

# A Diasporic Reading of Anita Desai's Clear Light of Day

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**Abstract:** 'Diaspora' is one of the sociological concepts that find its reflection in today's literature. Diasporic literature deals with expatriate sensibility. It focuses on the lives of immigrants and their inner and external conflicts in an alien land. Diasporic Literature occupies an important status in the literary field by highlighting issues like cultural dilemma, quest of identity, multiculturalism and universal aspects of human existence. This project dealt with Anita Desai. Anita Desai is one of the best-known contemporary women writers of Indian fiction in English. Her novel *Clear light of day* was published in 1980 is generally regarded as Anita Desai's finest work to date by critics. The author has identified it as her autobiographical work as a result of being set in the neighbourhood where she came of age. The novel was first of three Desai's books so far which was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. Plot matches theme in the parallel drawn between the partition of India and Pakistan and the move toward reunion of two sisters in New Delhi. In the following study the elements of the Diasporic literature is brought in with Anita Desai's novel *Clear light of day*.

**Keywords:** Alien land, cultural dilemma, identity, immigrants, multiculturalism.

## 1. Introduction

It is a well-accepted fact that the basic theme of all literature is human being, his or her actions, thoughts, feelings, beliefs and faiths. As human beings are described as social animals, it is quite obvious that sociological aspects of human beings are reflected in literature. Literature deals with the number of sociological concepts, movements aesthetically. The term Diaspora comes from an ancient Greek word meaning "to scatter about." And that's exactly what the people of Diasporas do- they scatter from their homeland to places across the globe, spreading their culture as they go. The Bible refers to the Diaspora of Jews exiled from Israel by the Babylonians. Diaspora Theory with its various features has influenced the literature of every language of the world. This literature is widely known as Expatriate or Diasporic Literature. It would be proper to examine features and aspects of such literature in which Indian Writing in English not only contributed greatly but also received international recognition and admiration in the past few years. On the background of globalization, the term 'Diaspora' raises the questions of acculturation, assimilation, the loss of identity etc. Diasporic Literature is a very vast

concept and an umbrella term that includes in it all those literary works written by the authors outside their native country, but these works are associated with native culture and background. In this wide context, all those writers can be regarded as Diasporic writers, who write outside their country but remained related to their homeland through their works. Diasporic literature has its roots in the sense of loss and alienation, which emerged as a result of migration and expatriation. Generally, Diasporic literature deals with alienation, displacement, existential rootlessness, nostalgia, quest for identity. It also addresses issues related to amalgamation or disintegration of cultures. It reflects the immigrant experience that comes out of the immigrant settlement.

The immigrants, whatever their reason for migration be, financial, social, political, no matter whether they migrated for trade and commerce, as religious preachers, as labourers, convicts, soldiers, as expatriates or refugees, exiles (forced or voluntary), or as guest workers in search of better life and opportunities have shared some common things as well as differences which are based on their conditions of migration and period of stay in the adopted land. Mostly the migrants suffer from the pain of being far off from their homes, the memories of their motherland, the anguish of leaving behind everything familiar agonizes the minds of migrants. William Safran has observed that; "---they continue to relate personally or vicariously, to the homeland in a way or another, and their ethnic-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship." (Safran, 1991:23)

The Diasporic Indians do not break their relationship with the ancestral land. There is a search for continuity and 'ancestral impulse', an effort to look for their roots. Settlement in alien land makes them experience dislocation. Dislocation can be considered as a break with the old identity. They experience the sense of loneliness in an alien land feel as they face non-acceptance by the host society and also experience ethnic discrimination. The immigrants attempt to assimilate, adapt and amalgamate with the society of their host country. Their attempts of adaptation and adjustment are not without their concern to maintain their original culture and identity. The marginal groups try to guard themselves against the dominant

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host group. The most important means used for insulation is the continuation of the cultural practices and social traditions. The first generation immigrants are always concerned with keeping the social, cultural baggage which consists of among other things their religion, language, music, art, dress, cuisine, etc. intact. Conscious attempts are made by the Diasporic communities to pass their traditions to the future generation. The experiences of these cultural elements have been varied in different Diasporic situations. Some of these elements have vanished, some have persisted or survived, others have experienced assimilation, syncretism or change, and few elements ought to be rejuvenated. The immigrants in these situations are compelled to feel that they stand on the borderline belonging neither to their motherland nor their adopted country. In their attempt to integrate with the adopted culture while maintaining their inheritance, they develop a dual identity, and their culture becomes a sandwich culture. Their efforts for assimilation and failure to do so dishearten them. The feeling of rootlessness, alienation, confusion, nostalgia, dislocation and sufferings due to discrimination on the basis of race, culture, religion and language concludes into conflicts, fight for identity and on the other hand lead to birth of feeling of marginality in the minority group. This results in the creation of a fractured identity.

As they are torn between the two places and two cultures and often languages; the expatriate writer navigates a new literary space. The Diasporic literature arises under these circumstances. The broken psyche of the immigrants sheds off its psychosis into writing. Therefore, the migrant writer feels a forceful need to write and with their multicultural ethos and a profound understanding of socio-cultural and economic realities around them, they have been successful in transforming their experiences into writings. Another important reason for writing by the creative talent in the Diasporic community is to make their existence recognized. The very act of creation is a purposeful effort to form a cultural identity.

Diasporic writing unfolds these experiences of unsettlement and dislocation, at some or the other level. A Diasporic text can be investigated in terms of location, dislocation and relocation. The changing designation of home and accompanying nervousness about homelessness and unfeasibility of going back are recurrent themes in Diasporic literature. The expatriate literature also deals mostly with the inner conflict in the context of cultural displacement. The immigrants away from the families fluctuate between crisis and reconstruction. They are thrice alienated from the native land they left behind, from their new host country and their children. Diasporic literature is in constant conversation with the metahome. The longing to regain lost home often culminates in the creation of a different version of home.

Nostalgia, loss, betrayal and duty are the foundations of new homes as Diasporic protagonist adjust to new countries. In adjusting to new countries, issues of acculturation and assimilation become the central point as these immigrants negotiate the unbalance of their hyphenated identities. Usually, the first generation diaspora clings to food and clothes as the most obvious markers of Indianness that sets them apart and

highlights their difference. The insistence on this difference is often a conscious declaration of belonging to another place. On the other hand, second generation diaspora declines and removes such identity markers to assimilate the dominant culture.

## 2. Works of Anita Desai

Anita Desai's original name is Anita Mazumdar. She was born on June 24, 1937 in Mussoorie, India. She is a novelist and author of children's books who has excelled in evoking character and mood through visual images ranging from the meteorological to the botanical.

Born to a German mother and Bengali father, Desai grew up speaking German, Hindi, and English. She received a B.A. in English from the University of Delhi in 1957. The suppression and oppression of Indian women were the subjects of her first novel, *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), and a later novel, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975). *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) was criticized as relying too heavily on imagery at the expense of plot and characterization, but it was praised for its poetic symbolism and use of sounds. *Clear Light of Day* (1980), considered the author's most successful work and it is praised for its highly evocative portrait of two sisters caught in the lassitude of Indian life. Its characters are revealed not only through imagery but through gesture, dialogue, and reflection. As do most of her works, the novel reflects Desai's essentially tragic view of life. Baumgartner's *Bombay* (1988) explores German and Jewish identity in the context of a chaotic contemporary India.

Other novels by Desai include *In Custody* (1984; film 1994) and *Journey to Ithaca* (1995). *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) takes as its subject the connections and gaps between Indian and American culture, while *The Zigzag Way* (2004) tells the story of an American academic who travels to Mexico to trace his Cornish ancestry. Desai also wrote short fiction—collections include *Games at Twilight, and Other Stories* (1978) and *Diamond Dust, and Other Stories* (2000)—and several children's books, including *The Village by the Sea* (1982). *The Artist of Disappearance* (2011) collected three novellas that examined the collateral abandonment and dislocation wrought by India's furious rush toward modernity. Her daughter Kiran Desai won the Booker Prize for the novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006).

It is no longer news that Indian novel in English has come of a particular age because 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 Desai 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. Published in 1980, *Clear Light of Day* is generally regarded as Anita Desai's finest work to date by critics. The author has identified it as her most autobiographical work as a result of being set in the neighbourhood where she came of age. The novel was first of three Desai books so far which was a finalist for the Man Booker Prize. Plot matches theme in the parallel drawn between the partition of India and Pakistan and the move toward reunion of two sisters in New Delhi.

The titular illumination refers to the lighting of the way reconciliation once all the misunderstandings and long-held emotional barriers have been cleared out of the way. This clarity is achieved by Desai through the implementation of a stream-of-consciousness technique that affords multiple viewpoints capable of shining the light of objective truth on individual events which recur through different subjective memories. The impact of the past upon the present is thematic presented in the structure of the four-part narrative. The present is introduced in part I as taking place in the late 70's while part II transports the reader back to the year of Indian independence, 1947. The part III of the book goes back even further in time in order to show the way that children perceive the world around them can have life-long consequences. Part IV traces the long decades of growth often required before insight is attained by putting readers back into the novel's present.

Desai has pointed to T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* as inspiration for the chronology of *Clear Light of Day*. The chronological impact of beginning at the end of the story and then circling back to the beginning was designed to situate the concept of time as a fourth dimension so essential to telling and understanding the story that it transcends mere theme to take on the elements of an actual character. As a character, time is interacting with the other characters in a way that forces past into the present to produce effects and consequences which will recur again in the future.

### 3. *Clear Light of Day*

The novel entitled, *Clear Light of Day*, written by Anita Desai. In 1980, Tara awakens one morning in her childhood home in Old Delhi, feeling nostalgic. Her sister, Bim, is a teacher and takes care of the house. The two discuss their old days. Tara has been married to Bakul who works in Indian embassies in foreign countries and travels a lot. Tara, unlike Bim, is low-spirited and has to constantly keep herself under check. They discuss the ageing house and have tea sometime after. Tara serves Bakul tea with little milk that is left after the cat is fed showing Bim's disdain towards Bakul. Their brother, Baba, comes and is also fed milk with quite a show, which makes Bakul resent his disdain more. Baba plays musical records all day long, which worries Tara. She asks Baba to go to the office, which he sadly declines. Tara feels bad for the state of him and declines Bakul's invitation to go out. The needle of Baba's gramophone breaks and the silence caused by it disturbs him so

much that he rushes out to the streets where he gets distraught by the crowd and comes running back crying. Bim tutors girls in her house and Bakul seems to criticise her actions. She treats everyone to ice-cream which Tara finds bizarre. They discuss their brother, Raja, and his marriage to the daughter of Hyder Ali Khan, their landlord. There are some sour feelings between Bim and Raja who used to be very close. Bim shows Tara a letter in which Raja tells Bim charging her the same rent as Nawab charged her parents. Bim finds his tone insulting and arrogant and keeps the letter as a token of remembrance and refuses to go to Hyderabad for the marriage. That evening they go to Misras, their neighbours. The Misras were a rich family fallen into despair due to their son's debauchery and vices and laziness to work. Their sisters, separated from their husbands, work hard to feed the family and yet are marginalised. The youngest, Mulk, creates a scene for not getting to host his musicians or an audience and is controlled by Bakul. Bim has them all return to avoid the Misras the extravagance of a meal. They get back and Bim speaks of seeing her aunt Mira after she died and the two sisters talk of partition and the events that followed.

In 1947, Bim and Raja are closest to each other than the rest of the siblings. Raja hero-worships Hyder Ali Saheb, their landlord and neighbour. Given his aptitude for Urdu, he is invited frequently to their house to browse among their vast collection of Urdu poetry. He takes to going there frequently earning disapproval from his parents, aunt and Bim. He begins to compare the two households and begins to detest his own. He takes Urdu as his primary language in school, instead of Hindi, against his family's wishes. He yearns to go to Jamia Milia Islamia, a college known for its inclination towards Islamic culture, against his father's wishes, who along with his wife are regulars at clubs and are hardly ever home. His father finally convinces him to go to the Hindu college, telling him of the disharmony and the growing communal environment. Their mother becomes ill and dies in hospital. They are hardly affected to be taken care. Since their parents were hardly around their aunt takes them to drinking out of stress during this time.

The father also dies in an accident and Raja is affected with tuberculosis. Tara keeps more company with Misra sisters whom Bim finds unambitious. She meets Bakul there and is love-struck, although Bim finds him pompous, arrogant and show-off. The doctor begins to be infatuated with Bim and invites her to a concert. Raja is required to take over his father's business which he refuses. He wants to go to Hyder Ali who has left for Hyderabad given the communal tension. On Raja's insistence, Bim goes to Hyder Ali's house and brings back Baba's beloved gramophone, Begum, the dog and Bhakt, the horse-tender. Bakul marries Tara and leaves. Bim also goes out sometime with Dr Biswas but finds him pompous and boring. Aunt Mira grows worse and after a series of embarrassed disrobing accidents, dies in her bed all the while trying to run to the well to drown in it as Bim sometimes sees her while taking her walks. Raja leaves for Hyderabad to look for Hyder Ali and Bhakt goes with him. Baba and Bim are left back and they hardly care for this development.

In 1940s, Aunt Mira, a distant cousin of Bim's mother, was widowed in her early teenage years and was thus reduced to be an unpaid house help. She started ageing prematurely and in an ugly fashion, and so was deemed unfit to be molested by the men of her household. Bim's mother sent for her as she couldn't take care of Baba who was showing growth defects. Aunt Mira, dispensable to her in-laws, was sent and became a parent figure for children. Their parents hardly cared for them and this drove the aunt and children closer. She had the parents buy a cow for fresh milk, which later died due to a servant's carelessness by drowning in a well. Aunt Mira was forever haunted by this incident. Tara develops as an under-confident child while Bim and Raja flourish. Tara is haunted by her childhood incidents, like shooting of a rabid dog and dismissal of a teacher for being in love with a foreigner. Bim, who defends the principle in this act as she had cancer, becomes a figure of resentment for Tara.

Tara begins to have confrontation issues. She abandons Bim twice in minor events- first in the midst of a bee-attack and then as Bim forced her to smoke while they wore Raja's pants and discovered a sense of entitlement in wearing male clothing. Tara begins to grow apart from her siblings and closer to Misra as there was frolic in their house when compared to her own house, which was quiet most of the time. Misra sisters treated her kindly and would frequently take her out to clubs and other places. At their marriage parties, Bim forced to go alone but Tara disapproves of Misra girls marrying without proper education and annoyance that she doesn't intend to marry.

Tara tries to make Bim forgive Raja but she won't relent. She also learns of Bim's financial problems and wonders how she is coping. Bim grows restless and angry and begins to snap at everyone particularly when a letter from her father's company comes about finance decisions. She is angry at Raja for leaving her like this and snaps at Baba who doesn't respond. Tara and Bakul try to convince Bim unsuccessfully. Her nieces come soon and she begins to enjoy their company and finds that she can forgive Raja after all. As Tara leaves for the wedding, she asks Bim to invite Raja to Delhi. That evening, she attends a concert at Misra's and realises families, despite their disputes, eventually come together.

#### 4. Diasporic Elements in Clear Light of Day

Clear Light of Day presents a story between pre and-post independence about the history of an extended family and the tragedies they faced. It is within these characters and writing techniques that Anita Desai reaches the readers of the middle class, thus expanding and developing their realms of imagination. Desai wove the history of Delhi with a middle-class Hindu family. The novel does not represent a new trend in Desai's fiction though it differs from her earlier novels. There is no real change in the thematic interests and the technical concerns of Desai. The summer of 1947 has divided the nation and the family - Hindus and Muslims are torn apart by Partition. It traces the effect of partition riots on the family. It describes the main events in the family against the background of the 1947 upheaval. Much of the conflict in India during the time of Anita Desai's novel Clear Light of Day centres upon religious tensions between the Muslims and Hindus. Desai, while

mentioning the events that were caused by the religious tensions, neglects to address the religious issue in a great detailed manner. While there is little mention of religion, language, which in India is divided along religious lines, is brought up many times.

Clear Light of Day is based on the backdrop of India-Pakistan partition of 1947. Although the lead characters are not directly involved in the event, but the partition affects their lives in subsequent years. The characters live in Old Delhi, which could be considered as the better part of town, and so don't have to witness any violence of the partition, but the Indo-Pak partition also ends up dividing the family. Raja moves to Hyderabad to follow his hero- Hyder Ali Khan Saheb, Tara marries out of desperation to leave her dysfunctional family, Bim and Baba remain in a house full of ghosts of their childhood. And, it's worth noticing how their separation is not a product of some grievous circumstance; it's because of their choices. Their partition is self-inflicted.

This novel describes the emotional reactions of two main characters, Bim and her younger sister Tara, who are haunted by the memories of the past. At the novel's heart are the moving relationships between the members of the Das family, who have grown apart from each other. Bim is a dissatisfied but ambitious history professor at a women's college who lives in her childhood home, where she cares for her mentally challenged brother, Baba. Tara is her younger, not ambitious, estranged sister, married and with children of her own. Raja is their popular, brilliant and successful brother. As Holly Smith says, "When Tara returns for a visit to stay with Bim and Baba, old memories and tensions resurface and blend into a domestic drama that is intensely beautiful and leads to profound self-understanding."-171. Bim is an independent woman. Bim's past memories of the family dominate her sterile existence; she feels betrayed by her sister Tara and replays her memories in the decaying family mansion in Old Delhi. Their mentally retarded brother plays old records. Throughout this novel, the house is a threatening presence characterized by an explosive silence and a recurrent image of Baba grinding the old gramophone and listening to the old cracked records of the forties. The middle-aged sisters remember their childhood in Delhi just before the partition. Tara has lived away from her home and returns there after many years. To her the homecoming is like a return to the pleasant and unpleasant memories of childhood. By temperament Tara has been a girl of modest ambitions. Raja and Bim want to do things, to be a hero and heroine when they grow up. They want to leave their old house and go away into the big wide world. Tara on the other hand is content to be herself. As children Raja and Bim were bright and ambitious whereas Tara was a mediocre with no unusual desires. Her ambition is to be a wife and mother when she grows up. She only wants the security of her house and the warmth of Mira-Masi's bed. She rejoiced in the sheltered life of her home in the company of Aunt Mira. Life has a way of upsetting childhood dreams. In their later lives, however, their careers are reversed. Tara is now a sophisticated lady but Bim and Raja are just ordinary persons. The marriage with Bakul and her stay abroad bring about a great change in

Tara's life. Throughout the story, Tara faces confrontation with Bakul, but handles her oppression delicately as most women do. When he insists that they go into the city and shop rather than 'vegetate' in Tara's house with her family, Tara feels torn and confused. She persists on staying with her older sister, Bim after not seeing her family for years

In this novel Desai has resorted to her characteristic technique of using an image as an apparently independent artistic unit or as an objective correlative with a view to vivifying the psychic state or emotion of a particular character. She has employed this technique quite effectively in the Part I of the novel. When Tara, on coming back home from abroad, begins to request Bim again and again to agree to join her, along with Baba, in attending the manager of Raja's eldest daughter in Hyderabad for which purpose she has come home, Bim gets emotionally agitated but keeps silent.

The novel is carefully constructed and beautifully written. Shifts from the present to the past tense and back help create an appropriate mood of nostalgia so necessary for the rendering of principal characters' stream-of consciousness. Moreover the old house with its neglected garden having a unused well provides a suitable background to the novel, thus making it look a unified whole. This superb handling of past and present requires a talent for plotting and a sense of control which are abundant in Desai. Beginning and ending in the present, the novel sandwiches two middle chapters that go back 20 years to the time of India's partition and the story of this family is told through each sister's memory. Tara does have a personal quest. She has carried guilt of having abandoned Bim and Baba.

### 5. Conclusion

Diaspora is therefore, a scattering of the seed in the wind, the fruits of which are a new creation and a fight to survive. Every Diasporic movement holds a historical significance, as it carries within itself the kernel of the nations' history. Diaspora is a journey towards self-realization, self-recognition, self-knowledge and self-definition. There is an element of creativity present in the Diasporic writings and this creation stands as a compensation for the many losses suffered.

New York Times (2000) praises the novel "as a wonderful novel about silence and music, about the partition of a family as well as a nation." Clear Light of Day was a landmark in Desai's career. "It marked my breaking out," says Desai,

explaining also the change that came over her use of language. She incorporated the rhythm and tone of Indian speech into English and the effect was described as "four-dimensional" by noted critic Gabrielle Annan in the Times Literary Supplement, "about time as a preserver and destroyer, about what the bondage of time does to people". Anita Desai is justifiably renowned for her keen, subtle eye and her calmly elegant prose. She is also a mistress of synecdoche, a writer whose delicate portraits of the outwards to convey tumultuous swathes of history. Although the characters in Clear Light of Day barely venture beyond their front gate, they live out the legacy of India's bitter battle for independence. Anita Desai's fictions are generally existentialist studies of individuals and hence background, political, historicity, social settings, class, cross-cultural pluralities are all only incidental. Desai focuses on personal struggles and problems of contemporary nuclear life that her Indian character must cope with. She portrays the cultural and social transformation that India has undergone as she presents her focus on incredible power of family and society and the relationship among family members and paying close attention to the traits of women suppressed by Indian society. Clear Light of Day is a hauntingly beautiful story of a bourgeois family's struggle against the forces of disintegration.

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