



Blue Ava Ford Publications

International Journal of Trends in English Language and Literature (IJTELL)

An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal; ISSN:2582-8487

Impact Factor: 8.02 (SJIF); www.ijtell.com Volume-7, Issue-1; Jan-Mar(2026)

Memory, Care, and Feminist Ethics: Reclaiming Women's Emotional Labour in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*

Dr. Devashish Kumar

Department of English, PhD from Malwanchal University, Indore, Madhya Pradesh, India

<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-0124-3243>

Article Received: 03/01/2026

Article Accepted: 30/01/2026

Published Online: 01/02/2026

DOI:10.53413/IJTELL.2025.71033

Abstract

In *Clear Light of Day*, a seminal feminist reflection on memory, care, and resilience in post-Partition India, Anita Desai offers a profoundly political exploration that moves away from a discourse anchored in overt violence or nationalist spectacle. Instead, the novel locates trauma within the domestic sphere and feminine experience, where emotional labour emerges as an unselfconscious site of feminist resistance. By critically examining Bim's sustained, moment-by-moment practices of care for her family—practices that refuse abandonment even at great personal cost—this paper explores how feminist agency in *Clear Light of Day* becomes possible through endurance rather than escape. Drawing on feminist ethics of care, feminist historiography, and narrative ethics, the paper argues that Desai reconfigures Indian feminist literary discourse by redefining resistance as an “ethics of persistence and memory.”

Keywords: Feminist ethics, Partition, emotional labour, Anita Desai, Indian women's writing.

1. Introduction

Indian nationalist historiography has often represented the Partition as a spectacular rupture marked by violence, displacement, and political transformation. Literary representations of Partition have similarly focused on trauma in its most visible manifestations—riots, migration, and collective suffering. Feminist scholarship, however, has increasingly challenged this historiographical emphasis by foregrounding women's experiences as articulated through quieter, everyday registers of life. It is within this alternative feminist archive that Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* must be situated.

While conventional Partition narratives foreground political turmoil, *Clear Light of Day* inscribes history within the intimate space of the family. Set in Old Delhi and spanning



International Journal of Trends in English Language and Literature (IJTELL)

An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal; ISSN:2582-8487

Impact Factor: 8.02 (SJIF); www.ijtell.com Volume-7, Issue-1; Jan-Mar(2026)

several decades, the novel chronicles “the lives of the Das children—Bim, Tara, Raja, and Baba—with a changing nation slowly evolving in the background.” The political events of Independence and Partition remain largely peripheral, yet their psychological residues profoundly shape interpersonal relationships within the novel. Desai’s feminist intervention lies precisely in this shift—from public history to private memory.

This paper argues that *Clear Light of Day* constructs a feminist discourse rooted in memory, care, and ethical responsibility. By centering Bim’s sustained emotional labour and her refusal to abandon familial responsibility despite betrayal and neglect, Desai challenges dominant feminist narratives that equate agency with escape or rupture. Instead, the novel reimagines resistance as endurance and remembrance, reclaiming women’s caregiving labour as an ethical and political practice rather than a naturalised obligation.

2. Review of Literature

Critical responses to *Clear Light of Day* have largely focused on its lyrical prose and psychological depth. The novel has been praised for its nuanced exploration of time, memory, and sibling relationships and is frequently positioned within the canon of Partition literature, particularly because of its deliberate avoidance of explicit representations of violence.

Bim has been read as an unconventional feminist heroine, noted for her rejection of marriage and assertion of independence through intellectual labour and teaching. While some feminist critics celebrate her as a figure of strength and autonomy, others interpret her anger and bitterness as limitations. Tara, by contrast, is often viewed as emblematic of conventional femininity and escape through marriage and migration.

However, much feminist scholarship has historically privileged autonomy and mobility over care, often positioning caregiving as subordinate to feminist freedom. Emotional labour and care work remain under-theorised within feminist criticism, particularly in the context of Partition narratives, where women’s caregiving roles are treated as peripheral rather than structurally central.

This study intervenes in that gap by foregrounding feminist ethics of care and feminist historiography. It interprets *Clear Light of Day* as a feminist rewriting of Partition in which resilience and ethical endurance, rather than violence or rupture, constitute the novel’s central mode of resistance.

3. Theoretical Framework

This paper primarily draws upon feminist ethics of care, which critiques masculinist ethical models rooted in autonomy, separation, and individual achievement. Feminist ethicists such as Carol Gilligan argue that caregiving, emotional responsibility, and relational ethics



should be recognised as moral practices rather than naturalised feminine traits. This framework is particularly relevant to *Clear Light of Day*, where women's caregiving sustains familial continuity amidst historical disruption.

The analysis also engages with feminist historiography, which challenges the exclusion of women's experiences from dominant historical narratives. By privileging memory, emotion, and the private sphere, feminist historiography contests the public-private divide that marginalises women's histories.

Finally, the paper draws on narrative ethics to examine how Desai structures moral insight through memory and persistence rather than resolution. The novel foregrounds ethical continuity over closure, presenting remembrance itself as a moral act.

Together, these theoretical frameworks enable a reading of *Clear Light of Day* that situates feminist agency within care, memory, and ethical endurance.

4. Partition as Emotional Residue

In *Clear Light of Day*, Partition functions not as a singular historical event but as an emotional residue permeating everyday family life. Political violence and mass migration remain largely offstage, yet their psychological aftermath—loss, resentment, and estrangement—shapes the relationships among the Das siblings. Raja's departure to Hyderabad after Partition symbolically mirrors the fragmentation of the nation itself.

Desai's refusal to dramatise violence constitutes a feminist narrative strategy. The novel shifts focus from spectacular acts of violence to the quieter, prolonged suffering endured within domestic spaces. Partition is experienced through abandonment, silence, and emotional dislocation rather than riots or bloodshed, thereby challenging masculinist historiographies that valorise rupture.

Women, particularly Bim, bear the burden of this emotional aftermath. While men relocate geographically and ideologically, women remain anchored to domestic spaces that preserve the residues of historical trauma.

5. Bim and the Ethics of Care

Bim emerges as the ethical centre of the novel. Unmarried and economically independent, she assumes responsibility for managing the household and caring for Baba, her developmentally challenged brother. Unlike feminist narratives that equate liberation with escape from domestic roles, *Clear Light of Day* acknowledges care as both necessary and ethically significant.

Desai does not idealise caregiving; it is portrayed as exhausting, resentment-filled, and emotionally demanding. Yet its moral value is insistently affirmed. Bim's refusal to abandon Baba stands in stark contrast to Raja's departure and Tara's withdrawal through



Blue Ava Ford Publications
**International Journal of Trends in English Language and
Literature (IJTELL)**

An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal; ISSN:2582-8487
Impact Factor: 8.02 (SJIF); www.ijtell.com Volume-7, Issue-1; Jan-Mar(2026)

marriage. Care thus becomes a feminist practice of resistance against erasure rather than a marker of submission.

By foregrounding Bim's endurance, Desai challenges feminist discourses that equate freedom with detachment, suggesting instead that responsibility itself may constitute a resilient form of resistance within a fractured social world.

6. Silence, Anger, and Feminist Memory

Silence in *Clear Light of Day* is inseparable from memory. Bim's long-sustained anger towards Raja reflects unresolved emotional histories that parallel unresolved national trauma. Silence here does not signify passivity; rather, it functions as a repository of memory. Desai presents memory as nonlinear and ethically demanding. Bim's gradual movement toward forgiveness is not a redemptive resolution but an act of ethical witnessing. Remembering itself becomes a form of resistance against historical forgetting.

Women's memories, often dismissed as emotional excess, are reconstructed as ethical archives. Through Bim, Desai asserts that personal memory is inseparable from historical consciousness.

7. Gender, Family, and Unequal Burdens

The novel exposes the unequal distribution of emotional labour within the family. Raja's ambitions are encouraged, Tara is sheltered through marriage, and Bim absorbs responsibility. This division reflects gendered norms that naturalise women's caregiving roles.

Desai critiques this system without vilifying individual male characters. Raja's abandonment is framed not as cruelty but as entitlement, revealing patriarchy as systemic rather than personal. Feminist resistance in the novel emerges not through accusation but through ethical persistence.

Bim's eventual recognition of her own strength lies in redefining care as a conscious choice rather than an imposed obligation.

8. Feminist Agency Without Escape

Clear Light of Day functions as a resistance narrative precisely because it rejects the trope of escape. It is not a story of departure or transcendence but one of persistence. The novel repeatedly emphasises refusal—refusal to forget, to abandon, and to disengage.

This aligns with a feminist realist mode in which subversion operates through continuity rather than rupture. Desai resists neoliberal feminist narratives that equate empowerment with mobility and success, asserting instead the legitimacy of endurance as a feminist act in contexts of historical fracture.



9. Rewriting Partition Through Women's Lives

By foregrounding women's emotional labour, *Clear Light of Day* offers a feminist reinterpretation of Partition. The novel suggests that national trauma cannot be fully understood outside the domestic sphere.

Desai positions women not as passive victims but as moral witnesses whose labour sustains continuity amid fragmentation. This feminist historiography expands the scope of Partition literature to include care, memory, and ethical resilience.

10. Conclusion

This study argues that *Clear Light of Day* generates a feminist discourse grounded in memory, care, and ethical endurance. Through Bim's sustained emotional labour, the novel reclaims caregiving as a site of feminist resistance rather than erasure. By situating Partition within the household rather than the public sphere, Desai subverts masculinist historiographies of national trauma.

The novel's refusal of closure or escape articulates a feminist realism in which endurance itself becomes agency. Ultimately, *Clear Light of Day* extends the boundaries of Indian feminist literary discourse by reconceptualising resistance not as triumph or interruption but as ethical persistence in the face of historical and familial disjunction.

References

- Desai, A. (1980). *Clear Light of Day*. Penguin.
- Ahmed, S. (2017). *Living a Feminist Life*. Duke University Press.
- Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a Different Voice*. Harvard University Press.
- Mohanty, C. T. (2003). *Feminism Without Borders*. Duke University Press.
- Nussbaum, M. (2001). *Upheavals of Thought*. Cambridge University Press.
- Tharu, S., & Lalita, K. (1991). *Women Writing in India*. Oxford University Press.
- Yuval-Davis, N. (1997). *Gender and Nation*. Sage.