

Time and Self in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* and Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* – A Comparison

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ABSTRACT

The paper proposes to compare *Cat's Eye* by Margaret Atwood, Canadian Feminist novelist with *Clear Light of Day*, an Indian novel by Anita Desai who also has feminist interests. Both are stories of two women/sisters. *Cat's Eye* show how Elaine comes to term with her sister as well as her past whereas *Clear light of Day* shows how Bim revisits her past and in that process rediscovers her own identity in relation to her sisters. Both the novels show the evolution of the self in relation to time. Whereas Atwood's approach to time is more scientific, Anita Desai's approach is more poetic and mystical.

KEYWORDS

Time; Self; Margaret Atwood; Anita Desai; Comparative Study

Margaret Atwood, probably the best known Canadian woman novelist today has been exploring women's problems with archetypal and political perspectives in her novels up to her *Handmaid's Tale*. Her *Cat's Eye* published in 1988 concentrates on the personal intimacy of two women: Elaine, the narrator and her childhood mate Cordelia. *Clear Light of Day* by Anita Desai an equally well-known woman novelist is similarly the story of two sisters coming to terms with each other and themselves across time. In both, time is also related to place-Toronto in *Cat's Eye* a malicious hyper-real city which willfully ignores individuals and Old Delhi packed with history in *Clear Light of Day*.

It is significant that both the novels have mottos pertaining to time and memory.

Whereas *Cat' Eye* has a quote from Eduardo Galeano's *Memory of Fire: Genesis* and Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*, "Why do we remember the past and not the future?" Anita Desai's novel has a quote on memory from Emily Dickinson and T. S. Eliot's lines: "See, now they vanish, The faces and places, with the self which, as it could, loved them, To become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern". Shanti Acharya rightly says, "The renewal of the self in another pattern is the theme of *Clear Light of Day*". (24)

In *Cat's Eye*, Elaine Risley, a painter now at midlife returning from Vancouver to Toronto a city which she fled after her first marriage, to attend the exhibition of art and this triggers a journey down the memory lane.

She even says, "until we moved to Toronto, I was happy." (Atwood 22)

Clear Light of Day begins with the partial reunion of the family, the two sisters Bim and Tara in their old house in Old Delhi when Tara who married a diplomat, Bakul and went abroad comes back with her husband.

In both the novels, the focus is on the relationship between the two women, Elaine and her friend Cordelia in *Cat's Eye*, Bim and her sister Tara in *Clear Light of Day*. In both cases, there is also a contrast between a sister and brother. As Charu Maini says, "It is the depiction of her relationship with Cordelia that makes *Cat's Eye* an apt example of a novel that takes a fresh look at the relationships between women. It analyses the complexity of this bond where these women often emerge as each other's tormentors and rescuers." (Maini 117) It is also a power struggle between the two from the beginning. Though there is also a growing bond and dependence between them, Cordelia's power over her is not because she is her enemy. "With enemies, you can feel hatred and anger but Cordelia is my friend" (Atwood 127). There is a kind of deep interdependence and almost sisterhood between the girls. Again in the words of Charu Maini, when Elaine wants friends,

It is Cordelia who reaches out and "creates a circle of two" taking her in. While Cordelia covers up Elaine's awkwardness and inadequacy, Elaine fills up Cordelia's hidden sense of inferiority which she conceals underneath her apparently overconfident exterior. While often being cruel to each other they go through life together with the support of a common defiant attitude that says "So?", meaning "So What?" (Maini 119)

When Elaine did a picture of Cordelia titled 'Half a face' her entire face was there to see. Elaine says, "Cordelia is afraid of me, in this picture. I am afraid of Cordelia. I'm not

afraid of seeing Cordelia. I'm afraid of being Cordelia. Because in some way we changed places, and I've forgotten when." (Atwood 243) Again Elaine enjoys her power over Cordelia when Cordelia says that she is a vampire and also feels that energy has passed between us and I am stronger probably (Atwood 249). Probably her victim's soul has entered her.

In *Clear Light of Day*, there is a similar relationship between two sisters, Bim and Tara. This novel begins with Tara, the younger sister returning to her childhood home in Old Delhi. The rose walk in which she used to walk with her mother was there unchanged but now with Bim, grey and heavy and not so unlike their mother in appearance only awake, watchful. Whereas Tara re-enacts the rites of childhood with the snail, Bim does not want to revive the past. The two sisters are also soon defined in relation to each other by Bakul,

If she had not those qualities- decision, firmness, resolve that he admired and tried to instil in his wife who lacked them so deplorably. If only Bim had not rather a coarse laugh and way of sitting with her legs up... now Tara would never... and if her nose were not so large unlike Tara's which was small... and Tara was gentler, more tender. (Desai 18-19)

During the school days, Tara always felt inferior to Bim: while Tara was interested in romances, Bim was interested in facts and games.

Section Three of the novel gives more glimpses of Tara's childhood fantasies; her feeling that she had witnessed her father murdering her mother, her experience of blood when a mad dog had crawled into one of the latrines, and the other connected with her teacher Miss Singh whose romance was brought to an abrupt end. This is followed by the incident when Tara was forced to experience guilt again when Bim made her try

a cigarette and the one in which she, Tara, did not stay with Bim to help her. All this grew into the spider fear that lurked at the centre of the web-world for Tara. According to symbolic interactionists,

Selves are frequently re-enacted acquiring a creative definition which eases each successive performance.... The past has no existence outside the minds of those who resurrect. They animate and produce time as the form of consciousness which produces them. They are all mediators and mediated of an experience of themselves as objects in history. Selves can then become incremental rather than isolated accomplishment. (Rock 135)

We find such an incremental evolution of self of Elaine in relation to time and her counterpart Cordelia in *Cat's Eye*. The past and the present are constantly juxtaposed and illuminated in relation to each other. Through her recollection of her childhood experience with Cordelia Elaine comes to terms with her sense of guilt and betrayal. When she meets Cordelia again she realizes Cordelia has also changed. "She has reinvented herself since her days of sloth and overeating and failure" (Atwood 322). When Cordelia asked Elaine whether she remembers the Tartans, Elaine muses, "I don't want to remember. The past has become discontinuous, like stones skipped across the water, like postcards: I catch an image of myself, a dark blank, an image, a blank" (322). She also glimpses the photos and recalls that she would never smile for those pictures. She remembers how wise she thought she then was. Now she realizes that she was not wise then but she was wise now. Again she compares her present feelings as a mother to her feelings as an adolescent. "Because I am a mother, I am capable of being shocked; as I never was when I was not one" (Atwood 333).

There is a similar development in Tara in *Clear Light of Day* in Section VI which comes back to the present. She realizes how little she had really observed-either as a child or as a grown-up woman. She had seen Bim through the lenses of her own self, as she had wanted to see her. And now, when she tried to be objective, when she was old enough, grown enough and removed enough to study her objectively, she found she could not-her vision was strewn, obscured and screened by too much of the past. (Desai 148)

In both the novels there is the counterpointing of the woman's view of time with that of a man. *Cat's Eye* begins with Elaine's brother Stephen's view of time:

Time is not a line but a dimension like the dimensions of space. If we can bend space we can bend time also and if you knew enough and you could move faster than light you could travel backwards in time and exist in two places at once. (Atwood 3)

Years later when he visits Toronto to give a lecture on a Unified Field theory he says, "When we gaze at the night sky," we are looking at fragments of the past. Not only in the sense that the stars as we see them are echoes of events that occurred light years distant in time and space." (Atwood 352). This is like Einstein's concept of fusion of time and space. Soon her brother dies in an accident (which appears to have been planned)

When Elaine meets Cordelia at the rest house, she feels that she has changed beyond recognition. She is very weak and though she takes her out she does not want to rescue her. She wants to be rid of Cordelia but she is not free from her. She often thinks of her and re-enacts her childhood experience with her. She wants to see her again and talk to her and give her vision of Cordelia which only an outsider can give. Finally, she thinks that Cordelia is dead while she is not. Then she imagines that Cordelia is on the hill as in the past and she

experiences the old shame but soon she realizes that Cordelia is no longer there. "There is nothing more for me to see. The bridge is only a bridge, the river a river, the sky is a sky" (Atwood 443).

In the end, Elaine comes to terms with Cordelia and the past when she is on the plane. The two old aged women's carefree behaviour and determination to enjoy the flight despite their arthritis and swollen leg and play for a short while again like children without old responsibilities grievances and hates makes Elaine feel that her life with Cordelia will never happen. She misses the future whereas the two women have been able to recover the childhood. However, she sees the full night, clear moonless filled with stars with Stephen's perspective. She feels, "if they were sounds, they would be echoes, of something that happened millions of years ago; a word made of numbers. Echoes of light, shining out of the midst of nothing." (Atwood 445) This recalls his earlier lecture in which he has said that stars, as we see them, are echoes of events that occurs lightning years distant in time and space. But she comes back to her simple vision and finally accepts the light as it is; "It is old light, and there's not much of it. But it's enough to see by." (Atwood 445) Thus the novel achieves a synthesis of two times: the cosmic scientific time of Elaine's brother and the human time of the giggling women over tea who are freed from time. She is also, in her simple human way, able to travel back into her past and transcend time as well as the self-limited by it. The novel celebrates the old light and the simple 'seeing' which probably is the most marvellous of all marvels.

Similarly, in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*, Bim discovers a deeper identity or self inseparable from others "so that the anger and disappointment she felt in them was only the anger and disappointment she felt at herself" (Desai 165). This was not only a horizontal spreading of the self but also a vertical going

down the roots. "She could hardly believe, at that moment, that she would live on after they did or they would continue after she had ended" (Desai 165). The passage recalls Eliot's lines quoted in the motto pattern: Bim's self which loved others is now renewed, transfigured, in another pattern.

This novel also ends with reference to 'the clear light of day' the Wordsworthian phrase. Whereas Wordsworth refers to the vision fading in the clear light of day in *Immortality of Ode* here the clear light of day symbolizes a moment of time and timelessness, when Baba, Bim and the Cat accept each other and live in silence. Now Bim seems the continuity of life symbolized in the house.

With her inner eye he saw how her own house and its particular history linked and contained her as well as her whole family with all their separate histories and experiences- not binding them within some dead and airless cell but giving them 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, the same secret darkness" (Desai 182).

The passage is reminiscent not only of Eliot but also of Nehru's *Discovery of India* to which the novel has already referred.

To conclude, in *Cat's Eye*, Atwood seems to give a fictional rendering of Stephen Hawking's real time and imaginary time. Hawking says there is a difference between the forward and backward direction of real-time in ordinary life. When a cup of water falling off a table breaking into pieces is filmed it can be run backwards or forward. When it runs backwards we will see the pieces suddenly gathering themselves together. By recalling the memories of others Elaine recomposes herself as well as Cordelia. Her time is human and personal whereas

Stephen's is cosmic but there is an interpenetration of both when Elaine is able to 'see' with the help of the light from the night sky.

But there is more of the transcendence of time and unity of self in *Clear Light of Day*. In the beginning Tara desperately tried to re-enact the childhood; in the course of the novel through significant recall and recovery of pattern, she is able to both accept and escape from the past and gets freed from guilt and pain, and in both cases the self discovers the unity in time, as well as with others, for which the house becomes a symbol. In fact, Tara sees

herself in Bim, and Bim in Tara; both are copresent in the house. Whereas Tara symbolizes the centrifugal movement of the self, Bim symbolizes its centripetal movement. They can also be linked with the linear and the cyclic views of the time and history. In both there is the liberation from time, when there is liberation from guilt, and in that moment of liberation, i.e., clear light of day, the loop in time becomes linked with the timeless, and the novel is a prose poem celebrating the discovery of a timeless self in time and place very much like Eliot's *Four Quartets* to which it often refers.

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