The Indian Novel in English – Anita Desai’s *Clear Light of Day* (1980)

Lecture: Introduction to Literary Studies
WS 2016/17
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Outline

Introduction

• Context I Author and Oeuvre
• Context II Moment
• Basic Coordinates: Central Topics and Concerns
• Aesthetics: Narrative and Literary Strategies
• Reception and Theoretical Perspectives
Introduction

Why is India so bad for women? Of all the rich G20 nations, India has been labelled the worst place to be a woman. But how is this possible in a country that prides itself on being the world’s largest democracy? (From The Guardian, 23rd July 2012)

One evening two weeks ago, just a few miles downhill, a young student left a bar and was set upon by a gang of at least 18 men. They dragged her into the road by her hair, tried to rip off her clothes and smiled at the cameras that filmed it all. It was around 9.30pm on one of Guwahati's busiest streets – a chaotic three-lane thoroughfare soundtracked by constantly beeping horns and chugging tuk-tuks. But for at least 20 minutes, no one called the police. They easily could have. Many of those present had phones: they were using them to film the scene as the men yanked up the girl's vest and tugged at her bra and groped her breasts as she begged for help from passing cars. We know this because a cameraman from the local TV channel was there too, capturing the attack for his viewers' enjoyment. The woman was abused for 45 minutes before the police arrived.
Introduction

"We have a woman president, we've had a woman prime minister. Yet in 2012, one of the greatest tragedies in our country is that women are on their own when it comes to their own safety," said a female newsreader on NDTV. She went on to outline another incident in India last week: a group of village elders in Baghpat, Uttar Pradesh, central India, who banned women from carrying mobile phones, choosing their own husbands or leaving the house unaccompanied or with their heads uncovered. "The story is the same," said the news anchor. "No respect for women. No respect for our culture. And as far as the law is concerned: who cares?"
Key Question

Images of Women in India

WHAT IS THE ROLE LITERATURE?
Context I Author: Anita Desai (1937-)

Born to a German mother and Bengali father, Desai grew up speaking German, Hindi, and English. She received a B.A. in English from the University of Delhi in 1957. The suppression and oppression of Indian women were the subjects of her first novel, *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), and a later novel, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975). *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) was criticized as relying too heavily on imagery at the expense of plot and characterization, but it was praised for its poetic symbolism and use of sounds. *Clear Light of Day* (1980), considered the author’s most successful work, is praised for its highly evocative portrait of two sisters. As do most of her works, the novel reflects Desai’s essentially tragic view of life. *Baumgartner’s Bombay* (1988) explores German and Jewish identity in the context of a chaotic contemporary India.
Key Concerns

1. Languages: Hindi, English, German
2. Suppression and oppression of Indian women
3. Imagery versus plot and characterisation: What kind of novel?
Context II Oeuvre

- Other novels by Desai include *In Custody* (1984; film 1994) and *Journey to Ithaca* (1995)
- *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) takes as its subject the connections and gaps between Indian and American culture, while *The Zigzag Way* (2004) tells the story of an American academic who travels to Mexico to trace his Cornish ancestry
- Short fiction—collections include *Games at Twilight, and Other Stories* (1978) and *Diamond Dust, and Other Stories* (2000)—and several children’s books, including *The Village by the Sea* (1982).
- *The Artist of Disappearance* (2011) collected three novellas that examined the collateral abandonment and dislocation wrought by India’s furious rush toward modernity
Meenakshi Mukherjee on the Novel in India

A study of the emergence of the novel in India has to be more than a purely literary exercise. The factors that shaped the growth of this genre since the mid-nineteenth century arose as much from the political and social situation of a colonized country as from several indigenous though attenuated narrative traditions of an ancient culture that survived through constant mutation.
Meenakshi Mukherjee on the Novel in India

English education and through English an exposure to western literature were by far the strongest influences at work. It is not an accident that the first crop of novels in India[,] in Bengali and Marathi, appeared exactly a generation after Macaulay’s Educational Minutes making English a necessary part of an educated Indian’s mental make-up were passed. Yet to regard the novel in India, as is sometimes done, as purely a legacy of British rule – such as the railways or cricket – would be to overlook the complex cultural determinants of a literary genre.
Context III Moment: First Indian Novel in English

- Bankimchandra Chatterjee’s *Rajmohan’s Wife* (1864)
- ideal of the “devoted and demure Hindu wife”
- Critique of the confinement in marriage
- Adventure story and romance
- Mother India Image
The Early Indian Novel in English

Created from an amalgam of classical, medieval and European sources and totally unprecedented imaginative leaps into what might constitute a new female subjectivity [...]. She, moreover, embodies the hopes of an entire society struggling for selfhood and dignity. (Paranjape 2002, 158)

Thesis: the ‘new woman’ is paralleled to the emerging nation
The Early Indian Novel in English

- Coloniser-Colonised Relationship
- Mantangini‘s Heroism and Gandhi‘s Idea of Women

Matangini read her fate in his looks and stood, not pale and trembling but firmly and proudly, with all the dignity and courage which had that very evening awed into silence the fury of her brutal oppressor. (Rajmohan‘s Wife 59)

If non-violence is the law of our being, the future lies with women [...] who can make a more effective appeal to the heart than women? [...] God has vouchsafed to women the power of non-violence more than to men. It is all the more effective because it is mute. Women are the natural messengers of the gospel of non-violence if only they will realise their high state. (cited in Chaudhuri 1993, 124)
The Early Indian Novel in English

• Gandhi redefines passivity as strength and political weapon
• division of *ghar* and *bahir*, home and world
• Gandhi changed the anti-imperialist struggle
• domestic rebellion
• Indian Epics: *Ramayana and Mahabharata*
• Rama and Sita
• Ideal of the *pativrata*
• *Stridharma* are the duties of a wife
• discourses on women’s spatial positioning
• Matangini’s transgression has to be viewed as an act of utter rebellion
Main Concerns, Possible Conclusions and Further Questions

WHO is the traditional woman?
Does she represent the NATION?
Re-definition of NATION and WOMEN by Gandhi
Women’s TRANSGRESSION of traditional characterisations
Basic Coordinates of *Clear Light of Day* (1980)

- Summary of the Plot
- Story is told mostly through the protagonist Bim
- The role of focalization
The Role of Focalization

What is focalization?
Focalization, a term coined by Genette (1972), may be defined as selection and restriction of narrative information in relation to the experience or knowledge of the narrator, the characters or other, more hypothetical entities in the storyworld. (The Living Handbook of Narratology http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/focalization)
Focalization in *Clear Light of Day* (1980)

It seemed to her that the dullness and the boredom of her childhood, her youth, were stored here in the room under the dusty red rugs, in the bloated brassware, amongst the dried grasses in the swollen vases, behind the yellow photographs in the oval frames – everything, everything that she had so hated as a child and that was still preserved here as if this were the storeroom of some dull, uninviting provincial museum. (*Clear Light* 20-1)
Characters and Their Roles

- Bim and Tara
- Raja
- Mira and Baba
Family and History

• The Home as witness
• Personal and national memory
• New conception of home

In August, 1947, when, after three hundred years in India, the British finally left, the subcontinent was partitioned into two independent nation states: Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan. Immediately, there began one of the greatest migrations in human history, as millions of Muslims trekked to West and East Pakistan (the latter now known as Bangladesh) while millions of Hindus and Sikhs headed in the opposite direction. Many hundreds of thousands never made it.
The Home as Witness (to History)

Across the Indian subcontinent, communities that had coexisted for almost a millennium attacked each other in a terrifying outbreak of sectarian violence, with Hindus and Sikhs on one side and Muslims on the other—a mutual genocide as unexpected as it was unprecedented. In Punjab and Bengal—provinces abutting India’s borders with West and East Pakistan, respectively—the carnage was especially intense, with massacres, arson, forced conversions, mass abductions, and savage sexual violence. Some seventy-five thousand women were raped, and many of them were then disfigured or dismembered. (From The New Yorker, 29th June 2015)
The Location of the Family Home: The Civil Lines
The Home as Witness (to History)

The city was in flames that summer. Every night fires lit up the horizon beyond the city walls so that the sky was luridly tinted with festive flames of orange and pink, and now and then a column of white smoke would rise and stand solid as an obelisk in the dark. Bim pacing up and down on the rooftop, would imagine she could hear the sound of shots and of cries and screams, but they lived so far outside the city, out in the Civil Lines where the gardens and bungalows were quiet and sheltered behind their hedges, that it was really rather improbable and she told herself she only imagined it. (Clear Light 44)
Colonial(ist) Space

Delhi was not alone in having a European quarter that suggested a suburban that was the very antithesis of life in the indigenous city. Beneath the apparent opposition, however, was a charged interconnection between the two spaces. The natives did not passively accept the dualities. The residents of Delhi responded in a variety of ways: by disdaining and rejecting, mocking and mimicking, participating and conniving, and learning and accepting. The development of the seemingly anti-thetical two house forms [the haveli and the bungalow] was deeply interrelated. (Hosagrahar 2001, 36)
Home Space and Women
Home Space and Women

All these years she had felt herself to be the centre – she had watched them all circling in the air, then returning, landing like birds, folding up their wings and letting down their legs till they touched solid ground. Solid ground. That was what the house had been – the lawn, the rose walk, the guava trees, the veranda: Bim’s domain. [...] Bim who has stayed, and become part of the pattern, inseparable. They had needed her as much as they had needed the sound of the pigeons in the veranda and the ritual of the family gathering on the lawn in the evening. (*Clear Light* 153)
Home Space and Women

• Changing patterns
• Change versus stasis
• Ambiguity of the home

A part of her was sinking languidly down into the passive pleasure of having returned to the familiar – like a pebble, she had been picked up and hurled back into the pond, and sunk down through the layer of green scum, through the secret cool depths to the soft rich mud at the bottom, sending up a line of bubbles of relief and joy. A part of her twitched, stirred like a fin in resentment: why was the pond so muddy and stagnant? Why had nothing changed? She had changed – why did it not keep up with her? (Clear Light 12)
Ambiguity of Home

“Being home” refers to the place where one lives within familiar, safe, protected boundaries; “not being home” is a matter of realizing that home was an illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences even within oneself. (Mohanty and Martin 2003, 90)
New Roles vs Stereotypes

- Motherhood
- Transformation of stereotypical images
- Bim’s character as palimpsest of identities
- Bim’s ‘in-betweenness’
- Private and public positions
Male Characters and the Home Space

- Husband-wife relationships vs brother-sister relationships
- Constructedness of male and female roles

When Bim realized, although incredulously, that Raja was withdrawing, that his maleness and his years were forcing him to withdraw from the cocoon-cosiness spun by his aunt and sisters out of their femaleness and lack – or surfeit – of years, [Bim] grew resentful. (*Clear Light* 118)

- Raja as hero
- ‘plotlessness’ of male characters’ lives
- Nationalist concept of home as female space
Reception and Theoretical Perspectives

- Home as female space is critiqued
- Character and space as interrelated
- Focalization offers a diversified view of home
- Focalization provides subjective perspectives rather than a distanced and objective narrator’s point of view
- Focalization versus stereotyping
- The historical context of male and female characters
- No ‘universal’ concept of femininity/masculinity
- Men and women are complementary elements in the family, and by implication, in society
Thank you.

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