

Love, Rivalry, and Betrayal: Sibling Dynamics in Anita Desai's *Voices in the City* and *Clear Light of Day*

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Cite this paper as: Dr. Deepti Jain Thakre, (2025) Love, Rivalry, and Betrayal: Sibling Dynamics in Anita Desai's *Voices in the City* and *Clear Light of Day*. *Journal of Neonatal Surgery*, 14 (30s), 603-605.

ABSTRACT

This study explores Anita Desai's nuanced portrayal of sibling relationships in two of her novel, *Voices in the City* and *Clear Light of Day*. It argues that Desai provides a rare and authentic representation of sibling dynamics, focusing on the complex interplay of love, jealousy, rivalry, and care between brothers and sisters.

In *Voices in the City*, the relationship between Nirode and his younger brother Arun is marked by envy and a sense of competition. Despite conflicts, there is also deep care between siblings. Nirode and Monisha, for example, share a bond of concern, with Nirode providing Monisha with advice and comfort, even as their lives take different paths. Monisha sacrifices her marriage and personal happiness to care for Nirode. Similarly, Nirode, after Monisha's death, attempts to support Amla, showing a shift in his understanding of family responsibility. Amla, often feeling isolated from her siblings, comes to understand Monisha's tragic fate and the lessons it imparts about reaching out to others.

In *Clear Light of Day*, the relationship between Bim and Raja is central. Bim, who has always relied on Raja, is hurt when he abandons her to pursue his own life in Hyderabad, leaving her to care for their ailing brother, Baba. This abandonment fosters deep resentment in Bim, who feels betrayed by Raja's selfishness. Her relationship with Tara, her other sister, is similarly strained, as it lacks the warmth and closeness she shared with Raja. Ultimately, Bim's emotional journey leads to reconciliation. Despite her anger, she forgives her siblings, especially Raja, after years of estrangement. The novel ends on a note of familial healing, as Bim takes the first step toward mending broken relationships, symbolizing the importance of love and forgiveness in sibling dynamics.

Desai's novels illustrate that sibling relationships are complex and multifaceted, encompassing a range of emotions from love and care to rivalry and resentment. Through the characters' struggles and eventual reconciliations, Desai emphasizes that no relationship—whether between spouses, parents and children, or siblings—is more important than another.

Keywords: Siblings, Relationship, Estrangement, abandonment, Resentment, Forgiveness.

1. INTRODUCTION

In literature, the relationships between husband and wife or between parent and child are often given greater focus. Scholars also tend to explore these dynamics more extensively due to their complexity and significance. However, Anita Desai stands out as one of the few authors who not only delves deeply into the relationships between spouses and parents and their children but also gives equal attention to the nuanced, intricate bonds among siblings. The portrayal of sibling relationships in her novels is rare for its authenticity and depth. In Desai's work, these bonds are layered with love, but often tinged with envy, rivalry, jealousy, and differences of opinion. The sibling relationship, as depicted in *Voices in the City* and *Clear Light of Day*, reflects these complexities in a way that resonates with real-life experiences.

In *Voices in the City*, Desai paints a poignant picture of sibling relationships, fraught with emotional turbulence and unspoken tensions. The novel follows four siblings—Nirode, Arun, Monisha, and Amla—each of whom experiences the ties of love and resentment in different ways. At the outset, Nirode's envy of his younger brother Arun is evident. He resents Arun's success in his studies and his ability to escape India for a life abroad—an opportunity Nirode himself regrets not pursuing. This envy, however, is intertwined with sadness, as Nirode reflects on the possibility that he may never see Arun again:

Nirode felt his brother's arm and shoulder still, their solidity beneath the light material of his clothing. He did not believe he would ever feel them again... Thinking how he envied Arun, how his envy was corroded with hate and how, yet, he loved him—but above all, envied—oh, envied him for being in the train, speeding out of this dark. (VC, 6-7)

This ambivalence—love and hatred intertwined—defines Nirode's relationship with Arun. His connection with Monisha, on the other hand, is marked by care and concern. When Monisha meets Nirode for the first time after she is married to Jiban,

she tries to search Nirode whom she knew before the marriage with “white muslin” but now what she sees is “small, shrunken.... Transparent, fragile, something so bare and irreducible” (VC, 110). She is concerned about him and in his eyes she sees, “the old sympathy, and a curiosity that alarms me for it seems to sense in my condition something that he understands instinctively and profoundly,” (VC, 111) Despite their differences, both Nirode and Monisha share a deep, unspoken understanding of each other, one that even surpasses the understanding between husband and wife in Desai’s novels. They are united in their love for Kafka, their shared loneliness, and their mutual acknowledgment of their respective failings.

When Nirode is hospitalized, Monisha takes on the role of caregiver with maternal devotion. She goes so far as to settle his bills, even at the cost of jeopardizing her own marriage. Nirode, sensing her unhappiness, urges her to leave her husband and her in-laws, but she cannot bring herself to do so. Eventually, Monisha’s life ends tragically, but not without leaving a lasting impact on her siblings. Her death serves as a catalyst for Nirode and Amla, teaching them lessons they had been unable to learn while she was alive.

Amla, the youngest sibling, often feels alienated from the deep bond between Monisha and Nirode. Yet, even she acknowledges the destructive forces that run through their family about which Jit remarks:

I don’t understand it, this terrible destructiveness in all of you. You seem to worship it, shelter it inside yourself as though it were essential in you. Nothing will persuade you to forgo it not you, not your brother [Nirode], nor that strange sister [Monisha] of yours.... You destroy you destroy yourselves, and you destroy that part of others that gets so fatally involved in you. There is this this dreadful attractiveness in your dark ways of thinking and feeling through life towards death. (VC, 175)

Amla concurs with Jit’s view but she feels that none of them can change since it’s their basic nature. When Amla meets Monisha she too is worried about her. She senses that something is wrong with Monisha, she also realizes that Jiban could never prove to be a good husband for Monisha as they both had nothing in common, but Amla too is unable to find out any solution until it’s too late. Although Monisha is disturb and upset she never tells a thing to her sister too. (Actually, she is never given a chance to spend any time alone with any of her siblings) But that does not prevent Monisha from playing the role of an elder sister, as the piece of advice which she received from Nirode, which she could never follow, she passes it on to Amla, so that she leads a happy life. She exclaims, “Amla, always go in the opposite direction!” (VC, 160) Although Amla does not understand the meaning of Monisha’s words immediately, by the end of the novel we get the feeling that Amla could survive because she understands what Monisha meant, though only after Monisha’s death. Monisha’s death actually paves way for both Nirode and Amla, teaching them the lesson of their life. As if to repay her debts Nirode who had been a meek observer throughout, suddenly comes to action and decides not to leave Monisha’s dead body with her in laws. This reflects his awareness that Monisha committed this gruesome act to escape from them. As long as Monisha was alive, Nirode could do nothing, but he is ready for any consequence to prove his love, his affection for the departed soul.

If Nirode could do something for Monisha only after her death, he tries to do things for Amla immediately when he feels that Amla needs his help. Amla initially arrives in Calcutta filled with energy and aspirations to succeed in the advertising world, but soon becomes disillusioned by the city’s ugliness and her own sense of isolation. She experiences a deep sense of melancholy and disconnection, leading Nirode, to introduce her to an artist named Dharma.

Dharma, like Nirode, has retreated from life and for years has focused solely on painting insects and plants, avoiding human figures. However, he expresses a desire to paint Amla’s portrait, sparking a new connection between them. Through their interactions, Amla begins to experience love for the first time, feeling a deep emotional bond with Dharma, whom she believes understands her better than anyone else. But her idealized view of Dharma shatters when she learns that he is a selfish, estranged man who has disowned his daughter and is indifferent to his wife’s silent suffering. Amla becomes disillusioned and again seeks escape.

Nirode introduces Amla to Bose, a writer of children’s books with a childlike innocence, offering her a fresh source of support. Monisha’s suicide serves as a harsh reminder of the dangers of emotional isolation, and it motivates Amla to avoid a similar fate by choosing a safer, more controlled path in life—focusing on her art and maintaining relationships with trustworthy, uncomplicated individuals like Bose. Ultimately, Amla learns the importance of reaching out to others and acknowledges the painful reality that, while love and connection are vital, they can also lead to profound vulnerability.

In Anita Desai’s *Clear Light of Day*, the author once again presents a deeply realistic portrayal of sibling relationships. Set in the post-colonial India, the narrative alternates between the past and present, exploring the history of the Das family and the impact of Partition. The main siblings in this novel—Bim, Raja, Tara, and Baba—navigate a complex web of emotional ties, marked by love, tensions of memory, loss, disappointment, and personal growth. Among them, the relationship between Bim and Raja is particularly special, though it undergoes a significant transformation.

Bim and Raja’s bond is close and nurturing, especially after their parents’ death, when Raja abandons Bim, leaving her with the responsibility of caring for their home and family. This abandonment hurts Bim deeply. She had always viewed Raja as her ally and had believed that he would stay with her forever. However, Raja leaves for Hyderabad to join the Hyder Ali

family, marrying their daughter, Benazir. His decision to prioritize his own future over his sister's needs is an act of selfishness that causes Bim immense pain.

While their parents were preoccupied with each other, Bim and Raja grew very close. They shared an intellectual connection, both enjoying literature, albeit with different tastes. Bim gravitated toward novels like *Gone with the Wind* and *Gibbon's Decline and Fall*, while Raja preferred adventure stories such as *Robin Hood* and *Beau Geste*. These differing preferences in reading occasionally caused tension between them, but the bond they shared was strong enough to transcend these differences. The following passage illustrates their enduring affection:

Yet when they came together it was with a pure and elemental joy that shot up and stood straight and bright above the surrounding dreariness. There were still those shining summer evenings on the banks of the Jamuna when they went together, Bim and Raja, barefoot over the sand to wade across the river, at that time of the year no more than a sluggish trickle... (CLD, 121).

As they grew older, Raja wrote poetry, and Bim admired him deeply, seeing him as a great poet and a heroic figure. She took on the role of his caretaker during his illnesses, nurturing him with the hope that he would one day step into their father's shoes. The close connection between Bim and Raja, however, meant that Tara often felt left out. Bim, a high-achieving student and head-girl of the school, found Tara's sluggishness irritating. She felt Tara was of little use, except when Raja became interested in more "manly" activities, like cycling or going to the movies. Bim's treatment of Tara could even be cruel at times. One painful incident that Tara never forgot occurred when Bim cut her hair, promising her curls but failing to deliver on the promise. Tara cried, but Bim showed no remorse, instead reprimanding her for having "wanted curls" in the first place and callously sending her to Aunt Mira for comfort saying:

You wanted curls, now you've got curls. You said I could cut your hair and I did. How was I to know you didn't mean it? (CLD, 119)

Despite the lack of warmth in their relationship, Bim eventually took it upon herself to marry Tara off to Bakul, without considering her own future. When Aunt Mira became ill and passed away, Bim silently assumed the responsibility of caring for Baba, their mentally disabled brother. She believed that Raja would be there to share this burden. But when Raja left for Hyderabad, Bim was deeply hurt, especially by his cold words:

I have to go. Now I can go. I have to begin my life some time, don't I? You don't want me to spend all my life down in this hole, do you? You don't think I can go on living just to keep my brother and sister company, do you? (CLD, 100)

Despite his promise to return, Raja never does, and the emotional strain on Bim worsens when she receives a letter from him after Hyder Ali's death. Raja reminds her that he owns the house they live in, and that he has no intention of raising the rent. For Bim, this letter is the final betrayal. She had cared for Raja unconditionally, and now, he was reminding her of his ownership, as if he were doing her a favour. She decides to cut ties with him forever, rejecting the poetry she once admired and seeing his former heroism as mere pretension.

Although Bim was not entirely devoid of romantic prospects—Dr. Biswas, their family doctor, had expressed interest in marrying her—she had dedicated her life to caring for her family and had never received encouragement from Raja to consider marriage. Raja had ridiculed Dr. Biswas's interest, and Bim's own desires were always put aside. When Bim learns that Raja has stopped writing to her, instead sending letters to Tara about his prosperous life, the final sense of abandonment sets in. Tara and Raja were never close, yet Raja seemed to have moved on, leaving Bim behind.

In a moment of deep reflection, Bim realizes that despite her hurt, she still loves her siblings. Her love for them, especially for Baba, is deep, unwavering, and rooted in their shared history. This realization leads her to forgive the wrongs done to her. In an act of grace, Bim reaches out to Tara, asking her to tell Raja that he is always welcome to visit and that she will wait for him. This gesture marks a turning point in the novel, as Bim's forgiveness begins to heal the rift between them.

Anita Desai's portrayal of sibling relationships in *Voices in the City* and *Clear Light of Day* offers a nuanced exploration of the emotional complexities that define these bonds. Through envy, rivalry, love, and betrayal, her characters experience the full range of human emotions, making their relationships both relatable and deeply moving. In Desai's world, no single relationship—whether between a husband and wife, parent and child, or siblings—is more important than another; each plays a vital role in the journey of life. Desai's exploration of these relationships invites readers to reflect on their own familial connections, making her work not only a literary achievement but also an emotional experience that lingers long after the last page is turned.

REFERENCES

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