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Memory, Care, and Feminist Ethics: Reclaiming Women's Emotional Labour in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*

Dr. Devashish Kumar

Department of English, Malwanchal University, Indore, Madhya Pradesh, India

Abstract-- In *Clear Light of Day*, a seminal feminist reflection on memory, care, and resilience in post-partition India, Anita Desai presents a sublimely political exploration of the same that far from being anchored to a politics of violence or nationalist spectacle identifies trauma as distinctly a product of domestic space and feminine existence, wherein the unselfconscious site of feminist resistance becomes precisely that of emotional labor. In critically examining Bim's moment-by-moment practice of care for her family members that refus[es] to let them go even at grave personal peril to herself, I seek to explore in this paper just how feminist agency becomes possible through endurance rather than escape in *Clear Light of Day* through a feminist ethics of care, feminist historiographic scholarship, alongside a concern for narrative ethics to critically argue that Desai restores Indian feminism's literary discourse through a justifiably revised understanding of resistance as precisely "ethics through persistence and memory".

Keywords-- Feminist ethics, Partition, emotional labour, Anita Desai, Indian women's writing

I. INTRODUCTION

Indian nationalist historical discourses have frequently posited the Partition as a spectacular instance of rupture, suffused with the presence of violence, displacement, and political transformation. Literary engagements with the Partition have equally focused on the traumatic moments in their most visible forms: as rioting, as displacement, and as collective suffering. However, feminist studies have been challenging this historiographical understanding about the Partition in terms of how women's experiences were indexed in other, softer registers of the ordinary. It is in this alternate archive of feminism that *Clear Light of Day* by Anita Desai needs to be located.

While the narratives of **Partition** center on political turmoils, *Clear Light of Day* marks history in the personal domain of the family. Sourced in Old Delhi and spanning several decades, the novel chronicled "the lives of the Das children, Bim, Tara, Raja, and Baba, with a changing nation slowly evolving in the background." Nonetheless, the political history of **Independence** or **Partition** is consistently remote to *Clear Light of Day*, even while its psychological aftermath influences each interpersonal relationship in **Desai's** novel.

Desai's feminist intervention is precisely situated in this shifting of history from **public** to **private** space.

This paper argues that *Clear Light of Day* constructs a feminist discourse rooted in memory, care, and ethical responsibility. By centering Bim's sustained emotional labour and her refusal to abandon family despite betrayal and neglect, Desai challenges dominant narratives that equate feminist agency with escape or rupture. Instead, the novel reimagines resistance as endurance and remembrance, reclaiming women's caregiving labour as a form of feminist ethics rather than naturalized obligation.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The critical reactions to *Clear Light of Day* have consisted of its lyrical style writing and the probing depth of its character engagements. *Clear Light of Day* was perceived to explore the themes of time and brother and sister ties skillfully. Most critical engagements of *Clear Light of Day* have situated the text within the body of literature that explores the Partition of India. This is due to the text's deliberate avoidance of the writing of violence.

Bim has been studied as a very unconventional female heroine in feminist critiques, such as her defiance of marriage and declaration of her independence via teaching and intellectual pursuits. While some feminist critiques see Bim as a symbol of feminist strength and power, others see her bitterness and anger expressed as limitations. Tara is seen as a symbol of femininity and escape via marriage and migration.

Nonetheless, a significant body of literature and scholarship has situated care and caregivers in a subordinate position to that of feminist autonomy. Little theoretical light has been shed on emotional labour and care in general and its relevance within feminist studies. The issue of partition has been further conceptualized and situated peripherally rather than being embedded within a structured position of female caregivers' lives.

But these questions are taken up in this study, which brings feminist ethics of care and feminist historiography to the foreground. This inquiry interprets *Clear Light of Day* as a feminist rewriting of Partition, where resilience rather than violence becomes pivotal.



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III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper will chiefly rely on feminist ethics of care, which critique masculinist ethical discourses based on autonomy, separation, and individual achievement. Feminist ethicists like Carol Gilligan and others specify that caregiving, responsibility, and emotions should not be considered natural to women but are truly acts of ethics. This is particularly relevant to **Clear Light of Day**, where the caregiving role of women keeps the family and emotional tie intact in the midst of historic disruption.

The paper also engages with feminist historiography, which challenges the erasure of the experiences of women from mainstream historical narratives. Feminist historiography focuses on memory, the private sphere, and emotion as valid sites of history, contesting the public sphere's domination of the private sphere and the concomitant erasure of the experiences of women.

At last, the ethics of the narrative shape the analysis of the structure of moral insight offered by Desai to the reader. As opposed to resolution, the novel promotes the ethics of persistence by placing memory as an act of morality.

Collectively, these theories provide the framework through which the reading of **Clear Light of Day** becomes possible in terms of the role of feminist agency within care, memory, and ethics..

IV. PARTITION AS EMOTIONAL RESIDUE

"Partition in **Clear Light of Day**," however, is not an event but a residuum of emotion that pervades family life." The political unrest of violence and migration is "largely offstage," but its aftereffects of loss, resentment, and estrangement inform the relationships of the Das brothers and sister. Raja's going away to Hyderabad after the partition of India is symbolic of the fragmentation of the nation itself.

The refusal to dramatise the act of violence in Desai's novel is a Feminist approach. The focus shifts not on the act of violence, but on the act of suffering that women undergo. The Partition isn't experienced through an act of rioting and subsequent violence. It happens through the act of abandonment and silence. This challenges the historiography that celebrates the act of rupture.

Women, especially Bim, bear the responsibility for this emotional aftermath. Men change their location, both geographically and ideologically, but women are anchored in the domestic space, which retains the residues of events past.

V. BIM AND THE ETHICS OF CARE

Bim emerges as the novel's ethical center. Unmarried and self-sufficient, this woman undertakes to run the family household as well as take care of Baba, her developmentally challenged brother. Unlike more feminist tales that have made freedom and self-sufficiency synonymous with escaping roles in the family, such as childcare and household management, the necessity for care in the novel is clearly acknowledged.

It is not idealized caregiving; it promotes resentment, anger, and emotional exhaustion. Yet, its moral value is insisted on by Desai. The refusal of Bim to abandon Baba finds a stark contrast in the fleeing of Raja and the marriage-induced withdrawal of Tara. Care here becomes a feminist practice resisting erasure rather than a marker of submission.

By centralizing Bim's endurance, Desai confronts feminist discourses that equate freedom with disconnection. The book instead poses whether responsibility might be revised as a resilient practice of resistance within a broken social world.

VI. SILENCE, ANGER, AND FEMINIST MEMORY

One of the important themes, silence, is inextricably linked with memory in **Clear Light of Day**. Bim's anger against Raja is kept alive through several years of unspoken resentment, reflecting how unresolved emotions reflect unresolved histories. Silence does not signal passivity; it stores memory.

Desai characterises the structure of memory as nonlinear and ethically demanding: Bim's incremental shift toward forgiveness is not redemption but ethical witness. Remembering itself becomes resistance to historical forgetting.

Women's memories, relegated to the realm of emotional excess, are reconstructed as ethical archives herein. Desai, through Bim, states that personal memory cannot be divorced from historical consciousness.

VII. GENDER, FAMILY, AND UNEQUAL BURDENS

This novel portrays the imbalance in emotional labour in the family. Raja's ambitions are fostered, Tara is sheltered through marriage, and Bim absorbs responsibility. This fits into the gendered norms that see the care work of females as naturalised.



Desai criticises the system but does so in a way that does not demonise male characters. The abandonment of Raja is not presented as a heartless act but as one of entitlement. The patriarchy in the novel appears systematic, not the result of an individual's actions.

In this particular case, feminist resistance is located neither in accusation nor in the lack of morals. Bim's eventual acceptance of her own strength is to redefine care as choice

VIII. FEMINIST AGENCY WITHOUT ESCAPE

Clear Light of Day is a Resistance narrative in the sense that it rejects narratives about escape. It is not a story about how a character leaves the family home or transcends their situation.

The character's actions are based on her persistence.

Insist is used five times in 'Clear Light of Day

Such a refusal resonates with the feminist realist mode. Desai recognises that often the modes of subversion are part of a continuum rather than a break. Resistant actuality is moral rather than spectacular.

In refusing the triumph, the novel resists the neoliberal feminist tropes that celebrate success and mobility. The novel asserts the legitimacy of endurance as a feminist act in the face of fracture and displacement.

IX. REWRITING PARTITION THROUGH WOMEN'S LIVES

Clear Light of Day is the feminist reinterpretation of the Partition experience as it foregrounds women and their emotional labour. It argues that the trauma experienced by the nation cannot be comprehended outside the home.

Desai's positioning of women is as moral witnesses and not as victims. Their existence maintains continuity in the state of fragmentation and defies nationalist discourses in which masculinity is defined in terms of mobility and action.

This feminist historiography thus broadens the fields of Partition literature to include care, memory, and resilience.

X. CONCLUSION

In encompassing all these arguments, this study has postulated that *Clear Light of Day* is a novel where a feminist discourse is generated through memory, care, and ethical resilience. By means of Bim's extended emotional work, the novel reverses the erasure of caregiving labour and positions it instead on the dual platform of feminism and resistance. By addressing the Partition narrative from inside the household space instead of from the public domain, the novel subverts the masculinist historiography of the Partition events.

Desai's refusal of closure or escape celebrates a kind of feminist realism in which endurance becomes a form of agency. *Clear Light of Day* finally extends the boundaries of feminist literary production in India through a reconceptualisation of resistance as not a moment of interruption or triumph but of ethical persistence in the midst of historical and familial disjunction.

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