

Clear Light of Day (1980)

Story In this gentle but powerful novel, Anita Desai explores the dynamics of family life and childhood through the history of the Das family in Delhi. The story is told in four parts. It begins in the present when the four siblings are adults (late 1970s), goes back to the time of Partition (1947), and then further back perhaps another 10 years and then concludes with a section set in the present.

In part one, Tara, one of two sisters in the family, returns to Delhi from America with her husband. They come to live with Bimla, the other sister, in the old family home, where Bimla takes care of their autistic brother, Baba. Tara and Bimla talk about their other brother, Raja, who lives far away and whose daughter is getting married. Bimla says she doesn't want to go to the wedding because of he, Raja, insulted her many years ago. The needle on Baba's record player breaks and the ensuing silence disturbs him so much that he rushes out into the street.

In part two, at the time of Partition (when India and Pakistan were created out of British India), the characters are teenagers. Their mother, father and aunt all die in quick succession, leaving the young people to look after themselves. Raja develops tuberculosis and Bimla takes care of him, while both sisters look after Baba. When Raja recovers, he becomes fascinated with Urdu poetry and grows close to their landlord, a Muslim man, whom he follows back to the far away town of Hyderabad. Tara then escapes her unhappy childhood by marrying Bakul, a leading diplomat, leaving Bimla to take care of Baba on her own. A doctor asks Bimla to marry him, but she rejects his offer.

In part three, we slip further back into the past, when Bimla, Tara and Raja were waiting for the birth of their little brother, Baba. Aunt Mira, widowed and mistreated by her in-laws, is drafted in to look after the baby and help raise the children. She persuades the parents to buy a cow for fresh milk, but it dies in a well due to the carelessness of a servant, an event that haunts Mira. Tensions and jealousies arise between Tara, on the one hand, and Bimla and Raja, on the other. Tara does not distinguish herself in school, as her sister and brother do. She says she wants to be a mother, while they conceive grand plans for the futures.

In part four, the story returns to part one and the present. Tara, newly arrived with her husband, argues with Bimla, telling her she must get over old squabbles and go to the wedding of Raja's daughter. Bimla remains firm and seems stuck in the past and worn down by financial worries. The situation builds until it explodes when Bimla gets angry with their helpless brother, Baba. This explosion clears the air, and Bimla realises that families crack but never break. Tara goes to the wedding in Hyderabad, but Bimla does not. Staying in Delhi, she goes to a concert at her neighbours' house, which she used to do as a young girl.

Characters

Bimla Bimla is the older sister, who lives in Delhi, where she teaches at a women's college and takes care of her autistic brother, Baba. Although she begins as confident and assertive, by the end she is resigned to her dull life. She is both traditional, in remaining in Delhi in her family's house, and modern, in deciding not to marry and to support herself.

Tara Tara is the younger sister, who is teased by her older sister and brother. She is shy and easily hurt, but later makes an apparently successful marriage with a high-level diplomat and lives most of her life outside India. At the end, she is more confident and insightful but remains under the more powerful presence of her husband. She is also a mixture of modernity (living abroad) and tradition (the submissive wife).

Raja Raja, their brother, is a sensitive and likable young boy, full of dreams and mischief. He is badly affected by his parents' deaths and falls ill with tuberculosis but recovers and develops a serious interest in Urdu poetry and culture (which was a political act at the time of Partition). In the end, he is a man of disappointed dreams.

Baba Baba, the youngest of the four siblings, has autism and is unable to speak, although he seems to understand the speech of others. He spends most of his day lying in bed and listening to

music on his record player. Any change in that routine causes him distress. We have little insight into his character, although he appears to represent the fundamental human need for love and predictability in our lives.

Themes

Time By choosing to tell the story in shifting time-frames, the author allows us to appreciate how the past exerts an influence on the present. We see this in characters of the three siblings, whose childhood jealousies and traumatic events (deaths of parents, aunt and a cow) continue to affect them in later life. The power of the past is also evident in the physical setting of the city and the family house. Delhi is an old city, inhabited for fifteen centuries and the centre of culture for a thousand years. The city is full of crumbling Mughal and pre-Mughal ruins, one of them being the Das family home, where most of the action takes place. The past, however, is not all-powerful and present events are important, such as the Partition, when Muslim families, some of them neighbours to the Das family, fled Delhi and moved to the newly-established Pakistan.

Separation Family and nation are also mirrored through the deep-running theme of separation. At almost every point in the novel, there is separation in the Das family. The father dies, the mother dies, the aunt dies, Tara moves away and Raja moves away. This fragmentation is paralleled by the breakup of the country into two separate states of India and Pakistan.

Escape Related to the themes of time and separation, is a third theme of escape. Even while they were children, the three siblings often escape from the lack of parental love. They visit their neighbours' house, they spend hours in the garden and they lose themselves in games. Their Muslim neighbours evacuate Delhi and move to Pakistan. Raja escapes into the imaginary world of Urdu poetry, which then takes him to another part of the country. Tara gets married and leaves India altogether. That leaves Bimla and Baba, both of whom are stuck in the ruts of the past. Bimla wanders around the decrepit, dusty house with its memories, while Baba listens to the same music as the needle on his gramophone goes around and around.