



CLEAR LIGHT OF DAY: A FOCUS ON THE THEMES OF MEMORY AND TIME

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ABSTRACT

"Clear Light of Day", one of the classic works of South Asian writer Anita Desai, focuses primarily on time and memory. In this novel she has skillfully portrayed how time and memory influence the personal and familial life, identities and relationships of individuals. Being set at the backdrop of Old Delhi, the novel reflects the importance of time and memory. Eventually, how time works as destroyer as well as preserver and how significant role memory plays in every individual's life become the pivotal themes in "Clear Light of Day". The novel explores the lives of the members of the Das family through the lenses of time and memory. Desai has used the concept of time of T. S. Eliot who remarks time as the "Destroyer and Preserver" and it has given the novel a profound base. This paper focuses closely on the roles and thematic exploration of time and memory in "Clear Light of Day".

Keywords: *Time, Memory, Nostalgia, Past, Present.*

ABSTRAK

"Clear Light of Day", salah satu karya klasik penulis Asia Selatan Anita Desai, berfokus terutama pada tema waktu dan ingatan. Dalam novel ini, Desai dengan terampil menggambarkan bagaimana waktu dan ingatan memengaruhi kehidupan pribadi dan keluarga, identitas, serta hubungan antar individu. Berlatar di kawasan Old Delhi, novel ini mencerminkan pentingnya waktu dan ingatan. Pada akhirnya, bagaimana waktu berperan sebagai penghancur sekaligus pelestari, serta bagaimana peran signifikan ingatan dalam kehidupan setiap individu menjadi tema sentral dalam "Clear Light of Day". Novel ini mengeksplorasi kehidupan anggota keluarga Das melalui perspektif waktu dan ingatan. Desai menggunakan konsep waktu dari T. S. Eliot, yang menyebut waktu sebagai "Penghancur dan Pelestari," dan konsep ini memberikan dasar yang mendalam bagi novel tersebut. Artikel ini secara khusus berfokus pada peran dan eksplorasi tematik waktu dan ingatan dalam "Clear Light of Day".

Kata Kunci : *Waktu, Memori, Nostlagia, masa lalu, dan sekarang*

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INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai, an Indian born English novelist, has mastered fluency over several languages including Bengali, English, German, Hindi and Urdu as she is tremendously influenced by her Bengali father D. N. Mazumdar and her mother, Toni Nime, a German descent. She acquires knowledge in various subjects from her childhood possessing extraordinary talent. As a child, she sat on her mother's lap and listened to German fairy tales as well as German Christmas carols. She mastered the memoirs of East Bengal legends from her Bengali father. These exciting stories heard from her parents belonging to two different cultures are sometimes blocked by the background of partition and somewhere else they all are pierced like arrows by the pain of separation. Time and



memories become the predominating issues both in her family setting as well as in the national historical context. Desai experiences bitter tastes being an integral witness of tragic partition of India into two racial countries in 1947. She too gathers better experiences in her domestic settings before partition as well. So, growing up in different cultural environments in her family, Anita

Desai builds her life as an ambidextrous person. But fortunately, or unfortunately after partition, the rootlessness of this anguish, and the struggle for existence later take a strong position in her writings that is observed again and again in most of her writings. Through sensitive psychological inquiry and sharp social criticism, her novels depict the emotional lives of people struggling to find meaning and stability within the framework of a society in flux. *Clear Light of Day* (1980) thus reflects the experiences and hazards, love and affection, affinity and hatred, aspirations and frustrations, present, past and future incidents and happenings of the writer's life. Desai undoubtedly gets tormented psychologically along with a hope for seeing a new morning with clear light. She frequently goes back and comes forward with time and her memories. The story of the novel, consequently, describes the tension of a post-partition Indian family- the Das family. While writing *Clear Light of Day*, she is inspired by T.S. Eliot's famous work, *Four Quartets*. Desai has broken the usual conventions of writing novel and composes this novel in four parts. A mixture of past and present is found in this novel. Desai has emphasized the role of time and memory in *Clear Light of Day* through rich character development and flawless narrative. Flashback technique is masterfully used in this novel. The characters of this novel keep moving backward and forward at the same time. The novel vividly reflects the significance of memories in personal life as well as in relationships.

Desai has used time and memory to shape her characters and narrative style and to demonstrate how memories influence one's present as well as future. In this novel, Desai explores the themes and contexts of different times in depth through three families and close observations of family life, breakdown of relationships among siblings over time have been discussed very intelligently. Desai herself remarks in *Tremendous Changes, Interview* by Sunil Sethi: "My novel is about time as a destroyer, as a preserver, and about what the bondage of time does to people. I have tried to tunnel under the mundane surface of domesticity" (1980, p. 142). Some scholars have delved into how Desai masterfully portrays these issues within the colonial and postcolonial Indian context, yet gaps remain in fully understanding the interconnectedness of these themes and their implications for contemporary readers.

Several studies highlight the struggles of female characters in a patriarchal and socio-culturally oppressive environment. Heidari, Abbasiyannejad, and Shobeiri (2011) argue that the female characters in *Clear Light of Day* mirror colonial subjugation, using language and culture imposed by their oppressors to carve out identities. This is echoed by Tomar (2013), who discusses how Desai critiques societal hegemony by portraying the 'othering' of women and their eventual resistance to these oppressive structures. These studies underscore the feminist undertones of Desai's work but leave room for further exploration of how such struggles intersect with broader familial and societal conflicts.

The psychological dimensions of familial relationships also feature prominently in the literature. Tyagi (2012) focuses on Bim's internal conflict and eventual reconciliation with her siblings, highlighting forgiveness as a mechanism for healing fractured relationships. This theme of familial tension is expanded by Talukder and Biswas (2023), who examine the shifting

dynamics among the Das siblings in a postcolonial society grappling with modernity and tradition. Together, these studies suggest that familial discord in *Clear Light of Day* is not just a personal struggle but a reflection of broader societal upheavals.

Further complicating the narrative are the socio-political backdrops of Partition and its aftermath, which permeate the lives of Desai's characters. Osman (2015) examines how the traumatic experiences of Partition shape individual and collective psyches, while Gunduz (2017) delves into the fragmented identities that emerge from these historical disruptions. Similarly, Biswas et al. (2024) explore the familial and religious conflicts intensified by the "divide and rule" policies of British colonialism, illustrating how these external forces exacerbate personal and communal tensions. These studies collectively illuminate the interplay between historical trauma and personal identity but do not fully address how Desai weaves these elements into a cohesive narrative that critiques both colonial and postcolonial realities.

Adding another layer to this discourse, Mallik (2020) examines time as both a unifying and divisive force, emphasizing its dual role in preserving familial bonds while simultaneously highlighting their fragility. This temporal perspective enriches the understanding of how Desai's characters navigate their personal and social realities, yet it raises questions about the enduring impact of historical events on the psychological and cultural dimensions of identity.

Beyond *Clear Light of Day*, studies on Desai's broader oeuvre provide valuable context for understanding her literary concerns. Shweta and Chauhan (2021) discuss the pervasive identity crises faced by Desai's female characters across her works, while Kumar (2024) critically explores how Desai challenges traditional gender roles within a feminist framework. George and Vijayaraghavan (2022) offer a unique perspective by examining food as a symbol of identity and intersectionality in *Fasting, Feasting*, reinforcing Desai's interest in how everyday elements reflect deeper societal structures.

While these studies offer valuable insights, they often treat individual themes—identity, gender, family, or historical trauma in isolation. What remains underexplored is how these themes intersect within *Clear Light of Day*, particularly in the context of broader socio-political and cultural transformations. The existing research sets the stage for a more integrated analysis that examines the interconnectedness of gendered oppression, familial dynamics, and historical contexts in shaping identity and resistance in Desai's work.

This study aims to address these gaps by adopting a holistic approach that situates *Clear Light of Day* within a continuum of colonial and postcolonial experiences. By examining how Desai's characters navigate their fragmented realities through the lens of gender, family, and history, this research seeks to provide a deeper understanding of her nuanced critique of societal and cultural hegemonies. This integrative perspective not only builds upon but also bridges the existing scholarship, offering a more comprehensive analysis of Desai's literary contributions.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research work will be accomplished following qualitative approach to explore how the themes of time and memory are brilliantly interwoven by Desai in *Clear Light of Day*. Both the primary and secondary sources of information will be incorporated in conducting this research from evaluative and analytical angle to concluded as well as to set up the central issue of the study concerned. In fact, the works of and on Anita Desai shall be rigorously analyzed to probe into the

key investigation of this article. To do this, 'arguments and counter-arguments basis' analysis shall be the most appropriate approach to the study. A list of references of the books and articles cited in this research study will be projected at the end of the article. This research article very definitely follows APA 7th manual for the quotations and references of the works cited in this paper.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

In *Clear Light of Day*, Desai wants to show how significant role time and memory play in individual's life and how time changes the depth of relationships through her masterful character development and distinct narrative style. The novel is set on Old Delhi, and it covers several decades focusing on the lives of Das siblings. Desai has used fragmented narrative structure to highlight the nature of time and memory. The characters of the novel, the members of Das family especially Bimla (Bim), Raja, Tara, Baba, Mira masi can be considered as the victim of time. It is nothing but time that creates boundary between past and present. Time passes but memory remains alive in the mind of the individuals. Time plays the role of both destroyer and preserver. Desai remarks about this finest literary work as "four-dimensional piece". Daniel Gnanaraj S writes in this regard:

The motif chosen for *Clear Light of Day* are drawn from the poems of Emily Dickinson and T. S. Eliot. They let us know that this will be a novel about memory: about places and people who go through change and transformation to find their true identities. (2019, p. 273)

According to Yadrami and Gupta:

With the help of memory Desai uses her literary craft to shape and mould her characters. Memory is used as a tool to travel through the landscape of past. It helps to achieve a combination of the presence of the past into our changing present and the possibilities of the future. (2020, p. 170)

The partition movement disintegrates the Das family. The closest relationship between Bim and Raja has broken down with the passage of time. Raja leaves their decaying family house to settle in Hyderabad. Tara gets married to a diplomat, Bakul and starts living an exciting life abroad. Only Bim and their intellectually barren brother, Baba remain in their old house. Bim becomes very lonely, vulnerable and frustrated to manage the family and to carry out all the responsibilities of their youngest brother, Baba. He seems like a burden to Bim and disturbing element like a buzzing "mosquito". Everything around them changes except these two siblings. Raja's humiliating letter to Bim as the land-lord of the house spoils the sweet relationship between them and turns it to a bitter one. Time here functions as an evil force to create a hard to break wall between siblings. The gap of time ultimately results in breaking down of relationship. Bim's assertion proves the bitterness of relationship between them as she said to Tara:

'You say I should come 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!' (Desai, 2007, p. 43)

She also remarks: "'I have ended it already', Bim stubbornly, 'by not going to see them and not having them here either. It is ended. But I don't forget, no'" (Desai, 2007, p. 43).

Mira masi was a mother figure to the Das siblings. Desai asserts that “They owned her and yes, she wanted to be owned. She owned them too, and they needed to be owned” (2007, p. 170). She was also a prey to the time. She was married off at a very early age. She lost her husband and was tortured in her in-laws’ house and finally took shelter to Das family to look after the Das siblings, especially mentally handicapped Baba. After the untimely death of Mr. and Mrs. Das, the unfortunate death of Mira masi indicates nothing but the cruelty of time as the novelist exposes in regard to this: “While drinking, her head slipped to one side, the glass spilt across her chin, dribbled down her neck into her nightie, and she died, not hideously by drowning, but quietly in her bed, pleasantly overcome by fumes of alcohol” (Desai, 2007, p. 151).

Perception of present is always influenced by the past. Memory can be considered as a great force here which cannot be seen but can be felt deeply. It is subjective in nature. Same memory may evoke different feelings in individuals. Memory creates nostalgia which functions as a double-edged sword. It creates wounds and it also functions as healer. Time can create instability in national life as well. During the partition movement in 1947, people had to pay great cost of lives and properties. Separation of India by the British basing on orthodox religious views resulted in separation of beloved ones. That time of 1947 acted as destroyer and was really unforgettable. Baba, the unwanted child and the youngest of Das siblings represents the uncertainty, unstable situation and political unrest of that time. Desai has skillfully portrayed the time in her novel *Clear Light of Day*:

‘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— ‘
‘For everyone in India,’ Tara reminded primly. ‘For every Hindu and Muslim. In India and in Pakistan.’ (2007, p. 64)

Time can also function as preserver. With the passage of time, memory keeps on forming in human minds whether it is pleasant or unpleasant. There remains some essence that cannot be washed away by the flow of time. The sound of a favourite song, sight of a known place, smell of a familiar perfume can take people back to past, even it can evoke nostalgia. Time disperses and memory re-unites. It depends on the circumstances, emotional strength or weakness and mental states of the individuals and through Tara’s utterances it becomes clear:

‘How everything goes on and on here, and never changes,’ she said. ‘I used to think about it all,’ and she waved her arm in a circular swoop to encompass the dripping tap at the end of the grass walk, the trees that quivered and shook with birds, the loping dog, the roses— ‘and it is all exactly the same, whenever we come home.’ (Desai, 2007, p. 6)

The memory of childhood for Bim is very painful and heart touching as everything has changed drastically around her except her own life. She had a very close relationship with her brother, Raja. But Raja leaves her alone. She cannot accept Raja's departure. Her struggles and sacrifices for the family create an emotional setting. In this regard it can be said that Bim's identity is built upon through her continuous involvement with the past, her memories functioning both as a source of potency and as an impotency she cannot overlook. Bim is struggling alone with her life. She expresses her grief in this case:

They had come like mosquitoes— Tara and Bakul, and behind them the Misras, and somewhere in the distance Raja and Benazir— only to torment her and, mosquito-like, sip her blood. All of them fed on her blood, at some time or the other had fed—it must have been good blood, sweet and nourishing. Now, when they were full, they rose in swarms, humming away, turning their backs on her. (Desai, 2007, p. 233)

All the memories are crystal clear in her mind. The memories keep coming back to her every moment. She is deeply engaged with all the memories. She tries to find a way to live with the unescapable influential memories. Her Past sometimes seems stronger than her present to her. Raja writes a letter to her as their landlord. This event hurts and humiliates her very deeply. She cannot forget his humiliation to her but eventually forgives him as she realizes that no one is flawless, and it is impossible to deny natural bond as everyone is created by the same creator. Bim realizes:

They were really all parts of her, inseparable, so many aspects of her as she was of them, so that the anger or the disappointment she felt in them was only the anger and disappointment she felt at herself. Whatever hurt they felt, she felt. Whatever diminished them, diminished her. What attacked them, attacked her. (Desai, 2007, p. 251)

On the other hand, Tara's childhood memories are mixed with guilt feelings and longing. Tara feels guilty as she did not help Bim when she was bitten by a swarm of bee. Tara was never present when Bim really needed her and “—she would never have done what Bim did—” (Desai, 2007, p. 3). In fact, she tries to escape her past by leaving their old house after getting married to Bakul, her returning to the old home in Old Delhi opens the door for confronting her long-suppressed memories. Human beings can never escape from memories. “How everything goes on and on here, and never changes” (Desai, 2007, p. 6), Tara asserted. It indicates the influential effect of her childhood memories. The “rose walk” still seems the same to her. Tara reminisces her childhood memories into her present life and finally achieves personal growth and maturity. It can be stated that Tara's march towards life-journey is symbolic to the human expectations to break away from painful memories, only to apprehend that reconciliation is integral for self-development. In fact, Tara's journey emphasizes the significance of realizing and acknowledging one's past to perceive ripeness of passion and affection.

Raja is the brother of Bim and Tara. His memories are different from the rest of his siblings. He is a highly ambitious person having a great desire for creating a new identity for himself. He has a great obsession for Urdu language and poetry. He has always admired Hyder Ali (their land-

lord) greatly. Bim loved Raja's psychological affinity for distinct culture and literature and admired him deeply. "She felt her exasperation blotted out by wonder as 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" (Desai, 2007, p. 69). But unfortunately, his aspirations make him isolated and separated from his siblings. He finally leaves home after partition movement and goes to Hyderabad. There he marries a Muslim girl, Benazir—the daughter of Hyder Ali and gets settled there. Hyder Ali had no son but only one daughter. So, Raja becomes the heir of him after his death and comes up with a new identity as the landlord to Bim and Baba.

Baba, the youngest of the Das siblings, remains constant amidst of change without having the faculty of realizing present, past or future. He follows an unchanged routine. He is mentally challenged; he has trouble in verbal communication. So, Baba does not talk much. Time is standstill in his life. He listens to the same old records in the gramophone that he picked up from the house of Hyder Ali after they were forced to leave the country. Desai writes: "Oh he doesn't want any new records", said Bim. 'He wouldn't play them. He loves his old ones'" (2007, p. 11). He lives in the perpetual present. He symbolizes stability among all sorts of instability. Hashmi remarks that "Baba, the autistic brother, is physically there but his presence amounts to nothing—he has no thoughts, responses, or initiatives which may cohere in his own or others' lives" (2007, p. 57). Time and memory cannot influence his static life and unchanged routine. Desai describes that he lived a life which was unaffected by time. It indicates the ineffectiveness of memory and time in Baba's life.

Desai has used Old Delhi and New Delhi as symbols to demonstrate the distinction between the old and new worlds. "Bim is like a living symbol of Old Delhi - her thoughts, lifestyle and the whole neighborhood hardly budge when it comes to change" (Biswas and Talukder, 2023, p. 552). Old Delhi represents tradition whereas New Delhi represents modernity. Old Delhi represents hopelessness and New Delhi points to hopefulness. "Old Delhi is symbolic of Bim's life which is monotonous and has the air of her past. Tara's life is like New Delhi which is developing fast" (Sharma, 1991, p. 109). In this case Desai also writes:

'Old Delhi does not change. It only decays. My students tell me it is a great cemetery, every house a tomb. Nothing but sleeping graves. Now New Delhi, they say is different. That is where things happen. The way they describe it, it sounds like a nest of fleas. So much happens there, it must be a jumping place. I never go. Baba never goes. And here, here nothing happens at all. Whatever happened, happened long ago—in the time of the Tughlaqs, the Khiljis, the Sultanate, the Moghuls—that lot.' (2007, pp. 7-8)

Time's overpowering influence is very vivid through this remark.

Though everything has changed with time, Bim has created a wall around herself and confined herself within this wall. Kirsti Weel Sannrud remarks: "Bim has made herself the centre of her own world for so many years, but when Tara points out that everything looks old and grey Bim is forced to take a closer look at the life she has created for herself" (2008, p. 49). She has never sought help from anyone else to run or to manage her family. What is past for Tara like the "rose walk" is still present for her. She could have got a better life like Tara and Raja, but she has

not gone with the traditional flow of time. She has sacrificed her whole life for the sake of her youngest brother, Baba. She knows well that there is another world outside of Old Delhi, but she has never wanted to be a part of it. She is aware about the rifts between the relationships of themselves but feels helpless to take any action. She thinks herself useless in comparison to her brother Raja and sister Tara who have turned their backs towards her. She knows that she is unable to afford the luxurious lifestyle like them. She feels very nostalgic and has no control over her feelings. This feeling increases her psychological burden. She finds solace in the history books as she is a history teacher at a college. She realizes that nothing can control time, and nothing can erase the essence of memories. She must have to live with the memories, and she must have to find a way out of this. Desai remarks in this regard:

All these would have to be mended, these rents and tears, she would have to mend and make her net whole so that it would suffice her in her passage through the ocean. Somehow, she would have to forgive Raja that unforgivable letter. Somehow, she would have to wrest forgiveness from Baba for herself. (2007, p. 252)

Over the time, Bim reaches to a realization that she should forgive her brother, Raja because nothing can break the blood connection among siblings. Tara works as a mediator to this event. Bim destroys the humiliating letter that Raja sent to her. It lightens up her inner burden that she has carried out for years. She must live the rest of her life with the sweet and sour memories. So, this reconciliation is very essential. Only with this she can look further, she can see the clear light of the day and can appreciate Baba's presence instead of considering him as a burden and disturbance because he is not responsible for anything going on around him. Bim reconciles her memories that everything is controlled by time- past, present or future. So, time acts as a healer of psychological aches of human beings like Bim, the central character of *Clear Light of Day* highlights "Time the destroyer is time the preserver" (Desai, 2007, p. 277).

CONCLUSION

To sum up, time and memory are two very significant aspects in Desai's novel *Clear Light of Day*. These aspects have greatly influenced the lives, actions and relationships of the characters and have made this novel worth reading. The roles of time and memory cannot be denied or ignored by anybody. Time is the biggest game changer, and memory provides individuals with unavoidable pleasant or unpleasant feelings. The wounds created by time can be healed by time only. Without the perception of the memories of the past, present and future become quite unthinkable. Time creates memory and memory turns into experiences that are indispensable parts of human lives. Through the exploration of these various events, Desai has demonstrated perfectly how time can be the destroyer and preserver and how memory can be unifying and divisive at the same time.

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