Duality of Time in Anita Desai’s Clear Light of Day
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Abstract: Time plays a vital role in Anita Desai’s Clear Light of Day that delineates time as a force which is a destroyer at the same time a preserver. It is a paradox that time which is a destroyer, should also be regarded as a preserver. With great success the author has brought out a deep truth underlying this paradox. This duality of time – time as a destroyer and as a preserver – has been vividly portrayed by the author in her novel. The present study aims to explore the significance of time in the spheres of national and domestic life. The story of the characters of the novel runs parallel with the history of the nation. The dissolution of the Das family in Clear Light of Day coincides with the Partition Movement and communal rioting of the nation. At the end of the novel, time as a destroyer is pushed into the background and time as a preserver emerges as triumphant. Finally the members of the family get united and the essential unity of the family has been preserved by time. The present study shows how time influences the people of the Das family in destroying as well as preserving their domestic life and domestic relationships.

Keywords: Time, Time as a Destroyer, Time as a Preserver, Bondage of Time,

“What is time? It is a secret – lacking in substance and yet almighty.” These are the words uttered by Thomas Mann, the German Nobel Laureate in literature, in his famous novel The Magic Mountain (1924). Time is something inescapable. Nobody can stop or arrest the passing of time; nor can anyone slow down the passing of time. All human beings are slaves of time because they all think in terms of days, months, and years; and they all think in terms of childhood, adolescence, adulthood, middle age and old age. More than fifteen hundred years earlier, time appeared as a mysterious entity to the Roman Church Father Saint Augustine who writes about time in his autobiography, Confessions: “What, then, is time? I know well enough what it is, provided that nobody asks me; but if I am asked what it is and try to explain, I am baffled”.

In literature the passage of time very often appears as a major theme and sometimes almost as a character in its own right. Time is a fundamental element not only of our existence but also in literature for almost as long as literature has existed. The passage of time allows plots to unfold and character to be drawn. Literally all stories take place in time and deal with time in different ways like real time narration, chronological development, flashbacks, flashforwards. This time has got a dual nature – it is a destroyer at the same time a preserver. Anita Desai’s Clear Light of Day has presented us with this dual nature of time. Here time is depicted as both a destroyer and a preserver. The novel gives a new dimension to the theme of the disintegration and reconciliation of human ties by bringing into focus the part played by time. The story describes the psychological stresses and tensions undergone by the members of a post-partition Indian family with the passage of time.

Let us first discuss the destructive power of time which can be seen in the writings of several authors as well. In Shelley’s “Ozymandias”, for example, the once-great king’s proud boast has been ironically disproved; Ozymandias’s works have crumbled and disappeared, his civilization is gone, all have been turned to dust by the impersonal, indiscriminate, destructive power of time. The ruined statue is now merely a monument to one man’s hubris, and a powerful statement about the insignificance of human beings to the passage of time. History also testifies the destructive power of time. The ancient Roman Empire flourished, and then began to decline and came to an end. The same was the case with the British Empire and Mogul Empire. Again fascism, Nazism and communism all arose, flourished and fell.

This destructive nature of time can also be seen in Anita Desai’s Clear Light of Day which basically deals with the fortunes and misfortunes of the Das family and the mutual relationships of the four children of that Hindu family as they grow up to adulthood, and then to the middle age, and even beyond that. The novel covers long span of time covering both British India, and post-independence India. The theme of the novel is the brother-sister and sister-sister relationships, and the stress and strain which these relationships undergo. The passage of time has worked havoc with the members of this family. The atmosphere of the household where the children – Raja, Bim, Tara, and Baba – grow up is unwholesome and melancholy because the parents, Mr. and Mrs. Das,
show very little interest in their upbringing. The youngest of the children, namely Baba, was a mentally retarded child from his very birth, and needed the constant care of his mother who, unable to cope with this task, managed to obtain the services of a poor cousin of hers. This cousin was Mira, called Mira-masi by the children. Aunt Mira began to look after the child Baba, who was unable to speak more than a word at a time. Baba was unable to comprehend what anybody said to him, and was unable to reply to anything that anybody asked him.

The other three children too did not lead normal lives because they did not get adequate attention from their parents. The parents, Mr. and Mrs. Das, were very fond of playing bridge; and they used to go regularly to the Roshanara Club (in Old Delhi) to enjoy the pleasure which they felt in pursuing this hobby. They generally returned late in the night and the children after having waited for them in vain, had gone to sleep. Mrs. Das dies after an illness. Then Mr. Das dies in a car accident. These deaths were among the misfortunes which had exerted a great pressure on Aunt Mira’s mind. The deaths of the Das parents left the Das children desolate even though the parents had not been a source of much joy to the children even during their life-time. Even the feeling that the parents are alive has a sustaining effect on children; and, therefore, the deaths of the parents can prove to be taxing events.

An even greater effect of the destructive force of time was the decline in the intimacy between the two children Bim and Raja. This intimacy had been a source of great strength to Bim; but, when Raja declared that he would soon be leaving for Hyderabad, Bim felt deeply hurt. Then the departure of Raja deepened her feeling of disappointment and frustration.

Years later, time dealt a heavy blow to the relationship between Bim and Raja because of a humiliating letter which Raja wrote to Bim about the old house in which Bim and Baba were living as tenants. The house belonged to a rich Muslim landlord, whose name is Hyder Ali. Hyder Ali leaves Delhi secretly with his family because the communal passions in the country have reached a state of frenzy and goes to Hyderabad where his mother owns a house and where the Muslims feel safer than they feel in Delhi. Raja decides to go to Hyderabad at the invitation of Hyder Ali who has written to him to join him there, and who has also promised to get him suitable employment in that city. Disregarding his domestic responsibilities as the eldest of the four children of the family, Raja leaves for Hyderabad, so that Bim is left alone in the old house in Old Delhi to look after her mentally retarded younger brother, Baba. Bim’s younger sister Tara had got married to a young man in the Indian foreign service, and had already left for Ceylon where her husband Bakul got his first posting. In course of time Raja gets married to Benazir, the only daughter of Hyder Ali; and when Hyder Ali dies, Raja and Benazir inherit all Hyder Ali’s property including the old house in Old Delhi in which the Das family (including Raja himself) had been the tenants, and in which Bim and Baba still live as tenants.

At this point Raja writes a letter to Bim from Hyderabad, informing her that Benazir and he have decided not to raise the rent of their house in Old Delhi but to allow Bim and Baba to continue living in that house as tenants on the same rent which the Das family had originally been paying to Hyder Ali. This letter has an almost devastating effect on Bim who finds that, far from recognizing his responsibilities as the eldest surviving member of the Das family he has begun to regard himself as a big landlord, and has now written a patronizing letter to her, allowing her and Baba to continue living in this house on the same rent. Bim had once been very close to Raja, had shared his interest in English poetry, and had been his playmates as well; but now she feels completely alienated from him on account of the humiliating letter which he has written to her. This letter tears apart Bim’s heart, and leaves a deep wound in it. This letter has been so offensive to Bim that she preserves it in order that she might occasionally read it and remind herself of the pain which Raja has inflicted upon her. This is how time can devastate certain precious human relationships. This is how time can cause immense destruction of domestic life and domestic relationships.

Aunt Mira has also seen the destructive power of time. She was twelve years old when she was married, and she was yet a virgin when she became a widow. Her young student-husband, having left to study in England immediately after their wedding, caught a cold in the rain one winter night, and died. She was left stranded with his family, and they blamed her bitterly for his death. They said that it was her unfortunate horoscope that had brought about her husband’s death. They further said that she should be made to pay for her guilt. So they made her scrub the floors of the house, to wash their clothes, and to cook their food. At night she massaged her mother-in-law’s legs and stitched the garments for her sisters-in-law. Not only did her hair turn prematurely white but she also became bald. This at least saved her from her brother-in-law who would certainly have seduced her if she had been attractive. As she was no longer attractive, they looked at her sullenly and made jokes about her loudly enough for her to overhear. So she was happy to quit that house and come to the Das house. She was like a cracked pot, a torn rag, and a picked bone of which the Das household could certainly make good use; and, indeed, she proved to be a useful slave in the Das house where she felt much happier than she had been in the house of her in-laws. Aunt Mira proved herself to be an excellent nurse when both Bim and Raja caught typhoid and lay ill. In course of time Aunt Mira dies, as a consequence of excessive drinking to which she had become addicted because she wanted to escape from the pressure of suffering and sorrow which
she was experiencing on account of the difficult time which the various members of the Das family were going through.

The passing of time can even disrupt the life of a whole nation. For example, India had been struggling to achieve independence from British rule for many years. Finally the British agreed to surrender their control of this country. Then came the time when the country had to be partitioned in order to meet the Muslim demand for the establishment of Pakistan. The partition of the country was preceded and followed by large-scale communal rioting. The Muslims fled from Delhi in order to escape the wrath of the Hindus. In *Clear Light of Day* many of the Muslims including Hyder Ali and his family fled to Hyderabad where they were safe because there the Muslims were in a majority. The bloodshed and the slaughter that took place in the summer of 1947 are among the unforgettable facts of history. The anger and resentment in the minds of both the Hindus and the Muslims led to a catastrophe. As a result the two communities have become permanently hostile to each other. The rioting of 1947 have vividly, though very briefly, been depicted by Anita Desai in her novel.

The story of the novel runs parallel with the history of the nation. The partition of India is a concrete reality that is concomitant with Raja leaving, Tara marrying, the deaths of the Das parents as well as Aunt Mira, and the separation of the Das family. These domestic separations are analogous to the social events leading up to Partition and to the social upheaval that followed the separation of Pakistan from India. The summer of 1947 has been described as tumultuous. In this summer the Hyder Ali family abandons Delhi for Hyderabad under the threat of racial violence and the father of the Das family dies. During the previous summer of 1946 the mother of the Das family had also died. It was the same summer when Jinnah made public demands for a Muslim homeland. Tara got married to Bakul in the summer of 1947, and they moved to Ceylon (Sri Lanka), leaving Bim alone to care for the other family members. This incident coincides with the official division of India from Pakistan in August of that same year. In the following summer, after the death of Gandhi in January 1946 and the continued flight of refugees across Indian borders, Aunt Mira dies and Raja leaves for Hyderabad. This event isolated Bim further and left her to care for those who are left behind: Baba and herself. Each of the three people who escaped (Tara, Raja and Aunt Mira) used a way of escape common during the Partition era: Tara fled the country for somewhere else, Raja fled to a Muslim center, and Aunt Mira left the earth entirely.

The passage of time, however, does not destroy everything. There are certain things that are indestructible and imperishable. In course of time, certain things acquire greater weight and validity. Certain things acquire an enduring value by time. For example we can mention the ancient Roman culture which still exists and which is still regarded as a model to be emulated. In this respect time can be regarded as a preserver.

In the novel *Clear Light of Day* certain things continue to exist despite the ravages of time. Time preserves certain positive experiences and values. Aunt Mira’s self-sacrifice is an example of this kind. She had assiduously been attending upon the mentally retarded child Baba, and had been taking great pains to keep him cheerful. Then there is Bim’s love for Baba. She had told Tara that she would never marry but would look after Baba. After Tara had gone away to a foreign country, after Aunt Mira had died, and after Raja had left for Hyderabad, Bim was alone in the old house to look after Baba. Then, in an introspective mood, stimulated by the presence of Tara and by Tara’s talk, Bim begins to think of the damage which Raja’s humiliating letter had done to her relationship with him. Bim’s meditations and reflections, supplemented by the dying words of Emperor Aurangzeb, lead her to forgive Raja for his “unforgivable” letter. The dying words of the emperor moved Bim deeply. The emperor had said that he had come into this world with nothing at all but that he was going away from here with a heavy weight of sinfulness on his mind. These words calmed Bim’s heart, and brought tears into her eyes. That same night she tore off the letter which Raja had written to her many years back, and which had offended her deeply.

Bim now begins to feel that there had been flaws and inadequacies not only in her love for Raja but also in her love for Tara and Baba. She entrusts Tara with a loving message for Raja from whom she had been feeling completely alienated. She even thinks it necessary to seek the forgiveness of Baba to whom she had spoken harshly a little while ago. Thus Bim’s love for her sister Tara and for her brothers, Raja and Baba, gains a new impetus. Her love for them is not only revived in its full strength but is further increased. It is in this way that time has served as a preserver.

The title of the novel is a phrase used in the final section of the novel by the author herself while describing the state of mind of the protagonist at a particular time in her life when she is reviewing her past and her relationships with her sister Tara and her two brothers, and more especially with her elder brother, Raja. In order to live life with all its frustrations, disappointments, unfaithfulness and treachery, one has to go beyond these mundane pettiness and to have a glimpse of the divine, that is, the Clear Light of Day. The title “Clear Light of Day” refers to Bim’s revelation that removes clouds of grudge, dissatisfaction and depression because of the treacherous behaviour of Raja who does not reciprocate Bim’s feelings who sacrifices her life for the sake of the family. There is an authorial comment on the title of the novel which has a broad sympathetic attitude of forgiveness bringing to our minds the final mood of Shakespeare’s Prospero in *The Tempest*. The comment focuses on Bim and her retrospection:
Time as a preserver plays its role especially in the last episode of the novel. Listening to the song of Mulk Misra’s aged guru, Bim is reminded of T.S. Eliot’s line: “Time the destroyer is time the preserver”. It then occurs to her that young Mulk and his aged guru belong to the same school of music, and that the difference between the freshness and sweetness of Mulk’s voice cannot efface the bond between the young disciple and the old guru. This thought leads her to realize that she, Tara, Raja, Baba, and even Aunt Mira, had lived together in the same old house and that, in fact, they had all sprung from the same soil. She now realizes the bond which unites them all, a bond which can never be obliterated. The essential unity of the family has thus been preserved by time.

In *Clear Light of Day*, Anita Desai quotes lines from two poems by Emily Dickinson and T.S. Eliot as epigraphs to the novel. The first epigraph has the following lines of Emily Dickinson:

> Memory is a strange bell –
> Jubilee and Knell

The significance of these two lines is that memories of the past play an important role in the novel and they are juxtaposed with the present as mentioned in the blurb “Memories of the past coalesce with the tensions and jealousies of the present in this sharply drawn and sorrowful portrait of the ebb and flow of sisterly love.” In the context of Baba’s character who is mentally retarded, memory plays even a very important role, because in his mind there are certain impressions that keep recurring. Because of his limited mental impressions he cannot go beyond them.

The second epigraph is by T.S. Eliot describing the passage of time and how in spite time passing things do not change really, only the pattern changes:

> See, now they vanish,
> The faces and places, with the self which, as it
> Could, loved them,
> To become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern.

Not only Anita Desai herself has said that time plays an important role in the novel but at the end of the novel there is a quotation from T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*: “Time the destroyer is time the preserver”. This line more or less reinforces the idea suggested in Eliot’s quotation in the epigraph. This is much about textual evidence and let us see what Anita Desai herself says about the novel. She speaks about *Clear Light of Day* at two places but basically what she says is the same. In her interview with Sunil Sethi in *India Today* in 1980 when the novel was published, she had said:

> “My novel is set in Old Delhi and records the tremendous changes that a Hindu family goes through since 1947. Basically my preoccupation 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 preserver and about what the bondage of time does to people. I have tried to tunnel under the mundane surface of domesticity.”

Almost the same idea is repeated later when she says:

> “What I have tried to prove is that although time appears to damage, destroy and extinguish, one finds instead that nothing is lost, nothing comes to an end, but the spiral of life leads as much upwards as downwards and is in perpetual circular motion, both the past and the future existing always in time present.”

At the end of the novel time as a preserver proves triumphant. While time as a destroyer, which played a major role throughout the novel, is at the end pushed into the background, and even eclipsed. Anita Desai has surely achieved a major success in establishing the theme of the novel which is about time as a destroyer and time as a preserver.

**References**