

TREMULOUS PAST, TURBULENT MEMORIES: REREADING OF ANITA DESAI'S NOVEL *CLEAR LIGHT OF DAY*.

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Abstract:

Anita Desai's novel *Clear Light of Day* centers on a house in New Delhi and the two brothers and two sisters who grew up there. Tara the younger sister, at the start of the story, re-visits her family, in between her husband's Foreign Service postings. She is engulfed by the disturbing memories of her childhood and the atmosphere of surrealistic stasis that the old house generates. Years of westernized and antiseptic living in different capital cities have not exercised these ghosts from a vividly remembered past from Tara's mind. By the time Tara's visit is over, she plumbs the darkest depths of the past, together with her elder sister Bimla or Bim. Together they traverse the road of anger, guilt, fear and remorse. All emotions are spent. There remains only a new awareness of the continuity of life. The present paper tries to deal with tremulous past and disturbing memories that the characters experience in the story.

Key Words: *Memories, tremulous, turbulent, death, decay etc.*

Of her novel, *Clear Light of Day*, Anita Desai states in 'Tremendous changes: Interview by Sunil Sethi'-

'My novel is set in Old Delhi and records the tremendous changes that a Hindu family goes through since 1947. Basically, my pre-occupation was with recording the passage of time: I was trying to write a four dimensional piece on how a family's life moves backwards and forwards in a period of time. My novel is about time as a destroyer, as a preserver, and about what the bondage of time does to people. I have tried to tunnel under the mundane surface of domesticity'. (Pg 142)

Desai's novel encompasses for more than the tormented lives of two sisters. "It evokes", as Meenakshi Mukherjee says, "a sense of time (the pre-partition riots, the turbulent months leading to the murder of Gandhiji), a spirit of place (the brooding decadence of a house in Old Delhi), many moods, many echoes and shadows of different darkness, all conveyed in a charged language that is unmistakably hers in its intensity and sensuousness." The brooding atmosphere, full of dark shadows, strange forebodings, lurking terrors and gnawing guilt from the past renders it the quality of an Ingmar Bergman movie, interpreted in terms of everyday life.

Tara, tremulous, with a rush of emotions and an insecurity that seeks constant shoring up, reminds one of Maya, the highly strung female protagonist in *Cry, the Peacock*. Here Tara's flight of fancy are kept somewhat in check by Bakul, her assertive diplomat of a husband and by the presence of her two almost grown up daughters. But Tara is not at peace with herself. She comes to the old decaying house, trying to exorcise the ghosts of childhood and adolescence. The past bears down on her with intensity of a half-remembered dream. She, like the author, tries to plumb down the memory lane, to connect the past with the present, to interrelate the changes, distortions and revelations that the two realities bring.

The house and its occupants are decaying slowly and steadily. In all these years that Tara has escaped and founded a family of her own, Bim, the brilliant but eccentric elder sister and Baba, the elf like but imbecile younger brother have never left the house. The house is a tomb in the great cemetery of Old Delhi which does not change or renew itself. These are ghostly figures trapped in the past, decaying in the present. The complex centripetal pulls between the brothers and sisters is the root cause of tension in the family. Memories of insufficiency of guilt and betrayal intermingle in Tara's mind. Images of decay and destruction surface constantly in her consciousness as she watches her sister, greying, bitter, grappling with dull students and her retarded brother, smooth, silent and white, locked in his lunatic world, constantly listening to the records of the forties.

Tara remembers the old well at the edge of the garden where the cow drowned and remained unsalvaged, the abortive picnic in the Lodhi Garden where Bim was attacked by the bees while she herself escaped; her father putting a shot of insulin into her mother's arm making the child Tara feel that he is murdering her, the nightmarish vision of the dotty aunt tearing her clothes in alcoholic frenzy; Raja the elder brother, so full of promise yet languishing in sick bed with tuberculosis, the decadent pomp of Hyder Ali, their neighbor with his plump silly daughter Benazir, the collusion of Raja and Bim against her and her insufferable sense of alienation at home and at school.

When challenged as to what she would like to be on growing up, she chooses to be a mother, much to the merriment of Raja and Bim. Yet she is the only one who escapes the pall of decay and death, that the old house casts on all, she is the only one who realizes what she had set out to do, however imperfect her model may be thereof. Here is the difference between the two sisters:

'Bim, of course, worshipped Florence Nightingale along with Joan of Arc in her private pantheon of saints and goddesses and Tara did not tell her that she hoped never to have to do anything in the world, that she wanted only to hide under Aunt Mira's quilt or behind the shrubs in the garden and never be asked to come out and do anything, prove herself to be anything.' (p.no 126)

Her school days were dreary, bringing out the yearning for comfort and security she needed : "Forced to go back to school, she accepted with a weak abandonment of hope that

these grey, wretched days would stretch on forever, blighting her life with their creeping mildew.”(p.no 127)

The secret hopeless suffering of a diabetic invalid mother, who is hardly aware of the existence of the children, a father who divides his time between his club and his wife, this total absorption of parents in each other to the point of excluding the children, adds to the grey chalk dust of life, the depth of despondency that the sensitive Tara feels. Added to this is their anxiety over the hopeless future of Baba, the mentally retarded kid brother. Bim is the natural leader, the Head girl at school and Raja, the brilliant orator and a budding poet; Tara timid and shy, trails behind constantly.

Her childhood fears never assuaged, grow up along with her and she ends up being a timid young woman. She is conscious of the fact that she abandoned Bim not because of spite or retaliation but because of fear-“it was the spider fear that lurked at the centre of the web-world for Tara. Yet she did abandon Bim. It was true that she did.”(p.no134) While Bim stays firmly against marriage; Tara sees no other alternative for escape. Bim has the foresight to guard herself against marriage ; she knows that it wouldn't be enough to hold her for the whole of her life: “Cant you think? I can think of hundreds of things to do instead. I wont marry.” Bim sticks with her decision with spirit. “I shall work. I shall do things. I shall earn my own living and look after Mira masi and Baba and be independent”. (p.no 140). She has a spirit and also a profession, and she need fear no one in the world. Tara provides a contrast to her fierce independence, hedged in as she is, by her fear and her insecurity.

For so many years Tara has tormented herself with having abandoned Bim, abandoned to their old house and their imbecile brother. When she wants to ask for her forgiveness for running away from the bees that swarmed around them in Lodhi Garden, leaving Bim to their mercy, it is symbolic of her asking forgiveness for the greater abandonment of Bim forever. She feels guilty breaking out, seeking fulfillment elsewhere while Bimstagnates and Raja too abdicates responsibility by running away to Hyderabad with Benazir. At the close of the novel, Tara meets with not forgiveness and understanding but forgetfulness and incomprehension. While Bim had forgotten the details of her guilt at the picnic site and cannot comprehend Tara's anguish at deserting her and marrying Bakul, Tara feels thankful that time had blurred not only the events of that bizarre picnic but also other grievances and miseries. But nothing is completely obliterated.

Bim sees in Tara's desperation a reflection of her own despairs. She reflects: “They were n in Iot 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, their faces reflected it together. ‘Nothing is over,’ she agreed. ‘Ever’, she accepted. Tara seemed comforted to have Bim's corroboration. When Bim repeated ‘Go, Tara’ ,she went. At least they had agreed to a continuation.” (P.no 174)

Tara knows she would come back again and again to draw sustenance from Bim, from that old house. She needs it to wade through the murky depths of years of sticky, secret, guilt, fear and insecurity. She comes to the terms with the fact that there remains a continuity of life, a life that marches along with time, destroyed and preserved by it, a life that is sustained by the old bonds of family life, luminous and engulfing like the light of a clear, bright day.

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