**Clear Light of Day**

Study Material by

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***Clear Light of Day*** is a novel published in 1980 by Indian novelist and three-time [Booker Prize](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Booker_Prize) finalist [Anita Desai](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anita_Desai). Set primarily in [Old Delhi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_Delhi), the story describes the tensions in a post-partition Indian family, starting with the characters as adults and moving back into their lives throughout the course of the novel. While the primary theme is the importance of family, other predominant themes include the importance of forgiveness,

One morning in 1980, [Tara](https://www.gradesaver.com/clear-light-of-day/study-guide/character-list#tara) Das wanders around in her childhood home in Old Delhi, feeling nostalgic. Her sister, Bim, is a teacher and takes care of the house. The two discuss the old days. Tara has been married to [Bakul](https://www.gradesaver.com/clear-light-of-day/study-guide/character-list#bakul), who works in Indian embassies in foreign countries and travels a lot, and has two teenage daughters. Tara is attractive, but, unlike the intelligent and fiercely self-possessed Bim, she is mild-mannered, pliable, and dependent on her husband. Tara and Bakul are in town for the wedding of Raja’s daughter; Raja is their brother, from whom Bim is estranged.

The sisters discuss the aging house and have tea sometime after. Tara serves Bakul tea with little milk that is left after the cat is fed, demonstrating Bim’s disdain towards Bakul. Their brother, [Baba](https://www.gradesaver.com/clear-light-of-day/study-guide/character-list#baba), comes in. He is a grown man but is mentally slow. Baba plays musical records all day long, which worries Tara. She asks Baba to go to the office, which he sadly declines. Tara is sad looking at the state of her brother 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; there, he gets distraught by the crowd and comes running back crying. Bim and Tara discuss their brother, Raja, and his marriage to the daughter of Hyder Ali, their landlord. There are sour feelings between Bim and Raja, the two of whom used to be very close, and Bim shows Tara a letter in which Raja tells Bim that, in the aftermath of Hyder Ali’s death, he will charge her the same rent as their parents were charged. Bim finds his tone insulting and arrogant; she keeps the letter as a token of remembrance and refuses to go to Hyderabad for the marriage.

That evening they visit the Misras, their neighbors. The Misras were a rich family fallen into hard times due to their sons’ debauchery, vices, and laziness. Their sisters, separated from their husbands, work hard to feed the family and yet are marginalized. The youngest, Mulk, causes a scene for not getting to host his musicians or an audience; only Bakul can quell his temper. Bim has them all return home, in order to avoid the Misras having to feed them all.

Back at the house, Bim speaks of seeing a specter of their Aunt Mira after she died; the two sisters talk of the Partition of India and Pakistan, and of the events that followed.

II

In 1947, Bim and Raja are closer to each other than the rest of the siblings. Raja hero-worships Hyder Ali, their landlord and neighbor. Given his aptitude for Urdu, he is invited frequently to their house to browse among the 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 Millia, a college known for its inclination towards Islamic culture, but this is against his father’s wishes. [Mr. Das](https://www.gradesaver.com/clear-light-of-day/study-guide/character-list#mr-das) finally tells him that it is unsafe for a Hindu boy to study Islamic culture during these troubled times. Raja does not know how to refute this, and he enrolls at the Hindu college.

Bim, Raja, Tara, and Baba are not particularly close to their parents, who are rarely home. One day, their mother falls ill and dies in the hospital. They are not very affected, but their aunt takes to drinking out of stress.

The father also dies in an accident and Raja is stricken with tuberculosis. He is querulous and miserable, and Bim is frustrated by his obsession with the Alis. Raja is particularly distressed when the Alis flee town due to the riots and fires resulting from the Partition.

Tara spends more time with Misra sisters, whom Bim finds unambitious. Tara meets Bakul there and is love-struck, although Bim finds him pompous, arrogant, and dull.

[Dr. Biswas](https://www.gradesaver.com/clear-light-of-day/study-guide/character-list#dr-biswas), a young man who frequently ministers to Raja and Aunt Mira (the latter of whom is descending into senile, drunken disaster), begins to be infatuated with Bim and invites her to a concert. She is not at all interested, and even though she agrees to a meeting with his mother, she realizes that she is not interested in marriage.

Raja is required to take over his father’s business, but 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 to see what is going on. Baba sees the daughter’s gramophone and records and immediately becomes obsessed. They bring the gramophone, a dog, and a servant back with them.

Bakul marries Tara and takes her with him. Aunt Mira grows worse and, after a series of embarrassing accidents, dies in her bed. She is buried in her only sari, which she never wore in life. Now that his health is improved, Raja leaves for Hyderabad to look for Hyder Ali. Baba and Bim are left together, but they are pleased with this development.

III

[Mrs. Das](https://www.gradesaver.com/clear-light-of-day/study-guide/character-list#mrs-das) gives birth to her fourth (and unexpected) child, Baba. He begins exhibiting some growth defects, so she calls for Aunt Mira.

Aunt Mira, a distant cousin of Bim’s mother, was widowed in her early teenage years (in the 1940s) and was thus reduced to unpaid house help. She started aging prematurely and hideously, and so was deemed unfit for the men of her household. Aunt Mira—disposable to her in-laws, for whom she was forced to work for as payment for the death of the husband—was sent for. The children are skeptical, but they all begin to love each other. She became a parental figure for children, as their parents hardly cared for them.

Aunt Mira had the parents buy a cow for fresh milk, but the animal later died when a careless servant did not lock it up and it fell into the garden well. Aunt Mira was forever haunted by this incident, as were the children.

Tara develops as a diffident, anxious 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 does well at school and defends the principal in her firing of the teacher, becomes a figure of resentment for Tara.

As Raja grows up, Tara and Bim spend more time together but their relationship has many fractures. Tara abandons Bim twice in minor events—first in the midst of a bee-attack and then when Bim forced her to smoke while they dressed up in Raja’s pants and discovered a sense of power in wearing male clothing. Tara has trouble forgetting when Bim cuts off Tara’s hair, promising her that she will grow curls afterward.

Tare begins to grow apart from her siblings and closer to Jaya and Sarla Misra, as there were levity and life in their house as compared to her own house. The Misra sisters treated her kindly and would frequently take her out to clubs and other places. At their marriage parties, Bim tells Tara she disapproves of the Misra girls marrying without proper education; she asserts that she doesn’t intend to marry.

IV

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 financial 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 to seek out Raja’s help, or at least Bakul’s, but she does not relent.

The sweltering night before the wedding, Bim realizes that she has been taking her anger out on Baba, and that is unacceptable to her. She begins to think deeply about her siblings and how tightly their lives are interwoven. After looking through some of Raja’s old poems and looking at an excerpt from an Indian saga, she finds that she can forgive Raja after all. She is overcome by a sense of wholeness and peace.

The next day, Bakul, Tara, and their daughters, who’d arrived recently, prepare to depart for the wedding. As Tara leaves for the wedding, Bim tells her that, while she and Baba are not coming to the wedding because they do not leave the house anymore, she would love if Raja came back here and brought the whole family.

That evening, Bim and Baba attend a concert at Misra garden, and Bim realizes that families, despite their disputes, eventually come together.

# Clear Light of Day Character List

## Bimla Das (Bim)

Bim is the eldest sister in the Das household. She lives in the house she lived in as a child with her family and runs it now. She is a history teacher and a great advocate of independence and individuality. She is said to have aged prematurely due to stress surrounding her household. She takes care of her brother and sick aunt even when everyone else deserts her. She wrestles with her anger towards her brother Raja, but she comes to forgive him and find peace in her tempestuous family relations by the end of the novel.

## Raja Das

Raja is Bim's younger brother; they used to be very close to each other in their earlier years. Raja is intelligent, romantic, and has great passion for Urdu poetry. He hero-worships Hyder Ali, their Muslim neighbor and landlord. He is arrogant, irresponsible, ambitious, and occasionally insensitive. He later marries Benazir, Hyder Ali's daughter, and leaves his siblings in Old Delhi.

## Tara

Tara is the second-youngest child of the Das household. She is pretty and sweet, but she is also less intellectual and confident than Bim. As a child, she hated going to school, and so she decided not to pursue higher education. Her only ambition was to be a mother, for which her elder siblings jeered her. She marries Bakul as a young woman and leaves India, living in various places abroad (although she visits often). She has anxiety and avoids confrontation, but occasionally demonstrates more self-possession than Bim and Bakul give her credit for.

## Baba

Baba is the youngest child of the Das household. He is mentally underdeveloped, and thus entirely dependent on Bim. Baba doesn't talk but he seems to understand others. He likes playing songs on the gramophone all day long and is agitated when he is unable to do so.

## Bakul

Bakul is Tara's husband and a diplomat. He is arrogant, likes to impress other people, and is a narcissist who dislikes when he is not the center of attention. He is disdainful of the Das household and does not want Tara to be affected by its unruliness and fixation on the past.

## Aunt Mira (Mira Masi)

Mira-masi is a distant cousin of Mrs. Das. She was widowed when she was twelve and was blamed for her husband's death; thus she was made to work as an unpaid servant for her in-laws. She begins to age prematurely because of this. She is sent to take care of Baba, but all of children are elated to have her since their parents don't care for them. Many things begin to disturb her; eventually, she becomes an alcoholic and mentally unstable.

## Mr. Das

He is the father and the patriarch of Das household, but is absent most of the time playing bridge at the club. He rarely interacts with his children, which is why the children don't really mourn his death. He is a partner in an insurance firm and leaves most of its running to his manager.

## Mrs. Das

She is the mother of the four Das children. She suffers from diabetes and later dies of it. She has no patience for her children and, like her husband, is an absentee figure at the house. Tara and Bim think of her as commanding and imperious, concerned mostly with her appearance.

## Dr. Biswas

He is the doctor who treats Raja when he was suffering from tuberculosis and Aunt Mira when she began to fall apart. Biswas studied in Germany and appreciates music immensely; he plays violin, but poorly. He takes a liking to Bim, but she doesn't return the favor. He likes to believe he is a self-sacrificing person, but Bim finds this insufferable.

## Misra sisters (Jaya and Sarla)

Jaya and Sarla are the neighbors of the Das family. They had no ambition, except to get married, and thus didn't complete their studies. Ironically, this is why they are deserted by their husbands. They run and provide for the Misra household by teaching dance and music to teen girls. They like the simple and unambitious Tara more than independent and headstrong Bim.

## Misra brothers

The three Misra brothers are lazy and unemployed. They were married but their wives left them out of disgust at their lazy lifestyles. They do nothing to run the house and like to make fun of Mulk, the youngest, for his singing. They have lecherous eyes and the Das sisters don't like to be around them.

## Mr. Misra

He is the aging Misra patriarch. He was meant to leave for studies in London in his youth, but a prediction by a swami led his father to send him to Burma, where he made a lot of money. He used to be rich until his sons' debauchery and laziness led to their bankruptcy.

## Hyder Ali

He is the landlord of multiple houses in Delhi, including the Das'. He is rich, charismatic, and lives next to the Das's in a huge mansion. He travels around on a white horse, an image that is immensely appealing to the impressionable Raja. He is a patron of Urdu poetry and encourages Raja by inviting him to his personal library and to gatherings of notable intellectuals. He and his family flee to Hyderabad when tensions over the Partition arise.

## Benazir

She is the only daughter of Hyder Ali, and she is a spoilt child; she later marries Raja and bears him several children. Little is known of her except that she liked American music as a child, is plump, and likes to eat and cook rich fatty dishes.

## Miss Singh

The young and vibrant teacher with whom Tara connects; she is laid off for her putatively bad behavior.

## Miss Stephen

The elderly principal whom the schoolgirls hate and treat poorly in the absence of Miss Singh; Bim's outburst that the woman has cancer is enough to quell the girls' discontent.

# Clear Light of Day Themes

## Partition

[*Clear Light of Day*](https://www.gradesaver.com/clear-light-of-day) is set during the India-Pakistan Partition of 1947. Although the lead characters are not directly involved in the event, 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 thus they do not have to witness any violence of the partition; however, the Partition ends up dividing the family to an extent anyway. Raja moves to Hyderabad to follow his hero, [Hyder Ali](https://www.gradesaver.com/clear-light-of-day/study-guide/character-list#hyder-ali)Khan Saheb; [Tara](https://www.gradesaver.com/clear-light-of-day/study-guide/character-list#tara) marries out of desperation to leave her dysfunctional family; and Bim and [Baba](https://www.gradesaver.com/clear-light-of-day/study-guide/character-list#baba) remain in a house full of ghosts of their childhood. It is also important that their separation is not a product of some grievous circumstance, but rather due to their choices. Their "partition" is self-inflicted.

## Family

Clear Light of Day is primarily concerned with the Das family, but the Das siblings often compare their situation to that of other families such as the Alis and the Misras. Family is something from which one wants to escape, such as with Raja and Tara; something that exasperates, angers, and confuses; something that can be lacking, as with the Das parents; and something that can be unlike what you thought it would be, as with the close relationship between Aunt Mira and the siblings, Bim's closeness with Baba, and Bim and Tara's realization that they are more alike and love each more deeply than they'd thought. Family is one of the few sustaining things in times of duress, and even though it is not perfect, it is worth investing in. Desai suggests that family makes us who we are and that we should forgive those whom we love in order to achieve peace.

## Adolescence

A major part of the book is dedicated to the early years of the Das siblings and to how that period shaped their current lives. While Bim and Raja as the eldest siblings were sure of themselves and ambitious, Tara and Baba were the least loved and grew up to be dependent—albeit in different ways— on others. The children were hardly ever cared for in their household, and so they constantly looked for affection from each other. Their experiences in adolescence were responsible for their future selves, including their oft-tense relations with each other. Raja, who was selfish and proud, becomes a rich, pompous man who is still trying to be the hero he idolized, Hyder Ali. Tara is constantly dependent on her husband and others to make decisions for her. Bim witnesses the degradation of her widowed aunt in her house and the limitations of marriage, and she decides to live a life of independence.

## Escapism

The Das siblings are constantly trying to escape their immediate surroundings. This need is fuelled by the lack of attention they get from their parents. Raja starts inclining towards Islamic culture against his family’s wishes, Tara first seeks attention from Mira Masi and starts to spend more time with the Misra sisters, ultamtely marrying [Bakul](https://www.gradesaver.com/clear-light-of-day/study-guide/character-list#bakul) and leaving Old Delhi. Baba also tries to escape his immediate surroundings, albeit in a more unconscious manner, by constantly playing the same music on a loop. These three characters are propelled by the need to repress unpleasant memories of their childhood. Bim appears to be the only person who doesn’t want to escape her family. However, as the story progresses, one sees through chinks in Bim’s armor. She is constantly hurt by her siblings and needs to escape—this time, ironically, into the past.

## Women's role in society

Bim and Tara are often compared to each other, and characters often express their opinion on one or the other based on their docility. While both sisters belong to the same surroundings, they derive their sentiments and motivations from different experiences. Bim is independent and strives for perfection, whereas Tara is an escapist and looks towards others for emotional support. The sisters are also deeply influenced by Mira Masi, their widowed aunt, and her struggles in the society, as well as the Misra sisters who despite being appropriately groomed are deserted by their husbands for not being educated. At certain points, Bim also compares herself with Raja and longs for the entitlement and the attention he gets for being a boy. Overall, Bim is able to transgress some gender boundaries but Desai is aware that 20th-century Indian culture is not one in which women have the same opportunities as men.

## Memory and the Weight of the Past

The main characters in Clear Light of Day are constantly drawn into the past and memory. Indeed, Bim's current life is like a shrine to the past: the same house, the same routine, old papers kept, rooms never changing their decor. Bim dwells in the past in her mind as well, thinking on various grievances and memories that shaped her. Tara lives more in the present because she knows what letting in the past will do: weigh her down, make her feel as if she were sinking into the dark and scummy well. Nevertheless, Tara comes to see that some engagement with the past is necessary because it shaped her and because she needed to gain understanding and resolution to things that had haunted her. Bim, for her part, finally sees the danger in dwelling too much in the past, and releases some of her heavier, more noxious memories.

## Forgiveness

One of Bim's major struggles in the novel is her inability to forgive Raja. She blames her ire towards him on the letter he wrote about being her landlord, but it is clear that her hurt stems from something deeper—something like Raja leaving the house and leaving Bim alone with the rest of the family, with whom she was not as close. Bim clings to her bitterness, believing it makes her powerful and incapable of being hurt again. However, by the end of the novel, Tara's visit has forced Bim to confront some of her own issues and to realize that her love of Raja is worth setting aside her grievance. She will accept him for who he is and will let him back into her life; her constant anger was only hurting her, rather than sustaining her. This decision to forgive was not made rashly or easily, but Bim's ability to get there reveals her to be a thoughtful, intelligent, and sympathetic character.