

## WOMAN AS A SYMBOL OF STRENGTH: A READING OF ANITA DESAI'S CLEAR LIGHT OF DAY

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### ABSTRACT

*Anita Desai's Clear Light of Day depicts partition violence from a womanize perspective. She has covered themes such as women's oppression and quest for a fulfilling identity and family relationship. Her novel is not populated with heroic characters whether they are males or female characters. Her protagonists are marked by certain passivity, yet they have certain heroic qualities in them. Her characters stand out because their flaws are so believable. They really seem like real people. Clear Light of Day is a narrative about familial love and loyalty, coping and forgiveness. It tells the story of contemporary India and the impact of political turmoil and civil war on a family, a plummet into mental illness and how a family copes to protect and takes care of its own.*

**KEYWORDS:** Patriarchal Structures; Independence; Freedom Struggle; Repression; Partition Riot

### INTRODUCTION

Unlike the first phase of partition, fiction in English by women writers, novels written in the second phase (1980s) capture the partition violence perpetrated n the women's body. Anita Desai's Clear Light of Day depicts partition violence from a feminist perspective. Desai's focus is on the violence in Delhi. Her fiction covers themes such women's subordination and quest for self-asserting identity and family relationship. Her protagonists are marked by certain passivity, yet have distinct heroic qualities in them. But in spite of such heroic streaks, they often meet with tragedy. Clear Light of Day tells the story of India at the time of partition-marred independence, and the impact of political turmoil and civil war on a family and how a family is webbed into its relationships. This essay makes the point that partition era's Indian women's subordination goes on due to their construct as the cultural symbolic of the nation—a repression, the protagonist of Clear Light of Day, Bim, refuses to accept and that by doing so, she demonstrates her inner strength in exploiting the contradictions within the patriarchal structure in her own favor.

This is a story of a bourgeois family's struggle against the forces of disintegration. The two sisters, separated by lifestyle and distance, take care of lives of themselves as well as their families. Tara, beautiful and worldly, has returned from living abroad as the wife of a diplomat. Bim, conventional and competent, has never left Old Delhi, where she cares for Baba, their older brother, Raja, whose childhood ambition was to become a hero and who has married a Muslim and become a successful businessman. Both Tara and Bim grapple with the tensions of the past and the present. They struggle to redefine themselves and move beyond the confining stasis of their house and childhood.

This endeavor gets allegorized in the national struggle of women to attain a new political and social role in a post-partitioned, independent India. Tara is dependent on her husband, and Bim is responsible for Baba. Desai depicts the

helplessness with which Tara and Bim try to cope up with a stifling, oppressive experience. Initially, Tara and Bim may appear to be complete opposites: Tara is young and modern while Bim is older, responsible for taking care of their younger brother, Baba, and still remaining in their childhood house. Yet the seeming binaries do not hold for modern-looking Tara, who actually chooses to lie under male patronage, while traditional-looking Bim who, as Miriam Thaggert rightly remarks, is “politically informed”, whose assertions “mark[...] historical events occurring in India with the events taking place in her own family” (92).

Both Tara and Bim make sacrifices in their own ways toward escape and independence. Tara marries in order to escape Old Delhi, but is dependent on her husband, but Bim refuses to sacrifice her responsibility for her younger brother, and so she gives up an element of independence she would have otherwise attained. This complex struggle with autonomy and independence occurs against the backdrop of the newly-partitioned nation. Desai’s writing criticizes the experience of powerlessness, and the novel ultimately extends to demand a new role for women in post-independent India, moving beyond traditional domestic roles to a new level of political and social empowerment.

In *Clear Light of Day*, Desai celebrates the Delhi’s past. The novel allows the reader to feel the depth of a family which is engrossed with its own problems, though the family members think that not much is wrong within the family. At the novel’s heart, are the moving relationships among the members of the Das’ family, which has grown up apart from each other? Bim is a dissatisfied but ambitious teacher at a women’s college. She lives in her childhood home, where she cares for her mentally challenged brother, Baba. Bim and Tara attempt to reconcile their childhood dreams with their adult lives. Their struggles with autonomy and independence are echoed in the backdrop of the newly-partitioned nation. When Tara returns to visit Bim and Baba, old memories resurface and blend into a domestic drama that is intensely beautiful and leads to profound self-understanding. But the novel focuses primarily on Bim and goes back to a time when the siblings were children.

Writing about the perplexities of women caught between colonial and patriarchal structures, Desai recognizes the mixed blessing of colonial education. Female protagonists, in her novels, often turn to English education to secure economic independence, thereby gaining some leverage in the traditional patriarchal systems within which they live. Education is portrayed as the process that brings women out of their homes and into the public space as “economically able subjects who gradually gain critical consciousness of the forces ruling their lives as women in postcolonial societies” (Rajeshwari Mohan 102).

*Clear Light of Day* interweaves the tales of three women—Mira, Bim and Tara—as they struggle with adulthood and its responsibilities along with traumatic events of India’s independence and partition. Through its involvement with personal as well as collective memory, the novel encourages a similar, even symbolical, reading of the story of the nation and the status of its women. Bim, the protagonist, is a woman upon whom the responsibility for the family is unconsciously forced, even though such a responsibility, morally, should have been taken up by her brother, Raja. In a society, where tradition guarantees men as patriarchal rulers and protectors of women, but such protection coming from the weaker sex, Bim’s situation comes out to imply a strong social critique.

While the independence struggle marks a movement when patriarchal restrictions on women underwent redefinition, the narrative of the novel posits an altogether different scenario. As women in growing numbers were joining the independence movement, and in the process of emancipating themselves, Bim remains firmly enclosed and imprisoned

in her home. Even though she is a very educated modern woman, ambitious about her future, her horizons are closed. This heavy loss is caused due to the family drama that narrows down her future prospects to a large extent. While the nation is undergoing fiery partition riots, Bim is left behind in the family home. She finds herself alone and quite unprepared to manage the small family business, sketch out a professional life for herself and take care of her younger brother and her father suffering from Down's Syndrome. Her elder brother, Raja, however, is given the opportunity to participate in the struggle but is unable to do so, as he is suffering from tuberculosis. Bim, the self-taught sister never leaves home.

A strong reason for remaining in the family home is her responsibility towards Baba. At one point, she expresses her frustration on Baba by asking him to go away and live with Raja in Hyderabad. But as soon as she does so, she is filled with guilt and regret:

It was Baba's silence and reserve and other worldliness that she had wanted to break open and ransack and rob, like the hunter, who, moved by the white bird's grace, as it hovers in the air above him, raises his crossbow and shoots to claim it for his own—his treasure, his loot and brings it hurtling down to his feet, no white spirit or symbol of grace, but only a dead albatross, a cold package of death. (Anita Desai 164–65)

The Das' home has seen many childhood dramas. Bim and Tara realize a sense of the worth of their sibling relationship. Tara's trip home every three to five years makes Bim realize the reason for her returning home: the Das' home. Bim now understands the "solid ground, that was what the house had been – the lawn, the rose walk, the guava trees, the veranda..." (153). and all of this is now Bim's domain from which she is inseparable.

With so much of inactivity Present in the house, "it is no wonder that Raja escapes into his Romantic world of Byron, Swinburne and Tennyson" (Sudhakar Ratnakar Jamkhandi 248). Bim and Raja walk at the terrace reciting poetry. Most of the time, he is at Hyder Ali's library attempting to escape from his home, as no other family but his own seems to have so much illness and oddity, "so many things that could not be mentioned and had to be camouflaged or ignored" (Desai 49). As Bim clears out the remains of the past from her room, she does not think of new beginnings but of death. Once again, she marks this turning point in her feelings when she draws a citation from "a book that would draw the tattered shreds of her mind together and plait them into a composed and concentrated whole" (167). Bim's loss of control is followed by a mood of subjective thinking in which she sees by the clear light of day that she is bound up to her siblings, is dependent on their love and approval, as much as they are. She prevents the characters from being static and the novel from degenerating into little more than an anecdotal narrative. Gradually, she represses her angry resistance to her family's dependence on her, and "accepts her place with a Christ-like abnegation of self, a series of revisions occur" in her mind (Mohan 109). Her anger is now transfigured through poetry. In her newly-found state of resignation, she can hear cadences that have eluded her in the past. Like Raja and Tara, Bim too is filled with guilt. At one level, she feels her staying back was a matter of compulsion, not of choice. But at another level, even if she would have been given a choice, she would have found it extremely difficult to go away voluntarily, as Raja and Tara had done. Having stayed back, however, she observes her action as a kind of sacrifice. It surfaces her guilt and forces her to recognize the ambivalent feelings in herself.

While Raja escapes the dreariness of the house by marrying Benazir in the Ali family and shifting to Hyderabad, Tara escapes by marrying Bakul, a Foreign Service diplomat. Still she likes to come home or she will lose touch. But while she relishes being home again, she resists the atmosphere when she says, "why had nothing changed—why did it not keep

up with her?" (Desai 12). She feels Bim is responsible for the "aura of the permanence" in the house (Jamkhandi 249). Tara further regrets, "why did Bim allow nothing to change?. but whenever she saw them, at intervals of three or five years, all was exactly as before" (Desai 12). Even Bakul's observation of the Misras is also true of the Das' home when he says, "It is very strange meeting them at intervals of several years, finds them exactly where they were" (150).

As for Tara, she finds a friend and a surrogate mother in Mira-masi in her childhood. Mira-masi entertains the three characters Bim, Tara and Raja in their childhood with stories. She provides them with a means of happiness, something their parents have never provided them. To them, "she was the tree that grew in the center of their lives and in whose shade they lived" (110–111). She was brought from her in-laws to her sister, so that she could be protected from the vultures' eyes of her in-laws and to take care of the children here, whose parents were busy playing cards. "At least that saved her from being used by her brothers in-law, who would have put the widow to a different use had she been more appetizing" (108). Married at a young age, of 12 and widowed while still a virgin, Mira looked much older than her elder sister. Being completely drained out in her in-law's house, doing exhaustive domestic work, she was "turned out" when no longer in use. Then "another household could find some use for her; cracked pot, torn rag, picked bone" (108). Constant repression of her sexuality, so that she does not fall prey to the appetites of her brothers-in-law and the constant demands placed on her by others to fulfill surrogate roles of woman as maid and as nurturer ultimately force her to "erase her memory and her body by slowly and silently drinking herself to death" (Sangeeta Ray 96). Her very identity in the Das' household as Mira-masi finally leads to her breakdown. She has never been allowed to be just Mira. Finally, she "dies denuded, ultimately reduced to a handful of ashes at the bottom of the river" (96). Desai here produces a weird picture of Mira-masi's madness in terms of Shakespeare's Ophelia. According to VrindaNabar, Mira-masi's Ophelia-like madness implied in "Bim's own recollection of her aunt as a drowned Ophelia. While the form Ophelia's madness takes is logically accountable within the dramatic framework of Hamlet, there are no corresponding logical connections in the instance of Mira" (97).

Bim is, however, much stronger than Mira-masi. That Bim takes up the responsibility of her family is praiseworthy. That she does not explode with anger and impatience is remarkable. She thinks that Tara and Bakul, even Raja and Benazir feed on her blood because it "must have been good blood, sweet and nourishing" (qtd. in Jamkhandi 53). She now realizes that her brothers and sister are all parts of her. Both Mira-masi and she never leave home, both find home a haven and they hardly need the outer world. Mira-masi feels she will drown in the well near the house and she unaccountably takes to drinking, as does a baby to a milk bottle. Towards the close of the novel, however, Bim does feel some resemblances between her and Mira-masi, when she says, "I always did feel that I shall end up in that well myself one day" (Desai 157). This uncanny, lingering presence of life-in-death makes visible the death-in-life, which is the fate that the peculiar circumstances of national culture impose on women. After Mira-masi's death, the only reason for Bim's remaining in the family home is her responsibility for Baba. In an elegiac vein, Bim recalls her anger towards her family and accepts her position with a messianic fatalism:

Bim could see as well as by the clear light of day that she felt only love and yearning for them all, if there were hurts, these gashes and wounds in her side that bled, then it was only because her love was imperfect and did not encompass them thoroughly enough, and because it had flaws and inadequacies and did not extend to all equally. (165)

Bim is the protector of her family honor. She is glad that the tall hedges conceal the house from sight. Until she is ready to reveal family's secrets, the hedges grow big and wild. Only at the end is she willing to trim them because she then

realizes how valuable she is to her siblings. *Clear Light of Day*, hence, makes its readers clear that agency in postcolonial context is often predicated upon the ability to negate the structures one inhabits intimately. Even though the Das home decays eventually, it has a rejuvenating influence on those who return and a reassuring one on those who remain. The novel leaves us with a sense of the crippling paucity of choices available to middle class women. Desai evokes the heat, the changes and non-changes of characters and their subtle secret movements.

The partition of the Das' family parallels the partition of British India into two nation states. The violent domestic upheavals of the Das family recall what the narrative of *Clear Light of Day* puts, as "there was rioting all through the country and slaughter on both sides of the border"(Ray 71). This is why, Sangeeta Ray rightly remarks that "certain important domestic episodes are inextricably connected to crucial historical events [in such a way that there is] the reflection of the macro political in the micro political"(138). Even though there is no graphic description of the partition riots in the novel, the spotlight on the upheaval in the Das' household micro politically represents the macro political dimensions of the brutality of the partition of 1947, and this oblique representation, as the analysis has shown, is from the womanize perspective, which exposes the appropriation of women at a time when a momentous event, such as the partition of the country was taking place.

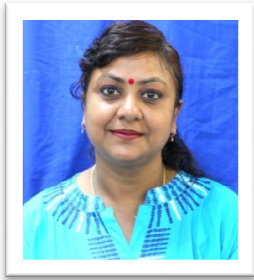
Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* shows history, as it impinges on the lives of her characters: it displays how people despite themselves are tied to others. Above all, it exhibits the ambivalences of people's emotions of the futility of human lives caught in a mesh of circumstances and accidents. Towards the close of the novel, Bim can see life in the clear light of day: that her life is for her siblings and that she holds a very significant place in their lives. The novel ends on a much clearer optimistic hope for future. In pre-partition India, women's sexuality was measured by patriarchy along the lines of their acquiescence to conventional household mores. However, things began to change radically in the aftermath of the partition violence of 1947. Women, particularly those affected by the seminal event, started to strive for an identity that was forged out of the dissolution of the strict distinctions between the private and public spheres. However, women's entry into the visible sphere only denoted an extension of their duties as caring and self-sacrificing sex. It increased their responsibilities in addition to regular household work. Women subsequently in no way acquired the agency to question their everyday life problems, deep-rooted in the patriarchal social order. A crack in that order was opened though the kind of inner strength that the likes of Bim displayed.

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