



QUEST FOR SELF-IDENTITY IN ANITA DESAI'S *CLEAR LIGHT OF DAY*

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ABSTRACT

The Twentieth Century is faced with the dissolution of old convictions and dogmas. As a result, man is caught in the whirlpool of uncertainty, perplexity and bewilderment. A typical twentieth century man finds himself estranged not only from his fellowmen but also from his innermost nature because he can find nothing to depend upon in the moments of extreme despair. Anitha Desai, a renowned Indian novelist and a professor of humanities at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology is known for her insightful exploration of the complex nature of human life and societal changes. Her novel *Clear Light of Day* focusses on the issues of self identity, family dynamics and woman's psyche. Bimla, the chief and the simplest protagonist of the novel is a combination of two-fold ambition. She wants to be emotionally and economically independent. Anita Desai in her portrayal of Bimla creates a new social order where women are not solely dependent on men for their spiritual and material happiness. Bimla achieves her feminine self in fusion, not in negation. Her deep commitment to her past as a maternal symbol, a feminine principle sustains her against the ravages of time. The present paper aims to analyze how Bimla achieves her identity and her 'self' through her commitment to family by playing different roles as sister and mother and provider. Her quest positively affiliated to others, goes beyond her introvert self. Search for identity crisis is no longer confined to the individual. It can characterize a group, an institution, a class, a profession or even a nation. An individual's sense of identity is shaped either consciously or unconsciously.

Keywords: self-identity, quest, individual.

INTRODUCTION

Identity is particularly subject to crisis in modernity because of the complex relationship, between the plurality of selves and the wider society, security and belongingness. Modern men who fail to realize their identity in the social milieu become withdrawn from society and victims of identity crisis. This state consists of a sense of isolation, alienation and a feeling that his existence in this life is meaningless.

Anitha Desai, a renowned Indian novelist and a professor of humanities at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology is known for her insightful exploration of the complex nature of human life and societal changes. Her novel *Clear Light of Day* focuses on the issues of selfidentity, family dynamics and woman's psyche. The novel revolves around the mutual relationships of the four children of that Hindu family as they grow up to adulthood and then to middle age. The four children of the family are Raja, Bim, Tara and Baba who grow up in a household which offers a melancholic atmosphere because of the parents. The parents are indifferent to their children. Mira-masi, the aunt of the children takes care of them particularly the mentally retarded child Baba with extreme care and concern. In the course of time, both of the

parents die and so does Mira-masi. Raja leaves Old Delhi for Hyderabad and marries Benazir who is the daughter of their Muslim landlord Hyder Ali. Tara also gets married to a young man in the Indian Foreign Service and leaves for Ceylon. Bimla, the protagonist of the novel is not only left alone in the Old house in Old Delhi but also the responsibility of looking after her mentally-retarded younger brother, Baba. Bimla's deep concern for Baba and her satisfaction with the job of a lecturer in history in a college give the way for becoming a spinster.

Bimla is a combination of two-fold ambition. She wants to be emotionally and economically independent. The phrase "clear light of day" is used by the novelist to describe a moment when Bim can see her emotions and relationships with a newfound clarity, even in a dimly lit room. While describing her reminiscences and meditations over her past, Bimla sitting in a shadowy and dark room all by herself can perceive distinctly that she still loves her siblings (Raja, Tara and Baba) with all their limitations and shortcomings. Anita Desai remarks that Bimla could see as clearly as in the light of day that she has felt only love and yearning for them all.

QUEST FOR SELF-IDENTITY

The novel *Clear Light of Day* throws light on the emotional affinity between two main characters, Bimla and her younger sister Tara, who are haunted by the memories of the past. The two sisters differ in their attitudes to memories of childhood. The circumstances of their lives differ. The identity of each enacts and articulates the past in its own pattern. Tara, the wife of Bakul, a diplomat posted abroad, is at home after many years. Her homecoming is a return to the pleasant and unpleasant memories of childhood.

Tara is a girl of modest ambitions, physically smaller and weaker than Bimla. She lacks Bimla's vigour and her stamina to face anything courageously. She is a nonentity at school. Tara rejoices in the sheltered and cloistered life of her home in the company of aunt Mira. In fact, aunt Mira is her other identity. Her marriage with Bakul and her stay abroad bring about a great change in the identity of Tara. Her life turns over a new leaf. When Tara returns to old Delhi, her old love for home revives and she wishes to fade away, to dissolve in the reminiscences of the past and to lose herself in order to recover her past identity.

Tara opts for a home-bound life. Bakul is annoyed at her relapse in to her

childhood frivolities. On the other hand, Bim's reactions to her adolescent days have noting of the romantic glamour of Tara's passionate musings about them. Bimla is a victim of circumstances and contrary to Bakul's expectations, Bimla leads a different life. She cannot take decisions, face challenges and be strong; she revels in her childhood fancies. The abrupt change in the circumstances of her life and her family not only poses a threat to her high aspirations but also simultaneously breeds identity crisis. She is unable to reconcile her aspirations to the circumstantial changes around her. After her parents' death and Tara's marriage, she is left alone to nurse her ailing brother Raja, attend to the aged, alcoholic and invalid aunt and look after her mentally retarded brother Baba. The familial situation burdens her, shatters her marital bliss and destroys her conjugal identity. After the passing away of aunt Mira, she feels forlorn. She is left alone in the company of her helpless younger brother. She undergoes sad and dismal experiences and she passed through alienation from those of fondly cherished to drain all her enthusiasm for the past.

Both Tara and Bimla realise the tremendous transformation brought about by time, altering their relations and attitudes.

They recall the period of childhood as an age of love and intimacy with each other, the four of them forming a complete whole. But cracks begin to appear as they grow up and acquire more individual personalities.

The partition of India and Pakistan creates a fissure in their familial ties. It disintegrates their family and becomes a powerful image of their feeling of estrangement. The partition brings barriers between people who have lived together for centuries in an atmosphere of mutual social and cultural understanding. Tara, Bimla and Raja face a severe identity crisis.

Bimla feels for her brother Baba with frustration. She gradually regains her clam, and her heart has filled with love for Raja, Tara and all of them who had lived in the house with her. She has living in a dark, dismal world where she could hardly get a glimpse of the clear light of day, where she experienced again the spider fear that lurked at the centre of the Web-world. But with her redeeming realisation and penitence, she is able to see this clear light:

Although it was shadowy and dark, Bim could see as well as by the clear light of day that she felt only love and yearning for them all, and if there were hurts, there gashes and wounds in her side that bide, them it

as only because her love as imperfect and did not encompass them thoroughly enough and because it had flows and inadequacies and did not extend to all equally (Desai 165)

The adult world of the characters is seen as a projection of their childhood identity. The contrast between time past and time present, between childhood and adulthood is crucial to the aesthetic get-up of the novel. The moonlit dream-world of childhood is seen against the passage of time thus the adult life of the characters is beclouded and bedimmed by their childhood identity. The novelist visualises the reality of childhood with a feminine and poetic-sensibility. The pestilent -stricken, violent world of the adults is contrasted with the boisterous and carefree world of the children. The image of sickness, disease and violence suggest the adult world, whereas images of joy, enthusiasm, curiosity and carelessness characterize childhood. The partition of the country poses another problem in the familial life of Bimla. Tara discovers her tender sensibility and her feminine identity in her adolescent infatuation with her teacher and even Baba is able to decipher the identity of his inarticulate world in the sounds of the gramophone he had collected from the

abandoned house of Hyder Ali. The children in this novel pass through different levels of awareness. They are alienated from the external world which intrudes upon their consciousness, breeding anguish in their unruffled existence. Lost in their fairy world, they are attracted by forces, beyond their control, which bring about a change in their identity. "Desai appears to promote harmony within self and social duty in *Clear Light of the Day*, which as many of her novels indicate, is never easy to do. It can however, be one of the effective and practical feminist approaches in countries not just India. Where community and close family relations exist." (Jackson 140)

Time acts as a catalytic agent in their lives. Tara seems to have lost her identity in marriage but she gains in terms of family and motherhood. She assumes a new identity with her marriage, the identity of a mother and a housewife. Raja too seems to have lost him. He relinquishes his Byronic longings in marriage, but experiences a new kind of awareness linked with his marital and conjugal life.

Bimla embodies not only the catabolic impulses but also the forces which ensure permanence and continuity in a dynamic and transient world. Bimla reflects Desai's vision of the identity of the New

Indian Woman. She chooses a new world where no one can dominate her. She wants to be independent and courageous too. Her desire to dress and smoke like a man helps her to be strong and confident. She does not want to show herself as an ordinary woman with weak will, dependent of male companion and submissive.

Bimla is the chief and the simplest protagonist of Anita Desai. Her ambition is two-fold to be emotionally and economically independent. She never wants to marry: "I can think of hundred things to do instead. I won't marry... I shall earn my on living and look after Miramasi and Baba and be independent." (Desai 140) She would not depend on any one, not even on her father. She depended on her father for education she would have been an illiterate. "For all father cared, I could have grown up illiterate and cooked for my living or swept.so I had to teach myself history and teach myself to teach." (Desai 155)

Bimla gets ready to take up family responsibilities without the aid or advice of male members in her family. Bimla is an emancipated single woman who is, nonetheless, respected by everybody around her. Bimla 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) Mr. Sharma who is the partner of Bimla’s father in the insurance business frequently wants that somebody from the Das family must attend the important meetings to be held at the office. At one point, Bimla decides to sell the family share of the business to Mr. Sharma. In this regard, she sees no reason for consulting her sister’s husband Bakul or her elder brother Raja. She has a firm confidence in modern woman’s capacity to cope with all kinds of situations in life. She thinks that her students will laugh at her if they learn that she is finding it difficult to face the situation arisen in her late father’s office. She has emerged as a strong woman and shoulder up the responsibility of her family. R.S.Sharma rightly says, “Bim is symbolic of forces that have sustained the foundation of all family life she becomes symbolic of the archetypal sustaining mother.” (Sharma 1) Bimla's quest for identity positively affiliated to others, goes beyond her introvert self.

Bimla revolts against the traditional image of the Indian woman both in her words and deeds. The idea of a mother appears in different ways throughout the

novel. Miramasi acts as a substitute mother and when she is gone, Bimla plays the foster mother to her brothers and sister. Thus, the three facets of the mother identity are explored in the novel. Bimla achieves her true ‘self’ in fusion, not in negation. Her deep commitment to her past as a maternal symbol, a feminine principle sustains her against the ravages of time. With her strong will and determination, Bimla emerges as a new woman of self-esteem.

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