting language and symbol, word and rhythm". She considers story, action, and drama unimportant unless they "emanate directly from the personalities" she chooses to write about.
- **Symbolism:** In her novels, **small objects, passing moods and attitudes acquire a large importance**. She frequently uses images that acquire the significance of symbols, revealing her "own mythology".

Experiments with Language

While she initially avoided the problem of conveying Indian speech rhythms, she later experimented with letting the Indian accent and tone enter her speech, particularly in *In Custody*.

In *Baumgartner's Bombay*, she executed a **trilingual narrative experiment**, using English, long passages in German, and Hindi phrases, enabling her to use the German language of her childhood.

3. Major Works and Themes

Desai's fiction largely focuses on a **domestic world**, interpreting her country for outsiders. She is interested primarily in the **lives of women in India since Independence** and the limitations placed upon them by the **patriarchal world**.

Early Novels (Focus on Domestic Disharmony)

- ***Cry, The Peacock* (1963):** Her first novel, set in Delhi. It focuses on Maya, who is trapped in a difficult marriage to the much older Gautama. The novel portrays the complexity of her inner life and ends tragically with her pushing her husband to his death and later committing suicide.
- ***Voices in the City* (1965):** Set in Calcutta. It explores the lives of Nirode and his sisters, Monisha and Amla, highlighting the destructive influence of the city. Monisha kills herself because of the strain of her marriage.
- ***Bye-Bye Blackbird* (1971):** Although ostensibly about Indian immigrants (Dev and Adit) dealing with racism in Britain, the focus shifts to the **alienation of Adit's English wife, Sarah**. The novel deals with psychological conflicts of immigrants who feel rootless.
- ***Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975):** The protagonist, Sita, attempts to escape her joyless marriage and avoid giving birth to her fifth child by retreating to a deserted island, Manori. She eventually accepts that she must return to reality and her family.

Award-Winning and Autobiographical Works

- ***Fire on the Mountain* (1977):** Set in the hill station of Kasauli. It won the **Sahitya Academy Award** and the Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize. The novel is a powerful, female-centered narrative focusing on three women (Nanda Kaul, Raka, and Ila Das) who retreat to the villa Carignano to escape the **brutal patriarchal worlds** in which they lived. The central character, Nanda Kaul, seeks isolation after a long life of duty and obligation. The psychological action culminates with the rape and murder of Ila Das and Raka starting a forest fire.

- **Clear Light of Day (1980):** Shortlisted for the Booker Prize. Desai considers this her **most autobiographical work**, set in the same neighbourhood in Delhi where she grew up. The novel explores the **importance of childhood and memories**. It details the **fragmentation of a family** against the backdrop of a fracturing nation (the 1947 Partition riots are in the background). The narrative structure is complex, moving backward and forward in time, divided into four parts that parallel T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*.
- **The Village by the Sea: An Indian Family Story (1982):** A book for young readers set in Thul, where Desai spent holidays with her children. She won the **1983 Guardian Children's Fiction Prize** for this work.

Later and Experimental Works

- **In Custody (1984):** Shortlisted for the Booker Prize. The novel plots the disillusionment of Hindi lecturer Deven Sharma after he travels to Delhi to interview his hero, the great Urdu poet Nur. It deals with the **decline of Muslim Urdu culture** in North India after Independence and Partition. Deven eventually becomes the custodian of the poet and his work. The novel was adapted into a Merchant Ivory film in 1993, which won the 1994 President of India Gold Medal for Best Picture.
- **Baumgartner's Bombay (1987):** A "brilliant portrait of alienation". The novel follows Hugo Baumgartner, an elderly **German Jewish refugee** who fled the Nazis in the 1930s only to be murdered in Bombay fifty years later by a young German drug addict he tried to help.
- **Fasting, Feasting (1999):** Shortlisted for the Booker Prize. This almost plotless novel brings together her themes in "near perfect synthesis," focusing on the lot of women in traditional Indian family structures while also exploring the West. The novel is carefully balanced by contrasts, shifting abruptly from India (Part One, featuring Uma) to the United States (Part Two, featuring Arun).

Other Works

- **Journey to Ithaca (1995):** Focuses on guru-seeking Westerners in India, specifically Matteo, his wife Sophie, and a charismatic Mother. This is noted as Desai's **least successful novel**.
- **The Zigzag Way (2004):** Set in 20th-century Mexico.
- **The Artist of Disappearance (2011):** Her latest collection of short stories.
- **Other Collections and Works:** *Games at Twilight and Other Stories* (1978), *Diamond Dust and Other Stories* (2000), *The Peacock Garden* (1974), and *Cat on a Houseboat* (1976).

4. Critical Assessment and Recognition

Legacy and Thematic Focus

Desai's reputation was built on her early portraits of **domestic disharmony** and the suffering of women in a patriarchal world. Later works demonstrated her ability to write equally well about men, Indians abroad, and Westerners in India. She consistently underlines how **gender issues are central to politics and the nation** as well as the family.

Views on Feminism

Desai is considered a pioneer in writing about feminist issues. However, she notes that younger generations of readers in India, impatient with women who do not "fight back," sometimes see her characters as "completely helpless women".

Desai defends her approach as **realistic**, stating that she aims to "get at the truth". She argues that it would have been "really fanciful" (unrealistic) to portray women like Bim and Tara (*Clear Light of Day*) as modern-day feminists at the time the story was set.

Awards Summary

Desai has been widely honoured internationally and in India:

- **Booker Prize Shortlist:** Three times: *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *In Custody* (1984), and *Fasting, Feasting* (1999).
- **Indian Awards:** **Sahitya Academy Award** (India's National Academy of Letters) for *Fire on the Mountain* (1978); and the **Padma Bhushan** (2014).
- **International Awards:** **British Guardian Prize for Children's Fiction** for *The Village by the Sea* (1983); Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize for *Fire on the Mountain* (1978); and the Alberto Moravia Prize for Literature (Italy) (2000).
- **Fellowships:** Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and received a Sahitya Akademi Fellowship (2007).

Vikram Seth

The Cosmopolitan Author: Biographical and Educational Foundations

Vikram Seth, born in Calcutta, India, on June 20, 1952, is recognized globally as a versatile Indian author who skillfully bridges cultural and temporal divides in his literary output. His ability to navigate and convincingly articulate diverse cultural landscapes stems directly from a foundational biography rooted in both elite Indian professionalism and an intensely unconventional, globe-spanning academic career.

Origins and Elite Indian Context

Seth was raised within an influential, high-achieving family milieu. His mother, Leila Seth, attained distinction as a judge, while his father, Prem Nath Seth, was a businessman and consultant. This environment provided a professional infrastructure and level of stability that is subtly reflected in his literature, which often analyzes the **Indian elite**. His foundational education was rigorous, beginning at the prestigious **Doon School**. Records from this time describe him as an "**indefatigable worker**," distinguished not only in academics but also in extracurricular pursuits such as debating, dramatics, music, and editing the *Doon School Weekly*.

This stable, privileged upbringing furnished the author with the cultural perspective necessary to conduct critical social analysis of the establishment, while simultaneously providing the intellectual discipline required to undertake large-scale literary projects later in life. The structural stability provided by his family life contrasts sharply with the social fluidity and post-Independence turmoil that forms the core subject matter of his epic fiction. This foundation of support and resource allowed him to pursue a nomadic academic path, which ultimately underpinned his status as a complex world writer.

The Global Academic Odyssey and the Interdisciplinary Mind

Seth's academic trajectory demonstrates a commitment to analytical rigor and systems thinking, which profoundly informs his literary methodology. After attending Tonbridge School in England for his A-levels, he matriculated at **Corpus Christi College, Oxford**, where he earned degrees in **Philosophy, Politics, and Economics (PPE)**. He continued his studies at **Stanford University** in the United States, receiving a Master's degree in economics in 1978. While he pursued a Ph.D. in Advanced Economics, he did not complete the program, instead incorporating creative writing studies into his time there. Later, he studied at **Nanjing University** in China.

This multidisciplinary training—spanning political philosophy, market analysis (economics), and deep cultural immersion (Chinese studies)—is highly atypical for a novelist, and it established a **cosmopolitan worldview** that values structure and systemic analysis. The intensive study of economics, in particular, requires the analytical modeling of complex relationships and causality, and this intellectual discipline translates directly into his literary constructions. His structural choices, such as the stringent control of the **sonnet form** in *The Golden Gate* or the architectural complexity required to manage the over 1,400-page social ecosystem of *A Suitable Boy*, are manifestations of this analytical training. Seth uses literary form not merely as a stylistic device, but as a methodological necessity for measuring and organizing large quantities of social data.

Institution/Location	Year (Approx.)	Primary Field of Study	Literary Significance
Corpus Christi College, Oxford (UK)	1975 (B.A.)	Philosophy, Politics, Economics (PPE)	Established analytical rigor and foundational formal discipline.
Stanford University (USA)	1978 (M.A.)	Advanced Economics, Creative Writing (Ph.D. incomplete)	Provided the geographical and cultural context for <i>The Golden Gate</i> ; reinforced systemic approach to narrative.
Nanjing University (China)	Late 1970s / Early 1980s	Chinese Studies	Direct inspiration and content source for the travelogue <i>From Heaven Lake</i> and T'ang dynasty translations.

Architectural Mastery in Verse: The Poetic Foundation

Vikram Seth's technical mastery of traditional poetic forms is a defining characteristic of his entire oeuvre, irrespective of genre. This technical proficiency is evident in his early work, including the poetry collection *Mappings*, and his subsequent endeavors into the highly demanding genre of the novel in verse.

The American Rhapsody: Analyzing *The Golden Gate*

The novel *The Golden Gate* (1986) is a landmark text in Seth's career, chronicling modern American culture, relationships, and the search for identity in the San Francisco Bay Area. The novel is a remarkable feat of structural engineering, as the entire narrative is composed in the severely constrained **Onegin stanza**, a form adapted from Alexander Pushkin.

This choice demonstrates the author's appetite for ambitious formal challenges, extending the narrative over nearly 600 pages while adhering to the structure of the sonnet. The restrictive, rigid verse imposes a formality on the storytelling that serves to identify and contain the outside "concrete world," which the novel fictionalizes. The use of a dense, 19th-century European verse form to depict the seemingly rootless, expansive culture of modern California creates an artistic tension. This juxtaposition implies that **structure**—intellectual, artistic, or formal—is the necessary instrument for measuring and interpreting the inherent emotional and social chaos of contemporary life, such as loneliness and relationship volatility. The work's success earned Seth the Commonwealth Poetry Prize and the Quality Paperback Book Club New Voice Award.

Translation, Libretti, and Poetic Integration

Seth's commitment to technical precision extends beyond original composition into translation. In ***Three Chinese Poets***, he translated the T'ang dynasty masters Wang Wei, Li Bai, and Du Fu. His philosophy in translation prioritizes "**fidelity and preserving formal features such as rhyme,**" even when acknowledging the inherent difficulty of capturing the original tonality and word associations in non-tonal English. This methodological consistency—a high valuation of formal constraint—is not merely aesthetic; it is rooted in a disciplined, intellectual approach to language, which critics praised for its "**delicate verbal and emotional discipline.**"

Furthermore, Seth seamlessly blends poetry and prose, ensuring that his poetic mastery functions as a narrative tool, even in his prose works. Literary analyses highlight his skill in employing poetic devices such as metaphors, similes, and rhythmic patterns that contribute significantly to the narrative's profound impact. This integration of formal rigor ensures that his large-scale prose novels maintain a rhetorical control and sophistication that distinguishes his work from traditional narrative realism.

The Magnum Opus: *A Suitable Boy* (1993) and Post-Independence India

The publication of ***A Suitable Boy*** in 1993 was a definitive moment in Seth's career, establishing him as a crucial voice in Indian English literature and a significant world writer.

Scale, Structure, and Narrative Ambition

A Suitable Boy is a work of extraordinary length, comprising over **1,300 pages** and holding the distinction of being one of the longest novels released in a single volume in the English language. The work is characterized by its expansive scope, intricately detailing the lives of four interlinked families in the newly formed republic of India. The primary narrative thread follows Mrs. Rupa Mehra's quest to secure a "**suitable boy**" for her younger daughter, Lata.

Despite its vastness, the novel maintains structural formality. It is divided into **19 parts**, with the content summary of each part articulated in **rhyming couplet form**, a subtle but significant nod to the author's poetic bedrock. This structural detail indicates that even in an epic prose novel, the author maintains a disciplined control over the narrative architecture, recalling the systematic complexity required by his academic background in economics.

Although the novel achieved widespread commercial success and earned the W. H. Smith Award and the Commonwealth Writer's Prize in 1994, it faced mixed critical reviews and was notably not shortlisted for the Booker Prize. This critical tension stems from the novel's deep commitment to **19th-century realism**—often drawing comparisons to the works of **Jane Austen** and **Charles Dickens**. While technically magnificent, this adherence to the classical social novel form was perhaps perceived by some critics as stylistically conventional compared to more experimental contemporary fiction.

Social and Political Realism (Early 1950s Context)

The novel is set against the backdrop of post-Independence India in the **early 1950s**, leading up to the nation's first post-Independence national election. It functions as a comprehensive look into the socio-political and cultural landscape of a nation in flux.

Seth utilizes the domestic plot of Lata's search for a husband as a microcosm for the macroscopic political and social transformations occurring in the nation. The narrative engages with crucial national issues of the era, including the abolition of the feudal **Zamindari system**, land reforms, Hindu-Muslim strife, the eclipse of princely states and landlords, academic affairs, and the social status of lower caste peoples such as the Jatav. The tensions inherent in selecting a suitable partner—a choice weighed heavily by religion, caste, and tradition—directly parallel the legislative challenges and cultural tensions facing the nascent state.

By centering the narrative on the family unit, Seth effectively demonstrates that the political transformation of India is inextricably linked to personal decisions and the enduring influence of cultural norms and elders. The novel's presentation of post-independence India is characterized by **social realism** and offers profound insights into the synthesis of societal context and personal depiction. Furthermore, the narrative structure asserts an unquestioning viewpoint of national progress toward a secular and modern vision for the developing nation.

Beyond India: Settings of Displacement, Music, and Memory

Seth's identity as a **world writer** is confirmed by his unusual ability to inhabit diverse geographical and cultural contexts with the detailed fluency of an insider. His works feature changing locales—India, China, America, and Europe—but they are consistently anchored by his interest in "**the world and its affairs**."

European Resonance: *An Equal Music*

The novel *An Equal Music* (1999) showcases Seth's cultural fluency outside of Indian themes. Set primarily in **Vienna and London**, the plot concerns the lives of professional classical musicians, Michael, a violinist, and Julia, a pianist. Their relationship, rekindled after a decade of separation, is complicated by Julia's married status and the tragic progression of her **deafness**, which affects their musical careers and attempts to perform Beethoven's Piano Trio Opus 1 No. 3.

Critics observed that in this work, the author writes "**like a complete insider within European society**," defying expectations that an Indian author must necessarily convey a non-native perspective. The novel is also notable for its detailed, sensitive, and medically informed portrayal of deafness and nervous breakdown.

The **musical setting** functions as a metaphor for artistic discipline and control. The perfection sought in classical music represents the formal artistry that Seth champions. However, this perfection is constantly threatened by the uncontrollable elements of human relationships and physical decline, such as Julia's deafness. This juxtaposition suggests a fundamental thematic concern in Seth's work: that while external structures (art, society, political systems) can be mastered, internal human emotions and physical realities remain inherently fragile and uncontrollable, leading characters to yearn for **universal human needs**.

Narrative Voice and Character Definition

Seth's chosen narrative technique is the **Omniscient voice**, characterized by an honest and self-effacing tone, allowing him to handle complex themes with "**consistent, imaginative objectivity**."

A key stylistic feature is that his characters are defined not primarily through internal monologue, self-expression, or description of their consciousness, but rather through their **interactions with others and how they are perceived socially**. This choice of prioritizing external definition serves to reinforce his project of social realism. By focusing on the individual's function within the social system—the family, career, or nation—the narrative analysis remains focused on social consequences rather than subjective psychological states, which complements the author's analytical intellectual background. The reader, consequently, is positioned to view family relationships and emotional attitudes as if "**looking through windows**" into the structure of society itself.

Early Non-Fiction and the Autobiographical Voice

Seth's early travel narrative, *From Heaven Lake: Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet* (1983), documents his remarkable journey hitchhiking from Nanjing University in China back to his home in New Delhi. This work, which won the Thomas Cook Travel Book Award, showcases his early facility with narrative voice in a non-fiction context. Seth is an unusually forthcoming writer whose published material is often replete with thinly disguised or undisguised **autobiographical details** regarding his personal life and that of his intimates. This transparency, coupled with an engaging narrative voice, often leads readers to presume an unwanted degree of personal familiarity with the author.

The Enduring Legacy and the Question of *A Suitable Girl*

Vikram Seth's contemporary legacy is dominated by the expectation and repeated delay of *A Suitable Girl*, the sequel to his magnum opus. The status of this book provides a unique case study in the tension between commercial pressure and the often-unpredictable nature of artistic production.

The Burden of the Epic Sequel

A Suitable Girl is planned as a "jump sequel" to *A Suitable Boy*, set in the **present day** rather than resuming immediately after the original's conclusion in 1952. The book was announced in 2009, but has yet to be completed, suffering extensive delays. The difficulties surrounding the manuscript gained notoriety following the missed deadline in June 2013, which was tied to a reported \$1.7 million advance for world English language rights (excluding US).

The delay has been openly discussed by Seth. He attributed the block to intensely personal struggles, including the failure of a romantic relationship, resulting in severe **writer's block**, "**dark periods**," and "**metaphysical struggles**" that rendered him "**acutely incapable of doing anything**." In a moment of candor, he acknowledged that his publishers feared he was suffering from "**brand disintegration**" due to the extended hiatus. Despite repeated deadline adjustments (e.g., hoping for publication in 2017), the novel remained unfinished as of 2023.

The public nature of this creative stasis offers a profound real-life manifestation of the very themes Seth masterfully explores in his fiction: the complex dynamics of love, the search for companionship, and pervasive loneliness. The author's struggle to proceed with a novel centered on finding a partner, precisely because of personal relational difficulties, creates a powerful intertextual connection that validates the emotional authenticity and struggle depicted in his art.

Strategic Diversification and the Future Canon

While *A Suitable Girl* remains incomplete, Seth has maintained parallel literary activities, suggesting the protracted delay is less a total paralysis and more a deep, forced incubation period. He confirmed in 2018 that he was still actively working on the sequel and expanding the universe to be collectively titled **A Bridge of Leaves**. This framework is planned to include *A Suitable Girl* along with two collections of related novellas, *Independence* (set before *Boy*) and *Oblivion* (set after *Girl*), demonstrating an extensive, continuous engagement with the material.

Furthermore, in 2024, Seth published a translation of *The Hanuman Chalisa*. Intriguingly, this poetic translation is directly linked to the novel's universe: the fictional character Bhaskar Tandon (the genius who memorized the ode in *A Suitable Boy* and is set to reappear as an Emeritus Professor in *A Suitable Girl*) is the figure who prompts the translation. This strategic diversification into highly structured, formal projects (like translation and libretti) functions as a creative pressure-release valve, allowing the author to maintain technical mastery and gather intellectual and emotional depth, thus transforming the writing block into a period of intensive, auxiliary research for the final product.

Year/Timeline	Event/Status	Significance/Cause of Delay
2009	Novel announced	High expectations and commercial stakes established.
2013 (June)	Initial commercial deadline missed	Failure attributed to personal relational difficulties and high-pressure \$1.7M advance.
2015-2017	Publication postponed (originally targeted 2016/2017)	Continued delay linked to writer's block; the author noted he felt "hopeless in love".
2024 (Ongoing)	Still unfinished; <i>Hanuman Chalisa</i> translation published	Confirmed active engagement with the universe, utilizing formal poetic work as related creative output.

Conclusion: The Enduring Legacy of Versatility

Vikram Seth's contribution to global literature is defined by a remarkable command over form coupled with a unique, analytical perspective rooted in his interdisciplinary education. He is a writer of exceptional versatility, equally adept at the precision of the verse novel (*The Golden Gate*), the translation of ancient T'ang dynasty poetry, and the sweeping scope of the social epic (*A Suitable Boy*). His most enduring legacy is his status as a quintessential **world writer** who transcends conventional geographic and genre categorization. His ability to inhabit diverse, highly specific contexts—from post-Independence India to California's technological anxiety, and the insulated world of European classical music—as a convincing "**insider**" challenges postcolonial literary assumptions. His works consistently explore universal human needs, relationships, and cultural identity.

Ultimately, Seth's canon demonstrates that **technical mastery and structural rigor are essential tools for analyzing and containing the chaotic realities of social and emotional life**. The ongoing, complex struggle to complete *A Suitable Girl*, which has become public knowledge, ironically validates the profound emotional struggles—the search for love, belonging, and stability—that lie beneath the meticulous surface of his architectural narratives. His disciplined approach and multifaceted output secure his position as a significant and challenging figure in contemporary world literature.

Nissim Ezekiel

Nissim Ezekiel (1924–2004) is widely regarded as the **father of modern Indian English poetry**. He emerged as a **leader** who helped define the standards and provided publication opportunities for new talent in modern Indian English poetry.

He is one of the most distinguished contemporary Indian poets in English. His poems are known for being both difficult and obscure, yet also stirring and highly accessible.

1. Life, Career, and Background

Education and Professional Life

Nissim Ezekiel was born on 16 December 1924, in **Mumbai (Maharashtra)**, and passed away in 2004.

- **Education:** He was educated in Mumbai and London. He earned a Bachelor of Arts (BA) in Literature from Wilson College, University of Mumbai, in 1947. Later, he studied philosophy at Birkbeck College, London, after moving there in November 1948.
- **Family:** His parents were both educators; his father was a Professor of Botany, and his mother was a school Principal. The Ezekiels belonged to Mumbai's **Marathi-speaking Jewish community**.

- **Career:** He took up teaching upon returning to India. He held short-term roles, including as an assistant editor for the *Illustrated Weekly of India* (for two years starting in 1953), a broadcaster on Art and Literature for All India Radio (for 10 years), and an advertising copywriter. He retired as a **Professor of English at the University of Bombay**. From 1961 to 1972, he headed the English department of Mithibai College, Bombay.
- **Literary Activities:** He was dedicated to the profession of poetry. He **edited several journals**, including 'Quest' and 'Imprint'. In 1961, he co-founded the literary monthly *Jumpo*. He also translated Jawaharlal Nehru's poetry from English to Marathi in 1976.
- **Recognition:** He was a **winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award**.

Published Collections

Ezekiel's published verse collections include:

- *A Time to Change* (1952). (His first collection was *The Bad Day*, published in 1952).
- *Sixty Poems* (1953).
- *The Third* (1959).
- *The Unfinished Man* (1960), which contains the poem 'Enterprise'.
- *The Exact Name* (1965), which contains the poem 'Night of the Scorpion'.
- *Hymns and Darkness* (1976).
- *Latter day Psalms* (1982). He also published a collection titled *Collected plays*.

2. Poetic Style, Themes, and Philosophy

Style and Technique

Ezekiel's poetry is known for its **professional attitude** and distinctive stylistic features:

- **Introspective and Ironic:** His poetry is chiefly **introspective and self-analytical**. He employs a **largely ironic stance** and uses **ironic perception**. This irony can be allied to satire (when the poet observes from a distance) or allied to compassion (when he examines the experience from within).
- **Language and Form:** His poems are generally **lucid, splendidly evocative, and satisfyingly sensuous**. Modern Indian English modernists like Ezekiel are characterized by their **precise use of language** and **well-crafted images**. He often uses **free verse**, which provides him more space for expression. His style is often compressed, having a **terse ending**.
- **Personal Focus:** He is one of the most personal and intimate of Indian poets. He frequently describes the happenings of his own life, noting that "Scores of my poems are obviously written for **personal therapeutic purposes**".

Core Themes

Ezekiel addresses modern concerns in a contemporary voice and manner:

- **Modern Urban Life:** He focuses on **life in Bombay** with all its difficulties.
- **The Personal and Metaphysical:** Recurring themes include **love, sex, death, loneliness, and prayer**. He also explores human sexuality.
- **Identity and Alienation:** His poems deal with the typically modern problems of **alienation and identity**.
- **The Indian Ethos:** His poetry reflects the **cultural ethos and heritage of India**.

3. Detailed Study of Key Works

A. 'Night of the Scorpion' (From *The Exact Name*)

This poem is a **poignant and touching poetic portrayal of a rustic situation**. It is an expression of Ezekiel's own **childhood experience** when his mother was stung by a scorpion.

- **Setting and Style:** The scene takes place on a dark night following ten hours of steady rain, which drove the scorpion (compared to the **Devil** or the **Evil One** with a "diabolic tail") beneath a sack of rice. It is written in **free verse** and conveys a living, truthful rural picture.
- **Central Conflict: Tradition vs. Modernity:** The poem juxtaposes the mother's pain with the variety of responses from the community, highlighting the clash between traditional superstition and modern rationality.
 - **Traditional/Superstitious Approach:** The village **peasants** gather like "swarms of flies". They search for the scorpion with candles and lanterns, believing that killing the scorpion would **nullify the effect of the poison**. They continuously **chant the name of God** to paralyze the poison.
 - **Indian Philosophy/Karma Theory:** The villagers believe the mother's suffering is due to the **sins of her previous birth** or is reducing the misfortunes of her **next birth**. They also believe the suffering will purify her soul and spirit from material desires and ambitions. A **holy man** is summoned to perform rites and incantations.
 - **Modern/Rational Approach:** The only **rational figure** amidst the chaos is the **poet's father**. He is a **skeptic and rationalist** who tries every practical remedy available (powders, mixtures, herbs, and hybrids). He performs an experiment by pouring paraffin on the bitten toe and lighting it.
- **The Mother's Climax:** After twenty painful hours, the poison loses its sting. The mother's final response provides the emotional climax and highlights **maternal affection**: she "only said / Thank God the scorpion picked on me / And spared my children". This shows the universal loving and caring nature of a mother.

B. 'Enterprise' (From *The Unfinished Man*)

This poem is considered one of Ezekiel's more serious works and is an **allegory of the pilgrimage theme with a suggestion of futility**.

- **The Journey and Disillusionment:** The poem describes a journey that begins as a **pilgrimage**, exalting minds and making burdens light. However, the group faces internal conflicts (losing a friend over how to cross a desert patch), external attacks, and getting lost. The group ignores the "thunder" (which is interpreted as the inner voice or conscience).
- **The Result of Failure:** The travelers lose hope, are deprived of necessities like soap, and end up broken or merely bent. When they finally reach their destination, they **hardly knew why they were there**. The trip had only "**darkened every face**".
- **Interpretation:** The poem addresses the **inevitable disillusionment** that follows any grand ambition. It serves as a critique of romantic idealism and ambitious ventures, suggesting that "the tragedy of modern humanity" is that every enterprise ends in **futility**.
- **The Concluding Wisdom:** The poem's central message is contained in the final line: "**Home is where we have to gather grace**". This line, which carries significant narrative weight, encourages an attitude of "stay at home"—meaning that answers and truth should be sought internally, rather than through fruitless external journeys. The poem begins in delight (the action of taking up the enterprise) and ends in wisdom (the discovery of their own ordinariness).

C. 'The Poet, Lover and Birdwatcher'

This poem highlights the **common qualities** shared by a poet, a lover, and a birdwatcher, focusing on their **quest for perfection** and the necessary patience and untiring efforts required.

- **Shared Quest:** All three strive for **perfection**, even though their specific paths and destinations are different. Their hunt is shaped by need and demands persistent **tolerance and patience**.
- **The Birdwatcher:** The birdwatcher is never still in his curiosity and must observe in **still motion**. To see rare species, he must ungrudgingly move along **remote and thorny paths** and deserted lanes where there is only silence.
- **The Lover:** The lover studies women and waits for the right woman. Women are viewed as **incomprehensible myths of light** rather than just "flesh and bones". When the lover is certain of love, he stops waiting and risks surrendering himself.
- **The Poet:** The poet studies **words or language** and waits for the right words. He expresses himself only when his **spirit is moved**. The poet is capable of believing incredible things, such that "a deaf can hear and a blind can recover sight".
- **The Path:** The path of all three is described as remote and full of hurdles, like the **dark floor of one's heart**. Their quest is often in **darkness**, an impractical world, but it is full of profound meaning for them. The result of their tireless creativity is miraculous.

Keki N. Daruwala

Keki N. Daruwala (born 1937) is celebrated as a **leading figure** in Indian poetry written in English today. He is highly regarded for his **craftsmanship** and his immense contributions to enriching Indian English poetry.

His work is essential to the literary landscape, to the point that Indian poetry "sans Daruwala is unimaginable".

1. Life, Career, and Literary Context

Background and Profession

Keki N. Daruwala was born in **Lahore**. He holds a Master's degree from Punjab University, Chandigarh.

- **Career:** He joined the **Indian Police Service (IPS) in 1958** and is now retired, living in **Delhi**.
- **Violence and Theme:** Critics frequently, though sometimes reductively, attribute the recurrent theme of **violence** in his poetry to his choice of profession. Since he was an IPS officer, his exposure to violence was considered "more enormous" compared to other poets.
- **Heritage:** Although he is a **Parsi**, his poems are described as **more Indian** in spirit and sensibility.

Recognition and Comparison

Daruwala has received significant acclaim:

- **Major Awards:** He won the **Sahitya Akademi Award in 1984** for his collection *The Keeper of the Dead*. He also received the **Commonwealth Poetry Award** for Asia in 1987.
- **Comparison with Ezekiel:** Among Indian poets writing in English, **Nissim Ezekiel is comparable to Daruwala**. However, some critics suggest that Daruwala often **outwits** or **surpasses the poetic excellence** or technique of Ezekiel.

2. Poetic Style and Craftsmanship

Daruwala is noted for producing a body of verse that is **technically brilliant, resonantly beautiful, profoundly disturbing yet appealing and approachable**.

Innovation and Technique

- **Diction and Language:** His poetic diction is **elegant, brilliant, and sophisticated**. His language is generally **not flat** or stereotyped. He has an "unusual capacity" to **combine words into striking phrases**. His diction can be called **erudite**.
- **Form and Structure:** His work demonstrates **distinctive technical skills**. He is considered **one of the most daring innovators** of Indian poetry in English. He uses the devices of **metre and rhyme for specific effects** and can combine **metrical patterns with free verse**.
- **Style:** His writing style is **terse, vigorous, and tensile**. His poetry is often **subtle and oblique**, reflecting the dictum that "All poetry is oblique, there is no direct poetry".
- **Irony and Satire:** A strong distinguishing characteristic is his **ironic stance**. He is praised for his **bitter satiric tone**, which is seen as exceptional in Indian verse.
- **Narrative:** He is known for the **narrative energy and sweep** of his poetry. His mode is primarily that of **narration and description**, often involving incident and event.

Imagery

Daruwalla is a master of imagery, which is one of the strongest points of his poetry.

- **Quality:** His imagery is **realistic and original**, often **strikingly original**. It is drawn from **first-hand observation**.
- **Function:** His imagery is not superimposed but **integral to the theme**. He uses **coarser images** and violent diction to enhance the intensity of violence in his poems.
- **Examples:** He can vividly paint the river Ghaghra as "**overstewed coffee**" in the evening and "**a red weal across the spine of the land**" at night. The sudden flight of children from an afflicted mother is compared to "**severed wings**".

3. Themes and Subject Matter

Daruwalla's poetry covers a **wide range** of experiences. His works are deeply rooted in the **Indian spirit and sensibility**.

Thematic Universality and Indian Reality

- **Violence and Conflict:** **Violence** is his foremost theme. His poetry reflects the **cross section of India**, focusing on the **multi-layered contradictory realities**. He vividly materializes abstractions, painting a vast portrait of post-Independence India as a "**landscape of meaninglessness**".
- **Humanism and Suffering:** His work demonstrates an **abounding concern for humanism** and social sympathy. Themes include **deprivation, misery, disease, and death**. His poems often present the **stark reality of Indian life**.
- **Pessimism:** His worldview, seen in poems like *Ruminations*, shows **violence and hatred** as omnipresent, sometimes leaning toward a pessimistic or "Hardian attitude towards life".

Social Evils and Satire

Daruwalla is known for his ironical and satirical treatment of social issues.

- **Corruption (*Graft*):** This poem is a masterpiece of satire that condemns **bribe-giving, bribe-taking, and the adulteration of foodstuffs**. He notes the irony that corrupt men often flourish and are blessed with long lives and many children.
- **Political Irony (*Collage I* and *The People*):** He uses irony to mock the claims of Indian leaders, suggesting that attempts to abolish evils like *zamindari*, drinking, and prostitution have often failed or backfired. *Collage I* concludes with the bitter satire that if plague broke out, there would be a **black-market in rats**.

4. Detailed Study of Key Poems

The Epileptic

This poem vividly portrays a minor incident—a **pregnant woman suffering an epileptic fit** during a rickshaw ride—to explore deep violence.

- **Multiple Levels of Violence:** The violence is not just physical but **psychological, sociological, and lexical**.
- **Psychological Violence:** The husband undergoes intense **stress and trauma**. The climax is the husband shaking, shocked by the technical medical terms used by the doctors (lexical violence), and his wife's disappointment upon regaining awareness.
- **Physical Violence:** The husband's desperate attempts to save her cause her physical violence, such as forcing her mouth open and placing a **gag between her teeth**.
- **Sociological Violence:** The poem presents a social disorder where the **privacy of the family is invaded** by the curious public who rush to help, often unhelpfully, thus inflicting a psychological wound on the husband.

The Ghaghra in Spate

This poem focuses on the **havoc caused by a flood** in the Ghaghra river, demonstrating both nature's destructive power and human endurance.

- **Imagery of Destruction:** The river is personified as being **"bitchy"** after the waters recede. The changing appearance of the river is marked by striking imagery, from looking like "over-boiled coffee" to a "red weal across the spine of the land".
- **Human Response:** The villagers face the tragedy with **stoic indifference**. They do not curse or pray because they are familiar with the river's relentless behaviour.
- **Social Indifference:** The poem contrasts the suffering of the starving villagers on rooftops with the sight of **women in chauffeur-driven cars** coming to collect driftwood and observe the devastation.

Ruminations

This meditative poem explores **violence, hatred, and the inevitability of death**.

- **Theme of Sin and Corruption:** It presents the idea that sin sticks so deep that modern man is incapable of the **"cleansed feeling"** that nature receives after rain.
- **Death and Destiny:** It reflects on man's ultimate fate, noting that whether a body is **buried, burned, or thrown to the birds**, the person surrenders their flesh.

Death of a Bird

This poem is often compared to Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, focusing on the **consciousness of sin** following an act of cruelty.

- **The Incident:** The hunter (the narrator) shoots a **fierce male bird** engaged in mating, committing a sin.
- **Consequences of Guilt:** The subsequent journey is marked by terror. The party's pony falls into a gorge, and its scream drowns the river's roar. The narrator and his companion feel depressed and their footsteps drag. The appearance of the mate, which also dies, leads the woman to declare that a **curse would overtake them**.

5. Bibliography of Works

Daruwalla's career has produced a prodigious corpus of work.

Poetry Collections

- *Under Orion* (1970)
- *Apparition in April* (1971)
- *Crossing of Rivers* (1976)
- *Winter Poems* (1980)
- ***The Keeper of the Dead*** (1982)
- *Landscapes* (1987)
- *A Summer of Tigers* (1995)
- *Night River* (2000)
- *The Map-maker* (2002)

Fiction Works

- *Swords and Abyss* (1979)
- *The Minister for Permanent Unrest & Other Stories* (1996)

Children's Books

- *Mr. Mugger and Mr. Stripes* (poetry)

Edited Works

- *Two Decades of Indian Poetry: 1960-80*

Daruwalla has also attempted plays (*Collected plays*) and is currently engaged in writing a novel volume titled *The Fire-altar*.

Ruskin Bond

Ruskin Bond (born 1937) is a prominent Indian writer known for his extensive contributions as a novelist, short story writer, poet, and essayist for children, young adults, and adults. His literary career, which began with his first published stories in 1951 at the age of seventeen, offers significant insight into the development of English literature in India and the postcolonial/post-Independence literatures.

I. Life, Identity, and Biographical Context

Heritage and Identity

Ruskin Bond is associated with the **end of British colonial rule in India and the postcolonial diaspora**. He is a fifth-generation American of English descent [i]. He is the **great-grandson, grandson, and son of Anglo-Indians**.

Crucially, Bond demonstrated the daring to **reject his British nationality by embracing India, the land of his birth**, following decolonization. He asserts that his identity as an Indian is **uncompromising** due to history.

Family and Education

His father, Aubrey Bond (also referred to by his initials A.A. Bond), was a teacher who served in the **Royal Air Force (RAF)**, posted in New Delhi. Bond's autobiographical writings capture his personal experiences as a child and teenager.

- **Childhood:** As a child, he lived in an old palace beside a lake, where his father organized a small school for the children of the local raja. He spent a blissful six months with his father in New Delhi, near Humayun's Tomb, exploring ruins, collecting stamps, and reading books.
- **Loss:** Following his parents' separation, he lived with his father. His father died in 1944 after periodic bouts of malaria and jaundice. The young Bond viewed this death as a **"vanishing"**.
- **Schooling:** He attended boarding school in Shimla, a preparatory school for boys that prided itself on being the **"Eton of the East"**, where he studied at Bishop Cotton. His first literary project, *Nine Months*, written during school, was discovered and destroyed by his headmaster, Mr. Fisher.
- **Early Career:** He left India to pursue his dream of becoming an author, spending years away in **Jersey and London**. His first novel was accepted for publication during this phase.

Residence and Setting

Ruskin Bond has been widely recognized as a **"regional" writer**.

- **Mussoorie:** He returned to India and struggled to survive as an author in post-Independence India before making his **"Great Escape to the Mountains"**. He has **settled permanently in Mussoorie** in the foothills of the Himalayas, writing steadily there for the past forty years.
- **The Himalayas:** His work evokes the local colour and atmosphere of the **small towns and villages of the lower Himalayas**. The Himalayan setting is of special importance, impacting his beliefs and worldview.

II. Literary Output and Themes

Volume and Genres

Bond's prodigious body of work includes:

- **Six novels or novellas.**
- **Over two hundred short stories.**
- **Thirty-five books for children.**
- **Four poetry collections**, including *Granny's Tree Climbing and Other Poems* (2000).
- **Five collections of essays.**
- **Four volumes of autobiography.**

Style and Process

- **Autobiography and Fiction:** He is a **highly autobiographical author**, drawing on his personal experiences and transforming them into fictional form.
- **Language and Voice:** His works reflect his Anglo-Indian experiences and the changing political and social climate. He brought a **youthful, fresher voice** to Indian writing in English.
- **Themes:** His fiction negotiates **personal, national, and cultural boundaries**. He is celebrated for his ability to convey a vision of India that readers can identify with, offering a unique insider's perspective on the lives of **simple rural or small-town people**.
- **Nature and Mysticism:** His work, such as the essay 'The River Is Eternal' in *Angry River*, explores themes of **Nature Mysticism and Vedanta Philosophy**.
- **Writing Method:** He belongs to the rare fraternity of writers who **still write by hand**. He uses a ball-point or roller-ball pen, finding typing too mechanical. He uses a 1956 Olympia typewriter for a second draft, but prefers writing longhand in odd places, such as on the steps of his cottage or under a chestnut tree.

Selected Works and Collections

Ruskin Bond's well-known works, available in various collections, include:

- ***The Room on the Roof*** (first novel). This work explores the **search for an identity** using **journey as metaphor**.
- ***The Night Train at Deoli***.
- ***Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra***.
- ***Scenes from a Writer's Life: A Memoir***.
- ***Delhi Is Not Far*** (a novella).
- ***The Room on the Roof and Vagrants in the Valley: Two Novels of Adolescence***.
- ***The Lamp Is Lit: Leaves from a Journal***.

III. Detailed Study of Key Literary Selections

Stories of Childhood and Family

- ***The Room of Many Colours***: This piece details his early childhood, including his father who taught him to write. It features his relationship with his **Ayah** (nanny), who filled his head with wonderful stories, and Dukhi, the sad gardener. It describes his interaction with a tiny, elderly lady, the **Rani**, who believed herself to be a queen and suffered from isolation in the palace. The Rani showed him her favourite room, which had **windowpanes of different coloured glass**, allowing her to see a "different world" through each pane.
- ***The Funeral***: Recounts the funeral of the boy's father in a hill station. The boy, alone and silent, follows the mourners to the cemetery and observes the eternal snows of the Himalayas. The boy thinks about how securely the dead are entombed, concluding that his father might escape by **growing into the root of a plant to become a tree or a flower**.
- ***Coming Home to Dehra***: The narrator recalls his return to Dehra after his father's death in 1944. He was initially happy living with his father in a large tent in New Delhi, but was sent to boarding school. His grief was worsened when the **headmaster confiscated and lost his father's letters**. He discovers he has a six-month-old half-brother upon returning to live with his mother and stepfather in Dehra.

Stories of Nature and Animals

- ***All Creatures Great and Small***: This is a nostalgic piece featuring his Grandfather's penchant for collecting animals in Dehra. The animals included a Great Dane, a mischievous monkey named **Toto**, which Grandfather bought for five rupees, and a python. Toto was so destructive he disposed of wallpaper and a school blazer. The python was eventually caught using a cage with a **mirror** because the snake had become "enamoured of his own reflection".
- ***Growing up with Trees***: Set in Dehradun, which was a good place for trees. The narrator mentions climbing trees, especially the ancient **banyan tree** behind the house, which was a world unto itself. He kept forbidden items—a catapult, comics, and chewing gum—in a hole in the jackfruit tree, which he forgot to collect when he left.
- ***The Tunnel***: The protagonist, Suraj, cycles out of Dehra to watch the midday train emerge from the tunnel. He meets the watchman, Sunder Singh, who claims the tunnel is his. Together, they encounter a **leopard**—which Sunder Singh calls "my leopard"—crouching in the tunnel and drive it out before the night mail arrives to prevent it from being killed.

Stories of Relationships and Chance Encounters

- **The Night Train at Deoli:** The narrator encounters a girl selling baskets on the lonely platform of Deoli station, where the train stops for ten minutes. He buys a basket but hesitates when he sees her again. He later reflects that he **will never break his journey there**, preferring to keep dreaming and hoping about the girl with the baskets.
- **The Girl on the Train:** The blind narrator travels alone to Rohana, where a girl gets in. The narrator keeps his blindness a secret and the girl expresses that she wishes she could look at something outside that was "worth seeing". After she leaves, a new passenger reveals that **the girl was completely blind**.
- **The Woman on Platform No. 8:** The twelve-year-old narrator, Arun, is waiting alone at Ambala station. He is approached by a kind, dignified woman in a white sari, who buys him tea and sweets in the dining room. When Arun's schoolmate Satish and his imposing mother arrive, the kind woman claims to be Arun's mother. Arun likes the woman's kindness and dislikes Satish's mother, proclaiming, **"I like strangers"**.
- **The Thief's Story:** Narrated by Hari Singh, an experienced fifteen-year-old thief. He takes a job working for Romi, a trusting writer. Hari steals Romi's money (seven hundred rupees) but fails to catch the Lucknow Express. He feels remorse not for robbing a good man, but for losing the opportunity to learn to write sentences. He returns the money, and Romi, realizing the truth, promises to teach him sentences and gives him a fifty-rupee note (still wet from the night's rain).
- **Love and Cricket:** The narrator, "Rusty", who is bored watching cricket, meets **Sushila**, his "lost love of twenty plus years ago". He tells her he never married after she turned him down (due to her parents' wishes, as he had "no money, and no prospects"). He hums the tune of *Daisy, Daisy* (A Bicycle Built for Two), which his grandfather used to sing. She is now a mother of three and married to a wealthy stockbroker.

Stories of Adolescence, Morality, and Social Conflict

- **The Fight:** Ranji, a Rajput, claims ownership of a clean forest pool in Rajpur. He battles Suraj, a thicker-set Punjabi boy. After a frantic, unscientific struggle that ends in a draw, Ranji demonstrates his superior diving and swimming skills. Suraj, impressed, asks Ranji to teach him, leading to the boys becoming friends.
- **A Case for Inspector Lal:** The narrator meets Inspector Keemat Lal, a policeman in Shahpur. The Inspector recounts the unsolved case of the murder of the Rani of Panauli (found with her head split open by an axe). The Inspector solved the case: the Rani was killed by a **young girl, Kusum**, whom the Rani was attempting to force into prostitution with a wealthy man named Mr. Kapur. The Inspector, feeling compassion, closed the case without punishing Kusum, though this cost him his promotion.
- **The Overcoat:** The narrator gives his overcoat to Julie, a young woman he meets at a Christmas party. The next day, he discovers the house she claimed to live in is a **roofless ruin**. An old woman informs him that Julie Mackinnon died of consumption **over forty years prior**. He finds his neatly folded overcoat on her grave in the cemetery.