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Female Characters in *Clear Light of Day*

In *Clear Light of Day* the female characters struggle for their identity despite all the limitations. For example, they appear to adopt the language and culture of the dominant class. This paper aims to show how the female protagonists like the colonized subjects fight to assert their existence in different ways like hybridization. These women employ the oppressor's discourse and culture in order to survive.

The story centers on an Indian family in old Delhi. The youngest daughter's memories and experiences. They have two brothers, Raja and Baba, the youngest member of the family, who is mentally handicapped. After their parents' death during their childhood, Bim had to look after Raja when he Tara, and her husband have returned to her home and family. As the story develops, Tara and her elder sister, Bim, reflect on their family became ill with tuberculosis, and nursed him back to health. She also had to care for her aunt when she fell ill, all the while taking care of Baba.

Now a history professor, Bim is a strong, independent unmarried woman who has to take on the family responsibility of looking after her handicapped brother, Baba, as well as their family home and business after their parents' death. She hails from a traditional family whose women including her

mother, sister and aunt are obliged to act according to the dictates of patriarchal society. However, her insight towards life, family, education and marriage which develops the notion of hybridity in this character makes her different from a typically Indian woman. Her character is in sharp contrast to her sister, Tara, who lacks the courage to face a tough challenge and “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” (28).

As a subjugated woman, Tara is taught by her husband, Bakul, after marriage to be ‘strong’ and ‘decisive’. Bim tries to be like her older brother Raja, who represents patriarchy. She stands against such a patriarchal way of life by acting like male characters because they are superior to women. Therefore, she has to hybridize her personality to differentiate herself from the typically passive Indian woman. Like Raja, she is fond of reading poetry. “She was acquainted with Byron, with Iqbal, even with T.S Eliot” (42). In a traditional Indian family, men are expected to read poetry since they are considered intellectually superior. During childhood, Bim wanted to be a “heroine” while her brother, Raja, wanted to be a “hero.” Tara, however, “physically smaller and weaker than Bim” (123), lacking her “vigor” and “stamina,” simply wanted to be a mother. The melting pot of school life made Tara “shrink ever further into a smaller, paler creature” (123), whereas it drew out 34

Bim’s ebullient and vivacious nature which was suppressed at home due to the unusual atmosphere of their house. “To Bim, school and its teachers and lessons were a challenge to her natural intelligence and mental curiosity that she was glad to meet” (123). School, as well as its teachers and lessons, was a terrifying prospect for Tara. “When confined within its high stone boundary walls, she thought of home with tearful yearning, almost unable to bear the separation from Aunt Mira, from Baba, from the comfortable, old, accustomed ayah...” (123). Like a young boy who enjoys playing sports, Bim had a “natural affinity with the bat and ball, and had the most splendid coordination, trained in sports as she was by Raja and Hamid who had often made use of her as afielder when they got up a cricket game between” (124). Playing sports with boys is another example of hybridization which gives Bim a chance to assert her existence.

On the other hand, Tara “was not good at any game” (124). If teachers and students “were choosing teams for a game, Tara was always left to the last, standing forgotten and wretched, and then one of the leaders would reluctantly agree to include her” (124). She is a passive woman who does not try to prove her female identity. It seems that to some extent, Tara welcomes her marginalized situation as a woman. When they were younger, Tara and Bim studied Hindi, while Raja embarked on Urdu because it was natural enough choice to make for the son of a Delhi family: Urdu had been the court language in the

days of the Muslim and Moghul rulers [who ruled India before British colonization] and had persisted as the language of the learned and the cultivated. Hindi was not then considered a language of great pedigree. (47)

As a male character, Raja chooses Urdu as the court language, which makes him feel proud and superior to others who learn Hindi. Urdu is a symbol of masculinity and considered as a superior and complete language. He made a scornful sound in his nose, holding up one of their Hindi copy-books as if it were an old sock, "Look, its angles are all wrong. And this having to go back and cross every word as you finish writing it, it is an-an impediment. How can you think fluently when you have to keep going back and crossing? It impedestheflow of the—the composition." (47)

Bim and Tara's struggle against the patriarchal society is illustrated by their hybridity, when for example they choose to "do anything they liked" because "Raja was not back from school and everyone else in the house was sleep" (131). They wondered "what should do they do that was daring enough, wild and unlawful enough for such a splendid opportunity?" (131). "Suddenly they saw why they were so different from their brother, so inferior and negligible in comparison: it was because they did not wear trousers" (132). They take their chance to enter patriarchal society by trying on Raja's pants by hybridizing themselves. Carried away by the splendour of their trousersed selves, Bim suddenly dashed across to the desk and pulled out the small top drawer in which Raja kept cigarettes. She found an opened packet with a few cheap, foulsmelling, loosely packed cigarettes and matches in her pocket, realizing now why Raja walked with fine, careless swagger. If she had pockets, if she had cigarettes, then it was only natural to swagger, to feel rich and superior and powerful. (132) To put on a pair of trousers signifies masculinity and superiority. When they tried on those trousers, they entered the world of masculinity which is another example of hybridization. "Now they thrust their hands into their pockets and felt even more superior" (132).

In this novel, Bim is portrayed as a woman who is totally different from the other Indian girls whose only ambition is marriage. She rejects Dr. Biswas, a man with a good position in the society. She becomes angry when Dr. Biswas, who wanted to marry her, behaves in the typically patriarchal way of keeping women down, by misunderstanding Bim's refusal: Now I understand why you do not wish to marry. You have dedicated your life to others—to yoursick brother and your aged aunt and your little brother who will be dependent on you all his life. You have sacrificed your own life for them. (97) Dr. Biswas doesn't understand the real reason for her refusal, because his justification for her refusal is she is a woman who wants to serve her family and sacrifices her life for them. He is not able to visualize Bim as a strong woman who wants to be independent. Bim's mouth fell open with astonishment at this

horrendous speech so solemnly, so leadenly spoken as if engraved on steel for posterity....She even hissed slightly in her rage and frustration—at being so misunderstood, so totally misread, then gulp a little with laughter at such grotesque misunderstanding, and her tangled emotions twisted her face and shook the thought of Biswas out of her. (97)

According to Sunania Singh, “Bim pursues her ambitions. It is by being productive and active that Bim gains her transcendence from life which Tara opts for in quest of love and protection. Bim refuses to confine herself to her role as a mere female, connoting an insignificant prey or object for other use and pleasure” (41). Bim would hate to be emotionally dependent on anyone. The novelty in Bim is that she has no desire to be owned. She has been teaching her students to be self-dependent, be different from the women of her own generation: I’m always trying to teach them, train them to be different from you and me—and if they know how badly handicapped I still am, how I myself haven’t been able to manage on my own—they’d laugh, wouldn’t they?”. (155) Her confession to Tara shows she tries to overcome her limitations. In spite of all the limitations and obstacles, Bim succeeds in building her ambition which is a triumph in being independent, and it is Tara and Bakul who realize this: “Bim had found everything she wanted in life. It seemed so incredible that she hadn’t had to go anywhere to find it, that she had stayed on in the old house, taught in the old collage, and yet it had given her everything she wanted. Isn’t that strange Bakul...” (158). Singh continues: Bim is able to acquire everything in life without the help of the masculine forces due to her confidence in herself. It is in Bim that we recognize the emerging new and independent woman that Simon de Beauvoir envisaged: Once she ceases to be a parasite, the system based on her dependence crumbles; between her and the universe there is no longer any need for a masculine mediator. (44)

There is another example of hybridity in the family when Tara and Bim, both members of a marginalized group, read books with confidence. By their actions, they are opposed to the conventions of Indian society at that time. What is also significant is the kind of books they were reading which reminds us again of women’s inferiority in the novel. This is indicative of traditional cultural influences in which girls are expected to read romantic novels “Gone with the Wind” and “Lorna Doone”, while as a man Raja is supposed to read adventurous books such as “Robin Hood” and “Beau Geste.” We can also see hybridity in Aunt Mira, another woman who undergoes too much hardship. However, she struggles to survive and tries to overcome the problems like a man. While she endured varying degrees of victimization, she still has sufficient courage and strength to care for this family when the parents, Bim and Tara’s parents abandon their duties. She is the only one in the family children can rely on. She experiences a difficult life. She had been twelve years old when she married and was a virgin when she was widowed—her young student husband, having left to study in England immediately after her wedding,

caught a cold in the rain one winter night, and died. She was left stranded with his family and they blamed her bitterly for his death....She should be made to pay for her guilt. (108) She is the victim of a cruel society which “suspected her of being a parasite” (108).

Contrary to the patriarchal expectation, Aunt Mira is “Quick, nerved and jump, yet for the children she was as solid as a rock, or a tree that can be relied on not to pull up its roots and move away in the night. She was like a tree growing at the centre of their lives, and which gave them shade. “She was the tree, she was the soil, and she was the earth. Touching them, watching them, she saw them as the leaves and flowers and fruit of the earth. So beautiful, she murmured, touching, watching—so beautiful and strong and living” (111). She does all the responsibilities which are expected to be done by the mother of the family. Aunt Mira stands up against a dominant society who expects a wife to be ...someone like their mother who raised her eyes when the father rose from the table and dropped them when she sat down; who spent long hours at a dressing table before a mirror, amongst jars and bottles that smell sweet and into which she dipped questing fingers and drew out the ingredients of a wife-sweet-smelling but soon rancid; who commended servants and chastised children and was obeyed like a queen. (111) Generally, the father of the family should protect the other members of the family in a traditional family in India, but in this family, Aunt Mira acts as a man, as a refuge for the children, “They crowded about her so that they formed a ring, a protective railing about her. Now no one could approach, no threat, no menace” (111). Therefore, she can be another example of hybrid character in a sense that despite the fact that she is a woman, is as strong as a man. Stick-like; she whipped her sari about her, jammed a few long steel pins into the little knot of hair on her head, and was dressed in an instant, ready to fly. She neither commanded nor chastised, and was certainly never obeyed. She was not soft or scented or sensual. She was bony and angular, wrinkled and desiccated-like a stick, or an ancient tree to which to which they adhered. (111)

Bim, Aunt Mira, and to some extent Tara are women who try to gain their own identities by adopting what men are expected to do and to be. Their identities are influenced by the society which is established by men. They embrace those conventions accepted by this society. As a result, it can be seen that Anita Desai’s female characters are equipped with hybridity which allows them to survive and assert their existence. Conclusion Identity is closely related to, and generally considered to be a derivative of, place and its cultural associations. The social context is an influential factor on the transformation of individual’s manner. Therefore, a study of this area can be a good way of illuminating the critical impact of social environment on people. This study shows how female characters can, to varying degrees, be confined in a society with a dominant culture which does not value female subjectivity, instead gives priority to men and places women in degrading positions. In *The Clear Light of Day* all the women are

forced to endure varying degrees of victimization. Throughout the novel the female protagonists' struggle to build their identity is highlighted by their efforts to adapt their discourse. Their attempts to be active members in society force them to hybridize their identity. Accordingly, they employ the oppressor's language and culture in order merely to cope and to adjust themselves for survival.

HISTORY IN *CLEAR LIGHT OF DAY*

Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* is essentially concerned with man's quest for identity, and she relates the quest of her individual protagonist to the past of her life. Anita Desai, as in most of her earlier novels, restricts the little action there is in *Clear Light of Day* to one place, Delhi, and here, more specifically, to the house and the garden of the Das family and its immediate neighbourhood. The times dealt with are the late 1930s, 1947 to 1948, 53 and a few days in the 1970s. Like Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, the immediate action of the novel is the present.

The omniscient narrator in *Clear Light of Day* recounts the story during a few days in the hot season in the early 1970s using the reunion of the two sisters to take them back into their childhood and adolescence with Tara giving way to her reminiscences and compelling Bim to follow her. To Tara and Bim past and present in Delhi appear at times almost unchanged and without movement — except, perhaps, a slow movement towards decay and, at other times, as two different worlds with a past to which they by no means want to return. Tara's words, '«I'm so glad it is over and we can never be young again»', are confirmed by Bim who adds, '«I never wish it back. I would never be young for anything.»'^ And yet, subconsciously they know that the present cannot be understood and be made an integral part of their selves as long as they look at the past from a preconceived and prejudiced point of view. The author shows, in the course of her novel, how both women in the end accept their childhood because '«It's never over. Nothing's over ever»' (p. 174), thereby gaining that insight into the continuance of the historical process.

The writer does not, however, confine herself to a retelling of history through the portrayal of individual characters; but rather, by interrelating character and event they reveal their deep interest in the strategy of recollection, which constitutes on the one hand biography, and on the other hand the academic discipline of history. Recollection is not being made use of as a dream

but as a mirror in which man tries to recognize the aspirations and strivings of mankind to recognize the totality of his own self as well as that of his species.

Anita Desai works through her characters' interaction, especially through dialogue and reminiscence, thus building up a concept of history in an indirect and implicit manner. In *Clear Light of Day* there are parallels between the historical process and individual experiences, especially in the second part of the book where the times are marked by departure and death, not only in the Das family but also in the life of the Indian nation. The years 1947-48 with the partition of the subcontinent, the enforced exodus of millions from their homes, violence, death and, finally, Gandhi's assassination, are of profound meaning for the Das children, but still, it appears that history and individuals are linked by coincidence rather than by some intrinsic logic.

India had been struggling to achieve independence from British rule for many years. Finally the British agreed to surrender their control of this country. Then came the time when the country had to be partitioned in order to meet the Muslim demand for the establishment of Pakistan. The partition of the country was preceded and followed by large-scale communal rioting. The Muslims fled from Delhi in order to escape the wrath of the Hindus.

Leila Essa in her "Partition in the Private Sphere: Family Narratives as Vehicles for the Trauma of National History in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* and Irina Liebmann's *Die freien Frauen*." she argues that "the microcosm of familial relationships" is being used "as a vessel for the narration of national history" (Essa 489) in Desai's novel. Agreeing to what Essa has said we may assert that In *Clear Light of Day* one can find that many of the Muslims including Hyder Ali and his family fled to Hyderabad where they were safe because there the Muslims were in a majority. The bloodshed and the slaughter that took place in the summer of 1947 are among the unforgettable facts of history. The anger and resentment in the minds of both the Hindus and the Muslims led to a catastrophe. As a result the two communities have become permanently hostile to each other. The rioting of 1947 have vividly, though very briefly, been depicted by Anita Desai in her novel. The story of the novel runs parallel with the history of the nation.

The partition of India is a concrete reality that is connected with Raja's leaving, Tara marrying, the deaths of the Das parents as well as Aunt Mira, and the separation of the Das family. These domestic separations are analogous to the social events leading up to Partition and to the social

upheaval that followed the separation of Pakistan from India. The summer of 1947 has been described as tumultuous. In this summer the Hyder Ali family abandons Delhi for Hyderabad under the threat of racial violence and the father of the Das family dies. During the previous summer of 1946 the mother of the Das family had also died. It was the same summer when Jinnah made public demands for a Muslim homeland. Tara got married to Bakul in the summer of 1947, and they moved to Ceylon (Sri Lanka), leaving Bim alone to care for the other family members.

This incident coincides with the official division of India from Pakistan in August of that same year. In the following summer, after the death of Gandhi in January 1946 and the continued flight of refugees across Indian borders, Aunt Mira dies and Raja leaves for Hyderabad. This event isolated Bim further and left her to care for those who are left behind: Baba and herself. Each of the three people who escaped (Tara, Raja and Aunt Mira) used a way of escape common during the Partition era: Tara fled the country for somewhere else, Raja fled to a Muslim center, and Aunt Mira left the earth entirely.

The passage of time, however, does not destroy everything. There are certain things that are indestructible and imperishable. In course of time, certain things acquire greater weight and validity. Certain things acquire an enduring value by time. For example we can mention how in post-partition India secularism got embedded in the Indian constitution as a fundamental practice thereby leaving hope for cultural reconciliations. In this respect time can be regarded as a preserver. In the novel *Clear Light of Day* certain things continue to exist despite the ravages of time. Time preserves certain positive experiences and values. Aunt Mira's self-sacrifice is an example of this kind. She had assiduously been attending upon the mentally retarded child Baba, and had been taking great pains to keep him cheerful. Then there is Bim's love for Baba. She had told Tara that she would never marry but would look after Baba. After Tara had gone away to a foreign country, after Aunt Mira had died, and after Raja had left for Hyderabad, Bim was alone in the old house to look after Baba. Then, in an introspective mood, stimulated by the presence of Tara and by Tara's talk, Bim begins to think of the damage which Raja's humiliating letter had done to her relationship with him. Bim's meditations and reflections, supplemented by the dying words of Emperor Aurangzeb, lead her to forgive Raja for his "unforgivable" letter. The dying words of the emperor moved Bim deeply. The emperor had said that he had come into this world

with nothing at all but that he was going away from here with a heavy weight of sinfulness on his mind. These words calmed Bim's heart, and brought tears into her eyes. That same night she tore off the letter which Raja had written to her many years back, and which had offended her deeply. Bim now begins to feel that there had been flaws and inadequacies not only in her love for Raja but also in her love for Tara and Baba. She entrusts Tara with a loving message for Raja from whom she had been feeling completely alienated. She even thinks it necessary to seek the forgiveness of Baba to whom she had spoken harshly a little while ago. Thus Bim's love for her sister Tara and for her brothers, Raja and Baba, gains a new impetus. Her love for them is not only revived in its full strength but is further increased. It is in this way that time has served as a preserver.