

Intersectionality in literature from postcolonial countries



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Sacrifice in women's writing often revolves around two different definitions of the word. The first definition is to voluntarily give something up of value, while the second definition is to offer or kill, often in a ceremonial fashion. Women's writing has a recurring motif of sacrifice where female characters are the object of a sacrifice or sacrifice something of their own, and in either case these sacrifices are usually overseen or ordered by men for the benefit of men. What differs, however, is the nature of women's sacrifice and this difference is often dependent on their individual circumstances, these circumstances creating different environments and practices for the treatment of women. In Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*, for example, the Indian middle class Bimla Das partially sacrifices her autonomy to care for her autistic brother. Contrastingly, in Ahdaf Soueif's *Aisha the Egyptian* lower class Zeina is sacrificed through the practice of child marriage. These two texts show that the nature of a woman's sacrifice is dependent on her individual circumstance. This essay will argue that *Clear Light of Day* and *Aisha* exemplify how an individual's circumstances in life change the meaning of sacrifice in relation to women, looking at how Bim of a *Clear Light of Day* voluntarily chooses to participate in her sacrifice while Zeina of *Aisha*, due to the community she is a part of, has no such choice.

Judith Butler writes: ' By conforming to a requirement of representational politics that feminism articulate a stable subject, feminism thus opens itself to charges of gross misrepresentation.' [1] Butler is talking about the issue of intersectionality and how feminism, through ignoring intersectionality, disenfranchises a large number of women. The idea of a ' universal woman', the supposed ' stable subject' of feminism, is ludicrous. Butler critiques

feminists who fail to see the ways in which issues of class, race, sexuality, disability, and religion overlap with the issue of sexism. There is no 'universal woman' but rather an array of women whose circumstances differ and who face sexism in different ways. Virginia Woolf's feminist essay *A Room of One's Own* is most likely of little significance to a member of the Dalit, or 'untouchable', caste in India as Woolf writes to a universal woman who is like her: white, middle class, and intellectually interested. If we are to write about how women sacrifice or are sacrificed we must acknowledge that the degree of sacrifice will differ pertaining to the woman's circumstances. An upper class woman in England may not sacrifice less than her lower class counterpart, but what she sacrifices will none the less be dependent on her class. The same can be said when referring to nation, the lower class women of England sacrificing differently than the lower class women of Egypt. To compare the significance of sacrifice in *Clear Light of Day* and *Aisha* is thus to cross examine differences of women's individual circumstances.

The Das family of *Clear Light of Day* are presented by Desai as living on the cusps of middle class comfort. Bim, the oldest of four siblings, works as a school teacher to provide for herself and her autistic brother Baba and they now live in their now crumbling family home. During her childhood Bim showed a vitality for life, an interest in poetry and sports and she admired historically strong female figures: 'Bim of course worshipped Florence Nightingale along with Joan of Arc in her private pantheon of saints and goddesses'.^[2] Though her life is not as full of noteworthy events as those of Nightingale or Joan of Arc were, Bim is shown to dream of becoming an independent heroine figure just like them. This dream, however, is sacrificed

due to the greater and more aggressive dreams of her brother, Raja. Raja dreams of living a life beyond his family who, as he grows up, he comes to see more and more as dysfunctional and withholding: ' He felt there could be no house as dismal as his own, as dusty and grimy and uncharming. Surely no family could have as much illness contained in it as his'. [Desai, pp. 49] Instead Raja aspires to a world of poetry and intellectual interest, his life directed ' towards society, company, applause; towards colour, song, charm.' [Desai, pp. 49] When Raja leaves the Das household to live in Hyderabad, and with her parents and aunt already dead, Bim has to become the head of her household and as such abandons her dreams of living independently from her family. Bim is, according Elaine Yee Lin Ho, representative of a trope in Desai's works of women who ' have accepted the grind of domesticity in a familial and cultural situation where other choices do not seem available or the opportunity for seeking them out does not arise'.[3] Bim's sacrifice of her independence can be read as a knowingly selfless act. Dr. Biswas, the family doctor who attends to Raja while he is ill, says to Bim ' 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, pp. 97] But despite the selflessness of her actions Bim resents Raja for making her sacrifice her own life so that he could live as he wishes and Baba has someone to care for him. Though Bim sacrifices her dreams of heroine scale greatness and fame she is never faced with the danger of homelessness, starvation, or a truly measly existence. Her home is guaranteed to her when Raja becomes the owner and landlord of the property, writing to Bim in a letter that ' you may continue to

have it at the same rent, I shall never think of raising it or of selling the house as long as you and Baba need it.' [Desai, pp. 27] In fact, Bim's main complaint in life is not that she never got to live a heroic life like that of Florence Nightingale or Joan of Arc, but rather that she is dependent on her brother's charity to have a home and she thus sees herself as pitied by Raja. When Tara implores Bim to join her in coming to the wedding of Raja's daughter, Bim says ' How can I? How can I enter his house - my landlords house? I, such a poor tenant? Because of me, he can't raise the rent or sell the house and make a profit - imagine that. The sacrifice!' [Desai, pp. 29] Bim interprets Raja's promise that she and Baba will be safe as an insult to her sacrifice, insensitive to her considering the fact that she has given up her life to care for Baba. Bim fails to see the honour in her sacrifice, she sees her abandoning her ambition of heroism as a failing on her part and a consequence of Raja's selfishness rather than an example of a selfless and caring personality. Jenni Valjento writes that Bim's ' martyr-like claiming of home and responsibility [are] the defining components of her personality.' [4] Bim sees living as martyr for her brother as a disgrace, showing a torn mentality as she is able to live selflessly so as to help her family but is unable to respect or appreciate this selflessness. Perhaps Bim's perception of herself as a wasted martyr for her brother's aspirations stems from the fact that she had the aspiration and potential to lead a successful life. Guaranteed a stable and safe life due Raja's owning of the house and her job, Bim sacrifices her lofty aspirations of heroism knowing that she will never live without. Her socio-economic status allows her to make the selfless sacrifice, it is simply her misconception of her sacrifice that disallows her from living a happy and fulfilled life.

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Whereas Bim knowingly, albeit bitterly, sacrifices her independence knowing full well that she will never live a life wanting of anything other than said independence, Zeina in *Aisha* is sacrificed involuntarily. Zeina, the nurse of the titular character Aisha, is married at the age of fifteen to her nineteen year old cousin and the marriage is shown to depersonalize Zeina as a person in her own right. In the marriage Zeina seems secondary to her husband. When her grandmother describes what marriage will mean to her Zeina is told that ' You'll be his wife and he'll be you husband and you'll serve him and do what he tells you.' [5] The tone in which this is said and the absoluteness of the statement show that Zeina, only a teenager at the time who admits later that ' I knew nothing of marriage', has no choice in the matter. [Soueif, pp. 85] Already Zeina has had her independence taken from her, different to how Bim willingly gives it up. Zeina shows very little worry about the marriage, instead becoming wrapped up in the romanticism of marriage and the supposed glamour of the ceremony. She says that ' My bridal box had been ready for years', and, as she is only fifteen at the time, this shows how Zeina's whole life, what little of it there has been so far, has been gearing up for the moment of her marriage.

However, the romanticism of the marriage ceremony is soon overruled by what comes to resemble a sacrificial ceremony centered around Zeina's virginity. Zeina's recounts the involvement of a Mashta, who Zeina describes as ' the woman who comes to adorn the bride'. [Soueif, pp. 86] Zeina is prepared for the marriage ceremony by having her body stripped of hair so as to make her more sexually appealing to her husband: ' The hair on your legs and your body, to make you nice and smooth for the bridegroom.'

[Soueif, pp. 87] Zeina describes the process as horrible and painful, saying that ' I struggle up but they held me down and the Mashta went on spreading the paste and tearing it off while I cried and screamed until I was completely clean.' [Soueif, pp. 89] Zeina, who earlier looked at the marriage as exciting and romantic, is clearly shown not to be the subject of the marriage. The marriage is not at all about her marrying for her own interests but rather her husband having his needs met. The ceremony itself continues this presentation of cruelty and barbarism when Zeina's virginity is tested: ' I lay there squirming and crying in gasps as he knelt down and forced his bandaged finger into me, working it round and round and in and out as I screamed and scream. Finally he took it out. The bandage was soaked with blood.' [Soueif, pp. 91 - 92]

The whole of this sacrificial scene is normalized in Zeina's narrative as if it were totally ordinary. Zeina is presented as being lower class through her job as a nurse to Aisha, as well through her husband's inherited family business: ' He was a butcher like his father'. [Soueif, pp. 85] Later on she almost seems to look back nostalgically at the scene. "' They told me to undress and I was so shy," said Zeina, laughing.' [Soueif, pp. 87] The fact that she laughs remembering how she was cruelly humiliated during the Mashta's waxing suggests she feels she was naïve back then; she undermines her own shyness, apprehension, and fear. Her protests, her displays of independence or secession from the marriage, are dismissed by her aunt: ' Come on, Zeina, don't be a spoilt child.' To protest against an unwanted marriage and stand up for oneself is shown to ' spoilt', therefore suggesting that a grateful child, or one who is aware of their own place, should accept the marriage and be

thankful for it. Zeina's story shows that being symbolically sacrificed through a violent marriage ceremony is normalized within her community, rural lower class Egyptians. She shows little awareness that she completely lacked autonomy during the process and that her life is defined by her husband. Zeina's circumstances, drastically different and noticeably harsher than Bim's, puts her in no position to make sacrifices, but rather only be the sacrifice.

Though *Clear Light of Day* and *Aisha* show that a woman's individual circumstances are integral factors to the nature of the sacrifice that she will make or be made of, both texts also show that sacrifice permeates the life of women despite issues of intersectionality. As sacrifice is a constant factor in their lives, women are not only the subjects of sacrifice but often are the instigators or partakers of sacrifice. The French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir writes that 'Patriarchal society, for example, being centered upon the conservation of the patrimony, implies necessarily, along with those who own and transmit wealth, the existence of men and women who take property away from its owners and put it into circulation.' [6] By writing 'men and women' Beauvoir acknowledges how women, just as much as men, are integral to the continuation of patriarchal processes, sacrifice being no exception. Still, even when women are not the subject of sacrifice, intersectionality plays a role in how they relate to it.

Tara, Bim's younger sister, is presented as more stereotypically feminine, meek, and unambitious than her sister: 'Tara did not tell her that she hoped never to have to do anything in the world, that she wanted only to hide under Aunt Mira's quilt or behind the shrubs in the garden and never be

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asked to come out and do anything, prove herself to be anything.' [Desai, pp. 126] Tara has no ambition or dream in the world other than escape her life in Old Dehli and she achieves this through marrying Bakul who becomes a foreign diplomat. By marrying, much like Raja, Tara leaves Bim to care for Bakul and is therefore equally as implicit in necessitating Bim's sacrifice of her ambition as Raja is. As can be seen in Zeina's marriage ceremony, women are also involved in the more brutal elements of symbolic female sacrifice. The women that Zeina trusts, her aunt and her grandmother, are involved with the humiliating act of the Mashta's waxing: ' I held on to my grandmother, but she pulled up my shift and my aunt took it off me'. [Soueif, pp. 87] They are then involved in the even crueller marriage ceremony along with other women: ' Suddenly four women surrounded me and pulled me to the floor. One pinned down my shoulders while the other held on to my waist and my aunt and grandmother pulled off my knickers.' [Soueif, pp. 91] As Amin Malak writes, Zeina is ' shocked by the violence and force used by female family members present in the wedding chamber to help the groom penetrate her with his bandaged finger so that the blood-soaked bandage can be exhibited as a sign of the virginity of the bride'.[7]

It is clear to see that women are active in necessitating the sacrifices of other women and partaking in the sacrifice of women, yet differences of intersectionality once again arise. Tara's marriage is not the single cause of her sister's sacrifice. Much like Bim, she perceives Raja as the main cause and urges Bim to forgive their brother through disposing of the insulting letter: ' Don't put it back there to take out and look at and hold against Raja. Tear it up, Bim, throw it away'. [Desai, pp. 29] Tara's leaving of her family

through marrying a man whose careers means he must spend nearly all of his time away from his home country make her just as much a cause in the sacrifice made by Bim as Raja; she too abandoned her sister and brother. However, due to the passive nature of her involvement in necessitating Bim's sacrifice, something as normalized within society as marriage, Tara seems totally unaware of this involvement. This is in stark contrast to the women who aid in the brutal sacrifice of Zeina who are instinctively aware of what they are doing to her and actively partake. Tara's involvement in Bim's sacrifice can go unnoticed as her socio-economic status deems marrying and leaving the family unit as an integral part of her female identity, while in the much lower socio-economically positioned family of Zeina the family unit is an active participant in sacrifice. The individual circumstances of women, once again, is shown to be intrinsically linked with the nature of female orientated sacrifice.

The difference in a woman's individual circumstances in relation to sacrifice is the difference between making a sacrifice and being a sacrifice. Bim, due to the safety net put in place for her by her brother and through the income of her teaching job, has the freedom to make a sacrifice so as to selflessly support her elder brother and care for her younger one. Meanwhile Zeina, due to customs of her community, is made a sacrifice of against her will. To say that the issue of intersectionality changes the way in which women sacrifice or are sacrificed is not to negate the experiences of some women. Bim's sacrifice, though voluntary, is not fair. Rather, to note the differences that arise from intersectionality is to provide validity to the experiences of all women, to recognise that issues of sexism range much wider than the simple

notion that 'women are oppressed'. Raising the issue of intersectionality in feminist thought is to attempt to limit the level of disenfranchisement within that school of thought, and to include all women in a discourse that seeks to liberate them.

Works Cited

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