



The Passage of Time: Unraveling Memory in *Clear Light of Day*

Muhd. Mustafizur Rahman

¹Associate Professor, Department of English, Bangladesh Army University of Engineering & Technology (BAUET), Natore-6431, Bangladesh

*Corresponding author: Email: mustafizsiu@yahoo.com

Abstract : *This qualitative research delves into Anita Desai's Clear Light of Day, focusing on the themes of time and memory and their profound impact on personal and familial identities. Set against the historical backdrop of Old Delhi and the partition of India, the novel explores how time both destroys and preserves, while memory serves as a key element in shaping characters' psychological experiences and relationships. Through a close textual analysis, the study investigates how Desai intertwines these themes to highlight emotional struggles, alienation, and eventual reconciliation. Drawing on the philosophical insights of T.S. Eliot, who portrays time as both a "Destroyer and Preserver," the research explores how these forces influence character development and the evolution of family dynamics. The findings underscore the significance of time and memory in the process of emotional healing and self-reconciliation, providing a deeper understanding of the novel's psychological and thematic complexities.*

Keywords: *Nostalgia, Psychological Struggles, Alienation, Reconciliation, Fragmentation*

1. INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai, an Indian-born English novelist, is fluent in several languages, including Bengali, English, German, Hindi, and Urdu, which reflects the multicultural influences of her upbringing. Her Bengali father shared East Bengal legends with her, while her German mother introduced her to fairy tales and carols. This blend of cultural narratives, coupled with the trauma of the partition of India, profoundly shaped Desai's exploration of themes like identity, memory, and time. Growing up amidst such cultural diversity, Desai gained a deep understanding of the complexities of the human psyche, which is evident in the multifaceted characters and themes of her novels. The partition's impact on Desai, particularly its effects on identity and belonging, plays a pivotal role in her work, contributing to themes of rootlessness, alienation, and survival. In *Clear Light of Day* (1980), Desai delves into the emotional and psychological consequences of these themes, focusing on the Das family, whose personal struggles mirror the larger societal trauma. The characters in the novel grapple with the weight of their collective history, and Desai's treatment of memory reflects the enduring scars left by the partition. This focus on emotional fragmentation and the search for identity is deeply influenced by Desai's own experience of socio-political upheaval. Through sensitive psychological insights, her novels portray characters wrestling with alienation and the effects of societal change. As critic R. Raj Rao observes, "Desai's novels, including *Clear Light of*

Day, confront the alienation caused by personal and social dislocation, where characters are unable to reconcile their inner world with the external reality” (Rao 122). This alienation is central to *Clear Light of Day*, where the passage of time and the burden of memory create a sense of estrangement among the characters. Desai’s literary style is also influenced by T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, particularly in her use of fragmented narrative techniques to explore the interconnection of past and present. In *Clear Light of Day*, she utilizes flashbacks and nonlinear storytelling to underscore the lasting impact of memory on the present. This manipulation of time aligns with Eliot’s view of time as cyclical and elusive, shaping both individuals and the society they live in. As Elaine S. Hedges writes, “Desai mirrors Eliot’s understanding of time, where the past, present, and future are in constant interplay, shaping the characters’ experiences in ways they cannot fully comprehend” (Hedges 78).

The novel not only explores time’s impact on the characters’ emotional lives but also examines how time shapes relationships, especially within the family. As Desai herself states in an interview with Sunil Sethi: “My novel is about time as a destroyer, as a preserver, and about what the bondage of time does to people” (Aethi 142). The passage of time, in *Clear Light of Day*, is both a force of destruction, which brings about loss and estrangement, and a force of preservation, which offers the potential for healing and reconciliation. This duality of time is also reflected in the memory of the characters, which serves as both a source of pain and a tool for healing. Time, as a destructive force, creates distances between the characters, while memory, when revisited, becomes a means to repair broken bonds.

Additionally, as scholar Robert McDonald notes, “In Desai’s work, time is never merely linear; it is experienced through the lens of memory, constantly shifting and distorting the past to create new meanings in the present” (McDonald 35). This shifting perception of time, as influenced by memory, forms the core of the narrative, with each character’s recollections offering a fragmented but ultimately cohesive picture of their shared history. Through this layered exploration of time and memory, Desai invites readers to consider how past experiences shape one’s present identity and influence the future.

Thus, *Clear Light of Day* encapsulates the tension between time as a destroyer and a preserver, illustrating how time and memory shape the Das family’s lives and relationships. The novel’s intricate structure and poignant character development provide a rich exploration of these themes, making it a profound meditation on the passage of time and the power of memory.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Several scholars have explored *Clear Light of Day* through various thematic lenses, revealing the complex interplay of memory, time, identity, and socio-cultural dynamics in Anita Desai's work.

In 2011, Marjan Heidari, Mina Abbasiyannejad, and Ashkan Shobeiri, in their article "*Women's Struggle for Identity in Anita Desai's Clear Light of Day*," examine the oppressive socio-cultural environment in which female characters are marginalized, similar to colonial elements. They discuss how these women navigate their struggles for identity by adopting the language and culture of their oppressors (31-39).

Dr. Bharati Tyagi, in her 2012 article "*Clear Light of Day: From Alienation to Affirmation*," focuses on the psychological dynamics of Bim, the central character, as she reflects on the misunderstandings among her siblings and the misfortunes she faces over time. Tyagi highlights Bim's realization that alienation from her family leads to psychological harm, and her eventual forgiveness of her siblings fosters emotional reconciliation (867-871).

In 2013, Ruchi Tomar's "*Postmodern Female Psyche with Reference to Anita Desai's Clear Light of Day*" explores the subjugation and suppression of women in a male-dominated society. Tomar praises Desai's portrayal of women's displacement through the processes of undermining and 'othering,' and examines how Desai challenges patriarchal hegemony, particularly in the context of feminism (1-4).

Ela Ipek Gunduz, in her 2017 research article "*Clear Light of Day: Fragmented Postcolonial Lives*," emphasizes Desai's exploration of individuals searching for their identities, especially the female characters. Gunduz argues that Desai reveals the fragmentation of identities resulting from the colonial and postcolonial impact on individuals (175-180).

In 2020, Srabani Mallik's article "*Bondage of Time and Human Bondage in Anita Desai's Clear Light of Day*" examines the dichotomy between existent and non-existent characters, highlighting how time affects familial lives. Mallik discusses how time accelerates the partition movement and racial riots, which ultimately dissolve the Das family. She also emphasizes time's dual role as both a preserver and a destroyer (1036-1041).

Md. Jobaar Talukder and Prakash Chandra Biswas, in their 2023 article "*Clear Light of Day: Exploring Social Dynamics through Illuminating Relationships*," explore the evolving relationships among the Das siblings in the context of modernity and postcolonial India. They discuss how Desai addresses the nostalgic emotions and ideologies of the characters amidst the shifting socio-cultural landscape (13-21).

Upon reviewing these studies, it is clear that while much has been written on *Clear Light of Day* from various thematic perspectives, there has been no focused study specifically on the themes of *memory* and *time* in the novel. This gap underscores the originality and contribution of the proposed research, which aims to offer a fresh angle by analyzing the role of memory and time in Desai's narrative. This study will add to the growing body of scholarship on *Clear Light of Day*, offering a deeper understanding of its thematic richness.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research will employ a qualitative approach to analyze how Anita Desai skillfully intertwines the themes of time and memory in *Clear Light of Day*. To conduct the study, both primary and secondary sources will be utilized, allowing for an evaluative and analytical exploration of the text. The research aims to offer a thorough conclusion while addressing the central issue of the study. A comprehensive examination of the works by and about Anita Desai will be conducted, with a particular focus on "arguments and counter-arguments" as the primary analytical method. A list of references for the books and articles cited in this paper will be provided at the end. This study adheres strictly to the MLA 9th edition guidelines for quotations and references.

4. DISCUSSION

In *Clear Light of Day*, Anita Desai highlights the profound impact of time and memory on individuals and relationships, using her characters and distinctive narrative style to illustrate how time shapes and transforms them. Set in Old Delhi, the novel spans decades, focusing on the Das siblings—Bimla (Bim), Raja, Tara, Baba, and Mira Masi. Desai employs a fragmented narrative structure to emphasize the interplay of time and memory, where time acts as both a destroyer and a preserver. As noted by Daniel Gnanaraj S, "The motif chosen for *Clear Light of Day* is drawn from the poems of Emily Dickinson and T.S. Eliot. They let us know that this will be a novel about memory: about places and people who go through change and transformation in an attempt to find their true identities" (273).

Memory, as a tool for navigating the past, plays a significant role in shaping Desai's characters, helping them reconcile the past with their present and envision the future (Yadrami and Gupta 170). The partition of India contributes to the disintegration of the Das family, with Raja moving away, Tara marrying and leaving for a fulfilling life abroad, and only Bim and Baba remaining in their family home. As time passes, Bim becomes increasingly isolated and burdened by caring for Baba. Her relationship with Raja is strained due to a humiliating letter

from him, and time becomes a destructive force in their bond. Bim expresses the bitterness between them when she says, “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?” (Desai 43).

Mira Masi, who served as a mother figure to the siblings, also suffers the passage of time. Despite enduring hardships, including an early marriage and abuse in her in-laws’ home, Mira Masi finds solace in the Das family. Her death, following the passing of Mr. and Mrs. Das, highlights the cruelty of time, as Desai poignantly writes, “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 151).

The perception of the present is always influenced by the past, with memory serving as a potent, though often unseen, force. Memory is inherently subjective, and the same recollection can evoke different emotions in various individuals. It creates nostalgia, which acts as a double-edged sword—it can both wound and heal. Time, in its passage, can also destabilize national life. During the 1947 partition, people suffered immense loss of life and property. The British division of India along religious lines led to the painful separation of loved ones, making 1947 an unforgettable chapter of destruction in history. Baba, the youngest and most unwanted child among the Das siblings, represents the uncertainty, political unrest, and instability of that time. Desai skillfully portrays time in *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. (Desai 64).

Time also functions as a preserver. Despite its passage, memory continuously forms in human minds, whether pleasant or painful. Some essence remains that time cannot erase— the sound of a favorite song, the sight of a familiar place, or the scent of a cherished perfume can all transport people back to the past, evoking nostalgia. While time disperses, memory reunites.

This is influenced by the circumstances, emotional states, and mental conditions of individuals. Through Tara's words, this becomes evident:

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 6)

For Bim, the memory of her childhood is painful and deeply emotional, as everything around her has changed, except her own life. She had once shared a close bond with her brother, Raja, but his departure leaves her isolated. She cannot accept his absence. Her struggles and sacrifices for the family create an emotional backdrop. Bim's identity is built on her ongoing connection to the past, with her memories serving as both a source of strength and a constant reminder of her limitations. Bim's life is a solitary struggle, and she expresses her grief:

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 233)

On the other hand, Tara's childhood memories are intertwined with feelings of guilt and longing. She feels guilty for not helping Bim when she was stung by a swarm of bees, as she was never there when Bim truly needed her. Tara reflects, "—she would never have done what Bim did—" (Desai 3). In reality, she attempts to escape her past by leaving their old home after marrying Bakul. However, her return to the house in Old Delhi forces her to confront the long-suppressed memories. Human beings cannot escape their memories. "How everything goes on and on here, and never changes," (Desai 6) Tara observes, underscoring the lasting impact of her childhood experiences. The "rose walk" still appears unchanged to her. Tara's reminiscences blend her past with her present, and through this, she experiences personal growth and maturity. Tara's journey symbolizes the human desire to break free from painful memories, only to realize that reconciliation with the past is essential for self-development. Her path emphasizes the importance of recognizing and acknowledging one's past in order to fully embrace the depth of affection and personal growth.

Raja, the ambitious brother of Bim and Tara, seeks to create a new identity through his passion for Urdu language and poetry, as well as his admiration for Hyder Ali, their landlord. Bim admires Raja's independent thinking and courage. However, his desire for a distinct identity isolates him from his family. After the partition, Raja moves to Hyderabad, marries

Benazir, the daughter of Hyder Ali, and becomes his heir. As a result, Raja adopts a new role as landlord, which separates him from his siblings, Bim and Baba.

Baba, the youngest of the Das siblings, remains unaffected by the passage of time, living in a perpetual present due to his mental challenges. He follows an unchanged routine and struggles with verbal communication, rarely speaking. Baba listens only to the old records he took from Hyder Ali's house, symbolizing his static existence. Desai writes: "Oh he doesn't want any new records," said Bim. "He wouldn't play them. He loves his old ones" (11). His life is immune to the influence of time and memory. As Hashmi notes, "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" (57). Baba's life illustrates the ineffectiveness of memory and time in his world, remaining untouched by change.

In *Clear Light of Day*, Anita Desai uses the contrasting images of Old Delhi and New Delhi to symbolize the clash between tradition and modernity, reflecting the divide between the past and the present. Old Delhi, with its stagnation and decay, mirrors Bim's life—rooted in the past, resistant to change. In contrast, New Delhi symbolizes progress, development, and hope, aligning with Tara's evolving life. As Biswas and Talukder observe, "Bim is like a living symbol of Old Delhi - her thoughts, lifestyle, and the whole neighborhood hardly budge when it comes to change" (552), while Sharma adds, "Old Delhi is symbolic of Bim's life, which is monotonous and has the air of her past" (109). Desai captures this contrast when Bim reflects, "Old Delhi does not change. It only decays...Now New Delhi, they say is different. That is where things happen" (7-8), highlighting the powerful influence of time on both place and individual lives.

Bim, however, remains trapped in her own world, emotionally tied to her childhood home and unable to move beyond the past. As Sannrud notes, "Bim has made herself the centre of her own world for so many years" (49). Her life, focused on caring for her mentally challenged brother Baba, has prevented her from embracing change. Bim's nostalgia and emotional burdens often lead her to seek solace in history books, where she can cling to the past. Desai illustrates this when Bim reflects on the need to mend her fractured relationships: "All these would have to be mended, these rents and tears...she would have to forgive Raja that unforgivable letter" (252).

Over time, Bim comes to understand the necessity of forgiveness and reconciliation, encouraged by Tara. The destruction of Raja's letter symbolizes Bim's release from the past and emotional burdens. By reconciling with her memories and her present, Bim can finally see the "clear light of day" and appreciate Baba's presence without resentment. Ultimately, Bim

recognizes that time is both destructive and preserving, acting as a force of healing and psychological renewal, as Desai poignantly writes, “Time the destroyer is time the preserver” (277).

5. CONCLUSION

Time and memory are central themes in Anita Desai’s *Clear Light of Day*, profoundly shaping the lives, actions, and relationships of the novel’s characters. These two elements intertwine in a way that makes them essential to understanding the unfolding of the story. Desai’s exploration of time and memory offers deep insight into how they influence individual and collective lives, bringing to light the complex ways in which the past, present, and future are interconnected. Through her characters, Desai illustrates the power of time to heal and wound, and the inescapable nature of memory as it shapes identity, relationships, and the course of life.

In *Clear Light of Day*, time is portrayed as both a destroyer and a preserver. Set against the backdrop of post-independence India, the characters’ lives have been profoundly affected by the passage of time, personal histories, and the political changes of the era. Time manifests in the novel both literally and symbolically, especially as it relates to the familial relationships that have been strained or altered over time. The Das family is a prime example, with time not only changing the physical spaces they inhabit, like their family home in Old Delhi, but also their internal landscapes. The bond between the siblings—Bimla, Tara, and the others—has been tested by years of silence, misunderstandings, and emotional pain. Time has both divided them and, over the course of the novel, offers the potential for reconciliation, as they confront the past and allow it to shape their present.

However, time’s passage also leaves scars that cannot be easily healed. The characters experience the inevitable march of time with a mix of resignation, frustration, and nostalgia. This is particularly evident in the way they reflect on their childhood, with memories of it tinged with both sweetness and regret. Tara, for example, returns to the family home after many years, only to be confronted by the changes in her family and the impact of time on her own sense of identity. Her reunion with Bimla, her elder sister, brings unresolved tensions to the surface, revealing how time can both preserve and erode relationships. Desai uses time as a silent force that dictates the rhythms of their lives, and even the characters’ attempts to challenge or outrun time ultimately reveal their inability to escape its grip.

Memory, on the other hand, is a pervasive force that continually shapes the characters’ perceptions of themselves and others. It is through memory that the characters process their

experiences, both joyous and painful. The novel suggests that memory is not a passive repository of the past, but an active, ever-present force that influences the present and future. The characters' memories are at once a source of comfort and a cause of pain. Bimla, for instance, is haunted by the memory of her early adulthood, particularly her experience with her lost love and her struggle to reconcile her role as a caretaker for her family. She is also burdened by the memory of her brother's departure, a wound that has never fully healed. Tara, on the other hand, struggles to remember her past and make sense of her family's history, which contributes to her sense of alienation. These conflicting memories illustrate the dual nature of memory, which can both unify and divide.

The complexity of memory is especially evident when the characters attempt to reconcile their past with the present. As the novel unfolds, time and memory come to play a significant role in the resolution of family tensions. In the final moments of the novel, there is a sense of closure as the characters come to terms with their past, acknowledging the importance of memory in shaping their lives and relationships. Desai does not present a simplistic or idealized view of memory and time; rather, she explores how they can create both distance and intimacy between people. Time, as it passes, can create divisions, but it also holds the possibility of healing. Memory, though it may divide, also offers the potential for understanding and reconciliation, provided the characters are willing to confront it.

Clear Light of Day is ultimately a reflection on the intricate relationship between time and memory. In this novel, time acts as both the destroyer of lives and the preserver of hope, while memory functions as both a source of unity and division. The characters' lives are marked by the wounds of time and the weight of their memories, yet it is through these very elements that they are able to make sense of their present and ultimately heal. By weaving together the threads of time and memory, Desai offers a profound exploration of human experience, showing how these forces shape not only individuals but also their relationships and the world around them. Through this lens, *Clear Light of Day* becomes not just a story of personal struggles but also an exploration of the broader forces that govern human existence, where time and memory are pivotal in shaping the characters' journeys and their attempts to reconcile with their past.

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