

Meanings through Meaningless in Anita Desai's Clear Light of Day

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Clear Light of Day (1980), excels Anita Desai's former works as she breaks new grounds by dwelling, for the first time, upon an existentialist theme of the time in relation to eternity. It is undoubtedly a remarkable novel depicting the emotional turmoil in the protagonist. Desai tries to connect the changes, distortions, revelations of the past and the present. The characters seek to fulfill themselves through their relationships in marriage and with brothers and sisters. The relation between the four brothers and sisters, Raja, Bim, Tara and Baba are threatened by their inability to perceive the deep connection with each other hidden under the apparent differences from the other. In their pursuit of individual destiny they find the loss of a wider- base, socially integrated deep-rootedness. They crave for the discovery of the sense of fullness and closeness that they seem to have lost somewhere. Anita Desai speaks: "My novel is set in old Delhi and records the tremendous changes that a Hindu family goes through since 1947. Basically, the preoccupation was with recording the passage of time. I was trying to write a four- dimensional piece on how a family's life moves backward and forward in a period of time. I have tried to tunnel under the mundane surface of domesticity." The novel though localized in Delhi since 1947, touches upon aspects of life that are universal. Here is the picture of the shattered life of a family connecting the past and the present, love and sacrifice, anger and accusation. It can be regarded as the story of Bim's affection for her family, her anger and loss of affections and ultimately her embracing of affections.

The novel begins with Tara, the younger sister visiting the family, along with her husband, Bakul. She feels engulfed by the memories of her childhood. Tara remarks to Bim, "How everything goes on and on here, and never changes? I used to think about it all, and it is all exactly the same whenever we come home." Bim replies, "But you wouldn't want to return to life as it used to be, would you? All that dullness, boredom waiting. Would you care to live that over again? Of course not. Do you know anyone who would secretly, sincerely in his innermost self..... really prefer to return to childhood?" but Tara is not much convinced by Bim's explanation. Tara chances upon her childhood, cries. "Look a Snail!" Bim thinks, "Was Tara, grown woman, mother of grown daughters still child enough to play with a snail? Would she go down her knees to scoop it up on a leaf and watch it draw its aluminous trail..." Anita Desai enters the world of children with love and understanding. Tara is unable to realize that time passes, changes and destroys things in life. But in the end she realizes that when she has to live in her family with changed set of relationships. Tara's flights of imagination are kept in check by Bakul- her diplomat husband. The past bears down on her with the intensity of a half- remembered dream. She tries to plumb memory's love.

Actually the house and its occupants are decaying slowly. Tara has escaped to a family of her own. Bim, the elder sister and her younger brother have never left the house. The complex centripetal pulls between the brothers and sisters cause tension within the family.

Raja, the elder brother, marries Benazir, the daughter of his landlord, Hyder Ali and settles down in Hyderabad, only Bim and Baba are left in the old house. His letter from Hyderabad irritates Bim, "...you may continue to have it at the same rent, I shall never think of raising it or of selling the house as long as you and Baba need it." The letter stabs at her sensitive heart. Anita Desai seems to propound that riches and property come in the way of human relationships. It creates in Bim's heart a misunderstanding with Raja. Tara who was firstly immature in her understanding, now realizes how the human relationship- even the intimate relationship changes with the passage of time. Although the parents in the family are self- occupied and have little chances of showing soft feelings to children yet the remaining members of the family mostly treat each other with enough love. Their diabetic mother and tight lipped father create a chasm between the parents and the children. It also brings the children closer to each other in search of love and security. The chief source of their affections is Mira- Masi. "She fed them with her own nutrients; she reared them in her own shade. But Bim feels discontented and restless when Raja goes out into the outside world. In his disappointment with their house, feeling "there could be no house as dismal as his own, as dusty and grimy and uncharming." Raja is enchanted by Hyder Ali their landlord. Raja is initiated into Urdu poetry and also Muslim culture. Bim and Tara admire their brother immensely, but Bim alone is able to keep pace with him. Tara feels left out of the circle of companionship in which Raja and Bim stand together. Bim sacrifices her life for her brothers, she says firmly, "I won't marry.... I won't. I shall never leave Baba and Raja and Mira- Masi." She takes care of Raja, Baba and Mira- Masi. The two sisters differ in their attitudes to their memories of childhood. When she comes to old Delhi her attachment to her home revives, "a part of her was sinking languidly, down into the passive pleasure of having returned to the familiar." The sight of her childhood snail, "an eternal, miniature Sisyphus" thrills her and she cries. "Look, a snail!". When her husband asks her to accompany him to his uncle's house, she blurts out, "But I had not meant to go anywhere, I only wanted to stay at home." To her husband her indulging into childhood frivolities is annoying: "And you won't let me help you. Taught you to execute your will. Be strong. Face challenges. Be decisive."

Mrs. Desai presents the psychology of child development in the novel with great success. Growth of Raja, Bim and Tara

from infancy to childhood, then to adolescence and finally to adulthood is presented excellently. The differences in their tempers, hobbies, personalities make them diverse solid individuals. "Tara... had always stood in the outside of that enclosed world of love and admiration in which BIM and Raja moved; watching them sucking her finger; excluded". After the death of her parents and the marriage of Tara, Bim is left alone to take care of her brother Raja, and mentally retarded brother Baba. She does not think of her own marriage. Dr Biswas who is disheartened by her negative response, understands later on that she has sacrificed her life for her sick brother, aged aunt and her little brother. When aunt Mira dies, Raja leaves her and Baba with indifference:

"I have to go. Now I can go: I have to begin my life sometime, don't I? You don't want me to spend all my life down in this hole, do you? You don't think I can go on living just to keep my brother and sister company, do you?"

She is left alone in the company of her helpless brother. This alienation from those whom she loved frustrates her. In her mood of utter disgust, she thinks that all her relations-Tara, Bakul, Raja and Banazir had come in her life like mosquitoes only to torment her and mosquito like, sip her blood. "It must have been good blood, sweet and nourishing. Now, when they were full, they rose in swarms, humming away, turning their backs on her." In this sad mood, she tells her brother Baba, "but I might have to send you to live with Raja. I come to ask you- what would you think of that? Are you willing to go and live with Raja in Hyderabad?" but she regains her calm and is filled with love for "Raja and Tara and all of them who had lived in the house with her." Although it was shadowy and dark, Bim could see as well as by the clear light of day, she felt only love and yearning for them all, and 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 did not extend to all equally.

Tara attempts to win the forgiveness of her sister for her childhood act of betrayal and Bim, the elder sister changes a little- she becomes less rash and more resigned. Anita Desai has tried successfully to portray the inability of human beings to really know each other. She has analyzed this theme through love, hate and misunderstanding that colour the relationship between the various fellows. The novel describes the events in the family against the backgrounds of the 1947 upheaval, Raja's fascination for their Muslim landlord's family, his love for Urdu and his desire to join the Jamia Millia, his affliction with tuberculosis and Bim's nursing him during his illness, his flight to Hyderabad to marry Banazir. Bim's rejection of Dr. Biswas's marriage proposal owing to her attachment for and duty to her neurotic brother and ailing aunt, Bim suffers from sundered relationships, violated loyalties and eroded lives. Her protective love for her younger brother, Baba shows the misery of a life that has appropriated innocence. She resists all bridges of understanding from the loved ones. She is finally compelled to reorganize the complex of vision and values determining her existence. In the end her love for relations is immense. She is thinking of

poor Baba, "She felt an immense, almost irresistible yearning to lie down beside him on the bed, stretch out limb to limb, silent and immobile together. She felt that they must be the same length that his slightness would fit in beside her size that his concavities would mould together with her convexities. Together they would form a whole that would be perfect and pure." It is this that helps her to realize to forgive Raja, to allow Tara to confess her guilt to try and understand the lives of her parents, to lay the ghost of Mira Masi and to make her love more articulate. She senses a oneness with Baba. She tells Tara to give a message to Raja that she would be waiting for them to come in the winters, that she wanted to see him. "There was nothing left in the way of a barrier, only the clear light pouring down from the sun." thus the memories of the past offer hope transferring attachment into a liberating force.

Attainment of emotional integration, through mutual understanding and affections is the eternal core of this novel. In the atmosphere of the Hindu-Muslim riots, hatred, general suspicion and fear, the inter-community marriage shown in the novel paves the way to the unity of mankind, raising man above religious and political fanaticism. Establishment of world human relationships on the basis of human feelings is the basic theme of this novel.

Hyder Ali inspires the sensitive imagination of Raja. Side by side is presented the theme of disenchantment through Raja's father who forbids Raja from joining Islamic studies. His father was afraid that Hindus will have a great hatred for Raja as a Muslim lover and may grow violent also. Bim finds Raja's life meaningless. She herself cannot live without love, love for Baba and Raja, love for family members. 'Love-starved' is the word she uses for herself; she makes this ironical dig at the usual man-woman love.

Anita Desai lays here the predicament of Indian woman. The Misra girls "Two grey-haired, spectacled, middle-aged women- once married but both rejected by their husbands....." are examples of helpless women and also of unhappiness and exploitation. Their father tells Bim: "You worked hard. You don't know how to enjoy life.... You and my two girls- you are too alike- you work and let the brothers enjoy." But "the Misra boys- fat, hairy brutes- why should others look after them. The poor Misra girls, so grey and bony and needle-faced, impersonating lovelorn maidens in order to earn their living." Bim has similar experience. Mira- Masi is the another example of exploitation of women. The whole novel shows how the passage of time alters the family relations. When Tara asks Bim to go to Hyderabad to attend the wedding of Raja's eldest daughter, Bim is offended at this, "Oh, you want to talk about Raja again. I'm bored with Raja, utterly bored. He is too rich to be interesting anymore, too fat and too successful. Rich, fat and successful people are boring. I'm not interested, Tara." But Tara says, "You should go and visit them, Bim, and see for yourself how it is. There's the wedding. They want you there. Here's letter, let me read it to you..." in this Letter, Raja does not even mention Bim – this deepens her agony. It reminds her of an earlier letter in which he had mentioned the reversal of his role 'from brother to landlord all for his selfish motives. Bim utterly disgusted

begins to think over how time has destroyed their relationships.

“At last the adored, the admired elder brother, had turned his back on Bim. Bim saw all their backs, turned on her, a row of backs turned. She folded her arm across her face – she did not want to see the ugly sight. She wanted them to go away and leave her.” Further she says, “All these years she had felt herself to be the centre – she had watched them all circling in the air, then returning, landing like birds, folding up their wings and letting down their legs till they touched solid grounds....” Towards the end of the IV section, when Bim finds unable to run the insurance business of her father after his death, and for which Raja never cared, she feels irritated and in a fit of anger, decides to sell her share to Mr. Sharma. In her anger, she attacks Baba also. “If I sell, it’ll mean the end of that part of our income. It was too small to count anyway, but it did cover some of the expenses. With my salary, I’ll be able to pay the rent, keep on the house. I’ll manage – but I might have to send you to live with Raja. I came to ask you – what would you think of that? ... Are you willing to go and live, with Raja in Hyderabad.” Baba feels sad. But then she feels sorry, “the darkest depths of past have been plumbed, all emotions – anger, guilt, fear and remorse – are spent, there remains for Bim only an engulfing low, luminous like a clear day.”

Clear Light of Day is a story of the affections of Bim. We notice how affections of Bim, Tara, Baba and Raja develop with the parents standing aloof and Bim and Raja getting emotionally closer to one another. When Raja deserts his family, Bim’s affections are stabbed in the vitals, his letter to Bim makes a deep emotion incision which is difficult to heal. Bim becomes a teacher and leads independent life. Tara puts a strain on Bim’s mind. She thinks of getting rid of Baba, “Are you willing to go and live with Raja in Hyderabad?” this could be called the “unkindest cut of all.” Bim “felt tears seep from under her eyelids involuntarily.” She was led to read Aurangzeb’s last words and repents. Her affections win and she invites Raja. The emotional conflict is resolved in favour of revival of affections. It is the story of a family.

The story gives a fine peep into the psyche of Bim. “She did not feel enough for her dead parents..... Her love for Raja had too much of a battering..... her love for Baba was too inarticulate, too unthinking.” She takes care of Das family, has to save money for the family. She is mentally and physically over- strained by serving three patients – Raja, Mira – Masi and Baba. Sometimes she feel herself strained and develops an indifferent apathy towards Raja, his family. She talks alone “I mean – I mean she’s only five years younger than I am and she thinks I’m old. She is cruel, Tara and cold. And Raja selfish, too selfish to care....” She moves through the house “like a dispelled storm” and spends money on books. She does not forgive Raja for a little. But after reading ‘The life of Aurangzeb’ she becomes remorseful. She tears out the old letter and invites Raja to Delhi. With her love and understanding she maintains good relationships with all hurdles. She understands the existential significance of time.

Mira Masi plays the role of a mother and identifies herself with the family interest so much that when she senses a danger for Raja or in his love for Hyder Ali and family, she is deeply shocked. She suffers for Das family. She sacrifices for the whole family. “Their opposing needs seemed to mingle and meet at the very roots, inside the soil in which they grew.... In the end they would swarm over her, reach up above her, tower into the sky, and she would be just the old log, the dried mass of roots on which they grow. She was the tree, she was the soil, she was the earth.” It is because of such persons, that the world, despite all alienation, and related problems is still worth-living.

Baba, innocent, silent and uncomplaining is tied by affection to Bim. Bim’s pathetic conversation with Baba unfolds the disorganized state of the family: “So there are just you and I left.... Baba... Does the house seem empty to you? Everyone’s gone, except you and I. They won’t come back. We’ll be alone now.”

Bim links up the boredom of her home with that of old Delhi; the condition in which the whole family lives makes them feel as if they are wallowing in a “pond so muddy and stagnant.” Bim says, “Here we are left rocking on the backwaters, getting duller and greyer every day.” Most of their problems they inherited from their parents. They were “sucked down into the silent centre of a deep, shadowy vortex while they floated on the surface, staring down into the underworld, their eyes popping with incomprehension.” Such members of a family are bound to be alienated from each other.

It also throws light on discords at various levels. To her husband, Tara is merely a “hopeless person.” Raja’s letter hurts his sister. Tara says to Bim: “I wouldn’t ever have believed – no one would ever have believed that you and Raja who were so close – so close – could be against each other ever. It’s just unbelievable.” The whole family suffers from the sense of disintegration within the disjunction from the world around. Upholding of human relationships and mutual love as the highest value in life gives a lasting popularity to the novel. Like Bim, Mira - Masi’s life is the centre of relations in the Das family. “Touching them, dressing them, lifting them, drawing them to her, she felt how their life streams met and flowed into each other. They drew from her and she gave readily.” Indifference of the Das parents lead to a certain depressing note in Bim and Tara.

Bim asks for a rational understanding of the relations. Her words threaten Tara, “that enclosed world of love and admiration which she had watched from the outside as an unequal younger sister.” Both the sisters are aware of their relations and attitudes. They are continually haunted by the memories of their childhood, their parents, the summer of 1947. They recall the period of childhood as an age of love and closeness with each other. The four of them form a complete circle. But cracks appear in their psychological trauma and stress. Bim is often unsteady, oscillating between alienation and confirmation, almost losing herself in the struggle. Her anger paves the way for an adjustment. Bim is a symbol of creative force, pleasing all. She takes care of

everyone, ignores her humiliations and other's ingratitude, in facing the harsh realities of life and in reconciling herself even with those forces which had been associated with the dust storm such as the actions of Raja, Bim becomes "symbolic of mother India herself who accommodates all, rejects none."

The excellence of this novel is in the psychological insight of the characters. Anita Desai tries to discover "the final pattern of meaning that emerges out of the apparent meaninglessness of life in a small family." Bim searches for harmony in relationships. With the passage of time she bears loneliness and isolation. In the end, she reconciles to the changes in relationships that she had hitherto violently rejected. She realizes that the soil of her house, 'contained all

time, past, future in it.... It was where the deepest self lived, and the deepest selves of her sisters and brothers and all those who shared that time with her." It depicts the emotional turmoil in the main protagonist. Virginia Woolf remarks that "Jane Austen went in and out of her people's minds like the blood in their veins" may be applied to Desai also whose pre-occupation with the inner lives of the characters is so significant. "Since her preoccupation is with the inner world of sensibility rather than the outer world of action." Says Iyengar, "she has tried to forge a style supple and suggestive enough to convey the fever and fretfulness of the stream of consciousness of her principal characters." This novel is the integral whole composed of the human psyche, the human situation.

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