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Custodianship and Care: Women and Reading in Anita Desai’s Clear Light of Day

By Aruni Mahapatra

Abstract
Several scholars have noted how the Indian state has been able to care for women only by placing them in custody of the family or the community, often overseen by male relatives. How do novels by Indian women writers intervene in this difficult social and legal problem? This paper answers this question by integrating feminist scholarship on the place of Indian women in postcolonial India with another scholarly tradition: the ethics of care. Conventionally, these two bodies of writing have not been in direct dialogue. This paper facilitates a conversation by close-reading Anita Desai’s Clear Light of Day, a novel that powerfully describes the struggles of educated women in independent India through a perceptive depiction of the complexities of care. It argues that a postcolonial theory of reading based on care must account for the powerful influence of custodianship in postcolonial India.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Custodianship, Women, India, Inheritance, Ethics of Care, Anita Desai, Clear Light of Day, Women caregivers

Introduction: Custodial Women in Modern India
The Constitution of independent India contains many laws and amendments designed to protect the rights of women to make independent choices about their bodies, as well as their properties. However, for varying reasons, these laws often fail to achieve their avowed goals. In 1984 the Indian Supreme Court passed a landmark judgment which foregrounded the fraught place of the Indian woman as a custodial subject caught between the patriarchal demands of the family and the state. The state intervened to “protect” this subject, but it could do so only by giving the family even more complete custody of women. In April 1985 the Supreme Court awarded Shahbano, a divorced Muslim woman, maintenance of Rs. 179.20 per month from her husband, Mohammed Ahmed Khan. Shahbano had been fighting for a higher maintenance sum for ten years prior to this judgement. A lower court had granted her Rs. 25, leading Shahbano to appeal to the higher court for a greater sum of money. Even though the Supreme Court had previously granted maintenance to divorced Muslim women, the court’s judgment to award Shahbano maintenance from her husband was perceived as a case of the legislative institution favoring an individual Muslim woman over the Muslim community, and thereby exceeding its secular mandate to intervene in the personal life of a community. This produced unprecedented debate on legal, social, and familial issues, all centred on the place of this Indian woman as a wife of a Muslim man and a citizen of a secular nation-state, two roles which appeared irreconcilable. Liberal intellectuals and women’s rights groups sparred with conservative groups, led primarily by the Muslim Personal Law Board, and in the end the Indian government gave in to the Muslim Personal Law Board.2

Following the demands of this Board, the Parliament passed a new Muslim Personal Law: The Muslim Women (Protection of Rights in Divorce) Act. This law took the

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2 Information on this landmark case is available in public; I have relied on articles in two English dailies. For more, please see Express Web Desk, “What is Shah Bano Case” and Team Frontline, “1985: Shah Bano Case.”
responsibility for the wife’s maintenance from the husband and placed it on her “children, parents, or those relatives who would be entitled to inherit her property upon her death,” and if her family did not have the means to support her, the State Wakf Boards (administrators of Muslim trust funds) would do so (Pathak and Rajan 561). Zakia Pathak and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan have studied the rhetoric with which this law was justified as manifestations of a “discourse of protection” (565-70). While the Muslim Personal Law Board took the side of the husband, the Indian government justified the need for a “Muslim personal law” (creating an exception to other secular laws on divorce and marriage) by arguing that such a law would protect both the woman and the minority Muslim community. This community had come under attack from majority Hindu groups who cited the Shahbano case as evidence of the backwardness of Muslim family life. The Muslim Women Act thus sought to protect Muslim women from the Muslim community, and the Muslim community from the Hindu community by pushing Muslim women back to their natal families. Pathak and Rajan deconstruct such claims of protection and demonstrate that “the meaning of the term ‘protection’ is always deferred” (570). In addition to the protector’s will to power, protectionist arguments “efface the recalcitrant (nonsubmissive) will of the protected” (570).

Following the co-written essay cited above, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan has further examined other instances of engagement between the postcolonial Indian state and women. In The Scandal of the State: Women, Law and Citizenship in Postcolonial India, Rajan argues that in postcolonial India, women and the state have reciprocally shaped each other. The issues of gender asserted by women’s rights movements have provoked crises in the very constitution of the state and forced the state to rethink the terms of its engagement and address towards citizens (Rajan 3-5). A dominant mode in which the state has addressed its women, and through which it has been able to fulfill its duty to grant basic human rights to its women, has been that of custodianship. Rajan’s first section is titled “Women in Custody,” and the first essay, on the famous “Ameena” case, is directly relevant for our argument here.

In August 1991 an eleven-year-old Muslim girl named Ameena was found crying on an Air India flight to Riyadh. She was sitting next to a sixty-year-old Saudi Arabian national named Yahya Mohammed al-Sageih who, she claimed, had married her. Ameena was rescued by the flight attendant, and the case gained national and global notoriety. For the first three months of the trial, the court had remanded Ameena to a juvenile home, considering her parents unfit custodians of this twelve-year old girl. However, as the hearings continued, the women’s rights group Janwadi Mahila Samiti demanded that Ameena be allowed to move back to her parents. Even though the parents had demonstrated their unfitness as caregivers, her family home was considered a better place for Ameena than juvenile homes, which were designed for women aged between eighteen and thirty-five. In March 1992 Ameena reiterated her desire to go home, and the High Court allowed her to return to her parents’ home. The criminal proceedings against her parents and al-Sageih continued and reached a conclusion with Ameena’s testimony in November 1992. In this testimony Ameena said that she had consented to the marriage, and that she was sixteen, not twelve. Ameena’s testimony, and the High Court’s sympathetic response to her desire, shows, for Rajan, how this case was resolved through a series of “renegotiations of the concept of custody” (57). Women’s rights organizations and the media had seriously questioned the competence of the family and the state to serve as custodians of the young woman Ameena. However, in the end, her voice was

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3 See Rajan’s The Scandal of the State, pp. 25-31, for a list of modes in which the state has addressed women, and, following this, the subjectivities created by the state’s address. The first mode of address, according to Rajan, is visible through a slew of “Personal Laws.” These were constituted to make exceptions to the Uniform Civil laws, in cases where religious communities wished to continue traditional practices. Ostensibly these make positive discriminations in the name of “community,” but as Rajan argues, almost all of them are “negatively discriminatory” towards women.
used to sanction her reinsertion into the custodianship of those very institutions whose unfitness had been demonstrated.

In the High Court’s response to Ameena’s desire, and in the media’s eager reporting of the details of the case, Rajan identifies Ameena’s transition from a custodial subject to a choosing subject. The court’s decision to let her return to her parents’ home, based on her “voice,” thus completes a circle that begins with her being “turned into an object of property” (sold by her father to another man in marriage for the sum of 6000 rupees) to “a passive subject of custody” and finally her promotion to the “active, agential role of the subject who is called on to make crucial decisions based on her own wishes and choices” (58). Scholars of postcolonial India have repeatedly pointed out the failures of the Indian state to recognize Indian women as autonomous agents. From the perspective of the “ethics of care,” as I will explain shortly, these failures are instances of bad care. Instead of meeting the needs of these women, the state was preserving the interests of the care providers, the husbands, the fathers, and individuals other than the ones who mattered.

In her recent work, Communities of Care, Talia Schaffer draws on the philosophical insights of the feminist “ethics of care” to produce a new methodology of reading novels. Although Schaffer’s study focuses on Victorian and modernist novels, there is much to suggest that this methodology can be useful for a study of other kinds of writing, especially women’s writing from postcolonial contexts. As this section has shown above, feminist writers and scholars from India have observed many aspects of women’s lives in postcolonial India that create conditions that resemble what Schaffer describes as the “care community” in Victorian literature. In the next section I will clear some of the methodological ground necessary for a care-based postcolonial theory of reading through a study of Anita Desai’s novel Clear Light of Day (1980). Desai’s novel, set in postcolonial India, focalizes the necessity, importance, and complexity of care so powerfully that the novel at times seems to anticipate feminist theories of the ethics of care. At the very least, Desai’s novel invites a comparative intellectual inquiry, a dialogue that integrates the methodological insights on care with social thinking from India that describes the conditions in which real and fictional Indians are prevailed upon to perform the labor of care. In this paper, I initiate this inquiry in three steps. I begin with a critical reading of Schaffer’s methodology of care, to isolate some questions that scholars may ask about literary representations of care in fictional narratives. I then move to a comparative analysis of the sociological aspects of care. In what ways is the context of postcolonial India different from the Victorian era, which justifies many of Schaffer’s stylistic and conceptual choices? Drawing heavily on the work of feminist sociologists and legal activists, I assert that in order to posit care as a methodological framework in the postcolonial Indian context, we need to understand custodianship.

**Reading “Care” in Society and Theory**

In this section I will clarify some methodological questions. What is care? What kinds of questions should literary critics ask when they analyze care in a novel? Further, are there any sociological conditions for this methodology? Are there certain social contexts in which this approach works better than others? If so, how can scholars adapt a care-based theory of reading to a feminist reading of novels by Indian women writers? I answer these questions by drawing on scholarship about disability, inheritance, and eldercare. This work invites us to think about care through the specific history of custodianship in postcolonial India.

Scholars in feminism, philosophy, and disability studies have defined care in many ways, and Schaffer helpfully distills from that critical mass her own definition that is informed by these studies and contributes directly to new ways of reading fiction. The most general may be Joan Tronto’s definition that care is “everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible” (qtd. in Held 31). At the other extreme...
one may place Deimut Bubeck, for whom “caring for is the meeting of the needs of one person by another person, where face-to-face interaction between carer and cared-for is a crucial element of the overall activity where the need is of such a nature that it cannot possibly be met by the person in need herself” (Held 32). Schaffer’s own definition is that care is “meeting another’s need” (35).

Each of these three words connects to a particular insight and enables a particular kind of work. “Meeting” signals distance from solving, curing, and similar tendencies in earlier scholarship on disability, in which there was a problematic and unconscious assumption that scholars of disability were solving a problem, or curing a disease that disability was. Instead, Schaffer is clear that care, whether provided by medical professionals or academics, does not fix or solve problems, so much as help manage the situation and enable someone (or something) to get from point A to point B. “Another” expands the ambit of care to include non-human providers and recipients of care, as in Charlotte Bronte’s Jane Eyre, where Jane claims that she felt more cared for by nature than any human being (Schaffer 42). Finally, “need” shifts the focus from the provider to the recipient. True care can only happen if the care provider does the critical work of learning what exactly the cared-for needs, as distinct from what the care-provider can provide or wants to provide. The word “need” also aligns with the key insight from disability studies that disability is not an exceptional or extraordinary condition manifested in some bodies. We all depend on each other; irrespective of whether we are disabled or sick, at some point we all have needs we cannot meet by ourselves.

Under this broad definition, Schaffer guides literary critics in the best way to study care in literature by describing five distinctive features of care. Two of these are relevant for our study here: care is performative, and it takes place in communities. By performative Schaffer reminds scholars that care-giving acts matter more than feelings that—one may presume—motivate acts of care. Such an emphasis acknowledges the majority of care that is provided by professional caregivers who perform effective care acts for strangers not out of feelings but to earn a living. Additionally, this emphasis helps literary critics better recognize and understand the labor of many fictional women who perform the labor of care both as professional duty and as personal choice. Traditional studies of character privilege interiority and assume that actions emerge from feelings that exist at a deeper, inner, or otherwise less visible space. This space, known as subjectivity, is often a function of privilege, and available to white, male, and European subjects in the Victorian novel. Instead of looking for inner subjectivities as the source of care acts, Schaffer enjoins critics to “respectfully interrogate the history of [these characters’] painful external social construction, the ways in which, from the beginning, their subjectivity was negotiated through exchanges of need with others” (52). This interrogation may be done, Schaffer suggests, by an approach in which scholars ask slightly different kinds of questions. Instead of asking who a character is, scholars should ask “who cares for whom” (12). Charlotte Bronte’s Villette, the question “who Lucy cares about” leads to a futile search for Lucy’s feelings; the better question is “who Lucy cares for” and this reveals Lucy’s growth in the novel, from a companion to a nursery-governess to a schoolteacher (Schaffer 89, emphasis in original).

These “exchanges of need with others” exist because Victorian society—and the fictional world of the Victorian novel—existed at a time when the modern medical profession, as we know it today, was still in the process of being established. Thus, care in these novels is provided by a community of relatives, friends, and sympathizers and only rarely by professional doctors or nurses. Schaffer is quick to admit, however, that for varying reasons,  

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4 In writing this, Schaffer joins a growing chorus of critics who have recently argued for a renewed focus on the way scholars study “characters,” an excellent sample of which can be found in Character: Three Inquiries in Literary Studies, co-written by Amanda Anderson, Rita Felski, and Toril Moi.
such care communities continue to exist and remain the primary form of care in many cultural and geographical contexts today. These include “indigenous people,” “Asian and African cultures,” “the collectives of disabled advocates giving mutual aid,” “the robust, joyful networks of queer families of choice,” among others (16). One example of such a care community is the middle-class household in postcolonial India. In this context, the people who needed care were various: the elderly, the sick, the disabled, but essentially everyone who could not by themselves meet their bodily needs. However, the care-providers were—and still are—women.

While care does not yet feature as a category of inquiry in postcolonial studies, feminist legal scholarship has something to say about eldercare in postcolonial India. Srimati Basu has shown that eldercare was an ideological strategy through which Indian families disentitled women from inheriting property. As I mentioned earlier in the previous section, women in twentieth-century North Indian families refused to inherit their share of the natal property in order to preserve ties with their families. Daughters were frequently the non-earning siblings, and by giving up their claims to natal property, they contributed to the family wealth. This created a sense of equality with the earning siblings, the brothers, who, by this logic, seemed to have “earned” their share of the family wealth by providing financial support. An exception to this norm was eldercare, and Basu presents a few cases in which the daughters or distant relatives inherited property, instead of biological sons. These persons were chosen because they had supported parents when they were sick and ageing. Materially, in terms of the division of labor in Indian households, the domestic work of managing intimate body fluids fell to women, and thus women were placed in situations where they had more opportunities to provide eldercare, earn the respect, and win inheritances not customarily extended to women. One respondent, Sushila, told Basu: “whoever is going to clean up my urine and feces and is going to put up with taking care of me, that’s who I want to give everything to” (299).

However, such labor did not position women to inherit property. Instead, patriarchal assumptions in the family held that sons who had jobs and brought home money provided more important support as opposed to daughters who performed unwaged labor inside the home. Basu cites several cases where women provided eldercare but did not inherit property and did not even expect to inherit anything. Instead, in many cases sons inherited property despite not living in the same house. In sum, notwithstanding a few exceptions, for most North Indian families, a woman’s labor of providing eldercare was considered a duty, which she could not leverage for a claim to property, while her brothers’ claim to natal property was considered a right. The Law said otherwise and granted women equal share in natal property irrespective of whether they performed the labor of eldercare. Despite such laws, women chose to give up their claims on natal property as a pragmatic economic decision. Given that women lacked financial independence, they preferred to not further deplete their natal wealth. Basu argues that women’s refusal was a “sacrifice,” in which women gave up physical property and “suffered extreme deprivation and violence” in order to gain “cultural property,” i.e., unbroken emotional ties with the natal family (303). Such relations, for Basu, appeared a “safer and more reliable” economic investment than claiming a share of natal property (304).

All of these concerns about the labor of care, as well as the tendency of patriarchal structures to keep women in custody of male relatives, are treated with great lucidity in Anita Desai’s novel Clear Light of Day (1984).

Clear Light of Day

In Clear Light of Day Anita Desai describes how the protagonist’s ability to read and remember English poems gives her the emotional and intellectual resources to resist the ideological pressures in which care becomes a way to keep women in custody. The novel concerns the Das family, and narrates the story of how the eldest daughter, Bim (perhaps short
for Bimala, but the novel does not specify this), finds the resources and the space to forgive her brother, Raja, for an insulting letter he had written to her many years ago. Early in the novel we learn about this letter: in it, Raja informed Bim that he had inherited the family’s house in Old Delhi through his marriage with the daughter of the landlord, Hyder Ali. However, he promised to “look after” Bim and Baba by not increasing the rent from the amount their parents used to pay Hyder Ali. Further, he also promised not to sell the house as long as they needed it (Desai 27). Bim was so angered by this condescending tone that she cut all ties with Raja and every other family member associated with Raja. The rest of the novel describes vignettes from childhood that the Das siblings shared. These vignettes reveal one obvious reason why Bim must have felt insulted: throughout her life she has provided care to others without receiving any herself. These vignettes also reveal something else: the different ways in which the siblings relate to reading, and the vastly different roles that reading plays for them. Reading deludes Raja into a false sense of masculine agency and power. On the other hand, for Bim, overburdened caregiver and self-made college professor, reading becomes both a means of providing care to others as well as, crucially, meeting her own needs. Bim quotes passages from English literature as she performs critical acts of care for other people. The novel suggests that through this combination of reading and care Bim finds the emotional resources to resist the discriminatory patriarchal assumptions about daughterly duties of care and brotherly rights to inherit property.

From the earliest time that the children were allowed to access books, Bim distinguished herself from her brother and sister. Raja, the boy, separates himself from the girls very early. After reading the “usual boyhood adventure stories, Robin Hood and Beau Geste,” Raja “fashions swords and bamboo sticks,” “pictures himself in outsize, heroic roles,” and purchases more books (Desai 120). By contrast, the two sisters present a somewhat more passive model of reading, as they “read themselves not into a blaze but a stupor” (120). The sisters sink “lower and lower under the dreadful weight of Gone with the Wind and Lorna Doone;” the “stories never emerge into the bright light of day and only made vague, blurred impressions on their drowsy, drugged minds, rather than vivid and clear-cut ones” (120-1). While Tara is “dragged helplessly into the underworld of semi-consciousness by the romances,” Bim is “irritated” and “tosses them aside in dissatisfaction” (121). Instead of romances, she prefers “facts, history, chronology, preferably” (121). She begins reading a book she “found on the drawing-room bookshelf” (122): Gibbon’s Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.

Perhaps this affinity for facts and history eventually makes a history professor of Bim; in the novel, however, she spends a lot of time remembering the care she provided. Despite her preference for facts over imaginative writing, lines of poetry are deeply intertwined with both the acts and the memory of care. The first person who needs her care is Raja, her brother, who contracts tuberculosis just as the city of Delhi descends into the violence that accompanied the partition of the subcontinent and the creation of India and Pakistan as separate nations. Raja’s sickness during this period is especially important, given that he imagined himself as a revolutionary, like those he read about in poems by Lord Byron. Desai pointedly contrasts Raja’s aspiration for public heroism with the private care he needs to survive. This care is provided by his sister Bim, who consoles him by reading aloud poems by Tennyson, Swinburne and Byron in between sponging him with wet towels, helping him change into fresh muslin shirts, and applying cold presses to his feverish forehead (42-44). She remembers her concerned refrain to him “shall I read to you?” twice later in the novel (46; 60). If the act of reading poetry could be an act of nursing, it also articulates Bim’s desire to know someone as more than simply a caregiver: Mira masi (Aunt Mira; masi is the Hindi word for maternal aunt). Mira was a cousin of their mother who had been widowed at fifteen and had been reduced to a “maid of all work” in her husband’s home (104). The Das family desired her domestic labor
when the youngest child, Baba, began to show signs of autism. While Mrs. Das was already stretched too thin and the boy was not beginning to speak, Mira was summoned. She endeared herself immediately to the children. She played games with them, domesticated animals, made sherbets from fruits plucked from the family gardens, never commanded or chastised them, and, most importantly, nursed them to health when they fell sick. However, soon after Tara married and left, Mira masi’s alcoholism got out of hand, and the caregiver needed to be cared for. Bim found herself having to care for both her brother (Raja), down with tuberculosis, and Mira masi, who was bedridden from tranquilizers to prevent her from hurting herself.

Remembering their aunt, Bim tells Tara, the middle sister, that for a long time after Mira masi’s death, Bim used to see her in the gardens. In response to Tara’s disbelief, Bim explains her vision of their dead aunt by reciting a whole stanza from the fifth section, “What the Thunder Said,” of T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*:

Who is the third who walks always beside you?
When I count, there are only you and I together
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded
I do not know whether a man or a woman
—But who is that on the other side of you? (Eliot 41)

Seeing incomprehension on Tara’s face, Bim provides Eliot’s explanation of the origin of these lines. As Eliot notes, the lines in *The Waste Land* were inspired by a passage titled “The Extra Man” from Sir Ernest Shackleton’s memoir of his Trans-Antarctic expedition of 1914-1916. Shackleton’s ship was stuck in pack ice for five months, and at one point a group of three, Shackleton and two of his men, marched for thirty-six hours to look for help across the glaciers of South Georgia island. Shackleton recalls that all three men imagined there was a fourth in their group. Shackleton attributes this hallucination to acute loneliness, out of which “Providence” alone could have rescued them (Eliot 60). Eliot adapts Shackleton’s hallucination at the ends of the earth but removes Shackleton’s certainty about the providential rescue. By providing Eliot’s footnote along with the quotation, Bim explains why Shackleton and Eliot would see a ghostly companion who did not in fact exist. She leaves unexplained, in this scene, the particular form of longing she feels for Mira masi, the person she remembers with such muted intensity.

This explanation comes a little later when the novel describes the exact moment that Mira masi dies. Both their parents have passed away, Tara (the middle sister) has married and left home, and Bim is home with three adults who need care. Raja has not yet recovered from tuberculosis, Baba is autistic and continues to need help, and Mira masi’s alcoholism, under control earlier, explodes into a chronic, self-destructive condition. She is completely bedridden, and administered a liquid diet when the doctor advises Bim to mix a little brandy in her water. One day, as Bim sits with her aunt’s bird-like wrist in her hand, feeling her pulse which was feeble like that of “an embryo in a fine-shelled egg” (97-98) she reads D. H. Lawrence’s poem “The Ship of Death”:

Now launch the small ship, now as the body dies
and life departs, launch out, the fragile soul
in the fragile ship of courage, the ark of faith
with its store of food and little cooking pans
and change of clothes,
upon the flood’s black waste
upon the waters of the end
upon the sea of death, where still we sail
darkly, for we cannot steer, and have no port. (qtd. in Desai 98)

As Bim reads these lines, she wishes she, too, could enter “the passage made for her by the older, the dying woman” (98). Before she can stop herself, Bim reads aloud the titular lines, almost as if asking her aunt the question Lawrence’s poem asks its readers, “Have you built your ship of death, O have you? / O build your ship of death, for you will need it” (99). Her aunt does not respond, murmurs in her sleep like “an old bird with its feathers plucked, its bones jutting out from under the blue-tinged skin,” and dies in her sleep soon afterwards (99). After her aunt’s death, Bim continues to see her in the gardens. Her aunt appears as she had been in her last days, with her “shrunken little body, naked, trailing a torn shred of a nightie, a wisp of pubic hair” (100). Bim blinks to be sure, and the figure vanishes. Puzzled and trying to understand this strange vision, Bim remembers some lines “she had read in Raja’s copy of The Waste Land” (100). In these lines, as quoted above, Eliot adapted the hallucination of explorers in Antarctica, who were so lonely that they developed an illusion that “there was one more member than could be counted” (Eliot 25).

As Bim identifies Mira masi as an unrecognized member that cannot be counted, she does not merely express a longing for a maternal figure; such a longing would only be natural, given that this aunt was the closest to a mother the children had known. Instead, caring for Mira masi reminds Bim of the toll that caregiving takes on women. In this ghost, then, Bim sees herself, defined and changed irreversibly by the care she provided. The apparition remains ghostly to taunt Bim for taking so much for granted: her aunt, how she cared for her siblings, how Bim herself cared for this aunt, how little she knew this woman, and how it was impossible to go back in time and change things.

By remembering the lines she had read in her brother’s copy of The Waste Land, Bim appropriates a masculine and European literary tradition to establish a sisterhood forged through the shared labor of care. Acts of care create the conditions for a form of kinship that transcends heteronormative biological reproduction. Undertaking this unconscious emotional labor, Bim moves from the insulting and distasteful idea that a lifetime of providing care has placed her as subservient to the house’s male owner. Bim moves away from this idea, and instead begins to remember the past, in which she cared for these people, in a much more affirmative manner. This affirmation comes from the caregiving in her past, as well as the independence of her later years, in which she chose to educate herself and become a college professor. So in the garden that morning, as Bim remembers the lines from Eliot’s The Waste Land to capture many of her unexpressed feelings about Mira masi, she chooses to view herself both as an integral part of the house and its custodian. Bim forgives Raja about the insulting letter, accepting that she was the carer and the custodian of the family and its physical abode, the house, even though technically she would remain the tenant and Raja the owner.

Conclusion

In the novel’s last scene, we see Bim attending a classical Indian music concert on her neighbour’s lawn. Here, Bim is “overcome with the memory of reading” and remembers a line she had read in “Raja’s well-thumbed copy of Eliot’s Four Quartets”: “Time the destroyer is time the preserver” (Desai 182; emphasis in original).

The words give Bim “comfort” and “solace” by helping her realize that the house with its “particular” history contained and gave space to the “separate histories” of her siblings (182). Bim calls the house a “secret darkness” that provided both “soil” and “food” to Raja, Tara, herself and Baba (182). The soil was “rich with time, dark with time” (182). It may appear
that Bim remembers these words because they help her tolerate the unpleasant realities of her life that she cannot change.

In light of the analysis presented above, however, we can understand these quotations not simply as explaining and guiding influences, but instead, as caregivers. Bim reaches for these quotations to care for herself, partly because there is no one else who can provide that care, but she is able to do that because she knows that these words that she remembers can “meet her need” in the way that Schaffer has defined, as explained earlier. Such need can be met if Bim carefully adapts these words to her reality. Bim has preserved the family through painful, lonely acts of caregiving. These acts have taken a toll on her by keeping her from discovering what else she may have done or become. Care has destroyed the innocent relationships she shared with her siblings. And yet, the memory of care, refracted through remembered lines of verse, has a curative influence. Alert readers cannot miss the exact nature of such curation; it assimilates Bim’s personal labor into an abstract idea of time. This idea may meet Bim’s need, but in the larger context, as a scene in an English-language novel by an Indian woman writer, this idea suggests that English literary education can allow an Indian woman to think that her care-giving role in the family can sustain both herself and her family. The precise manner in which Eliot’s words allow Bim to relate the past, for which she has already forgiven her family, with a future in which she wants to include her family, despite being mistreated by them, suggests that a literary education does not challenge but naturalizes the custodial status of women within the natal home. By describing how Bim draws intellectual and emotional succour from Eliot’s verse, Desai creates a diachronic vision of the Indian woman’s place in her natal family. The woman, in this case Bim, can imagine a future by accepting the natal home as the soil in which her deepest self lived.

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