

Mother-Daughter Relationship and its Catastrophic effects as Showcased by Anita Desai's Clear Light of Day

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Abstract

Indian novelist Anita Desai is well-known for her beautiful and moving work. Over the course of her multi-decade career, she has become a well-known personality in Indian literature and is praised for her insightful examination of interpersonal interactions, human emotions, and the intricacies of modern Indian culture. Desai's work is distinguished by its exquisite prose, striking imagery, and profound understanding of her characters' inner lives. Her writing frequently explores identity, cultural conflict, and people's hardships in a changing world, weaving fascinating narratives that connect with readers all across the world. Anita Desai is a prominent voice

in the literary world thanks to her multiple honours and devoted fan base. The complexities of mother-daughter relationships are frequently explored in Anita Desai's works, and they are portrayed with emotional resonance, depth, and complexity. These connections act as a prism through which she explores the intricacies of family, identity, tradition, and generational strife in her works. This mother-daughter relationship has immense depth and the effort of this research paper is to probe further into it and to bring to front the reasons contributing to the turmoil and emotional conflicts faced by the protagonist in the novel Clear Light of Day by Anita Desai. It is a great example of how dysfunctional, self-centred, and negligent mothers negatively impact their daughters' lives when they neglect to fulfil their primary duty of providing for their children. The emotional struggle that Bim and Tara, the daughters, experience both internally and as a result of the mother-daughter connection in the situation they find themselves in, is highlighted in the study. It provides a striking backdrop on which to depict Bim's and Tara's trauma's origins and their development into the individuals they become.

Key Words: Dysfunctional, Patriarchy, Patriarchal, Freedom, , Desires, Attractiveness, Mother-Daughter Relationship, Insecurity, Social, Negligent, Psychology, Independence.

Introduction

Clear Light of Day is a novel published in 1980 by Indian novelist and three-time Booker Prize finalist Anita Desai. The story is set in Old Delhi and revolves around the Das family, particularly the four siblings: Bim, Tara, Raja, and Baba. The novel primarily explores themes of memory, family dynamics, and the impact of historical and cultural changes in post-independence India. The novel starts with Bim, the eldest sibling, who is a schoolteacher in Old Delhi. She is a stoic and somewhat bitter character, burdened by the memory of her past. Her younger sister, Tara, returns to India after a long absence in the United States with her husband and children.

The story delves into the siblings' complex relationships and their differing responses to their past. Bim resents her sister for leaving the family and staying away for so long, while Tara is trying to find her place in a country she left behind. The two brothers, Raja and Baba, also have their own struggles.

Throughout the novel, the narrative alternates between past and present, revealing the family's history and the events that shaped their lives. The family home, with its memories and ghosts of the past, serves as a central symbol in the story.

As the novel unfolds, it becomes clear that the Das family is haunted by its history and the societal changes in India after independence. The characters are trying to come to terms with

their personal and collective past, and each of them grapples with their own demons.

"Clear Light of Day" is a poignant exploration of family, memory, and identity, and it provides a profound look at the complexities of life in post-independence India.

As the paper primarily focuses on the mother-daughter relationship and the conflicts that arise in and as a result of it, it is important to highlight the factors that led to sisters' lives becoming affected by it. "In this novel, parents have retained something of their own, a niche for their individual being, divorced from the duties of ideal parents" (Dasgupta viii).

Factors contributing to Bim's and Tara's Emotional Conflict:

After carefully reading the novel and examining the characters, it becomes apparent that the mother and daughters experience a relationship that is neutral in nature. Both physical and emotional distance can be seen in their connection. Even after the mother's passing, this is still in effect. The level of discord is so extreme that the girls, along with the other family members, suffer lifetime repercussions that even influence how they choose to live in the future.

Factors Contributing to Bim's and Tara's emotional Conflict: The dysfunctional families with negligent mothers, dictatorial fathers and the materialistic world that encompasses their lives, are all factors responsible for the decline in psychology of

their children. Without the support of their parents, children are compelled to live lives of insecurity and inferiority complex, which have a negative impact on them and leave them with lifelong scars. This is the primary factor that causes conflicting circumstances.

a. Dysfunctional Family: The dispute within dysfunctional families is one of the reasons for the mushrooming conflicts, especially within the Das family, and the whole novel revolves around the conflicts that the family and its members face. Desai is renowned for her expertise in playing around these issues. It is observed that the parents fail to leave a positive impact on their children, and therefore, the children don't feel their need. Tara remarks that she did not "need to wreck her parents' occupation or divert their attention. It would have frightened her a bit if they if they had come away, followed her and tried to communicate with her" (Desai, Clear Light of Day 34). Such is for the gap between the daughters and their parents. The children were so scared of their parents that on their return from Roshanara Club, after enjoying the evening playing cards with friends, "they would hastily lay down flat as 91 stiff as a row of corpses pretending to be fast asleep" (Desai, Clear Light of Day 168). There was a massive communication gap, "... their seemingly total disinterest in their children their absorption in each other was responsible for this" (Desai, Clear Light of Day 199).

They were unaware of their children's achievements. "When Bim became the head girl of her school, the principal came to congratulate the parents on her honour. They were not at home" (Desai, Clear Light of Day 200). The children felt emotionally distant from the house because of the type of attachment they had to it and the way they felt about it. Only when there is an emotional bond between family members, a house may be referred to as a "home." The connection was absolutely missing in the case of Mrs. Das's family. "The unsatisfactory atmosphere of their home" (Desai, Clear Light of Day 199) could not be defined. They thought of the house as a prison or a refuge. It was, "...still and petrified..." (Desai, Clear Light of Day 99). They never welcomed the thought of going back home. "As they turned to make their way back to the house, a kind of low trump beat started up in the pits of their stomachs reverberated through them making them

stop and clutch each other by the hand" (Desai, Clear Light of Day 186). When Bim and Tara meet later in their life, they recollect the horrified memories, and Bim, with a sour face says, "Who would be thrilled to return to this - this dead old house? Anyone would be horrified to return to it" (Desai, Clear Light of Day 237).

Their past experiences were so bitter and so full of loneliness, dullness, boredom and conflicts that they could never part with them. They compared their families to the families of their neighbours, the Mishras and the Alis, which according to them were an absolute contrast to theirs.

b. Role of Mr. Das: The main reason for the discord or conflict within the family were the autocratic Mr. Das who commanded all of attention and loyalty for himself and Mrs. Das, who lived that role to the exclusion of her children. To the children, the 92 father had been "...just a provider" (Desai, Clear Light of Day 99). After his demise, "For a while all that disturbed the children was the continuous presence of the car in the garage - it made them uneasy. They were simply not used to seeing it so much at home" (Desai,

Clear Light of Day 98). The very circumstance highlights the fact that the father was only an absentee figure at home and was never present to meet the children's emotional needs.

c.Role of Mrs. Das: Mrs. Das, the mother, like the father, is an absentee figure in the house. She is the most important reason for the emerging conflict in this novel. The mother who abdicates her place and her responsibilities into the hands of the ayah and later Mira-masi to the extent that she leaves deep scars in the lives of all four children: Raja, who finds his peace and identity in the home of Hyder Ali; Bim the main protagonist who is bitter about the role that has been thrust upon her; Tara the younger sister who becomes a pale, dependent shadow of her sister, Bim; and finally the youngest autistic Baba, the silent one and the one who is unable to take care of himself for even the basic aspects of living.

Mrs. Das is first presented to the readers at a point in her pregnancy when the doctor has encouraged her to start walking. She is merely meant to be there virtually for Tara, as she runs up and down by her side. She seemed to be ignorant of her presence and paid no attention to her chirpings. "Wrinkling her nose, the mother walked on brooding" (Desai, Clear Light of Day 157). She did not like, "exercise, perhaps the new baby either" (Desai, Clear Light of Day 2). She seemed to have no patience for her children.

She was always found absorbed in herself. She went to the, "Roshanara Club for her daily game of bridge" (Desai, Clear Light of Day 77) with her husband, 93 unaware of the children's

needs. "My bridge is suffering, she complained" (Desai, Clear Light of Day 158) and left the autistic little Baba to the mercy of the ayah. She said that she was tired of carrying and feeding him. Playing cards was a ritual she missed, "for the first time in twenty years, missed an evening at the club, said she did not feel well and would stay in bed" (Desai, Clear Light of Day 81). This habit turned out to be catastrophic for the children's future, particularly for Tara and Bim, the daughters. "Their mother died without seeing any of them again. If she ever, for a minute, regained consciousness, it was only to murmur the names of familiar cards that seem to drift through her mind with a dying rustle.... It was a little difficult for the children to remember always that she was not at the club, playing cards but dead" (Desai, Clear Light of Day 82). This obliquely implies that she was unable to connect with her own children. Even the loss of their mother had no impact on them. This was to such an extent that at a point in conversation with Dr. Biswas, Bim says, "...I didn't have one" (Desai, Clear Light of Day 129) in connection to her mother.

Throughout their mother's life, both, the daughter's and the sons found themselves lost without a sense of direction or guidance. As the mother had little interest in seeing to their upbringing, their conflicts were not settled. These unresolved clashing conditions are to be blamed for the emotional upheaval that the Das family children experience.

These fears could have been easily allayed had Mrs. Das been aware of her shortcomings and the effect they had on the children. Her disinterest in them resulted in lifelong scars, one of the several conflicts left behind by her choices in life. Desai used this imagery to bring out the olden structures of the crumbling society and the family, which needed change, but through

the rot clung to the lives of the impressionable children to their grown-up years.

The book blurb of *Clear Light of Day* mentions, "while their parents went to parties at Delhi's Roshanara Club, the children of the Das family brought themselves up reading Byron, listening to the gramophone and watching over sad alcoholic Miramasi" (Desai, Book Blurb: *Clear Light of Day*). The children were hardly ever cared for and that became the reason for their close bond to Mira-masi, "She was a cousin to the mother's, a poor relation who had been widowed at the fifteen..." (Desai, *Clear Light of Day* 159). They found in her a person who would love them unconditionally, "She fed them with her own nutrients, she reared them in her own shade, she was the support on which they leaned as they grew" (Desai, *Clear Light of Day* 170). The unapproachable mother's world revolved more around card playing and bridge, and even during her sickness, when the mother regained consciousness, she would, "take the names of familiar cards that seemed to drift through her mind with a dying rustle" (Desai, *Clear Light of Day* 82). So deeply involved was she in the world of her delusory recreation.

Desai deals with the making or breaking aspect of individuals within families in this novel and in the end, exhibits the power of relationships within the family as being the sustaining power in societies and in individuals. Raja and Tara rebel against their family to the extent that they leave the family geographically.

Out of the four children, in search of love, affection and satisfaction, Raja develops a deep bond with the Alis, Tara with the Mishra sisters and later with her husband, Bakul, Baba with his music and Mira-masi, while Bimla or Bim, was the only independent one who managed to be functional to the extent that she was able to look after Baba and Mira-masi on a long-term basis.

Bim's emotional conflict:

The conflicts that Bim experienced as a result of the type of relationship she had with her mother can only be understood as arising from the mother's physical and emotional absence in her capacity as the children's main support system. She had completely let go of her housewifely and motherly roles in favour of her role as a

wife., both physically and emotionally. Mrs. Das's social life consisted of playing cards with her friends and accompanying her husband wherever he wished. She failed to develop an emotional bond between and with children. The children consequently went through an uncared-for adolescence and an unsteady, insecure childhood. The neglect that the children suffered at her hands is highlighted by Desai in detail. She was the antithesis to the traditional and expected role of the Indian mother of her times.

The older daughter, Bim, was attractive, superior to the younger sister, Tara, and intelligent. She resided in a world of practicality. She was quite pragmatic in her outlook on life. Early on, the mother abdicates her duties to her. She is then compelled to look after her siblings. Bim takes over as the mother figure to Baba and later to Mira-masi who grows old and sick. Instead of getting married & leaving the house like Tara, she chooses to care for her elderly Mira-masi and her autistic brother Baba. She once admits, "Oh! I never go anywhere" (Desai, *Clear Light of Day* 7). When Tara questions her about not

leaving the house and going away. She consequently continues to be childless and without a company. Tara, her sister, taunts her love of the dog and the cat which she lavishes upon them in the absence of her own children which she could never have to which Bim retorts: "You are thinking how old spinsters go ga-ga over their pets because they haven't children. Children are the real thing, you think" (Desai, Clear Light of Day 10).

Having experienced a neglected childhood and a mother whose guidance is absent. Bim finds herself unequipped to forge a future for herself. She is inadvertently compelled to handle the household members' responsibilities. Dr. Biswas, in an attempt to make her feel understood, says, "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" (Desai, Clear Light of Day 148). This demonstrates how the internal turmoil in Bim led to her estrangement. She decides not to leave them. She is seen struggling and juggling between work and the house. "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 and every gesture they made, had been an enormous strain, she now felt, leaving her worn-out" (Desai, Clear Light of Day 253). She despised her mother, because of her never being present when needed and because of the obligations she was burdened with. In her heart of hearts, she believed that

her mother was the primary cause of all the troubles she was going through. She dislikes the fact of being compared to her mother. In conversation with her, Tara comments, "You looked so like mama from a distance... she realized at once that Bim would not like the comparison" (Desai, Clear Light of Day 4). The experiences Bim had growing up with her dysfunctional mother, during her formative years and suffocating adolescence, are what led Bim to bear this attitude toward her. She could never forget that she was abandoned at a very young age and missed being loved, taken care of, & touched by her.

Effect of the conflict on Bim

After the death of both the parents and Miramasi's collapse under the strain of Mrs. Das's death, Bim could only complain that 97 "...father never bothered to teach me. For all father cared, I could have grown up illiterate...so I had to teach myself history, and teach myself how to teach" (Desai, Clear Light of Day 236). This very neglect becomes Bim's lifeline since she takes up the teaching of history as her profession. This becomes her main liberating factor from the confines she found herself in, to become financially independent and strong enough to take up the responsibility of Baba and Mira-masi and also to run the old house to the best of her ability.

Bim tries to take on the role that Raja should have taken, to take responsibility of her family and the household. She tries to break the mould of the male bastion and the bonds of patriarchy. She shattered the myth of the role of the Indian woman as being subservient. She said, "I won't marry... I shall earn my own living and look after Mira-masi and Baba and be independent" (Desai, Clear Light of Day 215). Raja's abdication from his role as the patriarch bred resentment and

bitterness in Bim's life. This created a long-standing schism in their relationship, which affected the way she interacted with her siblings. Her sense of having been wronged by the family's expectations because of what she had become contrary to her abilities, of being a failure, coloured the way she looked at herself in this latter part of life and she finally chose to be strong and create her own identity.

Sunaina Singh states:

Bim pursues her ambitions. It is by being productive and active that Bim gains her transcendence from life which Tara opts for in quest of love and protection. Bim refuses to confine herself to the role of a mere female, connoting an insignificant prey or object for other use and pleasure. (Singh, The novels of Margaret Atwood and Anita Desai 41).

Her mother's abdication from her role as nurturer strained the relationships between the siblings, making each reach a place of functionality through difficult and rebellious decisions. Bim became a woman who was bitter, uncertain, too strict and unrelenting in her unforgiving attitude towards others and especially towards Raja. This was the legacy that her mother had left for Bim.

Bim finally finds catharsis in the negativity of her life, and she becomes a role model for those around her, especially her students. She becomes the mouthpiece of Desai in bringing and tutoring the younger generations to break the bonds of patriarchy and finding their own identity. She states, "I am always trying to teach them, train them to be different from you and me- and if they know how badly handicapped, I still am, how I myself haven't been able to manage on my own- they'd laugh, wouldn't they?" (Desai, Clear Light of Day 237).

The final tribute comes from Tara herself: Tara, who in the early part of the novel found several shortcomings in Bim finally realizes that Bim, whom everyone pitied and thought of as a person who had sacrificed much and achieved nothing, is finally a person who has formed a strong personality and found everything in life.

Tara's husband, Bakul, remarks: "She did not find it- she made it. She made what she wanted" (Desai, Clear Light of Day 241). Bim's conflicts transformed her into a

strong and determined person.

Tara's Emotional Conflict:

Tara is the secondary protagonist, a shadow to Bim, so that Bim's character could be highlighted through her own subdued character. She was the younger sister to Bim, and a mother of two daughters. She always perceived her parents as lacking in nurturing, just like Bim and the other siblings. In particular by her mother. She had a delicate personality, was attractive, and had an unimaginative universe to inhabit. The mother had no significance to her.

As was already established, the children were not being watched, which prevented them from developing the kind of strong emotional bonds in their growing up years that could only have been instilled in them by their mother. Her mother looked overly preoccupied with herself and her spouse.

When Tara visited her maternal house after a period of three years, "It seemed to her that the dullness and the boredom of her childhood, her

youth, were stored here in the room..." (Desai, Clear Light of Day 31). This was how she perceived her days spent there. The children were abandoned without any supervision and without any social abilities necessary for a fulfilling and successful life. They frequently encounter situations involving disputes and confrontations. Without the mother's oversight, Tara and Bim regularly find themselves in confusing and contradicting situations. Bim, at one time, goes to the extent of cutting her hair which brings strong repulsion in Tara for her.

Tara was sure she would never forgive Bim for her cruelty" (Desai, Clear Light of Day 183). She, many times, takes a dig at Tara. She tells Tara, "Oh! you poor little thing, you'd better get a bit tougher, hadn't you - Auntie's baby" (Desai, Clear Light of Day 194). Bim takes her as insignificant. Tara confesses that with Bim, "there was always the one sickening moment when she overstepped and began to hurtle downwards into disaster, always trying to drag her sister along with her"(Desai, Clear Light of Day 204).- Such was the intensity of the confrontations between the sisters, who lacked their mother's right channelling and guidance. She finally resolved to abandon Bim and her elder brother Raja, who got along better with Bim and alienates herself. 100 Tara was always compared with Bim, "as at school Bim became a different person active involved purposeful" (Desai, Clear Light of Day 188).

Thus, Tara faced difficult situations there. The teachers commented, "Look at your sister Bimla. You should try to be more like your sister Bimla. She plays games, she takes part in all activities, she is a monitor, the head girl and you..." (Desai, Clear Light of Day 188). This

further alienates Tara and causes her distress. She struggles with the complexity of situations that arise in school since she doesn't have a mother to lean on to for emotional support, comfort, consolation or for empathy. "The dreariness of school intensified and reached its intolerable acme for Tara..." (Desai, Clear Light of Day 192), and her horror lingered on with time. She only found comfort and refuge in Mira-masi, who took up the role of her mother.

"She began to shut herself away in her room or slip out by herself quite often to the Mishra's house next door" (Desai, Clear Light of Day 209) in order to find peace and company for herself. Tara believed that leaving the house was the only way to get rid of the dullness and boredom in her life as a result of the emotional turmoil she was going through. She appeared to have no other option than to escape. She made the choice to marry Bakul and start a family, leaving the house and its eerie memories behind.

Effect of the Conflict on Tara

As established earlier, Tara, the younger daughter, was a timid and a shy child compared to Bim, who was bold and shone at school in academics. Tara was not comparable to Bim in any way, and that was a strong reason for the resentment in her for years. Reason enough to make her want to escape her home, not just due to her mother's neglect but also due to her feelings of inferiority when compared to her bolder siblings. Bim made her feel drastically inferior and unwanted. In school, "When confined within its high stone boundary walls, she thought of home with tearful yearning, almost unable to bear the separation from aunt Mira, from Baba, from the comfortable, old, accustomed ayah..." (Desai, Clear Light of Day 189). This created a dependency upon another, stronger person within the

psyche of Tara, which couldn't be filled due to Raja also deserting his sisters for his own benefit and moving away to Hyderabad. Had Raja taken his rightful place as the head of the Das family, things may have turned out very differently for the Das girls.

The only bold actions that Tara took were in the presence of Bim, like the wearing of Raja's trousers and smoking cigarettes. The exhilaration of that bold act had a long-term effect on them, that of realizing the differences and the power play between men and women in a patriarchal society.

Bim and Tara were free one day and had nothing better to do, and so they went into Raja's room and challenged his power in the only way that could. "What should they do that was daring enough, wild and unlawful enough for such a splendid opportunity?" (Desai, *Clear Light of Day* 201). They dressed up in his trousers and the sense of freedom and power that they experienced was a source of wonder to them. This was probably the first act of rebellion and bravado that Tara showed, the second being her marriage to Bakul at a very young age to escape her dreary and insecure childhood. "Bakul had married her when she was eighteen" (Desai, *Clear Light of Day* 27). She used this as an escape from her routine home and insensitive family. While revisiting her mother's house, "whenever she saw a tangle, an emotional tangle of this kind rises up before her, she wanted only to turn and flee into the neat, sanitary, disinfected land in which she lived with Bakul..." (Desai, *Clear Light of Day* 43).

She finally finds security, love and affection in his house. 102 She finds comfort and success in convincing Bim that she ought to get along well with her long-forgotten brother Raja. Bim is compelled by her to forgive Raja and to start over. Looking at Tara depart, Bim finally admits that, "She saw in Tara's desperation a reflection of her own despairs. They were not so unlike They were more alike than any other two people could be they had to be. Their hands were so deep in the same water face their faces reflected it together" (Desai, *Clear Light of Day* 266). As a result, the sisters are able to come together and resolve the tensions that resulted from their poor upbringing, neglected childhood, and oppressive adolescence caused by a mother they were unable to discover.

Anita Desai, however, provides the readers with sufficient food for thought and prompts them to consider how a mother can affect her daughter's life and may be the only factor enhancing or degrading it.

Conclusion: It is now clear that both the female protagonists had to struggle to reach where they were in their present due to the conflicts arising in their lives due to the absence of the mother. Never in their thoughts did they want to be young, it would only bring them sadness and resentment. Both the girls had to conquer their limitations in order to be functional in life and to their different families, their duties and their responsibilities. Tara, to her new family created through marriage and Bim to her old family. Bim fulfils her responsibilities to her brother Baba, Mira-masi and her responsibilities regarding the home and all financial matters pertaining to the running of the home. To make the point clear, the all-encompassing and complete picture of the influences and character of the mother on her daughter, and those around has to be seen in its entirety. This has been made clear in *Clear Light of Day* by Anita Desai.

References

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