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Feminine personae in two works

Anita Desai's fiction seeks to unravel the complex responses of middle-class women to their domestic world, a world of web-like associations with parents, husband, siblings, and children. Such a task involves confronting feminine stereotypes of Indian culture. How Desai handles these stereotypes becomes an index of her intentions, and, I would argue, even a measure of her success. A self-conscious writer who is aware of her difference as a female novelist, Desai pursues several strategies, often within the same novel. She represents some women as molded by cultural norms, passively suffering the limitations such norms impose. With other women, Desai so renders their inner lives that cultural formulations about gender seem to have little bearing on their subjective reality. Their problems, we are to assume, have a human dimension beyond the bounds of gender. So determined is Desai to represent the issues confronted by these women as androgynous that she also offers men with similar responses and following a similar course of action. She also depicts women who consciously rebel against and reject socially sanctioned codes of feminine behavior. Finally, in a significant departure with *Clear Light of Day*, Desai offers women who, in searching for autonomy, achieve independence through affirmation of some stereotypically feminine aspect of personality. In so doing, Desai frees herself from those recurrent explorations of extremes of feminine sensibility which had become her dominant mode in earlier fiction.

Until *Clear Light of Day*, the women dominating Desai's fiction are variations of a recognizable type. They are sensitive, sometimes intensely emotional, always misfits within their world, and struggling to preserve their integrity in face of the demands made on them. Trapped in a repressive culture or an insular family, these women attempt to retain autonomy through two typical responses: they withdraw into a subjective world, often acting in ways society must deem neurotic or even mad; or they cultivate a coldness and detachment, refusing, for self-preservation, to give of themselves. With *Clear Light of Day*, a strong, individualized female protagonist achieves transcendence over inner division and social restrictions through celebration of her nurturing feminine self, through acceptance and accommodation rather than withdrawal and rejection. To establish the uniqueness of this achievement in *Clear Light of Day*, I begin with *Voices in the City* as my basis for comparisons. This second novel shares with others a sensitive, introverted woman as one of its central characters. But it also offers a wider range of women and attitudes, and it alone explores in depth the psyche of a young man, thus allowing us to isolate what Desai regards as quintessentially feminine.

All three protagonists of *Voices in the City*--Monisha, Amla, and Nirode--struggle for autonomy and individuation, and while their quest is similar and they are bonded by blood, for each the struggle is intensely lonely and very private. Such isolation, even when surrounded by family and friends, is typical in Desai. Also typically, development and freedom are seldom thwarted by economic constraints. Distinctive of this novel, however, is Desai's attempt to suggest that the problems confronted by the characters are not gender-specific. I say "attempt" because the issue is a confusing one. On the one hand, the circumstances that trap Monisha clearly derive from roles assigned to women in a traditional Indian household; her inherent passivity, as well, seems a stereotypically feminine trait. On the other hand, Monisha's

hypersensitivity and her refusal to share her self with others, born out of her fear of violation of that inner self, also characterize her brother, Nirode. The novel ends with Nirode asserting the identity of his struggle with Monisha's and finding in her death an inspiring resolution to his own dilemmas. Desai is obviously striving to universalize the predicament of the sensitive feminine temperament into a kind of existential anxiety. But in so doing, she negates the very difference of feminine perspective and psychology which has been the source of her artistic strength.

Monisha's predicament is a familiar one in Desai's fiction, shared in some measure by Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*, Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and Nanda in *Fire on the Mountain*. These women find themselves trapped in marriages where they are temperamentally incompatible with husbands and in-laws. They have refined, inward-looking, nervous sensibilities, while the men are invariably insular, complacent, or even vulgar. Indian society may regard marriage as a rite confirming secure identity on the woman, but for these women it only offers annihilation of their truest self.

Monisha has been married into a family and to a man that her aunt, a go-between, had reported to the parents as "completely unsuitable to Monisha's tastes and inclinations." The aunt hints that the parents, although aware of the incompatibility, deliberately marry Monisha to Jiban in order to curb what they regarded as her "morbid inclinations" (199). Like Amla, we must view the situation as "criminally unfair" (199). Monisha cannot learn to resign herself to this marriage or learn to love the boring nonentity who is her husband. "There is no love in my relationship with Jiban," Monisha muses, "which is filled only by loneliness and a desperate urge to succeed" (135).

There is even a greater incompatibility with other women of the joint household with whom Monisha is forced to share her life. Occupied in domestic work that she regards as meaningless drudgery--cutting vegetables, serving food--Monisha must listen to her mother-in-law recount the "remarkably many ways of cooking fish, of being Jiban's wife" (111-12). Her wardrobe is full of books, a freakish oddity to her sisters-in-law, who lie on her bed chattering about the number of saris that hang in theirs. She imagines, rightly, that they perceive her as a dangerous infidel "who ought never to have been allowed into this stronghold of practicality and chatter. I am too silent for them, I know: they all distrust silence" (119).

Denied the privacy she craves, Monisha finds herself totally alienated from those around her: "I am alone here" (136). Her choices for escape are limited. She cannot return to her mother about whom her feelings are ambivalent: "My relationship with mother . . . is filled with an inbred and invalid sense of duty, of honour, of concern. Besides, she is too whole and complete in herself to need our little offerings" (135-36). Apprehension about social consequences fuels these doubts: "Her [mother's] disapproval I could adapt myself to, but it is her disgrace in which I will not involve myself" (139). Nor does she have the option to sublimate her dissatisfaction through absorption with children. Monisha is barren. Unable to achieve autonomy, Monisha retreats to morbid introversion. The *Bhagavad Gita's* message of detachment is interpreted by her as a denial of all connection. So she records in her diary: "Traceless, meaningless, uninvolved--does this not amount to non-existence" (140). Having confronted her non-existence, her inner numbness when she fails to respond to the powerful music of the street singer, Monisha commits suicide.

While Monisha is passive, hers is not the subjugated consciousness of the typical, traditional Bengali woman. Monisha may share their existence but she does not share their attitudes; in fact, she views them with detached irony mingled with compassion: "I see many women . . . who follow five paces behind

their men. They wear saris of the duller colours . . . like the female birds in the cages, and there is something infinitely gentle, infinitely patient about their long eyes" (120). Being so aware, possessing so powerful a stubbornness, why cannot Monisha rebel? This is a question Amla too asks within the novel. Desai seems to suggest that Monisha's response is rooted in a particular kind of feminine temperament. While introversion leading to disintegration of personality is not in itself gender-related, it is, nevertheless, a likely consequence of feminine vulnerability.

Of course, not all women are equally vulnerable, and in Amla, the independent younger sister, Desai offers the rebel who consciously opposes the confinement of traditional female roles. Amla arrives in Calcutta relishing the idea of pursuing a career as a commercial artist, even though she is aware that her job will not involve her deepest self. She is unconventional enough to fall in love with a married artist, and in her ability to reach out and connect with other people she is very different from her emotionally stunted sister and brother. Calcutta may infect her with a desire for secrecy, but she is naturally expansive and communicative, quick and unstinting in her concern and compassion. Amla needs friends, needs reciprocation. "I never could avoid them [friends]," she tells Monisha (196).

Her relationship with Dharma is a curious one, and, as is typical in Desai, unfulfilling. For one, it is denuded of sexuality--another norm in Desai's fiction, where the experience of the outer world, and not relationships, is resonant with sensuality. Sexual passion, when it appears, is associated with the vulgar and the decadent, like Jit's wife, Sarla--"a voluptuous porpoise of ebony flesh" (34). Then, too, we sense that Dharma is using her vitality and her love to feed his development as an artist. Whatever the appeal of the mysterious, meditative Dharma as a human being in relationship with others, he is oddly self-centered and inadequate. He has cast out his fifteen-year-old daughter for making an alliance he dislikes. He perceives nothing shameful in having imposed his decision on his wife, Gita Devi, when this nearly destroys her sanity and empties her life of all joy. His self-righteous declarations that he has never regretted moving away from Calcutta for his wife's sake and that he will continue to protect her from associations she finds painful are crass enough to jolt even the lovesick Amla to the reality of the situation. She leaves feeling "emptied out, frangible and exhausted" (231).

Gita Devi represents what Amla or Monisha can never be: the traditional wife. Constantly sublimating her unhappiness through prayer, Gita Devi is the long-suffering wife that Indian tradition venerates. She cannot share her husband's intellectual life, but she is self-denying enough to leave him undisturbed to pursue his art and his friendships. And though she has been rendered childless by her husband's willful act, her motherhood is still the most passionate fact of her existence: "Nothing ever distracted her attention from our daughter, and it still does not" (229).

The novel offers not a single fulfilling male-female relationship. Desai, of course, does not intend her work to be a polemic against men, because she suggests that men, too, can be diminished by marriage. Within the novel, Nirode's violent rejection of marriage as destructive is related to his attempt to keep his spirit inviolate. Yet in so broadening and neutering the issue of marriage, Desai creates a problem for her readers. It is easy enough to see how the sensitive of either sex may fear the demands, the proprietorialness, and the obligations that often accompany marriage and threaten attempts by either partner to secure an autonomous self. The confusion arises because there is no equivalence in the causes which motivate this fear in men and women. Desai firmly grounds women's difficulties either in responses associated with feminine sensibility or in social conditions perpetuated by a

patriarchal culture. Hence there is fair amount of correspondence in the experience of her exceptional women. However, with a man like Nirode this rejection of marriage is a highly individual matter, a quirk of personality shaped by a peculiar case history, rather than a universal human response.

Nirode's quest for detachment and emancipation causes him to withdraw from all relationships. But his distrust of love is also rooted in his Oedipal feelings for his mother. It is difficult to sort out these motivations, specially because we are asked to acknowledge a metaphysical dimension to Nirode's quest. That is why the novel's conclusion is so puzzling. Despite the superficial similarity, Monisha and Nirode are widely separated in the causes of the disintegration. Are we called upon to be ironic over Nirode's rapture at Monisha's suicide as an emblem of "the vigilance of heart and conscience," a "celebration of the death of a saint" (248-49)? The tone of these passages does not augur such irony. Yet Monisha dies screaming "No! No!" as if, at the moment of her death she has recognized her suicide as a failure. And what must we make of Amla's response? Amla, the only person capable of freely caring for others learns caution from Monisha's death, and resolves to avoid "what lay on the other side of this stark, uncompromising margin" (248). Not she, but Nirode, the emotional recluse, suddenly finds himself liberated into caring and touching. These enigmatic transformations overburden the novel with a meaning that Desai's gender-specific analysis of Monisha's condition cannot sustain.

Nirode's final vision of his mother as Goddess Kali, now also identified with the city of Calcutta, provides an equally unsatisfactory resolution. We sense that the mother is unconventional and strong; despite her absorption in children, she has succeeded in keeping her inner self inviolate. Amla jokes about how she has made a fetish out of motherhood (141). Yet to Monisha, and more so to Nirode, her dedication to motherhood is a kind of devouring. So Nirode seeks independence from what he regards as the "warm, enveloping succubus" of mother love (37). He will not respond to her letters nor accept any financial help from her. Underlying this resentment of the children is the recognition that their mother exists in herself and by herself beyond their lives. "She is too whole and complete," as Monisha muses, to need her children.

Amla's disclosures to Dharma about her parents indicate that the coldness of the mother may well have been an adaptive strategy to an incompatible marriage. A high-caste Bengali family has arranged an out-of-caste marriage for financial reasons. Amla remembers her mother crying, as well as the "terrible contempt and resentment in her eyes," when she looked at her husband (207). She remembers her mother cooking marvellous dishes which her father rejected or the musical soirees the artistic mother arranged during which the father drank himself to sleep. An indolent, uncouth man, "My father always got on her nerves by simply never doing anything" (206). Apparently, the mother responded by withdrawing and forgetting him; she "deliberately shut her mind to him by concentrating it on flowers and music and fine food, things he shunned" (208). Such experiences have shaped the mother into an ambiguous person--warm-hearted, impulsive, instinctive but also self-absorbed and with a "cold, frosty love of power" (209).

Nirode's sex-nausea, his grotesque imaginings of his mother's involvement with her neighbor, Major Chadha, can thus be seen as the male child's response to this essential self-containment of his mother. Such a reading is confirmed by the mother's guilt and recognition that her strategy to survive intact in spirit may have been practiced at the expense of the children. In a letter, she regrets having retreated to Kalimpong, her "lifelong ivory tower." She recognizes that her "secluded paradise . . . seems to have no channel of communication to your very real and rough lives in the city" (201-202). Also, we

are never sure of the truth of Nirode's accusations because Amla challenges his vision of the mother's relationship with Major Chadha. We can speculate how a sensitive boy, so "devoted to [his] mother" during childhood (191), is now driven to assert his independence by rejecting that relationship. We can recognize the inner logic which now makes him imagine that love as emasculating both for himself and his father: "the love that made her swallow father whole, like a cobra swallows a fat, petrified rat, then spews him out in one flabby yellow mess" (190). Nevertheless, as Amla confirms for us, there is something morbid and insane in Nirode's rantings. The problem arises when Desai endorses Nirode's vision of the mother as Goddess Kali as the final one in the novel.

The mother as Kali is both generative and destructive, "the goddess and the demon are one" (255). "Isn't it perfect and inevitable," says Nirode to Amla, "that she should pour blood into our veins when we are born, and drain it from us when we die?" (256). Amla's repeated insistence that she is mother, "that is all," Desai projects as a weak, defensive manoeuvre. Throughout the novel, Amla has seen the mother as an individual shaped by particulars of her existence. At the novel's end she tries to assert the normality of her relationship with her mother by going to the mother's room in search of mutual comfort at Monisha's death, hoping that the mother will be willing "to gather Amla to her breast" (255). Instead she is coldly rejected. Nirode's vision of the mother as some kind of abstract, primeval force is affirmed.

It is impossible to see the relevance of this archetype to a portrait hitherto rendered with fine psychological and social particularity. Nor does Desai seem cognizant of the inherent patriarchal bias of this myth of the devouring mother born out of male fears of the woman's sexual rapacity. Desai has merely avoided, not resolved, the problem of representing her very valid insight that, contrary to cultural expectations, motherhood is not a simple, fulfilling experience for the woman. She takes up the issue again in two succeeding novels. Sita, in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and Nanda, in *Fire on the Mountain*, offer searing and complex denials of obligations of motherhood. *Clear Light of Day* continues these familiar preoccupations but also offers some new responses. And given the seeming impossibility, in Desai's fictional world, for women to reconcile their feminine capacity to nurture with their desire for autonomy, Bim's and Tara's relatively well-integrated personalities in *Clear Light of Day* must provoke comment. In particular, we must ask what precisely differentiates Bim and Tara from Desai's previous heroines? What elements of personality secure their wholeness and assure them some measure of fulfillment in an otherwise repressive situation?

As personality types--the strong, rebellious woman and the insecure, introverted one--the two sisters are easily recognizable from Desai's previous fiction. Their experience of childhood has been typically festering and messy. Yet now family life also has the ability to sustain not merely stifle, to connect individuals in meaningful relationships. This duality of family life is most vividly captured in the image of the house where this drama unfolds. The house is constricting and decayed but also a refuge. Because it allows her to focus on relationships, the house--and the family within it--offers Desai a more satisfactory symbol for the duality of women's experience than the archetype of Goddess Kali in *Voices in the City*. Conversely, the limited role with an inner strength frees some women from the spurious identity of accepted social roles or the more dangerous odysseys into the self, leading to madness or self-annihilation.

Desai has not retreated into a sentimental vision of the family, for the picture remains as disturbing and scathing as before. The parents of Tara and Bim, in their indifference and self-absorption, have left the children emotionally destitute. They exist in a shadowy off-stage, unseen and unconnected

to the children. The father is described as a "man who appeared to deal with both family and business by following a policy of neglect" (52). The severely diabetic mother "either sat at the card table, playing, or lay very still on her bed, with a suffering face tilted upwards in warning so that . . . [the children] did not dare approach" (102). When Baba is unexpectedly born to her in middle age, she soon "tired of carrying him about . . . became restless, spoke of her bridge four; 'My bridge is suffering,' she complained" (103). When she dies, the children feel nothing, only guilt at their lack of feeling. "It was a little difficult for the children to remember always that she was not at the club . . . but dead" (54). So, too, with the death of the father: "How little difference his death made to the household--they were so accustomed to his absence that it was but a small transition from the temporary to the permanent" (64).

This void has, to some extent, been filled by their widowed aunt, *Miramasi*, summoned to look after the retarded Baba, but becoming very quickly a surrogate mother for all the children. Through Aunt Mira, Desai offers yet another dimension of the cruelty of Indian families, particularly towards women who exist merely as appendages to their men. Married at twelve and widowed at fifteen while still a virgin, Aunt Mira has been shunned as bad luck and made to pay for her "guilt" by becoming a domestic slave, a "maid of all work" (104). Premature aged, growing "shabbier and skinnier and seedier" with use (104), she is discarded to another household when no longer indispensable.

This "cracked pot, torn rag, picked bone" (108), Aunt Mira, becomes the sustaining center in the lives of the children. "To the children she was . . . a tree that can be counted on not to pull up its roots and shift in the night. She was the tree that grew in the centre of their lives and in whose shade they lived" (110). Desai extends the image of the tree to represent what the experience of mothering felt like to Aunt Mira. Given her desperate situation as an unwanted widow, a life emptied of love and meaning, this new vocation can only be fulfilling. As the children crowd around her, she sees them as a "protective railing about her. Now no one could approach, no threat, no menace" (111). The children's possessiveness is reassuring: "They owned her and yes, she wanted to be owned" (111). There is something positive and natural about her giving of herself, for to stand alone "was not her way any more than the way of nature." A few lines later, the sentiment is repeated in a subtly altered form: "she would give in without any sacrifice of will--it *seemed* in keeping with nature to do so: (111; italics added).

With that "seemed," Desai has introduced a doubt which at the moment Aunt Mira is unwilling to acknowledge. Despite the mutual need, Aunt Mira is likely to be smothered, "choked," and "sucked . . . dry of substance" by her mothering role until she becomes "just the old log, the dried mass of roots on which they [the children] grew" (111). Later, when her consciousness is fractured through alcoholism, Aunt Mira has a nightmare vision: "A drudge in her cell, sealed into her chamber. A grey chamber, woven shut. Here she lived, here she crawled . . . from cell to cell, feeding the fat white larvae that . . . swelled on the nourishment she brought them" (89). "The children must have their milk," but Aunt Mira dreams of herself as being starved--"leave a little for me, please, just a drop" (90). She becomes identified in her mind, as well as Bim's and ours, with the bridal cow, the quintessential mother for Indians, drowned in the well, tumbling down to the drink that nourishes and annihilates. Significantly, Bim, too, will be haunted by thoughts of drowning in the well when she finds herself inwardly chaffing at her role as the sustainer of the family. And in her own need for solitude, Bim will also come to recognize Aunt Mira's need. "Perhaps that was what Aunt Mira had needed . . . they had never allowed her to be alone, never stopped pursuing her . . . for a minute" (173).

Desai apprehends the cultural manifestations of motherhood in their full complexity. If mothering can devour the mother, it can also diminish children. The mother may exploit her self-sacrifice to manipulate the children. The exploitation so unsatisfactorily imaged in the devouring Goddess Kali of *Voices in the City* is much more plausibly and comically rendered in Mrs. Biswas, the mother of Bim's hapless suitor, Dr. Biswas. Aptly, Mrs. Biswas has made a fetish of feeding her child. "'Eat a little, Shona,' she coaxed in a discontented mutter like a pigeon's." And when he refuses to oblige, she limps away from the table. "Earlier she had not limped, Bim notices, 'it was his not eating that brought on her limp' (91). Complaining variously about her dead husband, her painful arthritis, and the servant boy who has run away, Mrs. Biswas summons attention to her perpetual martyrdom. Her gift for loading her self-sacrifices onto others that Bim finds so distasteful functions both as a manipulative device and as a means of ratifying her identity as a long-suffering woman and mother.

Desai's most determined challenge to cultural stereotypes of motherhood stimulates her to create in Tara and Bim more unusual versions of the nurturing woman. Tara is traditional, a woman waiting for marriage as her final destiny. Yet she also has a quiet inner intensity and passion we must imagine lacking in her more common counterparts like the Misra girls. Indeed, in her shrinking tremulousness, Tara has much in common with Desai's earlier nervous and agitated heroines who are so appalled by ordinary domesticity that they withdraw into complete inwardness. Tara avoids this neurotic, subjective indulgence, but she also avoids the other extreme of complete loss of autonomy and individuality. She is able to do this, Desai seems to suggest, both because of her inner vitality and the fulfillment she achieves as a mother. Tara is Desai's portrait of an unfulfilled wife yet a contented mother, a common Indian type but here transfigured because free of all hints of self-sacrifice and obsessive absorption with or vicarious fulfillment through children.

Much younger than her vigorous and outgoing brother and sister, Tara, even in her maturity, remains somewhat child-like and vulnerable. She is easily distressed, for instance, at Bim's careless crumbling of a rose in full bloom (2). Her childhood memories evoke similar discomforts. Thus, she had hated school where she had felt exposed and defenseless. She is so morbidly sensitive to ugliness and pain that the weekly rounds of charity wards to distribute fruit make her physically sick (126). At home, though comforted by Aunt Mira, she feels similarly excluded from the life of her siblings: "Throughout her childhood, she had always stood on the outside of that enclosed world of love and admiration in which Bim and Raja moved" (26). While Bim and Raja dream of becoming heroes when they grow up, all Tara desires is domesticity and motherhood: "I am going to be a mother and knit for my babies," she declares to her outraged and scornful brother and sister (112).

Predictably, then, when Tara arrives home with Bakul one night, Bim recognizes with a shock the absolute rightness of such a pairing of Tara with an eligible suitor. For Tara, as for the Misra girls with whose lack of ambition for career and education Tara secretly empathizes, marriage is the necessary rite to adulthood. Where self-definition and self-direction are lacking, marriage alone can confer identity and impose direction to life. For Tara, marriage also provides escape from a strange, unhappy household. We may note Desai's care in avoiding all hints of self-sacrificing womanhood in Tara by making her escape into marriage during a time of immense crisis for the family--when, after the death of the parents, Bim must cope with Raja's illness and Aunt Mira's alcoholism.

While Bakul is her instrument of escape, he is also exactly the kind of man--pompous, glibly suave--likely to impress an insecure and impressionable

Tara. Our glimpses into their relationship years later confirm the continuing dependence of Tara. Yet Desai suggests that Tara has sufficient autonomous existence, subtly rooted in inwardness, to rebel against Bakul's overbearing control of her life. With "unaccustomed stubbornness," she chooses to stay home with Bim and Baba rather than visit relatives with Bakul (17). And, apparently, Bakul's efforts to mold Tara into an active, organized woman have met with only superficial success. So, too, she can rise above life-long habits of diffidence to oppose Bim's evaluations of Raja and of marriage and domesticity. However unsatisfactory her marriage, Tara has achieved "her own calm and happiness" (150), associated clearly at the end of the novel with her role as a mother. When her daughters arrive, Tara is relaxed, subtly at ease, even content. When Tara proudly offers her daughters to Bim, as if they were the "fruit she had raised," Desai evokes for us the image of the rooted tree, secure and nurturing.

These hesitant assertions of Tara are contrasted with Bim's more vigorous self-expression. Indeed, Desai's deliberate contrast between the two sisters becomes one of the structuring principles of the novel. Where Tara is traditional and subdued in behavior and thinking, Bim is ruggedly unconventional. She has short hair; she smokes; and she has a careless disregard for propriety. Her mannerisms are decidedly unfeminine, given as she is to sitting with her legs up and laughing heartily. Her bluntness and sardonic humor set her apart from the typical Indian woman who is restrained and hesitant of speech. Bim also has a very unfeminine disregard for appearance. On their first morning on the verandah, the sisters' clothes offer a vivid contrast. Tara wears a demure, pale blue nylon nightgown and elegant slippers whereas Bim is dressed in a shapeless, although decidedly comfortable, concoction that she has fashioned out of an old sari. She is also a slovenly housekeeper with little of that pride of place that characterizes women, and is more likely to spend her money on books than on refurbishing the house.

Bim's present behavior is rooted in her early chaffing at restraints imposed on girls. A childhood episode most poignantly captures Bim's craving for freedom so much more easily available to men. In a childish prank, at Bim's direction, Bim and Tara dress up in Raja's clothes to discover the liberation masculine attire offers: "Great possibilities unexpectedly opened up now they had their legs covered so sensibly and practically and no longer needed to worry about what lay bare beneath ballooning frocks" (132). These great possibilities Bim longs for in her dreams of a blazing career as a heroine.

So Bim chooses to pursue a career rather than to get married. She is bored by young men like Bakul and Dr. Biswas. She views marriage as a limiting of possibilities. Her disgust at the early marriage of the Misra girls prompts the passionate declaration that she will never marry: "I shall work--I shall *do* things . . . I shall earn my own living . . . and be independent" (140). While one of the ironies of the novel may be that Bim's adult life is rather restricted in space and activity, she is not wrong in her fears that to regard marriage as the sole avenue of feminine fulfillment is to court disaster. Her dark warning about the Misra girls--"They might find marriage isn't enough to last them the whole of their lives" (140)--is distressingly accurate. We see Jaya and Sarla abandoned by their husbands. They return home to a pathetic existence as exploited drudges of wastrel brothers whom they support by running a preschool, an occupation, Bim senses, they hate.

Bim's desire for independence accompanies a capacity to stand alone and assume control over events rather than allow herself to be passively buffeted by experience. When their childhood world collapses, Bim takes charge, nursing Raja to health and managing family affairs because Raja evades the responsibility. It is she who must worry about "the rent to be paid . . . people to

be fed every day, and Tara to be married off, and Baba to be taken care of for the rest of his life" (67). We are given a touching image of Bim waiting late at night for Tara to come home, as their mother might have had she cared and been alive, and as Aunt Mira would have had she been capable. Bim has, in effect, become the mother of this household; and in her skill as a nurse she is most closely associated with Aunt Mira, and with the feminine stereotype of the nurturing, sustaining woman. Even later in her life, we continue to see Bim in this role. She mothers animals, sardonically aware of the spinsterishness of this proclivity, and acts immensely protectively of Baba.

Desai is, once again, very careful to separate Bim's nurturing from any predilection for self-denial associated with Indian women. When Dr. Biswas piously declares, "Now I understand why you do not wish to marry. . . . You have sacrificed your own life for [your family]," Bim is at first astonished at his assumption. Then she is enraged and frustrated "at being so misunderstood, so totally misread" (97). The price Bim must pay for choosing not to marry is, perhaps, of another kind. Her choice to go her own way has made her somewhat eccentric. At moments, we, like Tara, see her as "headstrong." We note her unpleasing meanness about food with her guests, which is oddly contradicted by her lavishness with Baba and her pets. And the gardner complains about manure uselessly dumped in the garden while Bim refuses to furnish money for seeds.

More important is our realization that Bim's thoroughgoing independence has made her intolerant of weakness in others. This intolerance causes the festering resentment against Raja, from which Bim must free herself if she is to be whole. Also, the flip side of self-sufficiency can be loneliness breeding an inner desperation which erupts during the last few days of Tara's visit. Her fears are imaged through a haunting account of Emperor Aurengzeb's death: "Alone he had lived and alone he made ready to die" (167). She is able to still such fears through reenacting her mother-child relationship with Baba. First, seeking assurance of love, she is driven to hurt Baba. She walks into his room to "demand some kind of a response from him, some kind of justification from him for herself, her own life, her ways and attitudes," and then is led to emotionally blackmail him (163). Finally, she seeks forgiveness by touching him. Now she is free to forgive Raja and heal the wound by tearing up his "unforgivable" letter.

The transformation is signalled for the reader by the image of the tree both nourished and nourishing which reappears, for the final time, in association with Bim. With her inner eye, she envisions the house "where her deepest self lived" as the soil which has nourished her sister and brothers: "the soil in which to send down their roots, and food to make them grow and spread, reach out to new experiences and new lives, but always drawing from the same soil" (182). She achieves this epiphany after passing through a torturous dark night of the soul where she imagines her family sipping her blood: "All of them fed on her blood, at some time or the other had fed--it must have been good blood, sweet and nourishing" (153). This echo of Aunt Mira's nightmare establishes the identity of their roles. Unlike Aunt Mira, however, Bim is able to emerge whole to affirm again her relatedness to her family: "She saw how she loved . . . all of them who had lived in this house with her. . . . They were really all parts of her, inseparable, so many aspects of her as she was of them?" (165). The difference between Aunt Mira and Bim must be that Bim has not allowed herself to be consumed by her role, has not lived exclusively through that role. She has achieved both the autonomous existence and the privacy that Aunt Mira lacked. Through Bim, Desai is able to affirm nurturing as an essentially feminine attribute while simultaneously freeing the feminine role from stereotypical associations of dependence, weakness, and passivity.

And yet, despite the uplifting conclusion of the novel, we are left with residual question. Why is it that self-sufficiency for women never seems to be possible within marriage? Since Desai chooses to describe marriages between temperamentally incompatible people, we cannot determine if she regards the married state in itself as unsuitable fostering ground for self-actualization for women. Or is it only marriage as it exists among the Indian middle class, which limits women thus? Similarly, why is it that for all its emphasis on marriage and procreation, Desai's world is denuded of sexual passion? We could assume that Desai is rendering a characteristically Indian reality. Segregation of the sexes during most activities and the joint-family system inhibit sexual expression of affection. Nevertheless, it is hard to imagine that a woman like Bim has experienced no sexual stirring. Or has she merely sublimated her desires into this larger love of the family? Desai, we might conclude, has accepted the cultural stereotype that good women are not sexy. If, however, the man-woman relationship is to be recast to allow women full freedom and development, then, the potential of sexual passion to contribute to this fostering must also be acknowledged. As she continues to examine and recast cultural stereotypes, Desai may yet offer us that sexually alive, full-blooded, autonomous nurturing woman so far absent in her fictional world and rarely present in the milieu she so faithfully recreates.

Works Cited

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