

## TIME AS A DESTROYER AND PRESERVER IN ANITA DESAI'S *CLEAR LIGHT OF DAY*

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### **Abstract:**

*Clear Light of Day* (1980) is regarded as a masterful study of family attachments and their tremendous power. In this novel, Desai beautifully describes the state of the Delhi city. She also and also portrays how the passage of time has destroyed and deserted the old and the familiar in the family. The atmosphere of the decaying family home and the pressure of a hot, dusty summer underscore the spiritual malaise of two sisters as they analyse and compare their memories only to realize the overwhelming importance of family in their lives. Desai's works, mainly centered on relationships and the conflict between the individual and society, offer an increasingly sobering commentary on the human condition. Desai endeavors the depths of time as destroyer and a preserver, mirroring the vicissitudes, distortions and manifestations that the two realities, past and present bring about in the identity of the characters. This paper focuses on how time acts as a destroyer and preserver in the life of Das's family.

**Key Words:** Passage of time, destroyer, preserver, distortions and manifestations, past and present.

Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* was published in 1980. The novel has three dimensions, such as, a destroyer, as a preserver and about what the bondage of time does to people. In this novel, Desai paints the backdrop of the major incidents exclusively with the support of her characters. The novel is in old Delhi and records the fast changes happening in a Hindu family since 1947. In this masterpiece, a family life moves backwards and forwards in a fixed span of time.

Desai's novel is neither sociological nor psychic. She sets herself seriously to voice the mute miseries and helplessness of millions of married women. These women are tormented by existentialist problems and predicaments Desai reveals a rare imaginative awareness of various deeper forces at work and finds a profound understanding of women sensibility. In this way, she unravels the subconscious of her highly sensitive protagonist. She writes about helplessness, agony, anger, struggle and surrender.

Desai discovers the true sources of ageless and timeless experiences. These changes are explicit in the contrast between the young disciple and the old master. The four sections of the novel indicate the four dimensions of time. They record the changes that take place in a family in Delhi. Though Bim is the central character but the primary focus is not on her. There is an attempt to see the events in time from the perspective of childhood and age. In a sense the novel is about the growth of four children in an absurd world.

Mothers in Desai's novel tend to be variable in their approaches to social entrapment for the very "heterogeneity of female experience" (Chakravarty 77) keeps them in different compartments. But instead of a set of mothers who are biological but "silent sentinels, mute reminders of unfulfilled lives" (Chanda 82) a meaningful but surrogate mothering is much more emphatic here. So through the making of Bim's maternal feeling, Desai has reformulated the quasi-divine myth of mother which is typically associated with a woman fertilized and a perpetuator of a family line through a duly-solemnized marriage.

The novel has got two perspective symbols. There is the perspective of the childhood and there is another perspective of experience and maturity. On one side, the readers see the movement, on the other, a

kind of stillness. The contrasts that Desai suggests between these two perspectives are central to the aesthetic design of the novel. Simply because of her deep obsession with childhood, Tara does not comprehend the passage of time. Time factor works as a healer, but she does not feel how time changes, distorts or destroys various things in human life. Ultimately, she has to discover this aspect of life when she is shocked to find changed relationship, and an economical way of living in her old family.

The motif chosen for *Clear Light of Day* are drawn from the poems of Emily Dickinson and T.S. Eliot. They let us know that this will be a novel about memory: about places and people who go through change and transformation in an attempt to find their true identities. The first chapter deals with the present time, and the readers are introduced to the characters as they are now. The two sisters are reunited after some years apart. Tara, who is married to a diplomat, is back in India to attend their brother's daughter's marriage in Hyderabad. Tara's first stop on her journey however, is in Old Delhi to visit Bim in their childhood home. The second and third chapters deal with the memories of the past, and through Bim and Tara the readers are taken back to the years around the partition.

The feeling of bitterness, anxiety, uncertainty, and chaos can be traced from the very beginning of the novel, through the conversations between the two sisters, and it creates a gradually increasing tension in the novel. The world is shown as a place that can be confusing, exciting, and dangerous. It is in constant change, both in the neighbourhood of Old Delhi, and in the rest of the country. The children of the Das family grew up in a time of political unrest and uncertainty. Their parents failed to create a safe and stable home for them, and this failure haunts the characters as grownups. Tara, for instance, suffers as a child, and feels unsafe and unprotected. As a result, she wants a husband who can protect her and take care of her, and give her the stability her parents never gave her.

Bim, on the other hand, is left to manage on her own. She lives in clutter and dust, and as a result her life becomes over shadowed by all the things she holds on to. To Tara's surprise Bim still has everything that their parents owned: "Had she developed no taste of her own, no likings that made her wish to sweep the old house of all its rubbish and place in it things of her own choice?" (21).

The opening lines of the second chapter is "The city was in flames that summer, every night fires lit up the horizon beyond the city walls so that the sky was luridly fitted with festive flames of orange and pink..." (44). *Clear Light of Day* connects the first part beautifully. It shows Desai's perfect structuralism. It also shows how the passage of time has destroyed, distorted or altered the old and the familiar in the family.

The relationships among the siblings are described here, as well as their relationship to their parents and their aunt. The political situation in India before, during, and after the partition can be traced through the characters and their different experiences. In the fourth and last chapter, the characters find themselves in the present again, but now with a profound realization which they lacked in the first chapter. Bim, who has struggled with anger and bitterness, now realizes that she has to make peace with herself and the ghosts from her past in order to live a full and meaningful life. By shifting between present and past time, between what happens between Bim and Tara now versus past memories, moments of importance are revealed slowly.

From the very beginning, the reader senses that the tone between Bim and Tara is a bit tense. Bim is at times ironically sarcastic towards her sister, and Tara's experience is that "the elder sister did not take the younger seriously" (4). The reader can also hear of Raja, and his closeness to Bim as a child, and that this changed as they grew up. At times it is as if she longs for him: "I and Raja,' Bim mused, continuing to look up at the sky...'I and Raja' she said, 'I and Raja'" (25). By giving the reader these glimpses of almost forgotten feelings Desai reveals that there is something lurking below the surface. The sisters themselves must work in order to understand why the other sister acts and feels as she does. Early on for instance, one can see how Tara is shocked by Bim's negative attitude towards Raja:

Tara was too astounded, and too stricken to speak. Throughout her childhood, she had

always stood on the outside of that enclosed world of love and admiration in which Bim and Raja moved, watching them, sucking her finger, excluded. Now here was Bim, cruelly and wilfully smashing up that charmed world with her cynicism, her criticism. (26)

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The meaning of some of the characters names immediately gives a clue to what will happen in the novel, and helps link their lives together. The name of the Muslim neighbour of the Das family, Hyder Ali, is also the name of a Muslim ruler and commander who lived in the 18th century. Hyder Ali lived from 1722-1782, and was the ruler of the Kingdom of Mysore in southern India. The use of his name brings memories of a time when the Moghul Empire ruled India, and when Islamic culture flourished. The fictional character of Hyder Ali is presented as a great man on a white horse, who is culturally superior to his Hindu neighbours. Before he flees Delhi for Hyderabad he symbolizes the days when India still managed to preserve some of the magic from the Islamic cultural heritage.

Raja is Bim and Tara's brother. Raja has always admired Hyder Ali, and the two manage to become friends despite all their differences. It is no surprise to the reader that Raja married Hyder Ali's daughter. In a way it had to happen, the leader needed an heir, and the future king needed an empire, there was something gently loving in his gesture of placing his arm across the boy's shoulders as he came up, somehow making Raja think that Hyder Ali had no son, only a daughter "a curious thought, never spoken of, yet clearly felt" (56).

Raja wants his sisters to see him. As he later on takes on a new role in the family as a landlord he has in one way become their king. He has the power in his hands to control the destiny of Bim and Baba as they are materially dependent on him to be able to keep their house. The name of Bim can also be said to give us an idea of what will happen. Bimla means untouched, and is a good description of how Bim ends up living her life. She will let no man decide how she is to lead her life, and ends up not marrying at all.

Baba is the youngest son in the Das family, and the meaning of his name is father or elder, and can be a fairly neutral term. But just like the father of the children was never there mentally, only physically. Baba, because of his mental handicap, is always there physically but not mentally. Though his name ironically means father, Baba will always be the baby of the family, and he will always need mothering from Bim. Tara means star, as the wife of a diplomat she struggles to always shine in front of him, and to be a good wife and mother. She struggles to be perfect, like a shining star.

Aunt Mira said excitedly, and the children at the door jumped in surprise and joy at the unexpected boldness of her imagination. The gardener could look after it... the mother capitulated and the cow arrived, led in by the gardener on a rope to be examined and admired like a new bride even if she had her calf with her. (107)

The cow lived for one week before it one night, when the gardener had forgotten to take it in for the night, made its way towards the well and drowned in it. The tragic death would be a constant reminder for Mira-Masi. Later, it was discovered that it was impossible to pull the cow out of the well, and over time

this made the well polluted with green scum. In India, cows are holy, so for any Indian the sight of a drowned cow would be horrific.

On a symbolic level, the holy cow which drowned might be a sign of what is awaiting India; death and violence as a consequence of the partition. It can also be seen as a representation of old traditions dying. Just as the holy cow dies, Mira dies. Her death shows that the India that did not care for the weakest must die, and that new female roles must be created in order to get a more democratic society. It is also interesting that Bim and her aunt are drawn towards the well. Mira-Masi is drawn towards it because she feels guilty for the cow's death, and later Bim is drawn towards it because she feels guilty for her aunt's death.

After Mira-Masi dies she appears as a ghost in front of Bim: "Do you know, for a long time after Mira-Masi died for a long, long time I used to keep seeing her, just here by the hedge" (41). Bim is in a way surrounded by ghosts; the guilt over her mother and the guilt over her aunt's death are two ghosts that follow her both inside and around her home. Bim's journey in becoming a whole person is all about coming to terms with memories that haunt her from her childhood.

*Clear Light of Day* is filled with sounds and smells, and as one reads it is impossible not to hear "the koels in the morning, and the dog barking in the night, and the mosquitoes singing and singing" (3). These sounds and smells function symbolically on different levels in order to stress the importance of certain events. Mynah birds are heard throughout the novel, often where one needs a break from an awkward silence; "Bim said nothing. In the small silence a flock of Myrna's suddenly burst out of the green domes of the trees and, in a loud commotion of yellow beaks and brown wings, disappeared into the sun" (6). After her first date with Dr. Biswas, Bim desperately wants to go home, and her dog, Begum, is her rescue. Dr. Biswas wants to invite Bim to meet his mother, and Bim longs to get out of the situation she finds herself in. This was worse than anything she had feared. Growing darkly red, she said hastily "Yes, but I must run I must see if Raja and my aunt you know my aunt and Begum is barking. Begum stop!" (87).

In addition to adding noise, life, and colour to the story, animals are also used in order to point out different feelings in the characters, and they also function as symbols of what is going to happen in the future. The insects and mosquitoes may represent the feeling that Bim has from time to time of the people around her, the constant responsibilities of taking care of people, and later Tara's annoying voice that wants her to speak about Raja or Dr. Biswas. Mosquitoes are not very visible but they tend to concentrate around one's ears, becoming almost unbearable to listen to. Bim feels at one point that the mosquitoes are "like the thoughts of the day embodied in monster form, invisible in the dark but present everywhere" (152). She can hear their annoying sounds, just like she can hear her sister's voice and questions about Dr "what was his name" (152), and about fears one gets when "one is old" (153) and about the letter from Raja.

Everything Bim wants to forget is heard over and over again in her mind, and Tara's voice and her own thoughts become just like the annoying mosquitoes that will never go away. Baba is also in a way like a mosquito, and once in a while when Bim is exhausted and angry the buzzing sound from the insects are heard in the background. Animals also represent lost memories from the past, and some animals are used as a symbol of how time stands still in Old Delhi compared to the outside world. The novel begins with the arrival of Tara to her old home, and it shows how she is discovering all her childhood memories slowly for each day that passes, and realizing that there is some comfort still in the slow motion of the world that surrounds the house. Surprised to find that the old rose walk is still present in their garden she is thrilled when she discovers that also her childhood snail is still there, "making its way from under the flower up a clod of earth only to tumble off the top of the side an eternal, miniature Sisyphus" (2).

For Tara, her life as a diplomat's wife and the mother of two daughters that know only of the modern world, there is something pleasing and comforting in moments like this, where she can be only herself, without thinking about being how her husband or daughters expect her to be. "The slow movements of the snail might represent the old, traditional way of living which she once was a part of, and

it represents something in the past, something that time has not managed to change” (Sharma 108).

Seeing no change in the house and its surroundings, Tara does not manage to see the changes in her sister, and how bitterness and bad memories from the past are ruling her life. Once again this novel brings into focus the pitiable past of aunt Mira; she was younger than their mother although she looked so much older. She had been twelve years old when she married and was a virgin, she lives with this family and look after Bim, Raja, Tara and baba the sharp contrasts between the temperament of Bim and that of Tara is well brought out.

The old childhood memories are in a way good for Tara, but for Bim they represent the good relationship she used to have with her brother, and they become a memory of something lost. The garden and the “old rose walk” (2) also contribute to make a clear distinction between the two sisters and where they are in their lives. For Bim it is a part of her everyday life, something that has always been. The thought of it not being there is surprising to her, just as it is equally surprising to Tara that it still exists: “Bim, the old rose walk is still here' 'Of course' said Bim” (2).

Baba's gramophone is also central in the novel. He picked it up from Hyder Ali's house in the summer of 1947 after the owners had been forced to leave their home. His daughter, Benazir, had left it with some old British and American music, a clear contrast to the music that used to be played in Hyder Ali's house. Baba loves his gramophone and plays it every day. It gives him peace and joy, and at the same time it hinders the silence in penetrating the house. The gramophone is in a way Baba's way of expressing himself. He does not speak a lot, and has trouble in communicating verbally. Being mentally challenged and dependent on everyone around him, Baba is very vulnerable, and according to Sharma Desai “suggestively reveals the cruelty and heartlessness of the world” (Sharma 110).

Baba is the person to blame if things are difficult. Both Tara and Bim choose to push him at times in order to cover up their own insecurities. Baba is a representative of a society that has failed in taking care of the weak and innocent people. He lives in his own world and is most happy when he can be left alone, inside the house where it is safe, and where he can play his gramophone. At one point the record needs to be turned around as it has come to a halt, but before Baba can do this Tara interrupts him. She is used to her husband's way of dealing with things, and she feels that it is right of her to push him to go to the office. The music is off and the only thing heard is Tara's voice: “The room rang with her voice, then with silence. In the shaded darkness, silence had the quality of a looming dragon” (13).

Baba is no longer protected against the silence that is penetrating his room, or against voices that ask him to do things he is not capable of doing. As Tara leaves the room he tries to bring the music back, but something is wrong: “The needle stuck in a groove, Dream-in', dream-in', dream-in' hacked the singer, his voice growing more and more officious” (14).

Time is an important element of this story. As Desai points out herself, time is the fourth dimension. The present makes little sense unless one looks into the past and considers the future. One of the things that Desai does is that she separates between the new and old worlds, the modern and the traditional, the metropolitan and the decaying. New Delhi and Old Delhi are used to illustrate the differences between the two poles: “Old Delhi is symbolic of Bim's life which is monotonous and has the air of her past. Tara's life is like New Delhi which is developing fast” (Sharma 109). Bim and Baba live in the old city, and Bim represents those who have difficulties in letting go of the past:

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. Now New Delhi, they say is different... I never go. Baba never goes. And here, here nothing happens at all. Whatever happened, happened a long time ago in the time of the Tughlaqs, the Khiljis, the Sultanate, the Moghuls that lot.  
(5)

Through Bim, the readers can see how time has a deep impact on people's lives. Time has in many ways destroyed Bim's emotional life, as she has continued to carry painful memories rather than to go on

with her life: "Her development from adolescence to adulthood brings her nothing but the experiences of anxiety, pain, troubles, and despair" (Sharma 112). This is why the mentioning of Raja and his daughter's marriage brings painful memories for Bim, who suddenly experiences her childhood and youth over again, and the feeling of loss and betrayal makes her angry and resentful. One can follow her on a journey into discovering her true self, and into recognising that the past must be left in the past in order for her to move on. The opposition between the old and new can also be traced in the conversations between Bim and her sister Tara. Tara left their home years ago, wanting to escape the tiresome and dull everyday life of Old Delhi, and to improve her social status through her marriage.

How everything goes on and on here, and never changes' she said. 'I used to think about it all... and it is all exactly the same, whenever we come home'. 'Does that disappoint you?' Bim asked dryly, giving her a quick sideways look. 'Would you like to come back and find it changed?' (4)

Bim continues her indirect critique of her sister in her ironic comments: "all that dullness, boredom and 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?" (4). With these comments she makes Tara feel uncomfortable and insecure. There could also be some jealousy hidden behind all of this.

While one sister could not leave Old Delhi and all the responsibilities that followed it, the other dared to leave, and got to live an exciting life. Bim is in a way mocking her own life, and also her sister's life, her own life for not being as interesting and fulfilling as it could be, and her sister's life because she never did anything herself, she only follows her husband wherever he goes. By doing this Bim guards herself against any thoughts her sister might have about her life. Bim knows she has not been around much, so she safeguards herself by saying that she and Baba must seem funny to someone who has travelled as much as Tara.

Behind her ironic and sometimes quite cruel comments to her sister the readers can, from time to time, see a vulnerable and lonely person. Bim knows there is another world outside of old Delhi, yet she does not want to take part in it. Tara does not understand why things always are the same around the house, whenever she comes back. In her opinion the house and the garden could need some care, and Baba should definitely grow up and start acting more like his age: "Why did Bim allow nothing to change? Surely Baba ought to begin to grow up and develop at last, to unfold and reach out and stretch" (12).

Baba is here compared to a flower that needs nourishing in order to grow. Tara has always viewed Bim as a strong woman who does not need help from anyone: "She had always thought Bim so competent, so capable. Everyone thought that Aunt Mira, the teachers at school, even Raja. But Bim seemed to stampede through the house like a dishevelled storm, creating more havoc than order" (148).

Again Desai uses imagery related to nature. But whereas Baba is compared to a flower, Bim and her situation is linked to a force that creates devastation and chaos. Suddenly Tara realises that Bim too is only human, and cannot manage everything on her own. Tara had only managed to see Bim "through the lenses of her own self, as she had wanted to see her" (147). Feeling ashamed of her own escape and leaving Bim alone with their sick aunt, Tara needs to know that she can be forgiven in order to move on. "Oh Bim,' she moaned through her fingers. 'I didn't come and help help chase the bees away'" (149).

This is the first time Bim realises that she has been too occupied with taking care of everyone's physical needs she has become incapable of seeing the true feelings and reasons of why her sister, and possibly her brother, left. As the novel moves towards an end, we sense that Bim and her surroundings are about to change. Bim is filled with anger due to her sister and her husband, and due to Tara's and Raja's seemingly good relationship. She feels that her two siblings have turned their backs on her, as she is no longer good enough for them. While they share an expensive lifestyle Bim and Baba cannot afford their kind of luxury. Bim saw all their backs, turned on her, a row of backs, turned. She folded her arms across

her face.

She did not want to see the ugly sight. She wanted them to go away and leave her. They had come like mosquitoes Tara and Bakul, and behind them the Misra's, and somewhere in the distance Raja and Benazir only to torment her and, mosquito-like, sip her blood... Now, when they were full, they rose in swarms, humming away, turning their backs against her. (153)

Bim has made herself the centre of her world for so many years, but when Tara points out that everything looks old and grey, Bim is forced to take a closer look at the life she has created for herself. Being a proud person Bim does not want to seek help from her family, although she clearly needs and wants Raja to come and help her with the business. Bim's anger is compared to the summer heat "rising to its peak, or like the mercury in the barometer that hung on the veranda wall, swelling and bulging and glinting" (163). Baba's record is also symbolic of Bim's bottled up emotions at this point as the music sings out "Don't fence me in" (163).

After so many years of hiding her emotions, Bim has to come to terms with her anger. Her childhood dreams of becoming a great heroine are in her own words "Down at the bottom of the well gone, disappeared" (157). Just as the cow ended its life there, as Mira-Masi was always drawn towards it, Bim has always felt she would end up there as well. Although she is not there physically, she feels that the person she once dreamed of being, a heroine like Joan of Arc, died, and symbolically ended her life in the green scum of the well.

Looking back on everything Bim realises that her anger and resentment towards her brother due to his letter are caused by the great love she had for him before he left: "Her love for Raja had had too much of a battering, she had felt herself humiliated by his going away and leaving her, by his reversal of brother to landlord, that it had never recovered and become the tall, shining thing it had been once" (165).

Bim realises that if she wants to have a better life for herself she will have to dig deep into herself and find a way to forgive her brother. She also has to be able to forgive herself for the unfair treatment she has given Baba who too often had been the perfect person to be angry with: "These were great rents torn in the net that the knife of love had made. Stains of blood that the arrow of love had left. Stains that darkened the light that afternoon" (166).

As everything fell apart during the summer of 1947 Bim stopped looking forward, and her life became filled with unresolved issues from her youth which she will not let herself forget. By keeping the letter Raja sent her she makes sure she will never move forward, not realising that the one person she is hurting the most by doing this is her own self. By shutting out the people she loves the most she cannot have a meaningful life: "Although it was shadowy and dark, Bim could see as well as by the clear light of day that she felt only love and yearning for them all" (165).

Remembering her loved ones and the conflicts they have had over the last years Bim seeks her history books in order to calm herself down. Ironically, she finds the record of Aurangzeb. He ruled the Mughal Empire from 1658-1707. He rejected his loved ones, and ended up regretting this when he was dying. He says that many were around him when he was born, but now he has to be alone, and Bim cannot forget this sentence.

Time plays an important factor in the novel. Desai presents time as something that cannot be controlled or directed. In the novel, time becomes a major aspect of directing the event. Reality is the perception of an individual of the present instance in accordance to the past. Bim's reality is in sync with her present but she is nostalgic most of the time. Her thoughts move from the present experiences to the past experiences. She has no control over the nostalgic feeling that she experiences. And in Bim's reality her sadness is her family condition and the drab life of her family makes her sad and she loses her reality. She often thinks about how happy she was in the past, besides her handicapped brother Babu; she has less amount of stress.

The reader can find that stress alters the life and time is directly proportional to time. The longer one exists in the world the life is given to us. Similarly, Bim besides her toils and turmoil's decides to prolong the time and make her living. The life of Bim is much complicated and time is the only entity that can give her the remedy and change the drab life that she is experiencing.

Bim's reality is a fruitless life. She becomes infertile; she spent all of her life for her brother and her sister. Time has frozen in Das's family, not only in Bim's life, but in Tara and Baba's life also. Tara and Bim have their life perfect before Tara went abroad. Unknowingly, Tara comes to reality when she sees the unchanged life of her family in Delhi. When the author states that Baba has been much depended on Aunt Mira Masi, her unfortunate death shatters the remaining peace in Das's family. The aunt's death tightens Bim's burdens more. Desai gives the reader a clear assumption about the importance of unity in a family through time in *Clear Light of Day*.

Realising that she will not share his fate Bim rejects the past that has been filled with bitterness and anger and decides to destroy the letter Raja sent her. Only when she decides to tear up the letter and start over again can she allow herself to begin "the clearing of her decks, the lightening of her own bark" (169). Only then can she be content with her life, only then can she appreciate Baba's presence and see him as something more than a buzzing mosquito in her ear, and only then can she see clear light of day.

Time has frozen in Bim's life because she has not felt any happy occasions all her life and especially for a longer period of time her sadness seems to be very influential over her and she cannot escape the melancholia. Thus the readers find the time sequence in the thought process of the character to be frozen. Raja the brother of Bim, tries hard to drive away Bim's sadness or melancholia, but there is a shift of thought in Bim and she remains the same. Time doesn't fluctuate in Bim's reality. Throughout the novel, the readers can predict that time plays a vital role, even though it destroys, still it is the only hope the family can have.

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