



## 'Time' in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*

English

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### ABSTRACT

*Clear Light of Day* was first published in 1980 in the USA by Harper and Row; in the same year in Britain by Penguin Books. The title of the novel is a phrase used in the final section of the novel by the author by herself while describing the state of mind of the protagonist. According to the author this is a novel "about time as a destroyer, as a preserver, and about what the bondage of time does to people". The novel is a "four dimensional piece on how a family's life moves backwards and forwards in a period of time" At the same time, politics and history can be seen in the background throughout *Clear Light of Day*, as the Partition of British India in 1947 can be traced through the characters' various experiences. In that way we see in some detail how history has had an impact on people's personal lives. This is what makes the novel so interesting to read. The present paper analyses the notion of duality of time – time as a destroyer and as a preserver – as portrayed by the author in this novel.

### KEYWORDS

Time, Destroyer, Preserver, non – linear treatment of Time.

#### Introduction:

Time plays a crucial role in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*. It describes time as a destroyer as well as a preserver. This duality of time – time as a destroyer and as a preserver – has been vividly portrayed by the author in her novel. Time plays a significant role in the spheres of both national and domestic life. The story of the characters of the novel runs parallel with the history of the nation. The dispersion of the Das family in *Clear Light of Day* coincides with the Partition Movement and communal rioting of the nation. The country's partition parallels with the partition of the Das family. Time deals with several characters in *Clear Light of Day*, differently. Among the childhood ambitions of the Das children, only Tara materializes. She had always wanted to get married, become a mother and knit for her babies. Her husband Bakul, and her two daughters, fulfill this dream. Bim and Raja who had wanted to become a heroine and a hero respectively, are trapped by circumstances and fail to fulfill their dreams.

In *Clear Light of Day* Anita Desai highlights the role, Time plays in the life of her characters. She calls this work of her's as a "four dimensional piece", where she talks about time as a destroyer, as a preserver and about what the bondage of time does to people". (Anita Desai, "Interview," *India Today*, December 1-15, 1980, 142) Time surrounds all her characters as time is what one merges into. Time is never an independent module but self-reflection. With the historical and chronological background of partition in 1947, Anita Desai sees "the transition from temporary to permanent" by portraying the changes that take place in the Das family. The political division of the country in the name of religion left deep social, economic and psychological implications.

The focus on the lives of the families living in old Delhi demonstrates this rupture and anguish. The outside world with its rapid changes and unrest mark their effects on the changes in the lives within the confines of the house.

Child hood experiences are recalled in adulthood and through these intersections, characters grow. The bee episode at Lodhi gardens is an example in point. Tara remembers this episode when she left Bim who was attacked by bees and ran to escape the attack herself. She feels guilty about her response then and recalls the event to apologise to Bim for her selfishness. In short this moving backwards and forwards makes the events in *Clear Light of Day* more than just a conventional trip down the memory lane. Desai more interested in a final pattern that gives a perspective to the meaninglessness around. Her shifts between the past and the present is done smoothly. The central motif of the novel has to do with the paradox of change and continuity. This notion is beautifully captured by Desai in the last scene of the novel when Bim goes with Baba to hear Mulk Misra and his Guru sing: "She saw before her eyes how one ancient school of music contained both Mulk, still an immature disciple, and his aged, exhausted guru with all the disillusionments and defeats of his long experience" (p.182)

We find Bim listening to Mulk's song and reminiscing about Raja's copy of T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*: "*Time the destroyer is time the preserver*". Its meaning seemed to fall out of the dark sky and settle upon her like a cloak, or like a great pair of feathered wings. She huddled in its comfort, its solace. she saw before her eyes how one ancient school of music contained both Mulk, still an immature disciple, and his aged, exhausted guru with all the disillusionments and defeats of his long experience." (p.182)

Such an understanding of time gives her clearer insight into her own life: "With her inner eye she saw how her own house and its particular history linked and contained her as well 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)

In *Clear Light of Day* the past is visible through the minds of the two sisters. They are "overcome again by the spirit of the house" (p.20) Tara's return to attend Raja's daughter's wedding evokes nostalgia and regret, but most important is the affirmation and continuation of the past, present and future. The reconciliation with time by the sisters who speculate the past but live in the present but Baba lives in the past, listening to old records unwilling to emerge out of his imagination. He makes no contribution or contradiction as he has nothing to speak or communicate. He seems to have accepted his suffering without anger. For him there is no difference between the time past and the time present.

About Desai's non – linear treatment of time Alamgir Hashmi says: "Indeed, time is an emotional sequence of events rather than a serial imitation of chronological perception. Since the story is told in the stream-of-consciousness style, the linearity of the actual event is not imitated by the writing; the nature of event is 'emotional' as recollected by the characters..., through whose eyes the reader sees and assesses the situation. With a shifting point of view, and the frequent time lapse, the narrative is realized gradually and gathered skillfully." (p.71)

The notion of non- linear time used by Desai is also reflected in Bim's approach to life. She tells Tara: "There are these long still stretches – nothing happens – each day is exactly like the other – plodding, uneventful—and then suddenly there is a crash – mighty deeds take place—momentous events—even if one doesn't know it at the time—and then life subsides again into the backwaters till the next push, the next flood? That summer was certainly one of them—the summer of '47" (pp. 42-43).

The Das house in old Delhi also becomes a central motif of the structure. The characters, thoughts are inextricably tied to the memories of this house: "it was a sound of the house, as much as the contended muttering of the pigeons in the verandah. It gave a continuity and regularity that the ticking of a clock in the hall might convey in other houses."(p.102)

The Das home , ' the solid ground' that Tara, Raja, Bim and Baba cherish, has a strange effect on them. At first , in their adolescence, Bim prefers being at school to being at home; Raja prefers poring over the musty volumes and precious manuscripts in Hyder Ali's library; only Tara would rather be at home than anywhere else. In adulthood Raja , who now owns Das home as he inherits Hyder Ali's pr property upon marrying Benazir, has little need to return to it. Tara returns every three or five years to the house and to Bim as two are inseperable.

As Sudhakar R. Jamakhandi says , " the Das home has seen many childhood drama, and it is these that are conjured up in the collective memory of Tara and Bim until , upon their completion. Bim and Tara realize a sense of the worth of their sibling relationship. Tara seeks continuity fraom her frequent trips home and archives a sense of permanence only when Bim too realizes the reason for her return home : the house . Bim realizes, is " solid ground. That was what the house had been..the lawn, the rose walk, the guava trees, the veranda."(p. 153) And all of this is Bim's domain, the domain from which she is inseparable." (p. 8)

Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* has presented the dual nature of time. Here time is depicted as both a destroyer and a preserver. The novel gives a new dimension to the theme of the disintegration and reconciliation of human ties by bringing into focus the part played by time. The story describes the psychological stresses and tensions undergone by the members of a post-partition Indian family with the passage of time.

The destructive nature of time be seen in the fortunes and misfortunes of the Das family and the mutual relationships of the four children of that Hindu family as they grow up to adulthood, and then to the middle age, and even beyond that. The novel covers long span of time covering both British India, and post-independence India. The theme of the novel is the brother-sister and sister-sister relationships, and the stress and strain which these relationships undergo. The passage of time has worked havoc with the members of this family.

The passing of time can even disrupt the life of a whole nation. For example, India had been struggling to achieve independence from British rule for many years. Finally the British agreed to surrender their control of this country. Then came the time when the country had to be partitioned in order to meet the Muslim demand for the establishment of Pakistan. The partition of the country was preceded and followed by large-scale communal rioting. The Muslims fled from Delhi in order to escape the wrath of the Hindus. In *Clear Light of Day* many of the Muslims including Hyder Ali and his family fled to Hyderabad where they were safe because there the Muslims were in a majority. The bloodshed and the slaughter that took place in the summer of 1947 are among the unforgettable facts of history.

The story of the novel runs parallel with the history of the nation. The partition of India is a concrete reality that is concomitant with Raja leaving, Tara marrying, the deaths of the Das parents as well as Aunt Mira, and the separation of the Das family. These domestic separations are analogous to the social events leading up to Partition and to the social upheaval that followed the separation of Pakistan from India.

But time does not destroy everything. In the novel *Clear Light of Day* certain things continue to exist despite the ravages of time. Time preserves certain positive experiences and values. Aunt Mira's self-sacrifice is an example of this kind. Then there is Bim's love for Baba. She had told Tara that she would never marry but would look after Baba. After Tara had gone away to a foreign country, after Aunt Mira had died, and after Raja had left for Hyderabad, Bim was alone in the old house to look after Baba. At the end of the novel Bim's love for her sister Tara and for her brothers, Raja and Baba, gains a new impetus. Her love for them is not only revived in its full strength but is further increased. It is in this way that time has served as a preserver.

At the end of the novel, time as a destroyer is pushed into the background and time as a preserver emerges as triumphant. Finally the

members of the family get united and the essential unity of the family has been preserved by time.

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