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Escaping the Predicament of Single Sister: An Analysis of Role of Bimla in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*

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Abstract:

A writer of novels and short stories, Anita Desai has been active on the literary scene for more than two decades. Alienation, loneliness and failure of communication are some of the recurrent themes in the novels of Anita Desai. She spotlights the extremely complex nature of life. She is more concerned with the intensity of the characters rather than their variety. She is not interested in portraying the outer profile of a character which the eyes can see, but the inner reality, the inner turmoil, the chaos inside the mind. In *Clear Light of Day*, Anita Desai pleads for a new social order where women are not solely dependent on men for their spiritual and material happiness, but find resources of satisfaction other than of matrimony and progeny. This she does through her portrayal of Bim who breaks the stereotype of single woman as well as of motherhood. The present paper is an attempt to analyse the escape of a single sister from her predicament. Bim 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. Her commitment as a sibling to her different roles, that of a sister, a companion, a mother and a provider, sustains her against the onslaughts of time and makes her inturn the sustaining centre of her family.

Keywords: Matrimony, Progeny, Single sister, Commitment, Provider.

The post-independence period has brought to the forefront a number of noted women novelists who have enriched Indian English fiction by a creative release of feminine sensibility. Notable among them are Ruth Pravar Jhabvala, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal and Anita Desai. What distinguishes Anita Desai from other writers is her preoccupation with the individual, and her inner world of sensibility—the chaos inside her mind. Her forte is the exploration of the interior world, plunging into the limitless depths of the mind, and bringing into relief the hidden contours of the human psyche. For her, “It is depth which is interesting, delving deeper and deeper in a character, a situation, or a scene, rather than going round about it (Jain 68). A writer of novels and short stories, Anita Desai has been active on the literary scene for more than two decades:

As a consummate creative artist, Anita Desai shows tremendous potential and vitality. In her writings she not only offers an expose of human life in its shocking shallowness or outward show, but also provides, down deep, a philosophical probe or basis to sustain our life....Her earnest endeavour is to hold a mirror to life, and in the process, to unravel the mystery of human existence (Solanki 185).

Problems of human beings like alienation, loneliness and failure of communication are recurrent themes in the novels of Anita Desai. She spotlights the extremely complex nature of life. She is more concerned with the intensity of the characters rather than their variety. She is not interested in portraying the outer profile of a character which the eyes can see, but the inner reality, the inner turmoil, the chaos inside the mind. Moreover, she is interested in peculiar and eccentric characters rather than average ones.

Clear Light of Day adroitly focuses on the seething inner tensions in the life of Bimla, nicknamed Bim, who emerges as the most significant figure in the novel. She has to undergo several traumatic experiences, suffering tremendous moments of depression and withdrawing herself consciously into a kind of alienated living. However, Bim attempts to rise above the despair and disappointment of family expectations that characterises her youth. In her 'own' world she does define herself and it is through her that 'others' find definition. The pattern of female renunciation that the author upholds through Bim, her middle-aged 'single' heroine, is not a physical abandonment of one's family or an escape from family responsibilities, instead, it involves the sublimation of one's emotions, laying bare of one's soul, until there is no barrier

left between oneself and the other. Bim achieves all this, defines herself and thereby others as well.

Anita Desai pleads for a new social order, through her novel, where women are not solely dependent on men for their spiritual and material happiness, but they find resources of satisfaction other than those finds in matrimony and progeny. This she does through her portrayal of Bim who breaks the stereotype of single woman as well as that of motherhood. A single woman in Indian society is very often seen as overtly religious, a kind of saintly figure on the one hand or an outright witch on the other. She has little or no respect from family or society. Bim, on the contrary, is an emancipated single woman who is, nonetheless, respected by everybody around her. Bim develops the “awareness of time and its importance in human life” and strives “to be whole, to be sane amidst all decay, destruction and death.”(Raizada 17)

She is shown as a complete individual as she shoulders her responsibilities as a sister and companion and then traces her growth toward assuming the role of a mother, provider and even father. The novel reveals that what sustains life is not merely material and the wherewithal, rather it is love, care and affection of a mothering presence. Bim becomes that ‘mothering presence’ for her siblings. Anita Desai alludes to this sustaining presence of a mother in a number of ways. When the mother fails to take care of the children, we have Mira-Masi, the widowed aunt, who nurses the children as her own. When Mira-Masi is gone, we have Bim acting as the foster mother to her brothers and sister. So there are three aspects of the mother fictionalised in the novel—the mother who bears, the mother who cares and the mother who shares. Bim's life acquires a heroic dimension in this symbolic motherhood, for she not only sustains the family, she also sustains the house, which is suggestive of tradition. She, thus, becomes symbolic of forces that sustain and support life against all destructive impulses, of those creative and positive forces which ensure permanence in change, continuity in discontinuity.

Bim, who is free from the constraints of marriage, is symbolic of forces that sustain the foundation of all family life. She becomes emblematic of the archetypal sustaining mother. In her negation and in her affirmation both, she is like the mother who denies herself so that her children might live. In her attempt to take care of everyone, in ignoring her humiliations and other’s ingratitude, in facing the harsh realities of life and in reconciling herself with those forces which had been associated with the duststorm

such as the action of Raja, Bim becomes in effect “symbolic of mother India herself who accommodates all, rejects none.”(Sharma 146)

Bim moves on to become firm and independent. However her firmness and independence do not come about overnight, they grow through her self-questioning and through her rejection of Raja's sentimentality. In the beginning Bim was like any other child with ordinary instincts and desires. She had a stereotypical relationship with her siblings, experiencing the emotions of childhood love and hate. On one occasion she had cut off Tara's hair. Though, the incident is an instance of natural sibling jealousy, it also indicates Bim's growth toward a defiant, dry, harsh and non-empathetic person. At this stage, her predominant tendency seems to be toward asserting power. Whenever she fails to attain it, she turns to vindictive triumph. In this instance, her victim is Tara. She mocks at Tara's weakness, hates her for her complacency and calmness.

Bim goes on to reveal singular qualities as she grows. So, her girlhood figures prominently in the novel. At school she was an active person showing great interest in school activities, “To Bim, school and its teachers and lessons were a challenge to her natural intelligence and mental curiosity that she was glad to meet” (Desai 123). The hours she spent at school were the best to her. She proved to be a born organiser. She became the patrol leader of the Bluebirds, later of the Girl Guides, then Captain of the netball team, class monitor and lastly as a crowning glory, in her final year, the Head Girl. She showed excellent results in academics too. Thus, she was bold, independent and daring right from her school days. She had a dynamic character. She blossomed when leading others, holding responsibilities and when appreciated and admired.

As a young girl, Bim worshipped Florence Nightingale and Joan of Arc and wanted to distinguish herself like them. She wanted to become a 'heroine' on growing up. She wanted to do something extraordinary. This depicts a further growth in her personality. Bim's yearning for heroism is mirrored in her brother, Raja. She, therefore, becomes excessively attached to him. The childhood togetherness of Bim and Raja is well-depicted by Anita Desai. Bim admired Raja and encouraged him in every speculation, act and ambition; “every time his thoughts leap up, her own are there too, understanding, sympathising and encouraging” (Singh 191). They read together, played together and wandered about together. Raja was fond of reading and he often brought

books home to share with his sisters. Bim, particularly, responded very enthusiastically so that she could remain closest to Raja.

Bim realises early that besides being a sister she will also have to parent her younger siblings. When Tara falls in love with Bakul, she brings him home to speak to Bim about his intention of marrying her. By now the parents are dead, so Bim is acknowledged by Tara as the head of the family, whose consent is necessary for the wedding. Bim readily agrees to the marriage and gives Bakul her blessings as an elder might have given. Thus, Bim becomes the actual “head of the family” (Desai 81). However, though she is brave and courageous and now the guardian of her siblings, she wishes that at least someone should be by her to stand with her as she manages the affairs of her family because there is; “no one except Bim. Everything was left to her” (61). Bim is an ambitious and talented young girl who has numerous dreams and high hopes for her future. However, she sees her high aspirations thwarted by the changes in the circumstances of her family. Bim realises that the world does not recognise her as Florence Nightingale or Joan of Arc, though, she has shades of both within her narrow world. She realises that the world is full of harsh realities. To deal with these realities she makes claims on life. Bim is bold enough to live life on her terms and faces all difficulties and adversities with unique courage.

It is her courage that sustains her and enables her to take control over inimical situations. Her mother dies suddenly. After sometime, her father dies too in a car accident. The death of her parents hardly makes any emotional difference to the household. The family was so accustomed to their absence from the house that their deaths only mean a small transition from temporary absence to a permanent one. But the sudden deaths of the parents do increase the responsibilities on Bim. Mira Masi too ceases to play her role of a surrogate mother as she turns into an alcoholic wreck. Then, Raja falls ill and lies at home recuperating from tuberculosis. At this stage, Bim has three patients to look after—Mira Masi, Raja, and Baba who is a permanent invalid.

During Raja's illness Bim attends to all his needs with utmost care and devotion. She knows that her brother loves poetry above all other things. So she reads from his favourite poets to him. She knows that a change in the mode of thinking of an ailing person is a must to aid in recovery. So Bim is sure that through poetry; “she could lead him so simply into a world out of this sickness and anxiety and chaos” (46). Thus, Bim

understands Raja's needs by becoming a true friend and soul mate to him. She even abandons her studies to be able to nurse Raja properly. She does not think about her own interests and benefits, rather she is worried only about Raja's well-being. She becomes a motherly figure, an embodiment of devotion and sacrifice.

Bim assumes the role of a companion and then of a mother even for Baba, when the two of them are left behind in each other's company. In fact, one of her major reasons for deciding to opt out of marriage is that she has to take care of her mentally-retarded brother, Baba. Marriage means going away to live in another world and leave behind old ties. But Bim finds it difficult to break these ties. It is impossible for her to go away leaving Baba alone. Being a special child, he is incapable of taking care of himself and surviving in a ruthless world, so Bim takes care of him affectionately and sincerely. Bim, in a way, escapes the mundane existence of Tara, a married woman, and Mira Masi, a widowed woman. The constraints of marital life are not overlooked but are transformed in Bim's resolution to affirm the significance of sustaining motherhood beyond traditional limitations suggested in her relationship with Baba. The true significance of her resolution can be seen in the fact that she seeks her totality and wholeness in the retarded Baba. Bim and Baba are complimentary to each other. Baba is self-absorbed while Bim is absorbed in family, and in work. Baba is all sensation; he stands for sensitivity, tenderness and gentleness. Bim, on the other hand, is sensible who operates by dry reason and is able to deal with reality. It is only by being together that they can be whole.

Sometimes, outraged with the lack of any adequate response from anybody around her, Bim does show signs of mental imbalance. She threatens to give up her responsibilities. In a state of depression, she even stops taking interest in the house. She allows it to grow shabby and rundown, "The neglected and decaying house symbolises the frustrated and wasted life of the aging Bim" (Raizada 190). It is Tara's concern for Bim, for Raja, for the bitterness that has arisen between them that rouses Bim's anger. Tara's arrival rakes the old wounds and gashes that Bim had felt, and makes them fresh again; "Tara's concern quivering in the air, like the moist nose of a dog that is restless and won't lie down, made Bim want to stamp on it and stamp it out..." (Desai 162). Bim hates Tara's concern and pity because it nullifies all that she has done matter-of-factly and of her own volition. Bim's fierce independence and a sense of vindication are under siege and so she is enraged with everybody, including Baba, whose haplessness is seen to externalise Bim's own loneliness and emotional dereliction.

Most of Bim's frustration is caused by Raja's conduct. When he is sick with tuberculosis, Bim nurses him back to health nurturing the hope that he would take on the responsibility of the family business. She hopes that everything will be alright when her adored brother takes on the mantle of 'provider.' The father's demise certainly has some financial implications for the family because the father had been, if nothing else, a provider. Now when he is no more, Bim expects Raja to assume this role. But to Raja, the well-being and welfare of the HyderAlis, who have fled to safety at Hyderabad escaping communal riots, is more important than looking after the well-being of his own family members. Hyder Ali and his family had always encouraged him and provided him with a ground for the culmination of his romantic ideals, that his own family could never provide. He thus, constantly worries about the safety of Hyder Ali and pays no attention to the business of his father, though his father had desired in his will that Raja should attend to the office work after him. He tells Bim; "No, I don't care what my father has written in his will—I don't want to be a partner. I won't have anything to do with it—I am not a businessman ..." (65). He refuses to be a businessman in his own house but later in Hyderabad he takes care of Hyder Ali's business and after him, even inherits it. This causes great pain to Bim. Thus, Raja's flight is possible because of his sister, Bim who stays back and shoulders all responsibilities. In his urgency to begin his life Raja forgets Bim's need to do the same.

Though Bim feels lonely, however, she alone looks forward to fight her way out of her predicament. During her childhood loneliness, her brothers, sister and Mira Masi were there with her to fill the empty moments. But there is no one now except Baba to share her haunting seclusion. She is forlorn but not without hope. She hopes to survive despite no cooperation from her siblings, especially Raja. Circumstances take a turn for the worse and Raja, after his marriage, remains no more a brother in Bim's eyes. Not only does he shy away from his duty as an elder brother but, according to Bim's perception, goes to the extent of behaving with Bim as if he were a landlord, after inheriting the property of Hyder Ali, his father-in-law. His discourteous letter is the final straw:

...I want to assure you that, now that he 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 of selling the house as long as you and Baba need it...(27).

This letter hits Bim like a blow. A brother who had once been very intimate with and close to her has now written a letter to her, which seems to her to be written in his capacity as the new owner of the house, forgetting that he is also her brother. From this time onward Bim feels utterly rejected, she begins to harbour a bitter grievance against Raja; "Bim has been very angry all the summer along with herself, her family, her neighbours but most with her absent brother Raja for the callous letter he once wrote to her" (Raizada 48). Bim's misfortune lies in the fact that people whom she loves deeply has left her forlorn and emotionally destitute. Bim finally comprehends the futility of her inveterate bitterness and malignant spitefulness against Raja and Tara, and occasionally against Baba. She longs for protecting them instinctively and instantly from vulnerabilities and perils. Bimrealises; "how she loved them, loved Raja and Tara and all of them who had lived in this house with her" (Desai 165). Thus, Bim emerges a survivor, a winner, and resolves her grudges against Raja. Even Raja's indifferent and humiliating attitude "by the renewal of role from brother to landlord" (Asnani 100), becomes a tall and shining thing to her. She sees her own love so imperfect that could not encompass him thoroughly enough. She tears Raja's letter that had pitilessly haunted her like a ghost; "Having torn it, she felt she had begun the clearing of her own decks, the lightening of her own bark" (Desai 169). The tempest that rocked her hamlet is thus over. Bim is liberated from her twisted vision and her confused values. Following tradition, sub-consciously, Bim had invested orthodox 'brother-like' qualities on Raja and as sister she felt wronged when he abandoned the role, which she had to take on. But now fully realising her own self, her identity, she does not need the division of roles. She is one integrated person and attains internal freedom. She feels one with her siblings:

There could be no love deep and full and wide than this one, she knows....They were really all parts of her...as she was of them, so that the anger and disappointment she felt in them was only the anger and disappointment she felt at herself. Whatever hurt they felt, she felt. Whatever diminished them, diminished her (165)

Bim who seems to have lost love, marriage and domesticity, acquires everything in the wisdom of her acceptance that it is she who binds her siblings to their shared past. It is not because Bim fails to capture the heart of some eligible bachelor that she should remain single. An able and young doctor, Biswas, proposes to Bim. Having thought over the proposal coolly and carefully, she very politely declines it and discourages Dr. Biswas in his endeavour to win her heart. Bim's awareness of reality within herself and of her family and her mental ability are revealed in her decision not to enter into marriage with Dr. Biswas. A lucrative offer, particularly for a young girl in Bim's situation, it could be a romantic experience had she responded positively to the doctor's courting. At first, she is swayed, but then she comes to realise that he is not a man made for her. She is flabbergasted at Dr. Biswas's remark:

Now I understand why you do not wish to marry. You have dedicated your life to others—to your sick 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)

According to Bim, Dr. Biswas's conclusion is not correct. It is no simple sacrifice for her but a mixture of her necessity, of duty, but more so of her love, which later becomes her *raison d'être*.

Bim 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. Her commitment as a sibling to her different roles, that of a sister, a companion, a mother and a provider, sustains her against the onslaughts of time and makes her, in turn, the sustaining centre of her family. Her heart softens toward each member of her family and she looks forward to meet Raja. Bim is now able to see things in the 'clear light of day.' The recognition of her being the sister whom all the siblings look up for strength, succour and continuity lead her to a state of ultimate blessed wisdom.

Bim thus, works toward a reconciliation of discordant elements and does not move away from them. Being a woman of rare virtues, a dauntless spirit with education and a career, Bim stands for awareness. She embodies Anita Desai's vision of the new Indian woman who is independent. Her rejection of the traditional image of the Indian

woman—is manifest in all she says or does. Unlike most Indian girls, she opts out of marriage to lead a single life. She moves on to pursue a career and a way of life which she accepts gracefully despite its limitations. She refuses to play the conventional role of a sex-object and of a submissive wife and becomes, in a sense, a truly liberated woman. Contrary to the erroneous pre-conceptions attached to an independent woman self, Bim brilliantly manifests the superior steering of emotions, responsibilities and relationships by a person whose independence makes her more responsive, sure, and able. It is her liberated self that can, ultimately, overcome the difficulties in her acceptance of and bonding with her siblings. Thus, independence does not preclude interdependence and the need to relate, it only facilitates the latter without the burden of stereotypical expectations.

She also breaks the tradition of male inheritance of parental property, as she inherits the family business and responsibilities. The female takeover of parental property, causes an important shift in perspective, for, though in law a sister is entitled to an equal share of parental property, social ethics prescribe that she should decline the offer and withdraw in favour of her brothers. However, Bim breaks the tradition that continuity is contained only in the sons. She becomes the provider, inheriting her father's property, reluctantly but surely. She becomes the nurturer in place of her mother. But, it is in her role as sister that Bim faces the greatest challenge and attains the biggest fulfilment.

As long as Bim sees herself as being driven to undertake the responsibilities of provider-nurturer, she feels burdened. Notwithstanding her capacity and also her willingness to play those roles, Bim does feel that her space is being encroached by her siblings. The result is bitterness and a feeling of abandonment. However, after she comes to terms with her own self in her dark night's reading of *Aurangzeb*, she also relates to Raja, Tara and Baba as a sister. Standing on the same plane as the other three, now, Bimla can understand and, therefore, forgive the weaknesses as well as the longings of her siblings. Bimla's self-worth is softened and affirmed in the gentle admiration of Tara and the reminisced camaraderie and bond between Raja and herself. This new definition of her being a 'sister' unburdens her and she finds a newly-found freedom in the love of and for her siblings. Thus, the definition of Bimla's self and her position in the family defines the rest of the Das family.

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