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Kunapipi

Volume 6 | Issue 2 Article 10

1984

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Recommended Citation

Riemenschneider, Dieter, History and the Individual in Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children and Anita Desai's Clear Light of Day, *Kunapipi*, 6(2), 1984.
Available at:https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol6/iss2/10

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Abstract

Salman Rushdie's novel Midnight's Children and Anita Desai's Clear Light of Day are essentially concerned with man's quest for his identity, and both authors relate the quest of their individual hero or heroine to the past of their lives. However, Rushdie and Desai proceed very differently as a glance at their understanding of the terms 'history' and 'the past' shows. The former makes his narrator, Saleem Sinai, move in time and space: Covering the years from 1915 to 1978, Saleem narrates the fate of his family over three generations. Along with his grandparents he takes us from Kashmir via Amritsar to Agra where their five children are born. His parents settle temporarily in Delhi, move to Bombay where Saleem is born exactly on the stroke of midnight of India's independence, and finally emigrate to Rawalpindi in Pakistan where they perish in the 1965 India-Pakistan war. Saleem subsequently lives in the border area of Pakistan, is sent to Bangla Desh just before East Pakistan declares its independence in 1971, returns to Delhi, is taken to Benares by force and finally settles in Bombay to write his book because, as he says, he wants to preserve memory and save it 'from the corruption of the clocks'.

This journal article is available in Kunapipi: https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol6/iss2/10

DIETER RIEMENSCHNEIDER

History and the Individual in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*

To understand just one life, you have to swallow the world.

Salman Rushdie: *Midnight's Children*

'Nothing's over,' she agreed. 'Ever,' she accepted.

Anita Desai: *Clear Light of Day*

Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* and Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* are essentially concerned with man's quest for his identity, and both authors relate the quest of their individual hero or heroine to the past of their lives. However, Rushdie and Desai proceed very differently as a glance at their understanding of the terms 'history' and 'the past' shows. The former makes his narrator, Saleem Sinai, move in time and space: Covering the years from 1915 to 1978, Saleem narrates the fate of his family over three generations. Along with his grandparents he takes us from Kashmir via Amritsar to Agra where their five children are born. His parents settle temporarily in Delhi, move to Bombay where Saleem is born exactly on the stroke of midnight of India's independence, and finally emigrate to Rawalpindi in Pakistan where they perish in the 1965 India-Pakistan war. Saleem subsequently lives in the border area of Pakistan, is sent to Bangla Desh just before East Pakistan declares its independence in 1971, returns to Delhi, is taken to Benares by force and finally settles in Bombay to write his book because, as he says, he wants to preserve memory and save it 'from the corruption of the clocks'.[1]

Anita Desai, as in most of her earlier novels, restricts the little action there is in *Clear Light of Day* to one place, Delhi, and here, more specifically, to the house and the garden of the Das family and its immediate neighbourhood. The times dealt with are the late 1930s, 1947 to 1948,

and a few days in the 1970s. Like *Midnight's Children*, the immediate action of the novel is the present: Rushdie makes Saleem tell the story of his family in 1977 with the narrator interrupting himself every so often in order to comment on his present situation, on the act of writing, on history and a number of related issues. The omniscient narrator in *Clear Light of Day* recounts the story during a few days in the hot season in the early 1970s using the reunion of the two sisters to take them back into their childhood and adolescence with Tara giving way to her reminiscences and compelling Bim to follow her. While to Saleem the past constituting the present is full of changes in the life of the nation as well as in that of his family and is conceived of as a continuous and at times fast-moving process, to Tara and Bim, on the other hand, past and present in Delhi appear at times almost unchanged and without movement — except, perhaps, a slow movement towards decay and, at other times, as two different worlds with a past to which they by no means want to return. Tara's words, '«I'm so glad it is over and we can never be young again»', are confirmed by Bim who adds, '«I never wish it back. I would never be young for anything.»'[2] And yet, subconsciously they know that the present cannot be understood and be made an integral part of their selves as long as they look at the past from a preconceived and prejudiced point of view. The author shows, in the course of her novel, how both women in the end accept their childhood because '«It's never over. Nothing's over ever»' (p.174), thereby gaining that insight into the continuance of the historical process with which Saleem sets out to tell his story.

Both writers do not, however, confine themselves to a retelling of history through the portrayal of individual characters; rather, by interrelating character and event they reveal their deep interest in the central epistemological category of *recollection*, the category which constitutes on the one hand the aesthetic genres of the autobiography and the biography, and on the other hand the academic discipline of history. Recollection is not being made use of as a dream but as a mirror in which man tries to recognize the aspirations and strivings of mankind to recognize the totality of his own self as well as that of his species.

Again, both writers differ in the way they deal with recollection. While Anita Desai works through her characters' interaction, especially through dialogue and reminiscence, thus building up a concept of history in an indirect and implicit manner, Rushdie's narrator Saleem is a very self-conscious person who uses different means: he conceptualizes and verbalizes, for instance, the term recollection in phrases such as '[there] is no escape from past acquaintance. What you were is forever who you

are' (*MC*, p.368); or, towards the end of the novel, when he sums up his insight: 'Who what am I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to-me...' (*MC*, p.383).

Another difference in narrative procedure is the intricate relationship between historical events and personal experiences in the Sinai family which enables Rushdie to build up a myth of history which is as provocative as it is questionable. In *Clear Light of Day* there are parallels between the historical process and individual experiences, especially in the second part of the book where the times are marked by departure and death, not only in the Das family but also in the life of the Indian nation. The years 1947-48 with the partition of the subcontinent, the enforced exodus of millions from their homes, violence, death and, finally, Gandhi's assassination, are of profound meaning for the Das children, but still, it appears that history and individuals are linked by coincidence rather than by the same intrinsic logic we encounter in *Midnight's Children.*

Let us ask now how Saleem, Tara and Bim themselves, the main actors in these two novels, conceive of the past and thus, through their memories, reflect their authors' notions as to *how* to deal with history. Saleem, the chronicler of events, moves through time and space in order to grasp the totality of the Indian subcontinent. History to him is a closely knit, complex and intricately interrelated sequence of events not ruled, as it seems, by any logic exterior to it; rather, it creates its own logic. He returns again and again to a central passage of his story, i.e. Nehru's letter to his parents on the occasion of his birth on 15 August 1947, the day India became independent. '«We shall be watching over your life,»' it said, '«with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own»' (*MC*, p.122). This letter gives us the clue as to why it is that when Saleem retells the history of his family he, at the same time, writes the history of the subcontinent. His motivation — and that of Rushdie, we should add — appears moralistic in that it attempts to answer the question he asks the Midnight Children, all those born on the day of independence. This deals with 'the notions of purpose and meaning: «We must think,» I said, «what we are for»' (*MC*, p.228).

On the surface Saleem's hope to save memory from 'the corruption of the clocks' (*MC*, p.38) indicates a Western concept of history and reality which takes both for granted, for tangible truth. On the other hand Saleem's method of combining the individually subjective with the supraindividually objective, i.e. the family history with that of the subcontinent, is prompted by the disposition of the Indian mind to see correspondences in seemingly unrelated events:

> As a people we are obsessed with correspondences. Similarities between this and that, between apparently unconnected things make us clap our hands delightedly when we find them out. It is a sort of national longing for form — or perhaps simply an expression of our deep belief that forms lie hidden within reality; that meaning reveals itself only in flashes. Hence our vulnerability to omens. (*MC*, p.300)

Logically, then, to Saleem there is no fundamental doubt in the perhaps unreliable nature of his story. As he argues, the only reality for man is the one derived from his recollection, from his memory:

> 'I told you [Padma] the truth ... Memory's truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies, also; but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events; and no sane human being ever trusts someone else's version more than his own.' (*MC*, p.21)

Towards the end of his account Saleem reveals his ulterior motive, the reason why he wants to preserve the past, using the comparison of pickling fruit to preserve it:

> To pickle is to give immortality ... The art is to change the flavour in degree, but not in kind; and above all ... to give it shape and form — that is to say meaning.
>
> One day, perhaps, the world may taste the pickles of history ... I hope ... they possess the authentic taste of truth ... that they are, despite everything, acts of love. (*MC*, p.461)

Recapturing the past, then, is to be understood not only as man's attempt to give meaning to life, whatever the extent of his own imperfect vision, but, more importantly, as an act of love Bim and Tara conceive of the past as a period essentially lacking in positive meaning. However, sharing a number of memories makes them reflect and comment upon them: the rose-walk in the garden, Raja's illness, meeting the neighbours, playing by the river, Hyder Ali on his horse, Aunt Mira's arrival, and the fires burning on the horizon in that fateful summer of 1947. Seemingly disconnected events establish a logical sequence of their own and evoke strong emotional and psychological responses in both of them. This gives scope to the author to probe into her characters' interior landscapes which are embedded in the same historical background of the 1930s and the 1940s and which share the same very few exciting events in otherwise altogether quite unexciting lives.

They agreed, we said, never to return to the past, their childhood, '«all that dullness, boredom, waiting»' (*CLD*, p.4), where life seemed to have bypassed them. Still, there is Tara's need to return home at regular intervals in order, as she says, '«not to lose touch ... to find out and make

sure again»' (*CLD*, p.6). Bim, on the other hand, obviously had never seriously thought of leaving the house, that symbol of the past both try to feel indifferent to. Imperceptibly, however, the past creeps back into their thoughts and words; Tara and Bim realize how much they have been shaped by it — and to what an extent it has distorted their views of each other and of the family altogether. As Tara admits reflecting on her sister's mental make-up:

> She had always thought Bim so competent, so capable. Everyone had thought that ... But Bim seemed to stampede through the house like a dishevelled storm ... Tara saw how little she had really observed — either as a child or as a grown woman. She had seen Bim through the lenses of her own self, as she had wanted to see her. And now, when she tried to be objective ... she found she could not — her vision was strewn, obscured and screened by too much of the past. (*CLD*, p.148)

And the past had meant, over the years, to be excluded from Raja's and Bim's world of make-believe, to be dependent on Bim's exuberance, to feel terrified and looked down upon at school where Bim excelled, to be forced to take part in activities she abhorred and got sick over, to be despondent at the way the days never seemed to pass, the future never to begin. The past also meant feeling guilty for having left Bim behind to look after Baba, and for having run away from Bim once who had been attacked by a swarm of bees in an old tomb in the Lodi Gardens. Tara had escaped all these memories as soon as an opportunity offered itself: marriage and a life far away from home. Now she feels that her guilt has to be redeemed, that Bim has to forgive her so that she can live with the past. But, as she realizes, her sister has not only attached little attention to the incident in the Lodi Gardens but also says that Tara had done the right thing in going away. What else should she have done? Thus her sister, willingly or unwillingly, forces Tara to accept the past as it was, by looking straight at it, by living with it instead of being absolved from it.

Bim, too, reflecting on their childhood, gradually realizes how distorted her own vision of the past is. Her decision, years ago, not to leave the house but to look after Raja and Aunt Mira, thus, to become an independent woman and to earn her own living, had not really been founded on a realistic assessment of her own personality because she had always tried to behave the way others expected her to. She had known this instinctively for a long time, certainly since Dr Biswas, their young family doctor, had told her he understood why Bim chose to stay at home and look after Baba and Aunt Mira: they needed her support and it would be selfish to marry him. Yet ever since she had tried to suppress her memories of this incident because she had acted in a way she had not

really felt like. Now, under the pressure of Tara's reminiscences and guilt feelings, she is unable to hold out any longer herself: she abuses Baba, storms at him and sees in her mentally retarded brother the reason for all her failures. However, soon after her emotional outburst Bim is honest enough to admit that it is her distorted view of the past and of herself which made her attack innocent and helpless Baba who, in any case, had never even encroached on Bim's support and patience. She admits that '«I myself haven't been able to manage on my own»' (*CLD*, p.155).

For Tara and Bim, to turn to the past means to take courage and face the truth in order to live with it. If people succeed in doing so, they will realize that life means love, love for others, not self-love which needs the applause of others. As Bim sees it at the end:

> Although it was shadowy and dark, Bim could see as well as by the clear light of day that she felt only love and yearning for them all, and if there were hurts ... then it was only because her love was imperfect and did not encompass them thoroughly enough.... All these would have to be mended, these rents and tears, she would have to mend and make her net whole so that it would suffice her in her passage through the ocean. (*CLD*, p.165)

Let me now try to assess the artistic realization of the relationship between history and the individual by looking at the interaction and interdependence of character and event in both novels.

In Rushdie's book there is virtually no event which is not given an individual as well as an historical meaning. To cite only a few: Saleem's grandparents on their way from Kashmir to Agra stop over in Amritsar where Aziz experiences the Jallianwallah Bagh massacre in 1919. It is the day when he realizes how different his wife is from what he imagined her to be: orthodox, family-centred and strong-willed. Saleem's parents marry the day in 1945 when the first atom bomb ever is being exploded to destroy thousands and to usher in the nuclear age; they depart for Bombay on 4 June 1947, the day partition and the date of independence are announced by Nehru and Mountbatten; they acquire their own house on 15 August 1947, the day Saleem is born, from the Englishman Mr Methwold who claims that his ancestors were instrumental in establishing British rule in India; Saleem's grandfather returns to Kashmir on the same day in December 1963 when the prophet Mohammed's hair is stolen from the shrine in the Hazrat Bal mosque in Srinagar; on 23 September 1965 India's air force strafes Rawalpindi and Saleem's family is killed, his parents, his grandmother and an aunt; Shiva, the narrator's powerful adversary, moves in with Parvati-the-witch on the day in May 1974 when India explodes its first nuclear test bomb in Rajasthan and

enters the nuclear age; their son Adam is born on 25 June 1975, the day the Emergency is declared for the first time in the country. More examples could be cited to demonstrate Saleem's belief that

> I was linked to history both literally and metaphorically, both actively and passively, in what our ... scientists might term 'modes of connection composed of dualistically-combined configurations' of the two pairs of opposed adverbs given above. This is why hyphens are necessary: actively-literally, passively-metaphorically, actively-metaphorically and passively-literally, I was inextricably entwined in my world. (*MC*, p.238)

Since there can be no doubt about the close interconnection of character and event the question arises what pattern of history emerges. What is Saleem's and his family's fate, and does the first truly mirror that of the subcontinent?

The story proper begins when Saleem becomes aware of his gift to read the minds of other people and of the existence of the Midnight Children who are also uncommonly gifted. Three of them prove to be outstanding: Shiva, born like Saleem 'on the stroke of midnight' had been 'given the gifts of war'; Saleem, 'the greatest talent of all', had been endowed with 'the ability to look into the hearts and minds of men' (*MC*, p.200). Having been expelled from a children's gang he decides to set up his own, 'a gang which was spread over the length and breadth of the country, and whose headquarters were behind my eyebrows', called 'Midnight Children's Conference, my very own M.C.C.' (*MC*, p.207). And then there is Parvati-the-witch, the most powerful of the female Midnight's Children and only next to Saleem and Shiva because she was 'born a mere seven seconds after midnight on August 15th, [and] had been given the powers of the adept, the illuminatus, the genuine gifts of conjuration and sorcery...' (*MC*, p.200).

These three children are closely linked to each other. Saleem's power to communicate with all the Midnight Children is being used with the intention to turn his mind 'into a kind of forum in which they could talk to one another through me' (*MC*, p.227). Only Shiva can close 'off from me any part of his thoughts he chose to keep to himself' (*MC*, p.226). Against his objection but with Parvati's assistance Saleem becomes their leader, their chief who soon proceeds to find out from the children about 'the notions which plagued me all this time, the notions of purpose, and meaning. «We must think,» I said, «what we are for»' (*MC*, p.228). After all there must have been an agency which endowed all of them with supernatural, or rather, superhuman gifts. Saleem's unspoken assumption of the existence of an historical 'first cause' is soon questioned

because many different, often mutually exclusive answers are being offered to his query: collectivism and individualism, filial duty and infant revolution, or science and religion. Full of premonition he concludes that 'not a single one of us suggested that the purpose of Midnight's Children might be annihilation; that we would have no meaning until we were destroyed' (*MC*, p.229).

Worse is to follow: the children symbolizing India's potentiality to build her future for each of its citizens, to build '«the noble mansion of free India, where all her children may dwell»', as Nehru had declared once (*MC*, p.118), do not only differ ideologically, but strife, envy, selfishness, narrow-mindedness, regionalism and communalism gradually lead to the 'disintegration of the Midnight Children's Conference — which finally fell apart on the day the Chinese armies came down over the Himalayas to humiliate the Indian fauj' (*MC*, p.254), that is, in 1962. Besides, and perhaps more importantly, there is Shiva, Saleem's adversary, who had scoffed at the idea of the M.C.C., '«that club-shub stuff ... for you rich boys»' (*MC*, p.228). Intimately linked to Saleem — both children were exchanged soon after their birth without the knowledge of their parents so that Shiva is actually the son of Amina and Ahmed Sinai while Saleem's parents are Vanita, a poor musician's wife, and Methwold, former English landlord and owner of the Sinai house in Bombay — Shiva is condemned to a life of poverty and crime; he rejects Saleem's search for the purpose and meaning of their lives because poverty leaves no room for idealistic philosophizing: '«Rich kid,» Shiva yelled, «you don't know one damned thing! What *purpose*,man! What thing in the whole sister-sleeping world got *reason*, yara? Where's the reason in starving, man?»' (*MC*, p.220). And after the disintegration of the Midnight Children's Conference Shiva presses home his point that

> 'there is no third principle; there is only money-and-poverty, and have-and-lack ... there is only me-against-the-world ... and the world is no place for dreamers ... look at Birla and Tata, and all the powerful: they make things. For things, the country is run. Not for people.' (*MC*, p.255)

Saleem, unable to retort to Shiva's cynical analysis of the world, takes refuge in the idea that 'if there is a third principle, its name is childhood. But it dies; or rather, it is murdered' (*MC*, p.256). This is little consolation for never finding an answer to his search for meaning.

Perceived not so much as realistic human beings but, rather, as metaphorical and symbolical representatives Saleem and Shiva embody the principles of preservation and destruction, of idealism and materialism,

of good and evil, of selfless search and selfish 'struggle of oneself-against-the-crowd' (*MC*, p.282). The historical process is based on the dualism of opposing forces with the principle of Shiva, destruction, increasingly determining present and future. Accordingly, Shiva's rise in the nation to become 'India's most decorated war hero' (*MC*, p.407) after the two wars against Pakistan in 1965 and 1971 is juxtaposed with Saleem's decline. Not only does the latter lose his control over the Midnight Children (who had lost faith in him after India's defeat by the Chinese and had fled from him) but his family is also destroyed and his sister disappears. Saleem, degraded to sniffing out the Indian enemy — a faculty which had replaced his telepathic powers — succeeds in surviving the war in Bangla Desh and, with the support of Parvati-the-witch, returns to Delhi where he lives among magicians and conjurers in a slum. After a short while he is again forced to leave, is arrested and questioned about the Midnight Children whom he betrays to the new political power, the widow and her son. His own downfall and that of the children is brought about in Benares, symbolically one of the most holy places of Shiva worship in India, where all of them are castrated and thus, ironically, freed from their linkage with the country's history. Saleem and all the others end as 'broken promises, made to be broken' (*MC*, p.440). Regretting that he had ever thought and dreamt of a purpose in life he comes to the conclusion 'that privacy, the small individual lives of men, are preferable to all his inflated macrocosmic activities' (*MC*, p.435).

In the light of Saleem's downfall and withdrawal into his private shell and Shiva's rise — who, incidentally, creates a new race of children, bastards and products of his illegitimate and clandestine relations with numerous 'society ladies' — the question arises as to what extent Rushdie's-Saleem's story expresses a pessimistic view of history in that man is unable to stem the process of decay and destruction which, in turn, reveals that history by its own intrinsic logic moves towards its own annihilation. For Saleem himself there is no question: 'I will soon be thirty-one years old. Perhaps. If my crumbling, over-used body permits. But I have no hope of saving my life...' (*MC*, p.9). But then, introducing his long story on such a resigned note he implicitly questions his statement by underlining his view that there is, after all, some meaning, and this lies in employing one's recollection in order to give history immortality. This suggests that man's purpose in life as well as in history is to preserve it, hand its 'meaning' down to others for them to listen to and, perhaps, to learn from. Saleem, so it appears, has learnt his moral lesson. Yet underneath we detect another more embracing dimension to Saleem's account, a philosophical quest. Rushdie, apart from telling a

moral story, is basically concerned with the crucial question of Indian philosophy and the Indian mind, i.e., the perception of reality and illusion as a precondition of man's liberation, *moksha.* A look at a few explications given by Saleem as well as at some symbols in the story will verify our assumption.

We have already referred to memory's truth, to memory '[which] creates its own reality' (*MC*, p.211), an assertion that reality can be defined only as a subjective entity; it cannot claim to be truth as such. Even more so, our perception of what we call reality, the working of our senses which provide the data for our recollection, our memory, is restricted by its very nature. Saleem illustrates this in differing ways, e.g.

> Reality is a question of perspective, the further you get from the past, the more concrete and plausible it seems — but as you approach the present, it inevitably seems more and more incredible. Suppose yourself in a large cinema, sitting at first in the back row, and gradually moving up, row by row, until your nose is almost pressed against the screen. Gradually the stars' faces dissolve into dancing grain; tiny details assume grotesque proportions; the illusion dissolves — or rather, it becomes clear that the illusion itself *is* reality... (*MC*, pp.165-66)

Related to this statement is Saleem's reflection on the concept of history as perceived in Hindu cosmology. 'History,' he says, 'in my version [entering] a new phase on August 15th, 1947' (*MC*, p.194), is inextricably bound to the age of Darkness, Kali-Yuga, and thus is, by cosmological law, a period of decay resulting in the perversion of all values and virtues. The moral issue turns into a philosophical one because in the face of Hindu cosmology a few years in the history of man or a nation are but the most fleeting and meaningless fractions of moments in Brahma's life: Kali-Yuga comprising 432,000 years is only a tenth of the Maha-Yuga cycle which in turn is the one thousandth part of 'just one Day of Brahma' (*MC*, p.194), whose life spans a hundred years. Reality is, indeed, illusion within the context of Brahma's life irrespective of whether we take Hindu cosmology literally in a religious-philosophical sense or understand it as a myth created to grasp the relationship between reality and illusion. Saleem's despondency with his times is, perhaps, to be understood as expressing his resigned insight into man's non-knowledge, *avidya*, his failure to ever grasp the meaning of history the way historians and historiographers trust their ability to acquire it. Does not Rushdie's absurd story linking, even fusing the history of a nation with that of a family chosen at random expose, in its absurdity, the extent of the historian's and historiographer's hubris to *explain to us* what *really* happened in the past?

Next to reflection, episodes in the story illustrate the same predicament. Saleem cuts out newspaper items, for instance, words, syllables and letters, to piece them together to form a message to Commander Sabarmati that his wife betrays him (*MC*, pp.259-60). Seemingly important political newspaper items are cut up at random to constitute a new message on reality when rearranged in a new way. Saleem's act reveals the absurdity of the historian's claim to render history objectively; rather, history can be bent to serve subjective and individual purposes.

Finally, Rushdie-Saleem employ symbols which at times grow into myths as in the case of the perforated bedsheet kept as a family treasure like a few other items, e.g. the silver spittoon, the green metal box, or Saleem's umbilical cord. Initially the bedsheet with a hole at its centre served as a screen to hide a woman's body from the prying eyes of a male doctor permitting him only to inspect that part of the body which required treatment. Aziz, the young doctor, is often called to treat Naseem, a landowner's daughter, who is obviously a hypochondriac. He becomes haunted by the 'phantasm of a partitioned woman' (*MC*, p.25) whom he glues together in his imagination. Finally he falls in love with his image of Naseem 'because through [the perforated sheet] he had seen the things which had filled up the hole inside himself' (*MC*, p.27). After their marriage is agreed upon and Aziz comes to know his wife in her 'unpartitioned' nature he realizes how little reality tallies with his imagination. Through the symbol of the perforated sheet we are again made aware of man's imperfect perceptive and — in the case of Aziz — also his imperfect mental powers.

With the passage of time the sheet becomes moth-eaten. Aziz discovers on 14 August 1947 'that the hole had grown, that there were other, smaller holes in the surrounding fabric' (*MC*, p.111). They permit us, in the sense of the symbol's meaning, to recognize more of reality (illusion) by curtailing man's imaginative powers, by making them more and more superfluous — in much the same way as when we retreat from the screen in the cinema. The passage of thirty-two years, from 1915 to 1947, has taught Aziz much about the woman behind the sheet whom he had once fallen in love with.

A final reference to this symbol corroborates our analysis of its meaning. Saleem's family and along with it the past and its history are destroyed in the India-Pakistan war of 1965. They have ceased to exist as tangible objects and will survive only in Saleem's memory: 'Sheets of flame rose from a Rawalpindi bungalow, perforated sheets at whose centre hung a mysterious dark hole ... and one by one the war eliminated my drained, hopeless family from the earth' (*MC*, p.342).

Compared with this novel, *Clear Light of Day* appears to be not only much less ambitious in its philosophical scope but also more traditional in its narrative technique. Anita Desai, in the main, employs traditional narrative modes such as flashback, perspectivism, stream-of-consciousness, point of view and, related to this, associative thought processes that centre around a limited number of memories which are gradually transformed into meaningful symbols. The first and the last chapter deal with the present, and the narrator switches his focus repeatedly from one sister to the other. Both are given equal room for reminiscence, for expressing their thoughts and exchanging their views. Very often, especially in the first chapter, visual impressions form the starting point of reminiscences: the rose walk in the garden, the veranda of the house, or one of its rooms, the pond at the back of the garden where the cow had drowned, the road to the river Jumna where the children used to play and see their neighbour on his horse, the path across to the Misras, their other neighbours. Again and again visual impressions associate events, incidents, experiences related to tangible reality. Since Bim and Tara are hardly shown outside their house, their garden or their immediate surroundings, the past remembered appears simple and transparent. Bim, accordingly, sums up her concept of life at the end of the first chapter, the first day after Tara's arrival:

> 'Isn't it strange how life won't flow, like a river, but moves in jumps, as if it were held back by locks that are opened now and then to let it jump forward in a kind of flood? There are these long still stretches — nothing happens — ... and then suddenly there is a crash — mighty deeds take place ... That summer was certainly one of them — the summer of '47.' (*CLD*, p.43)

Bim's words serve the narrator as a cue to probe into their truth by turning back to 1947 and 1948, those eventful years in India's and the Das family's history, as we have said already. The flashback offers the opportunity to modify the narrator's point of view by alternately relating his story to one or the other of the Das children as well as to Aunt Mira. Tara's and Bim's notions of the past and each other are thus being scrutinized, verified, modified or proved wrong or distorted. Characters appear more complex and gain greater depth, especially Aunt Mira whom the children had always referred to as 'the tree that grew in the centre of their lives' (*CLD*, p.110). Paradoxically we see her now in all her frailty, her mental insecurity and physical weakness. We are made aware of the total extent of her dependence on others as a widow to which she had been condemned according to Hindu custom after the early death of her husband when she herself was only twelve years old. The

horrors of Aunt Mira's childhood, adolescence and mature life are juxtaposed with Tara's and Bim's — partly imagined — abhorrence of their own childhood experiences, thus putting their feelings and their psychological reactions into perspective since their own childhood had never really impinged on their freedom or their mental and psychological stability to the extent it had affected Aunt Mira's psyche, which finally succumbs to the strains experienced in the past and breaks.

A further flashback, presumably to the late 1930s, in the following chapter of the novel extends our understanding of the Das family even further because it deals with childhood proper when man's personality is being formed. The events narrated here make us understand why Raja, Tara and Bim reacted towards their family life in 1947/1948 the way the preceding chapter had told us, i.e., Raja leaving his home to join the Hyder Ali family in Hyderabad, Tara marrying a young diplomat and Bim rejecting the advances of Dr Biswas and his mother to marry him. To Raja, romantic and poet, departing had meant the realization of his childhood dreams 'of coming alive to ideas, to images picked up in the books he read' (*CLD*, p.120). To Tara, the over-sensitive and lonely child, breaking away from her home had meant escaping from a world where she had experienced again and again 'the spider fear that lurked at the centre of the web-world' (*CLD*, p.135). Finally, to Bim, her decision to stay on had been caused by Dr Biswas's words that she, Bim, obviously wanted to dedicate her life to her aunt and her brother (*CLD*, p.97). All of them, as we learn now, acted out of mistaken or misconceived notions of themselves: Raja did not lose his dependence on Hyder Ali and his family, nor Tara her anxieties and fears, nor Bim her lack of organising life for others. Thus, by directing her explorative beam of light deeper and deeper into their lives, the past of her adult characters, Desai reveals more and more of their true selves to us and to them. Tara and Bim eventually realize who they really are so that they can live on more truthfully to themselves and each other. Bim becomes reconciled to her life in the house which initially only *appeared* to satisfy her expectations from life; Tara accepts living with her past failings, as we have seen, without blaming others or seeking their forgiveness. The past, re-experienced in its fullness, needs no further explanation: 'Everything had been said at last, cleared out of the way finally. There was nothing left in the way of a barrier or a shadow, only the clear light pouring down from the sun' (*CLD*, p.177).

Comparing the approach of the two writers to what is essentially the same question, i.e., man's quest for meaning, we can draw the conclusion that while Rushdie/Saleem come to understand the individual by

grasping the 'meaning' or meaninglessness of history, Tara and Bim discover it by rediscovering their own and true selves. What both writers suggest and where they agree philosophically is the necessity of an awareness that the power of love does not only help in finding the answer to one's quest — different though an answer may be — but that love and acts of love are the means available to man to prevent his destruction and, along with that, the destruction of history. Paradoxically, Salman Rushdie, having lived for a long time outside India, appears to be closer to it than Anita Desai, to whom India is her home. Rushdie, rendering the action of his novel through the narrator's discourse and comments, through structuring motives, images and symbols, shows how close he is to the Indian philosophical tradition: by fusing moral and philosophical issues as well as different modes of perception of the world, by rejecting the belief in man's ability to write and think objectively about history, he demonstrates that reality can only be grasped through myth — or literature. Anita Desai, on the other hand, is much closer to Western philosophical and humanistic concerns; her concept of reality is that of a tangible though, perhaps, distorted entity. It is one which it is man's and woman's task to find for himself or herself.

NOTES

1. Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (London: Pan Books, 1982), p.38. All further references (*MC*) are to this edition and are included in the text.
2. Anita Desai, *Clear Light of Day* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1980), p.43. All further references (*CLD*) are to this edition and are included in the text.