
UNIT 1 ANITA DESAI: LIFE, WORKS AND THE LANGUAGE ISSUE

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 A Biographical Sketch of Anita Desai
- 1.2 Anita Desai's Major Works
- 1.3 Outlines of Anita Desai's Novels
- 1.4 Desai and the Language Issue
- 1.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.6 Questions

1.0 OBJECTIVES

This Unit will provide a biographical sketch of Anita Desai. Her major novels and their outlines will be discussed. The Unit will also include a detailed discussion on Desai's choice of the English language as her medium for writing.

1.1 A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF ANITA DESAI



Anita Desai (1937-)

Anita Desai was born on June 24, 1937 in Mussoorie, India. Her father, Dhiren Mazumdar, was a Bengali and her mother, Antionette Nime, was a German. The Mazumdars left Germany two decades before the Nazi persecutions and settled in India. Desai has inherited a multilingual background. She is familiar with Bengali, Hindi, German and English. However, the first language that she formally learnt to read and write was English, at Queen Mary's Higher Secondary School, in North Delhi. Her first piece of writing was also in English at the age of seven. She tried

her hand at short stories and made her own illustrations for them, sewing them on to covers to make them appear as books. She says:

My family became aware of it when they became the hapless recipients of the little books I wrote, illustrated, stitched and bound into birthday gifts, and resigned themselves to my future by calling me "The Writer in the Family." I saw no alternative but to fill the role given me.¹

These pieces were published in Children's magazines. It was in her twenties that Desai started writing novels. She admits that she prefers novels to short stories because the form of the novel gives her a "good deal of thought and time. [to] get round [the subject], see it from different angles and aspects, whereas a short story demands something quite different. You have the whole of it quite clear in your mind and you just put it down at one throw"²

The writers who made an impact on her mind were Emily Bronte, Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce and Gerard Manley Hopkins. She read *Wuthering Heights* when she was nine years old. The novel, she says, struck her

with gale force, it set my hair on end, I vibrated to it—I have never forgotten that experience and reality has never again seemed to me half as intense, significant or overwhelming as the world of books.³

Desai's childhood and student life was spent in Delhi. She graduated from Miranda House, Delhi University with English Honours in 1957. She worked for a year after her graduation at Max Mueller Bhawan in Calcutta. In 1958, a year after she graduated she married an executive, Ashvin Desai. She has four children. Her daughter Kiran Desai is also a writer. Her novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* has been recently published. This work was serialized in the *New Yorker* and has been included in the *Vintage Book of Indian Writing*.

Regarding the autobiographical element in her novels Desai comments:

In countless small ways the scenes and settings certainly belong to my life. Many of the minor characters and incidents are also based on real life. But the major characters and the major events are either entirely imaginary or an amalgamation of several characters and happenings. One can use the raw material of life only very selectively. It is common among writers to pick out something from real life and develop their situation around it; while there are others who start from some real experience... you use it as a base but don't confine yourself to it.⁴

Desai admits that *The Village by the Sea* tells a true story, "based entirely on fact." She recalls in her dedication the "many holidays" that she had spent in Thul.

After her mother's death in mid-seventies, the language of her childhood—German—gained a new significance. She associated it with her mother who was a German. It reminded her of the lullabies and nursery rhymes that she had learned in German as a child. Desai began to associate German with the deepest level of her consciousness. The hero of her novel, *Baumgartner's Bombay*, Hugo Baumgartner, is a German exile in India who has learnt smatterings of the local language. The novel is written in English, has long passages in German and is peppered with Hindi phrases.

Several literary awards have been given to Desai. Her novel, *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), won the Royal Society of Literature's Winifred Holtby memorial Prize and the 1978 National Academy of Letters Award. *Clear Light of Day* (1980) and *In Custody* (1984) were shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1980 and 1984 respectively. She has also had various academic honours. Desai was a visiting fellow at Girton College from 1987-1989 and is a Purington professor of English at Mt. Holyoke

College where she also teaches one semester of creative writing course. She is also a member of the Advisory Board for English of the National Academy of Letters in Delhi and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in London.

**Anita Desai: Life,
Works and the
Language Issue**

1.2 ANITA DESAI'S MAJOR WORKS

NOVELS

- Cry, the Peacock.* New Delhi: Orient, 1990
Voices in the City New Delhi: Orient, 1982
Bye-Bye, Blackbird. Delhi: Hind Pocket Books, 1971.
 Delhi : Orient, 1985
Where shall We Go This Summer? Delhi: Vikas, 1975.
 Delhi: Orient, 1991
Fire on the Mountain London: William Heinemann, 1977
Clear Light of Day. London: William Heinemann, 1980
 London: Penguin, 1980
In Custody USA: Harper and Row, 1984.
 London: Heinemann, 1988
Baumgartner's Bombay. Penguin Books, 1989

SHORT STORIES

- Games at Twilight* London: William Heinemann, 1978
Village by the Sea: A Long Story 1982.

FOR CHILDREN

- The Peacock Garden.* Bombay: Indian Book House, 1974.
Cat on a Houseboat. Bombay: Orient Longman, 1976.
 "Circus Cat, Alley Cat," *Thought*, 1957.
 "How Gentle is the Mist," *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, 1958.
 "Grand Mother," *Miscellany*, Calcutta: Writer's Workshop, 1960
 "An Examination," *Miscellany*, 1960.
 "To Seal a Picture," *Miscellany*, 1960.
 "Tea with the Maharani," *Envoy*, 1959.
 "Ghost House," *Quest*, 1961.
 "Mr. Bose's Private Bliss," *Envoy*, 1959.
 "Private Tuition by Mr. Bose," *Indian Literature*, 1970.
 "Descent from the Rooftop," *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, 1970.
 "Surface Textures," *Femina*, 1974.
 "The Accompanist," *Quest*, 1975.

1.3 OUTLINES OF ANITA DESAI'S NOVELS

Cry, The Peacock (1963) her first novel, deals with Maya who is trapped in a bad marriage to Gautama who is much older. The action of the novel is set in Delhi. Almost the entire story is "remembrance of things past" by Maya herself. It is really her effort to tell the story to herself to understand and find meaning in her life. Her husband, Gautama, is a successful, middle aged lawyer. He does not understand the temperament—partly spiritual—of his young wife. The complexities of her inner life is effectively brought out through the landscape as is her resentment against her husband for his inability to communicate with her. One day during a dust storm when both husband and wife go up to the roof of their house, she pushes him off from the parapet and he dies. A few days later she too commits suicide. The peacocks are

said to fight before they mate, "living they are aware of death. Dying, they are in love with life." In Maya's mind reality and myth merge into a nightmarish outcome.

Voices in the City (1965) followed *Cry, The Peacock* and is set in Calcutta, the city of Kali—Goddess of Death. Desai makes the mother of Nirode and his two sisters, Monisha and Amla, also like Kali who unleashes her evil powers. Monisha kills herself because she cannot bear the strain of her marriage to Jiban. The greater part of the novel is devoted to Nirode's move from failure to failure. Amla, who has not been in Calcutta for long (and here Desai clearly shows the evil associated with the city) resists the city's influence. The narration is on behalf of the characters after whom the chapter is entitled.

Bye-Bye Blackbird (1971) deals with Indian immigrants in Britain and the emotional disturbances experienced by them. Adit Sen and Dev are friends. Adit is settled in England having married Sarah, an English woman. Dev comes to England for higher studies and finds the racism there very unpalatable. Gradually Dev adjusts to the alien country but Adit begins to get disillusioned with it. Adit decides to return to India with his pregnant wife. Desai captures the psychological and emotional disturbances in Sarah brought upon by Adit's decision. The novel is divided into three parts: a) Arrival b) Discovery and c) Recognition and Departure. Through the main characters Dev, Adit and Sarah, Desai portrays the psychological conflicts of immigrants who feel rootless and alienated from both the country of their origin and the country to which they have migrated.

Where Shall We Go This Summer? (1975) Sita is trapped in a joyless marriage to Raman. She goes to a forsaken place Manori, an island in Marve, to escape the mundane reality of her husband and her four children. She also wants to avoid giving birth to her fifth child. She feels it is inhuman to bring another life into this cruel world. The Island brings back her childhood memories of her time spent with her selfish father. She realizes that the island is no place for her problems. Peace eludes her there and she feels alienated. Finally, she concludes that it is better to get back to reality. So she returns to her family.

Fire on the Mountain (1977) Nanda Kaul is the heroine of this novel. In order to break with her past, she retires to a haunted house "Carignano" in Kasauli. However, both the past and the present impinge on her existence depriving her of any peace. The past intrudes through the memory of her husband's infidelity. The present appears in the form of her great-granddaughter, Raka, who disturbs her cherished isolation. Things get complicated further with the presence of her classmate and friend, Ila Das who is now a welfare officer. Although she dislikes Ila, she pities her and decides to invite her over to stay with her. But she does not execute her plan. One day a police officer phones Nanda and informs her that Ila has been raped and murdered. She finds it difficult to accept the news and finally succumbs to the shock. Raka is the sole survivor. Ironically, Nanda Kaul who longed for stillness and calm attains it in a very strange way.

In Custody (1984) deals with Deven Sharma who loves Urdu but teaches Hindi to support his family. His friend, Murad, asks him to interview Nur, an old Urdu poet for a magazine that he edits. This simple project becomes very complicated as the novel progresses and instead of one interview, Deven takes on the responsibility of writing an entire biography of Nur. While implementing this project, Deven faces a series of disasters. He almost loses his job and gets used by the poet and his sycophants. But he learns from his experiences all about human limitations and gains a better understanding of life. Finally, through a series of events he becomes the custodian of Nur and his poetry.

Baumgartner's Bombay (1988) World War II is the backdrop against which the story unfolds itself. Hugo Baumgartner is the central character. He is a German refugee who comes to India before World War two to escape persecution. While in India,

Baumgartner, gradually falls into a routine life. He has no family. During his fifty years of stay in India, he barely links up with anyone. He eventually meets a young German at a café. Baumgartner, nurtures this stranger and extends hospitality to him. The central irony of the novel lies in the fact the Baumgartner, who fled Germany to escape persecution, is killed by this German stranger, who is a drug addict.

1.4 DESAI AND THE LANGUAGE ISSUE

Commenting on the writing of her novels Desai says, "it is not an act of deliberation, reason and choice. It is a matter of instinct, silence."⁵

Anita Desai grew up with German, Bengali, Hindi and English. She says: "We spoke German at home, it was the language in which I learned nursery rhymes and fairy tales. We spoke Hindi to all our friends and neighbours. I learned English when I went to school"⁶. Given her multilingual background Desai could have chosen any one of the four languages in which to write. But, she says, she found English most suitable for her works:

My language (of the novels) is English and I find it answers all my needs. It is rich and flexible, supple and adaptable, varied and vital. I think it is even capable of reflecting the Indian character and situation.⁷

Of course, circumstances also played a role, she says, in her choice of the language:

What were these circumstances, in my case? Like so many other Indians, I had been sent to a mission school, in my case Queen Mary's School in Old Delhi which was run by a Church of England sisterhood called the Grey Sisters. Although I had grown up speaking three languages at home—again, as most Indians do—English was the first language I learnt to read and write, and this fact affected my living and writing ever after. As soon as I learnt the English alphabet and saw how it could be transformed into fairy tales and verse, I looked on it as the key to the worlds of books, the world of the imagination, and I decided instantly that was the world in which I wanted to live, to which I belonged.⁸

Desai is quick to point out that there are problems for her as an Indian writer in choosing English as the medium for her works. This is partly to do with the fact that since English "is at best an immigrant in India," and there is little tradition to fall back on. She notes:

It was only when I had written about half-a-dozen novels that I became aware there was a problem involved in the writing of them—I mean other than the immediate problems I worked out daily on a sheet of paper. When I began to meet other writers and hear them speak at conferences, I saw how much thought they had given the matter of translating Indian thought, modes of expression and experiences into a foreign language that often did not have the vocabulary for them. I realized I had not really been solving these problems easily and unconsciously, I had been evading them, by sticking my head, ostrich-fashion, into the sands of what critics called the psychological novel, the subjective novel, which seemingly could be written in any language and did not call for the creation of realistic characters or dialogue.⁹

Desai comments about this "language of the interior" in her works. She says:

By writing novels that have been catalogued by critics as psychological, and that are purely subjective, I have been left free to employ, simply, the language of the interior. Even when two characters meet, they use this

particular type of language—the language of their thoughts of their interior selves—which has nothing to do with geography and can be written in any language.¹⁰

Desai states that while she was writing these subjective novels, Ruth Jhabvala was “reproducing Indian speech rhythms in English,” in her novels. But it is to Salman Rushdie that she gives credit for bringing “the spoken language off the streets onto the printed page”.¹¹

In *Custody*, she says, that she finally experimented with letting “Indian accent and tone enter her speech” It was like a bilingual experiment:

‘Sit down, Deven-bhai,’ [Murad] said, with a curt gesture of his betel-stained fingers. ‘I have already talked this over with Jain Sahib. He knows exactly what your needs are. His nephew is bringing us the best model, secondhand, in prime condition, Jain says. Sit down till he comes, why don’t you?’

‘What?’ stuttered Deven, turning cold at the thought of this newest deception of Murad’s. ‘You have already fixed it up with Mr. Jain? Where is this model coming from? Why secondhand? I will not buy second-hand goods, it will only break down, it will give trouble-’

‘Sahib, you are saying you want best model. I am getting you best model, at cheap rate. How can it be firsthand also? Again the dealer and Murad exchanged looks, not quite winking.’

(In *Custody*, London: Harper and Row, 1984, p.107.)

Later, during a lecture at Yale University in 1989, Desai talked about her trilingual experiment in *Baumgartner’s Bombay*. She says that she wrote the book with a sense of release in using the language of her childhood, German. She says,

It was a book I had to write if I were to clear away a pile of debris, or unload a heavy piece of baggage from my back, so that I could continue on my way.¹²

About her trilingual narrative experiment in the novel, she says:

For years, while I wrote away in English and talked away in Hindi, I was searching for a subject that would allow me to use that part of my tongue that I had to silence for all my writing years because I could not find the key to unlock it. I could have written a biography of my mother but I flinched from that.¹³

1.5 LET US SUM UP

This unit has given you insight into the peculiar circumstances of Anita Desai’s life and background to make you understand her multilingual origin and choice of the English Language as her medium for writing. Her persona comes out sharply in her self-reflective interviews. The background study of Anita Desai and her works will help you to appreciate the text under study better.

References

¹Anita Desai. *Common Wealth of Letters* Vol.2 No.1 June 1990.p.4

²Shyam A. Asnani. *Critical Responses to Indian English Fiction*. Delhi: Mittal, 1985. p.155

³Ibid; p.154

⁴"Anita Desai. Interview by Yashodhara Dalmia." *The Times of India*, April 29, 1979.

⁵"The Indian Writers Problems" in Ramesh K. Srivastava. Ed. *Perspectives on Anita Desai* Ghaziabad: Vimal Prakashan, 1984, p.3

⁶Ferrell Sarah. "A Banquet of Languages" Review of *Baumgartner's Bombay NY* *Times Book Review* April 9, 1989, p.3.

⁷"Anita Desai. An Interview" by Yashodhara Dalmia. *The Times of India*. April 29, 1979.

⁸Anita Desai. "On the English Language in India", *Common Wealth of Letters* Vol.2 No.1 June 1990, p.3.

⁹Ibid; p.4

¹⁰Ramesh K. Srivastava. Ed. *Perspectives on Anita Desai*. Ghaziabad: Vimal Prakashan, 1984, p.3.

¹¹Anita Desai. *Deadalus* Fall 1989, p.212.

¹²Anita Desai. *Common Wealth of Letters* Vol.2 No.1, June 1990, p.9.

¹³Ibid; pp 8-9.

1.6 QUESTIONS

1. Briefly comment on Desai's choice of English as her medium of writing.
2. What are the titles of Desai's novels? Do you notice any pattern in them?

UNIT 2 *CLEAR LIGHT OF DAY*: THEMES, TECHNIQUES, TIME

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Structure of *Clear Light of Day*
- 2.2 Detailed Storyline of Part I
- 2.3 Anita Desai's Techniques
- 2.4 Bim/Tara Relationship
- 2.5 Treatment of Time
- 2.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.7 Questions

2.0 OBJECTIVES

This Unit will outline the structure of the novel, *Clear Light of Day*. It will then outline the storyline of Part I of the novel. The techniques Anita Desai employs will be discussed next so that you can familiarize yourself with her style. The Bim/Tara relationship which is pivotal to the story will also be discussed keeping in mind the central issues of the novel. The unit will conclude with a set of questions which will further sensitize you to critical aspects of the novel.

2.1 STRUCTURE OF *CLEAR LIGHT OF DAY*

Desai's *Clear Light of Day* deals with the Das family chronicle. The narrative is divided into four untitled parts: Part I is set in the present; Part II goes back to the summer of 1947; Part III is set in an even earlier period of the Das children's childhood, and Part IV returns to the present with a futuristic perspective. Each part also deals with an important phase in the life of the main characters. In an interview, Desai stated that *Clear Light of Day* was an attempt to write "a four dimensional piece on how a family's life moves backwards and forwards in a period of time" ¹ The fourth dimension, Desai states, is 'time.' In fact, the four parts of the novel parallel the *Four Quartets* of T.S.Eliot whom she admired greatly. As in the 'Four Quartets', in *Clear Light of Day* too, time is the destroyer and the preserver. The very theme of the novel is to do with the paradox of change and continuity. Time is used as a structural device by Desai in her novel. The action delineates itself at:

"three time levels -- the past, the present and the vision of the timeless in which past, present and future fuse into a homogeneous entity. About the time-structure of the novel, Briraj Singh states: The past is not at all in one lump and the present in another; the two are so interfused that we keep going back at different times in the present to the same event of the past.....but always with the knowledge that the intervening description of the present has given."²

The four dimensional structure of the novel allows Desai to present reality from different angles. There is no linearity to the events in the novel. Desai uses the stream of consciousness technique in her narrative which links up events imaginistically rather than rationally. She is the omniscient observer. Through her third person narrative

³Ibid; p.154

⁴"Anita Desai. Interview by Yashodhara Dalmia." *The Times of India*, April 29, 1979.

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"three time levels -- the past, the present and the vision of the timeless in which past, present and future fuse into a homogeneous entity. About the time-structure of the novel, Briraj Singh states: The past is not at all in one lump and the present in another; the two are so interfused that we keep going back at different times in the present to the same event of the past.....but always with the knowledge that the intervening description of the present has given."²

The four dimensional structure of the novel allows Desai to present reality from different angles. There is no linearity to the events in the novel. Desai uses the stream of consciousness technique in her narrative which links up events imagistically rather than rationally. She is the omniscient observer. Through her third person narrative

she gives us a bird's eye view of the inner world of her characters. Asha Kanwar states that in:

Clear Light of Day:
Themes,
Techniques, Time

Clear Light of Day we have the three fold effect of time -- 'the passing of moments or hours, the voyage from youth to age, and the historical time, or time in relation to nationwide events.' ... Through the reminiscences of Tara and Bim, we are taken to their childhood and made aware of their growing up to youth and then to middle age. We are also made to see how Time affects the course of nations. Instead of celebrating the achievement of independence, Desai laments the partition, not because of its political implications, but for the bloodshed and the insane prejudice that followed in its wake.³

Through the four part structure of the novel, Desai effectively presents continuity and change foregrounding her theme of time as both preserver and destroyer.

2.2 DETAILED STORYLINE OF PART I

Part I begins with the present. Bim and Tara meet after a long time. Tara is the younger sister who is married to Bakul, an Indian Foreign Service officer. Bim is single, teaches history in a local college, and lives with her autistic brother, Baba. Mira Masi, who lives with Bim is already dead when the novel begins. Bim lives with Baba in their old rented home in Civil Lines in Old Delhi. Tara's visit to this home is twofold: First, her husband likes to keep in touch with his roots in India. This allows Tara to keep up with her own brothers and sister. Second, Moyna, her brother Raja's daughter, is getting married in Hyderabad and she wants to attend the wedding with her family.

Baba is introduced early in the novel through his music. "Sm-o-oke gets in your eyes," moaned an agonised voice, and Tara "sighed, and her shoulders dropped by a visible inch or two" (CLD.P. 7). Subsequent references to the Novel are from Penguin Books in association with William Heinemann Ltd. The other brother, Raja, who used to be once very close to Bim and has now drifted away, is also introduced early in the novel. Both Bim and he detested their parents' obsession with the card game. Raja used to "swear that one day he would leap up onto the table in a lion-mask, brandishing a torch, and set fire to this paper-- world of theirs, while Bim flashed her sewing scissors in the sunlight and declared she would creep in secretly at night and snip all the cards into bits" (P.22).

Raja and Bim have been very close as siblings. Their shared interest in literature and music make them seek each other's company as children. When Raja is seriously ill with T.B. it is Bim who nurses him back to health. The problem between the two begins when Raja marries Benazir, the daughter of his mentor and landlord, Hyder Ali. After Ali's death, Raja inherits all his property including the house in which Bim lives. The immediate cause of the rift between Bim and Raja is a letter that he writes to Bim after Ali's death:

You will have got our wire with the news of Hyder Ali Sahib's death. I know you will have been as saddened by it as we are. Perhaps you are also a bit worried about the future. But you must remember that when I left you, I promised I would always look after you, Bim. When Hyder Ali Sahib was ill and making out his will, Benazir herself spoke to him about the house and asked him to allow you to keep it at the same rent we used to pay him when father and mother were alive. He agreed -- you know he never cared for money, only for friendship -- and I want to assure you that now that he is dead and has left all his property to us, you may continue to have it at the same rent, I shall never think of raising it or of selling the house as long as

you and Baba need it. If you have any worries, Bim, you have only to tell--
Raja.

(P. 27)

Bim shows the letter to Tara and tells her how deeply wounded she was by his arrogance and insensitivity. When Tara asks Bim to go with them to Hyderabad for Moyna's marriage, she responds:

You say I should come to Hyderabad with you for his daughter's wedding. How can I? How can I enter his house -- my landlord's house? I, such a poor tenant? Because of me, he can't raise the rent or sell the house and make a profit - imagine that. The sacrifice!

(P. 28)

Tara later asks Bim to tear up the letter which she refuses, saying it should remain as a constant reminder to her, and her family, of the cause for the drift between them.

There are two other families -- apart from the Das'-- who are introduced in Part I. These are the Mishras and the Alis. The Mishra girls, Sarla and Jaya, are childless women and abandoned wives. They act as counterfoils to the Das sisters, Bim and Tara. The Ali family is important because Raja's association with them has an impact on his life.

Part I ends with the two Das sisters, Bim and Tara, talking about their unfulfilled childhood and youth. For both the sisters the summer of nineteen forty-seven was terrible. Their resentment against their parents for neglecting them, their own inability to deal and cope with their circumstances all come to the fore when they think back on their past:

'Youth?' said Bim, her head sinking as if with sleep, or sorrow. 'Yes, I am glad, too, it is over -- I never wish it back. Terrible, what it does to one -- what it did to us -- and one is too young to know how to cope, how to deal with that first terrible flood of life. One just goes under -- it sweeps one along -- and how many years and years it is before one can stand up to it, make a stand against it -- 'she shook her head sleepily. 'I never wish it back. I would never be young again for anything.'

(P. 43).

2.3 ANITA DESAI'S TECHNIQUES

Anita Desai has added a new dimension to Indian - English fiction by focussing on the inner world of her characters. Her preoccupation with the individual and his/her psychic complexities sets her apart from her contemporaries. In a sense she has ushered in the psychological novel in Indian - English fiction especially among women writers. Shyam A. Asnani states,

Ruth Praver Jhabvala chooses the social background for her comedies, tragi-comedies and farces. In Kamala Markandaya's novels the stress is as much on principal characters as on diverse contemporary problems -- economic, political, cultural, social. Nayantara Sahgal is nothing if not political or socio-political. Concerned exclusively with the personal tragedy of the individual, Desai is not interested in social or political probings, the outer-weather, the physical geography, or the visible action. Her forte is the exploration of the interior world, plunging into the limitless depths of the mind, and bringing into relief the hidden contours of the human psyche.⁴

Interestingly, Desai herself comments on the limiting parameters of the works by Indian-English women writers:

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With all the richness of material at hand, Indian women writers have stopped short from a lack of imagination, courage, nerve, or gusto--of the satirical edge, the ironic tone, the inspired criticism or the lyric response that alone might have brought their novels to life They seem unable to throw off the habits of reticence and acceptance of being uncritical and unobtrusive.⁵

For Desai the external world is not as important as the internal one. The outside world gains significance only in relation to the character perception of it. She tries

to discover its significance by plunging below the surface and plumbing the depths, then illuminating those depths till they become a more lucid, brilliant and explicable reflection of the visible world.⁶

Desai says, "only the individual, the solitary being, is of true interest. One must be alone, silent, in order to think or contemplate, or write."⁷

Preoccupation with the fragmentation of reality (started by the process of modernization) and its impact on the human psyche is of continued interest to Desai in all her major works. She tries to capture the prismatic quality of reality. This often makes her style juxtapose seemingly disparate ideas and emotions in the same character and situation. For example, Bim in *Clear Light of Day* is portrayed as melancholic, disillusioned and withdrawn. Yet simultaneously through it all we see her tolerance, self-sacrifice and courage. Her attempt is to discover and convey truth which she associates with the mind and not with the body. She distinguishes clearly between truth and reality.

Reality is merely one-tenth visible section of the iceberg that one sees above the surface of the ocean -- art remaining nine-tenths of it that lies below the surface. That is why it is more near Truth than Reality itself. Art does not merely reflect Reality -- it enlarges it.⁸

Such a comment also explains why Desai prefers writing novels to short stories. Writing novels gives,

a good deal of thought and time, get round it, see it from different angles and aspects, whereas a short story demands something quite different. You have the whole of it quite clear in your mind and just put it down at one throw.⁹

Desai's focus, undoubtedly, is on the inner lives of her characters, their dreams, mysteries, awareness of life's futility and other myriad impressions:

I am interested in characters who are not average but have retreated, or been driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against, or made a stand against, the general current. It is easy to flow with the current, it makes no demands, it costs no effort. But those who cannot follow it, whose heart cries out 'the great No,' who fight the current and struggle against it, they know what the demands are and what it costs to meet them.¹⁰

Almost all her female characters are hypersensitive, grappling with some problem or the other, "facing, single-handed, the ferocious assaults of existence"¹¹. All the female characters in Desai's novels grow and develop. Desai is however, quick to point out that it is not feminism that has taken her in this direction but her interest in individuals, both men and women.

Given Desai's emphasis on the inner world of her characters the techniques she finds most effective in portraying it are stream of consciousness, flashbacks and interior monologues. She captures a psychological realism which submerges the story with the consciousness of the characters. Plot acquires only secondary importance. Simple plot line leads to complex situations. A story, "imposed from the outside or a theme similarly imposed simply destroys their life, reduces them to a string of jerking puppets on a stage"¹²

My novels don't have themes -- at least not till they are finished, published or read, do I see any theme. While writing, I follow my instinct, I follow flashes of insight, I veer away from or even fight anything that threatens to distort or destroy this insight, and somehow come to the end and look back to see the pattern of footprints on the sand.¹³

In Desai's novels by and large, whatever action the characters engage in has a psychological impulse behind it. In *Clear Light of Day* when the sisters evoke the past their unconscious is brought to the fore intersecting behavioural patterns then and now. In a sense the structure of *Clear Light of Day* parallels the psychic unravelling of the characters. Multiple perspectives of the past are offered in which realism and psychic factors meet formulating a new past. Towards the end of Part I of the novel Bim tells her sister Tara:

Isn't it strange how life won't flow, like a river, but moves in jumps, as if it were held back by locks that are opened now and then to let it jump forwards in a kind of flood? 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).

Desai uses the partition backdrop in this novel but unlike other writers she does not appropriate it to forward her own political argument. On the contrary, she presents its significance entirely from the perspective of her character. In *Clear Light of Day* the childhood experiences form the core of the characters. The impact of these experiences on the psyche of the characters is what the story is all about. Since memory and recall play an important role in the novel, there is a lot of going back and forth almost like the oral tradition of the great Indian epics, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. Desai does not attempt to create a linear movement in her novel with a beginning, a middle and an end but she portrays things as they are. There is no exploration, conflict and resolution.

Perhaps it is due to Desai's flashback technique that she uses time from multiple dimensions: temporal, eternal and mythical. In *Clear Light of Day* for instance, time is seen in relation to youth and age, also in relation to national events and at times Desai depicts the significance of time contained in a minute. Time is both the destroyer and the preserver. The last episode in the novel when Bim and Baba go to listen to Mulk Mishra and his guru best exemplifies it:

The contrast between Mulk's voice and [the Guru's] was great: whereas Mulk's voice had been almost like a child's so sweet and clear, or a young man's full and ripe and with a touch of sweetness to it, the old man's was sharp, even a little cracked, inclined to break, although not merely with age but with the bitterness of his experiences, the sadness and passion and frustration.

(PP. 181-182).

Imagery is vital to Desai's works. Her use of it in *Clear Light of Day* is discussed in Unit 5:2.

***Clear Light of Day:*
Themes,
Techniques, Time**

"My novels " Desai states,
are no reflection of Indian society, politics or character. They are part of my private effort to seize upon the raw material of life -- its shapelessness, its meaninglessness.¹⁴

Summing up Desai's Techniques

- Emphasis on the inner world of character.
- Use of flashbacks, stream of consciousness and interior monologues.
- Depiction of fragmented reality through multiple perspectives.
- Effect of the above mentioned technique on the structure of the novel.
- Desai's treatment of time.
- The importance of imagery.

2.4 BIM/TARA RELATIONSHIP

The relationship between the two Das sisters, Bim and Tara, forms the core of Desai's novel, *Clear Light of Day*. Everything that happens in the novel is reflected on this relationship. Bim and Tara may naturally bond as siblings but their different personalities make their relationship a problematic one. This duality in their relationship is best encapsulated in the remark one of the Misra sisters, Jaya, makes to Tara:

'Bim has her own mind,' she said. 'Bim always did. You were always so different, you two sisters.'.... But Tara would not accept that. 'We're not really,' she said. 'We may seem to be--but we have everything in common. That makes us one. No one else knows all we share, Bim and I.'
(P. 162)

These two aspects of the Bim / Tara relationship -- their bonding and their differences-- remain an undercurrent throughout the novel. Interestingly, it is Tara's holiday visit to her sister Bim, that sets up the events in the novel.

Bim, short for Bimla, is the older of the two Das sisters. She is unmarried and teaches history in a local college. Desai describes her as "grey and heavy now and not so unlike their mother in appearance" (P. 2). Interestingly, after Mira Masi falls ill, Bim takes on the role as a surrogate mother to her siblings. Tara, the younger sister, is portrayed as a "languid little girl, listless, a dawdler" (P. 10). Tara is married to an IFS officer and has two daughters. Desai subtly reveals the different personalities of the two sisters by describing the way they dress:

Tara [was] in her elegant pale blue nylon nightgown and elegant silver slippers and Bim in curious shapeless handmade garment that Tara could see she had fashioned out of an old cotton sari by sewing it up on both sides, leaving enough room for her arms to come through and cutting out a wide scoop for her neck (P. 3).

In a sense the two sisters present different notions of Indian womanhood. Bim, the unmarried sister, is taken for granted by her siblings. Dr. Biswas comments on the situation during one of his visits to the Das household:

'I see, I see it all,' Dr. Biswas hurried on, staring hard at his shoes, making the most of this unusual burst of courage while it lasted. 'There are great

problems. Your father-the house-the family-Raja's illness-it is all too much for a young lady. Raja must recover, he must take his father's place.'

(P. 68)

Tara, the married sister, who is totally dependent on her husband, represents the typical Indian married woman. She has no ambitions of her own. Among the post Independent Indian-English writers, Desai is unique in portraying a wide gamut of Indian women. In *Clear Light of Day* we also have Mira Masi, the helpless widow; and there are the Misra sisters -- Sarla and Jaya--, both abandoned by their husbands

During Tara's visit to Bim and Baba, both sisters are aware of the changes in them, brought about by time. In fact, early in the novel, Desai introduces us to the tensions between the two sisters. Tara is surprised by the fact that things have not changed at all in her old Delhi home, "it is all exactly the same" (P. 4). Bim teasingly asks her, "would you like to come back to find it changed?" (P. 4)

Interestingly, Tara assesses her growth in relation to her responses to the house:

She stared sullenly, without lifting her head, at a water-colour above the plaster mantelpiece-red cannas painted with some watery fluid that had trickled weakly down the brown paper: who could have painted that? Why was it hung here? How could Bim bear to look at it for all of her life? Had she developed no taste of her own, no linings; that made her wish to sweep the old house of all its rubbish and place in it things of her own choice? Tara thought with longing of the neat, china-white flat in Washington, its cleanliness, its floweriness.

(P. 21)

Bim views her past differently. She tells Tara ... "After you married, and Raja went to Hyderabad, and Mira-masi died, I still had Baba. And that summer I got my job at the college and felt so pleased to be earning my living-" (P. 42).

Ironically, when we compare the childhood dreams of the two sisters -- Bim, who always wanted to be a heroine, a Joan of Arc or a Florence Nightingale, and Tara, who wanted to be a mother and just "knit" for her babies, --we notice that Tara's dream materialises. She becomes a mother of two girls. Bim, although heroic in her ability to deal with her circumstances, never achieves the heights she desires. Santosh Gupta says,

The different goals of life of the two sisters are an outcome of their tendency to live either by reason or by emotion/imagination, reflected in their reading. Tara's craving for the warm, half-sleepy, non-challenging atmosphere of their home, and aunt Mira's closeness is reflected to some extent in her enjoyment of the fairy-tales narrated by Aunt Mira. Tara is an incurable romantic who believes firmly in the possibility of coming upon a treasure, or at least a pearl in the snails she picks up in their garden. As she grows up she reads 'Lorna Doone' and the well-known 'Gone with the Wind' The elder sister's sharp mind did not give in easily to romance or romantic readings, and she wonders "what does she want?" The answer is "facts, history, and chronology".¹⁵

In the context of the conversation between the two Das sisters we discover that marriage is viewed as an escape route. Tara by marrying Bakul went out of the Das household in to the world, to something bigger and brighter. Bakul reinforces this idea. When he proposes to Tara he sees himself as rescuing her. He tells her: "This place is bad for you-so much sickness, so many worries. You are too young for all this. I must take you away" (P. 71). Tara's inertia when she visits her old Delhi home, is to do with her feelings of guilt in leaving Bim to cope with all the problems.

At an earlier point in the novel, Tara tells Bim, how she always wanted to escape from the Das household:

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The kind of atmosphere that used to fill it when father and mother were alive. Always ill or playing cards or at the club, always away, always leaving us out, leaving us behind- and then Mira-Masi becoming so-strange, and Raja so ill-till it seemed that the house was ill, illness passing from one generation to the other so that anyone who lived in it was bound to become ill and the only thing to do was to get away from it, escape . . . 'she stuttered to a halt, quite pale with the passion she had allowed into her words, and aghast at it:

Bim's eyes narrowed as she sat listening to her sister's outburst. 'Did you feel that way? She asked, coolly curious. 'I didn't know. I think I was so occupied with Raja and Mira-Masi that I didn't notice what effect it had on you. Why didn't I? She mused, swinging her leg casually. 'And that is why you married Bakul instead of going to college?

(P. 156)

Both Bim and Tara share an unfulfilled childhood and youth. Tara tells Bim about her youth: "I was glad when it was over." To which Bim responds, "Yes, I am glad, too, it is over--I never wish it back" (P. 43). The main reason for their bored and unhappy childhood was parental neglect:

Parents had sat, day after day and year after year till their deaths, playing bridge with friends like themselves, mostly silent, heads bent so that the knobs in their necks protruded, soft stained hands shuffling the cards, now and then speaking those names and numbers that remained a mystery to the children who were not allowed within the room while a game was in progress, who had sometimes folded themselves into the dusty curtains and stood peeping out, wondering at this strange, all-absorbing occupation that kept their parents sucked down into the silent centre of a deep, shadowy vortex while they floated on the surface, staring down into the underworld, their eyes popping with incomprehension.

(P. 22)

In the Das Household we notice Tara as an outsider:

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.

(P. 26)

Even at school Bim is the all rounder, a born leader. The teachers would admonish Tara in reproachful tones: "Look at your sister Bimla. You should try to be more like your sister Bimla. She plays games, she takes part in all activities, she is a monitor, the head girl. And you . . ." (P. 123). Bim's confident ways invariably overshadow Tara's diffident manner. There are two episodes that demonstrate this. The first one is when Bim cuts Tara's hair promising her curls which she knows she may not be able to do achieve:

"Come on, come on," Bim hurried her roughly, snipping the air with the big heavy sewing scissors and, making Tara crouch down behind the cast-iron water-tank on the roof, she cut through her hair at the ears with great sure crunches of the steel blades.

(P. 119)

The second episode is when Bim and Tara steal Raja's cigarettes and hide behind a bougainvillea bush to smoke:

'Oh, Bim, no-o! cried Tara in fright. Her sister was driving her, forcing her through fear again, as usual. She tried to resist, hopelessly. This was why she distrusted Bim so: Bim never knew when to stop.

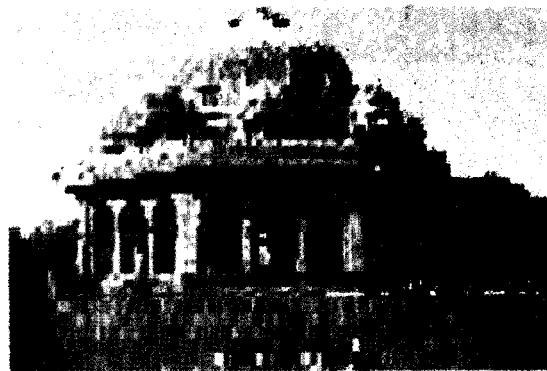
(P. 133)

Tara sums up the effect her sister Bim has on her when she says that she:

felt Bim's hold on her again-that rough, strong, sure grasp-dragging her own, down into a well of oppression, of lethargy, of ennui. She felt the waters of her childhood closing over her head again-black and scummy as in the well at the back.

(P. 149)

Being the weaker of the two sisters, Tara's tendency is to escape from ugliness. When the boredom of the Das household descends and engulfs her, her thoughts are of her home in Washington. Even as children when Bim and Raja would express their anger against their parents' obsessive card games by saying that they would tear and burn the cards, Tara would simply run to Mira-Masi for protection.



Lodhi Garden

One of the most striking examples of Tara's escapist tendencies is seen in the bee episode in Lodi Gardens. The Das sisters had gone on a picnic with the Misras to Lodi Gardens. The Misra sisters--Sarla and Jaya-- had invited two young possible suitors for themselves. Bim and Tara were invited by them to lend an informality to the atmosphere. But of course the atmosphere was anything but informal. Bim and Tara decided to go off on their own to look at the tombs. While they were in a tomb a boy threw a pebble which probably hit a bee hive. The bees attacked Bim holding her their prisoner. Tara ran away in desperation. At the time of the episode Tara did not have the courage to apologize to Bim. Much later in their lives Tara discusses the episode with her sister asking her for forgiveness. Bim's generosity is revealed when she tells Tara: "You couldn't help it-if you'd stayed, you'd have been stung, like me-you had to run" (P. 136).

Bim is the more giving of the two sisters. Even as a child her role models were Florence Nightingale and Joan of Arc. As a student she used to help out in a clinic for women in Kingsway Camp for refugees. Bim's selflessness extends to all her siblings and Mira Masi. She looks after their autistic brother Baba. She is his caretaker. Tara, on the contrary, does not view herself in this light. She is happy at Baba's dependence on Bim. It is Bim again who nurses both Raja, while he was suffering from T.B. and Mira-Masi. Tara, disliked any form of social work. In school she had to do some social work but she resented doing it. Once during a visit to a hospital she "saw the rice and dal being ladled out of pails onto aluminium platters in slopping piles, she was obliged to run out behind a hedge to be sick. After that, charity always had, for her, the sour reek of vomit" (P. 126).

Interestingly, despite Tara's self-centredness, it is she who acts as a mediator in bringing Bim and Raja together after the misunderstanding over Raja's letter. Raja had written a letter to Bim after his father-in-law Hyder Ali's death. In this letter he had stated that since he had inherited all the property as the only son-in-law, he had also acquired the home in which Bim lived. He reassured her that he would not increase the rent and would allow her to live in it as long as she wanted to. The patronizing tone of the letter infuriated Bim and she cut all ties with him. It is Tara who tells Bim to tear up the letter and forgive Raja. Eventually when Bim does tear up the letter it is because of her own compulsions. However, Tara is instrumental in making this happen. Similarly, it is Tara who notices the fact that Bim is very overstrained and is dangerously close to neurosis. She tells Bakul that Bim talks to herself. Her concern over Bim is expressed when she tells Jaya that Bim is in a strange mood and that she is worried about her:

'Oh,' said Tara. 'Bim is-is in a strange mood these days,' she explained, trying to bring in her own anxieties for Jaya's attention. 'I'm worried about her, Jaya.'

'About Bim?' Jaya was scornful. Indignation still burnt in her. How burnt and blackened her skin was, Tara noted, staring at their feet in slippers, making their way through the heavy white dust of the driveway. Jaya's feet were like the claws of an old crook, twisted and charred. Her voice, too, sounded like a burnt twig breaking, brittle and dry. 'No need to worry about Bim-she's always looked after herself. She can take care of herself.'

'For how long?' worried, Tara, holding her white cotton sari like a veil across her face against the blinding light. 'Bim's not young. And Baba's not young either. And here they are, just the two of them, while we are all away.'

There seemed no way of conveying her anxiety to Jaya.

(P. 161)

Like most of Desai's women characters, Bim and Tara also grow and are not what they are at the beginning of the novel.

2.5 TREATMENT OF TIME

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)

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 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)

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 the 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 realised gradually and gathered skilfully.¹⁶

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 country's partition parallels the partition of the Das family.

Time deals with the several characters in *Clear Light of Day*, differently. Among the childhood ambitions of the Das children, only Tara's materialises. 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.

Childhood experiences are recalled in adulthood and through these intersections, characters grow. The Bee episode at Lodi gardens is an example in point. Tara remembers this episode when she left Bim who was attacked by the bees and ran to escape the attack herself. She feels guilty about her response then and recalls the event to apologize 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 memory lane. Desai is 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 novel reads like a well orchestrated musical composition.

Interestingly, 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 the sound of the house, as much as the contended muttering of the pigeons in the verandah. It gave time a continuity and regularity that the ticking of a clock in the hall might convey in other houses.

(P. 102)

In fact, the Das home, as Sudhakar R. Jamkhandi says,

has seen many a 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 from her frequent trips home and achieves 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." (153) And all of this is Bim's domain, the domain from which she is inseparable.¹⁷

2.6 LET US SUM UP

Clear Light of Day:
Themes,
Techniques, Time

In this unit we have unfolded the structure of the novel giving you a detailed storyline of Part I of the novel. Then, the techniques Anita Desai employs have been discussed so also the Bim/Tara relationship and the thematic issues the relationship raises. We will continue with the storyline of the rest of the novel and the issues raised in the coming units.

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2.7 QUESTIONS

1. Critically comment on the structure of the novel.
2. Outline the story line of Part I of *Clear Light of Day*.
3. What are the chief techniques used by Desai in *Clear Light of Day*?
4. Discuss the personalities of Bim and Tara as depicted through their relationship in the novel.

UNIT 3 POLITICAL DIMENSION, MAJOR CHARACTERS

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Detailed Storyline of Part II
- 3.2 The Political Dimension of *Clear Light of Day*
- 3.3 The Importance of Raja in the novel
- 3.4 Baba's presence in *Clear Light of Day*
- 3.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.6 Questions

3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit you will be given a detailed storyline of Part II of *Clear Light of Day*. This will be followed by a discussion on the political dimension of the novel. The presence of Raja and Baba in the novel will also be discussed in some detail to acquaint you with their significance. The concluding unit will raise questions to enable you to give a focused reading to the text.

3.1 DETAILED STORYLINE OF PART II

Part II is set in the past. It begins with the violence of the partition and quickly moves onto Raja's illness with T.B. The Alis have left their neighbourhood amidst all the partition violence. Raja, who had got very close to Hyder Ali, is upset that he did not inform him before leaving. At times he wonders whether Hyder Ali and his family were taken forcibly away. He feels frustrated that he cannot help them in their time of need. Raja's concern for the Alis makes Bim see the heroic side of her brother. She "could not help admiring what she saw as his heroism, his independent thinking and courage. Raja was truly the stuff of which heroes are made" (P. 45). All summer Bim nurses her brother and reads his favourite poets to him: Tennyson, Browning and Swinburne.

In this section we get some more details about Raja. His admiration for Hyder Ali—his neighbour and landlord—is reciprocated by Ali. He encourages Raja to use his library at home. Gradually he begins to take part in the social life of Hyder Ali. It is at one of the social evenings at Ali's place that Raja first meets a poet from Hyderabad. He is very impressed by him and feels encouraged to become an Urdu poet himself.

Some details about the Das parents also emerge in this section. We come to know that it was Raja's father—keeping the partition context in mind—who insisted that he should not join Jamia Millia Islamia to study Urdu. Raja, joins Hindu College for a course in English Honours. His father had also been a student of the same college. While doing his undergraduate degree, Raja gets drawn into college politics. Later, he withdraws when he discovers the fundamentalist and terrorist nature of his friends' agenda and their hatred for the Muslims.

Raja's mother is described in this section as someone who was not too well:

Their mother, for the first time in twenty years, missed an evening at the club, said she did not feel well and would stay in bed. That night she passed

quietly into a coma so that when her husband returned from the club after an unsatisfactory game with an unaccustomed partner, he found her lying still and flaccid on her bed, quite beyond questioning him on his game.

The ambulance came. The children stumbled out of their beds to watch her being carried out like a parcel containing some dangerous material that had to be carefully handled...

Their mother died without seeing any of them again. If she ever, for a minute, regained consciousness, it was only to murmur the name of familiar cards that seemed to drift through her mind with a dying rustle.

(PP. 53-54)

In Part II of the novel we are further told about Mira Masi's addiction to brandy and Tara's friendship with the Misra sisters. It is through them that she meets Bakul at the Roshanara Club. A new relationship between Bim and Dr. Biswas also develops in this section. Dr. Biswas takes her to a music concert and for tea with his mother.

Two important episodes are mentioned in this section which have a lasting impact on the characters in the novel. The first is the drowning of the cow episode. (This episode will be dealt with in Unit 5:2 of this Block). The second is to do with Raja's decision to leave Delhi and settle in Hyderabad (see Unit 3:3 of this Block for a lengthier discussion). At the end of the section Bim and Baba are left together. Bim, who has been left behind by Raja, with all the family responsibilities tells Baba:

'So now there are just you and I left, Baba,' she muttered. 'Does the house seem empty to you? Everyone's gone, except you and I. They won't come back. We'll be alone now. But we don't have to worry about anyone now—Tara or Raja or Mira-Masi. We needn't worry now that they're all gone. We're just by ourselves and there's nothing to worry about. You're not afraid, are you?'

(P. 101).

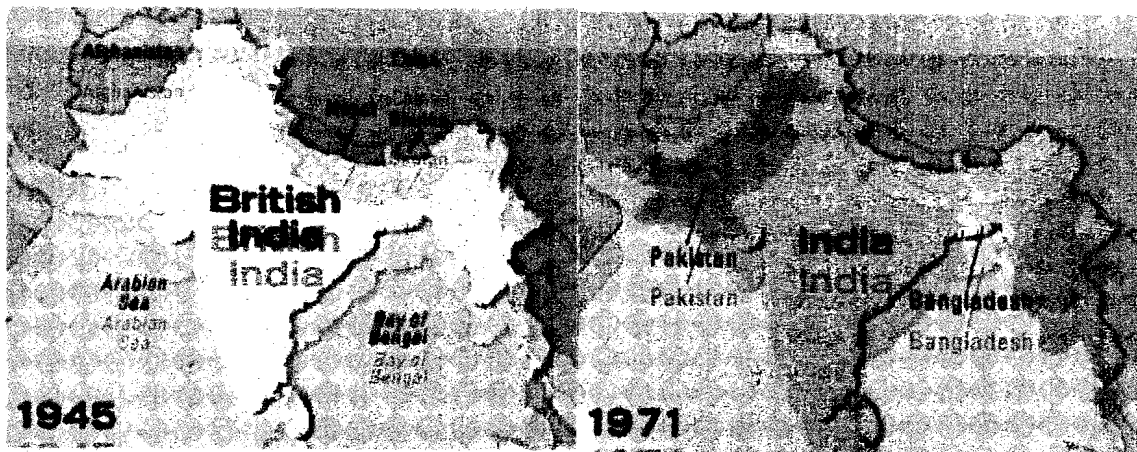
3.2 THE POLITICAL DIMENSION OF *CLEAR LIGHT OF DAY*

In a very broad sense, the growth of India's freedom struggle and the development of Indian-English fiction are interconnected. We have several novels in Indian-English which deal with the politics of India's struggle for independence. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, for example, is set in the 1930s and deals with the impact of Gandhian ideology of non-violence in a little south Indian village. Kushwant Singh's, *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, depicts the reactions of many of his characters to the Quit India movement of 1942.

Desai's *Clear Light of Day*, although mentions the late 30s and a few days in the 70s, is set in the summer of 1947. But, unlike, other writers dealing with this period, she does not foreground the political happenings of 1947 as the main theme of her novel, instead, she highlights the Das family history as it emerges through the turbulent happenings of national history. Personal emotions in the novel parallel national storms. When Bim worked,

She felt a sharp, fiery pining for college to re-open and her ordinary working life to be resumed. Then she would be able to end all this storm of emotion in which she had been dragged back and forth all summer as in a vast, warm ocean, and return to what she did best, most efficiently, with least expense of spirit – the keeping to schedule, the following of a time-table, the application of the mind to facts, figures, rules and analyses.

(P. 169)



The partition of India, symbolizes the break up of the Das family. Like post-independent India, which was looking for a new direction with its new identity, the Das children also face a crisis relating to their past. They have all grown differently with different goals and interests. Bim's relation to her past particularly parallels the crisis in modern India – of finding a new role for herself in relation to the past. Ironically, when Bim does realize her usefulness with her siblings, she locates herself not in the immediate history of the nation but to a past history when there was harmony between Hindus and Muslims and “a whole, a perfect pattern” existed.

Salman Rushdie in “Midnight's Children” also combines family history with national politics but both writers differ in the way they deal with it:

While Anita Desai works through her characters' interaction, especially through dialogue and reminiscence, thus building up a concept of history in an indirect and implicit manner, Rushdie's narrator Saleem is a very self-conscious individual who uses different means: he conceptualises and verbalises the term ‘recollection’ in phrases such as ‘[there] is no escape from past acquaintance. What you were is forever who you are’ (P.368); or, towards the end of his story, when he sums up his insight: ‘Who what am I, My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to-me. (p.383).

Another difference in narrative procedure is the intricate relationship between historical events and personal experiences in the Sinai family.. which enables Rushdie to build up a myth of history which is as provocative as it is questionable. *Clear Light of Day* does not lack parallels between the historical process and individual experiences, especially in the second part of the book where the times are marked by departure and death not only in the Das family but also in the life of the Indian nation—the years 1947-48 with the partition of the subcontinent, the enforced exodus of millions from their homes, violence, death and, finally, Gandhi's assassination, have profound meaning for the Das children—but still, it appears that history and the individuals are linked by coincidence rather than by the intrinsic logic we encounter in ‘Midnight's Children’.¹

In *Clear Light of Day* the happenings of 1947 are viewed from the perspective of the Das sisters:

‘Yes, what a summer,’ Tara murmured. Isn't it strange how life won't flow, like a river, but moves in jumps, as if it were held back by locks that are opened now and then to let it jump forwards in a kind of flood? 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 fires of 1947 burn on the horizon and the politics of the period is only glimpsed at by the Das sisters who live secluded in the Civil Lines area of Old Delhi:

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, and now and then a column of white smoke would rise and stand solid as an obelisk in the dark. Bim, pacing up and down on the rooftop, would imagine she could hear the sound of shots and of cries and screams, but they lived so far outside the city, out in the Civil Lines where the gardens and bungalows were quiet and sheltered behind their hedges, that it was really rather improbable and she told herself she only imagined it. All she really heard was the ceaseless rattling of frogs in the mud of the Jumna and occasionally a tonga horse nervously dashing down the road.
(P. 44)

Desai's skill as a novelist lies in the subtle way that she weaves in national history with the personal lives of her characters. We are told that the Das parents:

spent their lives playing bridge at the club, intently conning their hands, unaware of the movement of history that was bringing their way of life to an end. Their children were educated in English, in Christian schools, educated into a culture that in 1947 packed its bags and left, condemning them to live their lives as a futile exercise in nostalgia, dreaming like Bing Crosby on Baba's record of a white Christmas. Bim is offered no magic release. Even when she listens to the old man's song, what it brings to her mind is a line from *Four Quartets*.²

What we see emerge here is a neocolonial attitude. In the post-independent Indian context, this neocolonial attitude transfers itself into an upper middle class phenomenon, a form of snobbery. This is seen very clearly when Bim goes to Dr. Biswas' home for tea with his mother:

The tea party was of course a mistake and Bim scowled and cursed herself for having softened and let herself in for what was a humiliation and a disaster for everyone concerned.

Had Mrs. Biswas dressed for it? Bim had never seen anyone so dressed. So bathed, so powdered. She seemed to be dusted all over with flour. Perhaps she had fallen into a flour bin, like a large bun. But she smelt so powerfully of synthetic flowers, it must be powder after all. And her white sari crackled with starch, like a biscuit. And her hair gleamed with coconut oil, and flecks of gold glinted at the lobes of her ears and in the ringed folds of her neck. Altogether a piece of confectionery, thought Bim.

She was given a platter with all the goodies already heaped on it—neatly counted out, so many biscuits, so many pieces of mithai, so many firtters and a spoonful of chutney. Similar plates with exactly the same number of goodies were handed to Dr. Biswas, one kept by her. They ate.

A China cabinet against the wall them. It stood on four legs and housed little plaster figures from Germany—a miniature beer mug, Hansel and Gretel skipping in a meadow, a squirrel dressed in a daisy chain. There were Indian dolls, less travelled but more worn, tinselt garlands flaking off onto red organdie saris and gold turbans. There were clay toys in cane baskets—

yellow bananas, green chillies. A parrot. A cow. A plastic baby. And they all stared at Bim munching her way through the goodies. Dr. Biswas stared at his brown shoes, so highly polished. He ate nothing

(PP. 90-91)

Political Dimension, Major Characters

Interestingly, in *Clear Light of Day*, all great names of the partition period are mentioned: Jinnah, Nehru, Gandhi, Churchill and Mountbatten. Gandhi's murder for example, is told by a cobbler to Dr. Biswas. Again, almost all the characters refer to the Hindu/Muslim problem including minor characters like Mira Masi and Bakul (see P. 56 & PP. 70-71 respectively).

It is through Raja's interaction with the Alis and their Muslim friends that Desai subtly demonstrates to us the need for the formation of Pakistan. When Mira Masi admonishes Raja about his frequent trips to the Alis and that it was not safe to be with Muslims, he goes nevertheless. He listens to the conversations between Ali and his Muslim friends and "began to see Pakistan as they did—as a possibility, very close to them, palpable and real" (P. 57).

During the partition riots in the country, Raja was ill with T.B. and felt frustrated that he could not help the Alis. When Bim assuages his fears by saying that he must be safe, Raja explodes, "safe"? For Muslims? Here in India? It will be safe after every Muslim has had his throat slit" (P. 45).

Raja is secular in his approach to the Hindu/Muslim problem in the country. Bim wonders at his ways of thinking and feeling which are so different from the others. When Raja's father dissuades him from joining Jamia Millia Islamia for a course in Urdu, he is surprised by the reasons offered by his father: "If you, a Hindu boy, are caught in Jamia Millia, the centre of Islamic studies—as you call it—you will be torn to bits, you will be burnt alive—" (P. 52). While in Hindu college, Raja experiences Hindu fundamentalism, and decides to withdraw from political activities in college.

Later, after Raja's father's death, when his sister Bim asks him to help out with their father's business, he sharply retorts:

'Oh Bim, Bim,' he said, dramatically gesturing towards the door that opened out into the thick, dusty twilight. 'Look there-look,' he said, 'the city's burning down. Delhi is being destroyed. The whole country is split up and everyone's become a refugee. Our friends have been driven away, perhaps killed. And you ask me to worry about a few cheques and files in father's office.

(PP. 66-67)

Raja is one character in the novel who foresees the political violence that follows India's independence. He tells Bim:

'Don't you see—there is going to be fighting in the streets, people like Hyder Ali Sahib are going to be driven out, their property will be burnt and looted, the government is helpless, they're not preventing—preventing—but now tears of weakness rose in his throat, flooding it, and he closed his mouth and turned his head from side to side like a dog tied to a tight leash.

(PP. 59-60)

As predicted by Raja, we come to know in the course of the narrative, that during the partition riots of 1947, the Alis who owned half the houses in the area had to sell them and when they "left Delhi during the partition riots of 1947, they sold most of these houses to their Hindu tenants for a song—all except for Bim's house which she did not try to buy and which he continued to let to her at the same rent as before" (P.

28). It was Raja, again, who anticipated the violence following Gandhi's death (PP. 93-94).

Ali's leaving Delhi indicates the changed political atmosphere of the nation. The locked house symbolizes the Das childhood and past, a past of pre-partition harmony deliberately referred to by Desai in *Clear Light of Day* when she talks about the status of Urdu then and now:

Raja had studied Urdu in school in those days before the Partition when students had a choice between Hindi and Urdu. It was a natural enough choice to make for the son of a Delhi family: Urdu had been the court language in the days of the Muslim and Moghul rulers and had persisted as the language of the learned and the cultivated. Hindi was then considered a language of great pedigree; it had little to show for itself in its modern, clipped, workaday form, and its literature was all in ancient, extinct dialects. Raja, who read much and had a good ear, was aware of such differences.

(P. 47)

Alamgir Hashmi says of *Clear Light of Day*:

For weaving together the public and the private, for a balanced treatment of the historical elements in the book, for a sympathetic and introspective study of character and personal relationships, and for a pellucid, personal style, this novel remains a triumph. In twenty-five years of story-telling, *Clear Light of Days* is the best of Anita Desai, a novel which will continue to command attention and respect.³

3.3 THE IMPORTANCE OF RAJA IN *CLEAR LIGHT OF DAY*

Raja is a very important character in *Clear Light of Day*. Desai uses him for several reasons in the novel. Since the first part of the novel is set in the present, Raja is physically absent from it. When the novel begins he is already married to Benazir, the daughter of his neighbour and landlord, Hyder Ali, and is settled in Hyderabad.

The Raja/Ali relationship is important in the novel. Through the nurturing manner in which Ali treats Raja and the trusting way in which Raja responds to him, Desai demonstrates to us the harmony that existed between Hindus and Muslims in India before partition.

Very early in the novel we come to know of the fact that even as a child Raja admired Hyder Ali and considered him as his hero. He was overawed by the sight of Hyder Ali riding on his white horse, while he was playing on the banks of the river, "Jumna" with his sister, Bim. Bim tells Tara:

'We stood up to watch them go past and he wouldn't even look at us. The peon shouted to us to get out of the way. I think Hyder Ali Sahib used to think of himself as some kind of prince, a nawab. And Raja loved that.' Her eyes gleamed as much with malice as with remembrance. 'Raja stood up straight and stared and stared and I'm sure he longed to ride on a white horse with a dog to run behind him just as older Hyder Ali did. Hyder Ali Sahib was always Raja's ideal, wasn't he?' she ended up.

(P. 25)

When Ali comes to hear of Raja's interest in Urdu poetry he encourages him and allows him to use his personal library at home.

As Raja grows older he begins to participate in Ali's family parties:

**Political Dimension,
Major Characters**

In the evening, tired of his own noisy sisters and peculiar old aunt and still more peculiar little brother, he would wander across to the Hyder Ali's garden where there was always a gathering in a circle on the lawn, drinks and ice and betel leaves served on silver trays, and gentlemen discussing politics and quoting poetry.

(P. 49)

Desai, through these social evenings, points to a decadent life style that existed in pre-partitioned India.

Again, it is through Ali's parties which Raja attends, that Desai gives us a Muslim perspective on the need for India's partition. At these parties glasses,

of whisky were passed around, some poetry quoted, and soon they forgot Raja, or Raja's Hindu presence, and picked up the subject they had dropped on seeing him—Pakistan, as ever Pakistan. Raja listened silently as they spoke of Jinnah, of Gandhi and Nehru, of Mountbatten and Attlee and Churchill, because he knew this was not a matter in which he should express an opinion, but he listened and he began to see Pakistan as they did—as a possibility, very close to them, palpable and real.

(P. 57)

When Raja joins Hindu College as desired by his father, he gets involved in political activities. But when he discovers the bigotry of his friends and their hatred for Muslims and their anger against the creation of Pakistan, he withdraws. When he spoke to them 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. Some of them, his two or three closest friends, disclosed to him that they were members of terrorist societies; they told him they were not giving in cravenly to the partitioning of the country no matter what Gandhi said or Nehru did—they were going to fight to defend their country, their society, their religion.

(P. 57)

Through Raja's interactions both with his college friends and with his father—who dissuades him from joining Jamia Millia to study Urdu because it was unsafe for Hindus to be with Muslims in the partition context—, we come to know of the mounting tensions between Hindus and Muslims in 1947.

Raja's concern for Hyder Ali's family during the partition riots is further used by Desai to expose to us the fundamentalist atmosphere in India during that period. Through the conversations between Bim and Tara we come to know that during the partition riots of 1947, Raja was very ill with T.B. and feeling helpless. When Bim who had been nursing Raja through his illness tells him not to worry about the Alis and that they must be safe, he explodes:

'Safe? For Muslims? Here in India? It will be safe after every Muslim has had his throat slit,' Raja said with great viciousness. He half-lifted himself from the bed and then threw himself violently back again.' 'And here I am — too ill to even get up and help. And the only time in my life that I've ever been ill,' he added bitterly.

(P. 45)

Again, it is Raja who warns us of the chaos and violence that is to follow the death of Gandhi. He is relieved when he hears over the radio that it was a Hindu and not a Muslim who had killed Gandhi.

In a very broad sense, Raja's way of thinking and feeling is quite like Desai's, very cosmopolitan. Bim is bewildered by

Raja's ways of thinking and feeling, so different from anyone else's at that time or day. She could not help admiring what she saw as his heroism, his independent thinking and courage. Raja was truly the stuff of which heroes are made, she was convinced, and yet here he lay, ironically, too ill to play the hero he longed to and, she half-believed, was meant to be.

(P. 45)

The central irony in the novel, of course, is that Raja grows up to be anything but a hero. He ends up as a contented, rich local landlord with no dreams and ambitions. Bim tells Tara of the one time he visited her after her marriage:

They did visit me once... After their marriage, after their first baby was born, they did come to visit us. And Benazir was already so plump, and Raja—Raja looked like a pasha, he was so fat.

(P. 144)

Raja contributes very significantly to the political dimension of the novel. (For a detailed discussion on the political aspect of the novel see Unit 3:2 of this Block). But he also is central to the story line of *Clear Light of Day*. The Bim/Raja relationship is integral to the novel and it is the breakdown in this relationship that affects the characters in different ways.

Through the reminiscing of the Das sisters we come to know that as children, Bim and Raja were very close. They shared an interest in literature and played with boats on the banks of the river, "Jumna." The first mention of Raja is made in the novel in relation to his anger against his parents' excessive card games:

Raja used to swear that one day he would leap up onto the table in a lion-mask, brandishing a torch, and set fire to this paper-world of theirs, while Bim flashed her sewing scissors in the sunlight and declared she would creep in secretly at night and snip all the cards into bits. But Tara simply sucked her finger and retreated down the veranda to Aunt Mira's room where she could always tuck herself up in the plum-coloured quilt that smelt so comfortingly of the aged relation and her ginger cat, lay her head down beside that purring creature and feel such a warmth, such a softness of comfort and protection as not to feel the need to wreck her parents' occupation or divert their attention. It would have frightened her a bit if they had come, away, followed her and tried to communicate with her.

(P. 22)

However, when the novel begins the relationship between Bim and Raja "is ended," as Bim informs Tara when she asks her to join them in attending Moyna, Raja's daughter's wedding in Hyderabad:

'I have ended it already,' Bim said stubbornly, 'by not going to see them and not having them here either. It is ended. But I don't forget, no.'

(P. 28)

The immediate cause of the breakdown in the relationship between Bim and Raja is a letter that he had written to her after the death of his father-in-law, Hyder Ali. As Benazir's husband, Raja inherited all of Ali's property which included the house in which Bim and Baba now lived. In his letter, Raja wrote:

You will have got our wire with the news of Hyder Ali Sahib's death. I know you will have been as saddened by it as we are. Perhaps you are also a

bit worried about the future. But you must remember that when I left you, I promised I would always look after you, Bim. When Hyder Ali was ill and making out his will, Benazir herself spoke to him about the house and asked him to allow you to keep it at the same rent we used to pay him when father and mother were alive. He agreed—you know he never cared for money, only for friendship—and I want to assure you that now that he is dead and has left all his property to us, you may continue to have it at the same rent, I shall never think of raising it or of selling the house as long as you and Baba need it. If you have any worries, Bim you have only to tell—Raja.

(P. 27)

Bim is humiliated by the patronising tone of this letter. She feels that Raja, by projecting his “generosity” in not increasing the house rent was expecting her to be obliged to him. This is particularly offensive to her because she had relied upon Raja to take control of the business and the family after their father’s death. In a sense, this is his second betrayal. The first was when he walked out on the family:

‘I—I will—go today—today I will catch the train—I won’t stop here, with you, another day. It’s enough—enough—’ and he let go the chair and spread out his arms as if to push everything out of his way.

(P. 95)

Raja’s rebellion begins with his desire to study Urdu and become a poet. This rebellion later becomes a shirking off of his family responsibilities and family business.

Interestingly, the chasm between Bim and Raja had begun to appear much earlier as Santosh Gupta notes. Differences were there over,

their reading had revealed certain important differences in temperament, only they had not acknowledged them. Raja’s quest for the distant world, different cultures, more colourful and sophisticated than his own, had first led him to Urdu poetry and then to the house-hold of Hyder Ali. Bim had begun to ask for a rational, non-emotional, understanding of the world, through facts and chronology, rather than through imagination. In her anger she picks on Raja’s juvenelia as the target of bitter criticism—she calls them ‘terrible,’ and ‘nauseating.’ Shocking Tara, on her visit to Bim and Baba in their house in Old Delhi.⁴

Tara plays a crucial role in bringing Bim and Raja together again. She tries to persuade Bim to tear up Raja’s letter and to forgive him. She also pleads with Bim to attend Raja’s daughter, Moyna’s wedding in Hyderabad. When Bim makes up with her brother, it is due to her own compulsions, but Tara is also important in this reconciliation. Bim tells Tara:

Tell him we couldn’t come—but he should come. Bring him back with you, Tara—or tell him to come in the winter. All of them.

(P. 175)

Bim’s desire to make up with Raja is important because it makes her realize how different parts make the whole. Harmony, comes from an integration of the old and the new. She realizes there 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. She laid her hands across her eyes again.

(P. 166)

She knew that she had to forgive Raja, beg forgiveness from Baba for her displaced anger against him. Tara, Raja, Baba are all affected by the breakdown of the Bim/Raja relationship. They are all brought back to the fold. The central theme of the novel, time as a preserver and destroyer, is linked specifically with the re-uniting of Bim with Raja. Alamgir Hashmi says,

The *Clear Light of Day* is to be seen not only by Bim who, after reading a passage in *Life of Aurangzeb* and tearing up the last officious letter of Raja's that she has kept for years and never answered, appears amendable and forgiving; but also by others. Bim and Tara, whose 'difference' is emphasized throughout, are actually very much like each other; at least Tara says so to Jaya, the common friend-neighbour. Bim recognises, like Tara earlier, how really dark and silent their own house is. Baba begins to respond to affection and spends jolly hours with Tara's two young daughters... he once again enjoys listening to his monotonous forties records on an old HMV.⁵

3.4 BABA'S PRESENCE IN THE NOVEL

Baba and Bim are the two people who continue to live in their childhood home in Old Delhi around which the novel unfolds itself. He is described by Desai in the novel as:

a finely composed piece of sculpture in white. Marble, or milk. Or less: a spider's web, faint and shadowy, or just some moonlight spilt across the bed. There was something unsubstantial about his long slimness in the light white clothes, such a total absence of being, of character, of clamouring traits and characteristics.

(P. 40)

There may be a "total absence of being," in Baba, but he plays a significant role in the novel.

Baba's presence in the novel is heralded by music of the forties. The numbers he plays, "Sm-o-ke gets in your eyes," "Don't Fence Me In" and "Donkey's Serenade" are significant. They pick up the lack of clarity, wisdom, and the trapped situation of the central characters in the novel. Most of the characters in the novel are trapped: Baba is trapped by his autism, Bim is trapped by her circumstances, Tara by her guilt and Raja finds the Das household itself a trap. Mira Masi is trapped by her poverty and later, her alcoholism, and the Alis, by the partition riots. The lack of direction and the need for wisdom in the Das household, parallels the situation of independent India. This is further picked up by Desai's description of Baba in the novel as a person whose face "was blanched, like a plant grown underground or in deepest shade" (P. 8). Both the inexperience of the Das children in dealing with life after the departure of their parents, and the rawness of the nation in coping with its postcolonial situation are symbolised here.

The political dimension of the novel is also picked up by Baba's song numbers. His music of the forties sets the background for the novel which deals with events of that period.

Baba's music serves another important purpose in *Clear Light of Day*. In fact, the structure of the novel is indeed like a well orchestrated musical piece. Music is indeed integral to the novel in that it contrasts to the discordance repressed in the various characters. (For a detailed discussion on the significance of music in the novel see Unit 4:2).

Baba plays a very important functional role in the novel. It is because of him that Mira Masi, an important character, is brought into the novel. We are told by the narrator that Baba was conceived in his parents' old age. It was:

as if his parents, too aged, had given birth to a child without vitality or will—all that had gone into the other, earlier children and there had been none left for this last, late one.

(P. 103)

Although the new baby was the prettiest of all, people could not help but notice how slow he was in everything. The mother, who was "severely diabetic," got restless and Baba was entrusted to an ayah. When the ayah could not cope, Mira Masi was sent for (the significance of Mira Masi's role is discussed separately in Unit 4).

Baba has another functional role to play in the novel. It is with him that Bim goes to check out Ali's locked house. And it is from this house that Baba takes Benazir's abandoned gramophone on which he plays his music. The lock in Ali's house points to a chapter in Hindu/Muslim relations in India that has been closed after partition.

Much of the pathos in the novel emerges from Baba's presence in it. The episode when he goes out of the house because both Bim and Tara had wanted him to visit the office is truly pathetic:

His knees trembled in anticipation, knowing he would be forced down, or flung down if he continued down the road. But it was if Tara had given him a push down a steep incline. She had said that he was to go. Bim had said he was to go. Bim and Tara, both of them, wanted him to go. He was going.

His feet in their unfastened sandals scuffed through the dust of Bela Road. Sharp gravel kept slipping into them, prodding him. His arms swung wildly, propelling him along. His head bobbed, his white hair flopped. His eyes strained and saw black instead of white. Was he going to faint? Would he fall? Should he stop? Could he? Or would they drive him on? 'Hato! Hato!' Then he heard the crash he knew would come.

(P. 16)

Baba's most significant role in the novel is his relationship with Bim. He is dependent on her. She acts like his caretaker but Bim too needs him. She tells Tara that after everyone left Baba was still with her. Their mutual dependency is best articulated by Jaya to Tara when the latter expresses concern for Bim. Jaya says:

There are two of them—they have each other, 'Jaya's voice angrily smouldered. 'Bim has Baba to look after—she has always liked to rule others—and he needs her. Bim's all right.'

(P. 161)

It is again Baba who is with Bim at the musical evening at the Misras place, when she listens to the songs of Mulk Misra and his guru, and gets a perspective on her own life (for details see Unit 4:2 of the Block). The turning point in Bim's life comes a little earlier when she expresses her anger against Raja at Baba. Reviewing her limited finances, she advises Baba to go and live with Raja:

She was hitting the target now—hitting and hitting it. 'Are you willing to go and live with Raja in Hyderabad?'

She had not known she was going to say that till she had said it. She had only walked in to walk to Baba—cut down his defence and demand some kind of a response from him, some kind of justification from him for herself, her own life, her ways and attitudes, like a blessing from Baba. She had not known she would be led into making such a threat, or blackmailing Baba. She was still hardly aware of what she had said, only something seemed to slam inside her head, painfully, when she looked at Baba.

He did not say anything. He only sat on the edge of his bed as he always did, his long hands dangling loosely over his knees, but he seemed to draw back from her, as far as he could, and his mouth was drawn awry as if he had been slapped, hard.

'I mean', she cried, leaning out of her chair towards him, 'I mean—it's just an idea—I've been wondering—I wanted to ask you, Baba—what you thought.'

But Baba never told what he thought. No one knew if he thought.

'I didn't mean,' she said hoarsely, 'Baba, I didn't mean—'

Then Bim's rage was spent at last. It had reached its peak, its acme, like a great glittering wave that had hovered over everyone and that now collapsed, fell on the sand and seeped away, leaving nothing but a soggy shadow in the shape of Baba's silence.

(PP. 163-164)

Desai's greatness as a novelist lies in her ability to make even apparently insignificant characters play an integral role in the novel. Baba, in *Clear Light of Day* clearly illustrates this skill in the author.

3.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit we have further worked on the storyline of Part II of the novel. The political dimension of the novel has been brought out. The significance of Raja and Baba has been highlighted with a view to keep you focussed on the study of the text.

References

¹Dieter Riemenschneider. "History And The Individual in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*," Ed. Viney Kirpal, *The New Indian Novel in English: A Study of the 1980s*. Delhi: Allied, 1990. pp. 188-189.

²Richard Cronin. *Imagining India*. Macmillan: 1989.p.54

³A Hashmi. "*Clear Light of Day* between India and Pakistan," Ed. Viney Kirpal, *The New Indian Novel in English: A Study of the 1980s*. Delhi: Allied, 1990.p.70.

⁴Bridging the Polarities of Imagination and Reason in *Clear Light of Day*," ed. R.K. Dhawan. *The Fiction of Anita Desai*. New Delhi: Babri Publications, 1989.pp.121-122.

⁵"*Clear Light of Day* between India and Pakistan," ed. Vinay Kirpal, *The New Indian Novel in English: A Study of the 1980s*. Delhi: Allied, 1990.

3.6 QUESTIONS

1. Highlight the important episodes in Part II of *Clear Light of Day*.
2. Critically comment on the way in which Desai weaves in the political elements in *Clear Light of Day*.
3. Raja is a pivotal character in the happenings of *Clear Light of Day*. Discuss
4. Critically comment on Baba's presence in the novel.

UNIT 4 MUSIC, MINOR CHARACTERS

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Detailed Storyline of Part III
- 4.2 Importance of Music in *Clear Light of Day*
- 4.3 Minor characters: Mira Masi, Bakul & Dr. Biswas
- 4.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.5 Questions

4.0 OBJECTIVES

This Unit will first give a detailed outline of the storyline of Part III. It will then deal with the importance of music in the novel. A range of minor characters will also be discussed to point out their significance. The unit will conclude with Questions which will enable you to get a perspective on the section.

4.1 DETAILED STORYLINE OF PART III

Part III of *Clear Light of Day* is set in an even further past of the Das family life. In this part we come to know of Baba's birth. His parents had conceived him in their old age. The mother was "severely diabetic" when she was expecting him. The new baby though "the prettiest of all" was born autistic. The mother got tired of his slow ways and decided to hire an ayah to look after his needs. When the ayah too couldn't cope with Baba, Mira Masi or Aunt Mira, a poor widowed relative was asked to look after him and the other three Das children: Bim, Raja and Tara. The mother told them:

'She is coming to look after you children, .. You have become too much for me---you are all so noisy and naughty. She will discipline you. And look after your brother. I don't know what is wrong with him -he should be walking by now and doing things for himself. She will keep him in her room and look after him. And you will have to learn to be quiet'.

(P. 104)

Mira Masi has an important role to play in the novel. Part III provides us with details of Mira Masi's background. (For details concerning Mira Masi see, Unit 4:3 of this Block)

It is through this part of the novel that we come to know in greater detail about the childhood of Bim and Tara. The two sisters have very different personalities. In school Bim was the leader and well loved by her teachers. Tara, on the other hand, was always told to be like her sister. Where Bim loved social work, Tara, abhorred it. Tara emerges as the timid one in the childhood scenes evoked in this section. (For details about the Bim/Tara relationship, see Unit 1:4)

There are two episodes that are mentioned in Part III which are significant. The first episode deals with time when Bim cuts Tara's hair against her will. The second, is the Bee episode at Lodi Gardens. The first one gives us an insight into Bim's dominating and bullying ways and Tara's diffident personality. The second, demonstrates Tara's instinct to escape whenever confronted with a problem. (For details of the Bee episode, see Unit 5:2 of this Block).

It is in this section that we get information about the background of the Misras. They are the neighbours of the Das'. (For a detailed note on the Misras, see Unit 5:3 of this Block). The Misras are contrasted to the Das. The former are portrayed as very Indian in their ways and the latter, are delineated as more Western:

What attracted Tara was the contrast their home provided to hers. Even externally there were such obvious differences—at the Misra's no attempt was made, as at Tara's house, to 'keep up appearances.'

At the Misras, string beds might be carried into the drawing room for visiting relations, or else mats spread on the veranda floor when an influx of visitors grew so large that it overflowed.

(P. 137)

This section closes with an engagement party for the Misra sisters to which the Das sisters are invited. The noise and din of the party makes Bim ask Tara to go to the roof where it would be quieter. It is on the terrace that the two sisters discuss education and women. Bim says:

'I don't know how those two girls are going to study and pass their finals with all this going on,' she said.

'I don't think it matters to them,' said Tara, picking at flakes of blackened lichen on the balustrade sulkily. 'They're getting married,' she said. 'Why don't they go to college instead?'

Bim gave a snort of disgust. 'I don't know why they're in such a hurry to get married,' she said. 'Why don't they go to college instead?'

'Their mother wanted them to be married soon. She said she married when she was twelve and Jaya and Sarala are already sixteen and seventeen years old.'

'But they're not educated yet,' Bim said sharply. 'They haven't any degrees. They should go to college,' she insisted.

(PP. 139-140)

The section concludes with Bim's declaration that she will never get married adding, "I shall never leave Baba and Raja and MiraMasi" (p.140).

4.2 THE IMPORTANCE OF MUSIC IN *CLEAR LIGHT OF DAY*

Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*, is dominated by sound. The novel begins with the koels singing:

The koels began to call before daylight. Their voices rang out from the dark trees like an arrangement of bells, calling and echoing each others' calls, mocking and enticing each other into ever higher and shriller calls. More and more joined in as the sun rose.....

(P. 1)

Interestingly, the novel also ends with Mulk's guru singing the poetry of Iqbal. Desai uses music to foreground the theme of the novel. Syed Amanuddin notes that between the singing of the koels and the musical rendering of Iqbal's poetry, "we have the scratches and squeaks of old records".¹ These "scratches and squeaks" are the tensions and problems of a nation breaking up, a family getting fragmented:

The Partition brought barriers between people who had lived together for centuries in an atmosphere of mutual social and cultural understanding. The

division into two individual units causes each group a crisis of identity for there is a forced uprooting and deviation from the fundamental principles of the common Indian culture that had prevailed over the country, where individual units had followed their diverse ways of living, remaining one whole entity. In a similar manner Tara, Bim and Raja also face a crisis of relating their present to the past – their adulthood to childhood. The period that lies in between—the growing consciousness and search for individuality of adolescence—fails to provide a continuity from the early period of childhood to the later stage of adulthood, causing deep psychological trauma and stress.²

Music becomes a panacea for deeper disturbances in the novel. Most of the characters in *Clear Light of Day* are associated with music in some way or the other. It depicts their emotional strains. Because of the psychological nature of her novel, Desai often uses music to project thoughts, emotions and feelings in her characters. Baba, the autistic character in the novel is delineated through music. He is introduced through music of the forties evoking the period in which the novel is set. The numbers he plays are significant “sm-o-ke get in your eyes” and “Don’t Fence Me In.” They point to a trap that he is enmeshed in due to his disability. Syed Amanuddin says:

Blunt needles, old records with scratches, the mysterious silence of the listener, and his ghastly long arms fit the atmosphere of the decaying old Delhi.³

Baba refuses to change his old HMV gramophone with the latest Hi-Fi system that Raja gets him as a gift. When Tara tells Bim that she tried looking for new records for Baba while she was abroad but was unable to find “78s any more” (P. 7), Bim says, “Oh he doesn’t want any new records,....He wouldn’t play them. He loves his old ones” (P. 7).

As an autistic person, Baba is pushed to the margins of society. The HMV gramophone becomes a weapon of some sorts in his hands. Although he is silent, he controls sounds through music. This is effectively brought out by Desai in the opening scene of the novel. The cacophony that heralds Baba’s entrance takes over the atmosphere of the house: “The noise beat and thrummed in one of the curtained rooms behind him” (P. 7). Tara even wonders, “why did he spend his days and years listening to this appalling noise?” (P. 12).

The music coming out of the old HMV gramophone which belonged to Ali’s daughter, Benazir, becomes a voice from the past. When Raja is asked by Ali—who shifted to Hyderabad during the partition riots—to look into his house, he requests Bim to do him the favour since he was not well. Bim agrees and takes Baba with her. Inside the house, Baba is very quiet, but once he spots the gramophone he begins to respond differently:

Baba had been silent all through this ghostly tour, keeping close to her except when she made some small, nervous comment, when he gave start and jumped away from her. Now he pointed his finger and made a little desperate sound like a bell that won’t ring when pressed. Bim looked. ‘What?’ she asked, ‘that?’ Baba nodded, and she went with him to a corner where an old-fashioned His Master’s Voice gramophone stood on a small three-legged table, on the lower shelf of which were stacked the records Benazir and her friends had listened to . . . ‘Come, let’s go,’ said Bim, turning away. ‘Let’s go and look in the servants’ quarters—there may be someone there.’ But Baba would not go. He stood there fingering the smooth shining metal gadgetry in the green box, his long fingers closing about the curved silver horn, Admiringly, lovingly. ‘come Baba, come,’ Bim said several times, more and more impatiently, but he was

smiling to himself, quite deaf and unresponsive in the enclosed bubble of his dream, till she said angrily 'Then I'm going alone,' whereupon he reluctantly let down the lid, closing the box with a gentle creak, and followed her, dragging his foot and looking whipped so that she said in exasperation 'If you want it, I suppose there's nothing to stop you taking it. But first let's go and see if there's anyone outside, at the back, whom we can ask.' He raised his chin and gave her a shy, fearful look of hope then and followed her more willingly.

(P. 74)

In this episode we notice Baba communicating with Bim. Otherwise, throughout the novel he is engrossed in his own world and does not communicate with anyone. Baba's routine life is represented through the circular movement of the gramophone.

Dr. Biswas is also defined by the music he loves. He is the doctor that Mr. Das' firm sends to treat Raja, and later, Mira Masi. Dr. Biswas was initiated into Western classical music in Germany. He learnt the violin there. He tells Bim during a concert that he takes her to:

'When I first heard Mozart, Miss Das, I closed my eyes, and it was as if my hole past vanished, just rolled away from me—the country of my birth, my ancestors, my family, everything—and I arrived in a new world. It was a new world, a shining new world. I felt that when I heard Mozart for the first time—'

(P. 83)

But when he returns to India he can't relate to his violin. He tells Bim:

'I had so much there, I was so rich then! Now I feel very poor, useless. I touch my violin and try to make sounds to remind me of that time. I take lessons from the first violinist of the Delhi Music Society orchestra, and I play to myself and inflict my playing on my mother who is an old-fashioned Bengali lady and likes only Tagore's songs and suffers in silence because she loves me. I am her only son.'

(P. 84)

Desai, weaves in the strain of neocolonialism which runs as a reality in post-independent India. The East /West encounter brought by colonialism, is beautifully depicted by her through music. Biswas loves Western classical music and his mother loves Rabindra sangeet. Similarly, in the Das household, we hear Western songs and in their neighbours—Alis and Misras—we hear Indian classical music.

For the Misras too, Music is important. It is, for them, both a source of entertainment and livelihood. The two Misra sisters, Sarla and Jaya—after being abandoned by their husbands—earn their living by teaching singing and dancing to little girls. To the Misra boys—who have also been abandoned by their wives—music becomes a hobby and an interest. When Mulk comes to know of the fact that his sisters prevented the tabla-player, harmonium player, and his accompanists from coming for a musical evening because of the expense involved, he is furious:

'Food! It wasn't food they wanted. You are insulting them. You are insulting my guru. He does not want food, or money. He wants respect. Regard. That is what we must pay to guru. But you have no respect, no regard. You think only of money—money—money. That is what you think about, you two—'

'Mulk, Mulk.'

'They have minds full of money, dirty minds. They don't understand the artist, how the artist lives for his art. They don't know how it is only music—'

here he clasped his chest with a moist, sweating paw—‘only music that keeps me alive. Not food. Not money.’

(P. 38)

Music, Minor Characters

The main theme of the novel is brought out most effectively in the last scene when Mulk Misra and his ageing guru sing “at a soiree.” The Das’ are invited to the evening. However, only Bim and Baba attend it because Tara and her family have gone to Hyderabad to attend the wedding of Moyna, Raja’s daughter. At the musical evening, Bim notices the fact that though Mulk and his guru both hail from the same school of singing.

the contrast between Mulk’s voice and his was great: whereas Mulk’s voice had been almost like a child’s, so sweet and clear, or a young man’s full and ripe and with a touch of sweetness to it, the old man’s was sharp, even a little cracked, inclined to break, although not merely with age but with the bitterness of his experiences, the sadness and passion and frustration.

(FP. 181-182)

Bim realises that between the young and the old, the past and the present, the audience and the singers all form an integrated whole. As Santosh Gupta observes:

Music becomes symbolic of the intuitive understanding of oneself, and of the reality that lies submerged under appearances. With her “inner eyes” Bim perceives a continuity in history, hers, her family’s and in time, ‘not binding them within some dead and airless cell but giving them the soil in which to hand down their roots ... reach out to new lines, but always drawing from the same soil, the secret soil, the same secret darkness.’ (P. 182). Bim perceives this hidden source of her being: “It was where her deepest self lived, and the deeper selves of her sister and brothers.”

The harmonious relationship between the old Guru and Mulk also establishes the possibility of a meaningful interaction between past and present, old age and youth.

The song brings also a synthesis of poetry and melody, verbal and non-verbal, rational and emotional modes of artistic expression. The guru sings a verse of Iqbal to which both Bim and Baba respond, feeling closer to each other.

The last scene becomes the image of Bim’s reintegration with her family, society and culture, and her perception of a unity between divergent elements within herself and in the world.⁴

4.3 MINOR CHARACTERS: MIRA MASI, BAKUL AND DR. BISWAS

MIRA MASI

When the novel starts, Mira-Masi or Aunt Mira—as she is called—is already dead but she is a very important character in the novel. She comes into the Das household initially to look after the youngest Das child, Baba, who is autistic, but she eventually ends up looking after the other Das children as well. She becomes like a surrogate mother to them. Among her other tasks in the Das household are quilt making, story telling, pickle making and knitting.

Among the four Das children: Bim, Raja, Tara and Baba, Tara is the one who instantly bonds with Mira Masi. She “could wrap herself up in (Mira Masi) as in an old soft shawl. . . breathing in her aunt’s smell, finding in it a deep, musty comfort” (P. 109). Whenever, Bim and Raja would team up Tara would simply suck her

fingers and retreat to Mira Masi. Baba, is the other Das child on whom we see the influence of Mira Masi's affection:

To begin with, she stopped feeding him those milky sops from the tip of a silver spoon. Instead, she cut up small pieces of bread and let him pick them up and put them in his mouth himself. His sisters and his brother, who had not seen him perform this skill before, stood by, entranced, applauding him. Then she showed him how to slip a button into a buttonhole. They got great deal of amusement out of that, too. Eventually he could do up his buttons himself and then would stand basking in their congratulations like a duck in a shower of rain. Visitors could hardly believe their eyes when they saw him sitting on the veranda and playing a game of marbles with Aunt Mira—how his fingers got round the rolling globes of glass, how he manipulated them and rolled them back to her: it was a miracle.

(P. 106)

The other two Das children, Bim and Raja, also gradually get used to Mira-Masi. During the first summer of her stay at the Das home, it was she who nursed both Bim and Raja who were suffering from typhoid. The children neglected by their own parents need her "she was the tree that grew in the centre of their lives and in whose shade they lived" (P. 110). Mira-Masi, too, needed them. Abused by her relatives for being a widow she felt unwanted.

In Part III of the novel we get some details about Mira-Masi's background. We learn about the fact that she was barely "twelve years old when she was married and was a virgin when she was widowed" (P. 108). Her husband who had gone for higher studies to England, had died of a cold there. After this:

She was left stranded with his family and they blamed her bitterly for his death: it was her unfortunate horoscope that had brought it about, they said. She should be made to pay for her guilt. Guiltily, she scrubbed and washed and cooked for them. At night she massaged her mother-in-law's legs and nursed wakeful babies and stitched trousseaux for her sisters-in-law. Of course she aged. Not only was her hair white but she was nearly bald. At least that saved her from being used by her brothers-in-law who would have put the widow to a different use had she been more appetising. Since she was not, they eyed her unpleasing person sullenly and made jokes loudly enough for her to overhear. There was laughter, till they grew bored. She stayed with them so long that she became boring. They suspected her of being a parasite. It was time she was turned out. She was turned out. Another household could find some use for her: cracked pot, torn rag, picked bone.

(P. 108)

Through this description Desai tells us about the status of women in India. She is one of the first post-independent women writers who portrays a wide range of women: Abandoned ones, single and widowed women—in her novels. In *Clear Light of Day* although Mira-masi is a surrogate mother to the Das children, she can never be treated as a mother or wife. Even the Das children felt this way:

She really had not the qualities required by a mother or a wife. Even the children did not believe she had. Looking at her, they could not blame the husband for going away to England and dying. Aunt Mira would not have made a wife. What does make a wife? Why, they felt, a wife is someone like their mother who raised her eyes when the father rose from the table and dropped them when he sat down; who spent long hours at a dressing-table before a mirror, amongst jars and bottles that smelt sweet and into which she dipped questing fingers and drew out the ingredients of a wife—sweet-smelling but soon rancid; who commanded servants and chastised children and was obeyed like a queen. Aunt Mira had none of these attributes.

Sticklike, she whipped her sari about her, jammed a few long steel pins into the little knot of hair on her head, and was dressed in an instant, ready to fly. She neither commanded nor chastised, and was certainly never obeyed. She was not soft or scented or sensual. She was bony and angular, wrinkled and desiccated—like a stick, or an ancient tree to which they adhered.

(PP. 110-111)

Music, Minor Characters

Traditional Indian values are brought out cleverly and subtly by Desai through the treatment Mira-Masi gets from her family. When the Das children ask their mother why Mira-Masi always wore white, she explains, "that white was the widow's colour" (P. 108).

Alamgir Hashmi says that there is a "pallid light which hangs over the holy Indian matrimony" in *Clear Light of Day*.

Jaya and Sarla do not live with their husbands and are probably divorced, though it cannot be said openly; their two brothers cannot keep their wives with them because the wives cannot stand them and would rather stay in the brighter lights of New Delhi; Tara's mother and father seemed no great success as a married couple and they spent most of their time at the club, playing cards or bridge; Aunt Mira was maltreated by her husband's relatives after his death, so marriage is no parther-indemnity insurance either; Bim vows never to marry because marriage seems to deter or replace all normal and healthy pursuits such as study and active life (for Jaya and Sarla); Tara's marriage, ostensibly happy, remains an "instrument of escape" rather than a positive, desirable achievement. Bim says in Section III that "(Jaya and Sarla) might find marriage isn't enough to last them the whole of their lives." True enough, it turns out to be inadequate even for a short time, as the two sisters now live at their father's house.⁵

As early as Part II of the novel, we come to know that Mira-Masi is gradually becoming an alcoholic, she gets addicted to Brandi which was initially recommended to her for medicinal purposes. The mental derangement that has slowly set into Mira-Masi is clearly revealed in the episode when Bim and Baba go over to check out Hyder Ali's locked house. When they return home, Raja tells them that Mira-Masi is in a bad state:

Raja had bolted the door on the outside. Drawing back the bolt, Bim threw open the door, then quickly shut it behind her so that no one should come in, for aunt Mira was in a disgraceful state, a state no one should see her in. She had clawed off her clothes from her body so that her blouse hung in strips from the little shrivelled flaps of her blue-veined breasts and her sari trailed behind her on the floor as she lurched about the room in a kind of halting dance, her feet getting tangled in the torn muslin that lay everywhere, her one hand jerking at her side while the other held onto a glass of what smelt unmistakably like raw, undiluted liquor. Yes, there was the brandy bottle, nearly empty, on the floor by her bed.

(P. 77)

There is another episode where Mira-Masi runs naked whipping herself saying, "Oh God—the rats, the rats! Rats, lizards, snakes—they are eating me —oh, they are eating me—" (P. 96). Dr. Biswas is called for help and it is during this visit that he notices the responsibilities that Bim has to deal with alone. (For details on the Bim/Biswas relationship see note on Dr. Biswas in Unit 4:3 of this Block).

The alcoholic condition of Mira-Masi was the beginning of her death. The bird imagery—so central to the novel—is picked up in Mira-Masi's description while she was dying:

She lay quite still now, shrinking and shrivelling, till she almost ceased to be human, became bird instead, an old bird with its feathers plucked, its bones jutting out from under the blue-tinged skin, too antique, too crushed to move.
(P. 98)

Later, we are told that she screamed "like an owl, or a night jar starting out of the silence" (P. 99). (For the significance of bird imagery, see Unit 5:2 of this Block).

Mira-masi feels that she will drown in the well near the house. This fear is created in her by the episode of the drowning cow in the novel. It was Mira-Masi who suggested to Mrs. Das the notion of keeping a cow for fresh milk for the children. One day it drowned in the well. Mira-Masi felt guilty about it. She used to say, "she would drown herself" (P. 41). The image of the drowning cow shows her lack of control over herself. The cow coalesces with the white horse in the novel lending a richness to the imagery (see section on imagery, Unit 5:2).

The personalities of Bim and Tara are brought into sharper focus in relation to their treatment of Mira-Masi; although Tara was more attached to her, it is Bim who nurtures her through her illness. Tara's guilt in not nursing her is brought out when towards the end of the novel she tells Bim:

She had not even thought of Aunt Mira, had not once worried about her. Not till after her death. And of that she heard only after the funeral. 'I didn't even come to the funeral,' she wailed.

(P. 174)

Mira-Masi's spirit haunts Bim as well. For a very long time Bim

continued to see her, was certain that she saw her: the shrunken little body naked, triling a torn shred of a nightie, a wisp of pubic hair, as she slipped surreptitiously along the hedge, head bent low as if she hoped no one would notice her as she hurried towards the well..

(P. 100)

Bim connects what she had read in Raja's copy of *The Waste Land* "Who is the third who walks always beside you?" with "(Mira-masi's) small shadow thrown by a subliminal ghost that existed in the corner of the eye" (P. 100).

After Mira-Masi's death it is Bim and Raja who go to cremate her. References are made to Mira Masi at the end of the novel. When Tara's daughters come Bim tells Tara that she needs time with her nieces. Tara says, "You can have all the time you want with them...and influence them as much as you like. In our family, aunts have that prerogative. Like Mira-Masi had" (P. 174). We are also told that Baba shifts into Mira-masi's room (P. 12) and about her ashes been thrown into the "Jumna" (P. 24).

BAKUL

Bakul is married to Tara, the younger Das sister. He had met her at the Roshanara Club while he was still a trainee for the Indian Foreign Service. When the novel begins Bakul is visiting Delhi with his wife. Their two daughters are said to join them later.

Bakul, though a minor character, makes important contributions to the novel. It is through him that Desai gives us an outsider's perspective on the Das family. We first meet him in the Das house having morning tea with Bim, Tara and Baba. He appears withdrawn:

While the two women sat upright and tense and seethed with unspoken speech, the two men seemed dehydrated, emptied out, with not a word to say about anything.

Music, Minor
Characters

(P. 9)

He gets bored and restless and gets irritated with his wife for wanting to sit with her brother and sister "doing nothing" (P. 11). In fact, through Bakul, Desai throws light on the personalities of the Das sisters. He is surprised by his wife's behaviour the moment she is with her own family. He tells her: "So, I only have to bring you home for a day, Tara, and you go back to being the hopeless person you were before I married you" (P. 17). Unlike Tara who gives in to apathy easily, Bakul fights it:

Bakul said one could rise above the climate, that one could ignore it if one filled one's mind with so many thoughts and activities that there was no room for it. "Look at me," he had said the winter that they froze in Moscow. "I don't let the cold immobilize me, do I?"

(P. 21)

Over a period of time, Bakul, has made Tara into an:

active, organized woman who looked up her engagement book every morning, made plans and programmes 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)

That Bakul and their daughters have influenced Tara is evident from her observation when Baba refuses to respond to her question whether he would go to office:

He kept his head lowered, smiling slightly, sadly.
'Never?'

The room rang with her voice, then with silence... She herself had been taught, by her husband and by her daughters, to answer questions, to make statements, to be frank and to be precise. They would have none of these silences and shadows. Here things were left unsaid and undone. It was what they called 'Old Delhi decadence.'

(P. 13)

Bakul's reason for visiting Delhi is to keep up with his Indian roots,. He tells Bim, during one of the evenings at their neighbour, Misra's place, "part of me lives here, the deepest part of me, always" (P. 36). When the older Misra son asks Bakul as to how he explains the poverty and corruption in India to foreigners, Bakul responds, "why talk of local politics, party disputes, election malpractices?" (P. 35). Hashmi notes:

Bakul, though a representative of India abroad, distrusts Indian travel-agency arrangements and grumbles about the Old Delhi decadence.

Bakul is a flat character, a member of the Indian Foreign Service, a type that is practical, alert, and competent, but unimaginative and insipid; one that believes in projecting India abroad as "The Taj Mahal, the Bhagavad Gita, Indian philosophy, music, art, the great, immortal values of ancient India." He asks, "But why talk of local politics, party disputes, election malpractices, Nehru, his daughter, his grandson—such matters as will soon pass into oblivion?" (P. 35).

Official hypocrisy and shallow idealism which obstruct a realistic appraisal of things as they are, say, for Bim, thus become part of the Old Delhi decadence, although Bakul likes to think of himself as one belonging to the more aware and dynamic world of New Delhi.⁵

Through this conversation about India, Desai subtly tells us about the "reality" that is India and its "imagined reality" packaged abroad by non-resident Indians. In the post-colonial context this juxtaposition serves several purposes. For one, it shows the crucial juncture in which the country is situated, India-stripped of its colonial ties, floundering to find a direction. For another, Desai points out to us that neo-colonialism is a new reality in post-independent India:

The Misra brothers and sisters were not interested in the subtleties underlying such exchanges. One brother wanted to know 'what is the price of good whisky in Washington? Not that terrible thing called bourbon but scotch—can you get scotch?' and the sisters asked Tara where she had bought her chiffon sari and her leather bag, and for how much.

(P. 37)

This thread of neo-colonialism runs through the novel (for details see Unit 3:2 of this Block).

Bakul's most significant role in the novel is his request to Tara to arrange for Bim and Raja to meet in order to sort out their misunderstandings over the letter that Raja had written to her after he had inherited Hyder Ali's property:

'What is the matter with her?' asked Bakul, realizing Tara had to talk. He had his own suspicions about Bim but thought better of telling them to Tara. 'Is it that business with Sharma you told me about? Surely it can't be—she's been dealing with him for years.'

'It can't be that then,' Tara agreed. 'It seems to be Raja again, as far as I can see.'

'What, haven't they made up that quarrel yet? Bakul asked in a bored voice. Really, the house had an atmosphere—a chilling one, like a cemetery. I can't even remember what it was about – it was so long ago'. It wasn't really a quarrel—it was a letter—; it's just that Bim can't forget old grudges. They make her so miserable—I wish I could end them for her.'

Bakul paid her some attention now. He could always find a solution to any problem he liked to think. He rather relished problems. He relished solving them for anyone as easily impressed as Tara. He thought how nice it would be to have Tara stop looking so preoccupied and concerned and be impressed by him instead. Really, it was a night of Persian glamour and beauty. They should be sitting together in the moonlight, looking together the moon that hung over the garden like some great priceless pearl, flawed and blemished with gray shadowy ridges as only a very great beauty can risk being. Why were they worrying instead about Bim, and Raja? He came and stood close to Tara, his large solid thighs in their white pyjamas just before her eyes like two solid pillars, and his cigar glowing between two fingers. 'You must arrange for them to meet and speak,' he said in a thick, rich voice.

(P. 159)

As the novel progresses, one event leads to another and Bim "with her inner eye" sees how "her known house and its particular history linked and contained her as well as her whole family with all their separate histories and experiences" (P. 182)

DR. BISWAS

Dr. Biswas has a functional role to play in the novel. He is the doctor sent by Mr. Das' firm to treat Raja's tuberculosis. Later, he also treats Mira-Masi's alcoholism. He gradually becomes like a family doctor to the Das'. The first mention of a doctor is made in Part II of *Clear Light of Day*, when he comes to examine Raja who had

fallen ill. He diagnoses Raja as suffering from T.B. A more detailed description of the doctor is given when he makes his next visit to the Das'. We learn that he was a "soft-spoken and awkward young Bengali, sent by their father's partner" (P. 67).

Dr. Biswas, though a minor character in the novel, his sporadic presence is used very effectively by Desai. For one he gives us an outsider's viewpoint of Bim. During one of his visits to the Das home, when Bim asks him about Raja's recovery period, he says:

'I see, I see it all,' Dr. Biswas hurried on, staring hard at his shoes, making the most of this unusual burst of courage while it lasted. 'There are great problems. Your father—the house—the family—Raja's illness—it is all too much for a young lady. Raja must recover, he must take his father's place—'.
(P. 68)

This throws light on Bim and the circumstances within which she is situated. For another, it is to him that Bim unfolds her future plans. When he asks her to consider nursing as a profession, she says:

'It's all I do,' ...
Of Course, of course,' he stammered, flushing. 'I meant-....have you considered it as a profession? You do it so—so excellently.'
'No,' she assured him. 'What I think I shall do—I mean when Raja is well again and I have the time—I think I'll go back to college and finish my history course that I dropped when my aunt too fell ill, and when I get my degree—I might teach,' she ended up in a rush, the idea having just come to her as in a natural sequence of affairs.
(P. 85-86)

The importance of music in the novel has been already dealt within this unit. Dr. Biswas contributes immensely to it. (See Unit 4:2 of this unit). At one level, Dr. Biswas is used by Desai to demonstrate the neocolonial strain that emerges in post independent India (see Unit 3:2 of this Block).

Interestingly, Desai plays upon the Bim/Biswas relationship in the novel. She makes the readers believe that something may develop between them. That Dr. Biswas is interested in Bim is evident from the way he responds to her. He feels shy and nervous in her presence as is evident when Bim asks him to play the violin. It

embarrassed him so much that he became quite agitated. Dropping his bag, spilling his stethoscope, he fumbled about on the floor, picked them up, mumbling 'Oh no. impossible. You won't - I can't - you don't really—it won't -no, no, no. I can't play. Miss Das, instead—I will be so honoured—will you come—can you—a concert-you will hear—it will be—I would like—'

(P. 83)

When he takes her to the concert by the Delhi Music Society, he reveals details about his background. His mother, he says, was an "old-fashioned Bengali lady" who loved "Tagore songs" (P.84). both mother and son lived in a flat in Daryaganj. Dr. Biswas' sister was married and settled in Calcutta. We also come to know of his stint in Germany for higher studies and; how "the whole world of music unfolded" to him there (P. 83). Along with medicine he also learns the violin there.

Although Dr. Biswas sees himself as a rescuer vis-à-vis Bim, she doesn't view him the same way. She gets increasingly bored by him. When they go to Davico's restaurant after the concert, she says, "Now we must go,....I've never left Raja alone

for so long, or Mira-Masi” (P. 85). But Dr. Biswas is “all admiration” for her. He thanks her profusely for going out with him for the evening:

‘You don’t know—you can’t possibly know what it has meant to me. Only, please do come with me again—

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ cried Bim in a panic, and pushed at the gate so that he had to let go of the catch to save his fingers. Hurrying through, she shut the gate between them. ‘It’s really not right for me to have been out for so long—with Raja ill—and my aunt—you know my aunt—’

‘Yes, yes, but you can’t be a slave to them. I can’t be a slave to my mother. We must be ourselves. We must go out, have a little rest, some refreshment. Miss Das’ he gulped, ‘ come and meet my mother, please.’

(P. 87)

In the last part of the novel when Tara is feeling very upset for Bim because she sees her as being caught in a trap in the Das household, she asks Bim, “Oh, and Bim, do you ever see Dr.-Dr.—what was his name?” and Bim tells her flatly, “Dr. Biswas—No, I haven’t seen him since Mira Masi died” (P. 152).

The relationship between Dr. Biswas and Bim may not develop in the novel, but he does, have an impact on her. She acts on a hint thrown by him about helping in a clinic for women in Kingsway camp for refugees (P. 88). It is again through Dr. Biswas that we hear of Gandhi’s murder. The reference to this period in India. It adds to the political dimension of the novel. (See, Unit 3:2 of this Block).

4.4 LET US SUM UP

Having highlighted the story line of Part III of the novel, we have dealt with themes and issues which have been intricately webbed in the story line, Music for one has an important role to play in *Clear Light of Day*. We have also discussed the roles of Mira Masi, Bakul and Dr. Biswas who lend support to the storyline.

4.5 QUESTIONS

1. Highlight the important events in the storyline of Part III of the novel.
2. Music plays an important role in *Clear Light of Day*, comment.
3. Critically comment on the roles of Mira-Masi, Bakul, and Dr. Biswas.

References

¹Syed Amanuddin. “Bridging the Polarities of Imagination And Reason in *Clear Light of Day*,” *The Fiction of Anita Desai, Indian women Novelists set I: Vol II*. Ed. R.K. Dhawan. P.218.

²Ibid; p.221.

³Ibid; p.221.

⁴Ibid; pp. 128-129.

⁵A. Hashmi. “*Clear Light of Day Between India and Pakistan*,” ed. Viney Kirpal, *The New Indian Novel in English*. Delhi: Allied, 1990, P.70.

⁶Ibid; p. 69.

UNIT 5 ANITA DESAI'S CONTRIBUTION TO INDIAN ENGLISH FICTION

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Detailed storyline of Part IV
- 5.2 Imagery in *Clear Light of Day*
- 5.3 The Das Neighbours: Alis and Misras
- 5.4 Anita Desai's contribution to Indian-English Fiction
- 5.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.6 Questions
- 5.7 Suggested Reading

5.0 OBJECTIVES

This Unit will begin with a detailed storyline of Part-IV of *Clear Light of Day*. It will then discuss the imagery in the novel in some detail and move on to a discussion of the Das neighbours: the Alis and the Misras. Unit 5: 4 will highlight Anita Desai's contribution to Indian English fiction. The Unit will conclude with a select bibliography and questions.

5.1 DETAILED STORYLINE OF PART IV OF *CLEAR LIGHT OF DAY*

Part IV begins with a dust storm "raging outside" which is symbolic of the storm in the Das family and in the nation. The two sisters are busy. Tara was trying to write a letter to her daughters before their arrival in India. Bim was concentrating on her college work. Tara wanted Bim and her to "put their papers aside and sit in a companionable dusk" (P. 142). She was keen that Bim accompany her husband and children to Raja's daughter's wedding in Hyderabad. Bim refuses but Tara persists saying that she should attend the wedding.

In this section we get details about Raja's married life. He has four daughters and a son, Aijaz. Reference is also made in this section about a visit Raja had made with his family to Bim and Baba. The Bee episode which was mentioned earlier, is raked up again by Tara. She feels guilty for having abandoned her sister when the Bees attacked her. Tara wanted to ask Bim for "forgiveness and understanding , not simply forgetfulness and incomprehension" (P. 150).

Bim's feeling of rejection by her family surfaces in this section:

All these years she had felt herself to be the centre-- she had watched them all circling in the air, then returning, landing like birds, folding up their wings and letting down their legs till they touched solid ground. Solid ground. That was what the house had been-- the lawn, the rose walk, the guava trees, the veranda: Bim's domain... They had needed her as much as they had needed the sound of the pigeons in the veranda and the ritual of the family gathering on the lawn in the evening.

(P. 153)

It is in this section that a letter arrives from one Mr. Sharma who works in the Das office, requesting one of the Das children to attend an important meeting which will determine the future of the firm. Bim feels helpless and expresses a desire to sell the family shares. Tara asks her to consult the other family members before taking any hasty step. Bim gets furious that Raja has abandoned his family responsibilities and left her to cope with all the problems. She eventually takes out her anger against Baba:

All afternoon her anger swelled and spread, acquiring demonic proportions. It was like the summer itself, rising to its peak, or like the mercury in the barometer that hung on the veranda wall, swelling and bulging and glinting.

Then Baba, shaded and sequestered in his own room, played 'Don't Fence Me In' once too often. It was what Bim needed to break her in two, decapitate her with anger. Clutching at her throat, she strode into his room and jerked the needle-head off the record and twisted back the arm. In the silence that gaped like a wound left by a tooth that has been pulled, she said in a loud, loose voice, 'I want to have a talk with you, Baba. You'll have to leave that off and listen to me, and sitting down in a canvas chair by his bed, she rattled down a straight line aimed at Baba, shocked and confused before her, like a train racing down a line, driven by a mad driver. She could not look at Baba's widening eyes, more white than black, as she rattled on, straight at him, for he was the target she had chosen to hit --and hit and hit. She was telling him of her idea of selling their shares of the firm to Sharma, using that as a line on which to run. 'If I sell, it'll mean the end of that part of our income. It was too small to count anyway, but it did cover some of the expenses. With my salary, I'll be able to pay the rent, keep on the house, I'll manage--but I might have to send you to live with Raja. I came to ask you--what would you think of that?' She was hitting the target now--hitting and hitting it. 'Are you willing to go and live with Raja in Hyderabad?'

Then Bim's rage was spent at last. It had reached its peak, its acme, like a great glittering wave that had hovered over everyone and that now collapsed, fell on the sand and seeped away, leaving nothing but a soggy shadow in the shape of Baba's silence.

(PP. 163-164)

It is after this episode that Bim realizes that it is her own inadequacy which makes her attack the innocent and defenseless. She admits that, "I myself haven't been able to manage on my own" (P. 191). This realisation makes her achieve a spiritual wholeness by accepting and loving people for what they are. In *Clear Light of Day* she sees that the "soil contained all time, past and future in it. It was where her deepest self lived, and the selves of her sister and brothers and all those who shared that time with her" (P. 182). It is this realisation that also makes her find her own social relevance.

5.2 IMAGERY IN *CLEAR LIGHT OF DAY*

What lends a richness to Desai's novels is her powerful use of imagery. Nature, which includes animals, plants and birds, has a strong presence in almost all her works. Known in Indian-English fiction for ushering in the psychological novel, Desai uses external landscapes to portray interior states of mind. In *Cry, the Peacock*, the complexities of Maya's inner life is effectively brought out through the landscape as is her resentment against her husband for his inability to communicate with her. Baba, the autistic son, in *Clear Light of Day* is described as a "harmless garden spider" (P. 40). In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* The island people are described as goats ("neighed the goats" P.11) as they listen to Moses. Moses himself

is described as having "eyes like porpoises" (P. 139). In *Fire on the Mountain* the recurrent image of the "hen" accretes meaning in the feminine world of Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das. Desai's very first novel uses peacock in its title--*Cry, the Peacock*. She uses peacocks, who are said to fight before they mate--"Living they are aware of death. Dying, they are in love with life" --to demonstrate the merging of myth and reality in the central character, Maya's mind.

Desai's *Clear Light of Day* abounds in all sorts of imagery. The novel begins with the koels singing: "Their voices rang out from the dark trees like an arrangement of bells, calling and echoing each others' calls. More and more joined in as the sun rose..." (P. 1) and ends with Mulk's guru singing the poetry of Iqbal. Syed Amanuddin notes that between the singing of the koels and the musical rendering of Iqbal's poetry, "we have the scratches and squeaks of old records (P.218). These scratches and squeaks are the tensions and problems of a family and a nation breaking up. (For a detailed essay on the importance of Music imagery in the novel see Unit 4:2). The sandstorm raging at the opening of Part IV is emblematic of the ensuing emotional storm in the Das sisters. (For details of personal storms paralleling national storms see Unit 3:2).

In *Clear Light of Day*, through memory and recall, Desai brings out the inner repressions of her characters. She lays their feelings and emotions bare to us. The animal imagery in her novel is suggestive of the core of her characters. For example, people listening to Mulk's songs are like cooing "pigeons" (38). When Baba ventures out to the main road and returns soon after, he is described as a "thirsty dog" (P. 15). As Jasbir Jain Says:

There are other images and sounds and levels--the coppersmiths in the garden, of the crickets keeping Bim and Baba company after Raja's departure, of a dog pouncing on a flea, of the bees attacking Bim, of mynahs quarrelling, and 'pigeons beginning to mutter comfortably to each other in the verandah' (P. 146). The world of the novels is a world which is quite comfortable with the world of nature, and interacts with it with a fair amount of ease.¹

The two most significant episodes in the novel--the drowning of the cow and the attack by the bees--have to do with animals and nature. The well and the cow drowning in it occurs in both *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and *Clear Light of Day*. In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Sita's father had got the well dry for the islanders but later a cow fell and died in it. In *Clear Light of Day*, it was Mira Masi who suggested to Mrs. Das the notion of keeping a cow so that the children could have fresh milk. One day it drowned in the well and Mira Masi felt very guilty about it. The memory of this cow lingers on in the minds of the Das children. The drowning of the cow symbolizes Mira Masi's own loss of control over herself as it also signifies a new phase in the lives of the Das children, because its drowning is simultaneous with the deaths of their parents and the disintegration of the family. As J.P. Tripathi says,

Most haunting among the images in the novel is that of the well which becomes the symbol of death and a blind alley. The cow was drowned in it and never taken out so it becomes the symbol of nausea also. The symbolical meaning is brought out in the following words: 'The novel of the world it was, secret and hidden in thick folds of grass, from which they all emerged and to which they must return, crawling on their hands and knees.' It is thus associated with the cosmic system of death and destruction. The image is often involved and is associated with bottomless darkness and stench. It is also associated with ghosts and spirits.²

Interestingly, Desai coalesces the white horse on which Ali is first glimpsed at with the cow. The white horse represents the glamour of India's mogul past. It is this

image that inspires Raja to become like Ali. Later, we are told, that Raja's son gets a "white pony" as a gift from him.

The Bee episode--when Bim was attacked by the bees--and Tara abandoned her and escaped, is recalled by Tara several times in the novel. Her escape from the attack of bees is a prelude to her escape through marriage to Bakul from family responsibilities.

Light/shade imagery is important in *Clear Light of Day*. Light is associated with going out and freedom. When Bim teases Tara for saying that nothing had changed in the Das household she says:

'But you wouldn't want to return to life as it used to be, would you?'

Still frowning, Tara murmured meaninglessly 'Prefer to what?'

'Oh, to going on -to growing up-leaving-going away-into the world-something wider, freer-brighter, 'Bim laughed.

(P. 4)

Light is also associated with affection. It is in *Clear Light of Day* that Bim realises how she could make her alienated self connected again: "The bright light of day cut into her temples, leaving a wake of pain" (P. 172). She opens herself to the light of affection: "There was nothing left in the way of a barrier or a shadow, only the clear light pouring down from the sun. They might be floating in the light" (P. 177). (For imagery associated with music and politics in the novel see Unit 3:2 and Unit 4:3)

5.3 THE DAS NEIGHBOURS : ALIS AND MISRAS

ALIS

Hyder Ali, the neighbour and landlord of the Das', is one of the most important minor characters in the novel. The first mention of him is made in Part I when Bim and Tara recall their childhood. Tara reminds Bim of the times when Raja and she played on the banks of the 'Jumna.' Bim reminisces saying,

and the white horse riding by, Hyder Ali Sahib up on it, high above us, and his peon running in front of him, shouting, and his dog behind him, barking?" She laughed quite excitedly, seeing it again, this half-remembered picture. 'We stood up to watch them go past and he wouldn't even look at us. the peon shouted to us to get out of the way. I think Hyder Ali Sahib used to think of himself as some kind of prince, a nawab. And Raja loved that.'

(P. 25)

In Part III of the novel another reference is made to Ali on his horse on the banks of the "Jumna." When Raja and Bim would slowly trudge back home, they would hear the shouts of a man in khaki uniform:

'Hato! Hato!' shouted a man in a khaki uniform and a scarlet turban, and pounded past them on urgent heels, making way for a white horse that loomed up out of the dunes and floated by with a dimmed roar of hoof beats on the sand, followed by a slim golden dog with a happy plume of a tail waving in the purple air. The papas grass bent and parted for this procession and then rustled silkily upright into place again.

(P. 122)

These vignettes of Ali on his horse are significant. Through Ali, Desai shows us the more aristocratic, decadent form of life in old Delhi in pre-partition times. We are told by Desai that Ali was "either out on business or in his office room adjoining the library, going through his letters and files with a pair of clerks, for he was the owner of much property in Old Delhi and this seemed to entail an endless amount of paper work (P. 48).

**Anita Desai's
Contribution to
Indian English
Fiction**



Partition

Ali has a tremendous impact on Raja. Bim tells us that "Hyder Ali Sahib was always Raja's ideal, " (P. 25). Raja's first actual meeting with Hyder Ali mentioned in Part II of *Clear Light of Day*. When Ali hears of Raja's interest in Urdu poetry, he invites him to his "substantial library housed in a curious tower-like protruberance built at one corner of his bungalow" (P. 47). It is through Raja's visits to the Alis that his interest in Islamic studies is nurtured. His visits also make him part of their social circle. Most importantly, he meets Benazir, Ali's daughter and his future wife, during one of his library visits to the Ali home.

That Raja is interested in Benazir is clear from a flashback conversation between Bim and Raja in Part II of the novel. Raja, who is bedridden from T.B. tells Bim, "I wish I could go and see her" (P. 59). In fact, it is after his marriage to Benazir and he inherits Ali's property, that the final drift between Bim and him takes place. (For details see Unit 3 note on Raja). Of course, Ali had already started having an impact on Raja. This is expressed most dramatically in his abandoning his family responsibilities and leaving for Hyderabad to be with Ali. (For details, see Unit 3 note on Raja).

Details about Raja and his family are given to us in Part IV of the novel. He has four daughters and a son and it is to Raja and Benazir's daughter, Moyna's wedding, that Tara and her family have come to India. In this sense, Ali's grandchild is the structural reason for the meeting of Bim and Tara--the two central characters of *Clear Light of Day*. The story in the novel unfolds itself through their conversations and reminiscences. The HMV gramophone that Baba constantly plays also belongs to Benazir. (See Unit 3 Note on Music)

Desai tells us about Ali's death very early in the novel through a letter Raja sends to Bim. Through Tara's response to the letter, Desai skillfully tells us about Ali's background:

It took Tara some minutes to think out all the implications of this letter. To begin with, she studied the date and tried to recall when Hyder Ali had died. Instead a series of pictures of the Hyder Ali family flickered in the half-dark

of the room. There was Hyder Ali, once their neighbour and their landlord, as handsome and stately as a commissioned oil painting hung over a mantelpiece, all in silver and grey and scarlet as he had been on the white horse on which he rode along the river bank in the evenings while the children stood and watched. He had cultivated the best roses in Old Delhi and given parties to which poets and musicians came. Their parents were not amongst his friends. Then there was his daughter Benazir, a very young girl, plump and pretty, a veil thrown over her head as she hurried into the closed carriage that took her to school, and the Begum whom they seldom saw, she lived in the closed quarters of the house, but at Id sent them, and their other tenant-neighbours, rich sweets covered with fine silver foil on a tray decked with embroidered napkins. They had lived in the tall stucco house across the road, distinguished from all the others by its wealth of decorative touches like the coloured fanlight above the front door, the china tiles along the veranda walls and the coloured glass chandeliers and lamps. They had owned half the houses on that road. When they left Delhi during the partition riots of 1947, they sold most of these houses to their Hindu tenants for a song--all except for Bim's house which she did not try to buy and which she continued to let to her at the same rent as before. It was to this that Raja, his only son-in-law and inheritor of his considerable property, referred in his letter. It was a very old letter.

(PP. 27-28)

Through this background, Desai cleverly weaves in the political backdrop of her novel, viz. The partition riots of 1947. (For details, see Unit 3:2 of this workbook).

THE MISRAS

The Misras, like the Alis, are the neighbours of the Das'. But friendship between the two families was "formal and never close" (P. 136). They are introduced through music in the novel: "Walking up the Misra's driveway, they could hear... the sounds of the music and dance lessons that the Misra sisters gave in the evenings after their little nursery school had closed for the day" (P. 30). The importance of music in the novel is discussed in detail in Unit 4:2 of this workbook.

The Misras contribute to the novel in important ways. The Misra sisters, Jaya and Sarla, act as foils to the Das sisters, Bim and Tara. They are described as "two grey-haired, spectacled, middle aged women" (P. 30). The Misra sisters are a few years older than the Das girls. They all went to the same school and would occasionally do their homework together. Yet, "they had always regarded--or at least Bim had--the Misra girls as too boring to be cultivated" (P. 62). Tara, unlike Bim, gets drawn to the hustle and the bustle of the Misra home. Like her brother, Raja, who loved visiting Hyder Ali's home, Tara gets happiness from the Misra home. Theirs was a large family with people in and out of the house:

What attracted Tara was the contrast their home provided to hers. Even externally there were such obvious differences--at the Misras' no attempt was made, as at Tara's house, to 'keep up appearances.' They were so sure of their solid, middle-class bourgeois position that it never occurred to them to prove it or substantiate it by curtains at the windows, carpets on the floors, solid pieces of furniture placed at regular intervals, plates that matched each other on the table, white uniforms for the house servants and other such appurtenances considered indispensable by Tara's parents.

(P. 137)

It is through the Misra sisters and their various visits to the Roshanara Club, that Tara meets Bakul, her future husband. When she introduces him to Bim for the first time she says, "This is Bakul... 'The Misras--the Misras--' she stammered, 'took us to the Roshonara Club. There was a dance' (P. 63).

Unlike the Das sisters, the Misra sisters are very conservative. They get engaged and married very early, even before they could go to college for a degree. When Bim hears from Tara about their future plans, she says "I don't know why they're in such a hurry to get married, ... why don't they go to college instead?" (P. 140) Soon after marriage, Jaya and Sarla are abandoned by their husbands and they return to live with their old father and brothers who have also been abandoned by their wives. To earn a living, Jaya and Sarla run a nursery school by day and teach dance and music to children in the evenings. Through them, Desai portrays yet another notion of Indian womanhood: women, abandoned and exploited by their own families. The older Misra tells Bim that in a way she reminds him of his own daughters who selflessly work for others.

Jaya Misra is particularly important because she gives an insight into Bim's personality. During one of Jaya's little visits to Tara, the latter conveys her worries about Bim. She says, "Bim is--is in a strange mood these days, ... I'm worried about her, Jaya" (P. 161). Jaya immediately retorts that she should not worry because "Bim has her own mind. Bim always did. You were always so different, you two sisters" (P. 162). This little conversation depicts the problematic aspect in the central relationship of the novel viz. The Bim/Tara relationship. This relationship is discussed separately in Unit 2:4 of this workbook.

The Misra brothers sit idle. Their father describes them as "fat, lazy slobs" (P. 32). Brij Misra could not be successful as a manager of a firm because he did not want to associate with Punjabis from Pakistan as they did not hail from old families in prestigious Old Delhi. Mulk Misra wanted to pursue his hobby as a singer. His father tells Bim about him:

'And look at Mulk--our great musician--all he does is wave his hand in the air and look at the stars in the daytime sky, and sing. Sing! He only wants to sing. Why? For whom? Who asked him to sing? Nobody. He just wants to, that is all. He doesn't think anyone should ask him to work or earn money--they should only ask him to sing.'

(P. 33)

Mulk's idealistic and pleasure loving manner is brought out beautifully when Desai describes Mulk's reactions to the absence of the harmonium and the tabla players at one of the social evenings at their place. (For details see discussion on Music in Unit 4:2 of this Block). In a sense the Misra family becomes symbolic of the decadent values of Old Delhi.

The Misras are also associated with two major episodes in the novel. The first episode is the Bee episode at Lodi gardens and the second, is the musical evening at the Misras which Bim and Baba attend at the end of the novel. Both these episodes are central to the novel in that, they throw a flood of light on both its characters and its theme.

The Bee episode at Lodi gardens started with a picnic. Jaya and Sarla Misra had invited Bim and Tara for a picnic. Two young men had also been invited as "possible suitors" for the Misra sisters. The picnic "had been arranged to give their first meeting an air of informality" (P. 134). Bim and Tara felt uncomfortable with the group and decided to go for a walk to one of the tombs. While in one of the smaller tombs they were attacked by bees. Tara ran out leaving Bim behind. When she turned back she saw Bim had "her head bent and her arms crossed over her face... She seemed locked into the hive, as if she were the chosen queen, made prisoner" (P. 135). Tara, later, feels guilty about this incident. She feels that she should have not left her sister and escaped from the ugly scene. Desai uses this episode in the novel to show Tara's escapist tendencies and also to throw light on the subtle undercurrents in the Bim/Tara relationship.

The other important episode associated with the Misras is at the end of the novel. Bim, who has drifted away from her brother Raja, over a letter that he had sent her from Hyderabad, after he inherited Hyder Ali's property is feeling increasingly alienated and alone. Tara and her family have just left for Hyderabad to attend the wedding of Moyna, Raja's daughter. When the Misras invite her to attend a musical evening at their place, she takes Baba and goes for it. There she hears Mulk Misra and his guru sing and realizes 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.

(P. 182)

Her own past falls into a pattern for her. The central theme of the novel of change and continuity is brought out effectively through this episode at the Misras place. (for details see Unit 2.1 of this Block)

5.4 ANITA DESAI'S CONTRIBUTION TO INDIAN-ENGLISH FICTION

Anita Desai is one of the major voices in modern Indian-English fiction. In his selection of women writers, K.R. Shrinivasa Iyengar included a critique of Desai's fiction and stated that her first two novels, *Cry the Peacock* and *Voices in the City* have "added a new dimension to the achievement of the Indian women writers in India". This dimension takes multiple forms:

1. In Desai's novels there is a shift from the collective to the personal, from the communal to the individual. Unlike Jhabvala's novels where the social dimension is more important than the characters, and Markandaya's novels where the stress is on the economic and social background, Desai's novels highlight individual characters: their inner worlds and sensibilities. Her first two novels: *Cry, the Peacock* and *Voices in the city* are said to have ushered in the psychological novel in Indian-English fiction.
2. Desai's heroines represent the "creative release of feminine sensibility" which began to emerge after World War II. Her women characters are not ordinary mainstream women but are mostly from affluent families and do not have to worry about daily subsistence. They are more concerned with their emotional needs. Desai explores the inner world of her heroines and reveals the deeper forces at work in creating the feminine sensibility.
3. The journey to selfhood and freedom are important contributions made by Desai to Indian-English fiction. The motif of self exploration runs through all her novels (See Unit 1:2 for the list of her novels). This self exploration was new, especially for women characters, in the fiction of the sixties.
4. Since Desai's emphasis is on the inner world of her characters rather than the outer world of action, she uses the stream of consciousness technique to delineate her characters. The subtle nuances of the emotional world of her characters are reflected in syntax and imagery. (For details about Desai's techniques see Unit 2:3 for Note on imagery see Unit 5:2 of this Block).

5. The new emergent woman of the seventies is demonstrated best in the heroines of Desai's novels. The self sacrificing and patient Rukmini of Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* is displaced by intelligent, rebellious women who search for fulfillment and are willing to face the challenges of life. Maya, the heroine of *Cry, the Peacock*, is unique in resisting patriarchally defined notions of ideal womanhood. Maya is neurotic, sensitive and imaginative. The story of Maya as seen through her consciousness was new in the fiction of the late sixties.

Desai's mother characters are also not traditional, self effacing women. Sita, in *Where shall We Go this Summer?* for example, revolutionizes the concept of motherhood by refusing to give birth to her child in a hostile world. Monisha's mother in *Voices in the City* by having an extramarital affair goes against conventions and Bim's mother in *Clear Light of Day* is totally selfish and self absorbed.

5.5 LET US SUM UP

The concluding Unit in our discussion on *Clear Light of Day* began highlighting the main events in Part IV. This way the storyline which was gradually being unfolded in the earlier Unit was completed. We also discussed the use of imagery in the novel and moved on to the discussion of Das neighbours: Alis & Misras. The concluding segment of the Unit highlights Anita Desai's contribution to Indian-English fiction followed by a select bibliography. We have given you a long and comprehensive reading list here. Even if you don't go through all the books, some of these are easily available in libraries and you will find them very useful for understanding this fascinating novelist Anita Desai.

References

- ¹J.P. Tripathi. *Stairs to the Attic*. Jaipur: Printwell Publishers, 1987. p. 139.
- ²J.P. Tripathi. *The Mind and Art of Anita Desai*. Bareilly: Prakash Book, (1986. p.114).
- ³J.P. Tripathi. *The New Woman In Indian English: Women Writers since 1970's*. Delhi: B.R. Publishing House, 1995, p. 50.

5.6 QUESTIONS

1. Highlight the main events in Part IV of *Clear Light of Day*.
2. Critically comment on Desai's use of Imagery in *Clear Light of Day*.
3. Write short notes on the Das neighbours: Alis & Misras.
4. Anita Desai has contributed immensely to Indian-English fiction. Comment.

5.7 SUGGESTED READING

Afzal-Khan, Fawzia. *Cultural Imperialism and the Indo-English Novel*. Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 1993.

This book seeks to provide an analysis of "how binary categories of cultural classification such as Us/Them and East/West have worked in the production of knowledge and counter-knowledge within what has been a largely dominant Orientalist framework of literature and cultural study." The book studies the works of R.K. Narayan, Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya and Salman Rushdie.

Usha Bande. *The Novels of Anita Desai: A Study in the Character and Conflict* New Delhi: Prestige, 1988.

Using the concepts of Karen Horney and Abraham Maslow, Bande gives a psychoanalytic reading of Desai's novels.

Cronin, Richard. *Imagining India*. London: Macmillan Press, 1989.

This work is a collection of writers from Kipling to Salman Rushdie and from Gandhi to Ruth Praver Jhabvala, novelists and autobiographers: who share a single ambition--to create India by imagining it.

Jain, Jasbir. *Stairs to The Attic: The Novels of Anita Desai*. Jaipur: Printwell Publishers, 1987.

"Stairs to the Attic" is a phrase borrowed from Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* The book "focuses attention not only on Desai's thematic concerns, but also on her narrative techniques and more significantly on the lesser explored and felt psychological overtones of her works.

Meerabai, K. *Women's Vocies: The Novels of Indian Woman Writers*. Delhi: Prestige, 1996.

The book aims at a study of women characters as presented in the novels of women writers of Indian-English fiction. The book also highlights the narrative techniques used by them.

Prasad, Rajendra. *The Self, the Family and Society in Five Indian Novelists*. Prestige: Delhi, 1990.

This book studies the notion of the self, family and society in the works of Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, Arun Joshi and Anita Desai.

Seshadar, Vijayalakshmi. *The New Woman in Indian-English Women Writers since the 1970s*. Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1995.

"The book addresses itself to certain socio-literary aspects and presents a case for what can be termed woman-centred class oriented Indian-English fiction by women."

Shirwadkar, Meera. *Images of Women in the Indo-Anglian Novel*. Delhi: Sterling, 1979.

The book gives a feminist approach to Indian writing in English. In her ambitious attempt to trace the evolutionary chart of the feminine experience from "girlhood to old age, from the "dark room" of the tradition Indian household to the arena of modern political and social activity, Shirwadkar has covered an astonishingly large number of novels from *Padmini* (1990) to *Two Virgins* (1975)."

Singh, Sushila. *Feminism and Recent Fiction in English*. Delhi: Prestige, 1991.

The essays discuss recent Indian-English, British, American (including Black American), and Canadian fiction under the feminist perspective. Broadly, the essays fall into two categories--conceptual and analytical.

Walsh, William. *Indian Literature in English*. London and N.Y.: Longman, 1990.

This book covers a period of over two hundred years. The book while examining the founding fathers of Indian-English literature and tracing it up to Salman Rushdie, also touches upon Indian history and culture.

Williams, Haydn Morie. *Galaxy of Indian Writings in English* Delhi: Akshat Publications, 1987.

The essays in this book talk about the part played by Indian literature in English towards social change and Indian inwardness during colonial and post colonial period.

Other Works

Dash, Sandhayrani. *Form and Vision in the Novels of Anita Desai*. Delhi: Prestige, 1996.

Lal, Malashri. *The Law of the Threshold*. Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1995.

Kirpal, Viney. *The New Indian Novel in English: A Study of 1980's* Delhi: Allied publishers, 1990.

Rao, Visweswara. Ed. *Indian Writing Today*. Delhi: Indian Association for English Studies, 1996.

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