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FRAGMENTED IDENTITIES IN *CLEAR LIGHT OF DAY*: SCHISMS IN LITERATURE,  
GENDER AND PARTITION

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Abstract

This paper delves into the intricate tapestry of fragmented identities within Anita Desai's seminal work, "Clear Light of Day." Examining the novel through the lenses of literature, gender dynamics, and the resonating specter of Partition, the study unveils the multifaceted fractures that shape the characters and their interconnected lives. The narrative unfolds against the backdrop of post-independence India, exploring schisms not only between communities but also within familial and class structures. A critical analysis is undertaken to unravel the gendered dimensions embedded in the narrative, particularly in the portrayal of women and their roles. The pervasive influence of Partition emerges as a poignant undercurrent, haunting characters and contributing to the overarching theme of fractured identities. Through a nuanced exploration of literary elements, gender dynamics, and historical context, this paper seeks to illuminate the profound intricacies of identity fragmentation in "Clear Light of Day" and its broader implications for understanding the complexities of post-colonial Indian society.

Keywords: Anita Desai, Gender dynamics, Partition, Post-independence India, Identity fragmentation

In the antecedent epoch antedating its emancipation from British hegemony, India traversed a myriad of revolutionary movements, epitomizing an unequivocal quest for liberation. The nascent manifestations of nationalistic ideation, germinating within the psyche of the subjugated populace, were imbued with a distinctly Oriental ethos. While ostensibly adopting a political veneer, nationalism, in essence, was profoundly intertwined with cultural proclivities. The imperative perceived by nationalists, as articulated by Chatterjee, necessitated a comprehensive "re-equipage" of their cultural milieu, a process fraught with the delicate conundrum of both imitation and antagonism towards Western paradigms

(Chatterjee, 2). The exigency emanated from an apprehension that a mere emulation of the prevailing Western cultural hegemony would precipitate an erasure of the indigenous identity. Faced with the historical legacy of Mughal subjugation antecedent to British colonization, the nationalists found recourse in an attempt to reinstate India as a Hindu nation, inadvertently engendering a schism between the Hindu and Muslim communities that ultimately catalyzed the cataclysmic events of Partition. The concomitant communal strife and violence resulted in widespread carnage, with the literature of the era, including Anita Desai's "Clear Light of Day," serving

as a poignant testament to the trauma experienced by the populace.

Desai's narrative, while not overtly dwelling on the explicit horrors of Partition, intricately weaves the pervasive impact of this historical rupture into the fabric of the novel. At its core, the work revolves around the lives of four siblings—Raja, Bimla, Tara, and Baba— whose affluent familial domicile in Old Delhi shields them from existential vicissitudes. The familial challenges they confront, however, transcend economic exigencies, manifesting in a conspicuous dearth of parental engagement. The progenitors, ensconced in a preoccupation with bridge games at Delhi's Roshanara club, exhibit a conspicuous detachment from their offspring, even in the face of mortality. The demise of the parents, bereft of palpable consequence for the children habituated to parental neglect, propels Raja and Bim into a closer sibling bond, leaving the youngest, Tara, subjected to persistent bullying.

The introduction of the autistic Baba necessitates the intervention of a remote aunt, Mira Masi—an ostracized widow relegated to societal periphery. The ensuing camaraderie with Mira Masi, however, transmogrifies into a vicarious coping mechanism disrupted by the aunt's descent into alcoholism-induced insanity following the demise of their mother. Subsequent to their father's demise, Raja succumbs to tuberculosis, prompting Bim to assume the mantle of household stewardship, attending to Raja's ailment, caring for Baba, and managing domestic affairs. Tara's matrimonial union with Bakul culminates in her departure from the familial milieu. Against the backdrop of India's independence, Raja's concerns pivot towards Hyder Ali Saheb and his family, with whom he cultivated a bibliophilic affinity. The onerous toll exacted by independence, marked by the partition, impels Raja to seek solace in the knowledge of the Hyder Alis' safety. Ultimately, Raja's convalescence and departure to join the Hyder Alis leave Bim in solitary charge of the household, wherein she assiduously embraces her newfound responsibilities and ascends to the position of a history professor.

The narrative commences with the temporal eventuality of Tara and Bakul's visit, beseeching Bim's participation in the opulent nuptials of Raja's progeny in Hyderabad. It unveils the protracted absence of Raja in fulfilling his filial duties towards his younger siblings, acutely underscored by the epistle declaring his newfound status as Bim's landlord—a manifestation of the irreparable rupture in fraternal bonds. Bim, in her discernment, derides Tara's perpetual acquiescence to spousal dominance, a sentiment compounded by Bim's own mental perturbations evidenced through soliloquies and gesticulations.

A poignant realization dawns upon Tara as she perceives the onerous burden borne by Bim, attributing her psychological afflictions to the overwhelming responsibilities borne jointly by Raja and herself. Culminating in a cathartic act of absolution, Bim forgives Raja, thereby relinquishing the harbored resentments for a prospect of tranquility.

While the novel extensively navigates themes encompassing parent-child dynamics, sibling relationships, gender biases, and class stratification, it subtly alludes to the crucible of Partition. The harrowing historical panorama unfolds through Bim and Raja's narrative, with Raja's association with Hindu extremist cohorts bent on the eradication of Muslims manifesting the sectarian tumult. The complicity of the police force in impeding Muslim migration further accentuates the climate of religious discord. The clandestine departure of the Hyder Alis, concealing their exodus from Raja, underscores the palpable fear pervading their existence.

In an ostensibly unrelated trajectory, Raja's scholastic trajectory is delineated, revealing his initiation into the Urdu language—an antithesis to the prevailing Hindi disparagement. Initially lauded in social circles, Raja experiences a perceptible shift in reception as nationalist fervor burgeons. Denied entry to Jamia Millia College on religious grounds, Raja confronts the hazardous implications of traversing sectarian lines, contending with ostracism from both Hindu and Muslim factions.

This perilous landscape crystallizes when Raja, embracing English literature in a Hindu college, becomes a target of scorn and hostility for his sympathetic disposition towards the Muslim community. His confrontations with erstwhile friends-turned-foes, labeling him a "traitor," are emblematic of the polarized socio-political milieu. The looming specter of violence is palpable, epitomized by Raja's apprehensions regarding potential attacks on his domicile, revealing an unbridgeable schism where protection is elusive and law enforcement is intimidated by the volatile mob.

In antecedent elucidation, Urdu enjoyed a position of conspicuous esteem within societal echelons. The sudden attenuation of its prominence thus prompts an inquiry into the precipitating factors. Commencing from the latter part of the nineteenth century, linguistic dynamics assumed a pivotal role in the delineation of communal identities. Hindi, heretofore disparaged by erudite circles, underwent a transformative phase during the pre-independence era, fostering Hindu communal sentiments. This metamorphosis engendered a gendered semiotics, where linguistic constructs became imbued with femininity, overshadowing the ostensibly primary significance of Hindi as the *mātibhasha*.

The delineation of gender icons became instrumental in demarcating linguistic boundaries, not only between Hindi and Urdu but also within the Hindi domain itself, differentiating Braj Bhasa and Khari Boli. This phenomenon culminated in a pronounced espousal of the Nagari script. The semiotics surrounding the mother tongue became fraught with overt political connotations, concurrently manifesting as a source of tension. While Hindi was extolled as a dignified feminine entity in contradistinction to Urdu, the 'femininity' of the language proved to be a contentious factor in the dialectical discourse between Braj and Khari, wherein femininity became synonymous with degeneracy (Gupta, 204).

The personification of Hindi and Urdu as female entities accentuates this dichotomy, portraying Hindi as the patient and revered Hindu wife, while Urdu is cast as "a wanton Muslim

prostitute" (Gupta, 206). Urdu, perceived as having erotic proclivities, resulted in the denial of Urdu education to Hindu women. This is evident in the literary work "Clear Light of Day," wherein Raja becomes immersed in Urdu poetry, juxtaposed with the struggles of the female characters grappling with their Hindi essays. The depreciative perception of Urdu extended to its perceived lack of commercial value, relegating it to a sphere associated with prostitution and effeminacy (Gupta, 208).

The narrative complexity deepens with nuanced portrayals in the novel, wherein characters like Mulk aspire to pursue classical singing, only to face dismissal by their patriarchal fathers. The dichotomy is discernible in the allowance for the daughters to continue dance classes, a possible consequence of the erotic Urdu content prevalent in classical songs. This encapsulates the socio-cultural milieu wherein associations with Urdu were stigmatized as debauched, while expressions of Hindu piety in the form of dance were condoned.

Against the backdrop of burgeoning Hindu nationalism, there emerged a concerted effort to exalt Hindu virility. Muslim men were systematically portrayed as a peril to the Hindu community, with narratives depicting the abduction and violation of Hindu women by Muslim men gaining traction. The novel underscores this narrative trope through the portrayal of Hyder

Ali as an Islamic male epitomizing dangerous masculinity. Paradoxically, the protagonist Raja's conversion to Islam and marriage to a Muslim woman does not attract censure, elucidating a nuanced intersection of religious dynamics and societal perceptions. This anomaly finds explication in the prevailing Hindu ideology, wherein Hindu men courting Muslim women were eulogized. Narratives in Hindi literature celebrated instances such as Shivaji marrying Roshanara, the daughter of Aurangzeb, akin to Raja's union with Benazir, Hyder Ali's daughter, leading to his apotheosis as the quintessential hero.

In summation, the multifaceted interplay of linguistic, gendered, and communal dynamics within the narrative underscores the intricate tapestry of socio-cultural forces shaping the evolution of Hindi

and Urdu and their symbolic significance in a milieu marked by religious and nationalist fervor.

The Hindu nationalist faction strategically availed themselves of the maternal archetype as a rhetorical device for substantiating their contentions. The erection of the Bharat Mata Temple in Banaras, ostensibly conceived as an egalitarian space for all Indians, irrespective of caste or creed, to manifest their national veneration, paradoxically became imbued with overtly high-caste Hindu symbology. The implicit expectation that Muslim adherents participate in homage therein became an inherent contradiction, given the entailing procedural adherence to Hindu rites. A pivotal emblem emerged in the form of the bovine entity, elevated to the apogee of sanctity within the Hindu nation, metamorphosing into the maternal progenitor of all Hindus, warranting safeguarding from perceived non-Hindu elements, particularly Muslims. Evidently, this sociopolitical movement exhibited a pronounced gendered dimension, as the cow, emblematic of domesticity and subservience, paralleled societal expectations of ideal Hindu femininity.

In concurrence with this paradigm, the protagonist in the narrative deviates from the prescribed norm of the quintessential Hindu wife. Bim's non-conformity positions Mira Masi as her surrogate, ardently advocating for the acquisition of a cow to fulfill the familial nourishment role. The tragic demise of the cow constitutes a traumatic juncture for all characters except Raja, prompting Mira Masi to enigmatically forewarn Bim of an analogous fate, consolidating her symbolic affinity with the cow. Notably, Mira Masi's disquietude concerning Raja's frequent visits to Hyder Ali's residence exacerbates the narrative tension.

The character Bim is portrayed as a historiographer, imparting historical education at a women's college. Despite financial constraints impeding the improvement of her domicile or garden, a conspicuous abundance of costly historical tomes permeates her abode. In response to Tara's assertion attributing her afflictions to animosity towards Raja, Bim, agitated, delves into the Life of Aurangzeb, unearthing the ruler's reflections on

power and sin, challenging prevailing stereotypes of Muslim rulers as inherently tyrannical. This episode underscores the pivotal role history assumes in shaping cultural identities, necessitating a reevaluation of entrenched perceptions.

The schism between Raja and Bim extends beyond communal disparities to encompass class differentials. Raja's metamorphosis into a patriarch and relegation of his passion for Urdu poetry to a derided hobby underscores this class divide. His act of bequeathing a white pony to his son symbolizes an emulation of Hyder Ali's class, leading to a lapse in fraternal communication and a perceived shift to a landlord-like demeanor. Raja's persistent pursuit of a male heir following the birth of four daughters disconcerts Bim.

The specter of Partition casts a pervasive shadow over the narrative, culminating in Bakul's transfer to Ceylon, accompanied by Tara, who confesses to employing Bakul as an instrument of escape. Upon their return, both protagonists cling to nostalgic recollections, evading harsh realities concerning their homeland. Bakul extols the grandeur of India, emphasizing the Taj Mahal and the Gita, prompting Bim to posit that such glorification is only feasible when viewed from an external vantage point, as domestic inhabitants grapple with the exigencies of political and economic tumult.

The title "Clear Light of Day" is ostensibly derived from the First Epistle to the Corinthians 13:12, epitomizing a yearning for comprehensive knowledge rather than fractured insights. The post-independence era in India begets multifaceted schisms, commencing in a stifling dawn but concluding with Bim relinquishing resentment to embrace an unprejudiced reality upon Tara's departure. Desai navigates the trajectory of the novel towards the pursuit of knowledge beyond the confines of fragmented linguistic, class, and communal binaries.

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