

A Reading of Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*

It is no longer news that Indian novel in English has come of age. Anand's novel of ideas, Narayan's small-town narratives, and Raja Rao's metaphysical mode have led, as if naturally, to the more integrated though eccentric personal novel of the younger generation of writers, among them Anita Desai¹ is prominent. She excels at the subjective form. She has demonstrated her particular form from the very first, *Cry, The Peacock*, and in her late novels such as *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and *Fire on the Mountain*. But her sixth and most recent, *Clear Light of Day*, to my mind, has brought her art to the point to which it always seemed to gravitate; the point at which the individual life and the collective life of all intersect and the uniqueness of personal experience begins to exemplify a whole cultural pattern, one validating the other. In this novel, she is fully in command of the powers she earlier seemed to harness in the service of her fictional purpose.

The novel is divided in four parts of near-equal length, the second part being the time-pivot for the book, and longer in telling. We gradually get the story. Tara and her husband, Bakul, are on their regular three-yearly visit home from Washington, and in Old Delhi they stay with Bim and Baba, elder sister and younger brother of Tara's, respectively. For Tara the Old Delhi house is full of memories of recent and remote past—the two decades since 1947, and her childhood days before that. Old jealousies between the two sisters come up again as they reflect on how they were earlier; Tara, quiet, of delicate feelings, and less confident; Bim, stronger, abler in school, and attractive. But the intervening years have changed both in certain ways. Tension mounts as the silences grow longer and deeper in and around the house. Tara wonders how Bim can stay on in a shabby house, taking care of her retarded brother, Baba, and teaching history to young girls in a college. The family's "petrified" state both draws Tara in and repulses her enough to make her think again of fleeing to "that neat, sanitary, disinfected land in which she lived with Bakul" (p. 28)². The family's "petrified" state particularly becomes a subject of reflection and occasional discussion among its members because Bim refuses to attend Moyna's wedding (Raja's eldest daughter), which is to take place in Hyderabad. Bim holds it against Raja that he abandoned her and Baba after their parents' deaths; and that he also missed his true calling of being a poet, as he had earlier vowed to Bim, and merely became a fat, rich man. Bim herself, of course, has devoted her life to looking after others: Raja during his deadly illness in 1947, the alcoholic Aunt Mira, the retarded brother, and everyone else who needed care (including Hyder Ali Sahib's dog, Begum). In both sisters' lives, unhappiness and boredom in their house are distinct memories, relieved only by the presence of kind and affectionate (though perhaps not always the best) neighbors; though Tara's life changed with her marriage and stay abroad. Their brother Raja's life was different from theirs even in Delhi, but it changed radically after he left. He had idealized Hyder Ali Sahib, the Muslim gentleman who lived across the street until the Summer of 1947, and he moved to Hyderabad, inheriting Hyder Ali Sahib's property through marriage to Benazir, his father-in-law's only daughter.

The essay is based on lectures given by Alamgir Hashmi at the University of Bern and the University of Basel (Switzerland) in November 1982.

¹Anita Desai's six novels are: *Cry, the Peacock* (London: Peter Owen, 1963); *Voices in the City* (London: Peter Owen, 1965); *Bye-Bye Blackbird* (Delhi: Hind Pocket Books, 1971); *Where Shall We Go This Summer* (Delhi: Vikas, 1975); *Fire on the Mountain* (London: William Heinemann, 1977); *Clear Light of Day* (London: Heinemann and Penguin, 1980).

²Anita Desai, *Clear Light of Day* (London: Penguin, 1980); all page references to this edition are given in the text.

But 1947 is the crucial year, in the life of the family as in the life of the country. The three houses (the Greek "oikos") that figure in the lives of these characters contain three distinctive life cycles and are set up as contrasts to one another: all these are in Old Delhi, Bim's house, the Misra's, and Hyder Ali Sahib's. Over time, they all appear "empty" and cheerless. Some of the people who then (in Tara's younger years) inhabited these houses are still there, though many have disappeared, either by death or by moving to another place. On p. 41 occurs a crucial passage which, beyond the specific life and incident, states a theme of central importance in the novel:

Who is the third who walks always beside you?
When I count, there are only you and I together
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded
I do not know whether a man or a woman
—But who is that on the other side of you?

The passage from the last section of T.S. Eliot's 1922 poem *The Waste Land*, a poem that, according to Eliot, was written as a necessity against a personal crisis, recurs towards the end of Section II in the novel, invoking Eliot's own note on the inspiration: "The . . . lines were stimulated by the account of one of the Antarctic expeditions . . . : it was related that the party of explorers, at the extremity of their strength, had the constant delusion that there was *one more member* than could actually be counted."³

Tara and Bim have the delusion about Aunt Mira, whose soul still seems to inhabit the house or the garden. She is a missing person whose presence is felt. Baba, the autistic brother, is physically there but his existence amounts to nothing—he has no thoughts, responses, or initiatives which may cohere in his own or others' lives; Raja has moved to Hyderabad and absented himself physically; the Das mother and father are dead (Bim-and-Tara's parents)—they were rarely at home and with the children even when they were living; Hyder Ali Sahib and his family no longer live in the house across the street; Tara herself is now an absence abroad, and now a presence in the Old Delhi home. Yet, the novel is about the presence of the missing persons and their relations to those who actually reside in this place. For example, Raja lives in Hyderabad, but he is a main subject in Delhi; Aunt Mira is dead, but she presides over most things in Tara's, as well as Bim's, memories of the house, its past and present character and *atmosphere*. It is a sombre song of praise for Delhi, Old and New, ancient and modern, the city that has witnessed the empires (Muslim, British) build and collapse; and whose essential life continues at its own pace, compromising tradition with change, the diversity to unity, keeping alive its intrinsic relation to those who still live in it or have fallen away. In this sense, the novel deals with Delhi as Desai's earlier *Voices in the City* dealt with Calcutta, the vengeful City-Mother⁴ that both gives and takes away from its inhabitants; a creative influence that is equally destructive, a dark power whose claws can scratch a rock and invest it with meanings. And, finally, the novel is also about the irredeemable relation between the public event and a private sense of order. Since 1947 the Das family hasn't had better control than it had before. To Tara, by

³T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970), *The Waste Land* lines 360-66; Eliot's note on the lines, pp. 74-75. For Eliot's intention in writing the poem, see the documents in *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts including the Annotations of Ezra Pound* ed. Valerie Eliot (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1971).

⁴Calcutta is supposed to have been named after the goddess Kali.

Section IV, Bim in fact seems to have “lost control.” Of course, Bim does not see it that way; the shift in point of view, both in time and character—as on many other occasions, provides for Bim’s critical attitude to Tara and her belief that she has stood by and done her best.

Alamgir Hashmi