CHAPTER IV

CLEAR LIGHT OF DAY:
"ALIENATION AND RENUNCIATION"
Clear Light of Day begins with Tara's triennial visit to her home in old Delhi. To her sister Bim, living in a shabby, dusty house in old Delhi, Tara's visit turns out to be catalysis in her confrontation with her own life. That "the novel is carefully constructed, beautifully written, sensitive, funny, atmospheric was the verdict of the Times Literary Supplement."¹ About the theme of this novel, Anita Desai says:

My novel is set in Old Delhi and records the tremendous changes that a Hindu family goes through since 1947. Basically, my pre-occupation was with recording the passage of time. I was trying to write a four dimensional piece on how a family's life moves backwards and forwards in a period of time. 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.²

The novel is divided into four parts. Part I and Part IV are intermixed with the tormenting memories of the past of Bim and Tara. Part II and Part III deal with the partition of India and the childhood days of the main characters. It revolves round four
characters in a house in Old Delhi. The four major characters - Bim, Tara, Baba, and Raja - have great love and affection for each other. The book divides itself between the present of Tara's visit to their squalid mansion on the banks of Jamuna in old Delhi and the two sisters' memories of the past. The recapitulation reveals a past far from the usual cheerful, chaotic childhood that one comes across in an extended family structure. "Indeed, even the most casual reader of Clear Light of Day is likely to be impressed with this weaving of past and present into a single and unified whole."³

In Part I Tara comes to old Delhi with her husband Bakul for attending the wedding of Raja's daughter. They find the old monotony still there. Tara says: "How everything goes on and on here and never changes. I used to think about it all and it is all exactly the same whenever we come home."⁴ Bim replies to her: "But you wouldn't want to return to life as it used to be, would you? All that dullness, boredom, waiting. Would you care to live that over again? Of course not. Do you know anyone who would - secretly, sincerely, in his innermost self-really prefer to return to
childhood?" (4). Bim further explains to Tara the boredom and monotony in Delhi.

That is the risk of coming home to Old Delhi. 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 rest 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. (5)

Bim and Tara are inevitable extensions of the other protagonists of Anita Desai. Tara’s childhood is pre-occupied with mother’s death and some other minor incidents. These incidents of her childhood repeat themselves making her incapable to forge those memories. Tara’s weaknesses reveal Bim’s strength. But Tara’s sensitivity to weakness also throws Bim’s character in perspective. The novel is refracted through the consciousness of Bim. The novelist has endowed her with a capacity for self-analysis, and this can be described as a very
significant aspect of her character. She realizes that she is not able
to do all that she wanted for the members of her family. At the
same time she feels the effect of overwork on her:

She too wanted to sleep. She was exhausted —
by Tara, by Baba, by all of them. Loving them
and not loving. Accepting them and not
accepting them. Understanding them and not
understanding. The conflicts that rose inside
her with every word they spoke and every
gesture they made had been an enormous
strain, she now felt, leaving her worn out. In
spite of her exhaustion, she feared the night
and the long hours and the dark when she
would have to face herself. How would she
swim through that ocean and come out again?
She wondered (166-167)

Bim completes her education and she becomes a teacher
and leads an independent life. Some of the noble qualities of
Bim's character are admirable and make her personality
outstanding. Although she is often unsteady, oscillating between
the struggle, in the end she discovers the structure of her own
consciousness and achieves wholeness. Bim, unlike her sister, has
never really left her home. The note of sarcasm, irony, and
resentment is heavy in her words when she continues to prod Tara with her questioning: "Oh, to going on – to growing up – leaving – going away – into the world – something wider, freer – brighter." She outlines what the past had been to Tara: "Mira-masi swigging secretly from her brandy bottle. Baba winding up his gramophone. And Raja, if Raja were here, playing Lord Byron on his death-bed. I, reading to him. That is what you might have come back to, Tara. How would you have liked that" (5). Bim's parents are both portrayed as remote and far removed from the world of their children. They do not influence the lives of their children in any significant way.

*Clear Light of Day* has been called "a four dimensional novel" by the author. It endeavours to plumb the depths of time as a destroyer and as a preserver." In the novel, the problems of the self are finally confronted and resolved with an equal mastery of sense and style. The novelist describes the life in Delhi during the partition riots of 1947. Desai, in an interview with Sunil Sethi, describes the situation as her personal experience: "I was ten at the time of partition and profoundly affected by it, so much in our life suddenly changed character." Part II of the novel opens
with the lines "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" (44). The murder of Mahatma Gandhi is also referred to in Part II of the novel. "The house of Hyder Ali echoes the fate of Bim, who is also deserted, by Raja and Aunt Mira: the former deliberately abandons her and goes away to Hyderabad ... the latter dies."7

Aunt Mira is a cousin of their mother and she has been widowed at the age of fifteen. When she comes to look after the children, their mother says to 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 (204).

With the arrival of Aunt Mira, the children experience a certain measure of love and warmth that their lives have lacked. She is a
widow but a virgin and she suffers from a strange disease. Once Raja announces, so grandly, 'when I grow up, I shall be a hero,' which makes Bim respond 'And I will be a heroine,' which has made Tara feel so miserable and she runs to Aunt Mira, whimpering 'Bim and Raja say they will be a hero and heroine. They laugh when I say I will be a mother. Aunt Mira strokes Tara's head and consoles her, 'There, there, you'll see you grow up to be exactly what you want to be, and I very much doubt if Bim and Raja will be what they say they will be' (112). This consoles Tara entirely and it turns out to be true as well. Bim and Raja, though quite content to have Aunt Mira around, are not entirely contained in the self-diffident love of the Aunt. They bore great resentment against their parents, while Tara is passive even in her rejection of her parents, "day after day and year after year till their deaths" their parents spent the time,

*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 .... 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 verandah to Aunt Mira’s room where she could always tuck herself …It would have frightened her a bit if they had come away, followed her and tried to communicate with her. (22)

After their mother’s death Raja falls ill. The doctor sees the reports and says it is nothing so mental or emotional – the boy has become infected with tuberculosis. There is no one in the house to help Raja except Bim. Tara was always out then. Often Misra sisters, took her to the cinema, to Cannaught place to shop, or to the Roshonara club to play badminton and drink lemonade. Bim wonders at Tara going again and again to visit the Misra sisters because all through their school years they had chafed at
this too close a relationship with girls they considered dull and conservative. She then marries Bakul and then both go to Ceylon.

Like Tara, Raja also wants to escape to life outside the traditional pattern. Raja's world of escape lies in the character of the Hyder Ali who lived across the road. He is a rich, cultured sophisticated Muslim whose interest in literature and music and politics impressed Raja immensely. The neighbour and landlord, Hyder Ali had a substantial library at one corner of his bungalow. He knew about Raja's interest in Urdu and used to invite him to visit his library. Raja used to sit there for hours, daily, turning over the more valuable of Hyder Ali's manuscripts. Aunt Mira seemed perturbed by this strange friendship and warned him: "Raja, don't you think you go there a little too often? Are you sure you are not in their way?" (48). In the evenings tired of his own noisy sisters and his peculiar old aunt, and still more peculiar little brother, he wandered across to the Hyder Ali's garden where there was always a gathering of friends at that hour. He begins to compare their own house with Hyder Ali's home and other families. He inclines towards society, company,
applause, towards colour, song, charm. He feels there can be no house as dismal as his own, as dusty and grimy and uncharming.

Raja decides to join the Jamia Muslim University at Delhi, and asks his father to sign the form but his father refuses and says: '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 -.' So Raja joins at the Hindu college. Raja starts going on bicycle to college with the Misra boys. He brings home volumes of Tennyson and Swinburne and lends them to Bim to read. Bim and Raja read aloud to each other and memorise verses to quote aloud till Tara squirms in misery and Aunt Misra's jaw swings from its hinges in admiration. When the boys at Hindu college find that Raja is one Hindu who actually accepted the idea of Pakistan as feasible, they change from charmed friends into dangerous enemies. The partition takes Hyder Ali to Hyderabad, while Raja lies at home recuperating from tuberculosis. With Tara married and gone, Aunt Mira more and more confined to her room and her bottle, Baba eternally playing his records on the gramophone, Bim and Raja are thrown together for company and comfort. When Raja's health improves
steadily Bim goes back to college to complete the course in history and goes to help in a clinic for women in the Kingsway camp for refugees. On one day Bim comes home with the news that Mahatma Gandhi has been killed. Raja hurries to the radio in a kind of desperation, almost sobbing: "there'll be more riots - killing - they'll slaughter every Muslim they can find - anywhere," when the news comes on "they sank on to Raja's bed with relief to hear it was not a Muslim but a Hindu who had killed the Mahatma." Raja cries out, "Thank God. I thought of the Hyder Alis - what they would have to go through" - (94). These lines show the narrow world to which Raja devotes himself.

When Raja's health improves he wants to leave for Hyderabad to join the Hyder Alis and shouts at Bim:

I have to go. Now I can go. I have to begin my life sometime, don't I? You don't want me to spend all my life down in this hole, do you? You don't think I can go on living just to keep my brother and sister company, do you? (100)

Raja leaves for Hyderabad and marries Hyder Ali’s daughter.

Bim mutters and says to Baba,
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? There’s no
need to be afraid. It’s as if we were children
again – sitting on the verandah, waiting for
father and mother, when it’s growing dark
and it’s bedtime. Really it’ll be just the way
it was when we were children … It wasn’t so
bad then, … was it? No, when we were
children (10).

The betrayal of Bim is compounded when Raja writes to her only
to permit her to live in their house. When Tara asks Bim to come
to Hyderabad for Raja’s daughter’s wedding, Bim responds:
“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!” (28).
Tara is astonished at the changed attitude of Bim towards her
brother with whom she once had a sweet relation and advises
Bim to forget the past and to remove the misunderstanding because of the latter.

The novelist endows Bim with a capacity for self-analysis and this can be described as a very significant aspect of her character. Once Dr. Biswas says to Bim with a deep sigh: "Now I understand why you do not wish to marry. You have dedicated your life to others - to your sick brother and your aged aunt and your little brother who will be dependent on you all his life. You have sacrificed your own life for them" (97). This conclusion of Biswas horrifies Bim. She has not chosen the situation she has been caught in: "she even hissed slightly in her rage and frustration - at being so misunderstood, so totally misread, then gulped a little with laughter at such grotesque misunderstanding, and her tangled emotions twisted her face and shook her" (97). In childhood days, when Bim realized that Raja was withdrawing from the cocoon - cosiness spun by his aunt and his sisters out of their femaleness and lack - or surfeit - of years, she grew resentful. Her resentment leads her, at times, to be cruel to Tara. Once she cuts Tara's hair and says roughly to crying Tara: "you
wanted curls, now you’ve got curls. You said I could cut your hair and I did. How was I to know you didn’t mean it?” (119)

At school, Bim becomes a different person - active, involved, purposeful. Teachers are always admonishing 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 …” (123). The school brings out Bim’s natural energy and vivacity that is kept damped down at home because of the peculiar atmosphere of their house. School to Tara is a terror, a blight, a gathering of large, loud, malicious forces that threaten and mock her fragility. But to Bim, school and its teachers and lessons are a challenge to her natural intelligence and mental curiosity that she is glad to meet. When the others cluster together, sharing a delicious secret like a lollipop passed from one to the other for an unhygienic lick, Tara is left out. If they are choosing teams for a game, Tara is always left to the last. She is no good at any game while Bim has a natural affinity with the bat and ball. Bim worships Florence Nightingale along with Joan of Arc in her private pantheon of saints and goddesses.
Part IV of the novel connects Part I. Tara picks up the thread of earlier conversation and requests Bim to go to Hyderabad with Baba to attend the marriage of Raja’s daughter, Moyna. Bim is once again offended: “Oh, you want to talk about Raja again, I’m bored with Raja. Utterly bored.” Tara replies:

*Why do you imagine such things about Raja? You haven’t even seen him – in how many years, Bim? You live in the same country and never visit each other. I come, from abroad, every three years, to see you, to see Baba and Raja. I know more about Raja’s home and family than you do, Bim. You don’t know anything about his life, about his family or his work* (143).

Something about Raja’s letter, Tara’s comments, the world of luxury and extravagance created by them and approved by both of them, excluding her, her standards, too rough and too austere for them, make anger flower in Bim like some wild red tropical bloom, and a kind of resentment mixed with fear make her stutter, half-aloud:

*I mean – I mean she’s only five years younger than I am and she thinks I’m old. And she*
spies on me – she’s been spying. She is cruel, Tara and cold. And Raja selfish, too selfish to care. And what about the letter he wrote me? Oh yes, he writes beautiful letters to Tara – all wedding, all gold – but what about the letter he wrote me? My letter? Has Tara forgotten it – in my desk? And I – (147).

The arrival of a letter from her father’s office disturbs the routine of her life, because it requires her to go to the office to attend a meeting. She is reluctant to hold forth her compassion any longer, and with all her anger unappeased, she chooses Baba as her target and tells him of her idea of selling their shares of the firm to Sharma:

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? ... Are you willing to go and live with Raja in Hyderabad? (163)
But he says nothing. Perhaps that is why she decides to address her anger to Baba and not to Raja, Tara or Bakul: “She could have so easily drawn an answer out of them – she already knew the answers they would have yielded up” (164). It is Baba’s silence and reserve and otherworldliness that she has wanted to break open and she comes to the startling realization:

> There could be no love more deep and full and wide than this one, she knew. No other love had started so far back in time and had had so much time in which to grow and spread. 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 at herself. Whatever hurt they felt, she felt. Whatever diminished them, diminished her. What attacked them, attacked her, nor was there anyone else on earth whom she was wiling to forgive more readily or completely, or depend more instinctively and instantly. She could hardly believe, at that moment, that she would live on after they did or they would continue after she had ended. If such an unimaginable phenomenon could take place, then surely they would remain flawed, damaged for life.
The wholeness of the pattern, its perfection,
would be gone. (165)

Although it is shadowy and dark, Bim can see as well as by the clear light of day that she feels only love and yearning for them all. She moves to her desk and carefully draws out the entire lower drawer and carries it to the divan and reads the papers in the drawer intently by the dim brown-papered light for the first time in many years. They are not her papers, they are the translations, she has made once of Raja's poems. On each of them she can clearly see the influence of the poets he loved and copied. There is no image, no metaphor, no turn of phrase that is original. The only paper she tears that night is the letter he has written her and she has never answered. After that she spends the rest of the night in tearing and throwing away great piles of her own papers - old, dry, impersonal things, examination papers she has set for her students, notes she has made in her own student days, tutorial papers she has forgotten to hand back, trivial letters that do not bear re-reading, pamphlets and catalogues sent by bookshops and academic journals, empty cheque books and full pass books, files dating back to her father's life time. Her clearing
away of old papers becomes symbolic of her “clearing away of all barriers before readjustment and reconciliation can take place.”

When Tara is ready to go to Hyderabad Bim asks her to tell Raja, “Tell him how we’re not used to it — Baba and I. Tell him we never travel anymore. 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. And he can see Sharma about the firm — and settle things. And see to Hyder Ali’s old house — and repair it. Tell him I’m — I’m waiting for him — I want him to come — I want to see him.” (175-176). The melancholia that shatters her balance for twenty years is a measure of her sense of failure of life and her failure to honour her aspirations. But nonetheless, her courage and intellectual strength remain unaffected. The following words with which the novel ends only reinforce what has been said:

*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 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 (182).

Thus Bim remains a spinster to keep herself free from the shackles of family life. But this freedom is not cherished for long by her. While the others shirk their responsibilities, she finds herself enmeshed in a trap from which she too at first tries to escape. Even as she keeps meeting her siblings from time to time she experiences alienation – which results from an entrapment in never-ending responsibilities to which other siblings turn only a cold shoulder. Even by experiencing a sense of alienation Bim senses a kind of growth or a sense of an extended consciousness which makes her realize that she has in fact become a part of the pattern – consisting of several things which are precious to her, in fact inseparable attributes of her life (153). Thus Bim manages to find solace in the song of Mulk's aged guru and learns to more towards detachment and renunciation from an earlier sense of freedom and alienation.
REFERENCES


