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**Bim's Unfailing Strength in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day***

**Vimaladevi. M., Ph.D. Candidate**



**Anita Desai**

**Inner Lives of Characters**

In her novels Anita Desai explores the inner lives of her characters and hence her novels are often catalogued under psychological novels by literary critics.

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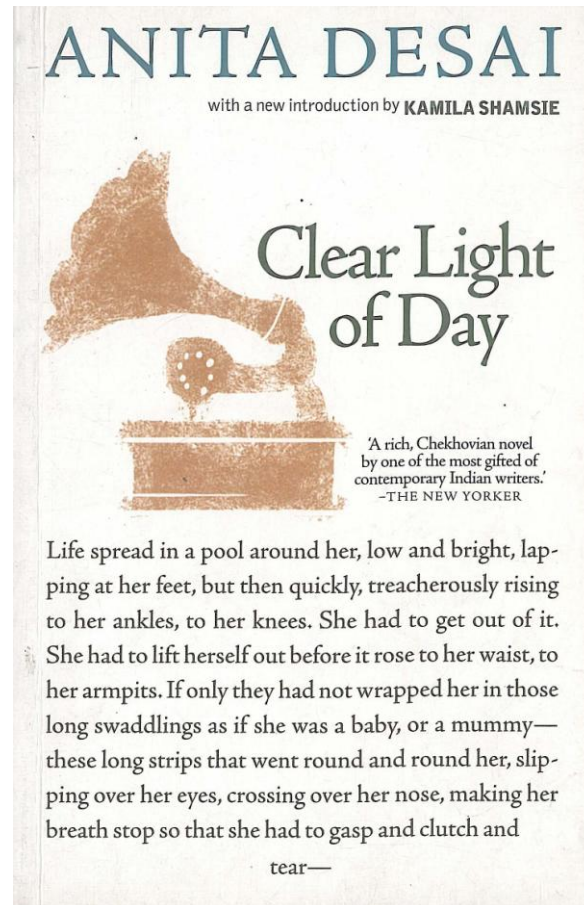
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Bim's Unfailing Strength in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*

This paper focuses on Bim, the protagonist in *Clear Light of Day* who decides to face life's challenges alone and while doing this, even though she encounters an identity crisis, her strong will-power and determination come to her help. The novel is set in Old Delhi and it speaks of a period soon after India's Independence and the communal riots that followed and as Nabar says, the novel exhibits "a neo-colonial attitude... a class consciousness which is sufficiently present in the Indian context" (Nabar, 16).

### **Main Characters in *Clear Light of Day***



The main characters in *Clear Light of Day*, Bimla, often referred to as Bim, Raja, Tara and Baba, as children, have gone through harrowing experiences at two levels, at personal level and at social level. At the personal level they have faced parental neglect and at the social level, they have witnessed the confusions following the Indian freedom struggle and the World War. Asha Kanwar, in her study of *Clear Light of Day* says that even though Anita Desai takes the 1947 partition as the central episode in the novel, she doesn't appropriate it thematically. (Kanwar, 27)

### **Growing Up in Aristocratic Setting**

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Bim's parents are too preoccupied with maintaining their aristocratic image in the social circles and they spend most of their time in playing Bridge and socializing in the Roshnara Club in Old Delhi. The children watch the goings and comings of their parents with fear, apprehension and curiosity. The last of the siblings Baba, rather a late arrival in the family, is an autistic child.

The parents bring a distant relation of the mother, Mira *masi*, to take care of the children. But the children learn to take care of themselves, at least the two elder ones, Bim and Raja and they in turn provide support to the younger two, Tara and Baba. As children they used to play their favourite game of what they want to be in life and Raja and Bim always want to be hero and heroine while Tara wants to be a mother knitting for her children.

Aunt Mira becomes their surrogate mother and takes good care of the children. They too huddle to her in moments of fear. After the death of their parents Bim becomes their mother figure, looking after Baba and taking care of Raja when he is down with tuberculosis.

### **Young Leader and Her Priorities**

As she grows up into a young woman, the leadership qualities in her help Bim to face the hard realities in life. Early in life, Bim has decided to be independent in life by pursuing education and by deciding not to marry. When Tara does not find anything unusual or wrong about the Misra sisters (young college students) getting married while they are still studying in college, Bim reacts vehemently.

‘I don't know why they're in such a hurry to get married,’ she said. ‘Why don't they go to college instead?’(220)

She further reinstates her priorities in life.

‘I won't,’ repeated Bim, adding, ‘I shall never leave Baba and Raja and Mira-*masi*,’... (221)

Bim is a woman with strong beliefs. She is not the kind of person to be bogged down by the conventional society.

Anita Ghosh in her study on the modern Indian women novelists makes this observation:

Desai points to a kind of feminist emancipation that lies in not limiting women to their traditional roles but in expanding and awakening them to several other possibilities. This kind of life, apart from being invigorating, also frees them from dependence on men.”(Ghosh, 252)

## **Realistic and Practical Temperament**

Bim is quite clear about what she wants to do with her life. She never tries to retain anybody with her for giving her company, neither her sister Tara who goes away with her husband Bakul nor her brother Raja who chases his ambition to build his future and fortune with the Hyder Alis in Hyderabad. Sudhakar Ratnakar Jamkhandi thinks that Bim's realistic and practical temperament has helped her to escape from her dreary world. (Jamkhandi, 12) Bim accepts her responsibilities in her life gracefully even though her hands are full with her mentally challenged brother Baba, and treads the long and tiring journey of life alone.

## **Years of Loneliness and Change of Personality**

But her long years of loneliness and struggle have taken their toll on her life. When Tara visits her sister after a lapse of several years, she finds her a changed person. In place of the confident and dominating personality, Tara finds a tyrant and at times a highly strung up individual who doesn't hesitate to be impolite to her brother-in-law, Bakul.

The changed personality of Bim is averse to any changes. Bim's refusal to make changes in the household can be viewed in the light of her changed perception. Her subconscious is trying to cling on to the joyful moments of her childhood when she was always in the company of her siblings. Bim doesn't seem to realize the fact that she is living on a myth by refusing to make any changes in the house even as her personality changes, her perception changes and also her physical appearance changes.

## **Thinking of Death and Decay**

Bim compares the old house in Old Delhi to a tomb in a great cemetery.

‘Old Delhi does not change. It only decays. My students tell me it is a great cemetery, every house a tomb. Nothing but sleeping graves...’ (13)

Bim feels ancient like Old Delhi and she thinks only of death and decay. It is as though years of toil and loneliness have taught her to take up a negative attitude.

## **Preferring Pets over Brother-in-Law**

Bim's insensitivity is further manifested in her showing lack of hospitality to Bakul. She shows more care for her pets than to her brother-in-law Bakul, when she is pouring out milk in her cat's saucer, when she is conscious that there isn't enough milk left for his morning tea. Bim makes sarcastic remarks on herself as belonging to the group of “old spinsters” and “love- starved spinsters” and these make Tara filled with a sense of guilt.

Virtually living alone with only her autistic brother Baba as her companion, Bim loses her trust in Tara and Raja. She wants to belong to the secluded world created by her. She shuns Tara and Raja from her world. Life has taught her to be tough.

### **Shrinking World**

Bim accuses Tara of leaving their old home for something brighter. The only person who knows her burden very well is Raja and he not only deserts her but he also betrays her. His letter allowing her to stay in their house by paying the same rent, wounds her ego. Bim's world shrinks into her college and her home with her dependent brother and her pets. No one else matters to her. She no longer believes in relationships.

### **Irrevocable Loss – Piling up Agony**

Even though Bim is relieved of the fact that the disturbing period of her youth has passed – because, for her, post-Independence India and the communal unrest meant more than external disturbance, it has seeped into her inner world like the “first terrible flood of life” (72) – a part of her self weeps at the loss of her youth, the irrevocable loss. When Bim tells Tara that she would never want to be young again, “An invisible cricket by her feet at that moment began to weep inconsolably.” (72).

Bim cannot accept the changes in Raja and Tara. She observes with disbelief and irritation the new-found strength in Tara. Similarly, she cannot take in the changed physical appearance and the lifestyle of Raja.

### **Identity Confusion**

Bim is conscious of her identity confusion even though she is pretending to take things lightly. She becomes impatient with Tara when she leaves half of an orange uneaten. When Tara tries to justify her act by saying she has left only the rotten parts, Bim retorts, “I do hate waste.”(229). Her hands shake with anger. Bim's depression takes her to the brink of neurosis. Bim, with her dominating nature, has unconsciously added anger to her trait to overcome her anxiety and the feeling of insecurity caused by loneliness.

### **Self-recognition**

Bim finally realizes the seriousness of her situation and she now wants to get herself out of this unfortunate situation. This realization is a good sign in Bim and it gives the answers to the questions that have been haunting her for many years.

They were really all parts of her, inseparable, so many aspects of her, as she was of them, so that the anger or the disappointment she felt at them was only the anger and the disappointment she felt at herself. Whatever hurt they felt, she felt. Whatever diminished them, diminished her. Whatever attacked them, attacked her. (257)

Even in her near-neurotic state, her strong will power and unfailing strength have only come to her rescue. She wants to forgive Raja for his unforgivable letter. It dawns on her that Raja has always been emulating his heroes in his life and in his poetry and that he has his limitations.

Bim's realization that she is part of the world of her brother and her sister, that they were all part of her, helps her to come through her identity crisis.

### **Anita Desai's Description and Explanation – Means of Restoration**

In her interview with Jasbir Jain, Anita Desai comments that "all human relationships are inadequate". (Jain,11) She explains further,

Basically everyone is solitary. I think involvement in human relationships in this world invariably leads to disaster. (Jain,11-12)

Probably Anita Desai is trying to project her thinking through Bim, the strong-willed woman who has learned to accept the reality of her life that she cannot always expect the companionship of her siblings who have their own priorities.

In her interview with Ramesh K. Srivastava, where Anita Desai dwells elaborately on the theme of *Clear Light of day*, she says that Time ultimately restores the essential harmony in a family. (Srivastava, 225)

Time has at last freed Bim from the grip of fear of loneliness and she is the independent self again ready to continue her journey through life.

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