

CLEAR LIGHT OF DAY

Anita Desai

(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.

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.

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.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

BIMLA (Independent)

Character As the oldest of four siblings, Bimla is the most confident and assertive, and while this doesn't change, it does assume a different shape in her later years. She remains an independent person, even though this requires decisions that do not always bring her happiness. While her siblings escape from the family home, she remains (with her autistic brother, Baba). She also remains unmarried, preferring to support herself by teaching history in a women's college. It is significant that she has chosen history, rather than, say, literature, since a key theme of the novel is the passage of time. Her movements are confined to the house, the garden, the neighbours' house and the college. While she is (largely) content, the burdens of the past bear down on her as the story unfolds. Events from her childhood continue to haunt her, and the rising costs of the house worry her. Although a single and independent woman, she takes on the housewifely tasks of cleaning, cooking and looking after a tubercular brother and an autistic brother. Bimla is a conflicted character, who wishes to live as an independent woman but also wants to keep the family together. In some ways,

she represents a traditional way of life, unhurried, unselfish, unconcerned with change. That last attitude, however, is her flaw.

Activities Bimla, as a young person, studies a lot, and when she plays with her siblings, she takes the dominant role. Later, she spends most of her time teaching at the college, preparing classes and talking with students. Throughout her life, she plays the role of a carer, and a surrogate mother, to her ill brother, Raja, and the autistic Baba.

Illustrative moments

Independent After her father dies, and the children are orphaned, Bimla speaks to herself during a walk in the garden at twilight. She reviews her young life and then makes a decision: 'I shall work – I shall do things. I shall earn my own living – and look after Mira-masi [her aunt] and Baba [her brother] – and be independent.' This is a heady thing for a young person to decide, but she never swerves from this commitment.

Self-pitying Part of the subtlety of Desai's description of Bimla is that we don't really know if she is happy or not. When Tara comes back from America, with her successful and wealthy husband, the unmarried, grey-haired Bimla and Tara have a long talk. Tara says it is nice to be in Delhi again, and Bimla replies, 'Old Delhi does not change. It only decays.' The reader knows she is also speaking of herself.

Introspective While none of the characters are religious—they are part of a modern, English-educated elite—Bimla has an introspection that comes close to meditation. After the fireworks and arguments at the end of the novel, she goes to her neighbours' house to listen to a concert of classical Indian songs by two men. In the serenity of that familiar setting, a house she has known all her life, she has a sort of epiphany. As she 'heard the difference between the old man's voice (sharp, cracked with the bitterness of experience) and the young man's voice (like a child's sweet and clear), she remembered the line in T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets: "Time the destroyer is time the preserver".'

RAJA (Sensitive)

Character Raja is the ambitious, sensitive and likable older brother of Bimla and Tara. When the children play a game of 'what do you want to be when you grow up?', he answers 'a hero.' As he grows up, he develops a deep interest in Muslim culture and Urdu poetry, which is a little unusual in a Hindu family. In fact, the novel is set in the time of Indian Independence and the riots that followed when Hindus and Muslims killed each other in the hundreds of thousands. Raja's interest in Muslim culture is not overtly political; it is, in fact, stimulated and encouraged by the Muslim family who lives next to his family in old Delhi. The more time he spends with Hyder Ali's household, the more he becomes disaffected from his own moribund family, epitomised by his age-denying sister, who is (paradoxically) a history teacher. The Muslim house, by contrast, is full of music, poetry, colour and vivacity, whereas his is dour and conventional. Raja's distancing from his own family is complete when he moves to Hyderabad (a Muslim kingdom in south India, which did not immediately join the Indian union in 1947), where Hyder Ali has relocated himself. And the rift with 'home' is sealed when Raja marries Hyder Ali's daughter. Raja is an interesting character. Intelligent and curious, he refuses to take over his father's business when the older man dies. Eventually, he withdraws from everything he has known, following a dream to become a poet, which in the end is unfulfilled.

Activities As a young child, he played in the family garden with his two sisters, but soon, as a teenager, he is drawn to the house next door, which is owned by their Muslim landlord, Hyder Ali. Once invited inside, Raja discovers a new world of Muslim culture and especially Urdu poetry. He spends hours reading books in Hyder Ali's impressive personal library. Still later, he goes to college, riding there on his bicycle. In the present he brings home books of English poetry, which he and his sister, Bimla, read together.

Illustrative moments

Sensitive Raja may be the oldest of three children, but he is also vulnerable because he has a sensitive nature. For example, he comes down with tuberculosis and has to be nursed back to health. But his deeper fragility is illustrated in a dramatic scene that occurs toward the end of the novel. When Raja learns that Gandhi has been assassinated, he rushes to the radio to hear the details, fearing that the assassin will, of course, be a Muslim. That would mean terrible repercussions for the Hyder Ali family still living next door. Hearing that it was, in fact, a Hindu (and not a Muslim) who murdered the great leader, Raja sinks on to the bed. 'Thank god,' he says through tears. 'There would have been more riots, killing. They'd have slaughtered every Muslim in sight, including the Hyder Alis.' The sight, in 1948, of an upper-class Hindu man crying because his Muslim neighbours have been spared harm is a moving picture of a sensitive person.

Disaffected Despite this delicacy, Raja appears in every external aspect likely to grow up and continue the family tradition. He is ambitious and intelligent and fully capable of running his father's business. He should get married and raise a family of his own in the ancestral house. But Raja is deeply affected by the tortuous events that unfold around him and he feels the chains of expectation from the 'family.' His disaffection, which had been growing for years, emerges full-blown in a scene when he is alone in conversation with his sister, Bimla. Partition is under way, the killings have started and the Hyder Alis have left for Hyderabad. Bimla asks how the family business is going, and Raja says, 'I have no idea and I don't care. I have to go. I have to go and begin my life. I can't spend all my life in this hole, can I? You don't think I can go on living just to keep my brother [with a learning disability] and sister company?' Raja's troubled life might be seen as a symbol of the pain and alienation that accompanied Independence and the creation of Pakistan. And that is one reason why this gentle novel, seemingly about family discord, remains one of the great fictional explorations of that period in Indian history.