



The Emergence of Changed Women in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*

Ayesha Sarah Haqq¹, Immanuvel Premkumar P.²

¹Research Scholar, Department of English, SHUATS, Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh

²Associate Professor, Department of English, SHUATS, Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh

Received: 24 May 2026; Received in revised form: 21 Jun 2026; Accepted: 25 Jun 2026; Available online: 30 Jun 2026

©2026 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— *The status and role of Indian women have undergone various changes in the society across the years. Mostly, their status depends upon the roles which are allocated to them by religion, tradition, class, caste and beliefs. Indian women have persistently faced challenges including gender discrimination and societal expectations entrenched in rigid traditional norms. The pursuit of gender equality by women has emerged as a global phenomenon. Over the course of time, a perceptible shift has occurred. The twentieth century has seen a rise in women's consciousness regarding their existence, desires, self-definition and destiny. Social and legal reforms have empowered women to resist patriarchal and oppressive structures as well as to redefine their roles. This paper examines the emergence of changed women in India within the framework of socio-cultural transformation and gender discourse. By focusing on both historical contexts and contemporary realities, it provides a thorough account of the transformation in women's lives and the myriad challenges they continue to overcome. It also touches upon the driving forces behind the transformation. Anita Desai is one of the prominent Indian novelists of the post-independence era. She possesses a feminist perspective that explores the struggles of women against the oppression of patriarchal structures. Her feminine sensibilities, empathy and compassion depict a comprehensive representation of the modern Indian woman, encompassing her desires, aspirations and discontentment. This study seeks to explore the challenges and transformative experiences of Indian women in Anita Desai's highly acclaimed novel *Clear Light of Day* (1980) that have shaped and continue to reshape their lives. It highlights the diverse trajectories of women and how they strive to overcome social and patriarchal obstacles in their search for independence, voice and individuality, emerging as changed women.*



Keywords— *Women, Nation, Tradition, Patriarchy, Individuality, Gender*

Introduction

India is a land of multiple cultures, religions, castes and languages with a dynamic history accentuated with relentless interaction and amalgamation of the migrating people and invaders. The status of Indian women has been subject to numerous changes throughout recorded Indian history. Generally, it is seen that women were suppressed within the patriarchal system and were relegated to household work. They were idealised as wives and mothers and their household responsibilities came to be regarded as sacred duties. In a patriarchal society, women are coerced

into a state of slavery in the name of traditions and customs. They possessed little individuality of their own and were prey to a set of values and rigid social practices that inhibited their autonomy. It is evident from the Indian culture that women are treated as the form of goddesses, whereas, on the other hand, they are mistreated, experience the practices of female infanticide, female foeticide and other forms of physical and verbal abuse.

In the nineteenth century, reform movements against the social evils that impacted women began in India. Western liberalism and the patriotic concepts disseminated through

Western education and Christian social initiatives significantly influenced the Indian Renaissance of the nineteenth century. During the British period, some substantial progress was made in eliminating inequalities between men and women, especially in matters of education, employment, social and political rights which affected women's status in various ways. The social reformer Raja Ram Mohan Roy, played an important role in the abolition of Sati in 1829 and was actively supported by the Governor-General of India, Lord William Bentinck. It was due to the efforts of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 was enforced. His pamphlet entitled *Marriage of Hindu Widows* came out in 1856 and he conferred an appeal to the government on the existing problem. Jyotirao Phule worked for the abolition of caste system and women's liberation in India. He opposed child marriage and polygamy as well as advocated for widow remarriage and women's education (Jayawardena 82, 84). Apart from these social reformers, Christian missionaries also endeavoured to secure various rights for women. Like William Carey, the founder of the English Baptist Missionary Society (1792), worked for the abolition of such practices as infanticide and sati. Thomas Smith, John Fordyce and Hana Catherine Mullens also worked for zenana missions and opened schools for girls. Their social activities were directed towards bringing about moral reforms in Indian society and helped in the liberation of Indian women.

In the post-independence era, a new image of the Indian woman has emerged. She redefines her 'self' as she becomes aware of her role and contribution in the management of the family and society. The graph of a woman's journey from possession to person has provided her with experiences that she has used to investigate the future possibilities for her fruitful contribution in the age of globalisation. Indian women have undergone a significant transformation, transitioning from voiceless, idealised, docile, and self-sacrificing women to vocal, liberated, assertive and practical beings. They no longer desire to live a life of subjugation, but rather to break free from the constraints of age-old traditions and live life to the fullest. The transition from tradition to modernity has become increasingly challenging for Indian women. They are striving hard to balance their personal aspirations with their obligations to their family and society.

Literature, especially fiction, mirrors contemporary societal realities and has consistently served as an effective instrument for fundamental transformation. It is a valuable source for observing the evolving nature of identities and a useful genre for investigating the ideological construction of narratives. In post-independence Indian English fiction, the changed woman is conscious of her individuality and

has been fighting for her rights as a human being. She appears to be engaged in a continual struggle for equality with men. The changed woman resents being subjected to oppressive restrictions. Her thirst for recognition is awakened. She seeks to find her position and place in the society. In the world of literature, women writers through their innovative and revolutionary ideas have daringly broken every barrier. The works of Kamla Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Geetha Hariharan, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur, Ruth Pravar Jhabvala and Kiran Desai are notable exponents of feminist consciousness. They have shown that women have started questioning the age-old, rigid traditional practices and patriarchal domination. These writers have tremendously worked for women's liberation and their works have left an indelible impression on the readers.

Anita Desai is one of the most lauded and widely known contemporary women writers of Indian English literature, exclusively in the works of Indian fiction. She was born on June 24, 1937, in Mussoorie, India. As the daughter of a German mother, Toni Nime and an Indian Bengali father, D. N. Mazumdar, she is a perfect representation of the bicultural heritage of postcolonial India. She is a prolific author of many novels and short stories and has been nominated three times for the Booker Prize. Her era was one of transition, ushering in a new set of norms, ideals and morals. Anita Desai is an acute observer of the society and the status of women in contemporary society particularly captivates her interest. She has a deep understanding of Indian culture from which she draws inspiration for her novels' settings and characters. Desai incorporates social and gender issues into her writing. The majority of her works explore, from a feminine point of view, the complexity of modern Indian culture and society, while at the same time drawing attention to the struggles many Indian women face in order to preserve their sense of self-identity. Desai's women strive to transcend the societal restrictions set by a tradition-bound patriarchal culture.

In her novels, she portrays the social and cultural changes that India has gone through, paying close attention to the trials of women suppressed by Indian society. She explores the psyche of her female characters, observing their ongoing struggle to maintain a balance between their own selves and the expectations of society. Woman in her novels needs freedom and justice to her personality and her individuality which the existing patriarchal system with its unequal distribution of power does not grant her. Her works are adored because of her unique writing style, the originality of her characters, and the subject matter that is grounded in reality. Anita Desai possesses an outstanding narrative power. Her characters are distinct from one another in every manner and each one possesses a unique set of traits. Her

protagonists embody her worldview; they exchange ideas and go on quests to find their purpose in life.

This paper presents the emergence of changed women in India within the framework of socio-cultural transformation and gender discourse. The study explores the challenges and transformative experiences of Indian women in Anita Desai's novel *Clear Light of Day*. This study follows qualitative approach to analyse the novel *Clear Light of Day*. The method involves a thorough reading of the novel to recognise the emergence of changed women through its characters. Desai's *Clear Light of Day* (1980) serves as the primary source for the study. The secondary sources comprise of the academic texts on emergence of women over a period of time in India, scholarly articles and research works.

Transformed Souls in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*

Anita Desai's novel *Clear Light of Day*, published in 1980, presents a real picture of women in modern India with psychological struggles, disappointments and the unpredictable course of their lives. The novel focuses on the interpersonal relationships of the Das siblings- Bimla (Bim), Tara, Raja and Baba and how they come to terms with changing realities and understand themselves and each other. The novel presents women characters who possess their own prejudices, inclinations, objectives and perspectives. Anita Desai shows the transformation in the patterned outlook of women. The novel portrays women's struggle to reclaim their lost identity. Bim, the central character in the novel, is a self-composed, independent, courageous and authoritative woman who has never tried to evade from the hard realities of life. She perpetually grapples with issues of identity and liberation. She embraces life as a challenge and rejects the accepted fate of a woman to marry, challenging the normative idea of marriage and dependence on men. Her perspective on education, life, family and marriage distinguishes her from the typical Indian woman.

Bim faces a variety of challenges, including the responsibility of the family after her parents' death, her brother Raja's abandonment of the family, the handling of her mentally retarded younger brother, Baba and pursuing her career are not the ordinary ones but they are great challenges of the time. It was not Raja who assumed the paternal role as is customary in Indian tradition, but rather Bim, despite the fact that such a task should have been morally undertaken by her brother. Although Bim lives in a patriarchal society where men give protection to the family but in this case, the protection and care are given by a woman who is considered as a weaker sex. It is clear that there has been a significant shift in societal norms.

Bim emerges as a New Woman who rejects the conventional role of women. Despite the fact that she was not a biological mother like her sister Tara, she served as a mother figure to her siblings. Tara, through marriage, escapes her chaotic family, whereas Bim possesses a resilient nature that empowers her to endure difficulties. In response to life's challenges, her 'self' rises to meet them, rather than retreating. Bim considers Joan of Arc and Florence Nightingale her ideals, as they defied the conventional roles of a woman.

In the novel, Bim responds critically to the early marriages of Jaya and Sarla (the Misra sisters) who embody traditional beliefs and accept their subservient role as women. Bim had expressed the importance of educating women, despite their marriage, in her criticism of two sisters who reside in an adjacent residence:

'But they're not *educated* yet,' Bim said sharply. 'They haven't any degrees. They should go to college', she insisted. because they might find marriage isn't enough to last them the whole of their lives. (Desai 214-215)

Bim believes that marriage alone is insufficient for sustaining the entirety of the girls' lives. In order to overcome life's challenges, women need to be economically independent. Her apprehension comes true when the two Misra sisters were abandoned and returned to their parents' residence shortly after their marriage.

Bim is an educated woman and teaches in college. Her ambition encompassed two dimensions: to be emotionally and financially independent. She instructs her students to transform from the woman of the past into a new self. She advocates for a sense of self-respect. She inculcates in young women the importance of independence and the ability to make decisions. In a conversation with Tara, Bim once said:

I'm always trying to teach them, *train* them to be different from what we were at their age – to be a new kind of woman from you or me. (Desai 236-237)

Women's independence and education are crucial for their empowerment. There is a wonderful reminder of why a girl's education is important is given by Kamla Bhasin, a distinguished feminist activist, poet, and author, in her poem *Because I am a Girl, I Must Study* (*Kyunki Main Ladki Hoon, Mujhe Padhna Hai*). It is a striking articulation of her convictions. It was written as a reply to a father's question about why his daughter should study when he has sons. The poem constitutes a dialogue commenced by the girl's father, followed by the remaining five stanzas in which the girl child articulates her fears, anxieties, challenges and

aspirations, for which she has only one remedy, the sole path to progress is education.

...To fight men's violence, I must study.
 To end my silence, I must study.
 To challenge patriarchy, I must study.
 To demolish all hierarchy, I must study.
 Because I am a girl, I must study. (qtd. in Bhagat)

These lines eloquently illustrate the profound impact of education in liberating women. It is essential to educate them to stand up for themselves in the face of the numerous challenges they encounter due to their gender.

The myth of changeless and typical femininity is transformed by the diversity of women's existences. Bim in the novel has the courage to become a mother figure in taking care of her siblings as well as holding a manly position in the family by taking all the responsibilities of the house. She declines to adhere to the conventional role of a woman. In the novel, Dr. Biswas remarked on Bim's altruistic devotion to her family and her sacrifices. His exclamation reveals the annals of her sacrifices to attain such a position:

Now I understand why you do not wish to marry. You have dedicated your life to others - to your sick brother and your aged aunt and your little brother who will be dependent on you all his life. You have sacrificed your own life for them. (Desai 148)

Bim becomes furious at his erroneous interpretation as he cannot perceive her as a courageous woman who wants to be independent. Desai depicts Bim as an individual who confronts life with fortitude. She is regarded as a victorious individual in life. In the novel, Tara and her husband Bakul come to this realisation, that "Bim had found everything she wanted in life" (Desai 240).

In the novel, she not only changed her attitude but also emerged from her domestic insularity. Bim was upset with her brother Raja for writing a letter as her landlord, forgetting that he was also her brother. Bim's affection for her brother had received too many setbacks and she had felt humiliated by his behaviour. The resentment that she experienced was entirely justified. However, Bim undergoes a transformation at the end of the novel when she extends her forgiveness to Raja for the unforgivable letter he had written to her years prior, as she recognises that the

bond of the family is greater than anything in the world. The transformation occurs because she sees things in a new light. This new light brings a kind of revelation to her. In the final episode of the novel, Bim is reminded of a line from T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*:

Time the destroyer is time the preserver. (Desai 277)

Subsequently, her thoughts shift to her house and her family. She grasps the fact that everyone who resided in the old house were born of the same soil and are bound to one another by unbreakable ties. This basic connection can't be broken by time itself. Thus, she becomes a transformed soul. There is a significant change of heart in the protagonist towards the end of the novel. Bim pushes away her pessimistic outlook on life:

Bim could see as well as by the clear light of day that she felt only love and yearning for them all. (Desai 251)

Bim examines the flaws of others through a lens of understanding. She experienced significant hardships in life; however, ultimately, she identifies certain values that are worthy of appreciation and contribute to a meaningful existence. Bim is able to transgress some gender boundaries. She takes up the familial responsibilities that are normally assigned to men, enabling her to defeat the patriarchal forces. In the male-dominated society, it is universally regarded that the man is the head of the family and is responsible for the family's welfare and unity. However, in this instance, Bim is the first to take the initiative in uniting the family and overlooking others' mistakes. This shows an emergence of a New Woman who is able to manage the family and career singlehandedly. Bim, in spite of doing so much for the family was taken for granted by them. Today, in every Indian family there is a Bim, a woman who seldom has the privilege of self-definition and does not see herself in a heroic light. The society takes her for granted.

Tara, the younger sister, experiences isolation both at home and in school during her growing years. She discovers to her dismay that she is not able to acquire the emotional stability her siblings possess, nor can she participate in their intellectual pursuits. Tara felt left alone because her elder siblings, Bim and Raja were closer to each other in their childhood.

Throughout her childhood, she had always stood on the outside of that enclosed world of love and admiration in which Bim and Raja moved. (Desai 39)

In addition to being ostracised by her family members, Tara was also made to feel inferior and ignorant compared to her

outgoing sister, Bim and brother, Raja. While they are active and extroverted, Tara is more reserved and timid.

Tara is like a traditional woman waiting for marriage as her ultimate goal. Her sole aspiration was to be a mother. Desai analysis, Tara was an optimistic girl who had made her own choice to get married. For Tara, marriage serves as an escape from an unusual, loveless and discontented household. Tara is married to a diplomat named Bakul who works for the Indian Foreign Service, and they have two daughters. Being settled in a foreign country, she comes to India to stay with her elder sister and brother at their home in Old Delhi. By staying in her childhood home, Tara reconnects with her memories, family and childhood experiences. This helps her to understand her past and the emotional distance that had grown between her and Bim. She realises that it can be reconciled rather than escaped, which displays her emotional maturity.

Tara's insecurity persisted even after her marriage, as she continued to cling to her husband. She tries to adjust herself to Bakul's lifestyle and expectations by suppressing her own feelings and opinions. Her husband alone made all the decisions and she was compelled to obey. Although Tara was not dissatisfied with her husband's obedience, the question that ultimately troubled her was, for how long? She acknowledges that she does something that she never likes.

Later, in the novel, Tara rebels against Bakul's overbearing control over her life. She rejects Bakul's invitation to visit relatives, opting instead to remain at home with Bim and Baba.

She felt she had followed him enough, it has been such an enormous strain, always pushing against her grain, it had drained her of too much strength, now she could only collapse, inevitably collapse. (Desai 27)

Tara's refusal to follow him indicates a meaningful resistance to patriarchal authority. It marks her transformation from a passive, dependent woman to someone who begins to assert her own feelings and choices. She is in quest of her true self.

Tara's endeavours to pacify Bim serve to reignite all of Bim's previous affection and love for Raja. Her presence helps the family move toward reconciliation and harmony at the end of the novel when Bim begins to reconsider her anger for Raja and even forgives him. Tara is a bridge between her two elder siblings, bringing them together even though they ignored her when they were children. She acts as a peacemaker between them.

Although Tara is shown as a weak character in the novel as she is shy, childlike, and easily distressed, even in her maturity but she ultimately emerges out to be a resilient

woman who understands the significance of family and motherhood as well as adapts to the circumstances. However, unsatisfactory her marriage was, Tara has attained her own peace and happiness, shown towards the end of the novel with her role as a contented mother. Tara's marriage was imperfect but she managed to keep the family together. She has the audacity to confront life's obstacles. She faces all the challenges with resolute conviction and shows an unwavering courage, proving true to the notion of a New Woman. She evolves from a timid child and submissive wife into a woman who achieves emotional balance and self-understanding.

Through the character of Aunt Mira, the author depicts the plight of a Hindu woman who became a widow at a young age. In the house of her in-laws,

She was left stranded with his family and they blamed her bitterly for his death: it was her unfortunate horoscope that had brought it about, they said. ... they eyed her unpleasing person sullenly and made jokes loudly enough for her to overhear. There was laughter, till they grew bored. She stayed with them so long that she became boring. They suspected her of being a parasite. It was time she was turned out. (Desai 165-166)

Aunt Mira has been called as a harbinger of misfortune and her in-laws have treated her as a domestic slave. She endures a challenging life. She was married at the age of twelve and widowed at the age of fifteen and soon after her husband's death, she was compelled to compensate for her guilt as a "maid of all work" (Desai 159). She was the victim of a cruel society. Desai presents a pathetic picture of an Indian widow who is constantly dressed in white and experiences a range of taunts, hardships and insults. In such a traditional society, widowhood is considered the most grievous form of adversity. They were subjected to various forms of degrading treatment. In Indian culture, the trajectory of Aunt Mira shows the extent to which women's potential is limited by family structures and restrictive gender roles. After enduring excessive hardships in her in-laws' house, she went to her relatives, the Das family, where she restored her sense of self. There, she assumes the role of a mother and serves as the anchor to the children- Bim, Tara, Raja and Baba. She provides them with love and attention they lacked from their own mother. She tries to endure and seeks to overcome the challenges. Despite the fact that she has experienced varying degrees of victimisation, she possesses the requisite courage and fortitude to care for this family when the parents neglect their responsibilities. She fulfils an invaluable duty to look after the mentally disabled child, Baba. Aunt Mira also serves as a significant source of support for Tara. She

becomes the central figure in the lives of the children. Aunt Mira is:

Quick, nervy and jumpy - yet to the children she was as constant as a staff, 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 center of their lives and in whose shade they lived. (Desai 169)

She is admired for her notable sacrifices in nurturing and ensuring the well-being of the family. She also longs for affection and protection and is delighted in receiving it from the children, if not from others. However, later in the novel, her addiction to alcohol as a result of the burden of responsibilities, emotional breakdown and the scars of her past ultimately leads to her tragic death.

Although being widowed, Aunt Mira redefined herself. She had acquired the ability to adapt and remain patient in the presence of ill-treatment and hard times. Her transformation lies in her shift from a helpless widow to a caring and responsible guardian. As a character in the novel, she embodies the spirit of service. Being an unwanted widow, a life devoid of love and purpose, she finds fulfilment in caring for the children.

CONCLUSION

Anita Desai's women are reflective regarding their conditions. They are new and challenging in terms of time as they rise and rebel against the general current of patriarchal society. They begin to explore their potential and strive for the fulfilment of their needs, thereby becoming the transformed souls. Women in *Clear Light of Day* exemplified the contemporary Indian woman, engaged in a continuous struggle for emancipation. In their pursuit of individuality, liberty and identity, they act and respond in radical ways to the established conventional framework. Their protest is not solely for equality but also for the recognition of their rights and place in the family and society. The advancement and welfare of a nation can be assessed by how it treats its women. Rigid conventional mindset still continues to govern numerous facets of women's lives, limiting autonomy even in progressive environments. The persistent quest for gender justice in India is a narrative of resistance and transformation, where each accomplishment is hard-won and each right is perpetually negotiated.

REFERENCES

[1] Alexander, Ashish. "The Bible and Origins of Modern Indian Fiction." *The Bible's Amazing Impact on Our World* by Vishal Mangalwadi, vol.1, Nivedit Good Books: Mussoorie, 2019, pp. 227-248.

- [2] Bhagat, Shalini Venugopal. "Kamla Bhasin, a First-Wave South Asian Feminist, Dies at 75". *The New York Times*, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/04/world/asia/kamla-bhasin-dead.html>.
- [3] Desai, Anita. *Clear Light of Day*. Vintage, 2007.
- [4] Forbes, Geraldine. *Women in Modern India*. Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- [5] Hazra, Moumita. "Role of Higher Education in Women Empowerment and Development." *International Journal of Current Advanced Research*, vol. 6; no. 8, 2017, pp. 5289-5291.
- [6] Heimsath, Charles H. *Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform*. Princeton University Press, 1964.
- [7] Jayawardena, Kumari. *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*. Verso, 2016.