

*Figuring the Maternal:
"Freedom" and "Responsibility"*
in Anita Desai's Novels

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I come from a country which prides itself on the fact that ever since it won independence from a colonial power in 1947, it has been a democracy. . . . I cannot, however, claim that there is no suppression in India. . . . There is a secret connivance at the taking away of freedom . . . for which a whole society, and its entire history with its burden of custom and tradition must be indicted.

ANITA DESAI, *A Secret Connivance*

IN THE NOVELS of Anita Desai, freedom entails responsibility; an independent nation should acknowledge its role in the continuation of such repressive practices as the silencing of women. Women themselves must recognize their own collusion in the process of their subjugation, Desai declares in "A Secret Connivance," citing the creation of multiple cults around the Mother Goddess, "that fecund figure from whom all good things flow. . . . In each myth, she plays the role of the loyal wife, unswerving in her devotion to her lord. She is meek, docile, trusting, faithful, and forgiving. Even when spirited and brave, she adheres to the archetype: willing to go through fire and water, dishonour and disgrace for his sake" (972).

"Questioning the myth" of the Mother Goddess, which has such a powerful hold on the public imagination is a daunting enterprise (972). Nevertheless, this seems to be Desai's self-assigned challenge in her fictional experiments with alternative versions of the idea of the maternal. The figure of the mother emerges in her novels as a sign of multiple possibilities, a trope with both repressive and emancipatory potential. This essay examines representations of the maternal in three novels—*Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975), *Clear Light of Day* (1980), and

Journey to Ithaca (1995)—as a way of interpreting Desai's exploration of the complex relationship between freedom and responsibility. From biological motherhood as a restrictive condition in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* to surrogate mothering as a limited though meaningful mode of agency in *Clear Light of Day*, to the assumption of the role of spiritual "Mother" as a position of power outside the domestic sphere in *Journey to Ithaca*, the idea of the maternal undergoes dramatic shifts, serving as a mode of cultural critique as well as a visionary projection of female self-empowerment through a reappropriation of the myth of the Mother Goddess. Desai tends to dissociate herself from any overt engagement with the women's movement, but her constructions of the maternal invite feminist interpretation, because they constitute a challenge to traditional representations of female subjectivity.¹

In the early part of this century, the colonialist projection of motherhood was perhaps best represented by the imperialist rhetoric of Katherine Mayo's *Mother India*, which argued for the urgent need to "rescue" Indian women from barbaric social practices.² Opposed to this was the nationalist construction of the Indian woman as the embodiment of a spiritual, essentialized "Indianness."³ Both narratives sought to construct a homogenized, abstract figure of "woman," to serve the needs of their respective political agendas, without any real concern for the divergent needs of actual women in different sectors of Indian society. The Gandhian identification of national freedom with women's freedom created an ambiguous situation where the contours of the struggle for women's emancipation came to be defined by the demands of the nationalist struggle for independence.⁴

After Independence, the role of women activists became restricted, more or less, to the field of social welfare. Typically, the middle-class educated Indian woman was encouraged to perceive herself as the ideal homemaker, who, unlike her Western counterparts, would devote the benefits of her modern education to the service of her family.⁵ In the definition of ideal womanhood which evolved in the decades following Independence, the elision of femininity and maternity was a determining

feature. As Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah point out, "in India, women's self-worth and value are usually dependent on their reproductive functions" (138). This valorization of motherhood has its own built-in paradoxes: maternity is associated with a capacity for voluntary self-sacrifice which entitles the mother to her quasi-divine status.

It is this reified image of maternity that Desai's texts seek to challenge in a variety of ways. *In Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, Sita's attempt to defer the moment of childbirth expresses a desire for control over her own body and, by implication, her destiny. Mira Masi and Bim, in *Clear Light of Day*, embody Desai's attempt to separate the task of mothering from the biological functions of pregnancy and childbirth. The title assumed by the Mother in *Journey to Ithaca* is presented in terms of its symbolic ramifications, extending the idea of the maternal beyond the prescribed limits of home and family. In the shadowy penumbra surrounding Desai's protagonists hover numerous absent, negligent, or "lost" mothers, whose abdication of the nurturing role suggests negative attitudes inadmissible in hegemonic cultural narratives. Also present is the figure of the mother who enjoys the power of parental discipline as an opportunity to exercise an authority denied her in other areas of her life. In all three novels, the maternal becomes the site for the articulation of the female desire to determine one's own identity, in confrontation with traditional inscriptions of the mother's body as a means of controlling female subjectivity.

A double-edged irony informs Desai's narrativization of this desire. The critique of societal norms implicit in her representations of the mother is offset by a rejection of versions of freedom that are either escapist or solipsistic. The female protagonists of these texts are women whose quest for independence leads to a recognition of the futility of the attempt to sever the ties that connect them with others. This knowledge creates a mood of acceptance, facilitating a willingness to resume a responsible role attuned to one's particular circumstances.

Desai's characters are not projected as representative of a homogeneous category; they testify to the heterogeneity of female experience, and the need to recognize the situatedness of

all frames of oppression as well as all modes of resistance. As Meenakshi Mukherjee points out, there is no attempt in Desai's novels to create a pan-Indian identity, although the characters are "culturally defined" by their location, attitudes, and memories (67). In *Journey to Ithaca*, the central characters are not Indian, although India continues to function as a catalyst in the dramatic changes that overtake their lives. Realism is a mode Desai had once rejected in favour of the "language of the interior"; but as her recent statements indicate, this does not imply a blindness to the writer's social role:

I think society is always rather uncomfortable when it has a writer in its midst because the writer is thought of as a critic or as a satirist, or else somebody that uncovers uncomfortable truths. . . . I think a writer has to assume that role although it's not given to him. He has to seize it and cling to it and hold on to it. . . . It is considered a particularly unseemly role for a woman to play.⁶

As a critic of society, the writer may, however, choose non-realistic narrative modes. Without overt recourse to fantasy or magic realism, Desai's novels, especially *Journey to Ithaca*, include a visionary dimension suggestive of epistemological modes that are intuitive rather than rational. Her novels also assert their literariness through complex intertextual engagement with texts from diverse sources. These features do not constitute a rejection of the "real"; they demand a recognition that the real may be negotiated, by the fiction-writer, in more ways than one.

Where Shall We Go This Summer? is the story of Sita, a pregnant woman terrified of bringing her fifth child into what she perceives as a violence-riddled world. The text presents her overwrought mental condition as the cumulative outcome of a difficult childhood followed by a stressful marriage. Neglected by their father, a committed freedom fighter, and deserted when very young by their mother, Sita and her siblings, Jivan and Rekha, are "flower children of the independence movement," deprived of a normal family life:

Sita had imagined she came into the world motherless—and the world was crowded enough so . . . [she] belonged, if to anyone, to this whole society that existed at that particular point in history—like a lamb does to its flock—and saw no reason why she should belong to one family alone. (84-85)

After Independence, they move to the house on the island of Manori, where Sita suffers loneliness and neglect, under the shadow of a talented elder sister whose closeness to their father carries incestuous overtones. The father, a charismatic personality, becomes a cult figure among the local villagers, compelling their participation in his vision of Manori as a pre-industrial idyll. Domination, silence, and a sense of betrayal haunt Sita's relationship with her father. When he dies, the absence of usual family bonds becomes apparent in the rapidity with which the siblings part company.

Sita marries Raman and moves to Bombay, where her sense of maladjustment is intensified by exposure to life in a middle-class joint family, for which her bizarre childhood has left her ill-prepared. The move to a separate apartment does little to improve matters, for Sita continues to chafe at Raman's conventional values, his excessive rationalism and total immersion in the mundane world of business affairs. The compliant role she is expected to play in a world characterized by "insularity and complacency" (49) as well as "aggression and violence" (50) generates gradual stages of disenchantment and despair, leading up to Sita's disturbed emotional state during her fifth pregnancy. In her fevered imagination, seemingly trivial incidents become horrific revelations of the chaos and destructiveness she sees as characteristic of postindependence India. Discrete images coalesce into a vision of global violence directed against her unborn child, a symbol of her own insecurity:

They all hammered at her with cruel fists—the fallen blocks, the torn watercolours, the headlines about the war in Viet Nam, the photograph of a woman weeping over a small grave, another of a crowd outside a Rhodesian jail, articles about the perfidy of Pakistan, the virtuousness of our own India. . . . They were hand grenades all, hurled at her frail goldfish-bowl belly. (55)

In a gesture of rebellion that is also a re-enactment of her mother's desertion, Sita, along with two of her children, Karan and Menaka, abandons her husband to seek shelter in Manori: "If reality were not to be borne, then illusion was the only alternative. She saw that island illusion as a refuge, a protection. It would hold her baby, safely unborn, by magic" (101). The

narrative charts the time she spends on the island, during the monsoon of 1967, wrestling with her private trauma, which is aggravated by the reproachful attitude of her children and the hostility of the caretakers, Moses and Miriam. The text includes, in flashback form, memories of earlier episodes in her life, marking 1947 as a point of transition when Sita's family had first moved to Manori. Faced, now, with the starkness of the near-primitive living conditions on the island, where her father had barred the entry of modern technology, Sita begins to realize that her idyllic image of Manori was an illusion, created and sustained by her father. She is forced to admit that her father's rhetoric had been fostered by deliberate falsehoods, which she herself, as well as the islanders, had supported out of loyalty. This stripping away of illusion creates the ground for Sita's eventual acceptance of her circumstances and her decision to return to the mainland.

Such is the background to Sita's temporary rejection of the maternal role. She has no desire to abort the child in her womb; as Shyam M. Asnani points out, her stance represents Desai's questioning of a society that regards woman as a "breeding machine" (49). Sita's urge to violate the "normal" biological cycle expresses the will to subvert the reductive identification of femininity with reproductive functions, as well as protectiveness towards a child who is also a metaphor for her own vulnerability: "More and more she lost all feminine, all maternal belief in childbirth, all faith in it, and began to fear it as yet one more act of violence and murder in a world that had more of them in it than she could take" (56). Her longing for liberation from maternity as a restrictive role is also contextualized in terms of an unsatisfactory marriage which leaves little room for communication, or for the articulation of desire. Her obsession with the hitchhiker accidentally encountered on the road and her treasured memory of a fleeting glimpse of an old man's tenderness for an ailing young woman are pointers to a repressed eroticism that threatens to transgress the prescribed limits of female sexuality encoded in marriage and motherhood.

Although Sita balks at the oppressiveness of cultural inscriptions of maternity, she does not reject mothering as a nurturing and life-sustaining attitude. The obverse of her fear of destruc-

tive violence is an urge to cherish and protect, expressed, for instance, in her anxiety over the fate of the injured eagle targeted by bloodthirsty crows (prefiguring her fierce protectiveness towards the child in her womb). There is thus a basic ambiguity in Desai's textual projection of the maternal: while hegemonic constructions of motherhood are presented as reductive or repressive, the association of maternity with the capacity for love and nurture is valorized as an alternative to divisive and destructive forces in the contemporary world. This ambiguity is generally overlooked in critical interpretations of the ending of the novel, which has been variously read as a defeatist concession to traditional systems, a valorization of critical realism over the mythic mode, and an expression of Desai's "firm conviction in the affirmative human values."⁷ Although there is a suggestion of closure in Sita's return to the domestic fold, the ending does not really resolve the dilemma that torments her divided subjectivity. She now accepts the inevitability of the birth of her child, but the prospect of childbirth does not offer her any joy: "once the infant was born, . . . Sita would lie still as though paralysed in a fearful accident, with blue lips and a grey sensation of death" (154). Here, the customary celebration of maternity is deliberately overturned.

The ambiguity of the ending is prefigured in the ironic authorial stance implicit throughout the novel. While sympathy for Sita is generated through the evocation of an alien present and a hostile past, there is also a suggested critique of her escapist pursuit of illusion at the expense of reality. The chief mouthpiece for this textual comment is Raman, the practical realist whose sarcasm serves as a reminder that what looms large in Sita's imagination might strike others as merely trivial. Reinforcing this ironic distance are several other figures in the narrative, notably Menaka, the future scientist, who rejects her mother's emotional temperament, and the islanders, especially Moses, whose remarks at the beginning and end of the novel provide the frame within which the main narrative is placed. The ironic perspective points at the dangers of Sita's tendency to categorize experience in terms of polarized opposites, such as island/mainland, illusion/reality, violence/peace, society/solitude, or imagination/reason.⁸

Sita's acceptance of the prospective birth of her child is thus symbolic of a larger reconciliation with the configuration of circumstances constitutive of her particular history—a history that permits only a limited possibility of intervention, located in her sensitivity to violence and injustice and her advocacy of love and nurture. Desai's use of the *Ramayana* myth underscores the cultural specificity of projections of the maternal in the novel. In the epic, as Sudhir Kakar points out, it is the fact of Sita's maternity which is seen to justify her reintegration into society following the doubts cast on her purity after abduction and exile; "Rama repents and is ready to take Sita back from her exile in the forest after he sees his sons for the first time" (79). The story, however, has subversive potential, if Sita's return to her mother, the earth, is read as an act of defiance against unjust societal norms.⁹ Both dimensions of the myth find expression in Desai's use of the name for a protagonist who locates in the maternal the crux of her split subjectivity.

In *Clear Light of Day*, two sisters, Bim and Tara, try to recollect their childhood when they meet after a long separation in their family home in Old Delhi. They remember their childhood dreams, the "summer of '47," the death of their parents, and the gradual disintegration of their family. Their brother, Raja, has settled in Hyderabad after marrying the daughter of their Muslim neighbour, Hyder Ali; Tara, married to a diplomat, is now the proud mother of two children. Bim, a university teacher, has remained single, staying behind in the old house to take care of their autistic brother Baba, and their alcoholic aunt, Mira Masi, who eventually commits suicide. The sisters' twin foray into the past becomes an attempt to retrieve lost or repressed childhood selves, as a way of coming to terms with their present predicament. Differences in attitude and temperament become sharply highlighted in their divergent responses to the same recollected episodes. Encounter with a sibling who is also an "other," makes each sister aware of her own shortcomings. Bim, watching her widely-travelled sister, realizes that her claim of independence is an illusion, masking the actual stagnancy of her existence in Old Delhi. Tara, who normally prides herself on being a perfect wife and mother, realizes that she has dwindled into a mere shadow of her husband, Bakul.

Perhaps the virtual absence of the mother is the most poignant feature of their recollections. Their mother's withdrawal from domestic affiliations is signalled by her preoccupation with playing cards, even in her dying moments. Although her negligence is presented in a pejorative light, in terms of its devastating effect upon her children, the text suggests that their mother's attitude was the result of prolonged, passive suffering inflicted by a dominating husband. One of Tara's earliest memories is the visual image of her father plunging a needle into her mother's arm: "Tara had fled, trembling, because she was sure she had seen her father kill her mother. All her life Tara had experienced that fear—her father had killed her mother" (23). The description, with its projection of female helplessness in the face of male aggression within the sanctioned framework of matrimony, carries explicit associations of sexual violence and death, triggering the subconscious fear which haunts Tara's relationship with her own husband.

Motherhood is thus projected as part of a larger framework of gendered social hierarchies, all of which place women in a subordinate position. Along with traditional images of maternity, conventional representations of romantic love and marriage are also subjected to critical scrutiny. Witnessing the Misra sisters' struggle for survival after their husbands have abandoned them, Bim is struck by the irony of their songs, which reiterate the male-centred romantic myth of Radha's love for Krishna: "the songs always Radha's in praise of Krishna, the dance always Radha pining for Krishna" (30). The idealization of romantic love in the arts is undercut by the hypocrisy which threatens Tara's marriage. Bakul, whose self-defined diplomatic mission is to ignore the harsher aspects of life in India in order to project a glamorous image of his country, carries his habitual posturing into private life as well. Seeking to monopolize his wife's attention, he summons up images from Persian art:

He thought how nice it would be to have Tara stop looking so preoccupied and concerned and be impressed by him instead. Really, it was a night of Persian glamour and beauty. They should be sitting together in the moonlight, looking together at the moon that hung over the garden like some great priceless pearl. (159)

In the frozen postures evoked by the description, there is no room for the woman to express her real desires. Tara, forced to repress her spontaneity in order to win his approval, knows the falseness of the veneer of sophistication she has acquired: "it was all just dust thrown into his eyes, dust" (12). In this context, Tara's pride in her daughters appears in a reductive light, as an instance of compliance arising from her limited vision.

For a novel about family life, *Clear Light of Day* has a surprisingly large number of characters who are single women, surviving on the periphery of a society that regards marriage and motherhood as the primary female goal. Bim has several shadow selves who inhabit this impossible realm. The plight of Mira Masi, a poor, childless widow, is only an extreme version of the dependency of the Mishra sisters, back in their father's house after their marriages have failed, trying now to eke out a meagre living from music and dance lessons while their brothers lead an indolent life.

Ironically, it is upon Mira Masi and Bim, women outside the normal parameters of matrimony and biological maternity, that the burden of mothering descends. The role of nurturer is not chosen by Mira Masi, but thrust upon her by circumstances. She seizes it as a way of justifying her presence in the Das household, accepting the parasitism of those around her:

They drew from her and she gave readily—she could not have not given. Would it weaken her? Would she be stronger if she put them away and stood by herself, alone? No, that was not her way any more than it was the way of nature. . . . She was the tree, she was the soil, she was the earth. (111)

There are suggestions of an ecofeminist stance in the imagery of this passage. The capacity for love is valorized even as its exploitation by others is exposed; the twin face of mothering is invoked.

The willingness to give takes its toll of surrogate mothers in this novel. It drives Mira Masi to alcoholism and suicide, and Bim to the brink of nervous collapse. What gives Bim the resilience to evade the fate of Mira Masi is an intuitive apprehension of her connectedness to others:

With her inner eye she 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 . . . 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. . . . That soil contained all time, past and future, in it. . . . It was where her deepest self lived, and the deepest selves of her sister and brothers and all those who shared that time with her. (182)

This epiphanic insight enables Bim to rise above her solipsism and to overcome her resentment against her family members, especially Raja. The ending, however, leaves Bim with options that are pathetically limited, generating a mood of acceptance that could be read, at a superficial level, as compliance with the middle-class Indian woman's prescribed role as homemaker. Shirley Chew draws our attention to the unresolved trauma of Mira Masi, whose tragedy continues to haunt the narrative (52). Certainly, the text resists closure at the end, but however tenuous the affirmative implications of Bim's visionary moment, the feeling persists, borne out by instances throughout the text, that what merits criticism is not the capacity for nurture, but the exploitation to which it leaves one vulnerable.

Love itself, as an act of reaching out to others, is projected as a unifying and sustaining force in a world otherwise riven by violence, separation, and death. Bim's family disintegrates at the precise moment in history when independent India is born in the bloodbath of the Partition. As Alamgir Hashmi points out, the three houses in Old Delhi, inhabited by the Das family, the Hyder Alis and the Mishras, represent the predicament of a particular segment of Indian society, caught in a moment of transition that demands "compromising tradition with change" (57).¹⁰ Hyder Ali's departure for Hyderabad becomes a symbol of the communal tensions and separatist politics which become associated with the founding of the new nation. To these divisive forces, Bim's newfound philosophy of love suggests an alternative. It also counters the detachment that had characterized the Das family at the time of the Partition riots. Following his illness, Raja, dropping his dreams of heroism and disappointing his nationalist friends at Hindu College, had married Hyder Ali's daughter and settled into a life of complacent consumerism, leaving Bim to tackle the family business as well as the burden of caring for Baba and Mira Masi. Tara had left the country, us-

ing Bakul as “an instrument of escape” (156), and Baba had retreated into the irrelevant world of Western pop music. Bim, stranded with family responsibilities, had given up the idea of marriage, seething with rage when her suitor, Dr. Biswas, had misinterpreted her situation as one of voluntary self-sacrifice in the mode popularized by literature and cinema.¹¹

Dieter Riemenschneider argues that, in *Clear Light of Day*, history and individuals seem linked by coincidence rather than by the intrinsic logic we encounter in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (189). However, it is at an epistemological level beyond the logical that Desai’s text locates Bim’s eventual awareness of the interconnectedness of “separate histories” (182). The musical performance which triggers Bim’s epiphany suggests modes of apprehension that are intuitive and emotional, in contrast to the “factual” truth-claims of conventional historiography.¹² This unusual approach to history also has a gendered dimension, for in place of the public feats of heroism traditionally celebrated by historians, Desai’s text foregrounds other, private histories which find a nodal point of intersection in the subjectivity of a woman who learns to embrace mothering as her vocation. Quotations from multiple sources, musical, poetic and historical, jostle for attention in this self-consciously literary novel; but instead of the circularity of the self-reflexive post-modern narrative, Desai’s text gestures insistently towards the existence of a “real” world with which it is imperative to connect. In her role as substitute mother, Bim discovers her own mode of connection.

In *Journey to Ithaca*, the domain of the mother is no longer the private sphere, but the public forum of the *ashram*, a place for collective pursuit of the spiritual. The title of “Mother” here signifies, not nurture and sacrifice, but the powerful role of spiritual leadership. A symbol of female power, this enigmatic character adds a different dimension to Desai’s exploration of the ambiguous potential of the trope of maternity.

The figure of the Mother in this novel is part of a central triangle of characters whose personal pilgrimages form the backbone of a narrative that spans several continents in a time frame stretching from the early part of the century to the 1970s. In-

spired by Hermann Hesse's *Journey to the East*, Matteo, a young Italian, joins the hippie influx into India in the 1970s. With him is Sophie, his German wife, whose practical spirit is repelled by the squalor she encounters in India.¹³ Their wanderings lead them to the *ashram* of the Mother, whose charisma leaves no one untouched except Sophie. Neglected by Matteo, and jealous of his devotion to the Mother, Sophie sets out to uncover the Mother's life-story, hoping to expose the so-called spiritual leader as a fraud. The story of another quest unfolds as Sophie's journey retraces the steps of Laila (the Mother's original name), whose wild spirit sought expression in a dramatic blend of passion, creativity, and spiritual emotion. The trail leads to Egypt, where the young Laila grew up in a society divided between colonial modernization and religious traditionalism; to Paris, where, as a guest of her own relatives and a trainee in Western dance, she discovered her alienation from her own milieu; to Venice, where, as "Leela," she joined the Indian dance troupe led by Krishna, her guru and lover, and thence to New York, where disillusionment led to physical and mental breakdown. A long-lost diary records Laila's responses to her arrival in India, and her encounter with the sage who introduces her to the spiritual path, becoming her mentor and perhaps her lover. Sophie's journey brings her back to the Indian *ashram*, where she hears that the Mother has died, and Matteo, distraught, has vanished. She must now undertake another quest, this time to seek out Matteo: "Now she knew why the mother went on that pilgrimage, why anyone goes on a pilgrimage, and why she must go too" (297).

In this palimpsestic narrative, the repetition of the quest motif suggests a link between the destinies of Sophie and the Mother, in spite of their differences in age, temperament, and personal circumstances. The shared spirit of questioning and rebellion which connects their separate stories suggests the persistence and ubiquity of prejudices that thwart women from acting as free agents in society. Laila, the misfit-turned-rebel, is a protofeminist figure, whose spirit, the text suggests, lives on in Sophie. Unlike Sita and Bim, middle-class women trapped by domesticity, Laila and Sophie reject the security of home and hearth to satisfy a

wanderlust which is really a desire to discover an authentic identity. The India they encounter strikes them as alien and treacherous, yet it is here that they experience visionary moments that indicate the future course of their lives. Both the Mother's adoption of the spiritual way, and Sophie's compulsion to go in search of Matteo, are assumptions of responsibility, involving an acceptance of the need to reach out and care for others.

For Laila, the absence of domestic constraints, especially those associated with biological motherhood, creates the special condition of her rootlessness, as well as an enabling factor in her metamorphosis into the Mother. The Mother's authority derives from a negation of the traditional attributes of maternity, because her elevated status is based on an ascetic renunciation of the domestic and, ostensibly, of the physical and sexual. The trajectory of Laila's life subverts conventional projections of biology as female destiny: "becoming the Mother" is a process of female self-empowerment which represents Desai's ironic appropriation of the patriarchal formulation of "femininity as maternity."

That the Mother enjoys her power and dislikes competition is evident in her manipulative marginalization of Sophie in order to monopolize Matteo's devotion. The struggle to possess Matteo's soul highlights the moral ambiguity of the actions of the two women who love him. While Sophie's self-righteous wish to expose the Mother's hypocrisy has distinct overtones of jealousy and revenge, the Mother's real motives remain equally dubious. Is she the saint her disciples, especially Matteo, take her to be, or the power-hungry woman whose malignancy Sophie claims to detect beneath the mask of sanctity? We are never quite sure.

Unlike Laila, Sophie is a wife and mother, but, like several other mothers in Desai's fiction, she is irresponsible. She abandons her children, Isabel and Giacomo, leaving them with their grandparents at Matteo's family home on Lake Como, while she pursues her personal goals. Her privileged social background makes this neglect of domestic duties possible, until, at the end of her pilgrimage, she arrives at an apprehension of the paradox-

ical relationship between freedom and responsibility. With this understanding, she is ready, like Sita and Bim before her, to accept the demands of her particular situation. The task of mothering those dependent on her—especially her husband—leaves her open to the possibility of exploitation; but then, as Desai's texts repeatedly suggest, this is a risk that the gift of love must entail.

Caught between these two assertive women, Matteo emerges as an elusive, almost insubstantial figure. Brought up by an over-protective mother (who anticipates Laila's transformation into the Mother as figure of authority), Matteo, as a child, is ill-equipped for survival in the brutally masculine world of the school in Turin to which he is sent. Lonely and withdrawn, he rejects the violence involved in "learning to be a man" (18), turning instead to the philosophy of peace and spirituality, to which his tutor, Fabio, introduces him. Like the protagonists of Desai's male-centred novels, *In Custody* and *Baumgartner's Bombay*, Matteo, the impractical dreamer, represents an interrogation of gendered stereotypes.¹⁴ An incurable romantic, Matteo continues, in adult life, to seek refuge in relationships with women stronger than himself. In the fictional world of *Journey to Ithaca*, women as substitute mothers are empowered to challenge the existing order, while the male protagonist remains, in spite of his visionary qualities, a victim rather than a survivor.

Anita Desai's narrativization of the maternal as a site for potential female self-empowerment remains, however, too ambiguous to be read as a naive celebration of autonomy for women. The relocation of the maternal in the sphere of spiritual activity represents a step beyond the private world into the realm of collectivity, but it still remains relatively segregated from the arena of mainstream public life. Both the Mother and Sophie remain aloof from the Indian characters, especially the women, who hover on the fringes of the narrative, suggesting the persistence of mental and cultural barriers yet to be crossed. These figures on the margin signify, perhaps, the need to reformulate, in the context of contemporary India, other, even more enabling, incarnations of the maternal.

NOTES

- 1 For attempts to analyze Desai's handling of the maternal myth, see Harveen Sachdeva Mann and Geetha Ramanathan. Mann's account of the use of the Kali myth in *Voices in the City*, indicates the enabling potential of the image of the Mother Goddess, but does not extend the analysis to a consideration of the continuing centrality of the maternal to Desai's formulations of female subjectivity. Ramanathan's argument (based on a discussion of *Fire on the Mountain*) that Desai's fictional universe is predicated upon a silencing of the mother, seems problematic.
- 2 For an account of the influence of Mayo's work see Mrinalini Sinha.
- 3 Partha Chatterjee regards this separation of spiritual and material spheres as the nationalist solution to the dilemma of accepting modernization without surrendering the uniqueness of an "authentic" national identity. Tanika Sarkar, on the other hand, sees in the construction of the "new" Indian woman a reconfiguration of previous social formations.
- 4 See Kishwar, "Gandhi on Women."
- 5 See Tharu and Lalitha; Nanda 49-56.
- 6 Desai, "The Indian Writer's Problems" 3; see Ball and Kanaganayakam, "Interview with Anita Desai" 38.
- 7 See, for example, Sharma 69; Vimala Rao 49; Ramachandra Rao 60; Afzal-Khan 59-96; and Asnani 52.
- 8 In an interview with Atma Ram 21-33, cited in Usha Bande 106, Desai analyzes Sita's change of attitude:
Of course if one is alive, in this world one cannot survive without compromise—drawing the line means certain death, and in the end, Sita opts for life—with compromise—consoling herself with Lawrence's verse, with the thought that she is compelled to make this tragic choice because she's part of the earth, of life, and can no more reject it than the slumbrous egg can or the heifer or the grain.
- 9 See, for example, Romila Thapar.
- 10 Desai, charged with contradicting the historical process in the depiction of Hyder Ali's move to Hyderabad rather than Pakistan, says: "There was a time when every Indian writer felt the need to write a Partition book . . . and that I wasn't interested in doing. . . . Besides, wouldn't it have been just too predictable? One must avoid clichés of that kind" (Ball and Kanaganayakam, 33-34).
- 11 For an account of representations of women in Bengali literature and cinema, see Arun P. Mukherjee 200.
- 12 For an analysis of the "lyric mode" in the novel, see Mohan.
- 13 Matteo and Sophie represent the two extreme images of India popular in the West, as outlined by Desai in "A Secret Connivance" 976.
- 14 See Malashri Lal 127-43.

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