

**A Study of Societal Relationships in Anita Desai Novels
(The Clear Light of The Day)**

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Abstract

The intention behind the writing of this paper is to exhibit the fictional writing of Anita Desai reflects the contemporary style of living, relations in the society. A theme of Anita Desai is always alienation from the society. She is one of the fictional writers of the Indian English. As a novelist she has portrayed the characters in novel depicting the societal cause, financial weakness are the causes for exile. The psychic nature of her characters is just derived from the society. Anita Desai has enriched the theme of people scared of living in the real world, rather would like to live in their dream world or virtual world. Her novels present an interpretation to the long consoled moan of a psyche. The writings of Anita Desai always go with the female Indian for the self-identity. Most of her works engage the complexities of modern Indian culture from a feminine perspective while highlighting the female Indian predicament of maintaining self-identity as an individual woman. She develops deep into the psyche of her female characters where she finds them struggling to strike a balance between self and society. She leads her characters to a sense of loneliness and alienation in many cases, but in some other cases there is a strong desire to overpower this as well. In most of her works, she stressed on the lives of the Indian middle-class women as most of her female characters highlighted on their strained relationships. She presents the plight of introspective, hypersensitive women in her novels.

Keywords: self-identity, alienation, introspective, consoled moan, strained relationships

The Psychological Sense of Exile and Alienation

Old jealousies between the two sisters come up again as they reflect on how they were earlier; Tara, quiet, of delicate feelings, and less confident; Bim, stronger, abler in school, and attractive. But the intervening years have changed both in certain ways. Tension mounts as the silences grow longer and deeper in and around the house. Tara wonders how Bim can stay on in a shabby house, taking care of her retarded brother, Baba, and teaching history to young girls in a college. The family's "petrified" state both draws Tara in and repulses her enough to make her think again of fleeing to "that neat, sanitary, disinfected land in which she lived with Bakul" (p. 28)².

The family's "petrified" state particularly becomes a subject of reflection and occasional discussion among its members because Bim refuses to attend Moyna's wedding (Raja's eldest daughter), which is to take place in Hyderabad. Bim holds it against Raja that he abandoned her and Baba after their parents' deaths; and that he also missed his true calling of being a poet, as he had earlier vowed to Bim, and merely became a fat, rich man. Bim herself, of course, has devoted her life to looking after others: Raja during his deadly illness in 1947, the alcoholic Aunt Mira, the retarded brother, and everyone else who needed care (including Hyder Ali Sahib's dog, Begum). In both sisters' lives, unhappiness and boredom in their house are distinct memories, relieved only by the presence of kind and affectionate (though perhaps not always the best) neighbors; though Tara's life changed with her marriage and stay abroad. Their brother Raja's life was different from theirs even in Delhi, but it changed radically after he left. He had idealized Hyder Ali Sahib, the Muslim gentleman who lived across the street until the Summer of 1947, and he moved to Hyderabad, inheriting Hyder Ali Sahib's property through marriage to Benazir, his father-in-law's only daughter.

Tara and Bim have the delusion about Aunt Mira, whose soul still seems to inhabit the house or the garden. She is a missing person whose presence is felt. Baba, the autistic brother, is physically there but his existence amounts to nothing—he has no thoughts, responses, or initiatives which may cohere in his own or others' lives; Raja has moved to Hyderabad and absented himself physically; the Das mother and father are dead (Bim-and-Tara's parents)—they were rarely at home and with the children even when they were living; Hyder Ali Sahib and his family no longer live in the house across the street; Tara herself is now an absence abroad, and now a presence in the Old Delhi home. Yet, the novel is about the presence of the missing persons and their relations to those who actually reside in this place.

For example, Raja lives in Hyderabad, but he is a main subject in Delhi; Aunt Mira is dead, but she presides over most things in Tara's, as well as Bim's, memories of the house, its past and present character and atmosphere. It is a somber song of praise for Delhi, Old and New, ancient and modern, the city that has witnessed the empires (Muslim, British) build and collapse; and whose essential life continues at its own pace, compromising tradition with change, the diversity to unity, keeping alive its intrinsic relation to those who still live in it or have fallen away. In this sense, the novel deals with Delhi as Desai's earlier *Voices in the City* dealt with Calcutta, the vengeful City-Mother⁴ that both gives and takes away from its inhabitants; a creative influence that is equally destructive, a dark power whose claws can scratch a rock and invest it with meanings. And, finally, the novel is also about the irredeemable relation between the public event and a private sense of order. Since 1947 the Das family hasn't had better control than it had before.

The role of the mother in this novel is not much different from that of his father. And then their mother, for the first time in twenty years, missed an evening at the club, says she does not feel well and will stay in bed. That night she passed quietly into coma so that when her husband returned from the club after an unsatisfactory game with a unaccustomed partner, he found her lying still and flaccid on her bed, quiet beyond question him *on his game*. (*Clear light of day*, p.53)

What does make a wife? Why, they felt a wife is someone like their mother who raised Her eyes when the father rose from the table and dropped them when he sat down, who spent Long hours at dressing table before mirror, amongst jars and bottles that smelt sweet and into Which she dipped questing fingers and drew at the ingredients of a wife –sweet smelling but Soon rancid: who commanded servants and chastised children and was obeyed like a queen. The novel “where shall we go this summer revolves round Sita, a mother of four and her unwillingness to deliver her fifth baby into a world here. The creative impulse had no chance against the over powering desire to destroy. Aunt Mira had none of these attributes. (*Clear Light of Day*, p.11)

In early summer, Tara, now a mature wife and mother, returns with her husband to the childhood home in Old Delhi where her sister Bim and brother Baba still live. Tara's tri-annual visit to India is punctuated by a special event the wedding of brother Raja's oldest daughter. Tara has become an adult woman, happily engaged in her official duties as the spouse of a foreign diplomat and the anxieties of rearing children in an alien culture. Despite

Bim's active teaching career, the ike Baba, who is mindlessly engrossed in his 1947 record collection, Bim is trapped in the past.

As their niece's wedding draws closer, the two sisters' initial uneasiness with each other develops into a tension marked by awkward conversations and equally uncomfortable silences. Bim, for reasons Tara cannot at first understand, refuses to attend the family celebration; the psychologically disabled Baba is absorbed in his world of old phonograph records and solitary games, and the wedding exists in a reality beyond his comprehension. Urging Bim to explain the tremendous anger she feels toward Raja, who was once her closest intimate, Tara elicits Bim's, and her own, reminiscences of youth. Their reminiscence takes them back to the violent summer of 1947, when, with the Indian independence and the founding of Pakistan...in *Clear Light of Day*, the political implications of Indian independence are reflected in the characters' inner turmoils

The contradictions between desire and necessity:

These are examined as the shaping forces in the characters' lives. Finally, Bim and Tara both realize that their present situations result not from the limitations of economic and physical need but are responses to hidden emotional struggles. Exorcising their private ghosts, the women achieve psychic independence, partly a result of their willingness to examine, albeit privately, their carefully protected areas of vulnerability. Yet the women's relationship is never sentimentalized. The narrative interpenetration of two complex perspectives, which otherwise remain profoundly separate from each other, makes Bim and Tara's story a moving and incisive psychological portrait seeking to comprehend the forces of human motivation.

Desai narrates events retrospectively and the Das sisters' return to adolescence and childhood thus achieves psychoanalytic significance. This is not, however, a clinical portrait; presenting events from multiple perspectives reconciles grievances. Desai's narrative technique provides the human compassion Bim and Tara often lack for each other. Bim and Tara are completely opposite in their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of the world, and each serves as a foil for the other's lack of a critically reflexive self-image.

The novel chronicles the sisters' history of competition in a number of ways. Their childhood rivalry for adult attention is surpassed by each woman's desire to earn Raja's respect. For Tara, this means playing the role of a competent and gracious diplomat's wife, wiping out the memory of an emotionally needy and naive child whose marriage conveniently unburdened her family. Bim, struggling to maintain her self-righteous dignity, counters Raja's perceived emotional and economic betrayal with the only tools available to her. Remaining physically

distant and refusing to communicate, Bim reaffirms herself through deliberate estrangement from Raja.

Apparent incongruities into an intense psychological drama:

The characters of these two women are fully realized. Anita Desai's skillful development of them meaningfully accounts for apparent incongruities, weaving them into an intense psychological drama. While the sisters' deepest insecurities remain, for each other, unspoken, their internal disclosures of memory fill the void of understanding between them for the reader. The traumatic events signaling the children's passage into adulthood is narrated from Bim's point of view. Then, Tara recounts the symbolically laden events of early childhood (the unspeakable terror associated with the household well, in which the cow was..As in most of her other novels, Desai's focus in *Clear Light of Day* is ostensibly narrow: She is interested in representing family relationships and individual acts of self-realization.

In this novel, however, the personal explorations of guilt, betrayal, inertia, and responsibility double as political realizations. Women must find a new political role in postcolonial India after the country's independence in 1947. Desai argues that women must struggle to make a place for themselves in a paternalistic nation, where womanhood is a mere symbolic construct (the "mother" nation). Her analysis of gender and politics thus extends into a critique of Indian nationalism, which excluded gender issues from its political rhetorics of liberation and rejuvenation.

Thus Bim understands of self and the nation is worked out through her reconstruction of the maternal figure: The mother is both a personal role to which she has been reduced by her family and a political symbol which is manipulated by the male political leaders of modern India. Bim must reinvent a positive maternal image in order to go beyond her personal role of caretaking and her politically inert position in society. The narrative of remembrance and reconciliation is affected through a complex web of maternal symbols and metaphors.

While the political implications of Desai's work are clear, the personal dynamics of self-knowledge and insight are prominent as well....Desai's adroit perception and representation of complex interior landscapes is the mainstay of her fiction. A focus on isolated individuals, particularly women, frequently figures in Desai's work. Desai invents compelling characters by representing women at various ages in different social stations and with diverse values.

Placing a variety of women at the center of her novels, Desai explores the question of what constitutes woman's fulfillment and examines the inevitable opposition she faces. Desai's

women are not entirely constructed by social situations but seek symbolic and actual autonomy, overcoming powerful psychic and political constraints.

It is appropriate that the major influence on *Clear Light of Day*, which has been called Anita Desai's most complex novel, was the poetry of T. S. Eliot, the American British writer whose intricate works transformed the poetic traditions of the early twentieth century. Desai credits Eliot's *Four Quartets* (1943) with having inspired her to write her novel in four sections that, like Eliot's work, ignore chronology.

Clear Light of Day reflects the concept of time suggested in one of the epigraphs to the novel, in which Eliot defines the human experience as a series of dreamlike sequences in which people, places, and the individual all continually appear, vanish, and then reappear. Interestingly, though in that passage Eliot also mentions love, the implication in *Clear Light of Day* is that neither reason nor the will can cause one person to love another. Instead, love is influenced by seemingly random memories along with the inevitable fact of change.

In the section devoted to the Das siblings' childhood, it is evident that when they are very young the two oldest children do have a special bond. It is only when Raja becomes aware of the difference between males and females that he distances himself from Bim, and her sense of rejection is so painful that she deliberately inflicts pain on her sister. Years later, Raja's move to Hyderabad, his acceptance as a member of Hyder Ali's family, his preoccupation with his wife and children, and his financial success all contribute to Bim's growing...

Anita Desai's novel, *Clear Light of Day*, is a small treasure rich in finely drawn characters, redolent with arresting imagery, and evocative of an India which challenges its inhabitants to survive the relentless environment. This story of change acknowledges the need to capitulate to that which is inevitable, and, in doing so, the characters experience love and hostility, resentment and acceptance, forgiveness and hate.

Tara, the wife of a diplomat, a woman with nearly grown daughters, has come to revisit her childhood home in Old Delhi, a dreary, disintegrating house where the paint is peeling, the varnish is crazed with lines caused by the oppressive heat of the shimmering summer climate, and the heavy curtains are suffocating with dust. The old rose walk in the garden boasts only a few, limp blossoms, their slight heads "lolling" on weak stems, the grass frizzles in the unbearable sun, and the garden gate stands neglected, sagging on its hinges. Here, Tara reflects, nothing ever changes.

Carefully taught by her husband to rise above the lethargy of her undisciplined background, to become organized and precise, she futilely tries to maintain an air of industry. Why does

her sister Bim Das seem so content with these dismal, unkempt surroundings? Why is no order imposed, no personality asserted? Harshly, she confronts her younger brother Baba Das, but his hands hang limply at his sides and she is answered only with shadows and silences. Tara shrinks back: her harshness is out of place in this immutable world. Surely, Bim herself who has always possessed decision, firmness, and resolve will share her secret for dealing with the “heavy, turgid atmosphere” of the house which is relentlessly pulling Tara under, making her feel as helpless as when she was a child.

As she watches Bim and talks with her, however, it becomes slowly apparent that the impression of changelessness is a false one, for Bim is only persevering with the inertia of her life. She runs the house eccentrically, even cruelly, serving meals of leftovers “smudged” onto small plates and served day after day as if to a family of kittens; she urges poor Baba to spend time at the family business, to take a bus and come home for lunch—an impossible task for a man with no personality and no vitality. She only succeeds in agitating him unnecessarily.

It is especially disturbing to Tara to realize Bim’s bitterness toward Raja Das, their once much-adored older brother who left home years before to marry the landlord’s daughter and inherit the property. At the mention of Raja’s name, Bim becomes cynical and critical. She has saved an old letter from him which she secrets away in the rolltop desk in her cluttered, untidy room as if it were a relic. Fiercely clattering down the stairs, she insists that Tara come with her and read the offending missive for herself.

Tara, horrified at her sister’s acrimonious denunciations, protests the letter’s age, but Bim refuses to listen, so intent is she about having been abused. Raja, newly appointed as his late father-in-law’s successor, has offered to allow Bim and Baba to live in the family home at the same rent as always. It is an awkward, yet loving message, but Bim, left alone to care for Baba, is deeply offended. This emotional tangle revealed in the musty, close room defies the neat rules and regulations of Tara’s adult life. She feels herself being drowned as if in a well, the scummy black water drawing inexorably over her head, a heavy weight pulling her down. Bim is a woman torn between two worlds—the old and the new. The four children grew up in an India raven by partition, in a household dominated by absent parents who appeared only when leaving for their club to play bridge, or arriving home to retire. Their mother, a diabetic, often lay in bed with her face set in a stiff warning that she was not to be approached. The children spent most of their time sitting on the veranda steps staring at the gate, or lying on their backs at night looking at the stars wondering, dreaming, always aware of the ponderous

ennui hanging in the air of their dismal home. The deaths of their parents made little difference for it were as if they were simply away playing cards.

Bim is left to be the head of the family. Her brother Raja, to whom this task would normally fall, has become terribly ill with tuberculosis, and Aunt Mira, who has nurtured them lovingly is further and further incapacitated by her addiction to alcohol. When Bakul, then Tara's prospective husband, asks for her hand in marriage, he goes to Bim for permission. Bim replies, "I don't think you need to ask..."

On the surface Tara is the opposite of her elder sister Bim: she has married a diplomat and moves into the circles of India's up and coming elite. While her sister Bim has remained confined in the decaying family home, Tara has moved out of that house and has followed her husband on his various missions all over the world. Yet, just like the history teacher Bim, Tara too feels the need to reconnect herself with her family past, and, during the course of the novel, she will reject the role of sheltered wife that she embraced to escape family pressures and frustrations

To discover her true character and become fully emancipated, Tara has paradoxically to go back to her childhood home and come to terms with her past. In this the Das family is in a similar condition to India itself. As Tara arrives at Bim's house, while she is leafing through a book of her childhood and a founding text for the Indian nation (Nehru's Letters to a Daughter), sitting on the stuffed chair, spongy and clammy to touch, she felt that heavy spirit come and weigh down her eyelids and the back of her neck so that she was pinned down under it, motionless

Here the character is clearly described as under the spell of the spirit of her childhood which leaves her motionless. By the end of the novel, however, Tara has progressed to be reconciled with her past and has grown more independent from her husband who has always tried to shelter her and avoid possible worries.

Conclusion:

This research article is an attempt to explore and examine thematic variety in Anita Desai's novels. Her each work is an accelerating exploration of the psychic self and emphasizes on the alienation of man from an absurd world, his estrangement from normal society, and his recognition of the world as negative and meaningless. She presents the man as sensitive, individual, fragmented and spiritually destroyed by the particular social conditions of life. Research article is an attempt to explore and examine thematic variety in Anita Desai's novels. Her each work is an accelerating exploration of the **psychic self** and

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