



The Generational Confrontation in Clear Light of the Day

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Introduction:

Anita Desai's sixth novel *Clear Light of Day* was published 1980. It was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, although it did not win. Desai considers it her most autobiographical work. The novel *Clear Light of Day* "surpasses all other novels in English set in India in characterization, poetic use of landscape and integrity of vision"³. Set in India's Old Delhi, *Clear Light of Day* is Anita Desai's tender, warm, and compassionate novel about family scars, the ability to forgive and forget, and the trials and tribulations of familial love. At the novel's heart are the moving relationships between the members of the Das family, who have grown apart from each other. It is four dimensional novels as it is about time as a destroyer, as a preserver and about what the bondage of time does to people. In the book, Old Delhi is frequently referred to as old, stagnate or decaying. Old Delhi is overcrowded and generally overlooked in favor of New Delhi. New Delhi is considered vibrant, modern and alive. In the book New Delhi is where the characters, specifically Bakul, go to avoid the soporific effects of Old Delhi or even to be connected with the outside world. Bim is in New Delhi when she hears of Gandhi's death, and Raja finds diversion and entertainment as a teenager in New Delhi. In this novel Desai paints the backdrop of the major incidents exclusively with the support of her characters- Bim, Meera Masi, Tara and Baba, who form the major action. Set in Old Delhi, this book describes the tensions in a post-partition Indian family during and after childhood, starting with the characters as adults and moving back into their lives through the course of the book. As Vinay Dubey says, the novel "describes the emotional relations of two main characters - Bim and her younger sister Tara, who are haunted by the memories of the past."

Clear Light of Day recounts the saga of the Das family, a Hindu clan from Old Delhi. The main characters are three of the four Das siblings: Bim, who is unmarried and teaches history at a women's college; her younger sister, Tara, who lives in America with her diplomat husband, Bakul, and their two teenage daughters; and their elder brother, Raja, who has given up his aspiration to become a poet and lives as a rich, fat businessman in Hyderabad with his Muslim-heiress wife, Benazir, and their five children. There is no concrete story element in this novel rather some sharp interlinked episodes of family life. These episodes are either discussed or recollected after a long while by the two characters, Bim and Tara. They present some old and familiar incidents of love and sacrifice, death and betrayal, anger and accusation which form the texture of the plot. We gradually get the story. The novel is divided into four parts covering the Das family from the children's perspective in this order: adulthood, adolescence, childhood, and the time perspective returns to adulthood. The novel centers on the Das family, who have grown apart with adulthood. The story begins with Tara, the wife of Bakul, India's ambassador to America, greeting her sister Bimla Das (Bim), who is a history teacher living in Old Delhi as well as their autistic brother Baba's caretaker. Tara and her husband, Bakul, are on their regular three-yearly visit home from Washington, and in Old Delhi they stay with Bim and Baba, elder sister and younger brother of Tara's, respectively. For Tara the Old Delhi house is full of memories of recent and remote past— the two decades since 1947, and her childhood days before that. Old jealousies between the two sisters come up again as they reflect on how they were earlier; Tara, quiet, of delicate feelings, and less confident; Bim, stronger, abler in school, and attractive. But the intervening years have changed both in certain ways. Tension mounts as the silences grow longer and deeper in and around the house. Tara wonders how Bim can stay on in a shabby house, taking care of her retarded brother, Baba, and teaching history to young girls in a college. The family's "petrified" state both draws Tara in and repulses her enough to make her think again of fleeing to "that neat, sanitary, disinfected land in which she lived with Bakul". (CLD 28) The family's "petrified" state particularly becomes a subject of reflection and occasional discussion among its members. Their conversation subsequently comes to Raja, their brother who lives in Hyderabad. Tara has come to India to attend the wedding of Raja's eldest daughter Moyna, an event that Bim is boycotting. Bim doesn't want to go to the wedding of Raja's daughter, showing Tara an old letter from Raja, unintentionally insulting her after the death of his father in law. Bim holds that Raja

abandoned her and Baba after their parents' deaths; and that he also missed his true calling of being a poet, as he had earlier vowed to Bim, and merely became a fat, rich man. Bim herself, of course, has devoted her life to looking after others: Raja during his deadly illness in 1947, the alcoholic Aunt Mira, the retarded brother, and everyone else who needed care. In both sisters' lives, unhappiness and boredom in their house are distinct memories, relieved only by the presence of kind and affectionate neighbors; though Tara's life changed with her marriage and stay abroad. Their brother Raja's life was different from theirs even in Delhi, but it changed radically after he left. He had idealized Hyder AH Sahib, the Muslim gentleman who lived across the street until the Summer of 1947, and he moved to Hyderabad, inheriting Hyder Ali Sahib's property through marriage to Benazir, his father-in-law's only daughter.

The novel highlights the theme of the effect of memories of the 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 tired of it and wishes to run away from it. Tara rejoices in the sheltered life of her home in the company of Aunt Mira. The marriage with Bakul and her stay abroad bring about a great change in Tara's life. When she returns home to Old Delhi, her earlier attachment to her home revives and she wishes to lose herself in the past—"a part of her was sinking languidly, down into the passive pleasure of having returned to the familiar." (CLD 12) Darshan Singh Maini comments: ...For Bim has acquired over the years a vested psychic interest in her almost gratuitous suffering, and she has, as a consequence, distorted not only the structure of her own sensibility, but more grievously, the structure of familiar sentiment. 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. No wonder, even her protective love for her younger brother, Baba—an angelic adult unable 'to connect', almost an overgrown child—in the end, shows the misery of a life that has appropriated innocence and inadvertently turned to advantage. In her desire to subdue the world to her own pitiful purposes, she has been narrowing the ambit of her sympathies and building up all manner of buffers and barricades against 'the assault of reality'. She has, in short, hardened into a college 'ma'am', bespectacled, gray, and forbidding. All messages and overtures from the loved ones are resisted and all bridges of understanding wilfully blown up. Little does she realise that no person could survive on a diet of distrust, and that the suppression of sentiment is as damaging as the suppression of sex. In her, thus, the Freudian tragedy is truly compounded.

It appears the house has always been like this with its over-grown bushes and undernourished flowers. The people either die or abandon it. The parents who hardly made their presence felt are now dead. The mother, a diabetic, had long given her responsibility to a distant cousin and the father, a club going card-playing man was known to the children as the master of exits and entrances. The mother's death leaves them with lingering feelings of disbelief and guilt and the father's death forces them to the bankruptcy. Mira masi collapses under the strain of sustaining the family's illnesses and problems and finally dies.

The relationship of Raja and Bim still continues to be estranged and Tara takes upon herself the task of probing beneath the wounds. Her visits to both of them are in search of her own sense of selfhood which she seeks in the past. Back in the old house she realises that she has never held on to anything, she has always surrendered. 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 relation and an economical way of living in her old family. She is surprised to see Bim's attitude towards Raja, "...enclosed world of love and admiration in which Bim and Raja moved, watching them, sucking her finger...Now here was Bim, harshly and willfully smashing up that charmed world with her cynicism, her criticism. She stood dismayed". (CLD 26) Tara expresses her astonishment at the changed relationship between Bim and Raja: "I wouldn't ever have believed—no one would ever have believed that you and Raja who were so close—so close could be against each other ever. It's just unbelievable..." (CLD 28-29)

Now Tara realises full well the changes made by the passage of time and advises Bim to forget the misunderstanding and humiliation caused by Raja's letter. In part two the setting switches to partition era India, when the characters are youngsters in what is now Bim's house. Raja is severely ill with tuberculosis and is left to Bim's ministrations. Aunt Mira (Mira Masi), their supposed caretaker after the death of the children's often absent parents, adds a new dimension in Part II of the novel. She becomes alcohol addicted and is shown ill with a strange disease. She suffers three fits in a day and the last one is very typical. It reveals her obsession with the image of the well in which the bride-like cow once drowned. Earlier Raja's fascination with Urdu attracts the attention of the family's Muslim landlord, Hyder Ali, whom Raja idolizes. When Raja recovers from his illness, he follows Hyder Ali to Hyderabad. Tara escapes from the situation through marriage to Bakul. Bim is then left to provide for Baba alone, in the midst of the partition. Part II also takes us to the riot affected life in Delhi. Part II begins with words suggesting suspense, sensation and terror of partition riots: "The city was in flames that summer, every night fires lit up the horizon beyond the city walls so that the sky was luridly tinted with festive

flames of orange and pink..." (CLD 44) The murder of Mahatma Gandhi as referred to in this part is also the outcome of partition. Part III of the novel covers some highly significant episodes in the early life of Bim, Tara and Raja. It also connects episodes of part I and the aesthetic relevance of those past days. Here in this part of the novel, Tara's mother is described pregnant for the fourth time and Bim, Tara and Raja are depicted in pre-partition India awaiting the birth of their brother Baba. Once again this part of the novel brings into focus the miserable past of Aunt Mira: "Aunt Mira was younger than their mother although she looked so much older, She had been twelve years old when she married and was a virgin." (CLD 108)

Aunt Mira is widowed by her husband and mistreated by her in-laws, is brought in to help Baba, who is autistic, and to raise the children. Raja is fascinated with poetry. He shares a close bond with Bim, the head girl at school, although they often exclude Tara. The sharp contrast between the temperament of Bim and that of Tara is well brought out. The final part of the novel returns to modern India and connects beautifully part I. It shows Delhi's perfect structuralism. It also shows how the passage of time has destroyed, distorted or altered the old and the familiar in the family. Tara picks the thread of her earlier conversation and requests Bim to go to Hyderabad with Baba to attend the marriage of Raja's eldest daughter Moyna. Bim once again offends: "Oh you want to talk about Raja again. I'm bored with Raja. Utterly bored." (CLD 145) After her anger fades she comes to the conclusion that the love of family is irreplaceable and can cover all wrongs. After Tara leaves she decides to go to her neighbors the Misras for a concert and she is touched by the unbreakable relationship they seem to have. By and by she begins to feel repentant of her attitude to helpless Baba, Raja and Tara. A new self-knowledge dawn upon her: "Somehow she would have to forgive Raja that unforgettable letter. Somehow she would have to wrest forgiveness from Baba herself...She laid her hands across her eyes again." (CLD 175-76)

All her fermenting emotions get spent. She realizes that everything of the dearest depths have been plumbed- time past and time present. She tells Tara to come back from the wedding with Raja and forgives him. Bim carries a childhood image of her brother Raja -romantic, poetic, dreamy - whereas Raja is rational, pragmatic and materialistic. She gets angry about Raja as she feels that he does not reciprocate her feelings normally; because, during childhood they had close emotional relationship, which she still feels as an adult. Raja avoids her. Bim is Raja's admirer and she encourages him in every act and ambition. They wanted to be the heroine and the hero, when they would grow up and go away into the big world away from their old parental home. In this way, they had greater mental and temperamental affinity with each other in comparison to the other brother and sister. Both of them are bold, independent and possess a fiery impetuous spirit. When Raja is sick, Bim takes care of him with love and devotion thinking that he would take her father's place the day he recovers. However, to her utter dismay, when Raja gets well, he decides to go away to a distant place. As he says,

"I will go- go to- to Hyderabad. Hyder Ali Sahib asked me to come.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?" (CLD 95). The religious undercurrents in the book manifest themselves in two ways: the partition and Raja's relationship with the Alis. As a young adult he found acceptance in Hyder Ali's nightly gatherings. His fascination with the Muslim culture, however, first manifests itself when he takes Urdu instead of Hindi, a language he considers banal, at school. Eventually he integrates himself into the Muslim culture and marries Hyder Ali's daughter, Benazir. However this relationship is strained during the partition and the Ali's subsequent flight to Hyderabad.

Thereby Raja leaves Bim alone with Baba in the crumbling house. Raja abdicates his responsibility towards Bim and Baba entirely. So, their relationship changes in a surprising manner. Tara too, later on, understands the significance of time and comes to realize how even the close relationship between a brother and a sister - changes surprisingly with the passage of time. This gets clearly reflected through the fact that Raja never recalls the old days, the love and sacrifice of Bim, her taking care of him in sickness. In this way, Bim is treated most cruelly by her brother. Utterly neglected and treacherously deserted, Bim muses painfully on how the passage of time has ravaged the old relationships of childhood and created a changed pattern of relationship in the family. So, after a long span of time, Bim decides to patch up with Raja who was probably not even conscious of the hurt and damage his letters have caused to Bim. She purges herself of the intense hatred for ultimately she realizes that no other love had started so far back in time and had had so much in which to grow and spread than she felt deeply for her family. She wakes from her dreamy world of the past in the clear light of day to mend her relations with her brother. Bim realizes that "the only way to happiness is to acknowledge and accept all" (M.K. Naik & Shaymal A. Narayan : 79). The novel also touches upon the issue of discord at other levels. Both Tara and her husband are not able to adjust. "To her husband, Tara is merely a hopeless person." (CLD 28) The relations between the four brothers and sisters - Raja, Bim, Tara and Baba are also threatened by their inability to perceive the deep connection with each other hidden under the apparent divergences and differences from the others. (CLD 18)

Bim is the chief and simplest protagonist of Anita Desai. Her ambition was two-fold: to be emotionally and economically independent. She has a complex, multidimensional personality. She is physically a healthy lady having a good amount of vigour and stamina. As the novelist narrates she is, a born organiser. She was patriot

leader of the blue birds...later the girl guides, then captain of the net-ball team, class perfect. Even - gloriously, in her final year at school- Head girl. (CLD 112) The novelist has painted Bimla Das basically as a woman with much softness and sensitivity. She never wanted to marry: "I can think of hundred things to do instead. I won't marry... I shall earn my own living—and look after Mira Masi and Baba and be independent." (CLD 140) She would not depend on anybody, not even on her father. Had she depend on her father for education she would have been an illiterate: "for all father cared, I could have grown up illiterate—and cooked for my living or swept. So I had to teach myself history and teach myself to teach." (CLD 155) She gets education in history, a subject which has immense significance for her. The past is important as the progenitor of the present. Bimla has confidence much like her creator that "both the past and the future exist always in time present". In an interview, Anita Desai points out clearly "time is presented as the fourth dimension of human existence". The whole novel revolves round 'Time' drawing different impressions from the characters. In her opinion present is the important section of past and future that makes her pursue her ambitions, despite the gloomy atmosphere at home, and the burden of responsibility.

Bim's parents are too preoccupied with maintaining their aristocratic image in the social circles and they spend most of their time in playing Bridge and trifle activities in Old Delhi. The children watch the goings and comings of their parents with fear and inquisitiveness. The last of the siblings Baba, rather a late arrival in the family, is an autistic child. Mira Masi, a distant relation of the mother is brought to take care of the children. But the children learn to take care of themselves, at least the two elder ones, Bim and Raja and they in turn provide support to the younger two, Tara and Baba. As children they used to play their favourite game of what they want to be in life and Raja and Bim always desire to be hero and heroine while Tara wants to be a mother knitting for her children. Mira Masi becomes their proxy mother and takes good care of the children. They too crowd together to her in moments of fear. After the death of their parents Bim becomes their mother figure, looking after Baba and taking care of Raja when he is down with tuberculosis. As she becomes a mature a young woman, the leadership qualities in her help Bim to face the hard realities in life. Early in life, Bim has decided to be independent in life by getting education and by deciding not to marry. When Tara does not find anything unusual or wrong about the Misra sisters getting married while they are still studying in college, Bim reacts vehemently: "I don't know why they're in such a hurry to get married," she said, why don't they go to college instead?" (CLD 220) She further reinstates her priorities in life. "I won't," repeated Bim, adding, "I shall never leave Baba and Raja and Mira-masi," (CLD 222) Bim is a woman with strong beliefs. She is not the kind of person to be bogged down by the traditional society. Bim is quite clear about what she wants to do with her life. She never tries to retain anybody with her for giving her company, neither her sister Tara who goes away with her husband Bakul nor her brother Raja who chases his ambition to build his future and fortune with Hyder Ali in Hyderabad. Bim accepts her responsibilities in her life gracefully even though her hands are full with her mentally challenged brother Baba, and treads the long and tiring journey of life alone. When Tara visits Bim after a lapse of several years, she finds her a changed person. In place of the confident and dominating personality, Tara finds in Bim a tyrant and at times a highly strung up individual who doesn't hesitate to be impolite to her brother-in-law, Bakul. The changed personality of Bim is averse to any changes. Bim's refusal to make changes in the household can be viewed in the light of her changed perception. Her subconscious is trying to cling on to the joyful moments of her childhood when she was always in the company of her siblings. Bim doesn't seem to realize the fact that she is living on a myth by refusing to make any changes in the house even as her personality changes, her perception changes and also her physical appearance changes. Bim compares the old house in Old Delhi to a tomb in a great cemetery. As she says, "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..." (CLD 13) Bim feels herself ancient like Old Delhi and she thinks only of death and decay. It is as though years of hard work and loneliness have taught her to take up a negative attitude. Bim's insensitivity is further manifested in her showing lack of hospitality to Bakul. She shows more care for her pets than to her brother-in-law Bakul, when she is pouring out milk in her cat's saucer, when she is conscious that there isn't enough milk left for his morning tea. Bim makes sarcastic remarks on herself as belonging to the group of old spinsters and love- starved spinsters and these make Tara filled with a sense of guilt. Virtually living alone with only her autistic brother Baba as her companion, Bim loses her trust in Tara and Raja. She wants to belong to the secluded world created by her. She shuns Tara and Raja from her world. Life has taught her to be tough.

Bim dislikes Tara's departure from their home. She accuses Tara of leaving their old home for something brighter. Bim cannot accept the changes in Tara and Raja. She observes with disbelief and irritation the new-found strength in Tara. Similarly, she cannot take in the changed physical appearance and the life style of Raja. The only person who knows her burden very well is Raja and he not only leaves her but he also betrays her. His letter allowing her to stay in their house by paying the same rent, wounds her ego. Bim's world shrinks into her college and her home with her dependent brother and her pets. No one else matters to her. She no longer believes in relationships. In her interview with Jasbir Jain, Anita Desai comments that "all human relationships are

inadequate" (Jain 11). She explains further, "Basically everyone is solitary. I think involvement in human relationships in this world invariably leads to disaster." (Jain 11-12)

Though pretending to take things lightly, Bim is conscious of her identity crisis. She becomes impatient with Tara when she leaves half of an orange uneaten. When Tara tries to justify her act by saying she has left only the rotten parts, Bim retorts, "I do hate waste." (CLD 229). Her hands shake with anger. Bim's depression takes her to the border of neurosis. Bim, with her dominating nature, has unconsciously added anger to her trait to overcome her anxiety and the feeling of insecurity caused by loneliness. Bim finally realizes the seriousness of her situation and consequently she decides to get herself out of this unfortunate situation. This realization is a good sign on the part of Bim and it gives the answers to the questions that have been troubling her for many years. They were really all parts of her, inseparable, so many aspects of her, as she was of them, so that the anger she felt at them was only the anger she felt at herself. She wants to forgive Raja for his unforgivable letter. It dawns on her that Raja has always been emulating his heroes in his life and in his poetry and that he has his limitations. Bim's realization that she is part of the world of her brother and her sister, that they were all part of her, helps her to come through her identity crisis. Time has ultimately freed Bim from the hold of fear of seclusion. She once again becomes the independent self-ready to persist her journey through life. In her interview with R. K. Srivastava, Anita Desai seems dwelling elaborately on the theme of Clear Light of day, when she says that, Time ultimately restores the essential harmony in a family. Probably Anita Desai is trying to project her philosophy through Bim, the strong-willed new woman who has learned to accept the reality of her life that she cannot always expect the companionship of her siblings who have their own priorities. The New Woman is essentially a woman of awareness and consciousness of her low position in the family and society.

Conclusion:

The feminist literary criticism has developed as a part of women's movement and its impact has wrought about a resolution in literary studies. Anita Desai's emerging New Woman is contemplative about her predicament and chooses to protest and fight against the general and, accepted norms and currents. What is different about these women is that they are prepared to face the consequences of their choices. Anita Desai asserts that her protagonists are new and different: "I'm interested in characters that are not average but have retreated or been driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against, the general current". Anita Desai's protagonists brought up to diffident, meek and quiet in the face of exploitation, are yet highly sensitive and intelligent and are desperate to find an outlet to their pangs. On the whole, the novel tells not just the story of the separation of a family, but also of a nation. The partition of India is a tangible reality that is concurrent to Raja leaving, Tara marrying and the separation of the family. These separations are parallel. The summer of 1947 is described as tumultuous; it is the summer when Raja leaves for Hyderabad and Tara marries Bakul and they leave for Ceylon. It is also the summer when Aunt Mira dies thus isolating Bim. In addition each of the three people who escaped-Tara, Raja and Aunt Mira used a way of escape common in the partition; Tara fled the country for somewhere else, Raja fled to a Muslim center, and aunt Mira left the earth entirely. Bim's inability to forgive Raja demonstrates that the deepest hurts come from the closest bonds. However she does find it in herself at the end of the book to forgive Raja for the insult and realize the importance of family. Bim's breakdown at the end of the book results in remarkable clarity of thought. In this insight, she concludes that the bond of family is greater than any other, that she felt their pains, and that she couldn't live without them. The languages used in Clear Light of Day represent different things. Urdu is the language of culture, refinement, and knowledge. Hindi is considered every day, mundane and banal. Additionally the repeated examples of poetry emphasize the beauty of the one language compared to the other as more often than not they are in Urdu. Raja expounds how an Urdu poet could do that in a single couplet. Urdu symbolizes Raja and the Ali's culture and sophistication.

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