

# ***CLEAR LIGHT OF THE DAY: FRAGMENTED POSTCOLONIAL LIVES\****

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## **ABSTRACT**

The striking changes in the outer realities of India and their effects on the Indian people after the colonization period are the direct sources of the fragmented Indian identities. As a reflection, Indo-Anglican writers try to describe the tension and anxiety of being modern in a traditional society by paying their attention to gradual transformation of the societal changes. Being an Indian is important for the Indo-Anglican writers so that they attempt to depict Indian traditions, customs, way of living and culture by blending their seemingly western perspectives. In this way, because they represent both tradition and modernity, they become important for the literary domain in India and in England.

As an Indo-Anglican writer, the difference of Anita Desai is her achievement to depict the psychology of her characters by focusing on their inner world in spite of the societal handicaps (Indian society is made up of groups rather than focusing on individual members) and the transformation of the society (past-present; traditional-modern). Indo-Anglican female authors have the conflict of being inter-cultural as a result of having western education. They tend to solve this crisis by looking back to their own past and through nostalgia, they try to regain their authentic identity. Likewise, Anita Desai in her novel *Clear Light of the Day* depicts individuals who are in search for their identity and Desai focuses especially on the painful voyage of the female character to find her identity by digging out her past. This article aims at analyzing Anita Desai's novel *Clear Light of the Day* in relation to the fragmented identities resulted from both the colonial and postcolonial effects over the individuals.

**Key Words:** Indo-Anglican writers, fragmentation, postcolonialism, Anita Desai, intercultural

Anita Desai was born in India in 1937, and grew up in Delhi. Her father was Bengali, her mother was German. She has published novels and short stories, several books for children and she has written the screenplay for *In Custody* which will be a film. She is married and the mother of four grown children. In 1986, she was a visiting fellow at Girton College, Cambridge University, and is now an honorary fellow. She is currently the Purington Professor in the Department of English at Mt. Holyoke College (Bliss, 1988: 521).

Indo-Anglican writers tend to depict Indian nationhood because their position as writers was directly related to the political independence of India. Therefore, they are usually concerned with the life in India and "... the consequent clash of the orient culture with their later western values and ideas. They are traditional and modern at the same time [and] an important renewing theme in many of their works is an exploration of their identity..." (Jena, 1989: 2). Indian female writers aim at describing the life in India peculiar to the traditional modes of culture, so they use conventional perspectives, but at the same

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time there exists a discrepancy because of cultural problems which are the results of the western educated hero/ine 's becoming inter-cultural. These figures tend to solve this crisis by looking back to their own past and through nostalgia<sup>1</sup>, they try to regain their authentic identity.

As a woman novelist of Indo-Anglican fiction, Anita Desai mirrors the status of women in India: After independence the status of woman in the Indian society underwent perceptible changes due to the spread of literacy, legislation and the experiences of the freedom movement... Therefore, an important renewing theme in many of [her] works is an exploration of ... identity, a study of ... arrival to self-awareness. (Jena, 1989: 2)

Being an Indian is important for the female writers – like Anita Desai - so that she attempts to depict Indian traditions, customs, way of living and culture by blending her western perspective. Therefore, she represents both tradition and modernity and as a result she is important for the literary domain in India and in England.

Desai achieves to depict the psychology of her characters by focusing on their inner world in spite of the societal handicaps (Indian society is made up of groups rather than focusing on individual members) and the transformation of the society (past-present; traditional-modern). Therefore, she depicts the psychological reality of her characters that are doomed to the constant struggle within a changing society.

Anita Desai's characters are fragmented within an involvement of a changing world; they are subject to it. As Stuart Hall asks in "Who needs Identity?": Is it possible to have "...an integral, originary and unified identity" (Hall, 1996: 1) in the age of deconstruction or is it possible to achieve a unique kind of identification which includes:

... more superficial or artificially imposed "selves" which a people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common and which can stabilize, fix or guarantee an unchanging 'oneness' or cultural belongingness underlying all the superficial differences. [Instead], ... identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, ... subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation " (Hall, 1996: 4).

Anita Desai, in her novel *Clear Light of the Day*, focuses on this notion of identity both personally and socially from a scope of a fragmented ideology.

In the novel, there are two girls who grow up with an indifferent mother and a father having diabetics and a mentally retarded brother Raja. When the time passes, within this small household, an alcoholic old aunt comes to take care of the children and the ill father; all of which made up of indifferent, abnormal, loveless and fragmented family relations. The younger girl Tara marries with Bakul, Raja the elder of the two brothers gets married to the daughter of their Muslim aristocrat neighbour and the older girl Bim stays at home to look after the house and Baba.

The novel begins with the family's gathering after some time and through flashbacks, the narrative fluctuates between childhood memories of the past (dreamlike) and adult world of the present (harsh reality). Besides, the differences between the two sisters even from the beginning are carefully drawn. Although, Bim represents the harshness and seriousness of the adult world when compared to Tara's

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<sup>1</sup> E.J. Hobsbawm asserts: "For all of us, there is a twilight zone between history and memory; between the past as a generalized record which is open to relatively dispassionate inspection and the past as a remembered part of, or background to, one's own life. For individual human beings this zone stretches from the point where living family traditions or memories begin say from the earliest family photo which the oldest living family member can identify or explicate – to the end of infancy, when public and private destinies are recognised as inseparable and as mutually defining one another" (Hobsbawm, 1989: 3).

childish behaviours, it will be realised that Bim is the one who resists change and continues to live in the past with “dullness, boredom and waiting” (Desai, 1980: 3). Even on the eyes of Tara, Bim represents stability, traditions, family and past roots. Tara says: ““You looked so like Mama from a distance, Bim” (Desai, 1980: 3). As a parallel theme to Bim’s and their house’s not changing, Bim also emphasises the region’s not being changed:

‘That is the risk of coming home to Old Delhi... Old Delhi doesn’t change. It only decays... Nothing but sleeping graves. Now New Delhi, they say is different. That is where things happen... And then the British built New Delhi and moved everything out. Here we are left rocking on the backwaters, getting duller and greyer, I suppose. Anyone who isn’t dull and grey goes away – to New Delhi, to England, to Canada, the Middle East. They don’t come back.’ (Desai, 1980: 5)

Both the effects of colonialism and modernity affect these native Indian people’s lives: if there is no change, it is problematic because there is no life there, if something changes, all the things are changed and nothing remains. Therefore, in one way or another, the ties of the past and the present are cut off. Both change and stability affect people, their life and their psychology directly.

The thing that over-stresses the melancholic mood of the house is the unchanging, stable memories of their childhood experiences which were the feelings reflected instead of having joy, happiness and dreams; led Tara to float into a nightmarish world reminding her of her family’s negative influence over their children: “It seemed to her that the dullness and the boredom of her childhood, her youth, were stored here in the room under the worn dusty red rugs... behind the yellow photographs in the oval frames – everything, everything she had so hated as a child and that was still preserved here...” (Desai, 1980: 21); actually these memories torment Bim more than Tara because she lives in and for this boredom and hopelessness.

From a broader perspective, it is explicit that “...as actual places and localities become ever more blurred and indeterminate, ideas of culturally and ethnically distinct places become perhaps even more salient” (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992: 10). After the colonial period, Old Delhi becomes a blurred place. Likewise, the house where these girls are grown is dominating their inner world with its haunting stability/resistance to change both in a negative and positive way. Positively, it unites all the family members within a common ground, negatively in the sense that their past experiences were desperate.

While the narration flows through Tara’s remembering their childhood memories; her life is also tied to Bim and Raja and their continuous enmity because of a letter. Firstly, through this letter, the narrator gets the chance to reveal the past events about Raja. Raja marries the daughter of their Muslim neighbour Hyder Ali Sahib whom he takes as a role model. Furthermore, his marriage and their removal from Old Delhi to New Delhi during the “partition riots of 1947” and selling all their houses to Hindus except Raja’s house on the condition that Bim should pay a rent to Raja as her landlord is important both for understanding Bim’s repentance of Raja’s letter and for showing the relationship between India and Pakistan.

While the two sisters are trying to find their way to reach their identity, they somehow tie the public and private history. Within the traces of their own life, the country’s efforts of finding its roots are seen. However, the personal and the public have already been fragmented by the lost ties and the outside interventions as they remind T.S.Eliot’s *Waste Land*:

Who is the third who walks always beside you?

When I count there are only you and I together

But when I look ahead up the white road

There is always another one walking beside you...

Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded

I do not know whether a man or a woman

-But who is that on the other side of you? (Desai, 1980: 41)

This third party in the poem both signifies the outsiders intervening this family members and outsider forces changing the country. Also, within this chaos resulted from the influence of the outsiders, the insiders' loose contact with each other as a result of change, transformation, modernisation and adulthood. As a result, they become fragmented figures who cut of their past ties with the present and forget their authentic identity. Both Bim and Tara fail to understand each other's agonies and they remain lonely as ever. Moreover, parallel to their personal fragmentation, in 1947 summer the country is also separated and fragmented: "For everyone in India... For every Hindu and Muslim. In India and in Pakistan... We could see the fires burning in the city every night" (Desai, 1980: 43). And they lament the year both as a private and a public curse.

In the second part, the partition of India and Pakistan is indirectly told by showing its effects especially on Raja's life. Especially, within his education Raja rejects to have Hindu and prefers Urdu which is a contradiction for a Hindu boy. Also, he continuously visits Hyder Ali Sahib; and not only influenced from his ideas but also he accepts his family order as his. Then, he decides the route of his life which is strictly denied by his father:

'I'm talking about the political situation. Don't you know anything about it? Don't you know what a struggle is going on for Pakistan? How the Muslims are pressing the British to divide the country and give them half? ... If you, a Hindu boy, are caught in ... the centre of Islamic studies... you will be torn to bits, you will be burnt alive-... Hindus and Muslims alike will be out for your blood. It isn't safe Raja, it isn't safe, son' (Desai, 1980: 52).

Raja's interest in their Muslim neighbour Hyder Ali Sahib also influences his views about the separation within the country. Although, he goes to "Hindu College" and studies English Literature rather than "Urdu at Jamia Millia" as Hyder Ali advises; because of his sympathy for the Muslims, other boys label him as a Muslim sympathiser who is a Pakistani spy because of his seeing Pakistan "...as a possibility, very close to them, palpable and real" (Desai, 1980: 57).

After these familial events, the tension within the country also rises because of the separation of the Muslims and Hindus and this also affects the family. The personal clashes with the political. Raja argues: "The city's burning down. Delhi is being destroyed. The whole country is split up and everyone's become a refugee. Our friends have been driven away, perhaps killed. And you ask me to worry about a few cheques and files in father's office" (Desai, 1980: 66). Raja emphasises the problems of the country, on the other hand Bim is mainly interested in the problems of the family as if she is the mother, Raja is the father and Tara and Baba are the children who should be taken care of. The question is: Which one is right? Yet, Tara marries with Bakul and Raja went to Hyder Ali's house and marries with Benazir; Bim stays at home to take care of both the house and Baba but she feels very lonely because of Raja and Tara's deserting her: "All the rooms were unnaturally enlarged by emptiness for all the small objects of ornament and comfort had been taken away and only the large pieces of furniture left... The squares and oblongs on the walls from which pictures had been removed were marked by brown rims of grime" (Desai, 1980: 73).

Therefore, in one way or another, all the people's lives in India are fragmented as Anita Desai expresses:

... when one says 'India' no Indian really knows what you mean. It's just the opening to a hundred questions. Which region? Which part of India? ... Which language? Which religion? Because India is a country made up of so many fragments... each little fragment has a culture which is so distinctly its own – its own language, its own script, its own literature. (Desai, 1994: 80)

Moreover, in spite of Dr. Biswas's interest in her, Bim rejects him and continues to sacrifice herself to her family. Maybe because Bim does not see any interest from her own mother and father in her childhood period and also Raja does not want to have this responsibility and Tara does not have the courage to have this burden; she becomes the heroine of the family voluntarily by sacrificing herself. Therefore, she continues to her boring, hopeless and monotonous life which is the very result of her own choices.

In part three, the narrator again turns to their childhood memories to understand their character more. While, the routine and dullness of their family continues and Tara and Bim could not name the unpleasant atmosphere:

A way out of what? they still could not say, could not define the unsatisfactory atmosphere at their home. They did not realize now that this unsatisfactoriness was not based only on their parents' continual absence, their seemingly total disinterest in their children, their absorption in each other. The secret, hopeless suffering of their mother was somehow at the root of this subdued greyness... Also, the disappointment that Baba's very life,... his hopeless future... The children could only sense it, they did not share it, except unwillingly. (Desai, 1980: 130)

Part Four again focuses on the adult life of Bim, Tara and Raja. Bim does not want to see Raja after his departure because "Raja the eldest must bear the family burden. But, she tends to exaggerate Raja's actions. Her words contain much bitterness" (Bande 146) because she thinks that he is selfish. Therefore she says: "I'm bored with Raja. Utterly bored... He is too rich to be interesting any more, too fat and too successful. Rich, fat and successful people are boring... He may be a grown man, respectable citizen, father of a family and all that – but what is he still trying to do, to be?" (Desai, 1980: 145). Bim concludes that nobody understands each other: "I think it's simply amazing – how very little one sees or understands even about one's own home or family" (Desai, 1980: 148). After remembering childhood memories, they confess that their lives are only failures – both Tara and Bim's.

Bim ... in spite of her brave efforts to tolerate and adjust with others... Her whole life is one of tolerance and sacrifice. She does not shrink from responsibility but faces them and tries to find out her way. Unlike Tara she is not an escapist who runs into matrimony sensing the trouble at home... Her life is one of constant struggle for survival... In spite of all these virtues, however, she too fails to psychologically adjust with her brother and sister... [So she tries to be] aloof and detached... (Jena, 1989: 24).

As a result, Bim learns to live with her loneliness and sacrifices which were never understood by her family and she consoles herself and reaches her true identity. And somehow she learns that within misery, she should continue her life – this is her life, her decisions and herself: "Her eyes opened at this sight against her will and she looked around the room almost in fear. But it was dark and shadowy..., ... in their shade she saw how she loved him, loved Raja and Tara and all of them who had lived in this house with her... Although it was shadowy and dark, Bim could see as well as by the clear light of the day that she felt only love and yearning for them all..." (Desai, 1980: 165). She stops criticising the others and accept them as they are: "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. The conflicts that rose inside her with every word they spoke ..., she now felt, leaving her worn out" (Desai, 1980: 166). In the end, she learns to live with all these: "*Alone he had*

*lived and alone he made ready to die... he wrote... Many were around me when I was born. But now 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?"* (Desai, 1980: 167). By making herself alienated, Bim tries to find her true identity and her desire to be free turns her into a non-conformist. Bim is a powerful character in the sense that: "...[she] achieves her identity and her self not in isolation but in togetherness, not in rejection, but in acceptance, not in withdrawal, but in positive commitment...She is peculiarly enough, both traditional and modern in her ideals" (Jena, 1989: 31).

The question is which one maintains her/his identity: the fragmented ones – Raja by imitating his Muslim neighbour and forgetting his responsibilities to his Hindu family or Tara by escaping from family burdens and marrying with a man and trying to forget about her past, or Bim who is complete in herself. Bim's completeness comes from the fact that she is in search of her true self which is a combination of past/present, failures/victories, responsibilities/burdens and her own self/the members of her family. Actually, Desai highlights the importance of reaching this completeness even within a world of fragmentation and dissolution by her protagonist – Bim.

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