

Exploring Indian Women's Psyche in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*: A Psychoanalysis

*Dr. Prakash Chandra Biswas¹, Md. Jobaar Talukder²

¹Associate Professor, Department of English, Islamic University, Kushtia-7003, Bangladesh.

²Student and researcher, Department of English, Islamic University, Kushtia-7003, Bangladesh.

*Corresponding Author

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2024.801041>

Received: 24 December 2023; Accepted: 29 December 2023; Published: 28 January 2024

ABSTRACT

[Anita Desai's 'Clear Light of Day' investigates the intricate interplay of Indian women's narratives, psychoanalytic theory and the literary brilliance of Anita Desai's work. Grounded in the psychoanalytic framework pioneered by Sigmund Freud and enriched by post-Freudian perspectives, the research centers on the psychological exploration of Desai's 'Clear Light of Day'. Focused on the character Bim, the paper unravels the layers of her personality, rebellion against societal norms and profound psychological bonds, offering a transformative understanding of the power inherent in literature, psychoanalysis, and the narratives of Indian women writers. The exploration extends beyond conventional portrayals highlighting Bim's resilience that transcends societal expectations emphasizing her intense desire for love and unwavering affection for family.]

Keywords: Exploration, Psyche, Indian Women's Writing, Psychoanalysis, Femininity.

INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai, an Indian born South-Asian writer in English living abroad and teaching in various renowned universities outside Indian-territory, mainly focuses on the psychological trauma and existential dilemma of human beings leading to identity crisis. Desai very particularly addresses Indian women's experiences in the domestic realm within the larger social and cultural context specially associated with middle class living in urban areas, setting the themes of her novels in postcolonial India. She gains acknowledgement as a writer of profound psychological insight on the displaced and the alienated who often encounter discrimination, and social prejudice as well as who often suffer a distorted sense of identity. Anita Desai, through using different literary devices like varied images, metaphors, symbol and myths, bears out the interior regions of human psyche, obsession, inner motives, latent desires and dormant impulses of human mind. She is the first among Indian English novelists forcefully expressing the existential problems of womankind; she is the first laying bare the inner recesses of human psyche; she is the first introducing deep psychological probing of her characters. So, unveiling psyche and femininity embarks on a captivating exploration of the multifaceted landscape of the writing of Anita Desai entwined with the profound insights of psychoanalytic theory and the literary brilliance of her notable novel *Clear Light of Day*. The narratives penned by Anita Desai serve as a powerful testament to the evolving roles of women, transcending societal norms and reflecting the transformative journey from pre-independence to the contemporary era.

The research methodology employed in this study combines qualitative analysis and literary criticism to explore the intricate interplay of Indian women's narratives, psychoanalytic theory, and the literary brilliance of Anita Desai's work, specifically focusing on *Clear Light of Day*. Grounded in the psychoanalytic framework pioneered by Sigmund Freud and enriched by post-Freudian perspectives, the research delves into the psychological exploration of Desai's novel. The qualitative analysis involves a

detailed examination of the characters, particularly Bim, utilizing the Freudian tripartite system (id, ego, and superego) and post-Freudian insights to uncover subconscious motivations, desires, and conflicts. Literary criticism is employed to dissect the narrative structure, symbolism, and linguistic elements, unveiling the symbolic nature of literary elements such as dreams, symbols, and metaphors. The research adopts a thematic approach, with a focus on Bim's personality, rebellion against societal norms, and profound psychological bonds, offering a transformative understanding of the power inherent in literature, psychoanalysis, and the narratives of Indian women writers. Additionally, the study explores the evolving landscape of psychoanalytic theory beyond Freud, acknowledging the contributions of post-Freudian thinkers like Jacques Lacan. The combination of qualitative analysis and literary criticism provides a comprehensive framework for unraveling the psyche and femininity in Desai's work, contributing to a deeper understanding of the psychological dimensions of Indian women's writing. A list of references of the books and articles used in the study will be included at the end of the article. The research study follows the MLA 9th manual for the citation and references of the works and quotations used in this paper.

Sigmund Freud was the pioneer of psychoanalysis which emerged as a powerful tool for understanding the complex ways in which the human mind works in literature. The theoretical framework of psychoanalysis, based on Freud's tripartite system, provides insight into the subconscious motivations, desires and conflicts of characters. In addition to Freud, the research recognizes the contributions of post Freudian thinkers such as Jacques Lacan who broadened the psychoanalytical toolkit to include linguistic and symbolic aspects. While there are many arguments about its limits, psychoanalysis remains a powerful tool that uncovers the complexities of human character and adds value to literary analysis. Anna Freud discloses Sigmund Freud's views regarding this practice of psychoanalysis in the "Introduction" of *The Essentials of Psychoanalysis*:

..., we would be convinced that a student of psycho-analysis wishes to learn more than the 'higher functionary', who wanted to use his newly acquired knowledge solely for deciding a legal question. Thus, we would use Freud's sequence of themes as a guiding principle for introducing students to the major elements of psycho-analysis: starting with the dream, we would proceed to the unconscious, the instinctual and sexual life, the structure of the personality, the defence mechanisms, and symptom-formation. (4)

Psychoanalysis as a literary theory offers a fascinating lens through which the intricate workings of the human mind as portrayed in literature are understood. Pioneered by Sigmund Freud, this theoretical framework delves into the subconscious motivations, desires, and conflicts that shape characters and narratives. The Freudian tripartite structure of the mind—comprising the id, ego, and superego—provides a compelling framework for dissecting characters' internal struggles and the tensions that drive plot development. Literary works become psychological landscapes with characters embodying facets of the human psyche and their actions serving as manifestations of underlying—often repressed emotions. Psychoanalysis also unveils the symbolic nature of literary elements; such as dreams, symbols, and metaphors, offering a methodical approach to decode the latent meanings and psychological depths woven into the fabric of storytelling. Regarding this repressed emotions Sigmund Freud writes in "The Structure of The Psychic Personality":

Thus we obtain our concept of the unconscious from the theory of repression. The repressed is the prototype of the unconscious for us. We see, however, that we have two kinds of unconscious—the one which is latent but capable of becoming conscious, and the one which is repressed and which is not, in itself and without more ado, capable of becoming unconscious. This piece of insight into psychical dynamics cannot fail to affect terminology and description. The latent, which is unconscious only descriptively, not in the dynamic sense, we call *preconscious*; we restrict the term *unconscious* to the dynamically unconscious repressed; so that now we have three terms, conscious (*Cs.*), *preconscious* (*Pcs.*), and unconscious (*Ucs.*), whose sense is no longer purely descriptive. (441)

The heart of this research lies in the psychological exploration of Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*. Set

against the timeless backdrop of old Delhi, the novel intricately unfolds the lives of siblings- Tara, Bim, Raja and Baba. As the narrative navigates the anticipation of Raja's daughter's wedding, the paper scrutinizes the psychological dimensions beneath the surface of their relationships. Bim, a living symbol of old Delhi, becomes a captivating subject of analysis. Her steadfast commitment to tradition, independence, and self-sacrifice emerges as a psychological drama challenging societal norms. Utilizing the flashback technique, the research unveils the layers of Bim's personality, her rebellion against societal expectations, and the profound psychological bonds linking the characters. The contrasting dynamics between Bim's independence and Tara's dependence on her husband add depth to the exploration of psychological intricacies. Tara's over excitement to get married with Bakul somehow makes Bim puzzled but she asserts to give her whole hearted assistance to arrange an early marriage of Tara and Bakul. Regarding this psychosexual desire of Tara and Bakul, Anita Desai writes in *Clear Light of Day* 2007:

‘An early marriage—that is exactly what I'd like for Tara; Bim said. ‘I will suit her. And she will suit you. Blessings, blessings; she cried lightly, and began to laugh again as she saw Tara, half-hidden behind the bamboo screen at her door, listening, waiting. (124)

Bim, in particular, emerges as a character who consciously chooses a divergent path from her sister. Opting for an independent life, she embodies a form of rebellion against societal norms. Embracing a spinster's lifestyle, Bim appears to sacrifice personal pursuits for the sake of caring for her autistic brother. Her strong affinity for animals, as revealed in her conversation with Tara, underscores her unique perspective on love and companionship. Bim's assertion, “you think animals take the place of babies for us love-starved spinsters; ... But you're wrong” (Desai, *Clear Light of Day* 2007, 10); sheds light on her distinctive approach to relationships, emphasizing a nuanced connection with her pets. These glimpses into Bim's life highlight her commitment to independence and self-sacrifice. As a history professor, Bim not only finds fulfillment in her academic pursuits but also fosters meaningful connections with her students. The narrative thus unveils the intricate layers of Bim's personality, portraying her as a woman who, despite societal expectations, forges her own path with resilience and individuality. In contrast to Bim's independence, Tara exhibits a marked dependence on her husband. Seeking freedom from responsibilities, Tara had left the ancestral house, choosing a life away from the traditional setting. Bim, while a strong and traditional woman, assumes the responsibility of caring for Raja, a duty that appears rooted in her husband's desire to distance themselves from the perceived dullness of their home. Engaging in acts like reading Byron for Raja, Bim finds a psychological connection with the valiant characters, approaching challenges with a belief in her ability to overcome them. Despite her outward resilience, Bim harbors a yearning for love, expressing this through her generous affection toward others in the hope of reciprocation.

The entry of Dr. Biswas further unravels Bim's psychological attachment to her childhood, accentuating her aspirations to emulate heroic figures. In this stage Dr. Biswas is found indulged in love with Bim as he intends to pass time with her going to a concert or keeping herself away from the household responsibilities as he says: “You won't—I can't—you don't really—it won't—no, no, no. I can't play. Miss Das, instead—I will be so honoured—will you come—can you—a concert—you will hear—it will be—I would like—” (Desai, *Clear Light of Day* 2007, 126). This complex psychodynamics leads Bim and Dr. Biswas to psychological intimacy desiring for more closed relation but the personal integrity and Bim's love for the tradition and also for her family members deters her from being so absorbed in love with Dr. Biswas. Her strong personality makes hindrances in her conscious *ego* but subconsciously her *id* aspires for Mr. Biswas's company as Desai writes in *Clear Light of Day* 2007:

‘You don't know—you can't possibly know what it has meant to me. Only, please do come with me again—’

Oh, I don't know; cried Bim in a panic, and pushed at the gate so that he had to let go of the catch to save his fingers. Hurrying through, she shut the gate between them. ‘It's really not right for me to have been out

for so long—with Raja ill—and my aunt—you know my aunt—’

‘Yes, yes, but you can’t be slave to them. I can’t be a slave to my mother. We must be ourselves. We must go out, have a little rest, some refreshment. Miss Das; he gulped, ‘come and meet my mother, please.’ (132)

So, Dr. Biswas’s entry introduces a significant dynamic into Bim’s life. Biswas suggests that Bim lives for others, implying that her reluctance to accept his proposal stems from this selflessness. This revelation shocks Bim, prompting her to reject Biswas’s proposal, drawing a comparison to Tara’s choice of marriage. Bim’s deep-seated psychological attachment to her childhood becomes apparent, shaping her understanding of love and relationships. Her childhood desire to emulate a heroine emerges as a formative influence, emphasizing how the experiences of her youth continue to echo throughout her adult life, shaping her responses to love and commitment. Desai upholds in *Clear Light of Day* (2000):

“She would hear their voice ringing, as pure as glass, or flame. Raja and Bim, tall and straight and true, their voice ringing out: ‘I will be a hero’, one had called out from the pure white peak of candle flame, and the other had echoed back, as in a song, ‘And I will be a heroine.’” (82)

In a departure from conventional portrayals, Bim transcends societal hierarchies, embodying a resilience that defies expectations. Her intense desire for love and unwavering affection for family illuminate the psychological depths shaping Desai’s literary masterpiece. As this article goes on the journey of unraveling psyche and femininity, it aims to offer readers and scholars a profound understanding of the transformative power inherent in literature, psychoanalysis, and the narratives of Indian women writers like Kamala Das, Rama Mehta, Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Arundhati Roy, Namita Gokhale, and many others. Indian women writing stories in English has got many great storytellers. These women have told tales about various parts of a woman’s life. These stories, written by Indian women, are really important in the world of books. Nowadays, women are not just stuck at home; they are doing all kinds of things that people used to think only men could do. For a long time, the way society saw women, especially because of old traditions, kept them from speaking their minds. But now, women understand what’s going on with these old ideas, and they are speaking up to show everyone that they can do more than just having babies and taking care of them. Because of their feelings and experiences, women writers can show women characters in a really deep and strong way. They are making their voices heard by telling stories. Like many famous Indian women writers in English mentioned above, Anita Desai very particularly uses her stories in *Clear Light of Day* 2007 to show how women have changed from before independence till now saying “I don’t think you need to ask anyone—except Tara. Modern times, Modern India. Independent India” (123).

Bim is like a living symbol of old Delhi – her thoughts, lifestyle, and the whole neighborhood hardly budge when it comes to change. Her house, not even getting a fresh coat of paint, stands as proof of her unwavering commitment to tradition. Bim’s personality, just like her house that stays the same, remains strong-willed and steadfast throughout her life, showing a sense of strictness and simplicity. Choosing to stay single, she embraces a life of solitude, much like the timeless essence of old Delhi itself. Her mindset seems deeply connected to times long gone, resisting the pull of modern ways. This becomes clear when she replies with frustration to Tara, questioning the idea of change and challenging any surface-level transformations in her surroundings asking: “Would you like to come back and find it changed” (Desai, *Clear Light of Day* 2007, 6)? Bim’s straightforward asking makes Tara puzzled and she murmured: “Changed? How? You mean the house newly painted, the garden newly planted, new people coming and going? Oh no, how could I, Bim” (Desai, *Clear Light of Day* 2007, 6)? This dichotomy of choices between two sisters very explicitly exposes the changing pattern of the modern society and the psychology of the modern Indian women like Tara but it really captures Bim’s strong ties to the past, pushing back against any changes that might touch the surface but can’t get to the heart of who she is. Bim rebukes this psychological change of Indian women as Desai writes: “Oh, to going on—to growing up—leaving—going away—into the world—something wider, freer—brighter; Bim laughed. ‘Brighter! Brighter!’ she called, shading her

eyes against the brightness” (*Clear Light of Day* 2007, 6).

It is crucial to acknowledge the evolving landscape of psychoanalytic theory beyond Freud, including the contributions of post-Freudian thinkers like Jacques Lacan. Lacanian psychoanalysis, for instance, introduces linguistic and symbolic dimensions, emphasizing the role of language in shaping identity and desire. This expansion enriches the psychoanalytic toolkit for literary analysis, inviting scholars to explore the linguistic constructions and narrative structures that contribute to character development and thematic exploration in literature. While critics debate the limitations and potential over simplifications of psychoanalysis, its enduring influence lies in its ability to unveil the complexities of human nature, offering readers and scholars alike a profound understanding of the psychological underpinnings that make literature a powerful reflection of the human experience. Anita Desai’s *Clear Light of Day* and her other books are the windows to deep psychological understanding examined through psychological lens. She is not merely interested in portraying a character with a social life or some kind of conflict. She is particularly concerned about the deep problems of psychology. R.A Singh rightly points out that “Desai’s fiction can be analyzed taking into consideration the psychological motivations of her novels as psychic drama” (9). In fact, her work *Clear Light of Day* can be considered as a good example of psychic drama without any doubt.

Desai’s heroines consistently grapple with profound psychological crises, a recurring motif woven throughout her novels. Published in 1980, *Clear Light of Day* unfolds against the backdrop of old Delhi and is intricately divided into three parts. The narrative revolves around the lives of siblings Bim, Raja, Tara and Baba. When Bim and Tara reunite after a considerable span of time, their reunion is marked by the anticipation of Raja’s daughter’s wedding. However, Bim harbors reservations about attending the ceremony, given her strained relationship with Raja. The novel skillfully explores the enduring impact of childhood memories stored in the subconscious, which significantly shapes the characters’ adult sensibilities. Tara, burdened with guilt for leaving Bim to care for their intellectually challenged brother Baba, who is now incapable of self-sufficiency, reflects the intricate psychological bonds that persist beneath the surface of their outward interactions. Even on the most superficial level, it becomes evident that the characters are intricately linked by psychological threads.

The author adeptly employs the flashback technique to delve into the characters’ psyches, revealing the profound impact of their childhood experiences. Through the lens of Bim’s memories, Desai skillfully explores the enduring influence of their formative years on the characters’ present lives. The characters, unaware of the subconscious effects stemming from their past, unwittingly project these influences onto their own children, as evident in their carefree approach to parenting and their reliance on Mira Masi for childcare:

The flashback technique is used effectively, by using the flashback method the psyche of the characters can be brought forth. And also, through Bim, Desai is able to talk about the impact of their childhood life. The characters themselves are unaware of the unconscious effect on them which is directly related to their childhood. This can be seen in the way they are treating their children, and how they are carefree about them. (Sakthivel and Santhi 4574)

Like the portrayal of many Indian female characters, Bim does not merely rebel against societal hierarchies, nor does she exhibit a lack of sexual agency. She transcends such desires, demonstrating a resilience that goes beyond conventional expectations. Despite her formidable exterior, Bim harbors an intense desire to express her love and be an integral part of others’ lives, particularly evident in her unwavering affection for Raja and Baba. This emotional connection is unequivocal. From her formative years, Bim aspired to emulate figures like Joan of Arc and Florence Nightingale, emblematic women renowned for their selfless service to others. The choice of these inspirations reveals a profound desire within Bim to emulate the sacrificial and altruistic qualities embodied by these historical figures. In a sense, she becomes akin to a lamb prepared for sacrifice, a role she seemingly accepts with grace and determination. As Desai writes,

“Bim of course worshipped Florence Nightingale along with Joan of Arc in her private pantheon of saints and goddesses” (*Clear light of Day* 2000, 129).

To sum up, unveiling psyche and femininity traverses the worlds of Indian women’s writings, psychology and psychoanalytical theory as well as Anita Desai’s *Clear light of Day* to reveal the hidden depths of Bim’s psyche. Based on psychoanalysis, this research highlights the transformative powers of literature in portraying the changing roles of women, as well as the intricacies of human character. Through the story of Bim, the exploration goes beyond the norms of society, emphasizing resilience and a deep yearning for love. With the continued influence of psychoanalysis, enriched by the post Freudian insights a better understanding of character intricacies is gained. As the setting of the novel in its most part travels through the literary worlds of old Delhi, the readers and scholars alike appreciate the deep synergy of psyche and feminism in the stories of Indian women writers, reflecting the resilience and strength that defines the human experience. It can be summed up that as a novelist Anita Desai designs the pattern of her novels so neatly to bring out the interior regions of human psyche. As a vehicle Desai’s *Clear light of Day* vents the predicament of man and his existential sufferings by immensely analyzing her characters from inside and upholds their suppressed desires and inner motives. So, from psychoanalytical point of view, Anita Desai very successfully explores the hidden motives of man, the untraded and unvisited regions of human psyche specially the protagonist of the novel, Bim and other side characters like Tara, Mrs. Das and Mira Masi. Desai sheds light on the psyche of Indian women, their subconscious desires for love and affection, their psycho sexual aspirations for opposite sexes and this psycho dynamics undoubtedly plays a pivotal role in *Clear light of Day*.

WORKS CITED

1. Desai, Anita. *Clear Light of Day*. 1st ed., Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2000.
2. Desai, Anita. *Clear Light of Day*. Penguin Random House, 2007.
3. Freud, Anna. “Introduction”. *The Essentials of Psychoanalysis* by Sigmund Freud (Translated from the German by James Strachey). Vintage, 2005.
4. Freud, Sigmund. “The Structure of the Psychic Personality”. *The Essentials of Psychoanalysis* (Selected, with an Introduction and Commentaries by Anna Freud, Translated from the German by James Strachey). Vintage, 2005.
5. Singh, R.A. “Clear Light of Day: A Four Dimensional Novel”. *The Fiction of Anita Desai*, Vol. 2, Suman Bala and R.K. Pabby (Ed). Khosla Publishing House, 2002, pp. 9-15. Print.
6. Sakthivel, P., and P. Santhi. “Psychological Servitude of Bim in Anita Desai’s ‘Clear Light of Day’”. *Ilkogretim Online – Elementary Education Online*, vol. 20, no. 5, 2021, pp. 4573-4576. <https://doi.org/10.17051/ilkonline2021.05.503>