

Clear Light of Day: A Study of Indian Motherhood in the Fiction of Anita Desai

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Introduction:

Anita Desai does not easily fit into traditional molds, and the scholarly criticism written in reference to her body of work illustrates this by its variety of themes, topics and opinions. Most scholars agree that Desai uses mundane, everyday activities and the seemingly ordinary domain in order to portray something greater and universal, in an existentialist sense, although identifying and describing exactly what that something greater is where most of the consensus among critics ends.

Although there are a variety of ways to look at Desai's work, and multiple ways to go about analyzing and exploring her fiction, this paper seeks to examine the variety of ways that the maternal is represented in the writings of Anita Desai and to question what types of policies, politics, and mythologies inform and create the societal role of the Indian mother within Anglo-Indian fiction. In order to investigate the complex and often inconsistent realm wherein Indian mothers dwell within Indo-Anglian fiction, one must look not only at the daily realities and the multiplicity of experiences Indian mothers have but also the historical and mythical constructions which shape the archetypal and idealistic portrayals to which Indian women are constantly compared.

This paper entitled "Clear Light of Day" focuses on Anita Desai's concern with the way mythical and ideological representations of Indian women contort and make the image of motherhood and maternity prescriptive within the context of her novels and, of course, in the larger Indian society. Figures such as Sita and the mother goddess constrain Indian women in two explicit ways, since they imply that every woman should be a mother but at the same time present an ideal which no woman can attain. In "Mapping Motherhood: The Fiction of Anita Desai," literary critic Geetanjali Chanda notes that Desai often "weaves the traditional duality of the

mother as creator and destroyer and embeds the text in an Indian reality where actual mothers are often ignored or ill-treated; whereas in folklore, myth and nation building the idea of motherhood is venerated and iconic mothers are worshipped". Critic Radha Chakravarty agrees and adds that "in India, women's self-worth and value are usually dependent on their reproductive functions. This valorization of motherhood has its own built-in paradoxes: maternity is associated with a capacity for voluntary self-sacrifice which entitles the mother to her quasi divine status".

Clear Light of Day:

Clear Light of Day is a novel that examines the interactions of two middle-aged sisters, Bimla ("Bim") and Tara Das, during a visit by Tara to their ancestral home in Old Delhi where Bim still resides. The story jumps back and forth between the present day (1980) and the sisters' childhood memories of Delhi during the traumatic partition and independence of India. Throughout the novel, Desai reveals more and more details about Bim and Tara's childhood which eventually shape how the reader characterizes the adult versions of the sisters and their actions. This time period in Indo-Anglian literature is similar to what was stated earlier in regards to *Fire on the Mountain*, with female Indian writers exploring more complex themes and pursuing ideas surrounding the concepts of identity and purpose. In 1980, the actual country of India was again under the leadership of Indira Gandhi, although sectarian violence and unrest still remained. The characters Bim, Tara, Mira-masi, Mother and the Misra sisters all add complexity to the discussion of Indian motherhood and also demonstrate how maternity and matrimony shape Indian women's lives. Chakravarty does note, however, that at the end of the novel, the figure of the mother still emerges as a complicated enigma, "a sign of multiple possibilities, a trope with both repressive and emancipatory potential". In this novel, Desai also

explores how female identity is formed and how self-reflection and memory operate in the female psyche. Within the story, motherhood can be characterized in a variety of ways, including through the nationalistic myth of mother India, the cow as a mythical feminine force, and the appropriation of characteristics of particular goddesses. It is also interesting to see how women who are not mothers are characterized within the social order of the novel and to investigate exactly what it means either to have access to or to be denied access to the societal role of mother.

Throughout the story, Bim Das is the person who holds the entire Das family together. She has to nurse her brother Raja back to health, take care of her other mentally-challenged brother, Baba, and keep an eye on her self-destructive, alcoholic Mira-masi all while trying to assert an independent self and oversee the affairs necessary to keep the house in order. At one point Bim laments, "I wish there was someone else who would go [on an errand]....there is never anybody except me". From a very young age, Bim is under the burden of a number of responsibilities, and there is a constant tension between what the family requires of her for its survival and what Bim wants for herself. At one point in the novel Bim proclaims, "I don't understand the insurance business. Father never bothered to teach me. For all father cared, I would have grown up illiterate and – and *cooked* for my living, or *swept*. So I had to teach myself history, and teach myself to teach," illustrating exactly how she feels about her upbringing and the lack of preparation it gave her for her actual future responsibilities. It is not only Bim's father that makes her feel she is unprepared, but later in her life her brother Raja also does not understand the encumbrances Bim has. Leaving her to care for the insurance business and renouncing any duties he would have had as the eldest son, Raja ignores how vulnerable she is economically as a single woman, "binding her to the very familial system she has wanted to escape. Bim's attempts to deal with her femininity as a controllable obstacle that can be overcome through education and willpower have not changed the fundamental distribution of social and economic power which ultimately demands that she pay the price for her brother's freedom". Like the house in Old Delhi, she remains static even when everything around her is changing. In a way the house itself can be seen as representative of India

during the time of the partition and beyond, while Bim, its keeper, is emblematic of Mother India, the caretaker of the nation. Like the mythical construct Mother India, Bim is not an actual biological mother, although in both cases that fact is not important; what is significant is that both Bim and Mother India have the characteristics deemed integral to motherhood and therefore can draw on the power of the myth to assert their individual persona, and in Bim's case to gain autonomy and mobility in her own right. Literary critic Sangeeta Dutta investigates this phenomenon, noting that "Desai raises the question whether rejecting physical motherhood is really rebellious. Bim has chosen to remain single, and seems antithetical to her sister Tara whose sole concentration is on her family and children. But though Bim had not physically been a life giver – her nurturing abilities are emphasized". Dutta goes on to say that "Bim achieves the identity of archetypal sustainer....by commitment to uphold relationships. Bim's symbolic motherhood sustains the family and also the house becomes a life giving and sustaining force against the destructive outer world". So again, the important part for the characterization and representation of the maternal is not physical, biological motherhood but, rather, the nurturing and caring role within each individual family unit, the role that Bim occupies within the Das household.

At first, Bim's burdens weigh heavily on the reader and make one feel mostly pity for her character and the life that she is forced to lead. In a telling anecdote, Tara remembers the time that Bim was attacked by a swarm of bees, and the narrator proclaims "It was a bees' festival, a celebration, Bim their appointed victim, the sacrificial victim on whom they had draped the ceremonial shawl, drawing it close about her neck as she stood drooping, shivering under the weight of their gauzy wings, their blue-black humming". Although this story is merely that of a childhood incident, it represents both the weight of responsibility that fell onto Bim's shoulders after the death of her parents and a marker of the guilt that her sister Tara felt at abandoning her family in order to pursue the more leisurely life of being Bakul's wife and the mother to his children. Bim, like Mother India, is merely the necessary victim, someone chosen to epitomize the traditions and rituals that symbolize India, even if that means complete self sacrifice. The nation should always be prioritized as

more important than the individual, and it is fitting that Bim, an individual, is attacked by a hive of bees, all acting in tandem and with the same interests. After Bim is attacked by the bees and forced to submit, she takes on the weight of the societal burdens and is actually brought close to resignation because of the immense encumbrance of responsibilities. Scholar Jenni Valjento actually feels that the entire novel rests on Bim's conflicted identity, her want to transcend the traditional role normally ascribed to Indian women but also her need to take care of the family and her family members. She states that Bim's identity formation consists of "a series of efforts to break free of an unwanted seclusion: isolated between the pathologically unchanging home and the prospect of adopting an equally restrictive upper middle-class female identity, Bim strives to be included in the changing outside world".

Despite the heavy burdens Bim is forced to endure alone, without the help of her able siblings Tara and Raja, she still emerges as a positively characterized model and one who is not easily defined and placed within societal structures. Literary critic Valjento claims that "Bim's cynicism [later in her life] comes from having no opportunities to act and be perceived as the kind of woman she originally wanted to be, and from a repeated obligation to be the woman others need to see her as," but I think most people look back on their lives and the desires they had when they were young and feel that they did not live up to their original expectations. Although Bim has obviously had to conform to certain roles within the family and as a woman, at the end of the novel Bim appears to reconcile these feelings and realize how her family and home life truly shaped both her and Tara's perceptions. Although she was forced to become the caretaker for her family and put her life plans on hold, Bim is able to use this to her advantage, refusing to marry and later becoming a teacher who has the ability to earn money outside of the home. She declares, "I shall work – I shall *do* things'....'I shall earn my own living – and look after *Mira-masi* and Baba and – and be independent". Through her unique yet restrictive upbringing, she sees the potential for liberation and the ability to assert one's self. Critic Anita Myles declares that through the character of Bim, "Anita Desai sends a message to all women – not to be cowed down by the

problems of life but to be stoic and develop the qualities of assertion and self-respect".

Despite the prominence of a nationalistic version of motherhood throughout *Clear Light of Day*, Bim is not the only character that is associated with a mythical representation or a universal symbol of motherhood. *Mira-masi*, the widowed aunt who arrives in Old Delhi to become the caretaker of the Das children, emerges as another model, albeit more repressed and thus less likely to find an outlet the way that Bim eventually does. Chakravarty posits that both Bim and *Mira-masi* represent Desai's attempt to "separate the task of mothering from the biological functions of pregnancy and childbirth". This is an important assertion because it again declares that the societal role of motherhood and the ideologies and mythologies that surround it are not contingent on biological motherhood and can indeed be upheld by single women who are still subscribing to the nurturer role. Desai once more evokes the imagery of bees to describe *Mira-masi's* bondage:

"A drudge in her cell, sealed into her chamber. A grey chamber, woven shut. Here she lived, here she crawled, dragging her heavy wings behind her. Crawled from cell to cell, feeding the fat white larvae that lived in the cells and swelled on the nourishment that she brought them. The cells swarmed with them, with their little tight white glistening lives. And she slaved and toiled, her long wings dragging. The air was filled with the angry buzzing of the queen bee".

This metaphorical vision reflects her actual lived experience which Desai characterizes as difficult since she "had been a twelve year old when she married and was a virgin when she was widowed – her young student husband, having left to study in England....caught a cold in the rain one winter night, and died," and, afterwards, "She was left stranded with his family and they blamed her bitterly for his death". Unable ever to consummate her marriage, and regarded by her in-laws as useless, *Mira Masi* is a tragic character throughout the novel. Her response to moving in with the Das family and taking care of her nieces and nephews is positive, and although she probably realizes she is being used for her caretaking abilities, she appears happy to have someone care about her.

The Vedic image of Gotama, the holy cow and a feminine force, is often described as devoted, compassionate, bountiful and protective, and these

characteristics are exactly what *Mira-masi* exudes, especially in regards to the Das children. *Mira-masi* mostly entertains the Das children, but she realizes that her occupation offers her no power in greater society and makes her reliant on the Das children:

“now they had an aunt, handed to them like a discarded household appliance they might find of use. They exchanged deep, understanding looks with each other: they had understood their power over her, they had seen she was buying or begging for their tolerance and patronage. They were not beyond, even at that age, feeling the superiority of their position and of extending their gratitude from that elevated position of power”.

In the novel, *Mira Masi* begs the Das parents to buy a cow in order to give fresh milk to the children and to save money; in the end, “the mother capitulated and the cow arrived, led in by the gardener on a rope to be examined and admired like a new bride” (107). Later there is another telling reference to *Mira Masi*’s connection with the cow when the narrator states, “If they [the Das children] choked her, if they sucked her dry of substance, she would give in without any sacrifice of will – it seemed in keeping with nature to do so”. *Mira Masi*’s ability to grant sustenance, her willingness to allow the children literally to suck her dry and the argument that this is both natural and keeping with the nature of things shows just how easily the connection between her and the Gotama image of the cow is to make. The narrator also declares of her, “She was the tree, she was the soil, she was the earth”. *Mira-masi* definitely has a connection to the natural world, which the holy cow Gotama has as well. In the actual plot of the novel, the cow that the Das family procured for their use ends up falling into the well, where it is stuck since no one can retrieve it. This leads to a slow death by starvation, a horrific event that haunted *Mira-masi* and the other Das children as well. Later, when *Mira-masi* is suffering from the last stages of alcoholism, “she seemed obsessed by the idea of the well – the hidden, scummy pool in which the bride-like cow they had once had, had drowned, and to which she seemed drawn,” and that haunting image proves to be a foreshadowing of *Mira-masi*’s future, which will include her death from alcohol, the amount so great that she basically drowns in it. And like a supernatural figure, and the cow-bride, she, too, haunts the text after her death, just a wisp of her

in Bim’s peripheral vision. The image of *Mira-masi* as Gotama proves how natural her role as widowed virgin is within Indian society. Although she had a difficult life in which nurturing and caretaking became her only options for survival, she, like the cow, is upheld as a positive image within Indian society for her self-sacrificing attributes. She married fairly well but supposedly brought her bad fortune into the arrangement, resulting in her being widowed before she even had the chance to consummate the relationship. It seems almost fated that she would not be a biological mother and she cannot claim motherhood and wifehood in the same sense that her sister can. She is able to assume the ideological role of motherhood, but only the self-sacrificial model, unlike Bim who is able to see opportunities even within her oppressive context.

Tara, Bim’s sister and a main character within the novel, emerges in contrast to Bim’s character, as a biological mother and submissive wife. Literary scholar Jenni Valjento characterizes Tara as perceiving “marriage as a way of escaping her doubly marginalized position, not only as the most ordinary and timid child in the family but also as the ‘other’ to Bim’s authoritative conception of female identity”. Unlike Bim who refuses to marry her entire life and instead looks for fulfillment in other venues, Tara marries Bakul as soon as she is able. Even as a child, Tara has already internalized the role of mother and wife as the only option available to her: “I am going to be a mother and knit for my babies,” she declares to both Raja and Bim, only gaining uproariously laughter from each of her siblings”. She emerges in this novel as a goddess appropriation and Sita character, reliant on her husband, unable to think independently and reticent to make autonomous decisions. She allows Bakul to take her away from her family in order to escape the somewhat complicated situation at her home, and also to help her transition from girl to woman, only made with her introduction into the world of motherhood. Like Sita she remains under her husband’s control, and submissive to his wishes, although for Tara this means putting on a face of refinement and diplomacy, traveling the world with her husband and children, and living a lavish lifestyle paid for by Bakul’s job, not what many would characterize as a difficult life. Also, Bakul emerges as a character that clearly cares for Tara and the entire Das family, despite his

somewhat sarcastic commentary on their lives, and although Tara can be equated with Sita, this does not seem to make her powerless or completely oppressed. Tara does appear to rely on Bakul much more than he relies on her, and in the novel when Tara is faced with difficult tasks, she feels she “wanted only to turn and flee into that neat, sanitary, disinfected land in which she lived with Bakul, with its set of rules and regulations, its neatness and orderliness. And seemliness too – seemliness”. Throughout the novel she is shown as dependent on Bakul for both the material items needed for survival but also the emotional stability necessary for her sanity. Near the end of the story when Tara reacts to Bakul and Bim’s interactions, she does so with jealousy and fear: “She sensed it with a small prick of jealousy – a minute prick that simply reminded her how very close she was to Bakul, how entirely dependent on him for her own calm and happiness. She felt very vulnerable”. Although this episode makes her appear petty, it also shows Tara’s position in her relationship with Bakul and alerts her to the dreadful consequences that would follow any separation between her and Bakul. Tara emerges as a mother who is fulfilled by her roles yet still questions her power and autonomy within that relationship. For her, motherhood is empowering in certain ways and also helped her escape from a difficult home situation and, especially at the end of the novel, reifies her purpose in life. As was stated earlier in the paper, Indian motherhood emerges full of possibilities, both positive and negative for various women, and for Tara this complexity remains true.

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