Decentering Rushdie

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On June 25, 1975, at a different midnight hour in postcolonial India, the populist leader Jayaprakash Narayan was awakened by the proverbial knock on the door. Perhaps JP, as he is often known, was not surprised to be summoned so rudely by the government despite being a septuagenarian veteran of the struggle against the British. After all, JP had been leading mobilizations against Prime Minister Indira Gandhi’s policies and methods for several years now. That very evening, at a massive rally at the Ram-lila Grounds in New Delhi, he had called for a week-long civil disobedience campaign against Indira Gandhi after her corrupt practices in the 1971 elections came to light. This was the last straw, apparently. The night before declaring a state of emergency, Gandhi ordered the arrest of hundreds of leaders, including JP, members of the opposition, and the rebellious “Young Turks” of her own party. Over the next nineteen months, Jawaharlal Nehru’s daughter conducted a barefaced assault on democracy: abolishing freedom of the press and civil liberties, centralizing state
power, confronting protesters with police repression and mass imprisonment, bulldozing slums for “beautification” projects, and conducting a forced sterilization campaign. New economic policies were designed, leading to the privatization of some sectors and the nationalization of others. Although the Emergency was lifted in January 1977 and Gandhi lost the February elections in a landslide, its aftereffects continue to haunt India. The rise of Hindu communalism since the 1980s and the post–Cold War neoliberal policies that have accelerated class inequality can both be traced back to the Emergency and Indira Gandhi’s return to power in 1980. The fact that no viable alternative existed to prevent Gandhi’s second coming seems to have wiped out the historic 1977 vote, once described as “democracy’s finest hour” (Tarlo 22).

The Emergency was not simply an aberration but was an attempt by Indian ruling elites to resolve the escalating political, economic, and social crises that began in the mid-to-late 1960s. Initially, in the early decades after independence, India may have appeared to be on its way to fulfilling the aims of Nehru’s “Tryst with Destiny” speech, shrugging off two centuries of colonial discrimination and exploitation. The Indian Constitution had enshrined the political equality of all Indians under the law, regardless of class, caste, religion, or gender. The first two Five-Year-Plans were fairly successful, and Nehru’s central role in forging the Non-Aligned Movement, a gathering of nations seeking independence from Cold War allegiances, raised India’s profile globally. However, as with decolonized Asian and African nation-states everywhere, India’s state-capitalist economy was coming under increasing pressure by the 1960s to pull down its protectionist walls. Wars with Pakistan and China, and the nationalism and xenophobia that accompany wars, punctuated the period (1962, 1965, 1971). A long economic downturn developed after the failures of the third Five-Year Plan (1961–66), resulting in soaring prices and severe cuts to public investment. To quell the waves of resistance in this period, most famously the Naxalbari rebellion in 1969 and the Indian Railways strike of 1974, the state struck back with deadly force. By removing the “obstacle” of democracy, the Emergency allowed the government to be more effective in carrying out its tasks of capital accumulation and social control.

The broad shift from namak-balaal to postnational cosmopolitanisms in the postcolonial Indian English novel, I argue, developed in the context of the ideological crisis around the national question that was generated during this period. Only a few decades removed from the euphoria of Independence Day, many were quick to contrast those two midnights
in 1947 and 1975. An excerpt from JP’s prison diary, cited in Nayantara Sahgal’s *Indira Gandhi’s Emergence and Style* (1978), captures the mood:

> It is not for this that I, at least, had fought for freedom [. . .] The people have to travel many long miles to reach that freedom for which thousands of the Congress’ youth made sacrifices. [. . .] Hunger, soaring prices and corruption stalk everywhere. [. . .] Unemployment goes on increasing. [. . .] Land-ceiling laws are passed but the number of landless people is increasing [. . .]. (121–24)\(^6\)

The deconstruction of nations and nationalisms in novels such as Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1980) was also a response to this very specific moment in Indian history. Indeed, one of *Midnight’s Children*’s many accomplishments is that it offers a portrayal of the ideological and ontological crises of its own time, reading Nehru through the lens of his daughter. The idealism of Saleem Sinai, its *namak-halaal* protagonist, is steadily beaten out of him by postcolonial realities.

Nevertheless, for a great many Indians of the twilight years, a historical memory of the anticolonial struggle did not yet allow for the cynicism that was to come. The militant strikes, rural uprisings, and mobilizations of the late 1960s and 1970s—in reaction to class inequalities, lack of access to education, tuition hikes, gender oppression, deforestation, and corruption—revealed a popular desire to reclaim the emancipatory visions of the past, often by directly adapting old slogans and tactics.\(^7\) As Sahgal suggests in *Indira Gandhi’s Emergence and Style*, the frequency and militancy of these actions sent “a shiver down the official spine” because their very existence disproved the idea that Gandhi—who cast herself as a left-wing populist and the guardian of her father’s legacy—was “pro-people” (127). It was through such opposition that Indira Gandhi was defeated, if temporarily, in 1977. Indeed, Sahgal’s persistent and public opposition to her first cousin illustrates that many mainstream nationalists were radicalized and thrown into activity—thus joining those who had continued to fight for genuine national liberation after the historic elite-subaltern alliances of the anticolonial struggle had split up. Sahgal’s novels and writing from the late 1960s to the present still aim to recover the nation, but with an increasingly skeptical edge—a far cry from the relatively uncritical portrayals of the nation in *A Time to Be Happy* (1958) and her early memoirs.

It is with regard to the ongoing ideological debates about the meaning of 1947 that I am inclined to call these years of the 1970s and early 1980s the “twilight years,” on the cusp of the old and the new. The grand
visions of revolutionary nationalism were severely discredited, but many still responded to the call to build that “noble mansion of free India where all her children may dwell” (“Tryst with Destiny” 4). The passage from JP above, for instance, obviously mourns the postcolonial present but from the perspective of hope, saying that “the people have to travel many long miles to reach that freedom.” The phrase echoes Faiz Ahmad Faiz’s metaphor of the ongoing journey to freedom in “Subh-e Azadi” (“Dawn of Freedom,” Urdu, 1952), written from a different prison: “Come, we must / search for that promised Dawn” (4.6–7). Both of these texts, though quite critical of the present, retain a namak-halaal orientation; freedom can and will be achieved. Rushdie’s attraction to yet ultimate dismissal of Saleem’s nationalist hopefulness in Midnight’s Children registers this namak-halaal desire but belongs to a new moment, anticipating and ushering in the postnational perspectives that became much more dominant through the 1980s and 1990s. In the discourse of Midnight’s Children, as I discuss in the next chapter, JP and Faiz represent not commitment and steadfastness but the susceptibility of Indians to the “optimism disease.”

My juxtaposition and comparison of Sahgal’s The Day in Shadow (1971) and Anita Desai’s Clear Light of Day (1980) aims to demonstrate the liminality of the twilight years and its impact on the Indian English novels in terms of the development of new perspectives, themes, and forms—foregrounding, in the process, the place of women’s writing and gender analysis in namak-halaal texts and in the development of the Indian English novel as a whole. On the surface, Sahgal’s and Desai’s novels are different from one another in quite obvious ways. The Day in Shadow, often read by critics as a “political novel” (when it is considered at all), is concerned with the Hindu Code Bill, the Indian government’s new policies on oil and weapons, and the passing of Nehruvian idealism. When Sardar Singh, the aged and dying Petroleum Minister, asks, “[H]ow did such a future emerge from such a past?” (125), he is giving voice to the ideological crises described above. But Desai’s text seems to avoid any discussion of the political. Although Partition violence forms the backdrop of the protagonists’ memories of their childhood, critics have argued that since the novel is “primarily interested in human relationships, not in history,” it cannot be considered a “historical novel” (Crane 10). Rather, terms such as “psychological novel” and “the Virginia Woolf of India” come to the fore in assessments of Desai’s novel. In terms of narrative strategies, admittedly, The Day in Shadow cannot compare with Clear Light of Day’s celebrated and subtle strategies of interiority that illuminate its characters’ motivations, desires, and fears.
But when read in the context of the twilight years—including the rise of the women’s movement and of women’s writing itself as an identifiable genre—the novels exhibit important ideological and aesthetic commonalities. Both texts focus on the visible and the intimate aspects of women’s oppression, challenging gendered divisions of the private and the public, the personal and the political, and encouraging the development of new strategies of characterization and voice. Simrit of *The Day in Shadow* and Bim of *Clear Light of Day* continually challenge male chauvinism, gender inequalities, and the role of the traditional family in perpetuating these. Furthermore, such devastating critiques of Indian/Hindu gender norms do not produce a postnational dismissal of the nation and its traditions but an attempt to refashion the nation into a gender-egalitarian space. A distinct namak-halaal framework is discernible: male characters who exhibit a crude sexism in their private and public lives are inevitably marked as cosmopolitan-elites who favor Western cultural spaces over Indian ones, defend militarism and authoritarianism over democracy, and/or romanticize the nation from an outsider’s vantage point. In this way, the novels represent a moment between things ended and things begun, considering the nation with a skepticism that foreshadows the postnational perspectives that will soon dominate the genre but also displaying namak-halaal ethics of solidarity and communication seen in the early postcolonial novels. Although, in my reading, *The Day in Shadow* and *Clear Light of Day* are not ultimately successful in imagining gender-inclusive national spaces, such feminist-nationalist representations force us to rethink theoretical frameworks in which nations and nationalisms are regarded as being inherently opposed to women’s liberation.

**Feminist Resolutions of the National Question**

Postcolonial women writers have often constructed the decolonized nation as a vehicle for future emancipation, even when it is also shown to be a site for oppression. For instance, Buchi Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), Nadine Gordimer’s *Burger’s Daughter* (1979), Jessica Hagedorn’s *Dogeaters* (1991), and Edwidge Danticat’s *The Dew Breaker* (2004) are products of different contexts, ideologies, and aesthetic traditions, but each novel seeks to rewrite the nation despite its sharp criticisms of it. Although none of these texts can be described as “nationalist” in a limited sense and each remains interested in cultural and ideological exchanges across national borders, each also recognizes that national contexts are
crucial in shaping the lives of its characters and future possibilities. Nevertheless, the opposition between “woman” and “nation” pervades Post-colonial Studies: a theoretical framework that often rests on an ahistorical notion of nationalism as being always already reactionary.

Consider, for instance, Partha Chatterjee’s “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question” (1990), an essay about colonial India whose paradigm about woman and nation is often cited in the contexts of Post-colonial Studies and South Asian Studies. Chatterjee describes how male nationalists’ views of women’s status were shaped by gendered concepts of ghar (“home”) and babir (“the world”):

The world is the external, the domain of the material [and gendered male]; the home represents our inner spiritual self, our true identity [. . . ]
The home in essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world—and woman is its representation. And so we get an identification of social roles of gender to correspond with the separation of the social sphere into ghar and babir. (“Nationalist” 238–39)

Anxious about their lack of power in the colonized world around them, Chatterjee asserts, male nationalists became interested in “home rule” in a domestic sense as well as a political one, tying women to the home and private sphere by making them representative of the nation’s pure, “inner spiritual self” that must not become sullied by the world. Undoubtedly, Chatterjee’s description is useful in understanding women’s secondary status in many visions of “national liberation.” It reminds us how the “imagined communities” of nations operate, claiming to provide resolutions for all inequalities within the nation but actually subordinating those concerns and silencing conflict. Chatterjee’s paradigm also describes feminist voices that limit women to subject positions associated with the feminized, private sphere. Liberal feminist movements and writers in colonial India, for instance, often internalized and naturalized the discourse that Chatterjee describes as they staked their claims to the nation (P. Bose 117–18).

Chatterjee’s formulation, however, tends to minimize both the resiliency of nationalisms and the variety of ways in which they have shaped themselves in relation to questions of gender—both historically and in literary imaginings. For instance, historians have critiqued Chatterjee for “an exclusive emphasis on the discursive contests between colonialism and nationalism that neglects the political economy of colonial rule” (Sreenivas 9), a methodology that fails to explain how nationalist discourses were produced in very specific colonial contexts. In Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation
Chapter 3

(2001), for example, Tanika Sarkar particularizes Chatterjee’s observations of the home/world discourse as one prevalent among nineteenth-century Bengali elites, and argues that it emerged in the contexts of their manifold struggles against the colonial state, upwardly mobile lower castes and classes, and radicalizing women (T. Sarkar 38). Rather than investigating how a particular nationalism became dominant over time in a given instance, Chatterjee generalizes his reading to “nationalism” itself. But other nationalisms have produced other ideas about women and the family. Mytheli Sreenivas’s Wives, Widows, and Concubines (2008) describes, for instance, the ways in which the Tamil Self-Respect movement and its radical notions of the family and conjugality actually contested, for a time, the sort of mainstream Indian nationalism that Chatterjee describes (92–93).8

The intersection of the categories of “woman” and “nation,” then, ought to be understood as a site of struggle and change, configured differently in different ideological and historical contexts. In literary analysis, positing the nation as being always already inimical to women’s progress and liberation sets up a false dichotomy in which nation-oriented writing is regarded as necessarily uncritical of women’s oppression while texts that challenge gender norms are inevitably anti- or postnational. In Indian women’s writing of the 1970s, however, we see different permutations of woman and nation. It recognizes the failures of Indian nationalism, broadly speaking, to include women’s liberation within its framework of emancipation, but then seeks to rewrite the nation in the interests of women. The results of this combination are often mixed, sometimes producing ideological and narrative tensions with the texts. Nevertheless, the theoretical and critical refusal to allow a text to be both feminist and nationalist or nation-centered ultimately limits our understanding of the range and complexity of women’s writing.

The ideological contexts of the twilight years—increasing skepticism toward the nation but continuing hope in its future—can help explain why Indian women’s writing of this period remains so tied to the nation. The 1970s, indeed, were central to the revival of the Indian women’s movement, and women’s writing flourished in its wake. Women participated in all of the revolts of the time, and often shaped their direction.9 These efforts received an ideological boost from the publication of Towards Equality in 1974, a report by a government-appointed committee charged with studying the status of women in India. On the one hand, it claimed that twenty-five years of independence had brought no improvement for women; on the other, by praising nineteenth-century reformers and nation-
alisms for their progressive positions on women’s equality, it placed its demands for change within the paradigms of anticolonial nationalism.  

Towards Equality was momentous in its impact in terms of creating programs and policies for women, funding more research on women’s lives and work, and opening up disciplines such as women’s history and women’s studies (Forbes 223). The end of the Emergency “was like the bursting of a dam” in terms of social movements (Vanaik 197; R. Kumar, History 106), and the women’s movement won important victories against social and legal inequalities in a variety of areas including rape, inheritance, prostitution, and marriage practices. Rather than rejecting a nation that had clearly left them behind, women’s movements and the other struggles of the 1970s revived and redirected the old discourse of emancipation, continuing to see the nation(-state) as a site for future progress and to act upon the opportunities afforded by the framework of secular democracy.

This was the context in which postcolonial Indian women’s literature, in all languages, came into its own. In Telugu literature, for example, serialized periodical publications by women writers in the 1970s were the basis for successful novels (Subbarayudu and Vijayasree 323). Similarly, in Tamil literature, the organization Ilakkiya Chintanai began publishing yearly anthologies of short stories in 1970, making accessible the work of the increasing number of writers of that genre, especially women writers (Sri 295). By 1973, in a seminar titled “Indian Literature Since Independence” held by the Sahitya Akademi in Bombay, Prema Nandakumar could say, “The most significant development for Indo-Anglian fiction in the last twenty-five years has been the emergence of a group of women novelists” (56). Anita Desai, Atia Hosain, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, and Shakuntala Shrinagesh had each published one or more novels in English by 1973. Institutions that encourage and make Indian women’s writing accessible today on a global scale developed out of this period, including the English-language journal Manushi (1979) and the publishing house Kali for Women (1984).

Thematically speaking, the personal was political in India, too. Women writers of the 1970s tended to write about women’s lives in a self-confident, if not outright radical, tone. Just as the women’s movement brought dowry death and rape out into the public sphere, writers such as Sahgal and Desai consistently took up themes such as the burden of (arranged) marriage, the massive responsibilities of the joint family, and the repression of sexual desire. Novels before this period had certainly discussed themes relating to women, but it was only with the work of the 1970s that women’s oppression gained legitimacy as a topic that novelists could explore in
its own right, and not as a passing problematic on the way to discussing “larger” issues such as modernization or political turmoil. To write about women also meant to question “seriously and systematically, and at times to reject outright, traditional interpretations of women’s role and status in society” (Gupta 299). And so, the very figures writers used to depict the oppression of women were transformed, from the simple glorification of women’s forbearance under a “halo of noble self-sacrifice” in earlier representations to those in which a “great diversity of characters and situations” was employed to reveal the complexity of the situation (299–300).

Indeed, despite notable variations in ideological perspectives, women’s writing in the charged context of the 1970s was “engaged in negotiation, debate, and protest invariably in areas that directly concern, or are closely related to, what it means to be a woman” (Tharu and Lalitha 115).

In Indian novels in English, the thematic shift toward women’s oppression developed alongside new strategies of narrative and representation, allowing for the examination of the psychological and personal impact of women’s oppression and the spectrum of women’s responses to it, from acceptance to compromise to rebellion. Two tendencies seem to evolve in the woman-centered Indian English novels of the 1970s, seemingly contradictory but often contained within a single work. On the one hand, the interior turn corresponded to a radical desire to investigate and reclaim the two crucial spaces of repression (in terms of psychology) and oppression (in term of physical cloistering in the home), a product of the gendered division of the world into private/public spheres. Like Shashi Deshpande’s portrayal of Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), for example, such representations grapple with the relationship between psychological and deeply personal knots (Sarita’s suicidal loneliness and distress over her marriage and career as a doctor) and illuminate the conditions that help shape them (Sarita’s family’s opposition to her intercaste marriage and profession). On the other hand, the interior turn often has a conservative tendency that cannot imagine a space beyond the traditional boundaries of gender and even dissuades readers from doing so. A good example of the latter is Rama Mehta’s *Inside the Haveli* (1977), a text whose consistent criticism of a patriarchal Rajasthani family is inexplicably undermined in its resolution when its long-suffering protagonist, Geeta, becomes the new head of the household upon the death of her mother-in-law. Failures on the ideological and aesthetic levels are intertwined; with no indication of an ironic switch in focalization, the novel suddenly closes the implied audience’s access to Geeta’s thoughts and appears to suggest that the *haveli* had now been reformed. Emerging strategies of interiority, in other words,
spanned the ideological spectrum in their conceptualizations of gender oppression and resistance.

These new ways of writing about women laid the groundwork for contemporary investigations of overlapping zones of power, a central trope in women’s writing and postcolonial literature in general. Women’s writing since 1970, Vinay Dharwadker argues, “focuses mainly on the unequal distribution of power across gender differences within middle-class Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh societies [. . .] [but] also deals with more complicated situations in which gender inequities combine with asymmetries between upper and lower classes, higher and lower castes, urban and rural environments, older and younger generations, and so on [. . .]” (239). In other words, women writers began not only to resist their exclusion from “the nation,” but to refute the restrictive division of the world into gendered public and private spheres by viewing their own oppression in light of other social factors. Ketu Katrak’s analysis of postcolonial women’s writing in the 1980s and 1990s describes the process that came into being in the 1970s: “representations of the deeply personal, even intimate issues facing their protagonists in their novels, poems, short stories are historicized within their particular socio-political milieu” (244). Thus, the same impulse that drew thousands of women into activism in the 1970s, namely, disillusionment with a postcolonial ruling class that colluded with traditional structures of women’s oppression (R. Kumar, History 97), also drove women writers’ search for a literary space in which to write out their lives and those of their sisters (and brothers) in increasingly complex ways.

Katrak’s observation, that women’s writing historicizes “representations of the deeply personal, even intimate issues” in “their particular socio-political milieu,” is central to my reading of Sahgal and Desai. First, it implicitly rejects the false divide of the “political novel” and the “psychological novel” that has saturated the critical readings of their work.14 In doing so, it allows us to ask important questions about the novels and the gendered division of the private/public spheres. In what way does Desai historicize Bim’s personal crisis? Conversely, what representations of the personal and the intimate drive Sahgal’s plotline: the situation of a divorced woman amidst the decline of Nehruvian India? In each case, despite their differences, we find that the nation serves as the privileged site upon which public/private spheres are critiqued and renegotiated. When Katrak rightfully defends the political and historical value of literary explorations of the personal, then, she limits the scope of women’s texts when she says that they “explore the personal dimensions of history rather
than overt concerns with political leadership and nation-states” (234, my italics). The words “rather than” suggest a thematic division between female and male writers that threatens to reinscribe the gendered divisions of the personal/political. Agreeing with Katrak’s assertion that “postcolonial women writers enable a reconceptualization of politics” when they focus on the personal, on the intimate, and on the body (234), I would like to add that they also do this when they choose to talk about governmental policy. The nation ought not to appear as the Other for critics who are, quite correctly, arguing for the political value of women’s writing.

Narrating the Public/Private Spheres

In The Day in Shadow and Clear Light of Day, the reimagining of a gender-egalitarian nation occurs not only in terms of plot and mimesis but also through the ethical and political sensibilities produced by their narrative strategies. The implied audiences are confronted with third-person narrations that are strategically limited, as they are either closely associated with or directly filtered through a female protagonist who has an incomplete understanding of herself and her situation. The effect is to create, at once, both a distant and an intimate understanding of women’s oppression in postcolonial India by revealing the processes through which characters come to political consciousness—a strategy we have already seen with regard to The Coffer Dams. Indeed, the limited dramatic action that does occur in the novels takes place within the protagonists’ flashbacks and memories (Livett 52; Banerjee 130). By hitching the implied audiences’ perspective onto protagonists whose knowledge expands through the narrative, the texts invite the readers to participate in the process—and to receive a political education themselves. Readers are persuaded to imagine, by the end of the novels, a harmonious, decompartmentalized world/nation/family that might regard women as equal to men. And this space of liberation, as it is imagined in the texts, is constructed as a freedom from both rootless cosmopolitanisms and orthodox traditions as each is associated with the corrupt and violent nation-state of the post-Nehruvian present.

The following sketch of the narrative strategies in the two novels offers some insight into how these processes of knowledge and self-consciousness work. Set in the late 1960s, after Nehru’s death and at the early stages of Indira Gandhi’s ascendancy, The Day in Shadow draws us into the life of Simrit, a journalist, in the immediate aftermath of her divorce from Som, a jet-setting businessman. The third-person omniscient narrative is focal-
ized through Simrit via the repeated use of free indirect style—a device by which a narrator moves into the consciousness of a character temporarily and sporadically. This develops the implied audience’s close identification with the character as well as the ability to critique that character from an “outside” space that exists within the structure of the narrative itself. On the one hand, the implied author gives readers direct access to Simrit’s changing mental state as she rehearses the events and emotions leading up to and immediately following her divorce, gradually freeing herself from the guilt and anger caused by its harsh terms. On the other, by using free indirect style rather than character narration—which quite often means reducing to zero the space between the narrator and the protagonist and maximizing the readers’ empathy with the latter—the implied author creates a distance between narrator and protagonist and invites our evaluation of Simrit’s developing knowledge. The novel concludes with Simrit’s marriage to Raj, a close friend and upright, Nehruvian MP, who is crucial to the development of her political consciousness and is never criticized by the novel.

Similarly, *Clear Light of Day* also employs a third-person narrative and free indirect style, but the narrator’s voice is so intertwined with the voice of Bim, the protagonist, that the free indirect style approximates the interior monologue produced in classic character narration. The novel is divided into four chapters: the first and last take place over a few weeks in what we may presume to be the early 1970s, framing the two middle chapters in which Bim, her sister Tara, and/or the third-person narrator reflect upon the summer of 1947—when the sisters were young and the nation-states of India and Pakistan were first established. Initially we see that Bim, a caustic, unmarried history professor, has taken responsibility for her ancestral, Old Delhi house, living there long after her siblings had left to pursue their own futures, throughout India and the world. Bim is forced to confront the roots of her bitterness by the visit of Tara, her younger sister, who lives abroad with her husband, Bakul, a jet-setting, Westernized diplomat. The narrative voice here allows us to critique Tara and Bakul through Bim’s perspective, but the very cynicism and bitterness of that perspective forces us to regard Bim, too, with critical distance. In particular, Bim is angry that her brother Raja, having inherited their old house after the death of his father-in-law, the previous landlord, wrote her a patronizing letter, “permitting her” to continue to live in their childhood house at the same rental rates. Bim must learn how to make peace with Raja, and the process begins at the end of the first chapter. Bim finally softens up, giving in to Tara’s demand that they remember their youth in
the Old Delhi house and come to terms with the traumas of the past. In the next two chapters, the narrative reveals to Bim and to its implied audience the origins of her oversensitivity and symbolically links the violence of the family to that of the original violence of Partition at the birth of the nation(s). In the frame narrative in the fourth and final chapter, Bim gradually heals her rifts with her family and its traditions, concluding that she needs to be less critical of them.

The two novels are remarkably similar on the level of plot and characterization, consisting of a central, female protagonist (Simrit, Bim) who must break out of the passivity and isolation imposed upon her by external forces, a supplementary character who helps her do so (Raj, Tara), and a resolution, driven by scattered, cathartic flashbacks, in which a synthesis through “communication” is finally achieved. More broadly, the novels present a spectrum of (elite) women’s oppression as characters struggle against a socially demanded subservience to their husbands (Simrit, Tara), the crushing burden of household responsibilities (Bim), sexual repression (Simrit), the cruelty of divorce laws (Simrit), the experience of widowhood and arranged marriage (Desai’s Mira Masi, Sahgal’s Shaila), and the feelings of martyrdom (Bim) and guilt (Simrit, Tara) that emerge from an internalization of traditional gender roles. In each case, the desire to gain freedom from the confining, domestic sphere forms the dramatic and emotional crux of the novel. The action and causation that drive the narratives are mainly psychological and discursive, with reinterpreted memories, remembered fears, and conversation playing prime roles. However, the novels explore and resolve the private/public division through different narrative arcs. The Day in Shadow enacts a centripetal movement in which the narrative consistently forces Simrit to exteriorize her sorrow, to recognize that her private oppression is linked to larger structures in a society that is willingly blind to the realities of women’s lives. Conversely, Clear Light of Day exhibits a centrifugal narrative, in which Bim must go deep within her family relations and familial past—which is also the nation’s past—in order to recognize and recover from the hidden traumas of life as a woman in a traditional family. Throughout, a fierce namak-halaal ethics is in play, though it is variously articulated.

To Be “Fully a Person”

Locating Simrit’s Voice

From the very opening of The Day in Shadow we are introduced to the novel’s strategies of free indirect style and how it turns Simrit into both the
subject and object of critique. Immediately after her divorce, Simrit attends a fancy party in New Delhi and finds that such social gatherings are replete with “reminders of the husband-centered world she had forsaken” (2). Focalized through Simrit, the narration shows how the simplest conversations can entrap women within an inexorably circular discourse of marriage and work:

“What does your husband do?” one of [the society women] wanted to know.

Wasn’t it odd, when you were standing there yourself, fully a person, not being asked what you did? [. . .] Simrit herself had never accepted a world where men did things and women waited for them. Hadn’t she? She could hear Raj demanding, never letting her get away with any neat hem-stitched notions about herself. Whatever her views on emancipation were, she had kept them well-buried.

“I am divorced,” she said.

“Oh,” said the woman.

“Then you must be working,” said her companion.

They had fixed her with a [. . .] look [that] made her feel she had broken out in spots and scales.

“I am a writer.” [. . .]

“I have a niece who writes now and then,” one of them said. “She writes the cleverest little pieces. It gives her something to do till she marries.”

She stopped abruptly. (The Day 6–7)

In terms of content, we learn that Simrit is a divorced woman, working as a writer (a journalist), who repeatedly finds herself marginalized within a conversation in which women like her have no ontological status. But it is the narrative strategy, exclusively granting Simrit interiority and agency and blocking out the consciousness of other partygoers, that allows the text to do its work.

Simrit’s emphasis that she is “fully a person” reveals her self-consciousness about her invisibility in a society that makes normative the gendered opposition of marriage/career. Her critical perspective draws out the way in which her very existence confounds the accepted logic of this opposition, that 1) women are either married or on their way to be married, 2) married women are merely appendages of their husbands who don’t work or “do” anything, and 3) writing, marked as frivolous (“cleverest little pieces”), is not a career but only something a woman might do before she gets married. Simrit’s interiority is not supplementary to the passage’s
critique of gender ideologies but foundational to it. While both Simrit and her questioners speak in short, chopped sentences, Simrit is the only one of these characters who is given a set of thoughts and emotions that not only explain her reactions but illuminate why she finds the conversation so unproductive.

Further, the focus on Simrit’s thoughts suggests a map of the process by which she has developed a political consciousness from within the constraints of the very society that she inhabits. The key here is the rhetorical question—“Hadn’t she?”—that interrupts what initially looks like a didactic passage (however welcome) in which a feminist, divorced career woman self-righteously criticizes a group of mean, married, social butterflies. Without surrendering an inch of ground to Simrit’s interlocutors, the implied author deepens our understanding of women’s oppression and resistance by conjuring up the figure of a “demanding” and challenging Raj within Simrit’s head. “Raj” is thus introduced to us as a sign that points to the still-transitional state of Simrit’s political consciousness. On the one hand, “Hadn’t she?” construes Simrit as being dependent on Raj; problematically, we often see Simrit escaping to him throughout the novel for emotional and intellectual support when faced with sexism. On the other hand, “Raj” appears here as Simrit’s construct and as a mark of her capability for self-critical reflection; it is Simrit who is reminding herself that developing an oppositional consciousness is an uneven process and that she cannot settle for the “neat, hem-stitched notions of herself” as the ever-rebellious woman. Indeed, by employing a metaphor associated with domestic work (“hem-stitched”) to describe the process of identity formation, Simrit implicitly links the desired deconstruction of that identity with the rejection of “proper” femininity itself. This texturing of Simrit’s interior at the very beginning of the novel makes her quite sympathetic to the audience and provides the charge for the overt critique of gendered public/private spheres that follows.

Simrit further commands our sympathies because she appears to be not only the protagonist but the guiding intelligence behind the narrative. Not only is she a character who is marginalized, who is aware of this process, and who is self-critical about her self-perceptions, but she is also a good storyteller. The narration leads us to attribute the clever arrangement of the passage, with its frequent interjections and the ironic placement of voices, to Simrit herself. The dry sense of irony that we see in Simrit’s thoughts (“Hadn’t she?”) is reflected in the dramatic arrangement of the dialogue, in which the insularity of society’s logic is reflected in the circularity of the conversation. Even the dull-witted partygoer is allowed
to realize, momentarily, that she and her friends had been putting their feet in their mouths by telling a divorced writer that writing was a decent activity for a “girl” before marriage. Such metacritical moments increase the audience’s pleasure and bind us closely to Simrit; for instance, the spurt of figurative language in the passage (“as if I had broken out in spots and scales”) is immediately followed by the line “I am a writer.” In this manner, like a first-person character narrator, Simrit accomplishes all of the narrator’s tasks, described in narrative theory as reporting (telling us the bare facts), interpreting (giving us a standpoint from which to view them), and evaluating (suggesting what we ought to make of the story).17

And yet, even in this passage, it is apparent that The Day in Shadow is not a first-person character narration but one told from a third-person perspective that frequently employs free indirect style. A sliver of space between the narrator and the protagonist opens up with the question “Hadn’t she?”—a momentary but jarring question that seems to come from outside of Simrit as the text invites us to critique not only the partygoers but Simrit herself. Although we quickly realize that Simrit is questioning herself, we see that, self-reflexive or not, Simrit is still a work in progress and we are asked to separate ourselves, however minutely, from her consciousness. The gap between Simrit and the narrator through the novel is often razor-thin, but even this slim presence is notable. It makes Simrit both the subject and the object of the narrator’s gaze: the medium through which the narrator can observe and convey the reality of women’s oppression and the character whose limited but growing self-consciousness offers insight into the development of oppositional consciousness. By making Simrit a dynamic, self-reflexive character and yet refusing to conflate her with the narrator, the implied author is able to chart her tumultuous shift from the discourse of victimization to that of empowerment—the telos of the text—without completely entangling the implied audience in every moment of that transition. In terms of literary-critical analysis, The Day in Shadow cannot be “simply” read as a classic social-realist text interested in linear models of character development over time: diachronic time (the story of how Simrit comes to consciousness) is combined with the synchronic (the Simrit who reflects on each moment of her life is herself in flux). Politically speaking, this method of narration 1) allows the exteriorizing of internal, private conflicts, challenging the public/private divide that makes women’s oppression a dirty little secret; and 2) puts a spotlight on the processes by which consciousness about this oppression develops.

In the earlier portions of the novel, before Raj takes center stage, Sim-
rit’s growing consciousness about her own life as an unhappy wife becomes the basis for her understanding of national politics. These insights into the public sphere, in turn, allow her to rearticulate the way she understands her problems with Som. The construction of Simrit’s voice—flexible, introspective, and always in the process of learning—allows her to move freely between the sexual politics of the bedroom, emotional stress, political corruption, and war profiteering. Simrit has already learned, for instance, that Som’s inability to communicate directly with her lies at the root of their problems (Livett 54–55), and that this is a direct result of a world always compartmentalized into “his” and “hers.” By chapter 7, the violence underpinning this world becomes more apparent; Simrit notices that Som would get quite angry “when something did not obediently fit into the compartment provided for it” (The Day 77, 79). It is this private violence that engenders Simrit’s new comprehension about Som’s business dealings, a “male” space that Simrit had never considered entering before. As she witnesses Som’s celebration with Vetter, his German business partner, after securing their armaments contract with the Indian government, Simrit marks them as the “envied, successful, appallingly creatures of her time, caught up in a sickness they did not even recognize” (86–87). The violence, she comes to see, extends across the private/public divide. Som and Vetter dismiss Simrit’s articulate objections to living on blood money and patronize her for having political opinions in the first place, but Simrit, refusing to celebrate with them, stakes out her own political space. Simrit rewrites India’s arms economy as a macabre one in which “[b]its of child [. . .] could be exchanged for a whole new drawing room, furniture, and upholstery, silk and velvet cushions for gracious and civilized living” (85–87).

This critique of national policy is explicitly articulated through reference to families and homes, allowing for a link between public and private on the level of language that reflects the thematic pairing of the two. Significantly, the association is developed not through metaphors but through politicized metonyms whose task is the unmasking of appearances. In Simrit’s words, “bits of child” are weapons, and her “gracious and civilized living” hides the processes of exchange that underlie her family’s wealth. Broadly, the emotive reference to children as a way of talking about weapons sales itself acts to break the divide between the private world of family and the public world of war and armaments; every casualty of war represents a violently fragmented child and family. Closer to home, Simrit’s language reveals that the violence of compartmentalization in the family and domestic sphere is linked to violence perpetuated within the nation itself. It is only fitting that Simrit brings the language by which she described
private oppression into the public sphere, wishing for an entirely different, noncompartmentalized, nonviolent world “whose texture is kindly” (85, 89). Simrit begins to think of Som’s notions of women’s economic dependency and subordination to the husband as his particular view of the world, not a natural state of being, and can represent her own vision of a peaceful, united world as a competing view. The leaking of political questions about the military and economics into Simrit’s personal life on the level of plot forces her to rethink the viability of having separate spheres at all.

In fact, the final split between Simrit and Som comes on the very night of Som’s and Vetter’s celebration of the military contract, when Simrit refuses to sleep with Som. Again, Simrit thinks through the discourse of decompartmentalization as she ponders how even a sex life “with laws of its own, kept apart from the rest of life, must wake up on a night such as this with all the doubts and fears of the years knocking against it” (The Day 90). The narrator traces how in the very act of particularizing Som’s world as a construct, Simrit engenders her own: “She was no longer able to follow the goals Som had set for himself, and the inability seemed to be spreading through her veins, affecting the very womb of her desires, drying up the fount within her” (90). Simrit thus portrays Som’s world as a parasitical one that uses the rhetoric of separate-but-equal spheres in order to dominate Simrit’s entire life. In both The Day in Shadow and Sahgal’s previous novel, This Time of Morning (1965), “the final break [between husband and wife] comes because of the violation of the unstated rule of obedience which the husbands think their wives must follow” (Paranjape, “The Crisis” 294). Earlier, Simrit had characterized sex with Som as an act of obedience and passivity, “centered [. . .] on anticipation of his next move and his next” (The Day 49). Refusing sex, in this context, is nothing short of an act of resistance on the level of the narrative, destabilizing the entire structure of the domestic sphere. Indeed, the passage above characterizes Simrit’s refusal as a whole-scale, bodily rejection of Som’s world, one that was “spreading through her veins.” She disagrees, at once, with what he wants in both the public and private spheres: his desires for the nation, his means of bringing in wealth, and the demands he makes of her body.

Even as the broad arc of Simrit’s politicization clearly moves from acceptance of rigid gender divisions to a rejection of them, the strategy of free indirect style in The Day in Shadow draws out the uneven process of this politicization. It takes a series of vicious blows for Simrit to truly comprehend the violent nature of the gendered private/public divide and to
develop a new perspective. Despite her criticisms of him, Simrit still wants Som as he was before, and it is Som who finally asks for a divorce. And even after the divorce, Simrit keeps faith in Som’s basic humanity, refusing to believe Raj when he says that the “Consent Terms” are murderous, placing millions of shares in the name of her children, but making her pay the heavy tax on it for nine years while not receiving a rupee (39–40). Consciousness does not change all at once. It takes time for Simrit to learn that decompartmentalization means forging communication, not making compromises at all costs. Simrit finally achieves a synthesis of her tendency to compromise and Raj’s advocacy of making “savage breaks with the past” by carefully “carry[ing] it along” as a memory that she firmly rejects (225).

One of Sahgal’s comments on her fiction, appearing in her introduction to Relationship: Extracts From a Correspondence (1994), gives insight into her portrayals of the difficulties of coming to political consciousness. The protagonists of This Time of Morning and The Day in Shadow, novels written during Sahgal’s own divorce,

limped their bewildered way to a new definition of virtue, one that meant leaving home. They had no idea there were human equations that did not extort obedience as the price of love and shelter, but they chose to take risks rather than settle for the shaky security only obedience would ensure. Like myself they had a tendency to grieve over broken bonds, and a longing for ordinary, uninterrupted living. Like myself, too, they were undramatic creatures on whom drama had insisted on descending, to beckon or goad them to decision and action. (ix)

This wonderful phrase—“longing for an ordinary, uninterrupted living”—allows us to bring together the novel’s narrative strategy and its political bent: to focus on the internal processes of a woman’s coming to feminist consciousness. Simrit is not an utter victim of circumstance, though the facts of her victimization do leave marks upon her consciousness. She is not a born radical though she develops a radical consciousness and becomes an agent, taking decisive action. The careful treatment of women’s oppression here breaks the dichotomy of representing women as either victims or heroes. The desire for “ordinary, uninterrupted living” and the attempt to represent it reminds us of Njabulo Ndebele’s call for a “rediscovery of the ordinary”: acts of representation that emphasize the complex dialectics of everyday living, not just narratives of spectacle, when portraying oppression and resistance.
Raj and the Nation

But there are clear limits to the text’s concept of fighting women’s oppression. The character of Raj in *The Day in Shadow* is one in a series of liberal, male characters in Sahgal’s early novels whose task is essentially to save her heroines (Paranjape, “The Crisis” 295). Raj’s interventions are central to Simrit’s struggle and to reconstructing the “backbone” that her life with Som had crushed (*The Day* 38). While Simrit’s break from Som begins with her own refusal to have sex with a man whose wealth is made through armaments, it is Raj who is presented as the driving force behind Simrit’s mental and physical emancipation, always possessing greater knowledge and foresight. Further, it is through Raj that *The Day in Shadow* most clearly and decisively weaves together its narratives of women’s oppression and national crisis. Indeed, Raj’s voice is hardly challenged by the third-person narrator; there is virtually no space within it to raise questions about his role either as Simrit’s advisor or as a Nehruvian politician. A more careful investigation of Raj is, therefore, necessary to see how the novel begins to shift toward a more mainstream notion of gendered private/public spheres despite its explicit efforts to dismantle such compartments.

When Simrit first meets him, Raj is in the midst of a two-pronged parliamentary war against Sumer Singh, the young radical Petroleum Minister who wants India to sign an oil exploration contract with the Soviet Union, and businessmen such as Som who would destroy India in their desire to accumulate capital. Raj attempts to resuscitate the classic principles of Nehruvian nonalignment, a balance “between Marx and anti-Marx,” to draw forth “a new breed of India-lovers” from the plethora of “America-lovers” and “Russia-lovers” (*The Day* 155, 158, 20). What is truly significant about the position taken by Raj, however, is that it represents a nationalist (really, nation-statist) critique of the postcolonial nation and, at times, the national liberation movement. While Raj and Ram Krishnan, his Gandhian mentor, are firmly committed to the principles of 1947, they admit to being disappointed by the current state of the nation and cast Sumer Singh as the product of failed nationalist visions. Sumer Singh’s critique of Gandhi marks him as an antagonist in the text—he wants to “bury Gandhi” and have “real revolution—not eyewash” (*The Day* 186, 192)—but the text acknowledges that Gandhian-Nehruvian voices offer no alternatives. Raj and Ram Krishnan wonder whether the gradual rise of authoritarianism (recall that the novel is published in 1971, four years before the Emergency) was the price India had to pay for a revolution that
did not “involve enough people deeply enough or long enough” (230, 233). Indeed, they see the tumultuous present as a reaction to what they regard to be India’s own historical and cultural weaknesses, including a legacy of subservience to foreign powers like Britain, the U.S.S.R., and the United States, on the one hand, and the ideological pull of Hinduism toward compromise, passivity, and acceptance, on the other.

This nationalist critique of the nation provides the backdrop for Raj’s explicit pairing of the public, national crisis with Simrit’s private one. Explaining the oil debate to Simrit, for instance, Raj comments that “independence has no meaning unless it’s economic. You’re realizing that now yourself” (The Day 10). Against Simrit’s protest that the Consent Terms were a personal matter, he continues, “Signing on the dotted line is the hallmark of the defeated […] whether they’re trusting souls like you or governments without know-how” (10). Simrit, in other words, becomes both a metaphor for India and a case study of “the Indian woman,” an example of what happens when emancipatory projects falter. Raj comments that economic victimization had produced both in Simrit and in India an “overwhelming passivity” in the face of brutality and a dependence on other people’s solutions (40, 155). The “mute, acquiescent” nation, “letting things happen to it, from a country to the mind and body of a woman” (The Day 37), is constructed by the narrator as both a parallel, analogous subject to Simrit and the cause of Simrit’s victimization. In an India caught between “its brave modernity and its gross old superstitions” (150), many laws defending women’s rights had been passed, but an underlying social and structural misogyny still positioned women seeking equality against the state. For instance, as Simrit notes, even the right to divorce had become part and parcel of women’s continuing oppression. The Hindu Code Bill (1954) had “jumped two thousand years of tradition to confer that particular twentieth-century blessing [of divorce]”—obtainable faster than the four years it took to get a Fiat and eight years to get a telephone (4–5). Simrit’s account drips with irony: “here we were […] the females among us, in the state of revolutionary emancipation, out on our ears on the street” (4–5).19

In response, Raj exhorts Simrit (and India) to reject the allegedly Hindu notion of restraint and the “endless, spongelike capacity to absorb,” especially “at this particular juncture in our history where we have to act […] [where] passion and deeds would serve us better” than simple compromise (13, 102). Indeed, the dichotomy that Raj draws between Indian society’s alleged passivity and Western individualism and activity is often so ruthless that it often invokes the (gendered) discourses of Orientalism. Indian/
Hindu lethargy, Raj avers, rests on fatalism and an inability to generate new ideas, reflecting “a whole culture [of] people—especially women—forever taking things lying down” and a “race” that “has yet to produce a modern thesis of its own” (140, 18). The alternative is signaled through characterization: Raj’s father had converted to Christianity because he saw Hinduism’s respect for renunciation as a fetishization that “made a man draw back and do nothing” (171). Although Raj is usually sympathetic to Simrit and contextualizes her unwillingness to act as a product of society, he sometimes becomes impatient, patronizingly contrasting her fatalism with his (Christian) resilience. Raj’s words invoke a broader discourse that has shaped male nationalists from the nineteenth century to the present—exhorting the feminized and demasculinized nation to rise and make its own destiny.

In this context, when women’s victimization becomes both the symbol for and the proof of national degeneration, Raj can rewrite Simrit’s fight against Som as a matter of deep importance to the nation. Refusing to bend to the violence of the Consent Terms would be performing “non-violence in action” (The Day 181) and would strengthen the nation, Raj reflects, for “if this nation were ever to come to life, the educated and privileged like her must make the most [. . .] of what they had” (36). People like Simrit—whom the text associates with orderliness and permanence, and “unspoilt, untouched, non-human things” such as nature and books (34–37, 4)—would have to live in the country as she lived in her half-settled apartment, “in a bit of a mess, with things not in their places, and not nearly enough of them to go around [. . .] There are no magic formulas. We can’t make coaches out of pumpkins except by our sweat” (14–15). Raj speaks beyond Simrit to the implied audience as a whole, especially English-speaking Indian elites who understand the Cinderella reference and have experienced the complications of balancing “West” and “East.” Like the narrator in Sahgal’s A Time to Be Happy (1958), Raj beckons this audience of the educated and the privileged to struggle on behalf of the nation. Cosmopolitanism and “hybridity” are not opposed to nationalism but depicted as essential for national regeneration: for Raj, the hard work of national wholeness also means being comfortable with the process over the product, with fuzziness and grayness over compartmentalization and rigidity.

It is Raj’s engagement in the politics of the nation—in terms of both the debate over oil and the handling of the Consent Terms—that makes him attractive to Simrit and ultimately cements their relationship. Raj’s “compelling passion so like [Simrit’s] own for [India]” becomes their com-
mon bond (15). Again, while Simrit’s own concern about the nation and its poor emerges repeatedly through the text, it is only after meeting Raj that she realizes that she “has never cried about such things before” (87). It is thus through Raj that Simrit finds a complete unity of her personal and political goals, the ones that she had articulated in the fight with Som over the arms deal. Like Simrit, he also believes in totalities and not fragments, that there exists “a world like that [of freedom] very near us, just around the corner if you look for the signs. You in your lifetime may reach out and touch it, if you have the courage [. . . ]” (The Day 177). The sense of wholeness enters into their personal lives as well: in direct contrast to her experience with Som, Simrit characterizes lovemaking with Raj as a joining of two souls, a wholeness completely distinct from “segmented ordinary life” (206). The “great, objective inheritance” in the nationalist vision of the two ostensibly disinherited lovers is the nation, in all its natural and cultural richness (35–36). Ram Krishan himself—the dormant, Gandhian figure in this novel similar to the narrator of A Time to Be Happy and K. L. in Rich Like Us—“begins to emerge from his self-imposed confinement [after his wife’s death] to take up the fight for India with new energy” and “begins paradoxically, to inherit the future” through Raj and Simrit, his adopted children (Livett 61).

Simrit’s move from dependence to independence, from Som to Raj, is in effect a feminist rewriting of the national question, a framework in which national progress is impossible as long as Indian women are being treated as unequal members of society. But falling in line with the namak-halaal cosmopolitanisms of the pre-Emergency period, this rewriting entails not a rejection of the nation but an imagined resurgence toward what the implied author constructs as the original goals of national liberation. In this process, cosmopolitanism and hybridity are not dismissed in and of themselves; indeed, Raj’s devastating and “Christian” critique of Indian/Hindu culture is foregrounded as providing a necessary “outside” viewpoint on the nation. However, as I have been emphasizing in this book, such cosmopolitan openness is not incompatible with nationalism but falls comfortably within the Nehruvian ideological framework that is explicit in Sahgal’s work.

For instance, when speaking at the foundation-laying ceremony for a women’s college in Allahabad in 1928, Nehru was appalled to find out that the college prospectus outlined the most backward ideas about women’s role in the private sphere. He angrily retorted that such ideas of women’s education meant not only that a woman was fit only for the “profession of marriage” but also that “[e]ven in this profession her lot is
to be of secondary importance. She is always to be the devoted help-mate, the follower, and the obedient slave of her husband and others [. . . ] The future of India cannot consist of dolls or playthings [referring to Ibsen’s *Doll’s House*]” (qtd. in Jayawardena 98). We see here the blend of cosmopolitanism, nationalism, and commitment to women’s equality that is central to Nehruvian discourse, distinguishing it from Gandhian and other cultural-nationalist ones. First, it reveals not only Nehru’s support for women’s education but also 1) his willingness to challenge curricula that turn such schools for women into sites for the teaching of traditional gender roles, and 2) his insistence on linking Indian progress to the rejection of ideas that render women into “dolls or playthings.” Second, while the passage remains firmly within a nationalist discourse and its concerns are clearly “the future of India,” Nehru does not hesitate to enlist the services of a European play in making his point against Indian traditionalism and—given the context of his speech—putting forth such cosmopolitan knowledge as a model for an alternative pedagogy. Women’s freedom from gender oppression and national freedom from colonial rule were thus intertwined and resisted the essentialist labels of “Western” and “Indian.” As Nehru writes in *The Discovery of India*, this sentiment reflects how the “call of freedom” had a “double meaning” for women fighting the colonial regime; their energy and enthusiasm for the nation “had no doubt their springs in the vague and hardly conscious, but nevertheless intense, desire to rid themselves of domestic slavery” (qtd. in Jayawardena 98–99).

“Staying Home”

*Bim’s Critique of NRIs*

*Clear Light of Day* seems to belong to a different universe. Its plot, characterization, and theme make paramount the characters’ internal lives and the repairing of broken familial bonds, apparently marginalizing the public sphere of national politics. While it is significant that the rupturing of Bim’s family occurs in 1947, the year in which British India was split into the nation-states of India and Pakistan, the Partition in *Clear Light of Day* appears to function mainly as a historical backdrop to dramatize the characters’ personal crises. For instance, when the text employs Bim’s voice in a didactic mode toward the end of the book in order to find solutions to interpersonal problems, it does not address—as does *The Day in Shadow*—whether and how national tensions might be related to those of the individual within the family. Nevertheless, I maintain, the implied
Chapter 3

author’s strategic choices in terms of characterization and plot force key political questions around gender and nation onto the table in explicit and implicit ways. On one level, Clear Light of Day details the negative experiences of daughters, wives, widows, and unmarried adult women, and only a severely limited and gendered notion of “the political” would exclude this novel from that category. On another level, although references to the world of governments and policies appear to be incidental and slight, there is enough textual evidence to suggest that the novel represents the nation as the historical and cultural ground upon which the family and its hierarchies are formed. The family and nation are united through characterization, voice, and symbolism, making it possible to read Clear Light of Day’s concerns about gender through the prism of the questions around cosmopolitanism and nationalism—especially as they were being articulated in the twilight years.

The key to an ideological and political analysis of the novel is recognizing that Bim, like Simrit above, is not only the object of the text’s critique but also the main voice through which the novel articulates its transformative visions. The many critics who read Clear Light of Day as mainly a narrative about Bim’s transformation from bitterness to calmness—with her sister Tara tutoring her along the way—usually minimize Bim’s importance in transforming other characters and, thus, in voicing the central political frameworks of the text. While Bim is clearly represented as an arrogant, angry woman who needs to learn how to cope with her past, she is also a clever observer of human behavior who, on the narrative level, gains an authoritative voice on questions of gender and the nation. Given this positioning, Bim’s growing awareness of her own foibles instigates, for her and for the implied audience, an understanding of the deep links between the family and the nation. By understanding the larger contexts of women’s isolation, the novel suggests, we might reimagine familial and national spaces that treat women with respect. And Bim is the only character who is sufficiently self-reflexive to develop such an understanding.

The first chapter of Clear Light of Day gives a sense of how difficult it is to disentangle the narrator’s perspective from that of the characters. Initially, it seems as if Bim and Tara are given equal weight as the narrative shifts from one character to the other, voicing their responses to one another. It might appear that the dialogue establishes a two-way relationship between Bim and Tara that drives the plot forward—or even that Bim’s obvious cruelty toward Tara makes her an antagonist. But the narrative voice, I contest, is focalized mainly through Bim. Undoubtedly, Tara is crucial to the narrative: it is her visit that unleashes Bim’s self-criticism
and critical memory, allowing her release from her ostracized existence. But it is Bim’s independence, her outright rejection of women’s oppression in the family, and her critique of a disengaged cosmopolitanism that drive the novel’s mimetic and political tasks. While Bim certainly shifts her perspective by the end of the chapter, it is really Tara who begins to arrive at a new consciousness: she can recognize her subordination to Bakul, stop feeling guilty for leaving Bim burdened with responsibilities, and move toward self-confidence.

The opening pages shuttle the narrative back and forth between the sisters through free indirect style and interior monologue, conveying how they watch one another intently and react to each other’s words and subtle elements of gesture and body language. On the day after her arrival to the Old Delhi house from the United States, Tara runs out to the garden as happy as a child, oblivious to the viciousness of the morning sun “slicing down like a blade of steel” or to the deteriorating plant life all around her (Clear Light 1). Cynically observing Tara’s nostalgic performance from a few feet behind her, Bim reaches out and pointedly crushes a rose in full bloom, an action that adds emphasis to her comment that the garden was degenerating annually (2). Tara is dismayed but carries on with a cheery, NRI exuberance about the garden that momentarily seduces even the earthly Bim, reminding her of a Lord Byron poem that she had read by Raja’s bed “that summer” of 1947 (3). But the Bim of chapter 1 must violently repress all nostalgic memories of family, and she angrily spreads the broken rose petals over the soil, trying “to bury it all again” (3). Panning out and zooming in, even as far as Bim’s subconscious, the third-person narrator deftly provides us with a wide range of emotions and memories that are stirred up when the diasporic Indian comes “home.”

At the core of the sisters’ divergent attitudes is a conflict around location and its meaning in terms of the family and the nation: the question of who has gone and who has stayed, and how each remembers the past. The narrative still moves between characters’ viewpoints but Bim increasingly takes on the role of questioning Tara’s utopian notions of home—revealing, at once, Bim’s greater knowledge as well as her arrogance. At one point, for instance, the nostalgic Tara exclaims with a sigh:

“How everything goes on and on here, and never changes [. . .] I used to think about it all,” and she waved her arm in a circular swoop to encompass the dripping tap at the end of the grass walk, the trees that quivered and shook with birds, the loping dog, the roses—“and it is all exactly the same, whenever we come home.” (4)
The third-person narrator in this passage, emerging between the quotation marks, describes the garden through the lens of Tara’s nostalgia, transforming the garden into an Edenic space. The “dripping tap” and the quivering and shaking of the bird-filled trees suggest a scene teeming with lushness and vibrancy. But the narrative voice is soon harnessed by Bim as she raises criticisms of Tara’s exoticization of “home.” Giving Tara “a quick sideways look,” Bim begins to provoke her: “Would you like to come back and find it changed?” (4). When Tara, confused, replies in the negative, Bim laughs: “But you wouldn’t want to return to life as it used to be, would you? [ . . . ] All that dullness, boredom, waiting. [ . . . ] Of course not [ . . . ] [You wouldn’t prefer it] to going on—to growing up—leaving—going away—into the world—something wider, freer—brighter” (4).

Bim has caught Tara in a discursive trap, exposing the elite expatriate’s longing for the nation as an inherently paradoxical one: situated abroad but repeatedly glorifying “home” in order to reaffirm national identity and affiliation. Poor Tara’s NRI nationalism, which is inherently a cosmopolitanism, is caught between two wrong answers. She cannot answer yes to Bim’s query about whether she desired to find things in India changed, as Tara’s version of cosmopolitanism requires that “home,” the family and the nation, remain frozen in time in order to be properly loved from afar. Bim’s query and her “quick, sideways look” draw attention to the patronizing implications of Tara’s “circular swoop,” that haughty, effortless gesture of the neither-native-nor-tourist figure that feels entitled to encompass Bim’s present as its past and to call Bim’s space “home” whenever it likes. But by replying that she does not want to see things change, Tara would be implying a negation of her identity as well, for Tara left, we later learn, because she did not love “home” the way it was. Bim attributes an oppositional framework to Tara that she cannot afford to acknowledge, in which “staying home” signifies dullness and waiting, while “going away” leads to excitement and freedom. In response to Bim’s prodding and sarcasm, Tara’s subsequent explanation for why she comes home inadvertently reveals the NRI national identity as a slippery performance, requiring regular, ritualized pilgrimages to the nation.

We will recall, however, that the arc of the first chapter moves from Bim and Tara’s early antagonisms to their united resolve to revisit the past. One of the key elements in this incremental drawing-together of the sisters is that the narrator, along with Bim, gradually disassociates Tara from Bakul. By the end of the chapter, this NRI nationalism (or vapid cosmopolitanism) is gendered male; Tara’s earlier attitude upon coming to
New Delhi is depicted as the product of domestic oppression, for she is the trophy wife who must mimic her husband’s cosmopolitan attitudes about the nation. Bim notes that when Tara, refusing to join Bakul in a New Delhi shopping excursion, says she prefers to stay home, Bakul berates her for degenerating in the Indian climate: he “only had to bring [her] home for one day” and she became “as weak-willed and helpless and defeatist as ever,” wanting to “sit about with her brother and sister all day, doing nothing” (Clear Light 17, 11). Bakul tempts her to enter into a different world, marked as urban, Western, and active: “If only you would come with me, I would show you how to be happy. How to be active and busy—and then you would be happy. If you came” (18). As we have seen, the words “coming,” “going,” and “staying” here are overcharged with meaning and rigidly dichotomized. Tara wants to stay home and to bite the fallen guava fruit in the luxurious indolence of Old Delhi/India while remaining with her family; Bakul wants her to be “happy,” away from home and in the bustle of New Delhi/cosmopolitan social life. As Bakul’s and Tara’s positions disentangle, under Bim’s watchful gaze, Westernization and urbanization are now linked with women’s subservience as well.

The triangle between Bim, Tara, and Bakul—and the gendering of cosmopolitanism—develops most sharply during a visit to the Misras, their neighbors. When asked about how he represents India to a U.S. audience, Bakul says, in his most dignified manner: “I refuse to talk about famine or droughts or caste wars or—or political disputes [. . .] with foreigners, in a foreign land [. . .] I choose to show them and inform them only of the best, the finest” (Clear Light 35). Bakul misses Bim’s sarcastic tone when she provocatively asks whether he is referring to the Taj Mahal, and the ensuing debate dramatizes two very different ways of imagining the nation:

“Yes [. . .] The Taj Mahal—the Bhagavad Gita—Indian philosophy—music—art—the great, immortal values of ancient India. Why talk of local politics, party disputes, election malpractices, Nehru, his daughter, his grandson—such matters as will soon pass into oblivion? These aren’t important when compared with India, eternal India—”

“Yes, it does help to live abroad if you feel that way,” mused Bim, [looking] carefully away from Tara, who watched. “If you lived here [. . .] I think you would be obliged to notice such things as bribery and corruption, red-tapism, famine, caste warfare, and all that [. . .] In all the comfort and luxury of the embassy, it must be much easier, very easy to concentrate on the Taj, on the Emperor Akbar. Over here I’m afraid you would be too busy queuing up for your rations [. . .]. (35–36)
Once again, it is Bim’s perspective that is championed by the text; she interrupts repeatedly and sarcastically and forces Bakul to unleash all the aspects of his national imaginary. Bakul, in contrast, is a character with no interiority. Bakul simply responds arrogantly and on cue (“promptly,” “firmly”) while Bim “muses,” reflects on the dialogue’s impact on her thawing relationship with Tara, and asserts her dialogic equality with him despite his arrogance at being a (male) diplomat. Bim gives Bakul a rhetorical thrashing. She criticizes Bakul’s vision of the nation for being ahistorical (“eternal India”) and apolitical and gives this reading a materialist gloss by suggesting that the “comfort and luxury” of a diplomat’s life abroad has much to do with his easy dismissal of real-world problems. Rejecting Bakul’s contention that his depiction of the nation is a functionalist one to combat Orientalist notions of India abroad, Bim emphasizes the importance of thinking about the crisis of Nehruvian politics, corruption and bureaucracy, famine, and caste inequalities. The nation is of utmost concern to Bim, but it is the day-to-day realities of the nation, not its image in the expatriate mind as a pure, eternal essence.

Significantly, the text is quite interested in drawing out Tara’s position here: she watches the debate and is being watched by Bim. The passage reminds us that Bim’s relationship to Tara is not oppositional but dialectical; their familial bond and common experience of women’s oppression allows for a dynamism and movement that is unavailable to Bakul. The deliberate noncommunication between Bim and Tara—Bim sees that Tara is watching but avoids her eyes—is itself a communication borne from years of a shared life, a knowledge that locking eyes would be like speaking, engendering interpretation and response. In fact, the context suggests that Bim looks away to limit potential misinterpretation of her statement. The specific moment at which Bim accounts for Tara’s presence is the line “it does help to live abroad [. . .]”; by looking away, Bim says, as it were, that her challenging of Bakul does not extend to Tara. Bim’s knowledge of Tara’s presence suggests a performative aspect to her debate, as if she is modeling behavior for Tara by standing up to Bakul as his equal. And when Tara, still sensitive, does react angrily to the rhetorical ending of Bim’s speech by reminding her that she was too wealthy to ever have to stand in line for rations, Bim’s reaction is not to get angry but to laugh and defuse the situation (36).

As this self-critical laughter toward the end of the chapter suggests, Bim is starting to soften toward Tara, seeking to engage her in dialogue, to move her away from Bakul’s patronizing influence, and to open herself up to criticism as well. Her thoughts at this juncture turn away from Bakul
to reflect on Tara’s “not quite assimilated cosmopolitanism that sat on her oddly, as if a child had dressed up in her mother’s high-heeled shoes—taller, certainly, but wobbling” (Clear Light 37). Problematically, neither the third-person narrator nor Bim is critical of Bim’s own patronizing attitude toward Tara, just as The Day in Shadow is unmindful of the way that Raj talks down to Simrit in “liberating” her. Nevertheless, by viewing Tara’s cosmopolitanism as a performance for her husband, a mark of her oppression as a woman, Bim stops thinking about her in essentialist terms and opens up the possibilities of change and transformation. Communication, not sarcasm, begins to emerge as a value as we move toward the cathartic moments of chapters 2 and 3. Upon returning from the Misras, Bim and Tara are able to begin a conversation in which the power dynamics between them subside in favor of the joint project of recovering the past and the link between familiar and national problems. But although they enter into the past together, it is Bim’s realization of Tara’s subject position and her growing awareness about her own that opens up this space for remembering the family and the nation.

Families and Nations

The analeptic, middle chapters of the novel establish the links between familial conflicts and national ones; the family is both a product of national crises and a metaphor for the fragmented nation. And central to the disintegration of and violence within the family, as Bim comes to realize, is the oppression of generations of women. Bim’s reflection on her own alienation from her family in the middle chapters emerges, in fact, from the deepening of a feminist or antisexist political consciousness that contextualizes individual experiences within larger histories. Following the novels’ various chains of signification, we can read the family and the nation as analogous objects for renewal and transformation. First, the “deep stone well [in the back garden] that held green scum and black deeds” (Clear Light 117) symbolically links together the main female characters’ stories and opens the door to a broader understanding of women’s oppression. Further, as Huma Ibrahim has shown, the well is also a symbol through which the story of the deteriorating nation is woven into the fabric and even the psyche of the female characters’ daily lives. At the same time, various male characters’ visions for solving familial/national crises are marked as idealist and utopian, as emphasized in the narration of Raja’s and Bakul’s youthful responses to Partition violence. Only selflessness and
sympathy stand out as potential avenues for healing and wholeness, as represented by Bim’s work as a volunteer to aid Partition refugees. While no explicitly political statements appear here, the tracing of Bim’s growing understanding about her own life becomes the basis of the novel’s politics and ideology.

The well is at once a symbol and a site of women’s oppression and of the repression of that oppression within the traditional family, an act that produces various shades of guilt, paranoia, and neuroses among the female characters of the novel. Indeed, this interpretation is strongly suggested to the reader by Bim herself, who emphasizes how the well was a site of calamity for the female characters in the Old Delhi house. The association begins with the death of the “bride-like cow” of the family, the producer of much milk and sustenance, that had wandered off and tumbled into the well and drowned, poisoning and blackening the water (Clear Light 99, 107, 117). The description of the cow as “bride-like” emphasizes its value, in Hindu iconography, as a symbol of femininity, fertility, and motherhood. The cow’s unfortunate death and the family’s inability to remove the rotting carcass make the well a source of fear for female characters; only Raja and the (male) gardener ever go even near the well, though the young Bim pretends to in an attempt to seem brave (99, 117). When Tara and Bim find themselves there once as children, they return screaming “at the horror behind the hedge, the well that waited for them at the bottom of the garden, bottomless and black and stinking” (118).

The narration explicitly recasts the well as the unconscious, the site of repression and its potential return as horror. The impact of the well is deepest on Mira-masi, Bim’s aged and widowed aunt, whom the family makes responsible for the cow’s death by accusing her of negligence. Mira-masi dreams nightly of the cow’s drowning and imagines her own destruction/suicide (99). Haunted by the well, the mature Bim herself fears that she is headed there toward the end of the novel (157), an idea that is resuscitated when Tara’s daughters, her nieces, call her “Bim-masi” (170). The language of drowning and death by water is invoked at other times throughout the novel as a way to describe coercion and suffocation, often prompting characters to refer to the well. For instance, Tara once describes Bim’s hold on her as “that rough, strong, sure grasp” that was dragging her down; the “waters of her childhood [were] closing over her head again—black and scummy as the well in the back” (149). The well is the site of violence against the feminine as well as the repression of that violence, one that rebounds back on the female characters as a warning
and a fear. As Bim reflects: “the horror of that death by drowning lived in the area behind the caravanda hedge like a mad relation, a family scandal or a hereditary illness waiting to re-emerge” (107–8). Indeed, each item of this triple simile alludes to the family, conjugal and joint, as the source of conflict and deterioration and binds it to the well. The family itself is turned into a prime site of repression and horror.

Ibrahim skillfully argues, further, that the well ought to be read as the site of the post-Partition national degeneration that is haunting the Old Delhi house and its women. As she puts it, *Clear Light of Day* is about “how a Hindu family negotiates the reality of everyday life before the Partition and how loyalties and emotions are disturbed and reconfigured after the Partition” (306). The cow had been brought into the home with much fanfare and was thought to be a provider of sustenance for the children (*Clear Light* 107); it can thus be read as an “icon for the carefully anticipated and finally decolonized nation” (Ibrahim 306). Watched carelessly, the cow drowns and symbolizes “the continuity of violence between families/nations and religions that began with Partition” (306). Ibrahim reads the cow’s unrecovered carcass as a symbol of the unrecovered wholeness of the new nation, “fester in the historical consciousness of the severed family/nation,” now viewed with a “participatory dread” that cannot be exorcised (307). The morbid attraction that Mira-masi and Bim have for the well, Ibrahim argues, is analogous to that of the crowds who were drawn, inexplicably, toward Partition violence; and, in that case, violence against the other was also violence to the family and to the self (307). *Clear Light of Day* reads the rupture of the nation not only as being analogous to the rupture of the family, but also as the very physical and imagined ground upon which familial oppression occurs. The violence of Partition is now located as the source of the violence against women in the family. This is how Ibrahim explains the intensity of the narrative voice when describing how Bim and Tara would shudder while watching the fires of the Partition rioting burn from the rooftop of the Old Delhi house: the event stands in for the nonfictional narratives of actual women who were victimized and terrorized by the communal violence, and the sisters’ recognition of that horror (Ibrahim 308).

Reading the well in this manner allows us to link the text’s desire for a reconstructed family to the desire for national wholeness that appears in bits and pieces throughout the novel—and against the “horror” of Partition violence that lies at the very foundation of the nation. One such scene is described from the vantage point of a bus traveling through Partition-era Delhi, as Bim remembers viewing
the massed jungle of rag-and-tin huts that had grown beneath [the city walls], housing the millions of refugees who were struggling in across the new border [. . .] They swarmed and crawled with a kind of crippled, subterranean life that made Bim feel that the city would never recover from this horror, that it would be changed irremediably, that it was already changed, no longer the city that she was born in. She set her jaw and stared into its shadowy thickness. (86)

The violence of the nation is being mourned in both meanings of the word “of,” both in terms of the violence caused by the nation (“the new border”) and upon it (“changed irremediably”). Caught in the contradictions of this “of,” however, are the refugees. Between Bim’s shock and her nostalgia for the pre-Partition nation, the meaning of “this horror” becomes ambiguous, pointing to both the conditions that created refugees and the refugees themselves. Seeing the refugees as the “outsiders” makes even Bim—a volunteer in refugee camps—describe them as a swarming, crawling horde of insects or animals, inhabiting a space inferior to the real subject of this passage: the city/home/nation. The elitism of bourgeois-nationalism emerges here clearly. Nevertheless, Bim means to be compassionate. Her determination to bear the sight of the refugees, setting her jaw against the inevitable changes, feeds her youthful resolution that she would never leave her home even if that limited her opportunities for marriage (Clear Light 140). For Bim, therefore, the family and home are always overwritten by the nation, and vice versa—and it is through the desire for recovering that imagined nation of the past that the contemporary nation is implicitly critiqued for its violence.

Only Bim can hold together the family/nation, and the gendering of her position is clearly revealed through the opposition of her materialist, locally grounded view of the nation against idealized forms expounded by male family members such as Bakul and Raja. The two characters, in a sense, could not be more different, though both are associated with antiparochial notions of identity. Bakul, the urban cosmopolitan, celebrates the new nation (Partition and all), and its Hindu heritage. Raja falls in love, as a boy, with the figure of Hyder Ali, the family’s landlord, on his horse; Urdu poetry and (elite) Muslim culture a bit later; and, inevitably, Hyder Ali’s daughter, Benazir. Terrified by the Partition riots and what it would mean for Hyder Ali and his family, Raja expresses his solidarity with him through supporting the creation of Pakistan (Clear Light 57). He finally goes to live with Hyder Ali, marries Benazir, and starts a family. Despite
their differences, both Bakul and Raja are depicted as being useless at the time of Partition and the disappearance of Hyder Ali’s family, their idealized visions of the nation dissolving in the fact of actual conflict. Bakul, a young civil servant in the late colonial era, doubts the reports of Partition violence and declares his full faith in Nehru, Viceroy Mountbatten, Mohammed Ali Jinnah (Pakistan’s first prime minister), and the “police protection” of the state (71). Raja, called “Lord Byron” by his classmates, announces to the world that he will protect Hyder Ali and Benazir (59). The younger Bim is critical of this bombast but not yet bitter. Positioned in opposition to these two men as the novel’s only realist, Bim exposes the material structures that allow such male romanticizations of the nation: the domestic work of Tara and Bim, respectively (cf. 100–101). The investigation of the past, of the roots of the family’s current fragmentation, leads to an explanation of Bim’s bitterness as a product of the pressures on the family/nation, linked through symbol and character.

The narrative resolution of *Clear Light of Day*, however, presents some textual obstacles for the implied audience, drawn in by the novel’s woman-centered representations of oppression in the family/nation. For, quite inexplicably, Bim’s critical lens is suddenly turned away from examining the social and familial structures that women inhabit and is directed, instead, at her individual psychology. Initially, as Bim seeks to “apply” the lessons learned from the flashback chapters, the old critical attitude persists; she is, at once, caustic as a person but also perceptive as an observer of social life. Bim recognizes the need to confront obstacles and to attempt communication, but is still quite aware of how she was wronged. Having learned the introspective, meditative quality of Bim’s voice, and the novel as a whole, the audience does not expect any dramatic breakthrough. But Bim suddenly arrives at an epiphany that transforms the text—and disrupts Desai’s characterization. When Bim lashes out at her autistic brother Baba one day, an image of the “smashed egg and the bird with a broken neck” that she had just seen outside flashes in her mind, a sight that had made her wonder what bird had “made its nest so crudely, so insecurely” (165, 163). And she sees herself in that bird:

> Her eyes opened up at this sight against her will, and she looked around the room almost in fear. [. . .] She saw how she loved [Baba], loved Raja and Tara and all of them who had lived in this house with her. There could be no love more deep and full and wide than this one, she knew. No other love had started so far back in time and had had so much time
in which to grow and spread. They were all really parts of her, inseparable [. . .] so that the anger or disappointment she felt in them was only the anger and disappointment she felt at herself. (165)

The (joint) family is apparently not a site of conflict, oppression, and repression, a false ideal that masks the material realities of women’s labor. Rather, the family is always already whole, “inseparable,” linked to the Old Delhi house and bound together by a “deep and full and wide” love and rooted in common location and history. The statement that “the anger or disappointment she felt in them was only the anger and disappointment she felt at herself” transforms the text from one that criticizes women’s internalization of gender norms to one that justifies it. Indeed, Bim’s recognition of her culpability is marked as the pinnacle of her new understanding of the family. She notes that if there were “gashes and wounds in her side that bled, then it was only because her love was imperfect and did not encompass [her family] thoroughly enough [. . .]” (165). Earlier, the text focused on bringing to light those “gashes and wounds,” suggesting that their cause lay in the violence of familial oppression, which was itself intertwined with the violent convulsions of the postcolonial nation as a symbol for it. Bim’s recognition of these systems of violence was presented as a mark of her growth. But these concluding passages offer the implied audience a new framework for gauging Bim and her progress. The “gashes and wounds” were only the product of her lack of understanding familial wholeness, a mark of her imperfect love.

In the aftermath of Bim’s new realization, a second event occurs, ending the novel, that seems extraneous but actually serves an important function: to expand Bim’s resolution on the level of the family to that of the nation and national culture. Bim and Baba go out to a concert at the Miras where their neighbor Mulk, previously described as a lazy and sexist boor who lives off the labor of his sisters, is going to sing after many years of fruitless practice. The setting of the outdoor, evening concert is described, without irony, as a “picture as perfectly composed as a Mughal miniature of a garden scene by night, peopled with lovers, princes, and musicians at play” (Clear Light 180). The scene evokes the poetry readings at Hyder Ali’s house, previously marked as idealist and romantic, that Raja had attended. A bit of the old Bim remains, thankfully: she is attracted not to Mulk’s “sweet and clear” voice but to his aged teacher’s, “sharp, even a little cracked, inclined to break [. . .] with the bitterness of his experiences, the sadness, the passion, the frustration. [. . .]” (182). However, Bim will now seek compromise at all costs. Listening to the
guru, Bim sees “how one ancient school of music contained both Mulk, still an immature disciple, and his aged, exhausted guru, with all the disillusionments and defeats of his long experience” (182). The association between this scene, Hyder Ali’s poetry readings, and “Mughal miniatures” evokes a sense of national culture as diverse, syncretic, and transcendent, and Bim immediately links these properties to the family: “her own house and its particular history linked and contained her as well as her whole family, with all their separate histories and experiences” (182). So when Bim hears the guru singing “verses [. . . ] that remind her of her brother’s (and her own) childhood romantic aspirations, she no longer rejects the memory” but “brush[es] aside the grey hair at her face and [. . . ] lean[s] excitedly towards Baba. ‘Iqbal’s,’ she said. ‘Raja’s favorite’” (182). Working as a balm to soothe Bim’s frustrations with her family, her neighbors, and her nation, the concert leaves the critical, independent Bim, inexplicably, contented and whole.

The Return to Tradition

Both The Day in Shadow and Clear Light of Day are profoundly and uniquely political in terms of theme and perspective, and their development of female characters’ interior lives actually enables their challenge to the gendered public/private spheres. Each novel, in different ways, holds the traditional family and the postcolonial nation-state responsible for violence toward women. However, each also returns to fairly unreconstructed models of familial and national communities in order to reimagine them as potentially emancipatory spaces. In The Day in Shadow, right-thinking politicians and husbands such as Raj are imagined as reforming the nation and gender relations. In Clear Light of Day, women who resolve to be less stubborn and more forgiving, as Bim finally does, allow the family and nation to heal. The texts’ failure to critique the traditional nation and family—ideological failures—produces unresolved contradictions and tensions on the aesthetic level. Ideological analysis becomes important not only for the discussion of politics and content, I suggest, but also for an analysis of the novels’ aesthetics.

Let’s first articulate what the novels themselves aim to do: they foreground a sympathetic approach to traditions even while being deeply committed to a nation and society that would treat its women justly, and that would stand for syncretic and nonparochial notions of culture and society. While The Day in Shadow critiques Hindu traditionalism, for instance, it
also cites quotations for Hindu scriptures such as the Upanishads in order to make its point about the need for syncretism. On the flip side, while *Clear Light of Day* critiques Bakul’s cosmopolitan idealism and champions “staying home,” Bim’s position, as the final resuscitation of Raja, Iqbal, and Lord Byron emphasizes, certainly does not emerge from a narrow perspective about cultural purity. Taken together, the novels rewrite the critique and reform of tradition as a process that is derived from Indian/Hindu tradition itself—and not as a deviation from it. For all her criticisms of tradition, as Sahgal explains in “My New Novel: *The Day in Shadow*” (*The Hindustan Times*, 18 December 1971), she sees in Hinduism a “powerful potential to provide men and women with a buoyant base for action” (*Point of View* 18).

It bears emphasizing that in taking up such a perspective toward Indian tradition, Sahgal and Desai place themselves within a long line of modern Indian nationalists, from Swami Vivekananda to M. K. Gandhi to Jawaharlal Nehru, who discussed the need for India to amalgamate “Western” values (activity, rationality) with “Eastern” ones (patience, spirituality). Such a discourse allowed, at once, an Enlightenment-style critique of traditional hierarchies and a valorization of precolonial practices. Take the following excerpt from Nehru’s *The Discovery of India*:

> National progress can […] lie neither in a repetition of the past, nor its denial. New patterns must inevitably be adopted but they must be integrated with the old. Sometimes the new, though very different, appears in terms of pre-existing patterns, and thus creates a feeling of continuous development from the past […]. There was [in the Indian past] a reverence for the past and for traditional forms, but there was also a freedom and flexibility of the mind […]. In no other way could that society have survived for thousands of years. Only a living and growing mind could overcome the rigidity of traditional forms, only those forms could give it continuity and stability. (*Discovery* 517)

The passage goes on to emphasize scientific learning over “religiosity” and the need to fight the effects of backward traditional forms: caste, class, and gender oppression (518–20). In effect, “national progress” is linked to an approach that 1) values synthesis and syncretism, in which the “new” is valued but “must be integrated with the old”; 2) recognizes that the “pre-existing patterns” are *already* implied in the “new”; and 3) asserts that ancient Indian society “survived for thousands of years” precisely because the “freedom and flexibility of mind” that Nehru is prescribing was prac-
ticed. “Freedom and flexibility,” newness and syncretism, are thus central aspects of “thousands of years” of Indian society, which was not stagnant but “living and growing.”

The passage critiques tradition, but, paradoxically, regards the critique and reworking of tradition as one of the central features of Indian tradition. On the one hand, Nehru challenges Orientalist oppositions between Western/dynamic and Eastern/stagnant. On the other, he raises questions about how tradition ought to be criticized. Who gets to decide what needs to be preserved, and what ought to be changed? Nehru resolves the question conservatively: making an ahistorical appeal to a unitary tradition as being sufficient in and of itself. Such modern-nationalist paradigms, despite their appeal to social reform and transformation, end up legitimating and reifying “Indian tradition.” As such, the passage serves to limit critique—and stands in tension with the quotation from Nehru discussed earlier on the topic of women’s education. The approach to Indian religious and cultural traditions in both The Day in Shadow and Clear Light of Day embodies a similar set of tensions. The ultimate championing of such ahistorical notions of tradition means that protagonists resolve crises by returning to mainstream traditions, whether political or cultural, with nothing more than a change in outlook. The key is the moral, upright individual, a good citizen who unselfishly acts for the betterment of all and interprets/reforms tradition in “appropriate” ways. The idealism and ultimate conservatism of these political ideologies produce certain textual ruptures that weaken the novels’ own literary projects. Most importantly, the return to tradition in these novels requires the taming and marginalization of the female protagonists whose paths to political consciousness were initially marked by a greater understanding of the structures of gender oppression in the family and the nation.

In The Day in Shadow the explicit adherence to Nehruvian approaches to political and cultural tradition both enables a critique of authoritarianism and women’s oppression and ultimately limits the novel’s development of character and voice. Take, for instance, Ram Krishan’s formula for personal and political action that synthesizes Raj’s (“Christian”) tendency to act decisively and Simrit’s (“Hindu”) unwillingness to make complete breaks with the past (The Day 235). Such a synthesis, in the novel’s imaginary, allows the nation to recover its Gandhian and Nehruvian political traditions and break from the post-Nehruvian dependency on the either/or future of “Marx and anti-Marx,” the Soviet Union and the West, Sumer Singh and Som—and therefore to build a nation that is more equitable. The union of Raj and Simrit symbolizes this idea of creating new political
paradigms through the combination of existing ones, and suggests the kind of individuals who might make such changes. But the novel’s ultimate focus on moral individuals undermines its own political analyses and forces the novel’s characters into molds that do not necessarily fit them. Simrit articulates this morality as a way to get around the confusing world of Indian politics, arguing that the “real dividing line in Indian politics would soon be between the ruthless and the compassionate. All the other labels and variations would not count” (*The Day* 222). In a time when significant leftist and secular forces uncritically supported Indira Gandhi’s authoritarianism, such a paradigm allowed *The Day in Shadow*’s prescient observation that so-called socialism was working hand-in-glove with domesticated international capital. But the imprecision and subjective nature of the categories “compassionate” and “ruthless” also ends up labeling as “compassionate” forces that are quite ruthless in terms of their oppression of women and ordinary Indians, and vice versa.

For instance, the reader is asked to sympathize with the plight of Sumer Singh’s aging and wealthy father, who fears that the new, “robber government” (of which his son is a member) will tax too heavily whatever inheritance he leaves for Sumer. Sumer’s father asserts that his problem is not that the government is “socialist”: “It has been [socialist] for twenty-five years. It is somewhat different today” (132). A moral yardstick is being used for the purposes of political theory: there is apparently a socialism of the present that is associated with hypocrites such as Sumer who find ways to keep their own inheritance even as they rob others, and a socialism of the Nehruvian past that defended property rights—one that a rich old man could get used to. But the moral yardstick is not applied consistently, for while we are asked to sympathize with Sumer’s father’s desire to transmit his personal wealth to his son, Som’s passing along a huge financial inheritance to Brij, his eldest son, and thus cutting out the divorced Simrit, is marked as immoral. The moral-political critique of the inheritance, that “no one should have that kind of money with no effort when so many still lived tortured lives” (*The Day* 56, 147), stands in conflict with the representation of Sumer’s father, in which the quantity of his wealth has no bearing on whether he gets to keep it in the family.

Perhaps the best evidence of the unreliability of the moral litmus test is the fact that even Som is partially resuscitated as an ally for Indian progress, as he turns out to represent the kind of “radical, self-sacrificing individualism” that the novel’s political ideology demands (*The Day* 235). Such individualism becomes so valued in the text that Raj and Som, in fact, are finally made to appear quite similar: “self-made men” with all
familial property and inheritance lost during Partition (104, 24), men who “could be formidable instruments of progress” (226). Indeed, unlike the “Russia-lover” Sumer Singh, sparks of Indianess emanate from behind Som’s cosmopolitan façade. It manifests itself in unexpected moments, especially through his Panjabi heritage, but his regional and national identities are depicted as being smothered amidst the frills of cosmopolitanism: German phrases “on the tip of his tongue,” French ties, Italian shoes, and a son going abroad to school (91, 216). As the novel proceeds, Som is increasingly described in a tone that almost pitys him for the absence of the nation in his life. For instance, the inquisitive Brij watches Som eat Indian bazaar food just before a trip to Europe:

Now he was eating heavily [. . .] almost like a man in prayer, chewing every mouthful with deliberation, savoring every morsel, as if the whole world were shut out. It was so strange, Pa sitting away in his own room, away from the others [European friends], about to leave for Europe, so terrifically dressed . . . but eating bazaar food like that, the only food he ate like that, as if it filled some enormous chasm in him with much more than food. (216)

Brij’s suspicion that the “chasm” represents the absence of his mother in his father’s life is only partially right; in the novel’s system of signification, missing Simrit is also missing India. A new compartment in Som’s fragmented life is opened up, a private, Indian space that is “away from the [European] others” in which bazaar food is consumed prayerfully, as an act of national longing. Indeed, if we follow the clues of Simrit’s own thoughts about Som, his “chasm” may be linked to the loss of his inheritance at Partition, a Panjabi life that represented his “real hunger,” far from the “monogrammed china and linen” of his cosmopolitan present (The Day 26). While this passage is incredibly valuable for its perceptions about the national longings of even allegedly antinational cosmopolitans, its eagerness to put aside criticisms of capitalism and sexism in the interests of a rehabilitating nationalism is suggestive of an ideological framework that creates instability on the level of plot, character, and voice, and is not consistent with its emancipatory claims.

If the return to tradition in The Day in Shadow is somewhat expected, being the result of a gradual progression, in Clear Light of Day it is an inversion that is quite shocking. On the level of character development and resolution, readers of all political persuasions might draw comfort from Bim’s ability to confront her repressions and anxieties, to go into her new
term as history professor at Indraprastha College and rearrange her decaying, “stifling, dust-choked room,” throwing away her old papers, trying to “jettison everything, lighten the bark, and go free” (Clear Light 168–69). But as Bim “goes free” she also loses her voice. The knots and complications in Bim’s thoughts disappear even as the gap between Bim and the third-person narrator virtually vanishes: throughout the fourth chapter, Bim’s role is to articulate surprisingly simple platitudes, however touching, about the love that families must have for one another. As with Simrit in the later chapters of The Day in Shadow, an apparent consequence of liberation is the utter loss of a textured interiority, the achievement of which remains the strongest and most unique feature of the novel. The sophisticated implied audience that was imagined by the text in its earlier chapters—one that learned to accept Bim’s cynicism and her critique of traditionalism—is now forced to accept Bim’s absorption into a static tradition. But what are we to make of the fact that at least some of the basis of Bim’s initial alienation was her relatives’ own narrowness and conservatism with regard to women’s roles in the family? What do we make of the fact that the implied author—who initially revealed Bim’s shrewdness and her arrogance simultaneously by emphasizing the gap between her voice and the narrator’s—now dissolves the gap and offers a univocal story of Bim’s transformation?

We are left with a surprising reinscription onto Bim of the figure of the self-sacrificing woman, a figure that Gupta relegates to the period before the 1960s (299)—and this at the conclusion of a novel that explicitly criticizes the violence that such “ideals” cause in women’s lives. Bim, Miramasi, Tara, and the Misra sisters are shaped and crushed by the burdens of being the good widow, the good wife, the good mother, the good daughter, and the good sister. But Bim’s “epiphany” valorizes the woman’s subservience to the family and the idea that she ought to blame herself for being dissatisfied by its individual members. The quotation from Iqbal that ends the book emphasizes and glorifies subservience on an ontological level: “In Your world I am subjected and constrained, but over my world You have dominion” (Clear Light 183). Addressed to God and/or a lover, the line glorifies self-sacrifice and voluntary submission; the speaker is “subjected and constrained” in the listener’s world, and the latter has complete “dominion” in the speaker’s world.

This valorization of willing subservience attenuates another possibility for resolving Bim’s frustrations that had been raised earlier: the rejection of traditional notions of women’s self-sacrifice but not the idea of freely performed acts of service and solidarity. As Bim reviews her life and begins
to heal, she remembers what the frustrated Dr. Biswas, a jilted suitor, had said to her: “Now I understand why you do not wish to marry. You have dedicated your life to others—to your sick brother and your aged aunt and your little brother who will be dependent on you all his life. You have sacrificed your own life for them” (Clear Light 97). What Bim dislikes in this characterization of her is not the idea of helping others, but the prescriptive element in them: the words were “so leadenly spoken as if engraved on steel for posterity” (97). Her service to her family implicitly becomes, in this refutation of Dr. Biswas, a voluntary act. But by representing Bim as “flawed” for being angry at Raja’s condescension and NRI arrogance, the novel undermines its own critique of women’s oppression. Indeed, the reduction of Bim toward the end of the book into an embittered old spinster who has missed out on her dreams is more in line with Tara’s own fixation on the idea of Bim’s being unmarried (151–52) than with Bim’s fierce independence. Before her conversations with Tara, Bim seems to be quite happy with her own “family” of history students who have come to her home for their lessons, exhibiting a persona of informality of which Bakul, with his fixed notions of how women should behave in public, does not approve (20). She appears to be far from desirous of being in either Tara’s or Raja’s situation. Are we to reread the entire novel, understanding Bim’s spirit of independence as a mark of her flawed nature?

In light of these novels’ final return to political and cultural traditions, it may be tempting to read them as two more examples of the how the nation and its traditions are inimical to women’s emancipation, revealing the taming influence of national thinking on feminist and antiseexist critique. The texts’ desires for wholeness through regenerated models of the nation, whether in the arms of a male Nehruvian nationalist such as Raj or in reconstructed models of the family/nation, place their female protagonists firmly back into gendered private spheres. However, I read their final turns toward tradition as contradicting and displacing earlier insights. The initial critiques of women’s oppression are themselves linked to critiques of the postcolonial nation, specifically militarism, foreign policy, divorce laws, corruption and rations, Partition violence, and the refugee crisis. Furthermore, these critiques of the present emerge not from postnational positions but from namak-halaal and nationalist ones: the postcolonial nation had betrayed the ideals of the past, whether these were embedded in Gandhi and Nehru (Sahgal) or Akbar and cultural traditions (Desai). The fact that these novels do not produce alternative, gender-egalitarian models of nations and families ought not to minimize their efforts to seek such spaces. At the very least, we need to record the presence of feminist-
nationalisms in postcolonial women’s writing and explain, with references to historical and ideological contexts, why it is that old models of the nation and of gendered private/public spheres assert themselves even when such texts clearly desire something new.

The authors themselves, disinterested in whether they are regarded as radical critics of nationalism or not, provide more direct responses to such questions. In interviews and articles, both Sahgal and Desai have defended their portrayals of women’s characters by suggesting that compromise, and not radical antagonism, is the basis for women’s emancipation. As educated, urban, professional women, they represent themselves as being personally outraged by social and political oppression but, at the same time, as individuals who choose compromise (often marked as “nonviolent”) over radicalism (often marked as “violent”). The authors also point out that there is continuity between their own perspectives and their fiction, as their (urban, middle-class) characters constantly choose reconciliation and dialogue over self-annihilation. However, as I have tried to suggest, historical and ideological developments in the early decades of Indian post-coloniality push these authors to express ideas that are far more radical than they may seem, even to the writers themselves. Or perhaps Sahgal does recognize this, as she writes in a 1991 letter: “I am a conservative (i.e., careful about stepping out into the new) who has been constantly driven to be a revolutionary by the force of circumstances and the nature of events around me” (Paranjape, “Crisis of Contemporary India” 298). This striking self-definition is consistent with my discussion of how The Day in Shadow and Clear Light of Day do emerge into the new, investigating gender and sexuality through giving greater depth to female characters. Amidst the ideological turmoil and confusion of the 1970s, however, a time when Communists (among others) supported authoritarianism and Hindu fundamentalists (among others) opposed it, that newness was delimited by historical and ideological contradictions that literature could not necessarily overcome.30