



CHAPTER V

CLEAR LIGHT OF DAY



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Clear Light of Day presents a story between pre-and-post independence about the history of an extended family and the tragedies they faced. It is within these characters and writing techniques that Anita Desai reaches the readers of the middle class, thus expanding and developing their realms of imagination. Desai wove the history of Delhi with a middle-class Hindu family. The novel does not represent a new trend in Desai's fiction though it differs from her earlier novels. There is no real change in the thematic interests and the technical concerns of Desai. *New York Times* praises the novel "as a wonderful novel about silence and music, about the partition of a family as well as a nation."¹⁶⁵ A review in *New Yorker* says, "A rich, Chekhovian novel by one of the most gifted of contemporary Indian writers."¹⁶⁶ *Brijraj Singh* compares the novel to "an extended piece of music, subtle, sensitive, sensuous in its line and melody but also complex and richly integrated in its total effect."¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵ New York Times.

¹⁶⁶ New Yorker.

¹⁶⁷ Brijraj Singh, "The Fiction of Anita Desai", The Humanities Review III, 2 (July-December 1981) 43.

Clear Light of Day was a landmark in her career. "It marked my breaking out," says **Desai**, explaining also the change that came over her use of language. She incorporated the rhythm and tone of Indian speech into English and the effect was described as "four-dimensional" by noted critic *Gabrielle Annan* in the *Times Literary Supplement*. **Sunil Sethi** says in the words of Desai the novel is "about time as a preserver and destroyer, about what the bondage of time does to people."¹⁶⁸

The title of the novel, *Clear Light of Day*, refers to a passage in the fourth part of the novel in which Bimla Das, who had always believed in the past, matures now and begins to look afresh in 'the clear light of day' that she felt only love and yearning for them all:

"If there were hurts, these gashes and wounds in her side that bled, then it was only because her love was imperfect and did not encompass them thoroughly enough and because it had flaws and inadequacies and did not extend to all equally" (p. 165). In the 'clear light of day' of her maturing consciousness, Bim realizes that she was narrow in her love and forgives all. It is the story of a woman wrapped up in the world of fantasies and visions. Bim lived in the

¹⁶⁸ Sunil Sethi, "Interview with Anita Desai" (India Today, Dec.1-15, 1980) 142.

dreamy world of the past but wakes up in the clear light of day to mend her relations with her brother.

The summer of 1947 has divided the nation and the family - Hindus and Muslims are torn apart by Partition. Part II traces the effect of partition riots on the family. It describes the main events in the family against the background of the 1947 upheaval. Much of the conflict in India during the time of Anita Desai's novel *Clear Light of Day* centers upon religious tensions between the Muslims and Hindus. Desai, while mentioning the events that were caused by the religious tensions, neglects to address the religion issue in any great detail. While there is little mention of religion, language, which in India is divided along religious lines, is brought up many times

Through Tara's and Bim's consciousness Desai examines the same events from different points of view. Although the characters barely venture beyond their front gate, they live out the legacy of India's bitter battle for independence. "The spunky children of a poor Indian village, the Old Delhi family torn apart by Partition, the ageing debauched poet, the dignified, tired matriarch, the plain and lumpish spinster - Desai's characters are never cardboard cut-outs, they aren't victims and they aren't heroes - they are just human."¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁹ Preface to Desai, Anita. *Clear Light of Day*. (Great Britain:

Clear Light of Day, Desai's masterpiece of familial attachments and avowedly her most autobiographical novel, evokes this transition through an anglicised family in Old Delhi in the 40s. "Perhaps I fused my sisters, both working women, one married, the other not, into one character, Bim," says *Desai*. "But what's mostly autobiographical is the atmosphere of that household and that house."¹⁷⁰

This novel describes the emotional reactions of two main characters, Bim and her younger sister Tara, who are haunted by the memories of the past. At the novel's heart are the moving relationships between the members of the Das family, who have grown apart from each other. Bim is a dissatisfied but ambitious history professor at a women's college who lives in her childhood home, where she cares for her mentally challenged brother, Baba. Tara is her younger, unambitious, estranged sister, married and with children of her own. Raja is their popular, brilliant and successful brother. As *Holly Smith* says, "When Tara returns for a visit to stay with Bim and Baba, old memories and tensions resurface and blend into a domestic drama that is intensely beautiful and leads to profound self-understanding."¹⁷¹

Penguin Books, 1980).

¹⁷⁰ Anita Desai, "Replies to the Questionnaire".

¹⁷¹ Holly Smith, Editorial Review (from Barnes & Noble).

In the words of *Brijraj Singh*, "Desai's world may be small, but it is a world through which the same winds blow as sweep through the whole of the sub-continent."¹⁷² The rhythm of life of middle class children growing up in such a setting, their play, their hopes and frustrations, the seasons, especially the summer, the river and the sandbanks, the dusty gardens, the koels, the coppersmiths, the barking dogs, the carts on the road, ice cream, sitting on the lawn with cool drinks, sleeping out in the open, the whirring fans and bamboo chicks-all the details of the kind of life being described are vividly created by Desai till the reader who has lived through them all begins to feel that it is a part of his own life that is being evoked.

Desai is able to show the outer sides of her characters through Bim and Bim's family and neighbours. Externally, Bim is portrayed as a strong, stable, at times traditional Indian woman who is a bit bitter at others, especially her family members:

"She had always thought Bim so competent, so capable. Everyone had thought that" (p. 148). She is the one who is forced to take care of her mentally handicapped brother, Baba. Tara does not understand why Bim doesn't want anything to change, when she rejects the hopeless atmosphere of the house:

¹⁷² Singh, "The Fiction of Anita Desai" 190.

"Why did Bim allow nothing to change? Surely, Baba ought to begin to grow and develop at last, to unfold and reach out and stretch. But whenever she saw them, at intervals of three or five years, all was exactly as before" (p. 12). Even after she becomes accustomed to her brother, Bim is forced to care for her alcoholic Mira-masi, "swigging secretly from her brandy bottle" (p. 5).

Bim is an independent woman. Bim's memories of the family past dominate her sterile existence, she feels betrayed by her sister Tara and replays her memories in the decaying family mansion in Old Delhi. Their mentally retarded brother plays old records. Throughout this novel, the house is a threatening presence characterized by an explosive silence and a recurrent image of Baba grinding the old gramophone and listening to the old cracked records of the forties. *Madhusudan Prasad* says, "It is this dominant static image of the house that looms large in the mind of the reader, symbolically suggesting the suppressed anger and bitterness of Bim."¹⁷³

"It seemed to her that the dullness and the boredom of her childhood, her youth, were stored here in the room under the worn dusty red rugs, in the bloated brassware, amongst the dried grasses in the swollen vases, behind the yellowed

¹⁷³ Madhusudan Prasad, *The Novels of Anita Desai: A Study in Imagery* (Allahabad: New Horizon, 1981).

photographs in the oval frames - everything, everything that she had so hated as a child and that was still preserved here as if this were the storeroom of some dull, uninviting provincial museum" (p. 16). Tara finds the house dusty and shabby. On the other hand Bim realizes that it must seem strange to Tara and Bakul who have travelled far and wide to find the house in a sorry state. She tries to link up its boredom with that of the locale of Old Delhi:

"Old Delhi does not change. It only decays. My students tell me it is a great cemetery, every house a tomb. Nothing but sleeping graves..." (p. 14).

Once the house had been a constricting prison for her. Now it becomes a refuge from the world on which Bim resolutely turns her back. She lives there, bitter and angry and alone save for Baba. Bim is a manic depressive woman who is very annoyed with life because it is unfair and she ended up in the wrong side of the table. She wishes to perpetuate the romantic past, ignoring the changing realities and relationships. So she resents everyone that happened to be lucky enough to avoid life traps and despises those who fell on them. She keeps nursing a massive feeling of hurt against the world in general and against her brother Raja, in particular. They had all gone, Raja with his Muslim wife to Hyderabad, Tara with Bakul to a gay life abroad. "Even though the book is beautifully written, the dark mood that the author impress on its main character, permeates to the reader

and you become caught up in an atmosphere whereby reading is an effort, so each page develops slow, very slow.”¹⁷⁴

Bim’s reactions to her adolescent days have nothing of the romantic and sentimental glamour of Tara’s musings about them. An ambitious and talented girl, she has seen her high aspirations thwarted by the sudden change in the circumstances of her life and family. After the death of her parents and the marriage of Tara, she is left alone to nurse her ailing brother Raja, attended to the aged, alcoholic and invalid aunt and look after the mentally retarded Baba. Being burdened with heavy responsibilities at a very young age, she cannot even think of her marriage and the happiness of conjugal life.

Dr. Biswas who is disheartened by her negative response to his overtures of marriage, understands later on that she has sacrificed her life for her sick brother, her aged aunt and her little brother. When aunt Mira dies and Raja leaves her and Baba with callous indifference she says,

“I have to go. Now I can go: I have to begin my life sometime, don’t I? You don’t want me to spend all my life down in this hole, do you? You don’t think I can go on living just to keep my brother and sister company, do you?” (p. 100).

¹⁷⁴ Lisa Grup, A novel about healing old wounds (English 124 Section 13, 2/21/00).

She is left alone in the company of her helpless brother. The unhappy experiences through which she has passed and the alienation from those whom she has loved, drain all her enthusiasm for her past. Seeing Tara yearning wistfully for her childhood days she tells her,

“But you wouldn’t want to return to life as it used to be, would you? All that dullness, boredom, waiting. Would you care to live that over again? Of course not. Do you know anyone who would—secretly, sincerely, in his innermost self—really prefer to return to childhood?” (p. 4).

Bim’s sturdy exterior contrasts that of her shy sister Tara. Tara is seemingly content with her husband, Bakul, who "had gradually trained her and made her into an active, organized woman who looked up her engagement book every morning, made plans and programs for the day ahead and then walked her way through them to retire to her room at night, tired with the triumphant tiredness of the virtuous and the dutiful" (p. 21). Bakul, an Indian diplomat, seeks out Tara for his own personal gain, before he acquires a self-righteous attitude about reforming her. As a member of the foreign service, specializing in European languages, Bakul approaches Tara with the hope of taking a wife with him when he is transferred to Western Europe. Bakul requires a wife, like Tara, to mirror his own ideals and produce children that will sustain such ideals, as well. With his own personal motives, he ambitiously chooses to acquire Tara, as Britain

chose to possess India. Tara becomes the subject of male domination when she marries Bakul and allows him to suppress her true self. The young girl, who would run down the verandah steps and search for guavas or who would search for treasure and find delight even in snails, did not disappear, but only "if she [could be] sure Bakul would no look out and see", Tara would do the same (p.11). Bakul attempts to 'modernize Tara in the same manner Britain tries to 'civilize' India.

Baba always seems to be oblivious to everything going on and, therefore, is assumed by everyone to understand nothing. His constant amusement with pebbles, wanderings aimlessly into the streets and obsession with musical instruments only validate his oblivion and deficiency to others: "Now Baba took his hand off the gramophone arm, relinquishing it sadly, and his hands hung loosely at his sides, as helplessly as a dead man's. His head, too sank lower and lower" (p. 13).

Contrary to the inferior Baba, there is the bold brother, Raja, who is looked up to by his family. He is the proud, confident, brave and independent son who escapes to his Muslim neighbours' parties during riotous times and leaves Bim without a doubt. Another seemingly self assured male character in the novel is Tara's husband, Bakul:

"While she stammered and Bakul tried gallantly to help with some more polished and assured phrases that he

slipped in with a self-assurance that filled in the gaps left by Tara and even propped up the little that she managed to say, coolly and powerfully" (p. 63). Bakul is seen, especially in Tara's eyes, as a smart, successful and sophisticated man who has prevailed in the much adorned "America." In the words of *Poonam Patelon*, Anita Desai uses the characters in her novel to manifest the outer facades of people.¹⁷⁵

Raja is the most obviously hero-conscious character. First of all, he is extremely artistic and idealistic, so he adores poetry, in both English and Urdu. As *Laura Melton* says, "Raja is not trying to be an original poet on his own; he simply tries to be exactly like his heroes, which he does perfectly."¹⁷⁶ Through the Urdu poetry that he so admires, Raja becomes acquainted with Hyder Ali. Going to the Hyder Ali's garden parties brought him close to Muslims and their conversations and he began to view things the way they did. Raja does succeed in marrying Hyder Ali's daughter Benazir and succeeding to Hyder Ali's rich estate, so that part of his dream comes through. He shared his love of poetry with Bim and though she lacked his own artistic sensibility,

¹⁷⁵ Poonam Patelon, Anita Desai 2 (Posted by April 03, 2003 at 23:22:19).

¹⁷⁶ Laura Melton, *Transforming Heroes: Idealism in Clear Light of Day* (December 15, 1999).

she tried to participate in it and, above all, admired it profoundly. She imitated him in some ways and her professed desire to be a heroine was merely because Raja had first said that he wanted to be a hero. Raja was, unquestionably, Bim's hero. However, after a letter from Raja, which deeply offends her, she completely rejects him and all his heroic ideals. Even though she had been so completely devoted to him, she now feels rejected herself and denounces his poetry as "*terrible verses*" (p. 25) and later, rages about Raja's giving his son a white pony, merely to fulfill his own obsession with imitating Hyder Ali. Since she received the letter, she has had no contact at all with Raja, periodically rereading the letter in order to reinvigorate her anger. However, at the end of the novel, following pressure from Tara and a rereading of Raja's poems, Bim comes to peace with both her idealistic view of Raja and her later disillusionment. She neither adores nor despises him, rather, she understands and forgives him, telling him that she would like to renew contact. As Bim thinks,

"The poems were really very derivative. On each of them she could clearly see the influence of the poets he loved and copied. There was no image, no metaphor, no turn of phrase that was original. Each was a meticulous imitation of what he had read, memorized and recited One could see in them only a wish to emulate and to step where his heroes had stepped before him" (p. 168).

Bim, who has idealised her brother, is inevitably disappointed when she discovers that he is an ordinary young man and becomes bitter. However, between Bim and Tara, the emotions shift and Tara is no longer the feeble victim in Bim's eyes, who inwardly envies her sister's happiness found in adulthood whilst resenting it. Twenty years ago when Tara married, she left Old Delhi and a home full of sickness and death, while Bim continued to live in the family home, taking care of Baba.

Now Tara has returned to her family home in old Delhi with her husband. It is her first visit in ten years. This is not an extraordinary return. They come home every three years. The timing of this visit coincides with a wedding of her niece in Hyderabad. Tara and her family will go. But Bim and Baba, the sister and brother who live in this house, will not. It turns out there is a deep historical rift between Bim and their brother Raja in Hyderabad. Bim refuses to attend. She can't visit their brother Raja who, like Tara, left her many years ago. Instead Bim dwells bitterly on her feelings of abandonment and the impact on her of her country's recent history: the violent conflict between Hindus and Muslims, the death of Gandhi and the ensuing struggle for political power and the malaria epidemic that killed so many. In Bim's presence, Tara once again feels "herself shrink into that small miserable wretch of twenty years ago, both admiring and resenting her tall striding sister", while "Bim was calmly

unaware of any of her sister's agonies, past or present." *Alex Feeman* says, "With language that describes both the harshness and beauty of family and the land, Anita Desai takes the reader with Tara and Bim on their struggle to confront and heal old wounds."¹⁷⁷

Tara's visit is incidental, it is mainly a device to open up the story of the siblings especially Bim's story. Two sisters differ in their attitudes to their memories of childhood because of their differing temperaments and circumstances of life. *Prathima Maramraj* says, "When Tara returns home to Old Delhi, her earlier attachment to her home revives and she wishes to lose herself in the past. As the story opens, we find Tara musing over her salad days in "the rose walk of her ancestral house."¹⁷⁸

The middle-aged sisters remember their childhood in Delhi just before the partition. Tara has lived away from her home and returns there after many years. To her the homecoming is like a return to the pleasant and unpleasant memories of childhood. By temperament Tara has been a girl of modest ambitions. Raja and Bim want to do things, to be a hero and heroine when they grow up. They want to leave their

¹⁷⁷ Alex Feeman, 500 Great Books by Women.

¹⁷⁸ Prathima Maramraj, *Seminar in Cross-Culture Studies*, Paper Proposal (June 18, 1996).

old house and go away into the big wide world. Tara on the other hand is content to be herself. As children Raja and Bim were bright and ambitious whereas Tara was a mediocre with no unusual desires. Her ambition is to be a wife and mother when she grows up. She only wants the security of her house and the warmth of Mira-Masi's bed. She rejoiced in the sheltered life of her home in the company of Aunt Mira. Life has a way of upsetting childhood dreams. In their later lives, however, their careers are reversed. Tara is now a sophisticated lady but Bim and Raja are just ordinary persons.

The marriage with Bakul and her stay abroad bring about a great change in Tara's life. Throughout the story, Tara faces confrontation with Bakul, but handles her oppression delicately as most women do. When he insists that they go into the city and shop rather than 'vegetate' in Tara's house with her family, Tara feels torn and confused. After not seeing her family for years, she persists on staying with her older sister, Bim. To Bakul her relapse into childhood frivolities is annoying: "and you won't let me help you. I thought I had taught you a different life, a different way of living. Taught you to execute your will. Face challenges. But no, the day you enter your old home, you are as weak-willed and helpless and defeatist as ever" (p. 17).

Bakul does use intimidation to control her, as he declares, "you can't just sit about with your brother and sister all day, doing nothing... Of course you'll come ... There's no

question about it' (p. 11). Yet with further resistance and opposition, Tara manages to get her way.

In this novel Desai has resorted to her characteristic technique of using an image as an apparently independent artistic unit or as an objective correlative with a view to vivifying the psychic state or emotion of a particular character. She has employed this technique quite effectively in the Part I of the novel. When Tara, on coming back home from abroad, begins to request Bim again and again to agree to join her, along with Baba, in attending the marriage of Raja's eldest daughter in Hyderabad for which purpose she has come home, Bim gets emotionally agitated but keeps silent. Desai depicts Bim's emotional commotion through two images put together serving as significant objective correlatives:

"In the small silence a flock of minahs suddenly burst out.....while their shrieks and cackles still rang in the air, they heard another sound, one that made Bim stop and stare and the dog lift his head..... throwing back his head, bellowed in that magnificent voice..." (p. 6).

A little later Desai employs two more images—one of the pigeons cooing and the other of a gecko-clucking—to convey Tara's uneasiness and irritation caused by disorderliness in the house and summer heat in Delhi.

The novel is written in third person, but in both voices. When two sisters and a brother meet in their childhood home,

past and present collide, leaving a sorrowful portrait of sisterly love. And it breaks linear structure. With her break from a linear structure, Desai brought in memories from the past of this house. In the words of *Mahmud Rahman* she does not use it as a technique to depict Tara's life abroad. In fact, it is mostly unconcerned with her life in the U.S., another way she emphasizes the present and Bim and Baba's lives in the house.¹⁷⁹ The past is of supreme importance in the novel. It is most skillfully woven with the present. *Brijraj Singh* says, "Indeed even the most casual reader is likely to be impressed with this weaving of past and present into a single and unified whole."¹⁸⁰

The novel is carefully constructed and beautifully written. Shifts from the present to the past tense and back help create an appropriate mood of nostalgia so necessary for the rendering of principal characters' stream-of-consciousness. Moreover the old house with its neglected garden having a disused well provides a suitable background to the novel, thus making it look a unified whole. This superb handling of past and present requires a talent for plotting and a sense of control which are abundant in Desai. Beginning and ending in the present, the novel sandwiches

¹⁷⁹ Mahmud Rahman, *Narrative strategy in postcolonial*

'return home' novels (Ajuan Mance, December 1, 2002).

¹⁸⁰ Singh, "The Fiction of Anita Desai."

two middle chapters that go back 20 years to the time of India's partition and the story of this family is told through each sister's memory. Tara does have a personal quest. She has carried guilt over having abandoned Bim and Baba. When a marriage possibility had presented itself during her youth, she had taken it. During this visit, she seeks Bim's forgiveness and she also tries to encourage Bim to put aside her grudge against Raja.

There is a movement in time, from the past to the present and present to the past. What is remarkable is not merely the skill of this weaving but also its economy. There is very little action in the novel. *B.Ramachandra Rao* rightly points out that it would be more accurate to say that nothing really happens in the novel. The characters are treated with the usual mixture of satire and sympathy, of detachment and insight.¹⁸¹ Bim's present condition, her relationship with Tara and the atmosphere of the house compel the sisters to remember and what they remember constitutes the novel.

Wiehe in his *Book Review* states that this is a novel of perfect details that looks at the world through a magnifying glass. The entire novel is made up of small bits of this family

¹⁸¹ B.Ramachandra Rao, *The Novels of Mrs.Anita Desai: A Study* (Ludhiana: Kalyani Publishers, 1973).

that somehow comprise a whole world within the pieces. This novel reaches to the very heart of India and humanity.¹⁸²

The two epigraphs of Emily Dickinson and T.S.Eliot which preface the novel, highlight the theme to the effect of the remembrance of past on the chief protagonists. While to Tara the memories are a 'jubilee', a source of wistful joy, to Bim they strike like the 'knell' of sorrow. The former wants to live her past and enjoy it while the latter is wearied of it and wishes to escape from it.

Bim lives in the dreamy world of the past but wakes up in the clear light of day to mend her relations with her brother. The moment of truth when she sees the 'clear light of day', undoubtedly rests upon a silent gathering of insights, but the authenticity of that incremental weight somehow remains unrelated to her 'recovery' and redemption. Bim's recognition of her predicament and error is beautifully described by Desai. "She felt an immense, almost irresistible yearning to lie down beside him on the bed together they would form a whole that would be perfect and pure..." (p. 166). For once in life, she is spiritually at ease.

The excellence of *Clear Light of Day* is essentially in the psychological insight and in the poetic tone by means of which even when the emotional strains for Bim are numerous,

¹⁸² Wiehe, **Book Review Digest** (28 Jan. 1981).

the author never allows us to forget the spirit of tolerance, fortitude and self sacrifice or to doubt whether Bim really has within her the titanic strength for tragic purification.¹⁸³ In the paradox of Bim's tragic living we perceive that through the chill, brooding melancholy, withdrawal and disillusionment about her volatile nature and the mutability of a star-crossed fate, man may still apprehend, however poignantly, a beauty and grandeur that are not mutable.

Not every writer could be trusted with the powers of a 'shaping imagination.' *Harish Raizada* says, "Desai's 'shaping imagination' and critical sense are the qualities woefully lacking in other Indo-English women novelists."¹⁸⁴

The inability of human beings to really know each other is very well communicated by the novelist through the analysis of the love, hate and misunderstanding that colour the relationship between the various characters. To the family living in a shabby, dusty house in Delhi, Tara's visit brings a sharp reminder of life outside tradition. For Bim coping endlessly with their problems, there is renewal of the old jealousies for, unlike her sister, she has failed to escape. *Tuomas Huttunen* says, "But escape to what? Anita Desai

¹⁸³ Amazon.co.uk Review 21 Mar.2001, 9 Sept.2004.

¹⁸⁴ Harish Raizada, *The Haunted Protagonists of Anita Desai* 46.

adroitly focuses on the tensions of life in a changing society.”

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A reader reviews, “This was a book that kept my interest from the beginning, in large part because of the expert characterization of the central characters. It is both depressing and optimistic; the characters mostly are constrained by their personality and history, yet at the end are able to transcend themselves. It seems that in returning to what they are attempting to escape from - the family - they are finally able to become whole. Their flashes of insight and the author's analysis may seem contrived at times, but it's difficult to imagine how it could be expressed better.” Another reviewer says, “Patience Pays Off! I think Ms. Desai would capture the heart of any woman of Indian origin. The book does start of very slowly but nevertheless beckons your patience. Bimla, Tara, Raj and Mira Masi are not the most admirable characters, yet they touch you so. Despite the underlying depression, I could not help but smile!”¹⁸⁶

Foregrounding Bim's point of view is the radical departure in this novel. It is the point of view of someone who did not leave. And to add to that effect, the book

¹⁸⁵ Tuomas Huttunen, *Third Space – Narrative Identity in the Fiction of the Indian Diaspora* (U of Turku).

¹⁸⁶ Reader Reviews, [www. Bookfinder.US](http://www.Bookfinder.US)

eschews the journey motif. The entire novel is set within this house and the immediate neighborhood, the next door houses and the riverbank. Two journeys are described, one in the past when Bim went out on a date and the other in the present when Baba makes a vain attempt to leave and take a bus, but both journeys end in frustration.

This is a book that opts for the motif of enclosure, a choice often made by women writers. And even though Bim teaches in the college, in the time period depicted in the novel, even college is brought into the house where Bim organizes a tutorial session for her students. In the end, she reflects on the house and her family. The neglected and decaying house symbolizes the frustrated and wasted life of the aging Bim. As the feeling of how she has suffered because of others overpowers her mind, she wishes to be left alone. In her mood of utter disgust she thinks that all her relations had come in her life like mosquitoes only to torment her and sip her blood:

“It must have been good blood, sweet and nourishing. Now when they were full, they rose in swarms, humming away, turning their backs on her?” (p. 153). In this mood of deep agony and anger she even wishes to get rid of the responsibility of Baba and tells him, “But I might have to send you to live with Raja. I come to ask you—what would you think of that? (p. 163). She gradually regains her calm

and her heart is filled with love for Raja and Tara and all of them who had lived in the house with her.

“With her inner eye she saw how her own house and its particular history linked and contained her as well as her whole family with all their separate histories and experiences—not binding them within some dead and airless cell but giving them the soil in which to send down their roots and food to make them grow and spread, reach out to new experiences and new lives, but always drawing from the same soil, the same secret darkness. That soil contained all time, past and future, in it. It was dark with time, rich with time. It was where her deepest self lived, and the deepest selves of her sister and brothers and all those who shared that time with her” (p. 182).

Bim, the person who has stayed home, who has nursed her memories and grudges, who had been left behind by those who ran for the exit doors, finds it in herself to let go of her resentments. She appreciates her house and sees it as the embodiment of sibling love. *Mahmud Rahman* says, “With her break from a linear structure, Desai brought in memories from the past of this house. Unlike Adib Khan’s book, she does not use it as a technique to depict Tara’s life abroad. In fact, it is mostly unconcerned with her life in the U.S., another way she emphasizes the present and Bim and Baba’s

lives in the house.”¹⁸⁷ *Clear light of day* focuses more on the adult life of Bim and Tara, who are re-examinig their childhood in an attempt to understand what they have become.

In *Clear Light of Day* the socio-political situation is not the point of the story but that it is merely the setting as well as a contributing factor to the way the child develops. This is a point that has been stressed by many of Desai's critics. Indeed, Anita Desai disowns all social concerns and asserts more than once that she is interested in individuals and not in social issues. Social issues intrude only where they affect the character. Political turmoil of the summer of 1947 is presented only through the eyes of Raja, the brother, who is worried because his neighbours, the Hyder Alis are in danger. She also manages to convey her own thoughts about the absurdity of the conflict by showing to what extent "Raja and Bim are aghast at the sudden outbreak of hatred, mistrust and parochialism among the Hindu-Muslim sections in India when Independence was to be declared". Because they are children, Raja and Bim do not understand the complex situation which the country is in and are uninfluenced by their

¹⁸⁷ Mahmud Rahman, **English 295 Independent Study:**

Migrant writers returning home in their fiction (Ajuan Mance, December 1, 2002).

knowledge of India's past in perceiving the absurdity and horror of the sudden hate between neighbours. Their perception carries so much weight because it is so pure and is probably the only one which could show with such impartiality what is occurring in India at the time.

R. James Abraham says, "I look at the female characters of Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* and analyze the ways in which Desai complicates or rejects the construction of Indian women as self-sacrificing, spiritual beings.¹⁸⁸ Desai's story moves away from complex allegories of nationhood and focus on the private lives of an Indian family. While Bim is capable of rejecting the nationalist construction of women in her private life, thereby empowering herself from being more than just an object of representation, her encounters with men are marked with an attempt to place her back into the role of self-sacrificing female. This most notably occurs when the larger narrative of Indian history intrudes on Bim's private life. "While Desai challenges the representation of Indian women that had been prevalent throughout modern Indian history, she shows a keen

¹⁸⁸ R. James Abraham, **Gender and Discourse of National in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*.**

awareness that her own counter- narrative runs the risk of repression.”¹⁸⁹

Social issues such as the restrictions imposed on women are shed light on through Bim, who in her naiveté, fails to realize that "the Hindu social code sees external ambition in women as detrimental and unnatural" and that "sociological factors regard Bim's high ideals of service as only "sacrifice for the family." Judged by this conventional social matrix her sublime ambition is reduced to a pathetic search." Desai is careful not to let her book become a piece of political propaganda and remain intent on showing the absurdities of politics through the children. It is the effect of an event on the people rather than the event itself which remains the focus of Desai.

The tensions between women and society also run through *Clear Light Of Day*, where the unmarried Bim wrestles with family bonds while resenting her brother and sister who have both moved away. Desai's novels have been attacked for emphasizing the constriction of women's lives. They explore the position of the isolated within the family, especially an intelligent, sensitive woman lamenting lost creativity, or counting the cost of being creative. It might be held against her by feminists that her characters are

¹⁸⁹ Anne Tyler, *New York Times*.

constrained. But how many women do break out? Anita's work belongs to two traditions. Her sensibility is deeply rooted in Delhi's mixed culture. As *Hussain* says, "She appropriated the language of English modernism and Virginia Woolf, as well as Japanese, Russian, and existentialist literature, to convey something very Indian."¹⁹⁰ Now there's a multiplicity of voices but then she was working pretty much alone.

Anita Desai has created an entire little civilization here from a fistful of memories, from a patchwork of sickroom dreams and childhood games and fairy tales. *Anne Tyler* says, "*Clear Light of Day* does what only the very best novels can do; it totally submerges us. It also takes us so deeply into another world that we almost fear we won't be able to climb out again."¹⁹¹

As Desai demonstrates in her novel, language can have a profound impact on people's lives. It can divide people who otherwise share similar backgrounds or it can unite people who are extremely different. *Lisa Grup* says, "By studying the language usage in Desai's novel, similarities can be drawn between certain aspects of the Das sibling's relationship and the political situation in India."¹⁹² Urdu and Hindi, the native

¹⁹⁰ Hussein, *The Novels of Anita Desai*.

¹⁹¹ Anne Tyler, *New York Times*.

¹⁹² Lisa Grup, *Language in Clear Light of Day* (English 124

languages of India divided the Das siblings as well as India in a time of turmoil, while English was able to unite them. The Das siblings, excluding Baba, who did not communicate well, were deeply affected by these language differences. In school the Das children were forced to learn different languages, as the political situation in India changed. Before the Partition, Raja was allowed to choose which language, Hindi or Urdu, he wanted to study. Raja's obsession with Hyder Ali also could have had an impact on his choice. Raja loved to compose poetry in Urdu and to also read poetry by his favorite Urdu poet, Iqbal. Bim and Tara could not understand this poetry with which Raja's life was consumed.

By learning Urdu, Raja separated himself from his family and Hindu friends and connected himself to the Hyder Ali family. This caused his Hindu friends to think that he was a traitor to the Indian cause. "When he spoke to them [fellow students] of Pakistan as something he quite accepted, they turned on him openly, called him a traitor, drowned out his piping efforts at reasonableness with the powerful arguments of fanatics". Raja's reading of Urdu and Iqbal separated him from his siblings, while uniting him with the Muslims.

Bim, the child "who desired to conquer the world but who ends up by conquering herself", who claims that she wants to become a heroine, offers a bittersweet example of

the high hopes and impossibility of a youth's dream. Bim does not consider that being a "heroine" implies helping others, she considers its values on a purely personal level. Tara lacks the idealistic mindset shared by Raja and Bim which drives them to latch onto heroic models. Much more down-to-earth and unimpressed by lofty goals, as a child she wants simply to grow up to be a mother. As Aunt Mira assures Tara, "There, there, you'll see you grow up to be exactly what you want to be, and I very much doubt if Bim and Raja will be what they say they will be." The passage continues, "This consoled Tara entirely and turned out to be true as well" (p. 112). Tara's humble, realistic goals fit her timid, cautious personality better than bold heroism.

"Who is the hero of the novel itself? Plot-wise, there is no one character identifiable as the sole hero. *Laura Melton* says, "... but mine is Bim, because she strikes a balance between idealism and reality."¹⁹³ In the words of *Anita Desai*, "I'm really not drawn to writing about heroes and heroines in the conventional sense of the words but I have found that my characters who appear like losers, victims show a kind of heroism, of survival. I think if you can come through the experience of life with the heart and mind intact, without compromising yourself, that to me is a heroic act that needs to be celebrated. Bim, however, has entertained ideals,

¹⁹³ Melton, *Transforming Heroes*.

had them crushed, and finally come to terms with her disillusionment. Bim is the heroine in *Clear Light of Day*.¹⁹⁴

Anita Desai is justifiably renowned for her keen, subtle eye and her calmly elegant prose. She is also a mistress of synecdoche, a writer whose delicate portraits of the quotidian resonate outwards to convey tumultuous swathes of history. Although the characters in *Clear Light of Day* barely venture beyond their front gate, they live out the legacy of India's bitter battle for independence. As *Paul Sharrad* says, "Hers is a miniaturist's gift, precise, deft and powerful."¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁴ Anita Desai, "Replies to the Questionnaire"

¹⁹⁵ Paul Sharrad, *Blackbirding*.