

# CLEAR LIGHT OF DAY : LOVE THAT RESISTS PARTITION

*Clear Light of Day* (1980), Anita Desai's sixth novel, consisting of four unnamed parts, has been acclaimed as 'a wonderful novel about silence and music, about the partition of a family as well as a nation'. Besides this, since its publication, the novel has been explored in various ways. Anita Desai states in her interview with Sunil Sethi :

My novel is about time as a destroyer, as a preserver and about what the bondage of time does to the people (India Today Dec 1-5, 1980 : 142).

Taking the cue from the novelist's statement, the critics like Madhusudan Prasad (1984), Asha Kanwar (1989) and Sandhyarani Das (1996) have explored in it the theme of time in relation to eternity. Again, Santosh Gupta has studied it as 'bridging the polarities of imagination and reason' (S. Gupta in R.K. Dhawan (ed.) Set I, vol. III, 1991 : 236). Usha Bande has studied the characters of the novel in the light of Third Force psychology in her book *The Novels of Anita Desai* (1988). And in a comparative study the theme of alienation has been explored by Rajib Sharma in *Feminine Sensibility : Alienation in Charlotte Bronte and Anita Desai* (1995). All such readings have ignored to focus on women's question. I, however, propose to break new ground by exploring the novel as a significant discourse on post-colonial feminism.

Though an avowedly subjective writer, Anita Desai does not forget to focus on women's question and their search for identity in the post-independence patriarchal society. In constructing the different women characters like Mira Masi, a widow, Bimala, a spinster and Tara, a married woman, the novelist insistently questions and opposes Hindu patriarchal ideologies. In constructing the discourse of widowhood, she seems to expose the nationalist project's failure to solve the problem of widowhood and the remarriage of the

girl widow. And in making a woman like Bimala abrogate heterosexual marriage and live an independent life, Anita Desai subverts the conventional gender identity and thereby suggests a prospect of emancipation for woman. But while Tara is taken into consideration, the novelist is seen to shift her feminist position towards the appropriation of the patriarchal institution like marriage and family for sharing sexual power and pleasure. Lastly, in preferring, through Bimala and Tara, a composite culture to the pure patriarchal Hindu national culture, she posits herself as a postcolonial feminist writer in this novel.

The novel opens with the mocking and enticing call of the koels that wake up Tara, who has come to visit their family at Old Delhi during summer vacation along with her diplomat husband Bakul. Her visit rakes up all the bitter memories of the past in her elder sister Bimala, a lecturer-in-history in a local college, a spinster living in that old house. The whole incidents of the novel shuttle between time past and present. Through the memories of the two sisters we are provided with the vignettes of their childhood, their parents, the elder brother Raja, the political changes in the country and their effects on the household.

The old house at Old Delhi seems to represent the middle class Hindu patriarchal family of the pre-partition period. The house, as S. Indira says, is associated with 'sickness, indifference, unnaturalness and apathy' (1994 : 127). The mother, a diabetic patient, is confined to bed or to a card-table; the father is totally engrossed in his wife, card games and visits to club. None of the parents takes care of their children. Baba, the newly born baby, has to be nursed, but the mother is unable, so a Mira Masi is searched out.

Mira Masi's plight is so bad that it beggars all description. Her victimization appears to be total, rendering her inarticulate. Vrinda Nabar has pointed to the picture of Mira Masi. In her opinion, 'though Desai has convincingly brought out the essence of her presence – her smell, yet the picture is still somewhat amorphous since it does not really individualize Mira Masi, but merely puts her into a recognizable slot. Her story is dismissed in just one paragraph' (Vrinda Nabar in R.K. Dhawan (ed.) Set I, vol. IV, 1991 : 21). What Vrinda Nabar has failed to note is that in patriarchy the unproductive women are disallowed any space and voice, witch, lesbian and the widow for examples. In Hindu society the widowhood is considered to be so ominous that it is disallowed any space to avoid its evil

influence. In spite of being aware of all these proscriptions, Anita Desai has given her space, though very small one, by resurrecting her subjugated experiences in Hindu patriarchal society. In resurrecting her subjugated experiences she has also given her voice against the oppressive patriarchal structure of Hindu society.

As Mira Masi arrived, she was not however given a warm welcome, though she happens to be a poor relation of the Das family. In Hindu family a kith is always received and taken care of. But Mira Masi was searched out just to take care of the children as an additional hand to the Ayah. The narrative of this discourse now swerves back to her past life which is more painful and wretched :

Aunt Mira, though younger than their mother, looked so much older. At the age of twelve she married and was a virgin when she was widowed—her young student husband, having left to study in England immediately after their wedding, caught a cold in the rain one winter night, and died (108).

And for the death of her husband, her in-laws accused her horoscope very seriously :

It was her unfortunate horoscope that had brought it about (Ibid).

So she was coerced into slaving to perform works like scrubbing, washing, cooking, nursing, massaging, stitching. She was robbed of all her ornaments and saris. Her brothers-in-law made attempts to enjoy her sex. But when they failed, they called her a 'parasite' and threw her out as a 'cracked pot, torn-rag, picked bone' (108). However, she was not abandoned for ever, she was again searched out for Das family. But the irony is that it was not for alleviating her misery but for using her as an unpaid slave.

In Das family, the love-lorn widow forgot all about her past as the innocent children reciprocated by loving her back. She was given the honour of the role of Masi, mother's sister. The children observed that though Masi nursed them, took care of them, amused them with fairy tales, never commanded and chastised them, yet it was not she, but their mother who had the authority in the family.

However, after the death of their parents, Masi turned alcoholic and insane. The factors contributing to her alcoholism and insanity may be several. She might have understood that the children would be married and again in the fag end of her life she would be abandoned. The sense of abandonment perhaps made a tremendous impact upon her psyche, turning her mad. And to forget this haunting sense of abandonment she might have taken to alcohol. Anyway, her dancing with a glass of ale in her hand and her exposure of the blue-veined shrivelled breasts seem to suggest her tendency to go against the Hindu patriarchal ideology that imposes rigorous control upon a widow's body. It might also be construed as a symbolic protest on behalf of the Hindu widows against the oppressive Hindu patriarchal ideology.

However, we find the discourse of a compliant woman like Tara and the discourse of a resistant woman like Bim are in conflictual relationship with one another. One may think that in constructing Tara Anita Desai invokes the conventional narrative resolution of marriage. She seems to be encouraging Hindu patriarchal ideology about women :

Pita rakshati kaumaryan bharta raksati yauvane raksanti sthavire putrali na stri svatantryan arhati (The father looks after her in her childhood, the husband protects her in her youth, and the sons take care of her when she becomes old. The woman is never fit for freedom).

But in a Foucauldian feminist perspective, Tara's entry into marriage may also be interpreted in a different way. It is interesting to note that the marriage has not been imposed upon her by any male member of the family. Rather she has willingly entered it in order to serve her personal ends. The radical feminists would call her the agent of patriarchy. But in a Foucauldian feminist perspective privilege is not given to a single locus of resistance. It assumes that there can be taken different positions of resistance in power relations. Again, power can also be resisted from two strategic positions of appropriation and abrogation. Caliban in *The Tempest* appropriates his master's language in a selective way to sling curses and abuses upon Prospero. The subalterns appropriate the religion of the dominant group to have an access to the dominant culture. Tara is no exception to this case. She appropriates marriage for her protection and for negotiating power and pleasure with her diplomat husband, Bakul. Bimala, on the other hand, abrogates marriage in order to lead

an independent life and thereby subverts the patriarchal ideology that woman is never fit for freedom. Not only that, in leading an independent life she ushers in a form of emancipation for women.

Though a compliant woman, Tara is unlike other compliant women because, unlike them, she is very much selfish and active in respect of seeking happiness and pleasure of her life. Marriage has engendered a change in her. In her childhood period 'she would be dragged helplessly into the underworld of semi-consciousness by the romances she read' (120). While Bim would toss them aside in dissatisfaction, she 'needed facts, history, chronology preferably' (121). Thus there was a conflict between them. We find that in the early period of her life, Tara's subjectivity was produced by the effect of the discourses of romances and fairy-tales; Bim's, on the other hand, by the effect of the discourse of autobiographies of the western women. As a result, Tara was dominated by emotionality and Bim by rationality. The former did not consider romantic love as 'the pivot of woman's oppression', as Shulamith Firestone, a radical feminist, does. Rather for the appropriation of the ideology of romance she was waiting for the prince to be entrapped by her for her escape from the sick, indifferent, unnatural family atmosphere. It is true that she wilted when confronted by a challenge, had no friends; charity had, for her, the sour reek of vomit. Bim, of course, worshipped Florence Nightingale along with Joan of Arc in her private pantheon of saints and goddess, and 'Tara did not tell her that she hoped never to have to do anything in the world, that she wanted only to hide under Aunt Mira's quilt or behind the shrubs in the garden ... when challenged to name her own particular heroine, she looked vague, tried to shift away, saying she would think of it. Tara lacked the boldness to make an answer even if she could think of it' (126).

Tara, however, declared to be a mother : 'I am going to be a mother and knit for my babies' (112). This decision she perhaps took by seeing her own mother who, without actually performing the role of a mother, enjoyed power and pleasure in the family. She therefore enticed Bakul by making her worthy in his androcentric scales of value. She avoided being ugly, cruel, because she perhaps knew all such attributes would be undesirable to her man, and abandoned the widow and her headstrong elder sister by

marrying Bakul and fragmented 'the continuities of female life into discontinuous states' (K. K. Ruthven, 1984 : 80) .

After marriage Tara has changed a lot. She now looks elegant in pale blue nylon nightgown. She loves Bakul very much, shares his sense of nationalism. Whatever she now does she does for satisfying his male gaze and in so doing she gets pleasure. She adopts those norms of fashion and beauty which her husband chooses for her. This pathological torture of her husband she willingly enjoys. Now if Tara's position is judged by the radical feminism's concept of power, based on 'oppressive – victim' model, she would be adjudged the victim of patriarchal ideology. But what is noticeable is that Tara does not feel to be victimized or tortured by Bakul. In this context, Foucault's concept of power may well expose Tara's position in patriarchy.

Foucault's term is 'repressive hypothesis' which he uses to describe the function of power. John Frow puts it in this way :

If power is no longer thought simply as a negative and repressive force but as the condition of production of all speech, and if power is conceived as polar rather than monolithic, as an asymmetrical dispersion, then all utterances will be potentially splintered, formally open to contradictory uses. (Frow, 1985 : 206, quoted in Sara Mills, 1997 : 20).

This sums up the sense of Foucault's analysis of power, that is, power is dispersed throughout social relations, that it produces possible forms of behaviour as well as restricting behaviour. Power is more a form of action or relation between people which is negotiated in each interaction. Adapting Foucault's model it may be said that Tara , in each interaction with Babul , does not feel that Babul is all-powerful. She also takes the subject position and in producing certain forms of behaviour enjoys power. Mention may be made of her interaction with Bakul as the latter insists on her accompanying him to his uncle's house at New Delhi:

Tara said in a strained voice, 'but I had not meant to go anywhere. I only wanted to stay at home' ... 'I'll wait till the girls come. I'll go shopping with them', said she with an unaccustomed stubbornness. (11)

Bakul ... said, 'you surely don't mean that. You can't just sit about with your brother and sister all day, doing nothing' (Ibid).

Tara : 'But it's what I want – just to be at home again, with them ... I don't want to go to New Delhi at all'. (Ibid).

Besides this, though as a wife subjected to 'pativrata' ideology, Tara enjoys the power of socializing her children, the power of running the family very methodically and of arranging programmes, and behind her husband, the status of a diplomat's wife.

Tara also enjoys power by showing meek disobedience to Bakul who reacts to a rare gesture of meek disobedience by sermonising her to become strong and decisive :

I thought I had taught you a different life, a different way of living. Taught you to execute your will. Be strong. Face challenges. Be decisive (17).

Tara actually very submissively disobeys Bakul. This is what she confesses :

She had fooled Bakul into believing that she had acquired it (the desirable quality). But it was all just dust thrown into his eyes (32).

Tara now feels :

She had followed him enough, it has been such an enormous strain, always pushing against her grain, it had drained her of too much strength, now she could only collapse, inevitably collapse. (18).

Tara perhaps now realises that the present femininity which has been constructed by the pressure of her husband's gaze is not of her own. In this femininity she feels fragmented. So she shifts her position from the modern sophisticated life to her insecure past, to her childhood years in search of wholeness of her life. But situating herself in the present life she realises that some elements of her past cannot be accommodated to her present life. So out of anxiety she asks :

Why was the pond so muddy and stagnant? Why had nothing changed? She had changed – why did it not keep up with her (12).

Again, she eagerly wants to connect her present to the past and thus to keep continuity with the old family. Her journey along with her children and husband towards Hyderabad to attend the marriage ceremony of Raja's daughter suggests that she wants to maintain relationship with all members of the old family. Through the relationship with them she betrays her predilection for relational form of identity. She does not want to live only with her husband and her daughters in Washington delinking relationship with all members of the old house at Delhi. Thus by showing her sense of belongingness to an Indian family, Tara reveals her sense of Indianness which is surely not unmodified by her sense of western culture.

Now before constructing Bim, let us take note of other characters' comment on her.

Tara tells her husband : 'Bim seemed so normal and contented that she had found everything she wanted in life' (158). Bakul, slightly modifying her remark, says, 'she did not find it – she made it' (Ibid). Bakul's observation and understanding about Bim corresponds to Bim's self-analysis :

For all father cared, I could have grown up illiterate and – and cooked for my living, or swept. So I had to teach myself history, and teach myself to teach (155).

The discourse makes it clear that Bim educated herself to make her self-reliant. The unsatisfactory atmosphere, she lived in during the early part of her life, made her more ambitious at school because she thought 'education was a way out' (130).

The knowledge she gathered from school education enabled her to understand the gender-discrimination. Being enlightened she questioned, 'why did girls have to wear frocks?' (132). In her opinion, all that difference between male and female was due to the different dresses prescribed for females by patriarchal ideology. So challenging androcentric norms of dress, she put on trousers which gave her a sense of superiority,

independence and possessiveness. Even unknowingly through her act of smoking she violated the nationalist resolution on women's question that Indian women should not smoke. From the early part of her life she dreamt of leading an independent life. At school she was active, involved, purposeful, a born organiser, a bright student. But school to Tara was a terror. Unlike Tara, she never avoided going to hospitals on charity on Thursdays. In every respect Bim differed from Tara. Unlike Tara, she believed that marriage could not be an alternative to a profession, or equated with career. Countering Tara's query, 'what else could there be?' (140), she firmly added :

What else? Can't you think? I can think of hundred of things to do instead. I won't marry ... I shall work – I shall do things ... I shall earn my own living – and look after Mira Masi and Baba and – and be independent. There will be so many things to do (Ibid).

In this discourse Bim counters the heterosexual discourse that ascribes the role(s) of wife and mother to women. Moreover, the ideology she inscribes in her discourse goes against the patriarchal ideology that denies women freedom and independent profession.

In her later life Bim put her feminist ideology into practice. She nursed unselfishly her ailing brother Raja, senile Mira Masi and the handicapped Baba. Not that she was not wooed, but she was not in a position to accept the proposal of marriage. Rejected by her, Dr. Biswas thought that she had lost her willingness to marry because of her selfless devotion to the service of her sick and dependent brothers and aged aunt. But the fact was something else. In the tea-party she discovered Dr. Biswas was 'his mother's son' (92). Despite that, her subjectivity was deeply affected by two incidents of the victimization of women by men, namely the victimization of aunt Mira and of the Misra daughters who were recently divorced with no fault of their own. These circumstances strengthened her past resolution that she would not marry, but earn her own living.

That the eldest son would shoulder the responsibility of the family after the demise of the parents is the ideology of the Hindu undivided family. No wonder, Bim expected Raja to do the same. But Raja, her Byronic hero, disappointed her, as he left for Hyderabad in search of his own career. Now, because of her affection for Baba, her retarded brother, she

could not but accept the onus of the family, but without depending on anyone (male or female) economically or emotionally. Still in her mind she cherished the hope that Raja would return to look after the family. But her hope was dashed when Raja's bullying letter reached her :

... Perhaps you are also a bit worried about the future. But you must remember that when I left you, I promised I would always look after you, Bim ... and I want to assure you that now that he (Hyder Ali Saheb) is dead and has left all his property to us, you may continue to have it at the same rent. I shall never think of raising it or selling the house as long as you and Baba need it. If you have any worries, Bim, you have only to tell – Raja (27).

The oppressive letter shattered the entire fabric of her life. The relationship of brother-sister was reduced to the bitter relationship of landlord-tenant. Defiant as she is, Bim could not stomach the bossiness. A sense of misandry may have developed in her due to the letter. This is perhaps why we find her use Baba as a site to express her feminist backlash and ignore the diplomat Bakul. Mention may be made of the incident when Bim pours out milk out of the jug for her cats, instead of pouring out tea for Bakul. As a host, she should have shown hospitality to him but she simply de-recognises his presence. Again, Bakul's diplomatic superiority gets a jostle as he tries to poke his nose into the insurance deal between Bim and Mr. Sharma. Bim hits at his male ego just by declaring her unilateral decision that she would dispose of the business.

At present Bim thinks that she has been very much used by her relatives, yet she has a soft-corner for them. This shows that her self is divided. Though divided, she does not suffer from insecurity. In this respect a difference between her and the Misra sisters – Jaya and Sarala, who slog the whole day to fend for the family and yet are insecure, in need of protection from their alcoholic brother or insane father – is perceptible. Bim confesses :

She was exhausted by Tara, by Baba, by all of them. Loving them and not loving them. Accepting them and not accepting them. Understanding them and not understanding them (166).

The conflict that arises in her mind makes her worn out, yet she does not seek any protection from anybody. Only silently under the cover of darkness at night she wonders, 'how would she swim through the ocean and come out again?' (167). Just at that moment a book entitled *Life of Aurangzeb* shows her way. The discourse of the emperor's death moulds her subjectivity in a new direction. The discourse is as follows :

... Many were around me when I was born, but not I am going alone. I know not why I am or wherefore I came into the world ... Life is transient and the lost moment never comes back ... When I have lost hope in myself, how can I hope in others? Come what will, I have launched my bark upon the waters ... Every torment I have inflicted, every sin I have committed, every wrong I have done, I carry the consequences with me. Strange that I came with *nothing* into the world, and now go away with this stupendous caravan of sin!" (167).

The knowledge that Bim derives from this discourse enables her to jettison the thoughtless accumulation from the bark of her life. She now discovers that Raja's poems are nothing but derivations and he is a plagiarist. She tears his letter and forgives him. She forgives Tara too, keeping aside the wounded sentiment that her relatives have exhausted her. She now makes an attempt to tie with all members of the family in a bond of love. She feels elated by the embrace of Tara's daughters next morning. Through her act of advising them not to marry early, she tries to influence them, just as she did her students. But as she is addressed by her nieces as their 'Bim-Masi' (170), she immediately recollects the abject condition of Mira Masi and silently refuses to accept the role. In a confessional mood she says to herself that she is neither 'a sister, nor an aunt', but 'a solitary old woman' (173). In this context it is worthwhile to quote Peter Berger who defines the shift from traditional to modern identity as 'one from a world of honour to one of dignity : in a world of honour the individual discovers his true identity in his roles, and to turn away from the roles is to turn away from himself, but in a world of dignity the individual can only discover his identity by emancipating himself from his socially imposed roles' (quoted in Patricia Waugh, 1992 : 190). Adapting Peter Berger's observation we may say that Bim is in search of her true identity through her refusal of the socially imposed role of Masi. Asserting herself as an 'old woman', she takes a position of resistance to all roles prescribed for woman in patriarchal societies. However, she tries to overcome her aloneness by giving consent to the

continuity gets cemented by Iqbal's song sung by Mulk's Guru that leads her to understand that life gets meaning when it is related to its other, when disciple is related to Guru, man to God, individual member to other members of the family. What is interesting to note here is that her sense of maintaining a cohesive tie with the other members of the family distinguishes her from the westernized woman who, as Parthe Chatterjee argues, 'was fond of useless luxury and cared little for the well-being of the home' (quoted in Leena Gandhi, 1998: 97). Again, she is unlike the 'new woman' which was constructed by the discourse of nationalism by combining 'spiritual Maitreyi, the learned Gargi, the suffering Sita, the faithful Savitiri and the heroic Laskmibai' (Uma Chakrovorty in Sangari and Vaid (eds.) 1993:79). The independence of her mind may be linked to what Foucault called 'the art of voluntary inservitude' (James Schmidt and Thomas E. Watenberg in Michael Kelly, (ed.) 1994:292). This is because unlike the 'new woman who was subjected to new patriarchy', (Parthe Chatterjee in Sangari and Vaid (eds.), 1993:244), she has courageously created herself for emancipation from the oppressive patriarchal ideologies. Here it is pertinent to refer to Kristen Holst Petersen's observation in regard to postcolonialism's failure and success. As he puts it, 'the postcolonialism fails conclusively to resolve the conflicting claims of 'feminist emancipation' and 'cultural emancipation'. It is unable to decide which is more important, which comes first, the fight for female equality or fight against cultural imperialism?' (quoted in Leena Gandhi, 1998:93). What we find in this novel is that in constructing Bimala, Anita Desai seems to emphasise that the fight for women's emancipation is contingent upon the fight against cultural imperialism. Bimala has refused to be dominated by the purity of the Hindu culture. Rather she has allowed her subjectivity to receive conducive elements from the autobiographical discourses of the western women like Florence Nightingale and Joan of Arc, from those of great muslim persons like Aurangzeb and Iqbal. Not only that, she has also received some elements from the nationalist discourse on Indian womanhood. This shows her preference for multiculturalism over pure Hindu culture.

Thus in this novel, through Bim and Tara, Anita Desai underscores the composite culture over the pure Hindu patriarchal culture towards the emancipation of Indian women.

Last but not least, the text has a gap. This gap is created by the novelist's stony silence in regard to Raja's religion. Did Hyder Ali Sahib have Raja converted into Islam before accepting him as his son-in-law? Or, did he allow Raja to observe his own Hindu religion even though he gave his daughter Benazir in marriage to him? The novelist's silence seems to indicate that where love is dominant, religion is marginal; and it is through love that the divide between Hindu and Muslim can be bridged, paving the way towards a true nationalism. Thus Anita Desai is perhaps in favour of an acquiescent India, resisting the dominance of one culture over the other.