

Impact Factor: 8.67

ISSN:0976-8165

The Criterion

THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

15 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

VOL. 15 ISSUE-6 DECEMBER 2024

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

The Fragile Bonds: Exploring Dysfunctional Parent-Child Dynamics in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14605250>

Article History: Submitted-05/11/2024, Revised-17/12/2024, Accepted-20/12/2024, Published-31/12/2024.

Abstract:

Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* explores the emotional and psychological consequences of dysfunctional family relationships, mainly focusing on the neglectful parenting that shapes the lives of the Das siblings—Bim, Tara, Raja, and Baba. This article delves into the catastrophic effects of emotional abandonment by their parents, analyzing the characters through psychological frameworks such as Diana Baumrind's parenting styles and John Bowlby's attachment theory. The neglectful behavior of the Das parents leaves a lasting emotional scars on their children, with each sibling responding differently to their shared trauma. Bim becomes bitter and emotionally isolated, taking on burdens of responsibility; Tara escapes through marriage, seeking validation and security; and Raja rebels, pursuing intellectual autonomy away from the family. Baba, the youngest and most vulnerable sibling, plays a pivotal yet understated role in highlighting the consequences of neglect on a dependent child. His mental challenges and dependence on Bim emphasize the unequal distribution of caregiving within the family and deepen Bim's sense of entrapment.

Keywords: Dysfunctional family, parenting styles, Diana Baumrind, John Bowlby, attachment theory, neglect, sibling, psychological effects, intellectual rebellion, escape, isolation, resilience, familial obligations, emotional abandonment.

Introduction

Anita Desai, an acclaimed Indian author, is known for her deep psychological explorations of human relationships, particularly within the confines of familial structures. Her novel *Clear Light of Day* (1980) offers a deep exploration of family complexities, with a particular focus on the parent-child relationship. Set against the backdrop of Old Delhi, the novel revolves around the lives of the Das family, where unresolved tensions and psychological scars are passed down through generations. Desai intricately crafts a narrative that underscores how dysfunctional parent-child relationships can lead to long-lasting emotional turmoil, especially for children who are left to grapple with feelings of neglect, resentment, and unfulfilled desires.

This article examines the parent-child dynamics in *Clear Light of Day* and their catastrophic effects on the characters. It draws on psychological theories, such as Diana Baumrind's parenting styles and John Bowlby's attachment theory, to better understand the emotional and psychological toll these relationships impose on the novel's key characters. Through an analysis of the novel's Das siblings—Bim, Tara, Raja and Baba—this article explores how Desai portrays the fragility of human relationships when parental roles are either absent or inadequately performed.

Dysfunctional Parenting in *Clear Light of Day*

Desai's *Clear Light of Day* focuses heavily on the implications of absent or neglectful parenting. The Das parents are portrayed as distant, detached, and largely absent from their children's lives, both physically and emotionally. The Das family resides in Old Delhi, where the father, though owning an insurance company, often neglects his work in favour of visiting clubs and playing cards. His wife, a loyal companion, accompanies him on these outings, while her days are spent mainly in bed looking pained and detached or focused on improving the bridge game. Their lives revolve around bridge to such an extent that, as one speculates, if the mother were to emerge from her coma, her first words would likely be "...the names of familiar cards" (Desai 53). They have four children—Bim, Raja, Tara, and Baa. But the parents show little interest in them, acting almost as if they had no children at all. "In this novel parents have retained something of their own, a niche for their individual being, divorced from the duties of ideal parents." (Dasgupta viii)

The parents' indifference is striking, with the mother being as detached as the father. She resents the demands of child-rearing, particularly with Baba, whom she dismisses as a distraction from the bridge. Like her other children, Baba is entrusted to the care of others; when the ayah struggles to manage his needs—especially as he is the youngest and mentally retarded—the responsibility falls to Aunt Mira. The children are thus largely neglected, growing up with parents who avoid engaging with them and maintain a distant, almost unfamiliar presence. Tara admits that she would have found it unsettling if her parents had addressed her directly, as she was not used to receiving their attention.

At night, the children instinctively fall silent and pretend to be asleep at the sound of their parents' approach, fearing that any attention they might receive would be unwelcome. Raja and Bim harbor resentment toward their parents, feeling abandoned in favor of their parents' preference for playing the bridge. They plot to destroy the cards that have stolen their parents' affection: Raja imagines setting them on fire, while Bim envisions cutting them into tiny pieces. Meanwhile, Tara seeks refuge with Aunt Mira, finding comfort in her warmth and compassion, and chooses not "...to feel the need to wreck her parents' occupation or divert their attention" (Desai 22).

The family dynamic lacks the nurturing and guidance which the children typically require during their formative years, leading to fractured sibling relationships and individual emotional struggles. Parents' emotional detachment reflects what attachment theorists like Diana Baumrind would classify as an "uninvolved" or "neglectful" parental figure. Bowlby's attachment theory emphasizes the importance of a secure attachment between parents and children, which provides the child with a sense of safety and stability.

The Children's Response

In Desai's Fiction *Clear Light of Day*, the Das children experience a kind of emotional abandonment, which manifests in their adult lives as unresolved anger, fractured self-esteem, and internal conflict. Bim, for example, is left with the burden of caretaking responsibilities, not just for her younger siblings but later for her mentally challenged brother Baba, while the parents remain largely oblivious.

Bim's journey through parental neglect

Bim, the eldest Das sibling, is distinguished by her exceptional resilience and the profound emotional scars she carries. Although strong, she holds a persistent resentment towards her parents due to their neglect. In her childhood, Bim assumed a parental role out of necessity, being forced into adulthood prematurely because of her parents' irresponsibility. This early burden, coupled with a lack of emotional support, has had a lasting impact on her psychological well-being as she grows older.

After their mother's death, Raja became seriously ill, their father also passed away, and Aunt Mira began to behave erratically, descending into delirium from secret alcoholism—all responsibilities that fell on Bim. Suddenly, Bim found herself leading the family, granting Tara permission to date and later blessing her marriage, while simultaneously caring for Raja and Mira-masi. Dr. Biswas, who frequently visited to offer assistance, expressed a desire to marry Bim, but she declined. As S. P. Swain observes in his article "The Alienated Self—A Study of Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*":

“Bim is a victim of circumstances. The abrupt changes in circumstances of her life and her family not only poses a threat to her high aspirations but simultaneously breeds identity crisis. She is unable to reconcile her aspiration to the circumstantial changes around her.”
(Swain 54)

Following her parents' death and Tara's marriage, Bim is left to care for her ailing brother Raja, attend to her elderly and alcoholic Aunt Mira, and look after her mentally retarded brother, Baba. These heavy responsibilities hinder her prospects for marital happiness and erode her sense of identity within a conjugal relationship.

Bim is a mother figure to Baba and is deeply devoted to her animals and students, whom she lovingly calls her "babies." When Tara asks her husband how Bim, despite rarely leaving home, seems to have achieved everything she desired, Bakul responds, “She did not find it – she made it. She made what she wanted” (Desai 158). However, Tara notices Bim's underlying unhappiness, bitterness, and unresolved resentment.

Applying Diana Baumrind's parenting styles framework, the Das parents can be classified as neglectful—they were disengaged from their children's lives and indifferent to their emotional and

psychological needs. This lack of involvement led Bim to become fiercely independent but also emotionally stunted. She suppresses her desires, refusing to marry or pursue a life outside the family home, feeling trapped by the familial obligations imposed upon her. Her bitterness towards her siblings, particularly Raja, stems from the perceived unfairness of her situation and the emotional burden she is forced to bear alone.

Tara's search for escape and self-assertion

As the youngest Das sibling, Tara was the “baby” of the family, initially enjoying attention from her mother, but this shifted after Baba's birth. Left out of her older siblings' games for being too young and different, she grew up feeling isolated. While Raja and Bim were bold and engaged in poetry, Tara was timid, struggling even to remember a line. Aunt Mira's arrival transformed Tara's life, providing her with companionship and protection. This bond led Tara to develop an "irritating habit" of clinging to Mira-masi and avoiding the world beyond her sheltered home.

Tara's fragile, passive nature contrasts sharply with Bim's strength. In the school, she felt intimidated and socially isolated, struggling in the shadow of her outgoing sister, Bim. School was “a terror, a blight, a gathering of large, loud, malicious forces that threatened and mocked her fragility... when confronted by a challenge, [she] shrank back into a knot of horrified stupor... [gazing] dully at the teachers” (Desai 122-123). While Bim overlooked her struggles, the Misra girls offered Tara friendship, eventually introducing her to Bakul, whom she married to escape the stifling family environment.

Tara's need for validation and security, particularly from her husband, reflects the lasting wounds of her parents' neglect. Her attachment struggles, as outlined by Bowlby, manifest in her constant sense of inadequacy and need for reassurance. Despite efforts to reconnect with Bim, the emotional distance between them remains, stemming from their shared but diverging responses to parental neglect.

Raja's Search for Autonomy and Rebellion

In an Indian family, the eldest son traditionally holds an important role as the heir and custodian of the family's legacy, often receiving special attention. However, in Das family, all the children are met with equal indifference and neglect. Raja seeks to rebel against the family and its dysfunctionality by identifying with Hyder Ali who was Das family's wealthy Muslim neighbour.

Raja's fascination with Hyder Ali and his intellectual ambitions reflects his desire to escape the limitations imposed by his neglectful parents and dysfunctional household. He dreams of a life of intellectual freedom, unattainable within the emotional constraints of his family environment.

Raja finds a father figure in their neighbour and landlord, Hyder Ali, whom he admires deeply. As a boy, Raja was captivated by Hyder Ali's graceful presence and was thrilled when invited to explore his library rich in Urdu literature. Over time, Raja became part of Hyder Ali's social circle, which was filled with lively discussions, music, and poetry—a vibrant world that contrasted sharply with his own home and he felt a natural pull toward "... society, company, applause" (Desai 49). For Raja, Hyder Ali was an idol and a figure to admire. However, as one moment reveals, he might be even more: "There was something gently loving in [Hyder Ali's] gesture of placing his arm across the boy's shoulders as he came up, somehow making Raja think that Hyder Ali had no son, only a daughter" (Desai 56).

Raja's departure from the family home to pursue his ambitions leaves Bim feeling abandoned and betrayed. Seeking a better life, Raja moves to Hyderabad, where he finds acceptance and a sense of belonging with Hyder Ali's family. After marrying Hyder Ali's daughter, Benazir, Raja becomes the heir and sole son of this affluent new family, gaining the recognition and appreciation he longed for. In her eyes, Raja's escape to a more prosperous life, much like Tara's marriage, is an act of selfishness, leaving her to bear the burden of family obligations. However, Raja's actions can be seen as a response to the neglectful and detached parenting that left the children emotionally stranded, each seeking an escape in different ways. Raja's rebellion and ultimate separation from the family highlight how parental neglect can push children to seek autonomy, sometimes at the cost of family unity.

Baba, the silent sufferer

Baba, the youngest of the Das siblings, is a poignant symbol of emotional fragility and silent suffering in the face of neglect. Unlike his siblings, Baba is mentally challenged and remains detached from the ongoing familial tensions. His condition is met with indifference by his parents, leaving him to rely on his elder sister Bim for care and support. Baba's silence and dependence highlight the emotional toll of being ignored by his parents, whose neglect amplifies his vulnerability.

Baba's quiet existence and his retreat into the comfort of his records and gramophone reflect his coping mechanism for the emotional neglect he endures. While Bim takes on the role of his caregiver, her resentment towards this burden often surfaces, creating an emotional distance between them. Baba's passive suffering illustrates the devastating effects of neglect, particularly on those unable to articulate their pain.

Conclusion

Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* offers a poignant exploration of the long-lasting impact of dysfunctional parent-child relationships. Through the portrayal of the Das family, Desai illustrates how the emotional neglect and absence of parental involvement can leave lasting scars on children, affecting their psychological well-being and their ability to form meaningful relationships with others. The siblings' emotional estrangement from each other serves as a testament to the destructive effects of neglectful parenting, as they are each left to grapple with feelings of resentment, inadequacy, and unfulfilled desires.

Ultimately, Desai's novel serves as a reminder of the fragility of familial bonds, particularly when they are built on a foundation of neglect and emotional absence. The catastrophic effects of these dysfunctional relationships reverberate through the lives of the Das siblings, shaping their identities and choices in ways that leave them isolated and emotionally damaged. Through this exploration, *Clear Light of Day* underscores the vital role of parents in nurturing and supporting their children's emotional and psychological development, as well as the deep-seated wounds that result when these needs remain unfulfilled.

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