Clear Light of Day

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ANITA DESAI

The daughter of a German mother and Bengali father, Anita Desai grew up between five languages and literary traditions—German, Bengali, Hindi, Urdu, and English—in the same Delhi neighborhood where *Clear Light of Day* is set. She started writing at a young age and lived through the 1947 Partition riots that play a central role in the novel. After completing an English Literature degree at the University of Delhi, she married a Bengali businessman and moved to Kolkata, where she began seriously writing novels and helped found a publishing company named Writers Workshop. While she has published more than a dozen novels in the years since, she first gained international recognition for her 1977 *Fire on the Mountain* and then for *Clear Light of Day*. In fact, she was a finalist for the Booker Prize three times—for this novel, *In Custody* (1984), and *Fasting, Feasting* (1999)—and her daughter, novelist Kiran Desai, would go on to win it in 2006 for *The Inheritance of Loss*. Anita Desai has won several other major literary awards, including India's two most important: the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Sahitya Akademi Fellowship. In addition to several cities in India, Desai has also lived and taught in England, Mexico, and the United States, where she is currently an Emerita Professor at MIT.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Clear Light of Day takes place largely in the shadow of Indian independence, and especially the Partition that accompanied it. Responding to longstanding demands from Muslims for an independent state, the British split India into two countries, India and Pakistan. While India's elites celebrated the independence movement's victory and the nation's birth as a secular, democratic republic, the masses faced horrific violence. This was the case particularly in Punjab and Bengal (which were split between India and Pakistan) but also in cities like Delhi, where tens of thousands of people died in violent riots. In the Partition's immediate aftermath, some 300,000 Muslim migrants left Delhi and roughly 500,000 non-Muslims came from Pakistan, and the city's population doubled overall between 1941 and 1951. Still, Delhi's history is inextricably connected to both cultures, as its rulers were long Urdu-speaking Muslims and its masses Hindi-speaking Hindus. While not central to the Das family's conflicts, the Partition serves as a metaphor for their separation (as Tara and Raja move away permanently just after it) and its violence is constantly present in Part II of the novel. For instance, Hyder Ali Sahib, the Das family's wealthy Muslim landlord, leaves with his family for Hyderabad—which briefly remains an independent princely state ruled by a Muslim Nizam. Bim notes the city's growing refugee camps while on the bus with Dr. Biswas, then learns about Mahatma Gandhi's murder at the hands of a radical Hindu assassin on another date with him. Above all, Raja's love for Urdu poetry enables him to cross between Hindu and Muslim social spheres in a way that is increasingly taboo in his day and age, but which also represents Desai's hopes for a future in which India can again find the religious harmony she observed in her childhood.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

While Anita Desai's novels have touched on a wide range of themes and historical, geographical, and cultural settings, they have largely approached questions of gender, history, diaspora, and cultural identity in India through rich profiles of Indian women's inner lives and family relationships. Her first major novel is arguably *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), which follows an elderly widow who lives alone in the mountains and receives a surprise visit from her great-granddaughter. Desai's second Booker Prize-nominated novel (after this one) is *In Custody* (1984), which explores Hindu-Muslim relations and Delhi history through the story of a down-and-out Hindi teacher's fraught relationship with an elderly Urdu poet. Her young adult novel *The Village by the Sea* (1982) describes a struggling village family's relationship with elderly vacationers from the city, *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988) describes a German Jewish Holocaust refugee who moves to India, and *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) focuses on an Indian family whose son goes to an American university. Anita Desai's daughter Kiran Desai, also a novelist, has published *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998) and the Booker Prize-winning *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), and her friend and neighbor Ruth Prawer Jhabvala is best known for *Heat and Dust* (1975). Some of the English poems that Desai's characters read in *Clear Light of Day* include Lord Byron's "The Destruction of Sennacherib" (1815), T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" (1922), and D.H. Lawrence's "The Ship of Death" (1932). They also read the Urdu-language works of poets like Mirza Ghalib, Daagh Dehlvi, and especially Pakistan's national poet Muhammad Iqbal.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Clear Light of Day
- **When Written:** 1978–1980
- **Where Written:** Mumbai, India
- **When Published:** 1980
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary

- **Genre:** Novel, Historical Fiction, Indian Fiction, Psychological Fiction
- **Setting:** The Das family home on Bela Road in Old Delhi
- **Climax:** Bim lashes out at Baba, regrets it, and decides to forgive her family.
- **Antagonist:** The Das parents, Bakul, Dr. Biswas
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

From Private Life to Public Acclaim. While *Clear Light of Day* is by all accounts fiction, Desai also considers it the most autobiographical of all her works and has even claimed that she wrote it less for the public than to explore her own private childhood memories. For this reason, she was astonished when it received major international attention.

PLOT SUMMARY

Anita Desai's novel *Clear Light of Day* follows the complicated relationships among the four Das siblings—Bim, Raja, Tara, and Baba—as a difficult childhood, family responsibilities, incompatible dreams, and Indian history bring them together and drive them apart over the course of their lives. The novel is divided into four parts; the first and last are set in 1980, and the middle two parts take place during the siblings' childhood in the 1930s and 1940s, all in the family's **house** on well-to-do Bela Road in Old Delhi.

In the 1930s and early 1940s, the children's mother grows frustrated when Baba (who has a serious developmental disability) fails to develop at an ordinary rate. She brings her cousin Mira, a poor widow, to take care of her children so that she can focus on her card games and diabetes. Mira brings handmade toys, lovingly nurses the children through illness, and generally treats them like the center of her universe. She bonds deeply with sensitive Tara, whom the bolder, closer Bim and Raja tease relentlessly. While Bim and Raja excel at school, Tara struggles, withdraws into herself, and dreams of escaping. One day, a game of hide-and-seek tag brings Bim and Tara face-to-face with **the well** in the back garden, where the family's cow once fell and decomposed. Another day, they sneak into Raja's room, try on his trousers, and imagine having the confidence, power, and freedom that their society reserves for men. Later, on a picnic with the neighbors, the Misra sisters, a swarm of bees attacks Bim and Tara feels guilty that she can't stop them. The Misra sisters get engaged, but Bim decides that she will never give away her freedom to a man through marriage.

It's now the summer of 1947, and Bim is on the roof watching fires burn across Delhi from riots between Hindus and Muslims. She runs downstairs to tell Raja, who is bedridden with pneumonia and deeply concerned about Hyder Ali, the family's landlord. After all, the benevolent landlord took Raja in after learning about his passionate interest in Urdu poetry. Due to the growing religious tensions, Raja's father made him study English literature at the Hindu College instead of Urdu literature at the Jamia Millia Islamic College. The Das siblings' mother suddenly falls into a coma and dies, Aunt Mira withdraws and descends into alcoholism, Tara spends all her time away from home with the Misra sisters and Bakul (her future husband, whom she has just started dating), and then the siblings' distant father dies in a car accident. Suddenly, Bim has to take care of Raja, Baba, and Aunt Mira all on her own. Raja refuses to take over their father's role in the family insurance business, but since it only consists of occasionally going into the office and signing papers, the manager Mr. Sharma agrees to give Baba the role instead. Meanwhile, the awkward Dr. Biswas tries to court Bim when he visits to check on Aunt Mira and Raja, but she rejects him. Tara marries Bakul and moves away, and after Hyder Ali's family escapes to Hyderabad, Baba finds Hyder Ali's daughter Benazir's old **gramophone** in his house. After months of withering away, hallucinating, and tearing off her clothes in agony, Aunt Mira finally dies, and Raja recovers from his illness and suddenly leaves Delhi to go live with Hyder Ali in Hyderabad.

Skipping forward to 1980, Tara meets Bim down in the garden, reminiscing about her childhood and remarking how little the house has changed. Tara has just flown in from the United States with Bakul, who is the Indian Ambassador; in contrast, Bim has never married, still lives in the family house, and works as a history teacher at a local women's college. She also takes care of the dog Badshah, the cat, and Baba. Bakul tries convincing Tara to spend the day visiting his family, but she prefers to stay at home with hers instead. She visits Baba, who still communicates through nods and gestures instead of words and spends most of his time listening to songs from their childhood on his creaky old **gramophone**. After the needle breaks, he throws it away and stumbles out of the house onto the road, but he sees a cart-driver whip his horse and runs back into the house, horrified. Bim gives a lesson to her students, and they all have ice cream with Tara, who remembers how their mother and father spent all their time playing bridge with their friends while their Aunt Mira raised them.

Bim and Tara go back through the Urdu poems that Raja wrote in school, and then Bim shows Tara a letter from Raja. Raja has inherited the house after marrying Benazir, and he promises never to sell it or raise the rent. Bim took such offense at this letter that she hasn't spoken to Raja in years and doesn't plan to attend his daughter Moyna's wedding—which is why Tara and Bakul have come to India. Tara, Bakul, and Bim visit the neighbors, the Misra family. The two sisters and three brothers all still live at home, and all of their spouses have left them. While the brothers have spent their lives drinking heavily and launching a series of failed business ventures, the sisters have

worked hard to pay the bills. Across the street, Hyder Ali Sahib's old house is empty and falling apart—as it has been since he left shortly after India's independence in 1947.

Bim still refuses to attend Moyna's wedding, despite Tara's best efforts to change her mind. Bim complains that Raja was "rich, fat and successful" when he last visited her and even brought them gifts they didn't want, but in reality, she resents that her siblings live such easy, luxurious lives while she is still stuck at home, taking care of Baba and struggling to make ends meet. Noticing that Bim serves them leftovers and leaves the garden without fertilizer, while spending a fortune on books, Tara starts to wonder if she was wrong to always respect her sister's competence and decisiveness. Realizing how their lonely childhood has made their adult relationships so bitter, Tara apologizes for not saving Bim from the bees and asks about Dr. Biswas (which offends Bim). But she points out that the house feels safe and welcoming now that Bim is in charge of it.

When a letter arrives from Mr. Sharma, Bim decides that she is going to sell off the family's shares and refuses Tara's advice to consult Bakul first. She starts treating Tara with cruelty, and then even tells Baba that he might have to move to Hyderabad with Raja—but catches herself, apologizes, and realizes that she loves her family but has to forgive them if she really wants to move forward in life. She spends all night throwing away old paperwork and finally tears up Raja's letter. Tara's daughters Mala and Maya arrive for the wedding, and Tara finally apologizes to Bim for marrying Bakul and leaving, instead of helping her take care of Raja, Baba, and Aunt Mira. They leave for the wedding, but Bim asks them to invite Raja to visit her. The novel closes with Bim attending a party at the Misras' house, thinking about her family's traditions and enduring connections, and resolving to grow back together with them.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Tara – Tara is the third Das sibling, and the novel revolves around the memories and family conflicts that arise when she travels back to India to stay with Bim and Baba in **the family house** in Delhi, then attend Raja's daughter Moyna's wedding in Hyderabad. Part I and Part IV of the novel primarily follow her perspective and note her changing perspective on her family relationships, childhood, and major life decisions. As a child, she is timid and vain; she struggles to fit in at school and Raja and Bim tease her relentlessly, but she grows closely attached to Aunt Mira. After Aunt Mira's death, she starts spending most of her time with the Misra sisters, then takes the first opportunity to marry Bakul and leave India. In adulthood, she is outwardly successful and takes pride in raising her daughters Mala and Maya, but her relationship with Bakul is cold and unsatisfying. She also resents Bim's defiance and resistance to change, just like Bim resents Tara's elitism and weakness of will. But at the end of the novel, the sisters overcome their differences, apologize for their past errors, and agree to work toward a new, more fruitful relationship.

Bim – Bimla, or Bim, is the second Das sibling—and arguably the main protagonist, as the novel's action revolves around her fraught relationships with Raja, Tara, and Baba. Brilliant and stubborn, Bim excels in school, loves poetry and especially history, and forms a very close bond with her brother Raja. Defying traditional gender roles, she chooses independence over marriage, earns a degree, and dreams of building a great career. But instead, she ends up drawn back into traditionally feminine roles: living her whole life in **the same house** where she grew up, taking care of Baba, and teaching history classes to make ends meet, while none of her other siblings have to work. She resents Raja for leaving Delhi after she nursed him back to health, then promising not to raise the rent after he inherited ownership of the house where she lives. Bim also resents Tara for marrying Bakul and becoming a housewife instead of pursuing her own goals. As a result, she grows bitter and cruel over the course of Tara's visit, until she lashes out at Baba, which shows her that she must forgive and establish new relationships with her siblings instead of holding onto past resentments. The novel ends with her agreeing to reestablish contact with Raja and contemplating how families grow and change over time.

Baba – Baba is the youngest Das sibling, who faces a lifelong developmental disability. He never learns to speak more than the occasional word and cannot make complex decisions, although he understands most of what is going on around him and enjoys physical games like marbles and bagatelle. He spends most of his time on repetitive activities, like throwing pebbles and particularly listening to his **gramophone**, and he ironically becomes the head of the family business after Mr. Sharma explains that he need only go into the office and sign paperwork. Desai briefly gives the reader a view of his inner world when his gramophone needle wears out and he runs off into the street during Part I. The novel's climax involves Bim, who has taken care of him ever since Aunt Mira's death, taking out her anger on him and telling him he will have to move to Raja's house in Hyderabad. His visible disappointment conceals a much deeper sorrow, and she immediately regrets and takes back her statement. Baba serves as an essentially innocent but dependent character whose disability leaves him stuck in the past—particularly as he spends decades living in the same room and listening to the same old records from the 1940s. In this sense, the novel draws a clear analogy between his personal trajectory on the one hand, and the tragedy of India's Partition and Old Delhi's gradual decline on the other.

Raja – Raja is the eldest Das sibling, and while he does not appear in the present-day sections of the novel, his daughter Moyna's wedding is the occasion for Tara's visit to India.

Additionally, his childhood relationships with Bim and Tara and subsequent departure for Hyderabad are central to the plot. In particular, the novel uses Raja's life as a vehicle for exploring Hindu-Muslim relations in India's history and culture: while his family is Hindu, Raja studies Urdu in school and takes a deep interest in Urdu poetry, which leads Hyder Ali Sahib to take him in. Part II of the novel shows him sick with pneumonia in 1947, dreaming of becoming a hero like Lord Byron and reading poetry with Bim, who nurses him back to health and with whom he shares a close bond. But after recuperating, he follows Hyder Ali to Hyderabad, where he eventually marries Ali's daughter Benazir and inherits Ali's property. This makes him Bim's landlord, and a letter he writes her about **the house** leads her to harbor resentment toward him for years. According to Bim, not only is Raja fat, wealthy, and ostentatious, but he continues pursuing his foolish childhood dream of being an Urdu poet. Still, she ultimately decides to forgive him.

Aunt Mira – Aunt Mira (or Mira-*masi*) is the distant relation of the Das siblings' mother who raises them—and particularly the younger siblings, Tara and Baba. As a girl, she is married off to a man who goes to study in England but dies almost immediately, leaving her widowed. She remains with her husband's family, as tradition dictates, but they brutally exploit her; she is grateful for the opportunity to move in with the Das family instead. She cares deeply for the children, giving them the attention their parents never did. She feels a strong connection to animals, and Tara bonds very closely with her. But the scars of Mira's past are still too much to bear, and she turns to alcohol, which gradually diminishes her capacities as the children come of age and then leaves her entirely bedridden by 1947, when Part II of the novel is set. Her last days are a horrifying mixture of alcohol-driven hallucinations, drunken delirium, and self-harm. Bim and Dr. Biswas try to nurse her back to health, but instead, she dies drinking in bed. Besides highlighting the Das mother and father's poor parenting by contrast, Aunt Mira's trajectory demonstrates how restrictive gender roles and family structures limit women's potential in India culture. In this sense, she is a significant character foil for Bim—who also spends much of her life as a caretaker due to circumstances outside her control.

Bakul – Tara's husband Bakul is a diplomat who serves as the Indian Ambassador to the United States in the present-day sections of the novel. Arrogant, worldly, and eloquent, he craves power and attention but cares little about his family's wellbeing—much like the Das mother and father. He complains incessantly about **the Das family's old house**, spends most of his time visiting his own family elsewhere in Delhi, and grows angry with Tara when she refuses to join him. He also tries to impress the Misra brothers and frequently compares Tara to her older sister Bim, as though deciding if he should have married Bim instead. His temperament suggests that his and Tara's marriage is less than blissful, and that she perhaps regrets marrying him as a teenager—which she did primarily to escape her unhappy home life in Delhi.

The Das Mother – Like their father, the Das siblings' haughty, preoccupied mother spends most of her time playing cards with her country club friends. She only does the bare minimum to manage her serious diabetes, and she has little patience for or interest in raising her children, who have virtually no relationship with her growing up. For instance, when she sees Baba facing developmental challenges, she makes no effort to help him—instead, she gets angry at the ayah and brings in Aunt Mira to come take care of the children. Like their father, she dies suddenly when the children are young and remains nameless throughout the novel, which reflects her emotional distance from and indifference toward her children.

The Das Father – The Das siblings' father is a well-to-do Delhi businessman who runs a small but successful insurance company. Cold and distant, he spends most of his time playing bridge and taking care of his diabetic wife (including by giving her the injections that Tara remembers for the rest of her life). Indeed, he seldom pays any attention to his children, except when he berates Raja to convince him that he must go to the Hindu College instead of the Jamia Milia Islamic College. This is why he remains nameless throughout the novel, just like their mother. He dies in a car accident when the children are young, but his insurance business continues to support the family after his death.

Hyder Ali – Hyder Ali is the wealthy, politically-connected patriarch of an important Muslim family who lives across the road from the Das family and rents them **their house**—until he escapes to Hyderabad in the Partition. He becomes Raja's main father figure after noticing and nurturing the boy's interest in Urdu poetry. Later, Raja moves to Hyderabad with him, marries his daughter Benazir, inherits all of his property, and dedicates himself to poetry. Notably, while Hyder Ali is a politically significant Muslim with important ties to the movement to create Pakistan, he does not actually go to Pakistan after independence. His significant role in the novel points to Desai's emphasis on tolerance and religious harmony.

Dr. Biswas – Dr. Biswas is the physician who cares for Raja during his pneumonia and Aunt Mira during her fatal decline into alcoholism. Awkward and bookish, he takes an interest in Bim and asks her out on a few dates, which revolve around the interest in Western classical music that he developed while studying medicine in Germany. He doesn't take Bim's interest in history seriously and tells her to become a nurse instead, and when he invites her over to his house, he childishly gets in an argument with his mother. These experiences reinforce Bim's decision never to marry.

Misra Brothers (Brij, Manu, and Mulk) – Brij, Manu, and Mulk Misra are the Das family's next-door neighbors (along with their sisters Jaya and Sarla). As children, they are close with

Raja, and as adults, they are good-for-nothing businessmen whose projects all fail while they waste their family's money on whiskey. Mulk is also a singer, and his performance at his guru's birthday party provides the occasion for the novel's closing scene.

Bhakta – Bhakta is a Hindu servant who works for Hyder Ali. He takes refuge in Hyder Ali's house after the Partition because he fears that fellow Hindus will turn against him, then briefly moves to the Das home and finally goes with Raja to reunite with Hyder Ali's family in Hyderabad.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Badshah – Badshah (whose name means "king" in Persian and Urdu) is Bim's poorly-behaved 12-year-old dog.

Cat – Aunt Mira's nurturing character draws a cat to move into **the house** when the Das siblings are children; in the present-day sections of the novels, Bim cares for a different cat, who may be a descendant of the original and who serves to underline Bim's similarities with Aunt Mira.

Mr. Sharma – Mr. Sharma is a partner in the Das father's insurance company. He coordinates all business with the siblings after their father's death.

Mrs. Biswas – Mrs. Biswas is Dr. Biswas's critical, pretentious mother.

Misra Sisters (Jaya and Sarla) – Jaya and Sarla Misra (and their brothers) are the Das family's next-door neighbors and Tara's closest friends during her childhood (although Bim considers them superficial and frivolous). They grow up to have unhappy marriages and become dance teachers.

Misra Uncle – The Misra sisters' and brothers' elderly father tells Bim about his business ventures in Burma and his disappointment with his sons when the Das siblings visit his house in Part I.

Hamid – Hamid is Raja's Muslim childhood friend.

Janaki – Janaki is a servant who works in the Das household.

The Ayah – The ayah (nanny) helps raise the Das siblings.

Benazir – Benazir is Hyder Ali Sahib's daughter, Raja's wife, the bride-to-be Moyna's mother, and the original owner of Baba's **gramophone** (which he takes from her house after she leaves Delhi forever during the Partition).

The Cow – The cow that the Das siblings' mother agrees to purchase at Aunt Mira's behest falls into the **well** and dies.

Moyna – Moyna is Raja and Benazir's daughter, whose wedding in Hyderabad provides the occasion for Tara, Bakul, and their daughters' visit to India.

Mala and Maya – Mala and Maya are Tara and Bakul's teenage daughters, who arrive to Delhi at the end of the novel.

TERMS

Jumna River – The Jumna—or, more commonly, Yamuna—is a major Indian river that runs through Delhi and into the Ganges.

Lord Byron – Lord Byron was a major English Romantic poet. The literary archetype of the troubled, defiant, self-important Byronic Hero inspires **Raja** to live a similarly heroic life. This archetype is based on Byron's characters and his personal decision to join the Greek War of Independence, in which he died at only 36 years old.

Rabindranath Tagore – Rabindranath Tagore was a prominent Bengali writer and independence activist. He won the Nobel Prize in Literature, and his work is well-known and universally acclaimed throughout South Asia today, especially by Bengalis like **Dr. Biswas** and **Mrs. Biswas**.

Bagatelle – Bagatelle is a tabletop game related to billiards.

T.S. Eliot – T.S. Eliot was a major British-American Modernist poet. **Bim** frequently quotes his poem *The Waste Land* (1922), and his *Four Quartets* (1943) likely inspired this novel's four-part form and much of its symbolism.

Urdu – Urdu is the traditional language of Delhi's high culture, Muslim rulers, and literary and political elite. While it remains an official language in India today, it is on the decline because most of its speakers fled to Pakistan after the Partition. It is very similar to Hindi—and indistinguishable in most everyday conversation—except that it takes its specialized vocabulary from Persian instead of Sanskrit and uses the Perso-Arabic script instead of the Devanagari script.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

FAMILY, LOVE, AND FORGIVENESS

Clear Light of Day describes the fraught relationships among the four Das siblings—Bimla ("Bim"), Tara, Raja, and Baba—by interlacing scenes from their troubled childhood in the 1930s and 1940s with the story of Tara's trip back to their family grand, decaying Old Delhi **home** in 1980. After their parents' deaths, the siblings cope in different ways. Raja and Bim turn to literature and dream of living out heroic adventures, but they exclude anxious, sensitive Tara, who turns inward and yearns to leave the house, marry, and become a mother. Meanwhile, Baba suffers from developmental disabilities, barely speaks, and spends every day of his adult life listening to old records on his **gramophone**.

Tara marries young and moves away with her diplomat husband Bakul, but Raja catches tuberculosis and Aunt Mira slips into alcoholism, leaving Bim as their (and Baba's) caretaker by default. Eventually, Mira dies and Raja moves away to marry the family's landlord Hyder Ali's daughter. Later, Raja becomes Bim's landlord himself. So whereas Tara and Raja grow wealthy and worldly, Bim and Baba remain behind, never to marry or leave the house.

When Tara visits India in 1980, she spends several weeks in Delhi before going to Hyderabad for Raja's daughter Moyna's wedding, but resentment consumes the siblings' relationships. Tara resents Bim and Raja for mistreating her as a child, while Bim resents both Tara and Raja for leaving her behind. In fact, Bim hasn't spoken to Raja in years and refuses to attend Moyna's wedding. In the process of trying to heal her broken relationships, Tara realizes that she must cope with her sense of guilt by asking Bim to forgive her for leaving. She does, and Bim agrees. But Bim also explodes in rage at all three of her siblings, then has a similar epiphany about her love for them and the value of forgiveness. She resolves to reconcile with Raja, and the novel ends with a series of revelations about the power of familial love. Desai shows that, because family relationships are so central to our formation as individuals, they often hold both the source of and the solution to our deepest conflicts. Understanding the importance of family and recognizing the underlying love that binds families together can encourage people to choose forgiveness, Desai suggests, which allows them to lift the emotional burden of holding resentment and helps them change for the better.

MEMORY, CHANGE, AND IDENTITY

In *Clear Light of Day* Anita Desai uses multiple timelines to explore how memory can change over time and shape people's sense of self, as well as how a person's changing sense of self over the course of their lives can also shape what they remember. For instance, Desai frequently depicts Tara and Bim reminiscing about events in one part of the novel before revealing elsewhere in the novel how those events really unfolded, and she even shows how one sister completely forgets scenes that are forever seared in the other's mind (like Tara and Bim's fateful encounter with a swarm of bees in Lodi Garden). Desai also describes how certain feelings and images from the past return to people throughout their lives, shaping their perceptions of themselves and the people who surround them, like Tara's memory of her father injecting her mother with insulin or Bim's inconsistent feelings about Raja's Urdu poetry. Indeed, much of the Das siblings' mutual resentment throughout the book comes not from what actually happened in their childhood, but rather from which details they choose to remember and why.

These questions about the reliability of memory lead Tara to reappraise her childhood at the end of the novel. When she first returns to Delhi in the opening pages, she feels like Bim and the house have stayed exactly the same since their childhoods, while she and Raja have grown. But by the end, she realizes that maybe it is just the opposite: her fears and anxieties from childhood are coloring her perception of the house and her relationship with her sister, while in reality, Bim has changed and turned the house into a welcoming space. Desai thus shows that, since a person has no access to their past except through unreliable memories, what they remember often says as much about them as the things they're remembering. But this also means that memory can serve as a useful guide for exploring one's own assumptions, experiences, and feelings.

GENDER AND INDIAN CULTURE

The Das siblings grow up in a deeply patriarchal culture in which men are allowed to pursue careers of their choice while women are expected to marry as teenagers and then dedicate their whole lives to caring for their husbands, in-laws, and children. Of course, the Das family's wealth and liberal values spare Tara and Bim from the worst of what Indian women face—unlike Aunt Mira, whose late husband's family essentially treats her as an indentured servant until Tara and Bim's mother calls her to Delhi. But still, the sisters end up limited and confined by the expectation that Indian women should be obedient caregivers above all else. Tara and Bim first realize this when they try on Raja's trousers while he's away—they instantly feel comfortable and powerful, which represents the advantages that men and boys enjoy in all aspects of public life.

While Tara genuinely loves being a mother later in life, her husband Bakul belittles and ignores her. Bim, in contrast, refuses to marry in an attempt to preserve her independence, but she still gets thrown into a caregiving role against her will when both Aunt Mira and Raja fall sick—because Bim is the eldest able woman in the family, she has no choice but to step up. Despite her excellent performance at school and her grand dreams, her life ends up looking much like Aunt Mira's, and she has to pause her studies. Eventually, she returns to them and becomes a teacher at a women's college (which is still a delimited, gender-segregated space). All the while, she continues taking care of Baba, which also prevents her from leaving Delhi to pursue other opportunities. Her care obligations are clearly the root cause of her resentment toward Raja: as children, they promised each other that they would stick together and become a hero and a heroine. But whereas society allowed him to pursue his dream, she was not allowed to pursue hers. While Bimla's teaching career shows that Indian women are by no means powerless, her overall trajectory still shows that patriarchal societies like India's limit women's ability to achieve their goals by disproportionately placing care obligations on them. Desai suggests that Indian women cannot escape this predicament through individual determination

alone and so should work to change broader norms about the gendered division of labor instead.

ART AND SOCIAL DIVISIONS

Clear Light of Day is set in Delhi in part during the summer of 1947, as the partition of India and Pakistan gives both nations independence—but also sets off deadly riots between Hindus and Muslims across the subcontinent. Instead of experiencing these riots directly, the Hindu Das family, which is facing its own serious internal divide, gets to go up on their roof and watch them from a comfortable distance. After all, they live in a wealthy neighborhood where Hindus and Muslims generally get along, and they are progressive-minded liberals who try their best to fight the growing trend of religious polarization, segregation, and suspicion. Most importantly, Raja studies Urdu in school and falls in love with its long poetic tradition. He wants to attend an Islamic studies college, and while his father refuses on the grounds of safety, he still marries his Muslim landlord Hyder Ali's daughter Benazir and goes to live in a predominantly Muslim community in Hyderabad. After all, this religious intermixing is part of his local heritage: India's Muslim emperors ruled from Old Delhi, speaking in Urdu, long before the British built New Delhi.

Indeed, it's no coincidence that Raja's other great literary passion besides Urdu poetry is the work of English-speaking Romantic and Modernist poets, like Byron and T. S. Eliot. While of course these writers' work was brought to India through colonialism, this didn't make them any less valuable or inspiring to young Indians like Raja. The same principle applies to music throughout this book: Baba listens to American jazz and English Christmas music on his **gramophone**, while Dr. Biswas adores classical German composers and the novel ends with Bim attending a traditional mushaira (Urdu musical poetry recitation). For Desai, anything goes because there is no one single true Indian identity. Rather, she shows how art's universal appeal can unite people across cultures, and she depicts her characters bridging religious and cultural divides through it in order to highlight the way that India, and Delhi in particular, has always been a place where different cultures come into contact and produce novel outcomes, ideas, and ways of life as a result.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE DAS HOUSE

The Das family's house on Bela Road in Old Delhi represents the way that family, culture, and geography continue to root people and connect them to the past, no matter how hard they try to forget, ignore, or move beyond them. Except for a few scenes that follow the siblings elsewhere around Delhi, the whole novel takes place in the house and its garden. The house figures less as an inanimate container for the protagonists' lives than a living, breathing character in its own right. It is full of history and activity, animal life and sound—from Badshah's barking to the shriek of Baba's **gramophone**. The house raises the Das children, and Bim grows up to repay it by caring for it.

When Tara arrives in 1980, the house is much the same as when she left it in the late 1940s—except it is slowly crumbling, the garden is fading, and new animals have moved in. This sense of slow decline reflects how Bim, Baba, and particularly Delhi itself have aged: by slowly withering in place while remaining essentially the same. Yet the house's familiar sights, sounds, smells, and feelings strike Tara, then encourage her to remember and reconsider her past in a process that eventually brings her and Bim back together. At the end of the novel, Bim remembers T.S. Eliot's line "*Time the destroyer is time the preserver*," then thinks of her house and family. While the Das siblings' relationships to home and one another might change or erode over time, she suggests, they can still strengthen those relationships again—and this process of endurance and change within the same rooted relationships is precisely what makes them family and what makes their house a home.

BABA'S GRAMOPHONE

The old gramophone that Baba constantly plays at an ear-splitting volume represents stagnation, historical continuity, and the power of silence. It originally belongs to Hyder Ali's daughter Benazir, but Baba finds it while checking on Hyder Ali's house with Bim shortly after the Partition. Even though Baba usually just follows Bim and does not take much interest in his surroundings, he actually leaves her side to go get the abandoned gramophone and take it home. He gives it a new lease on life and starts playing Benazir's old records—mostly American and British songs from the 1940s, which reflect the global cultural influences that arrived in India on the eve of its independence. In fact, he becomes entirely fixated on the gramophone, which starts occupying his time, to the point of serving as a symbolic replacement for his late caretaker Aunt Mira and even driving him apart from his siblings.

By 1980, more than three decades later, Baba is still doing exactly the same thing all day, every day. Bim learns to ignore the noise, but everyone else finds it maddening. Baba refuses to listen to new records or use the new gramophone that Raja brings him, and he feels severe anxiety whenever his own stops working (like during Part I, when his needle wears out and he has a panic attack and runs into the street). In this way, the

gramophone becomes a symbol of Baba's arrested development and need to control his environment—which he has, in a way, passed on to Bim. As Baba cannot speak, the gramophone also becomes something of a substitute voice for him: the family knows that all is well when it plays, but the family worries when it falls silent.

THE WELL

The well behind **the Das family's house** represents the siblings' childhood—and their struggle to make sense of it. While they know of the well's existence from a young age, they almost never see it: they are told to avoid it for safety reasons, it's located in an unkempt part of the garden behind the house, and most importantly, it has a dark past. The family's cow fell inside by accident one night and drowned, but its carcass was too heavy to pull out, so the family had no choice but to leave it inside to decompose. (This is particularly sinister because cows are holy to Hindus like the Das family.) One day, Bim and Tara wandered over to the well while playing as children, looked inside, and saw nothing but murky black water. They associate the well with death: Aunt Mira imagines dying there and Bim dreams of finding her aunt's body floating there; Bim later comments that her dreams have been lost "down at the bottom of the well" and jokes about dying there, too.

Just as the dark secret of indifferent parents and an unhappy childhood forever shapes the siblings' lives but often aren't things they're consciously aware of, the dark secret of the cow's death hides somewhere beneath the murky surface of the well. Notably, the well itself reveals nothing about its history or true depth, just as the siblings cannot truly understand their childhoods. In the present-day parts of the novel, the adult siblings gaze into their past much as Bim and Tara gazed into the well as children. They grasp for these hidden secrets but realize that memory is imperfect and the people they most need to hear from (their deceased parents) are already gone. The most they can do is speculate, compare stories, and build new relationships in the future.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Mariner edition of *Clear Light of Day* published in 2000.

Part 1 Quotes

"But you wouldn't want to return to life as it used to be, would you?" Bim continued to tease her in that dry voice. "All that dullness, boredom, waiting. Would you care to live that over again? Of course not. Do you know anyone who would—secretly, sincerely, in his innermost self—*really* prefer to return to childhood?"

Related Characters: Bim (speaker), Tara

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

When Tara arrives to Delhi, one of the first things she remarks to Bim is that the family house seems exactly as before. Bim teases her, first asking if she expected it to change and then asking if there's really anything positive about it not changing—as she says here, nobody really wants to go back to childhood anyways. While she presents this idea as innocent banter, it's also entirely true for the Das siblings, whose unhappy childhood continues to haunt them—and drive them apart—more than three decades later.

This conversation at the very beginning of the novel foreshadows its central concerns and overall structure, which consists of digging back into the Das siblings' childhood to reveal the origins of their present-day conflicts, both internal and interpersonal. The Das siblings have all tried their best to put the "dullness, boredom, [and] waiting" of their childhoods behind them, but they have lost their relationships with one another in the process. So just as the novel gives the reader a tour through their past, Tara's visit to Delhi becomes an occasion for her and Bim to explore, reevaluate, and finally truly address their unhappy childhoods—and make amends for the ways they have hurt each other.

"Old Delhi does not change. It only decays. My students tell me it is a great cemetery, every house a tomb. Nothing but sleeping graves. Now New Delhi, they say is different. That is where things happen. The way they describe it, it sounds like a nest of fleas. So much happens there, it must be a jumping place. I never go. Baba never goes. And here, here nothing happens at all. Whatever happened, happened lone ago—in the time of the Tughlaqs the Khiljis the Sultanate, the Moghuls—that lot." She snapped her fingers in time to her words smartly. "And then the British built New Delhi and moved everything out. Here we are left rocking on the backwaters, getting duller and greyer I suppose. Anyone who isn't dull and grey goes away—to New Delhi, to England, to Canada, the Middle East. They don't come back."

Related Characters: Bim (speaker), Tara, Baba, Bakul

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

When Tara first returns to her family home at the beginning of Part I, she remarks that little seems to have changed and reminisces with Bim about their childhood, unhappy as it may have been. Bim gives her this speech about Old Delhi, which establishes an ongoing metaphorical link between the city, the Das household, and Bim herself. All three change only by decaying: their essences remain the same, and they do not grow or adapt to the times. Yet they are all also full of rich history and tradition, which historians like Bim cherish but modern types are often too quick to forget. At the very end of the novel, Bim remembers a line from T.S. Eliot that succinctly captures this idea: "*Time the destroyer is time the preserver.*" Time may have taken its toll on Old Delhi, but it has also given the city its unique identity, character, and significance to the broader world, as a portal into India's multicultural past.

This all contrasts with New Delhi, the British-built district that became India's capital after independence. It's no surprise that Bim's young students find New Delhi's energy exciting, or that Tara's diplomat husband Bakul works and has family there. If Bim represents India's past, then her students and Bakul represent its future as a modern, independent nation. The conflict between Old and New Delhi thus represents the tension between these past- and future-oriented attitudes toward life, India, and identity, which are the source of Bim and Tara's deep-set differences and occasional mutual resentment throughout the novel.

[Tara] was prevented from explaining herself by the approach of a monstrous body of noise that seemed to be pushing its way out through a tight tunnel, rustily grinding through, and then emerged into full brassy volume, making the pigeons that lived on the ledge under the veranda ceiling throw up their wings and depart as if at a shot.

Related Characters: Tara, Bim, Baba

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

Baba's decades-old gramophone screeches alive unexpectedly, interrupting a conversation between Tara and Bim. Tara is surprised to hear that he still has the same machine and handful of old records from the 1940s (although readers will later learn that Raja tried to buy him a newer model, but he refused to use it). But more importantly, she notes that the sound is deafening to the point of being all-consuming: Baba plays his records so loud that it's difficult to have any sort of conversation, or even be alone with one's thoughts. Tara is disappointed to see that Bim simply accepts this as normal, like the dog Badshah's constant barking and the house falling into a state of disrepair, when it would be easy to ask Baba to just reduce the volume.

Yet the gramophone interrupting the conversation also has symbolic importance, particularly in the context of the Das siblings' family relationships. It enables Baba to join the conversation, cutting off a brewing argument between Bim and Tara. It's his way of making his presence heard, which is crucial because he cannot speak otherwise—readers do not know this yet, but due to his developmental disability, he is essentially nonverbal. Thus, this memorable first introduction to Baba's gramophone makes it clear how the device enables him to compensate for his silence.

The ice-cream did have, she had to admit, a beneficial effect all round: in a little while, as the students began to leave the house, prettily covering their heads against the sun with coloured veils and squealing as the heat of the earth burnt through their slippers, the gramophone in Baba's room stirred and rumbled into life again. Tara was grateful for it. She wished Bakul could see them now—her family.

Related Characters: Tara, Bim, Baba, Bakul

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

Tara's first day back in Delhi is full of disappointment and frustration. The house is decaying, Bim is inflexible and cold, and Baba panics and runs out into the street. Additionally, Bakul criticizes Tara's family, tries to force her to spend the day with *his* family instead, and gets angry when she refuses. But then, Bim's students come over to the house for a tutoring session, and the ice cream man follows. In the sweltering Delhi summer afternoon—the sunlight of the book's title—Tara suddenly finds herself at ease. Seeing Bim and Baba in their respective elements, Tara remembers what she missed about home, Old Delhi, and her family. She even gets a glimpse of the happy family life she never had as a child. More than anything else, her commitment to making this possibility a reality is what motivates her to make amends with Bim and persuade Bim to reconcile with Raja.

> *You must remember that when I left you, I promised I would always look after you, Bim. When Hyder Ali Sahib was ill and making out his will, Benazir herself spoke to him about the house and asked him to allow you to keep it at the same rent we used to pay him when father and mother were alive. He agreed—you know he never cared for money, only for friendship—and I want to assure you that now that he is dead and has left all his property to us, you may continue to have it at the same rent, I shall never think of raising it or of selling the house as long as you and Baba need it. If you have any worries, Bim, you have only to tell—Raja.*

Related Characters: Raja (speaker), Bim, Baba, The Das Mother, The Das Father, Hyder Ali , Benazir

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is from Raja's letter to Bim, which he clearly meant in good faith but which she took as a grave insult. This early in the novel, readers still do not know the whole backstory about Raja's relationship with Hyder Ali (who was like a father to him) and his marriage to Benazir. But it is clear that Raja has inherited Hyder Ali's property, including the family's house, and is trying to accommodate Bim, who has chosen to stay there with Baba. There are many reasons this could irritate Bim—perhaps she cannot stand the prospect of her brother becoming her landlord, or perhaps she cannot bear the thought of getting special treatment from him because he knows she could not afford the house otherwise. But regardless, readers will have to make an educated guess about how Bim and Raja's history colors her interpretation of the letter. They will soon learn, but Desai wants them to approach Bim and Raja's sibling rivalry with the same kind of uncertainty and disbelief as Tara does—and then reevaluate their preconceptions over the course of the novel, as the truth gradually comes out.

> "I still keep it in my desk—to remind me. Whenever I begin to wish to see Raja again or wish he would come and see us, then I take out that letter and read it again. Oh, I can tell you, I could write him such an answer, he wouldn't forget it for many years either!" She gave a short laugh and ended it with a kind of a choke, saying "You say I should come to Hyderabad with you for his daughter's wedding. How can I? How can I enter his house—my landlord's house? I, such a poor tenant? Because of me, he can't raise the rent or sell the house and make a profit—imagine that. The sacrifice!"

Related Characters: Bim (speaker), Tara, Raja

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

Bim tells Tara why she has kept Raja's letter (and refused to respond) for so many years. Even though Tara quite justifiably chalks it up to a misunderstanding and encourages Bim to move on, Bim insists that she cannot and will not. Indeed, she even admits that she sometimes wants to reach out to Raja, but she has to use the letter to convince herself not to. This suggests that she has some other, deeper reason for avoiding Raja: perhaps she is afraid of his judgment, envious of him, or angry about something far worse than the rent on the house, for instance. Similarly, her dramatic talk about being her brother's "poor tenant" suggests that her real issue with the letter is not that she is costing him money by paying an under-market rent, but

rather the very fact that he is living comfortably off inherited wealth and still bothering to charge her rent at all. He has turned an equal sibling relationship into an unequal one between a landlord and tenant. Over the course of the novel, as readers learn about all the sacrifices Bim made for Raja in her youth, the roots of her resentment will become even clearer.

Part 2 Quotes

Raja had studied Urdu in school in those days before the Partition when students had a choice between Hindi and Urdu. It was a natural enough choice to make for the son of a Delhi family: Urdu had been the court language in the days of the Muslim and Moghul rulers and had persisted as the language of the learned and the cultivated. Hindi was not then considered a language of great pedigree; it had little to show for itself in its modern, clipped, workaday form, and its literature was all in ancient, extinct dialects. Raja, who read much and had a good ear, was aware of such differences.

Related Characters: Raja

Related Themes:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

This passage explains how Raja first became interested in Urdu and why Urdu had such a special place in Delhi before the Partition. It also points to some of the reasons why the difference between Hindi and Urdu remains so controversial. In reality, they are two different versions of the same language: Delhi's rulers infused the language with Persian influences and wrote it in the Persian (or Arabic) script, turning it into Urdu, while the Hindu population continued using a more Sanskrit-influenced version of the language, which became Hindi. Delhi's high culture—including its literature—was virtually all in Urdu, even during British times, so this language was a natural choice for a young man interested in poetry, like Raja. Yet after the Partition, many of Delhi's Muslims would depart for Pakistan, and Hindi would supplant Urdu as the prestige language. This meant that its Urdu poetry tradition suddenly started to lose its relevance—a phenomenon that another of Desai's novels, *In Custody*, focuses on specifically. For Desai and many other contemporary Indian writers, Urdu's loss of prestige cleaved apart India's literary culture and constituted one of the Partition's great tragedies.

"This is no college for you. It is a Jamia Millia form."

"That is where I want to study. I went there to get a form."

"You can't study there," his father said, taking the cigar out of his mouth and spitting out a shred of tobacco. "It is a college for Muslim boys."

"No, anyone can go there who wants to specialise in Islamic studies."

Related Characters: Raja, The Das Father (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

When Raja reveals that he wants to go to the Jamia Millia Islamic College to study Urdu poetry, this is his father's reaction. Without hesitation, his father says that a Hindu boy cannot study at an Islamic college in India in the 1940s. This decision is more about cynicism than bigotry: Raja's father knows that religious tensions are on the rise in India, particularly as Muslim leaders are calling for the formation of a separate Muslim state called Pakistan, and this means it could be dangerous for a Hindu boy to study at an Islamic college. Muslim students may be suspicious of Raja, and fellow Hindus could accuse him of treason—as they eventually will even at the Hindu college he ultimately attends. Violence is bound to break out, in the father's estimation, and someone like Raja will be a prime target. Thus, Raja will have to put his passion for Islamic studies on hold and choose a more socially acceptable course of study: English literature.

In addition to reflecting the Das father's fraught, controlling relationship with his children, this turn of events demonstrates how the Partition cut off ties between Hindu and Muslim communities in India—and forced many young people like Raja to sacrifice their interests, friendships, and dreams.

> She needed protection. She wanted help. She reached out for the hand that would help her, protect her …

… Here it was. Here, in this tall, slim coolness just by her hand, at the tips of her fingers. If she got her fingers around it, its slender pale glassiness, and then drew it closer, close to her mouth, she could close her lips about it and suck, suck little, little sips, with little, little juicy sounds, and it would be so sweet, so sweet again, just as when they were little babies, little babies for her to feed, herself a little baby sucking, sucking at the little trickle of juice that came hurrying in, sliding in …

And she sucked and laughed and sucked and cried.

Related Characters: Tara, Bim, Raja, Aunt Mira

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 78-79

Explanation and Analysis

This is one of Desai's haunting descriptions of Aunt Mira's descent into alcoholism, which not coincidentally begins after Bim and Raja grow up and Tara marries Bakul and moves away. Without the children and work that gave her life a sense of purpose, Aunt Mira finds life itself slipping outside her control. It is too lonely, cold, and overwhelming, so she turns to alcohol—which, as this passage illustrates, promises to protect her from the harsh realities of the world (kind of like motherhood does for Tara, poetry does for Raja, history does for Bim, and the gramophone does for Baba). Readers may also interpret Mira's alcoholism in terms of Indian gender norms: she is so used to spending her whole life caring for others that, without anyone else to care for, she breaks down internally.

While it certainly wouldn't be fair to say that the Das siblings are *responsible* for Mira's disease, Bim does *become* responsible for her as her condition worsens. In this passage, imagery of Aunt Mira caring for babies mixes with imagery of Aunt Mira *becoming* a baby—regressing emotionally and psychologically as the weight of her experiences crushes her. Ultimately, the roles get reversed, and Bim dedicates much of her time to caring for her former caregiver. Even if Aunt Mira dies under decidedly unglamorous circumstances, she at least finally gets the love and care that she has spent her whole life generously giving out and never receiving in return.

> "Now I understand why you do not wish to marry. You have dedicated your life to others—to your sick brother and your aged aunt and your little brother who will be dependent on you all his life. You have sacrificed your own life for them."

Related Characters: Dr. Biswas (speaker), Tara, Bim, Baba, Raja, Aunt Mira

Related Themes:

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

Dr. Biswas tells Bim this at the end of their final meeting. She has long written off the prospect of marrying him, and he has finally figured it out. Yet it's unclear whether he says this out of bitterness or sincerity—after all, he is consistently awkward and has little sense of what is socially appropriate.

Of course, it's true that Bim is sacrificing her time and many of her plans to take care of Raja, Mira, and Baba—and some readers might even think that her decision to stay in Delhi for the rest of her life instead of moving onto bigger things makes Dr. Biswas entirely correct. Yet Bim takes great offense at Dr. Biswas's comment and never forgets it because it implies that her aspirations go no higher than caring for her family members. In reality, she did not *choose* to care for Baba, Aunt Mira, and Raja. Rather, this responsibility simply fell on her after her parents' death. She had no alternative. At the same time, she has no intentions of dedicating her entire life to them. Instead, she dreams of becoming a poet, writer, or historian and sees her caretaking role as temporary.

Perhaps most importantly, her opposition to marriage—and her specific disinterest in Dr. Biswas—has absolutely nothing to do with her family. Rather, as readers will learn at the end of Part III, she has seen how social expectations around marriage shape and confine the young women around her (including Tara), leading them to give up their career goals and become obedient to their husbands. She emphatically does not want this fate for herself, and so she chooses independence instead. Thus, Bim's anger at Dr. Biswas stems from the way he interprets her life decisions through conventional gender roles when, in reality, she is doing everything in her power to break free of them.

"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?"

[...]

"Bim, I'll come back," he said. "I'm leaving all my books and papers with you. Look after them till I come back."

"Why should you come back?" Bim asked stonily.

"Bim, don't be so *hard*. You know I must come back—to look after you and Baba. I can't leave you alone."

Related Characters: Bim, Raja (speaker), Baba, Hyder Ali

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 100-101

Explanation and Analysis

After recovering from his tuberculosis, Raja frantically leaves Delhi to join Hyder Ali in Hyderabad. As he packs his things, he justifies his departure by insisting that he has no choice: he has to live the life he has planned; he cannot stay in Delhi just because Bim and Baba are there. Somehow, it doesn't occur to him that Bim has done precisely what he insists he can't possibly do, staying in Delhi and putting her studies on hold to care for him, Baba, and Aunt Mira.

But as he actually gets in the car to go away, he promises Bim that he will return, as he has a responsibility to her and Baba—presumably because he is now the man of the house. As a matter of fact, he doesn't: he will spend the rest of his life in Hyderabad and only occasionally visit Delhi. (Indeed, the novel only mentions one later visit, which is around the year 1965.) The papers he leaves behind in 1947 are still piled up in the house in 1980, and he and Bim will never again be close. In fact, this episode demonstrates the complex roots of their feud: Bim feels unappreciated and abandoned; Raja doesn't follow through with his promises and arrogantly assumes that Bim and Baba cannot survive without him, while also refusing to help provide for them. Clearly, Bim has ample reason to be mad at Raja—but little reason to let her resentment last so many decades, into their fifties.

Part 3 Quotes

Usually the mother did not take exercise. She either sat up at the card table, playing, or lay very still on her bed, with a suffering face tilted upwards in warning so that Tara did not dare approach. Even now she kept her distance. She paced slowly, obediently, her arms folded, her chin sunk into her neck, as if considering a hand of cards, while Tara, in her nightie, skipped and danced after her, her bare feet making tracks through the misty dew on the grass.

Related Characters: Tara, The Das Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 102

Explanation and Analysis

After Part II describes the Das parents' deaths during the fateful summer of 1947, Part III returns to the siblings' childhoods and so gives the most complete picture anywhere in the novel of what their parents were actually like—and why they proved so incapable of nurturing their children. In particular, it focuses on the Das mother, who suffered a severe case of diabetes that left her in chronic pain. She struggled to find the energy for much of anything and spent most of her waking hours playing cards with her friends at her country club. But the doctor ordered her to get some exercise to manage her diabetes. She often ignored this advice, but sometimes reluctantly followed it, as the novel explains here. Desai emphasizes the contrast between the mother's pessimism and lethargy, on the one hand, and Tara's energy and childhood sense of wonder, on the other. As a result, Tara's mother scarcely took an interest in her—which left her feeling isolated and unloved.

No one could help noticing how slow he was to learn such baby skills as turning over, sitting up, smiling in response, talking, standing or walking. It all seemed to take an age with him. He seemed to have no desire to reach out and take anything. It was as if his parents, too aged, had given birth to a child without vitality or will—all that had gone into the other, earlier children and there had been none left for this last, late one. [...] His mother soon tired of carrying him about, feeding him milky foods with a silver spoon, washing and powdering him. [...] "My bridge is suffering," she complained. There was the ayah of course, Tara's ayah made nurse again, but she could only be made to work twelve hours a day, or sixteen, or eighteen, not more. She could not stay awake for twenty-four.

Related Characters: The Das Mother (speaker), Tara, Baba, Aunt Mira, The Ayah

Related Themes:

Page Number: 103

Explanation and Analysis

Shortly after Baba's birth, it immediately becomes clear to everybody that there is something out of the ordinary about him. Rather than engaging with the world around him, he just passively stares at it. He does not develop interests, make friends, or even talk. Clearly, he needs special support—but instead of making an extra effort to get him this support, his mother just gives up on him instead and blames the ayah (nanny) for his issues. She puts her own preferences above her baby's needs, and so she withdraws—just as she does with all of her other children. While her own health issues might lead readers to empathize with her to some extent, it's still clear that her lack of commitment to her children shapes them in lasting, harmful ways. Baba is fortunate to have Aunt Mira come and take his mother's place, but he will nevertheless live most of his life isolated and alone, disconnected from the people and the world around him.

> The girls [...] looked through the green tin trunk once again for some remnant of her wedding, of her improbable married life. And there was one: a stripe of crimson and gold edging an untouched Benares silk sari. Since it was white, she had been allowed to retain it, and now it was yellowed like old ivory. The strip of crimson and gold made it impossible for her to wear: taboo. It was wrapped carefully in tissue and laid away like some precious relic. [...] It contained Aunt Mira's past, and the might-have-been future, as floating and elusive as the musk itself. But she would not touch it. When they became insistent, she said, laughing, "All right, when I die, you may dress me in it for the funeral pyre."

Related Characters: Aunt Mira (speaker), Tara, Bim

Related Themes:

Page Number: 108-109

Explanation and Analysis

The Das children are curious about Aunt Mira's past and particularly wonder why she only wears white. Their parents explain that it's because Aunt Mira is a widow, and Indian women traditionally wear white in mourning for the rest of their lives after being widowed. But Tara and Bim insist that Aunt Mira should shed this baggage now that she lives with them. Adding some color back into her wardrobe would be a way to symbolically reclaim her independence, to define herself in her own way instead of letting the dead husband she barely ever met continue to define her.

But Aunt Mira is too traditional and God-fearing to wear anything but white. She has already given away all of her old, colored clothing except for this one sari—which she refuses to wear. She jokes that the children can cremate her in it, which represents the way that only death can liberate her from the family, social, and financial factors that confine her life on earth. But from Part II, readers will know that they actually did: Bim and Raja wrapped her in this striped sari for her cremation, bringing her wholly unserious proposal to fruition. Thus, Aunt Mira's striped sari represents not only the patriarchal norms that dictate women's lives in India, but also the way that women themselves come to believe and perpetuate those norms.

> They grew around her knees, stubby and strong, some as high as her waist, some rising to her shoulders. She felt their limbs, brown and knobby with muscle, hot with the life force. They crowded about her so that they formed a ring, a protective railing about her. Now no one could approach, no threat, no menace. Their arms were tight around her, keeping her for themselves. They owned her and yes, she wanted to be owned. She owned them too, and they needed to be owned. Their opposing needs seemed to mingle and meet at the very roots, inside the soil in which they grew.

Related Characters: Tara, Bim, Baba, Raja, Aunt Mira

Related Themes:

Page Number: 111

Explanation and Analysis

Desai explains how Aunt Mira's relationship with the Das siblings changed over time by analogizing them all to trees. Aunt Mira is like a strong older tree and the children like the younger ones that grow together in its shadow. But inevitably, they outgrow her, robbing her of her special role and sense of purpose. Notably, this passage emphasizes that the protection is mutual: Aunt Mira may help the children grow at first by providing a safe and enriching environment for them, but they also form "a protective railing" for her, serving as a buffer between her and the

harshness of the world and her past. Since they became rooted in the same soil, this passage suggests, Aunt Mira may have come to think they would never be separated. But the children are eager to grow up and leave Delhi. To Aunt Mira, this constitutes a profound, even insurmountable setback: it means losing her sense of identity, having to confront a world in which she no longer has an established role or community.

> The water at the bottom was black, with an oily, green sheen. […] The cow had never been hauled out. Although men had come with ropes and pulleys to help the gardener, it had proved impossible. She had been left to rot: that was what made the horror of it so dense and intolerable. The girls stared, scarcely breathing, till their eyes started out of their heads, but no ghostly ship of bones rode the still water. It must have sunk to the bottom and rooted itself in the mud, like a tree. There was nothing to see—neither hoof nor horn nor one staring, glittering eye. The water had stagnated and blackened, closing over the bones like a new skin. But even the new skin was black now and although it stank, it gave away nothing.

Related Characters: Tara, Bim, The Cow

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis

During a game of hide-and-seek tag with their brother, Bim and Tara venture into the house's back garden and come face-to-face with the dreaded well, which they have never seen before. They look down inside, heeding their parents' warnings to be careful not to fall in, and search for any sign of the cow that fell inside and died. This event still haunts the family years later, but they can't see actual evidence of the event: the cow has long since decomposed, and its bones are hiding somewhere in the well's invisible deaths.

This cow is a metaphor for the Das siblings' childhood more broadly: it is also full of "dense and intolerable" scenes of "horror" that have fallen out of conscious view and lodged themselves somewhere deep inside the siblings' minds. They can remember much of this childhood trauma, but not all of it—and certainly not with the exactitude that Desai offers when she recounts their childhoods in Parts II and III. Like the well, the siblings have learned to form a "new skin" and "[give] away nothing" of their past.

> The girls became infected with something of Raja's restlessness. It made Bim more ambitious at school […] She was not quite sure where this would lead but she seemed to realize it was a way out. A way out of what? They still could not say, could not define the unsatisfactory atmosphere of their home. They did not realize now that this unsatisfactoriness was not based only on their parents' continual absence, their seemingly total disinterest in their children, their absorption in each other. The secret, hopeless suffering of their mother was somehow at the root of this subdued greyness, this silent desperation that pervaded the house. Also the disappointment that Baba's very life and existence were to them, his hopeless future, their anxiety over him. The children could only sense all this, they did not share it, except unwillingly.

Related Characters: Tara, Bim, Raja, The Das Mother, The Das Father

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 130

Explanation and Analysis

The older they grow, the further away from home the Das children begin to set their sights. They do so in different ways: Raja continues dreaming of becoming a poet and Tara of marriage, but Bim looks for a middle ground, a practical and respectable career that can bring her independence. In parallel, the children also start to analyze their family life and understand *why* they find the prospect of staying at home so dreadful. As this passage explains, while they may not yet *fully* understand "the unsatisfactory atmosphere of their home," they now see that their relationship with their parents is at the root of it—and grasp some of the reasons why their parents are so cold. Their mother's illness is the key culprit: it leaves her in a constant state of misery that makes it difficult for her to care about *anyone*, including her children. While the Das siblings' shared understanding of these circumstances could enable them to come together and form a close bond, they never really talk about this understanding until decades later.

> "I shall earn my own living—and look after Mira-*masi* and Baba and—and be independent. There'll be so many things to do—when we are grown up—when all this is over—" and she swept an arm out over the garden party, dismissing it. "When we are grown up at last—then—then—" but she couldn't finish for emotion, and her eyes shone in the dusk.

Related Characters: Bim (speaker), Tara, Baba, Aunt Mira, Misra Sisters (Jaya and Sarla)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 140-141

Explanation and Analysis

At the Misra sisters' joint engagement party, Bim and Tara have a rare heart-to-heart about their dreams and plans for the future. Tara admits to Bim that she wants to be like the Misras: she wants to marry as soon as possible, then move away from home. But Bim explains that she has higher hopes for herself. Given her outstanding performance at school, she knows that she can have a successful career and be independent—or trade a woman's life for a man's, according to colonial India's gender norms. But she doesn't think she has to choose between this and the traditionally feminine role of caring for her family. Rather, she thinks she can work *and* take care of the family members who will need her, Aunt Mira and Baba. In a way, she wants to make up for her own childhood by giving her family the love and care that she and her siblings never received from their parents—and all without needing to depend on a man for her survival. So even as Tara complains in Part I and Part IV that Bim failed to live up to her potential, in reality, Bim *does* achieve her dream.

Part 4 Quotes

❝ She had always thought Bim so competent, so capable. Everyone had thought that—Aunt Mira, the teachers at school, even Raja. But Bim seemed to stampede through the house like a dishevelled storm, creating more havoc than order. […] 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, when she was old enough, grown enough and removed enough to study her objectively, she found she could not—her vision was strewn, obscured and screened by too much of the past.

Related Characters: Tara, Bim, Raja, Aunt Mira

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 148

Explanation and Analysis

As Tara takes stock of Bim's lifestyle and conflict with Raja, she starts questioning her own previous assumptions about her sister. She had always admired Bim, who did so much better in school and never seemed to doubt herself. But now, she sees that Bim lives in a state of permanent chaos, following whim more than logic. She starts to wonder if her childhood ideas about Bim were too rosy, or if perhaps she has come to remember a different version of Bim than the sister she actually knew as a girl.

In other words, Tara's new perspective on Bim leads her to question the very nature of memory and identity. Has Bim changed, has Tara, or have they both—just in opposite directions? Just as Tara's objective analyses of Bim are "obstructed and screened by" the past, her ideas about the past are "obstructed and screened by" everything that has happened since. It is impossible for her to separate her ideas about herself from her memories about Bim, or those memories about Bim from the sister she sees before her. She and her sister are inextricably intertwined, as are memory and the present, and there is no way to access some deeper truth independent of these entanglements.

❝ They had come like mosquitoes—Tara and Bakul, and behind them the Misras, and somewhere in the distance Raja and Benazir—only to torment her and, mosquito-like, sip her blood. All of them fed on her blood, at some time or the other had fed—it must have been good blood, sweet and nourishing. Now, when they were full, they rose in swarms, humming away, turning their backs on her.

All these years she had felt herself to be the centre—she had watched them all circling in the air, then returning, landing like birds, folding up their wings and letting down their legs till they touched solid ground. Solid ground. That was what the house had been—the lawn, the rose walk, the guava trees, the veranda: Bim's domain.

Related Characters: Tara, Bim, Raja, Bakul, Misra Sisters (Jaya and Sarla), Misra Brothers (Brij, Manu, and Mulk), Benazir

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 153

Explanation and Analysis

Bim, Tara, and Bakul spend the evening sulking, drowning in mutual resentment. This is how Bim justifies hers: she feels that all the people she lists here, but most of all Tara and Raja, have benefited from her generosity but refused to repay it in kind. She has spent her whole life giving and giving, hoping that someone will finally give back to her, and it has taken decades to realize that it will not happen. Having stayed in Delhi while the others have left, she associates herself with the family home. After all, it has done much the same: raised and sheltered people who have left, and who look down on it upon their return. Bim's sense that her siblings have cheated and taken advantage of her is the root of her resentment, and her attempts to overcome it are the focal point of the novel's first and last parts. Put differently, she will need to find a new framework for understanding her siblings' behavior (and her history with them) if she wants to move on and build new, mutually supportive relationships with them.

❝ She had not known she was going to say that till she had said it. She had only walked in to talk to Baba—cut down his defence and demand some kind of a response from him, some kind of justification from him for herself, her own life, her ways and attitudes, like a blessing from Baba. She had not known she would be led into making such a threat, or blackmailing Baba. She was still hardly aware of what she had said, only something seemed to slam inside her head, painfully, when she looked at Baba.

Related Characters: Tara, Bim, Baba, Raja

Related Themes:

Page Number: 163-164

Explanation and Analysis

As her fury at Tara and Raja grows, Bim starts behaving in increasingly erratic, reckless, and even cruel ways. She starts planning to sell the family's shares in their insurance business over Tara and Bakul's objections, and eventually, she even turns against Baba, telling him that he may have to move in with Raja in Hyderabad if she does ultimately sell the shares. Baba responds with his characteristic silence and a glance of disappointment and fear that Bim alone is capable of recognizing.

Bim quickly catches herself, reminds herself that Baba is absolutely innocent, and starts wondering how she reached this point. She recognizes that she was really trying to reach out, to evoke some reaction from Baba, because *she* wanted affirmation from him. Through this recognition, she turns her attention from her siblings' behavior to her own for the first time. This breakthrough moment eventually leads her to reappraise her relationships with Tara and Raja—and commit to choosing love, forgiveness, and harmony over resentment and distance.

❝ 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, these gashes and wounds in her side that bled, then it was only because her love was imperfect and did not encompass them thoroughly enough, and because it had flaws and inadequacies and did not extend to all equally.

Related Characters: Tara, Bim, Baba, Raja, The Das Mother, The Das Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 165

Explanation and Analysis

The novel's title comes from this description of Bim's epiphany about the importance of love and the power of forgiveness. As she takes a broader view of her life and relationships, she realizes that she is essentially choosing her own unhappiness: while her siblings are willing to forgive and seek reconciliation, she has been the holdout. The solution to her "gashes and wounds" is not to push her loved ones away and sink deeper into isolation, but rather to learn to love them better—which requires accepting their shortcomings and their mistakes in the past.

Specifically, she realizes that her resentment is rooted in misunderstanding, but empathy and grace can guide her toward forgiveness. She still resents her parents for their absence, but she has never fully understood their absence. She has not forgiven Raja because she still feels humiliated by the way he suddenly left her and then became her landlord. And she wishes she could understand what life is like for Baba, so that she could better love and provide for him. Taking on this new attitude requires a leap of faith, but Tara has helped her see that forgiveness will enable her to once again feel the overwhelming love she felt for her siblings as a child—and that is reward enough.

"Soul of my soul . . . Now I am going alone. I grieve for your helplessness, but what is the use? Every torment I have inflicted, every sin I have committed, every wrong I have done, I carry the consequences with me. Strange that I came with nothing into the world, and now go away with this stupendous caravan of sin!"

Related Characters: Bim

Related Themes:

Page Number: 167

Explanation and Analysis

As she contemplates her relationships with her siblings in her study, Bim reads these lines from a history book. They are some of the final words of the great Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, a legendary conqueror who turned India into the world's largest, richest, and most powerful empire—but also inflicted great pain and suffering on the people he ruled. As he faces mortality, Aurangzeb starts to reinterpret his decisions. What will follow him into the afterlife and define him for posterity, he seems to ask: his greatness or the sins he committed to achieve it?

The parallel to Bim's own situation is clear: like Aurangzeb, she has chosen power over love, superiority over equality, and righteousness over conciliation. But also like Aurangzeb, as she takes stock of her life, she starts to wonder if perhaps she has made the wrong choices. Fortunately, whereas Aurangzeb realized this on his deathbed, Bim is only in her fifties. She has plenty of time to live, repair her family relationships, and enjoy the fruits of this labor. So as she considers her options, the right decision becomes more and more obvious.

"Shall I tell Raja—?"

"Yes," Bim urged, her voice flying, buoyant. "Tell him how we're not used to it—Baba and I. Tell him we never travel any more. Tell him we couldn't come—but *he* should come. Bring him back with you, Tara—or tell him to come in the winter. All of them. And he can see Sharma about the firm—and settle things. And see to Hyder Ali's old house—and repair it. Tell him I'm—I'm waiting for him—I want him to come—I want to see him."

As if frightened by this breakdown in Bim's innermost self, this crumbling of a great block of stone and concrete, a dam, to release a flood of roaring water, Tara unexpectedly let go Bim's hand and fell forwards into the car.

Related Characters: Tara, Bim (speaker), Baba, Raja, Hyder Ali , Mr. Sharma

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 175-176

Explanation and Analysis

This is Tara and Bim's final exchange before Tara and her family depart for Hyderabad. Bim agrees not just to see Raja, and not just to work toward repairing their relationship, but also to reintegrate him into all the family dynamics and decisions from which she has excluded him for so long. In this way, she chooses forgiveness over resentment and brings the novel's main conflict to a resolution.

Given Bim's lifelong pattern of extreme stubbornness, Tara is astonished to see her open up and decide to leave behind a decades-old feud in a matter of days. Bim's very "innermost self" seems to be changing, and even if this change is for the better, it can be jarring to watch it firsthand. In fact, Tara is so shocked that she doesn't know what to say and simply disappears into the departing car without a response.

Admittedly, some readers might find this conclusion underwhelming and wish that Desai had actually *shown* Bim and Raja's reconciliation instead. Nevertheless, she closes the novel's plot with Bim's *decision* to forgive because that is the idea at the center of her book: it is within people's power to hold or leave behind resentment, to reject or love the people closest to them. For Desai, there is no need to *show* Bim and Raja repair their relationship, because Bim's decision to do so will make it inevitable.

With her inner eye she saw how her own house and its particular history linked and contained her as well as her whole family with all their separate histories and experiences—not binding them within some dead and airless cell but giving them the soil in which to send down their roots, and food to make them grow and spread, reach out to new experiences and new lives, but always drawing from the same soil, the same secret darkness. That soil contained all time, past and future, in it. It was dark with time, rich with time. It was where her deepest self lived, and the deepest selves of her sister and brothers and all those who shared that time with her.

Related Characters: Bim, Misra Brothers (Brij, Manu, and

Mulk)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 182

Explanation and Analysis

The novel ends with Bim contemplating her siblings' fate and her decision to forgive them while watching Mulk Misra and his guru sing. She remembers a T.S. Eliot line—"*Time the destroyer is time the preserver*"—and realizes that *time* is what has both sundered and reunified her family. As she explains here, the beauty of family is precisely that people can always return to it in a new form. Family gives people the security of consistency, but also permission to change. People's deep connections to their family members can never completely disappear, even if they separate for decades, like Bim and Raja. After sharing so much time and so many experiences, Bim and her siblings will always intimately know one another's "deepest selves," whether they admit it or not.

Of course, that time and those experiences have centered on the family's house on Bela Road, which has remained almost exactly the same over the decades—and served as the setting for nearly the entire novel. (This scene is a rare exception.) The home roots the Das siblings without limiting them, nourishes them without suffocating them, and connects them to the past without drowning them in it. In this respect, it is much like the kind of loving parents that they never got to have. But Bim has realized that now, as adults, they can provide this kind of love to each other and their children—and thus break the cycle of suspicion and resentment that has tainted their relationships and limited their happiness for so long.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1

It's 1980 at the Das family's house on Bela Road in Old Delhi. Tara wakes to birds singing at dawn and walks out on the veranda. She sees her sister Bim down below, strolling on the only well-maintained part of their yard, a ribbon of grass between two rose beds. Tara remembers walking there as a young girl and finding a snail, which her mother found disgusting. She goes down to join Bim, who bends down and shakes a dying rose. Its petals fall, and one lands on a snail, which Tara picks up in wonder. Bim finds this childish, and she remembers a poem she read by her ill brother Raja's bedside one summer. Tara says that Bim looks like their mother.

Desai begins her novel with characteristically rich imagery that emphasizes how the natural environment connects the past to the future: the house and the nature in and around it have stayed the same, even as Tara has grown. But returning gives Tara an opportunity to reconnect with her past. While readers do not yet know about Tara and Bim's relationship—or even that Tara has left India and the house while Bim has stayed—there is clearly a sense of conflict beneath their loving sisterly connection. Indeed, since the novel revolves around this family drama, Desai purposefully reveals crucial details about the family history little by little over the course of the novel for the sake of pacing and mystery. To this end, it's not yet clear what Bim's resemblance to her mother says about her, or whether Tara means it positively or negatively.

Bim asks if Tara slept after coming from the airport. Tara admits that she didn't, thanks to excitement and the barking dog, Badshah. But Bim says she finds Badshah's voice beautiful. Badshah runs over to dig at the snail, and Bim caresses him and explains that he's now 12. Tara says that **the house** is still the same. Bim asks if she wanted it to change and comments that people prefer to grow up and move away. Tara notes that Bim didn't, and Bim replies that she and their brother Baba don't travel, unlike Tara and her husband Bakul. Bim bitterly asks if Tara wishes Raja and Aunt Mira were there.

Tara and Bim's conversation reveals traces of resentment. Tara judges Bim for never moving or updating the house, as though this means she has refused to grow up or move forward in life. And Bim judges Tara for seeing herself as superior because she did *move away, as well as for her enduring affection for family members with whom Bim has fought: Raja and Aunt Mira. Badshah digging for the snail represents how the sisters are at odds—they see the same things through opposite perspectives. Bim sees Badshah as beautiful, but Tara sees him as grotesque, and while Tara finds the snail beautiful, Bim finds Tara's obsession with it childish.*

Bim comments that "Old Delhi does not change. It only decays." Her students compare it to a cemetery and prefer the activity of New Delhi, but Bim and Baba never leave. Most people who leave go forever. But Tara notes that she and Bakul like returning home. They will go to a wedding in Hyderabad, and then Bakul will tour around India. (As a diplomat, he can't lose touch with his country.) But Tara must go to their brother Raja's house for another wedding, which she hopes Bim and Baba can attend.

Bim's sees Delhi much the way Tara sees her*: as decaying, not growing. But Bim's comments also point to ongoing political conflicts and social transitions in independent India, where people's obsession with newness may be leading them to lose sight of their history and traditions. This is particularly true in Delhi, which is full of centuries-old monuments as well as the nation's new elite. Crucially, most of the monuments date from the era of Muslim rule, and the nation's new elite is nominally secular but predominantly Hindu. Tara goes on to explain the purpose of her trip. Combined with her previous comments, Bim's disinterest in attending the wedding points to an enduring conflict between her and Raja.*

Before Bim can answer, Badshah notices the cat stuck in a tree; it starts to howl at her. Bim approaches the tree, gets the cat to slowly climb down, and embraces her. Bim accuses Tara of assuming that she only loves animals because she doesn't have children.

Bim's accusations reflect resentment and paranoia, but also underline how differently she and Tara now live. Unlike Tara, Bim has neither married nor had children. While Tara may attribute this to a lack of opportunity, readers will soon learn that it was actually a deliberate choice.

Baba's **record-player** screeches on, and Tara notices Bakul sitting on the veranda, waiting for tea. Walking back to the veranda, Bim explains that Baba still listens to the same records. While Tara serves Bakul's tea, Bim pours out most of his milk in the cat's bowl. The deafening record finally ends, and white-haired Baba stumbles onto the veranda for his tea. Bim gives him milk with sugar, and everyone—including the cat—watches Baba drink it in silence. Bim comments that the cat doesn't like humans drinking her milk.

The fact that Baba keeps listening to the same records suggests that he, like Bim, has not changed in many years. His gramophone is as deafening as Badshah's bark; the unusual volume of both suggests that Bim and Baba simply do not remember how most people live (or recognize what would make most people uncomfortable). Bim's decision to give milk to the cat instead of Bakul again shows that she doesn't necessarily have fond feelings toward her family.

"Our first morning in Delhi," Bakul announces, and Tara smiles and asks what they should do. Bim says her students are coming for make-up lessons before summer vacation. Bakul says that he and Tara should visit his relatives, and Bim asks Baba several times if he will go in to the office. He smiles, obliviously stares at the floor, and says nothing. Everyone returns to their bedrooms, and Baba puts on a new record.

Nobody in the family truly sees eye-to-eye. Bim refuses to modify her schedule for her family visit, but Bakul is no better: he tries to pull Tara away from her family and get her to spend time with his instead. Baba's lack of response is the first clear sign in the novel of his developmental disability.

In their room, Bakul says that he and Tara should have stayed with his relatives in central New Delhi. He also tells her that it's time to go out. Tara says she would rather stay at home with her siblings, but Bakul angrily says that she can't and enters the bathroom. Returning to the veranda, Tara gazes at the guava trees, remembers eating their fruit, and laments that her daughters don't understand "such rustic pleasures." She wonders why Bim, Baba, and **the house** haven't changed, and she decides that Bakul is right to resent them.

Bakul's stubbornness and anger show that he is no better than Bim: he also resents the family, and he also doesn't truly see or value Tara's needs. Of course, this reflects a key gender dynamic that repeats throughout the novel: women sacrifice their own needs in order to take care of men's needs. Meanwhile, Tara's reaction to seeing the guava tree reflects her daughters' wealthy American upbringing and shows that she remains torn between her past and present selves—the lives she has lived with Bim and Bakul, respectively.

Tara finds Baba sitting on the bed and listening to the **gramophone** in his large, empty room. She asks if he wants a ride, and he shakes his head. Then Tara asks if he ever goes to the office, and he smiles and looks down. She asks again, forcefully, and he says nothing. Both frustrated at his silence and mad at herself for judging him, she says she'll ask Bim instead, and Baba looks up and nods happily. Tara returns to her room.

Baba's silence makes it all the more clear that he is somehow neurodivergent, but readers still don't know if this is a lifelong condition or something he has acquired in middle age. Clearly, he is more comfortable following Bim's decisions than making his own. In a way, he reflects the family's troubling dynamics, writ large: he remains isolated because he cannot communicate across the distance separating him from his family members.

Baba's record starts to repeat due to his **gramophone**'s worn-out needle, so he throws it away and paces around his room. Anxious at hearing other sounds, he hastily gets dressed and stumbles outside, through the gate and onto the road. Tara stops herself from yelling to him, unaware that his adventures always lead to trouble. Baba hesitates, then shuffles out into the dusty road, worried he will get hit. He hears a crash, but it is a horse-drawn cart falling over. The driver whips the horse until it bleeds, and Baba covers his eyes and ears and runs back inside, where Tara takes him to his bed and gives him water.

Desai gives the reader a glimpse into Baba's mind. His anxiety shows that the gramophone's familiar sounds calm him—in a way, since he cannot speak, the gramophone serves as a substitute voice. It's significant that Tara doesn't know how dangerous it is for Baba to go outside—even though she clearly cares for him, she has also grown distant from him, and only Bim truly understands his needs. The driver whipping the horse reflects the chaos, danger, and cruelty of the outside world—and may explain why Bim and Baba choose to avoid it.

While Tara looks for Bim, Bakul angrily asks why she isn't getting ready to leave. She murmurs that she wants to stay, but instead of exploding in anger, he calls her "weak-willed and helpless and defeatist." He says she's unhappy at home and should come stay with his uncle, but she shakes her head. He leaves, and on his way out, he passes Bim and the young girls she's teaching, who say they want to learn about empresses instead of emperors. Bakul decides that Bim has all the "decision, firmness, [and] resolve" that Tara lacks, but she is too plain and unattractive. His uncle's driver arrives, and he leaves.

Bakul appears to be unwilling or unable to see things from Tara's perspective. On the one hand, his characterization of her as "weak-willed and helpless and defeatist" doesn't seem consistent with her relationship with Bim—who resents her for choosing to move away and live an independent life. On the other hand, readers will soon learn that Bim used *to see Tara in much the same terms, and that Bakul worries about her reverting to her past self when she visits home. Bakul's evaluation of Bim suggests that he is trying to decide if he should have tried to marry her instead. Like Bim's insistence on teaching about emperors instead of empresses, this reflects men's unquestioned dominance in much of Indian culture.*

Later that morning, Tara watches Bim bring her students into the yard and buy them ice cream from a man on his bicycle. She buys one for Tara too, takes one into Baba's room, and then jokingly scolds one of her students for giving her leftovers to Badshah. The girls leave, Baba's **gramophone** turns back on, and Tara feels at home.

Bim's gentle affection for her students contrasts sharply with her cruel indifference toward Tara. But it's also redeeming: it shows that Bim hasn't become a mean person. *(She's just angry at Tara.) Seeing the sister she once knew and loved, Tara eases into the comfort of home, which she hasn't felt in many years.*

Bakul returns in the afternoon. While he naps, Tara reads and contemplates **the house**'s old, worn-out decorations. She nearly goes out to the veranda, but she gets a glimpse of the sweltering afternoon sun and decides against it. She remembers how Bakul stayed busy in the Moscow winter by filling his calendar—which he taught Tara to do, too. But here, at home in summer, she cannot. She feels her mother and father's spirits in the room where they used to play bridge all day with their friends. She reminisces about napping with the cat in Aunt Mira's room, and she remembers seeing her father give her mother an injection and thinking that he was killing her.

It's ironic that Bakul complains about Tara's passivity and weakness of will, but spends the day being driven around by a chauffeur and the afternoon sleeping. This suggests that the scorching Delhi summer is getting to him, too. The details about their life in Moscow suggests that they have traveled all over the world to follow his diplomatic career, and Tara's memories of the house offer glimpses into her parents—who seem to have been distant, fearsome figures.

From the roof, Bim and Tara look down onto the garden, the neighborhood, and the muddy Jumna river, which Tara says she can't believe they used to play in as girls. Joking that Tara has become a snob, Bim points out that the Jumna is holy and that she wants her ashes thrown there when she dies. Bim reminisces about riding with the ferryman and watching Hyder Ali Sahib pass on his horse, but Tara says that she wasn't there—only Bim and Raja. Tara remembers Raja reciting poems there on the roof, but Bim calls Raja's work terrible, offers to read her some of his old poems, and threatens to shred them.

Tara's comments about the river and Bim's accusations of snobbery reflect both how different they have become and how differently they remember their childhoods. While Tara seems to have lost touch with India's traditions, yet chosen motherhood over education and a career, Bim has made a career out of teaching India's history. The contrast between Bim and Raja going to the river together as children (without Tara) and Bim criticizing Raja's poetry today again reflects how a breach has formed in their relationship.

Bim leads Tara into her room, which used to be their father's office and is still full of file cabinets and stacks of paper. She pulls out Raja's poems, but Tara realizes that they are in Urdu, which she can't read. Bim finds an English letter from Raja and hands it to Tara. Raja writes that he has inherited his father-in-law Hyder Ali Sahib's property but won't raise the rent on Bim and Baba. Tara remembers Hyder Ali, their onetime landlord, who lived across the street and was greatly respected in Old Delhi. He left in the Partition and sold all his property—except **this house**.

Bim's room seems frozen in time. The stacks of her father's documents suggest both that she has inherited her parents' role as master of her house and that she struggles to move on from the past. It's significant that Raja wrote in Urdu—the old language of Delhi's high culture and Muslim leaders, which has been on the decline in India since the Partition that Hyder Ali fled. This suggests that Raja and Hyder Ali were able to connect across Hindu-Muslim lines in a way that is no longer common.

Bim explains that she can't attend Raja's daughter Moyna's wedding because she feels guilty to still be in **the house**, paying so little for rent. Flipping through a history book, Tara proposes they go to the wedding and move on, but Bim says she'll never forget the insult in the letter. Tara can't believe that Bim and Raja are now at odds—they were so inseparable growing up. She encourages Bim to tear up the letter, but Bim insists on keeping it.

Bim appears to have brought Tara to the office specifically to show her Raja's letter, which is the main source of her discontent with him. While Bim claims to feel bad about not paying enough *rent, it's also possible that she finds it unfathomable that her brother would charge her rent at all. She clearly refuses to forgive Raja—and her struggle to do so will form the backbone of the novel's plot.*

Tara, Bim, and Bakul visit the Misras, the neighbors and mutual friends who introduced Tara and Bakul. While the Misra sisters teach dance classes inside, Tara and Bakul join the Misra brothers, who are lounging on the porch. Bim goes to the veranda to chat with the Misra father, who recounts how he was supposed to study law in England, until a swami (holy man) told his father to send his son east instead. So he ended up working in a family friend's lumber business in Burma instead.

Throughout this novel, the Misra family will serve as a foil to the Das family (Tara, Bim, Baba, and Raja). Much like Bim, the Misras still live in the same house where they grew up. Bim's decision to talk to the father reflects both her distaste for the siblings and the way her personality has aged beyond her years. Beyond highlighting how whims and randomness can shape family dynamics and people's lives in profound ways, the father's story about working in Burma also indicates that—contrary to Bim's earlier comment—some people do *leave Old Delhi and later return.*

Bim jokes about grading exam papers and the Misra father comments that she overworks herself—like his own daughters. Meanwhile, his useless sons just sit around, drink, and launch failed business ventures. Worrying about the Misra family's future, Bim feels relieved that their father's old insurance business still keeps the family afloat. Misra Uncle complains that the doctor won't let him smoke or drink anymore, then he admits that he used to be even worse than his sons.

The Misra family's gender dynamics largely reflect the Das family's—and specifically the conflict between Bim (who is a teacher, like the Misra sisters) and Raja (who lives off family money and does not work, like the Misra brothers). The Misra father's comments about his past vices suggest that no matter how much people like Bim seem never to change, it actually is possible for people to continue growing, even later in life. He points to how younger generations grow into older ones, adopting habits and social roles they used to see in their parents and elders.

One of the Misra sisters, Jaya, comes to bring Bim downstairs. She promises that the cook is bringing the Misra father's food. Down in the garden, the Misra brothers ask Bakul how he explains India's political situation to foreign reporters, and Bakul replies that he only comments on India's strengths and ancient culture, not its poverty or internal politics. Bim jokes that it's easy to forget India's problems while living abroad. Tara jokes that Bim doesn't see those problems because she scarcely leaves **the house**. While Bakul lights Bim's cigarette, Tara observes that she used to be prettier than Bim when they were young, but Bim is now more attractive in middle age. Perhaps it's Bim's cigarette, or maybe it's because she never married.

Bakul's comments demonstrate that he cares primarily about appearances and status, not truth or India's development. To some extent, this may be an understandable response to foreigners' prejudices about India, but it also suggests that he is too selfish and superficial to honorably represent his country. Tara and Bim's spate over whether Bim or Bakul has a truer knowledge of India raises key questions about class, power, and national identity. They are both social elites, and he works for the government but clearly has lost touch with the country's traditions, culture, and reality, while she teaches its history for a living but knows little beyond her house's walls. Lastly, in addition to suggesting that beauty standards are different for women of different ages, Tara's thoughts about Bim again point to the way that people and their relationships inevitably change over time.

The Misra brothers ask about the price of scotch in Washington, and the Misra sisters say it's time for Tara's daughters to marry—they are 16 and 17. The youngest brother, Mulk, drunkenly sings to himself, then stands up and starts yelling at the family for firing his musical accompanists because they ran out of money. Bakul calmly leads the incoherent, crying Mulk away.

The Misras' concerns are typical of gender roles among the Indian elite: scotch is many (if not most) well-to-do Indian men's preferred drink, and women's status depends largely on marriage. It is still typical for many Indian women to marry in their late teens—although less so among urban elites now than during the 1980s. Mulk's incoherent outburst shows that the Misra family's income isn't enough to keep up with their social class—but it's also something readers should keep in mind for later.

Bim hears Badshah barking and says it's time to go home. The Misra sisters insist they stay for dinner, but Bim remembers that there was very little to eat last time, so she leads Tara and Bakul to the gate. The Misra sisters reminisce about a picnic they all once shared. While crossing the street, Bakul points out that Hyder Ali's old house is falling apart, and Bim explains that the only person living there is a poor, opium-addicted relative of Ali's from Hyderabad.

Mulk's troubled music career and the Misra sisters' invitation to a likely meager dinner demonstrate the gap between their outward class status and their inward reality. They seem like decaying shells of their former selves—much like Bim, in Tara's eyes. The picnic is another detail readers should keep in mind going forward.

Back at home, Tara and Bim pass the sleeping Baba, who looks like a shell of his former self. As they walk through the garden, Bim comments that she used to feel Aunt Mira's presence there after her death in the summer of 1947, and she quotes a verse from T. S. Eliot. Unbeknownst to Bim, Tara has spent her whole life "both admiring and resenting" Bim and Raja's knowledge of poetry. Bim and Tara remember the turmoil of that summer, which will forever define their youth in their minds. They solemnly agree that they are grateful to have grown up.

Just as Baba's past self is more resonant and meaningful to the sisters than his present one, Aunt Mira lingers in the garden primarily through what she used to be—and the way the sisters remember her. Poetry not only unifies Bim and Raja, but also marks their sophistication and connection to the world beyond India. In a way, then, it's ironic that Tara now leads a sophisticated, jet-setting life, while Bim stays at home. The sisters' conversation about 1947 foreshadows the next part of the novel, which will return to that fateful era of their lives.

PART 2

It's the summer of 1947. Bim watches the flames in the distance from the terrace each night, then reports what she sees to Raja, who is too sick to climb the stairs. As she gives him sponge baths, he asks for any signs of Hyder Ali, whose house is empty. Bim figures that Ali and his family left quietly and would return when it becomes safe, but Raja said that India will never again be safe for Muslims.

The summer of 1947 is the summer of the Partition and Indian Independence. British India is being split into two states: India, which is legally secular but demographically Hindu-majority, and Pakistan, which is a legally Islamic state for South Asia's Muslims. Non-Muslims—particularly Hindus and Sikhs—are fleeing Pakistan for India, and particularly Delhi. Meanwhile, many of Delhi's Muslims are fleeing to Pakistan and the Muslim-ruled princely state of Hyderabad, in part because they are facing violent riots. These riots are why Delhi is on fire, and why Raja is worried for Hyder Ali. It's telling that Bim can watch them at a distance, from the comfort of her family's large home and bourgeois neighborhood.

All summer, Bim sooths Raja by reading him poetry. He loves British writers like Byron, Tennyson, and Swinburne, but he invariably gets tired of them and starts quoting couplets in Urdu instead. But Bim doesn't know Urdu, the language of Delhi's literature and Muslim rulers, which Raja learned in school as a child. Upon learning of the neighbor child's interest in poetry, Hyder Ali had invited Raja to visit his vast library. He started spending hours there every day, perusing Ali's books under the librarian's supervision and borrowing some to take home. As he grew up, he started attending parties and even reciting Urdu poetry in Ali's home. Soon, he began writing his own poetry.

Bim and Raja's close relationship as children contrasts with their cold, distant one as adults. While Bim is taking care of Raja because she is the only capable adult in the household, it's still telling that this responsibility falls on her, as a woman—and that Raja will never repay her in any way. Raja's childhood interest in Urdu poetry and relationship with Hyder Ali demonstrate how it was possible for Hindus and Muslims to live side-by-side and share culture before the Partition. But much of Das's work—and Raja's life in this novel—revolves around the desire to reclaim this lost sense of harmony. Similarly, Bim and Raja's diverse choice of poetry demonstrates how several different cultural influences have shaped India in general and its longtime capital, Delhi, in particular.

The summer after finishing school, Raja asked Raja's father to sign his application form for the Jamia Millia college of Islamic studies. His father refused and tore up the form. They argued fiercely all summer until his father finally explained one day that, with the struggle for independence raging and calls for the formation of Pakistan spreading, it would not be safe for a Hindu boy in a Muslim college once riots inevitably broke out. Both Hindus and Muslims would probably try to kill him. For the rest of the summer, Raja's father took any opportunity he found to debate Raja about the risks of studying at Jamia Millia. Raja eventually gave in, and his father went back to ignoring the whole family, like he used to.

Raja's father is probably right that it would be too dangerous for a Hindu boy to study in an Islamic college. But he goes about proving his point in a stubborn, combative, and authoritarian way, which demonstrates that he clearly was not a nurturing or capable parent. Indeed, he doesn't seem to take any interest in his son at all when power and control are not at stake. In contrast, Hyder Ali serves as a truer father figure to Raja: he spends time with him, educates him, and takes his interests and desires seriously. Where Raja's father sees only the potential for Hindu-Muslim strife, Hyder Ali sees an opportunity to raise a young man committed to religious harmony.

One day that summer, the family's mother felt sick, so she stayed home instead of going to play bridge at the club. The father returned home to find her in a coma, and the ambulance brought her to the hospital. The father visited her every night, but she never reawakened and soon died. The kids neither saw her in the hospital nor attended her funeral. But her absence made little difference at home, because she scarcely saw the children even when she was alive.

The circumstances surrounding the mother's death underlines the great emotional distance between the Das parents and their children. The father didn't bring the kids to visit her, and they scarcely would have wanted to. Readers will learn more about the mother's life, personality, health, and parenting in Part III of the novel—but none of it will be particularly flattering.

When the father decided that Raja would study English literature at the Hindu College, Raja locked himself in his room for a week, refusing to visit Hyder Ali's house or play with his siblings. But he eventually befriended the Misra brothers, who went to the same college. He took a liking to English poetry, which he started sharing with Bim. He avoided talking politics with his classmates, who were mostly Hindu nationalists, but he started telling Bim that he would become a hero, like Lord Byron, who died after joining the Greek War of Independence.

Raja turned to English poetry when he could no longer study Urdu poetry—which parallels the way Delhi was first ruled in Urdu by the Mughals and later in English by the British Empire. His love for literature is one of the many autobiographical elements in this novel: Anita Desai has discussed how she grew up in a multilingual environment and scarcely spoke *English, but she discovered a passion for the language through literature. (This is why she writes in English as opposed to any of the other languages with which she grew up.) Raja's dream of Byronic heroism shows how literature can inspire people, but also raises the question of how gender shapes notions of heroism and power: Bim will develop similar dreams, but only one of them will get the chance to pursue them.*

When Raja resumed going to Hyder Ali's house for parties, Aunt Mira began whispering that it wasn't safe for him to mix with Muslims. Raja ignored this, but he noticed that Hyder Ali's gatherings were getting smaller and Hyder Ali's friends were reluctant to discuss Pakistan in his presence. Meanwhile, upon realizing that he accepted the idea of Pakistan, his classmates turned against him and called him a traitor. His closest school friends even tried to recruit him into Hindu nationalist terrorist groups.

Hindu-Muslim tensions grew even in the Das family's well-off, progressive neighborhood. This happened not because either group felt any animosity toward the other, but rather because both feared for their safety and reputation. Of course, this is similar to the resentment that drives Bim and Raja apart as adults. In fact, the Partition and the conflict between Bim and Raja serve as metaphors for one another throughout the novel.

Raja fell ill and stopped going to school. When the doctor diagnosed him with tuberculosis, Raja's family and friends scarcely believed it. Raja blamed stress and fatigue from the intensity of literature and politics. His school friends visited to try and convince him to take up arms, but he rejected them and threatened to inform the police. They reported *him* to the police instead, and an undercover officer started lingering outside **the house** every night. Raja was thrilled, then worried, and finally frightened for Hyder Ali's family. After discussing his fears with Bim, she would either read him poetry or go to the roof and report on what she saw. But nothing ever happened in the area or in Hyder Ali's empty house. When she pointed this out, he would scream at her to go check on Hyder Ali.

The undercover policeman initially seems to fulfill Raja's dreams of merging his two great loves, politics and literature, through a kind of Byronic heroism. But he then realizes that it represents a serious threat to his safety and reflects the dangers that people who try to bridge the Hindu-Muslim divide will start to face in the future, as the periodic religious violence that has marked India's past give way to the constant, explosive tensions that will mark its future. Raja foolishly takes his anger out on Bim, his caretaker, apparently failing to realize that such behavior may have repercussions in the future.

Besides Bim, nobody else was around to take care of Raja. Aunt Mira didn't understand his illness, so she withdrew from him. Tara, meanwhile, spent most of her time with the Misra sisters. Aunt Mira would wait for her to return on the porch, then go to bed in the early evening, at which time Bim would take her place. Baba would sit near her on the steps to the veranda, playing with pebbles and saying nothing, as usual. Bim would stare uneasily at the gate, waiting for Tara to return and wondering why she would spend time with the boring, unsophisticated Misra girls.

Bim ends up taking care of Raja simply because he has no other option. Notably, his father is scarcely present—likely because he sees caretaking as women's work—and Aunt Mira is incapable, even though she has been the children's main nurturing, maternal presence. But there is a reward in this caretaking for Bim: besides Bim and Raja, everyone in the family is isolated and unhappy. Bim's thoughts about the Misra sisters explain why, in Part I, she preferred to chat with their father: she has never much liked them. But her feelings may be as much about Tara failing to care for Raja as her genuine opinion of the Misras.

One evening, Tara returned with Bakul. They had gone together to a dance at the club with the Misra sisters. Bakul politely asked if Tara could come to a party at his house. Bim and Aunt Mira agreed, awestruck that Tara had met such a handsome young gentleman. After Bakul left, Bim asked Aunt Mira if he and Tara might get married. Drinking liquor from her tumbler, Aunt Mira said yes.

Tara and Bakul meet through the Misras, which helps explain why they all remain close later in life. Bim, Tara, and Aunt Mira all seem to tacitly understand that Tara is attracted to Bakul because he offers her a way out of her otherwise unhappy life in Delhi.

Soon thereafter, the father dies when his car hits a bump, the door opens, and he flies out and breaks his neck. But as with the mother, his absence makes little difference at home. He leaves behind his clothing, files, and car—which Raja sells to a nearby garage. It ends up in the junkyard. When the gardener has to return to his village, the driver takes over his job.

Like the Das mother, the Das father dies in an unpredictable accident—which would constitute a tragedy in most families, but scarcely registers in this one. Indeed, the novel describes coping with his death as more of a logistical challenge than an emotional one. Still, the children are now on their own, and Raja becomes the family's patriarch. This context can all help readers understand the great breach that has formed between Raja and Bim by the events of Part I in 1980.

The father's junior business partner, Mr. Sharma, visits to offer Raja his father's role in the insurance firm. Raja refuses and proposes Baba take the position, but Bim protests, noting Baba's cognitive limitations. Sharma assures her that they only need the family name and Baba's signature, and Raja concludes that Baba can go into the office and sign papers as needed. Sharma agrees and admits that this is all their father had done for many years: his employees did all the real work. Raja returns to bed, and when Bim comes to take his temperature, he insists that business and money don't matter like the riots and Partition do. But Bim reminds Raja that they have to pay rent, feed the family, take care of Baba, and get Tara married.

While Bim clearly understands the financial necessities involved in running a household—perhaps because she is a woman who has been forced to take on caretaking roles—Raja overlooks them because of his idealistic obsession with politics and literature. This leads him to reject the role that is both his birthright and his obligation. While it's deeply ironic that the job goes to Baba—who is incapable of most everyday activities, not to mention running an insurance company—it's also telling that the Das father did very little serious work over the last several years. This indicates that he wasn't distant from his children because he was too busy with work—rather, he arguably tried to appear busy with work so that he didn't have to deal with his children.

Worried, Bim sits Dr. Biswas down later that evening to ask about Raja's condition. The nervous doctor promises that Raja's infection is mild and that he will heal with time. The doctor starts to awkwardly stutter when Bim mentions her father. When the doctor says he knows that the family is in difficult circumstances and Raja must take their father's place, Bim laughs and calls Janaki for tea. The doctor again promises that Raja will improve, especially once the summer passes, and that it won't be necessary to send him to a sanatorium in the hills. Bim doesn't fully believe him. The doctor drinks his tea in a single gup and leaves.

The doctor and Bim couldn't be any more different: he is awkward, conventional, and blindly optimistic, but he enjoys the social advantages of being a man; she is confident, freethinking, cynical, and trapped at home by the obligations associated with Indian womanhood. These differences will become more important later. Bim laughs at the suggestion that Raja will take her father's place because she knows that she is the only one truly capable of leading the family.

Bakul and Tara return home and chat with Bim, who looks weak and grim. Bakul explains that he's being sent to a posting in Ceylon, and Bim asks when the independence and partition will happen. He admits that it will be soon, and "there will be trouble," but he claims that the government is making preparations and that this neighborhood will be safe. He comments that Hyder Ali's family is probably safe, but he promises to ask for more specific information soon. After Bim leaves, Bakul asks Tara to follow him and leave her worries behind.

There's a great symbolic importance to Bakul leaving India as soon as it achieves independence: along with his nonchalant predictions about the coming violence, this further shows that he is completely disconnected from the realities of the country he represents as a diplomat. Still, he finally promises to give Tara the escape from Delhi that she has been seeking—and Raja the information he needs about Hyder Ali.

As riots spread, Raja gets a letter from Hyder Ali Sahib, who reports that his family is all safe in Hyderabad and asks Raja to check on his house. Since Raja is too sick, Bim and Baba go to the house, which is eerily dark and empty, with only some furniture remaining. They check every room except the library, which Bim doesn't want to open because it's so sacred to Raja. Hyder Ali's daughter Benazir's room is a mess. Baba notices Benazir's **gramophone** and her collection of British and American records. He refuses to leave them, and then Bim starts to walk away. They find Hyder Ali's dog Begum on the veranda and decide to take her home.

Raja ends up hearing from Hyder Ali directly, rather than learning about his whereabouts through Bakul. It's significant that Hyder Ali chose to move not to Pakistan but to Hyderabad—a princely state ruled by a Muslim Nawab, which will soon be annexed into India. Bim and Baba's visit to Hyder Ali's house also reveals the backstory behind Baba's gramophone, even if it isn't clear why *Baba finds the record player so fascinating. It's also noteworthy that most of Benazir's records are British and American songs: this speaks to both the global influences that have shaped Indian life and the colonial past that India is in the process of leaving behind.*

Bim and Baba find a servant (Bhakta) in his quarters. He tells them to be quiet, lest the police find and torture him to get information on Hyder Ali, who is hiding because fellow Hindus will kill him if they learn he was working for a Muslim family. Bim offers to let him stay with them, and they pass back through the house. On the way, Baba runs off. He returns with Benazir's **gramophone** and records. They all return home, where Raja is standing on the veranda and notices the gramophone. He tells Bim to go visit Aunt Mira, who is unwell.

Bhakta's fears show that, unlike the wealthy Das family and their neighbors, working-class Hindus and Muslims alike face serious threats from the riots. This reflects how Partition has led to a serious deterioration in Hindu-Muslim relations—which Hyder Ali's empty house arguably represents. Like Bim's decision to take Bhakta in, Raja's insistence that she go check on Aunt Mira (and his refusal to do it himself) reflects the way that caretaking obligations have taken over her life and come to define her.

Bim finds Aunt Mira stumbling about, with her blouse torn and her sari half unraveled, clutching a bottle of liquor. When Bim approaches to hug her, she steps away and then trips over her clothes, spilling her bottle. As the **gramophone** starts to play in Baba's room next door, Aunt Mira feels that her life is overwhelming her, but can be contained in a bottle. She drinks, which burns her insides, and she thinks that Raja and Bim are like two flames trying to be heroes, casting menacing shadows on the walls. Frightened and desperate, she reaches for the bottle again.

While readers have already seen Aunt Mira drinking, they don't know how long she has been doing so, whether it has been steadily worsening, or why she hits a breaking point now. Perhaps she has lost her sense of purpose because the children have grown up. This reading is supported by the fact that her episode coincides with the first sounds of Baba's gramophone, something that he has chosen for himself, he does independently, and separates him from others. Regardless, Desai's rich description of Aunt Mira's delirium reflects many of the central patterns her life shares with the children's, including people's failure to achieve their dreams and their strategies for coping with isolation.

Dr. Biswas starts visiting the family more often to treat both Aunt Mira's drinking and Raja's fevers. Baba's records play constantly, and Bim rushes around **the house**, trying to hold things together. Dr. Biswas asks how Bim can tolerate Baba's music and invites her to a classical concert on the weekend. She declines, since she has three sick patients to attend to, and she starts to laugh at the absurdity of the situation.

With her time split among three patients (Baba, Raja, and Aunt Mira) and no other family members around to support her, Bim must put her own needs and life plans on hold and give herself up entirely to caretaking. This shows how Indian culture's default assumption that women serve as caretakers greatly limits their potential. Meanwhile, Dr. Biswas draws a contrast between the refined classical music that he appreciates and the vulgar popular music that Baba listens to, but Bim has little interest in this idea—and Desai raises the question of whether one is a more valid or valuable form of culture than the other.

After bringing Tara home, Bakul asks why Bim is already greying. She doesn't believe it until he shows her. Bakul then asks if he can marry Tara, and Bim says he doesn't need her permission. He offers to wait, in case Bim needs Tara at home, but Bim encourages him to marry her now. He says his parents have agreed, so that he and Tara can get married in time to go to Ceylon together. And he jokes that he'll buy Tara hair dye before the wedding.

Bim has essentially become the head of household. Bakul treats her as such by asking her permission to marry Tara (as he would ordinarily ask her father), and her grey hair suggests that this new role is already taking an emotional toll. Bim clearly knows that moving away will be best for Tara, so selflessly pushes for this to happen, but it's unclear if Tara ever learns about it. Thus, while this scene gives important context to Bim and Tara's separation and conflicts later in life, it also shows their underlying love and good will.

Tara's marriage, Baba's **gramophone**, and Aunt Mira's alcoholism bring Raja and Bim closer than ever. They spend their time reading and writing poetry, but Bim eventually gets tired of Raja's Urdu verses. She invites Dr. Biswas to play his violin for them, but he awkwardly declines and invites her to a concert instead. She agrees. After the concert, they get drinks at a restaurant where a band is playing German waltzes. Dr. Biswas explains how Mozart changed his life. He reminisces about his medical school days in Berlin, and laments losing his music habit when he moved home to India. Bim jokes that she should be a nurse but explains that she would rather finish her history degree and become a teacher.

Raja and Bim's close relationship is perhaps their only consolation in an otherwise brutally difficult summer. Much like Bakul does for Tara, Dr. Biswas offers Bim a way out of the house—even if she can barely tolerate their evident lack of connection. Dr. Biswas's attempt to override Bim's career choices reflects both his inability to see her as his equal and the way gender norms confine women to certain female-coded professions (like nursing). Lastly, while Dr. Biswas's passion for classical music further demonstrates how varied artistic influences enrich Indian culture, it also suggests that his obsession with Western culture may lead him to lose track of India's own traditional cultural richness.

The bus ride takes Bim and Dr. Biswas past the huts full of new refugees. When they reach **Bim's house**, Dr. Biswas tells Bim how much he enjoyed the evening and asks her to meet his mother. She half-heartedly agrees and rushes inside to Raja, who jokes about Biswas playing the violin and singing Tagore.

The refugees' huts demonstrate how Partition is reshaping life in Delhi. While the newcomers face urgent humanitarian needs—and Bim will soon start dedicating her precious free time to helping them—Dr. Biswas remains engrossed in his romantic fantasies. He simply doesn't realize that Bim has no interest in him.

With cooler weather, Raja's health starts to improve, and Bim goes back to school and starts volunteering at a clinic for refugee women. Aunt Mira now spends most of her time drunk in her room. One day, Raja and Bim start wondering where she finds the alcohol. Bim blames Bhakta. One day, Aunt Mira drops a glass and cuts her hands. Bim rushes over to help her, and then Dr. Biswas comes to bandage her up. Aunt Mira feels trapped in her bandages and yearns to break free from her bed. She feels that her room is like a prison cell and that only the bottle can save her.

Aunt Mira's drinking has rendered her infirm: she cannot even care for herself anymore, not to mention anyone else. Her dreams of freedom parallel Tara, Bim, and Raja's: everyone seems to want to escape the Das family house, but so far, only Tara has succeeded. Desai intentionally doesn't share Aunt Mira's backstory—and thus the reasons for her alcoholism—until Part III of the novel.

Bim regrets going to tea with the overdressed, heavily made-up Mrs. Biswas. Dr. Biswas doesn't touch his plate of biscuits and sweets, and Mrs. Biswas scowls and complains about her dead husband, her arthritis, the servant boy, and how hard her son works. She tells him to play the violin. He tells her to sing her Tagore songs instead, and their disagreement grows into a heated argument. As if this weren't uncomfortable enough, Bim gets up to leave at precisely the same moment when Mrs. Biswas agrees to sing. Mrs. Biswas judgmentally agrees that Bim can go, and Dr. Biswas insists on following her home, even after she refuses. They pass a crowd listening to a radio in a tea shop—Gandhi has just been murdered. Dr. Biswas briefly stops to listen to the news. Bim runs to catch her bus and waves goodbye to him.

Not only does Dr. Biswas's close but combative relationship with his mother explain his immaturity and difficulty relating to others, but it also provides a significant contrast to the Das siblings' relationship with their own distant parents (which forced them to become self-sufficient at an early age). Dr. Biswas's insistence on following Bim may seem chivalrous to him, but it looks like an uncomfortable invasion of privacy to her. Finally, the news of Gandhi's murder again brings 1947 India's fraught social and political context to the fore of the novel.

As soon as she gets home, Bim runs into Raja's room to tell him of Gandhi's murder. Raja jumps violently out of bed, turns on the radio, and predicts that anti-Muslim riots will soon follow. They are relieved to learn that the assassin was a Hindu man, not a Muslim man, but they still assume that India will descend into chaos. Raja later asks about Bim's tea party, and whether Mrs. Biswas will let her marry Dr. Biswas. But Bim replies that she never wants to see him again.

This conversation between Bim and Raja captures the fear, uncertainty, and tension that characterized life in India at the time of the Partition. Namely, it was clear that violence would follow, just not where or against whom—and so Indians could only wait with bated breath. Raja's questions about Mrs. Biswas demonstrate that not even he understands Bim's true feelings toward Dr. Biswas.

Unfortunately, Bim *does* meet Dr. Biswas one more time. By spring, Raja is mostly healed but still stuck at home, which makes him impatient and restless. He complains about **the house**'s upkeep and taunts Bim while she studies. She tells him to go to bed, and he replies that he will go to Hyderabad instead to be with Hyder Ali. He runs to his room and starts packing, but he grows feverish and goes to bed instead. In the mid-afternoon heat, Aunt Mira runs naked out of her room onto the veranda and starts yelling that "rats, lizards, [and] snakes" are devouring her. Bim wraps her in a blanket, and Raja calls Dr. Biswas.

The image of both Raja and Aunt Mira running frenzied around the house, while Bim tries to pick up the pieces, succinctly captures the obligations that have been unfairly placed on her. Raja takes his frustration out on her, which suggests that he does not truly appreciate the sacrifices she has made to care for him. While it's understandable that he would prefer to live with Hyder Ali instead of remaining at home, this will also mean shirking his obligations to his family.

Dr. Biswas comes to give Aunt Mira an injection. He hands Bim a bottle of brandy and tells her to give it to Aunt Mira little by little, lest she die from withdrawal. On the way out, he says that he sees why Bim doesn't want to marry: she has already sacrificed her own life to care for Baba, Raja, and Aunt Mira. Shocked and offended, Bim attributes this comment to a "grotesque misunderstanding" and tries her best to forget it.

Dr. Biswas probably makes his comment out of spite, but there is an element of truth to it: caring for Baba, Raja, and Aunt Mira has *taken over Bim's life. However, she fully intends to get her life back in the future, and her care duties are not the reason she refuses to marry—rather, she wants to maintain her independence instead of having to answer to a husband.*

Aunt Mira declines into a stupor. Bim reads D. H. Lawrence's poem "Ship of Death" and measures out Aunt Mira's brandy day after day. One night, Aunt Mira tears off her clothes and starts to scream about jumping into **the well**. Bim brings her brandy, but as she drinks, she drops her glass, and her head falls to the side. Aunt Mira is dead. For several nights, Bim dreams of finding her body floating in the well. After dressing Aunt Mira in her striped silk sari, Bim and Raja cremate her and spread her ashes in the Jumna river. For years, Bim sees Aunt Mira's spirit wandering through the garden, which reminds her of a verse about "*the third who walks always beside you*" from T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

Aunt Mira dies, but unlike the Das parents, she gets a dignified funeral, and her sprit lingers around the house. This is because she was the only true parental figure in the household—besides arguably Hyder Ali, to Raja. So even if the circumstances of Aunt Mira's life and death are less than dignified, she will always remain a respected figure to the Das family. She and Bim both associate her death with the well behind the family house. On one level, this suggests that drinking herself to death was much like jumping in the well: a form of suicide. On another level, this foreshadows the symbolism about death, the unholy, and the limits of memory that will come to be associated with the well in the rest of the novel. Readers will learn more about this well—and Aunt Mira's striped sari—in Part III.

Raja packs his things and leaves for Hyderabad, declaring that he refuses to just hang around in Delhi, wasting his life with his siblings. He angrily tells Bim to leave him alone, but when he promises that he will return, she coldly asks why. He leaves, taking Hyder Ali's servant Bhakta with him. Bim sits on the steps with Baba, who plays with his pebbles. She remarks that although they are the only two left, now they can again be carefree, like when they were children.

Raja's departure is the last of the many tragedies that separate, decimate, and permanently scar the Das family in the summer of 1947. Just a few months before, both parents and Aunt Mira were all alive, and all four children were living at home. Now, only Bim and Baba are left, and Bim's responsibility for Baba helps explain why they are still living at home decades later, in Part I and Part IV of the novel. Raja's sudden departure—and failure to repay Bim in any way for nursing him back to health—also helps explain their ongoing feud in 1980.

PART 3

The narrative returns to the Das siblings' childhood. Every morning, little Tara follows her mother to the grass between the rose beds, which are far shabbier than Hyder Ali Sahib's in his garden across the road. One day, while her mother paces back and forth for the exercise her doctor ordered, Tara runs around and finds a gleaming white snail amid the roses.

Instead of presenting a linear narrative, Desai continues telescoping further back into the Das siblings' lives. By inverting the usual chain of cause and effect in literature, she forces readers to make sense of her characters and their decisions without knowing for sure what motivates them. This also contributes to Desai's analysis of memory and the novel's pacing: as the significance of key moments in Parts I and II are not clear until Part III, Desai creates a sense of suspense. For instance, in this passage, readers see Tara's childhood interaction with the snail (which she reproduces as an adult in the novel's opening passage). Readers can now better understand the snail's emotional significance to her and note the discrepancies between her past and her memories of it: for instance, she is wrong to think that the family's garden was once pristine.

After Baba's birth, everyone sees how beautiful and quiet he is, but they also notice that he develops slowly. Instead of learning to grasp, speak, and walk, he just stares blankly into space. The mother grows tired of caring for him and returns her focus to playing bridge. Frustrated that the ayah proves incapable of working around the clock, the mother invites her poor, sickly, widowed cousin Mira to come take care of him.

Readers finally learn the secrets behind two of the novel's key mysteries: Baba's disability and Aunt Mira's role in the family. The mother responds to Baba's issues with resignation and indifference. She expects superhuman effort from the ayah, while offering no effort of her own, and she never so much as considers trying to understand the ayah's situation or limitations. She invites Mira into the house for entirely selfish reasons—in order to get free childcare—and not because she actually cares about her cousin.

When Aunt Mira first arrives, the children are surprised to see her tattered luggage, but they are delighted to find that it's full of handmade gifts—something their parents would never find the time for. They understand their power over Aunt Mira, but they also cherish her warmth and attention. She greatly helps Baba, teaching him to eat his own bread, button his own shirt, and play marbles and bagatelle. He never learns to say more than an occasional word, but the family gets used to his silence. Animals love Aunt Mira, too: a cat moves into **the house**, and when she complains about the milkman watering down his product, the mother reluctantly agrees to get a cow. It produces delicious milk, but one night that spring, it wanders away, falls into **the well**, and drowns. The mother and father are furious, and Aunt Mira has nightmares about the cow.

Mira is the opposite of the Das parents: her luggage demonstrates that she is poor, but her gifts show that she is willing to give everything she does *have—time, attention, and warmth—to the children. In contrast, the Das parents offer money but not care. Even if this situation creates a complicated power dynamic between the children and Aunt Mira, they greatly respect and appreciate her because she parents them (particularly Baba) in a way their mother and father never did. Mira's facility with animals further reflects her warmth and capacity for care, but the cow's drowning is an ominous sign, particularly because cows are sacred in Hinduism. Not only does this drowning explain why both Mira and Bim associated Mira's death with the well in Part II, but it also reflects how well-intended actions can have unintended consequences and how dark memories from the past can shape people's beliefs, actions, and identities in an enduring way. After all, its carcass gets stuck at the bottom of the murky black well forever, so it becomes a metaphor for the childhood memories presented in Parts II and III, which underlie the Das siblings' conflicts in Parts I and IV.*

When she was 12, Aunt Mira's family married her to a young man who promptly died during his studies in England. She stayed with his family, who blamed her and worked her to the bone—which is why she looked so much older than her age. Even after moving in with the Das family, she continues to wear a widow's white clothes; she gave away all her other outfits, except one silk sari with crimson stripes, which she refuses to wear and jokes that the children can put on her for her cremation. She attends Theosophy meetings for a time, but she grows tired and withdraws.

As Indian women typically move in permanently with their husbands' families upon marriage, Aunt Mira's situation is unfortunately all too common among Indian widows. Her traumatic past explains why she is so grateful to move in with the Das family—even if they also take her in primarily to make her work. Yet her insistence on wearing a widow's white, even in the progressive Das household, shows that she still believes in the same traditions that have oppressed her. This is why she refuses to wear the striped sari—the same one in which the Das siblings cremate her in Part II. Desai may be suggesting that only death could release her from the burdens of her past. Lastly, readers unfamiliar with Theosophy need only know that it was a new age spiritual movement started by European and Indian intellectuals that played a significant role in the Indian independence movement.

Tara feels safest wrapped in Aunt Mira's shawl or sari, and she loves Aunt Mira's bedtime stories, which she continues telling even after the kids are supposed to be asleep. She knits the children sweaters and makes pickles in jars on the veranda. Even though she lacks the grace and authority to be a mother or wife, the children's lives revolve around her—and hers around them. She helps them grow until they tower over her.

Aunt Mira's warmth gives the children a sense of safety (and connection with India's cultural roots) that they never got from their parents. This is particularly crucial for young, sensitive Tara—who has generally found herself isolated, as her older siblings Bim and Raja exclude her.

When Bim and Raja get typhoid, Aunt Mira nurses them back to health. But she always finds time to play with Tara and show her affection. For instance, one day Raja and Bim say they will grow up to be a hero and a heroine, but Tara says she wants to be a mother. Raja and Bim laugh at her—but Aunt Mira comforts her and promises that her dream is the only realistic one. During the summer, the children spend afternoons playing games, like naming the hottest and coolest things they can imagine, playing in the garden's water tap, and sneaking into the servants' quarters.

Aunt Mira's presence gives the children the sense of safety they need to play. Tara may be conventional or even unimaginative, but Aunt Mira assures her that this means she can actually fulfill her dreams—unlike her siblings, who will soon find literature and politics nurturing their dreams of heroism. Indeed, Part II shows that Raja leaves for Hyderabad without ever giving up on these dreams, while caretaking demands force Bim to set them aside. In this way, Bim's role in Part II parallels Aunt Mira's in Part III: they care for each other through illness, and they both care for Raja, who doesn't adequately recognize their efforts.

When the children dare each other to name the scariest thing they can imagine, Tara remembers seeing her father give her mother an injection and thinking he was killing her. That night, she asks Aunt Mira why her parents haven't come home for dinner and why they spend so much time playing cards. Aunt Mira unconvincingly claims that it helps with their mother's diabetes pain, then explains how their mother needs daily insulin injections. Tara feels relieved.

Tara returned to this same memory in Part I. It so marked her because it distilled her fear of her distant yet controlling parents into a single, harrowing image. While the mother's diabetes helps explain her self-preoccupation (and the injections), Tara sees even as a child that their card-playing is really a way of escaping from their family (and the rest of their lives). This more complete portrait of the Das mother and father can help readers see that their poor parenting was really an extension of their own unhappiness.

As he grows up, Raja starts questioning Aunt Mira's stories and spending less time at home. He steals the soda-man's cart and cycles, he wrestles, and he sneaks into the movies with his friend Hamid. At home, Bim and Tara fight for his attention. Once, they nearly catch him during a game of hide-and-seek tag, but he escapes through the hedges into the back garden. They follow him and end up next to **the well**. Gazing down at the black water, they look for signs of the cow, which decomposed inside because it was too heavy to pull out. There are none. They go back to the front garden and scream at Raja.

As the eldest sibling, Raja is the first to realize that he can also seek adventure, belonging, and happiness outside the home. But Desai shows that his withdrawal has ripple effects on Tara, Bim, and their relationship—which they never fully address or resolve. Tara and Bim's encounter with the well in their backyard is an important metaphor for their lifelong attempts to confront the darkness in their past. For all their attempts to discern what has happened (like their attempts to see the cow's bones in the water), they cannot reach any reliable conclusion about the past—either because they do not understand it or because their memories are unreliable.

Over time, Bim starts resenting Raja's withdrawal from the family and taking her anger out on Tara. For example, Tara wishes she could have curls, so Bim promises to help—and cuts off all Tara's hair instead. Raja and Hamid laugh at Tara, Bim mocks her, and Aunt Mira promises that her hair will grow back.

Bim bullying Tara offers another example of how the Das siblings channel their frustration and hurt into further conflict, instead of reconciliation. This pattern repeats itself throughout their lives, from the way Raja treats Bim at the end of Part II to the way Bim treats all of her siblings—including even Baba—in Parts I and IV.

The older the siblings get, the more stifling they find their home life. Raja escapes by wandering the city, reading books, and playing with Hamid, but Bim and Tara find their women's novels dull and uninspiring. Bim starts reading history books instead. Still, they find some joy, like when Bim and Raja wade across the Jumna on summer evenings to pick melons straight from the tree. Tara and Baba go to bring them home, and the four siblings all watch Hyder Ali Sahib ride across the dunes on his horse. But for the most part, they find themselves waiting for some change in their lives.

Raja's coping strategies differ from Bim and Tara's in large part because of gender. While literature by and for men encourages heroism and adventure, literature by and for women focuses on the domestic sphere—and may even create a self-fulfilling prophecy by encouraging women's confinement to it. Similarly, while it's dangerous and socially unacceptable for young women to wander Delhi on their own, it's perfectly fine for Raja to do so—even alongside a Muslim best friend. The image of Hyder Ali Sahib on his horse is another one of the memories that resonates with the Das siblings well into adulthood.

Bim loves school, where she leads activities, thrives on intellectual challenges, and even finishes as head girl. But Tara finds school scary and overwhelming. She struggles to pay attention in class, make friends, play sports, and even draw and paint. The missionaries and converts who run the school dislike her almost as much as her classmates, who find her "unbearably snobbish and conceited." Bim outright avoids her. Above all, Tara hates visiting the mission's charity hospital on Thursdays to give out their leftover fruit and the scratchy blankets they knit in class. Bim mocks Tara for thinking she's too refined for the hospital. Tara resigns herself to the miseries of school and tries her best to enjoy herself at home in the afternoons.

Bim is a natural-born leader, so school gives her the resources and platform she needs to shine. This strongly suggests that she has a bright career ahead of her—and yet readers will already know from Part I and Part II that other duties will get in the way. In contrast, school only exposes Tara's sensitivity and constant need for reassurance. This is why she has always found Aunt Mira's presence so soothing, but now that she is in school, she has gone back to feeling isolated and out-of-place. It is thus abundantly clear why she is eager to escape her life in Delhi. Clearly, Bim and Tara are already drifting apart, in personality as well as in their relationship.

Two incidents mark Tara's school days. First, a mad dog wanders into the school latrines, and the local animal control shoots and kills it. Second, the principal suspends one of the teachers—the young, neurotic Miss Singh—for her relationship with a blond monk who hangs out near the school. The girls bring her flowers, but she never returns to school, so they plan to prank the principal in revenge. They stop when Bim reveals that the principal has cancer, but Tara holds a grudge against them both for years.

To Tara, these two incidents represent the dangers of the outside world—and suggest that the best course of action for her is to be a respectable young woman and stay at home. In particular, Miss Singh demonstrates that women can choose to live and love beyond the parameters that Indian culture sets for them, but that they will face punishment for doing so.

The siblings grow restless and dream of leaving home. Bim's academic and Raja's poetry prizes indicate that they will eventually be successful enough to do so. One afternoon, Bim and Tara wander into Raja's room while he is away, go through his books and closet, and try on his pants. They feel comfortable with their legs covered and wonder if this is why men are so confident. Bim takes Raja's cigarettes. She and Tara go outside to take a walk but hide in a bush and smoke instead. Tara doesn't want to, and she discards her cigarette after one drag. The cigarette lands in a pile of leaves and starts a fire, which Bim frantically puts out. At that moment, Raja comes home. The girls run into his room and take off their trousers, but he catches them.

Bim and Tara's game of dress-up further highlights how rigid gender roles bolster men's freedom at women's expense. This is true as much in India's traditional society as in the European cultures that have shaped it through and after colonialism. Desai emphasizes how Indian culture socializes people into these gender roles from a young age: even as schoolchildren, Bim and Tara clearly see that their brother enjoys greater freedom and opportunity than they will ever be able to. Their cigarette fire may represent the danger that women's independence poses to the existing social order.

One day, Tara abandons Bim out of fear, not anger. They go to a picnic in the Lodi Gardens with the Misra sisters, brothers, and two quiet boys who are supposed to be the sisters' suitors. After sitting around feeling uncomfortable for some time, Tara and Bim decide to go visit one of the tombs located in the gardens. They enter, a boy throws a pebble inside after them, and they hear a sinister buzzing sound. It's a swarm of bees. They run back outside, but the swarm engulfs Bim. Tara makes it to the Misras, who return to save Bim. Raja later blames Tara for leaving Bim behind, but Tara and Bim never discuss the matter. Aunt Mira and the ayah treat Bim's stings, but Tara never shows hers to anyone.

Even if she may not have been able to save Bim on her own, Tara comes to see her decision to run back toward the Misras instead of helping Bim as a form of cowardice. Her guilt over this perceived shortcoming further drives a wedge between her and Bim. Yet she doesn't mention or treat her own bee stings. Put differently, she hides her own needs because she knows her sister's are greater, which parallels the way she puts her own feelings and needs aside in her relationship and conflicts with Bim during the present-day sections of the novel (Part I and Part IV). Crucially, this episode in the Lodi Gardens will play an important role in Part IV of the novel, as Tara never fully lets go of her guilt—but Bim remembers events differently.

Tara starts avoiding her siblings and instead spending time alone or with the Misra sisters—even though Bim and Raja hate them, and their families have never been particularly close. Unlike Tara's family, the large, intergenerational Misra family doesn't try to "keep up appearances" with sophisticated decorations or manners. Despite her shyness, Tara shares the Misra girls' preference for shopping and partying over studying, and the family kindly takes her in. When she wanders over to their house during a family photo, they even insist she join. The Misra girls also introduce Tara to young men at the club.

It becomes all the more clear that the Das siblings' adult conflicts go all the way back to these early experiences. As a child, Tara sought warmth and belonging through Aunt Mira; as she grows up, she finds it with the easygoing Misra family instead. In this way, she proves much like Raja, who copes with his cold parents by bonding with Hamid, then later Hyder Ali and his family. Still, readers may find it ironic that Tara ends up marrying Bakul, who is positively obsessed with "keep[ing] up appearances."

At the Misra sisters' engagement party, Bim sulks in the corner, then goes out to the garden and the roof terrace, forcing Tara to follow her the whole way. Bim complains that the Misras won't have time to study and says that they should go to college instead of getting married, which will limit them. While Bim insists that she will never marry, Tara realizes that she will do so as soon as she possibly can, to get away from her family. Bim declares that she will have her own career and take care of Baba and Aunt Mira.

Bim and Tara's actions at the engagement party underline how they have grown into very different women with diametrically opposed values. While Tara sees the Misra sisters' marriage as a model to aspire to—and achieves these dreams by marrying Bakul in Part II—Bim instead sees marriage as a trap that prevents women from achieving their potential. Crucially, she does not see this as mutually exclusive with caretaking. Rather, she thinks she can combine traditionally masculine and feminine roles by having a career, caring for her family members, and financially providing for them at the same time.

PART 4

Back in 1980, Bim corrects exam papers, and Tara writes her daughters a letter at the dining room table. Everything looks orange due to the dust storm. Tara says that Bim and Baba should come to Raja's daughter Moyna's wedding for a change of scenery. Noting that Bim talks aloud to herself all day while making hand gestures, Tara suggests that Bim is worried about her relationship with Raja. But Bim says that Raja isn't interesting anymore, now that he's "rich, fat and successful."

Part IV of the novel returns to where Part I left off. After Parts II and III, readers now have the background knowledge they need to understand why Bim and Baba have stayed in Delhi, as well as why Bim continues to resent Tara and Raja now, decades after the conflicts that initially drove them apart. It's now clear that the novel's climax and conclusion will revolve around whether the siblings manage to reconcile. Tara is clearly invested in this project, and she makes a concerted effort to push Bim to give Raja another chance.

Tara points out that, while she visits Raja every three years, Bim knows nothing about his life. But Bim complains that Raja spends his time at parties reciting poetry (which she has not read) and spoils his five kids (whom she has never met). She points out that Raja's family *did* visit her shortly after his first daughter Moyna's birth. Raja was fat and brought gifts—pearls for Bim and a new **gramophone** for Baba—but they didn't touch either gift. Raja complained that they "know nothing." Bim wonders if Moyna, who is now getting married, is as fat as Benazir used to be. She complains that Raja and his family enjoy food too much, so they must be unhappy. Tara asks why, and Bim says that it's because Raja turned poetry, his vocation, into a hobby. Dumbstruck, Tara repeats that Bim should go see Raja's life firsthand.

Bim has not seen Raja for at least 15 years. Her bitter disdain for him is thus based more on rumor, history, and theory than actual experience. Rather than considering the love and support that she, Baba, Raja, and Raja's children might have gained if they built loving relationships, she fixates on past slights and flatly rejects the possibility of reconciliation. She particularly distinguishes herself from Raja by contrasting his indulgence with her own sense of responsibility. Meanwhile, Raja's thoughtful gifts clearly show that he wants to reconnect: he s willing to reconcile if and when Bim is willing to join him.

Tara opens and reads aloud a letter from Raja to Bim. Raja writes that he and Benazir bought their son a pony, and Bim interrupts to complain that Raja is "still trying to be Hyder Ali Sahib" and projecting his childhood desires onto his son. Bim predicts that the pony will buck the boy off, hurting him and causing a fight with his father. Tara reads on about Moyna's wedding arrangements, but Bim ignores her and instead complains about her leaving peeled oranges out on the table. (It wasn't her, but Bakul.)

Bim takes any opportunity she can find to criticize her brother, even though he has made the effort to write her. Curiously, while Bim previously mentioned Hyder Ali Sahib's horse as a fond memory, here, she turns it into a means to criticize her brother. Admittedly, Raja's letter focuses on himself and his family instead of Bim, but he has little alternative because he knows nothing about her day-to-day life. Lastly, with her comment about the oranges, Bim starts turning her anger against Tara, too—perhaps because Tara's insistence that Bim give Raja another chance would force Bim to admit that she was wrong.

In the kitchen, Bim starts shaking in anger and drops the orange peels, furious that her siblings live in luxury and disdain her way of life. She tells herself that Tara is cruel and Raja is selfish, then she goes to the steps and calls Janaki to clean. Tara watches Bim from afar, confused at her behavior—for instance, she saves every scrap of uneaten food but spends a fortune on books. But Tara is glad that Bakul takes most of his meals with friends in the city. Another morning, she learns that the gardener has no seeds or fertilizer—only manure. Tara wonders if her childhood perception of Bim's competence was wrong, or if Bim has simply grown less competent with the years.

Desai reveals that there's really a degree of envy behind Bim's anger at Raja and Tara's wealth and status. Namely, even though Bim would never be caught dead living a life of plenty, she also sees that her siblings have grown rich without working a day in their lives—while she has worked tirelessly her whole life, but still struggles to make ends meet. While Bim calls Raja selfish and Tara cruel, it's abundantly clear that both have tried to connect with her—and she *is the one who refuses to build a relationship with them. Lastly, Tara's observations about how Bim actually lives raise a difficult puzzle that gets to the nature of remembrance and identity: are her childhood memories unreliable, or has Bim simply changed? Does she have any way of knowing which of these two alternatives is right?*

That evening, Tara says that she is noticing all sorts of things about her family that she never saw before. Bakul says that this is because children are too busy playing to comprehend family dynamics, but Bim announces that children understand them better than anyone else and that she and her siblings didn't play as kids—they just sat around. Tara feels obligated to agree. Bim says that she and her siblings understood the family dynamics, but just did nothing. Suddenly, Tara apologizes for not saving Bim from the bees in Lodi Gardens. After explaining what happened to Bakul, Bim says that Tara couldn't have done anything else—and was right to go get help. In fact, Bim says she had forgotten the whole incident.

Bakul's explanation makes sense on the surface, but it reveals that he doesn't understand what Tara and her siblings' childhood was really like. Meanwhile, Bim defends the opposite position, claiming that children are somehow wiser than adults. Clearly, the truth is somewhere in the middle: the Das siblings knew they were unhappy and could tell that their childhood was somehow unusual, but they did not have all the tools they needed to fully understand their family dynamics until much later. In this way, Tara once again gets caught between two stubborn, inconsiderate loved ones. Next, Tara's apology for the incident at Lodi Gardens demonstrates how people's differing memories of the same events can deeply shape their relationships and sense of self.

Conversation turns to the Misras. Bakul says it's strange to come back time after time and find that they haven't changed at all. Bim agrees and laughs with him. Bakul asks about the Misras' spouses. Bim explains that they all got fed up with the Misras and Old Delhi, so returned to their own families. She thinks the Misra sisters "hate children [and] hate teaching," but don't realize it. Tara wonders if Bim may really be talking about herself. She asks if Bim ever sees Dr. Biswas, and Bim immediately says no.

The Misras continue serving as a foil for the Das family. On the one hand, the Misras are still as close as ever, while the Das siblings have drifted apart. Yet compared to the Misras, the Das siblings seem to have turned out alright. In part because *they spend most of their time with one another and have no outside reference point, the Misras proved intolerable to their own spouses and are barely surviving financially. Of course, Bim's comment further shows how she copes with her own conflicts and frustrations by projecting them outward onto other people, and Tara's question about Dr. Biswas shows that she never fully understood Bim's feelings toward the doctor or reasons for rejecting marriage.*

Bim, Tara, and Bakul all sit in silence, swatting at mosquitos. Bakul is frustrated that nobody is listening to him, Tara about her blunder over Dr. Biswas, and Bim by Tara's questions and letter from Raja. Bim concludes that Tara, Bakul, Raja, and his family are like mosquitos who sucked her blood and then flew away, leaving her behind like a dusty heirloom. She looks at Baba and wonders what he thinks of her and whether he would notice if she disappeared.

This evening of universal frustration over private, unspoken complaints is a microcosm of the pattern that has torn the Das siblings apart over the course of their lives. Namely, each resents the others for failing to acknowledge or meet their own needs during their childhoods. But they all fail to see that they were all doing the best they could in a difficult situation, where they lacked parental guidance or protection. Because they neither voice nor forget their complaints, they fail to move past them.

A letter comes from Sharma, who needs a family member to go to an important meeting. Bim asks Baba, who stares at his **gramophone**. She considers going herself or sending Bakul, lamenting that Raja doesn't help. She complains to Tara, noting that their father never cared about her education and wondering if they should sell their shares in the business. Tara promises to ask for Bakul's advice, but Bim says she sees herself as a fool and failure, since she has to beg men to help her make decisions. Tara promises that this isn't about gender: it's about consulting the whole family before making a major decision.

Desai reveals that the family business continues functioning just as Raja left it, with Baba at the helm. While Bim's complaints about their father's disinterest in her education and her inability to take charge of the business are perfectly valid, she takes them too far, both blaming herself and turning them against her family members in the process. Her disagreement with Tara about whether consulting Bakul means capitulating to men or reaching family consensus exemplifies this pattern. This suggests that Bim's pride and need for control lead her to refuse cooperation and consensus in more contexts than just her frayed relationship with Raja.

Bim sourly asks if this includes Raja. Tara says he'd love to come home, but Bim says he'll hate "**this dead old house**." Tara replies that, while the house needs maintenance, now that Bim is in charge, it's no longer the empty, foreboding place that she wanted to escape as a girl. Realizing that she was always busy with Raja and Aunt Mira, Bim asks if this is why Tara married young and didn't go to college. Tara replies that she hated school and dreaded the idea of college, so when she fell in love with Bakul, she seized the opportunity to escape. Bim struggles to believe that Tara had such complex feelings as a child, and Tara admits that she is only putting words to those feelings now.

Tara's comment about the house becoming comforting and welcoming under Bim's tenure indicates that she hopes to put the past behind her and demonstrates how families' ability to transform over time is one of their particular strengths. Just as Tara finally learns about Bim's real feelings toward Dr. Biswas, Bim finally learns why Tara really married so young. Readers may be surprised that the sisters didn't understand decisions that were so central to both of their lives for so many years. This again speaks to how isolated they were as children, but also how much space they have to grow as adults.

Bim and Tara agree that it's ironic that, as children, Tara preferred to stay home and Bim to go out, but Tara ended up leaving and Bim staying home. Bim remembers how she and Raja dreamed of being a heroine and a hero, but she concludes that those dreams have been lost "down at the bottom of **the well.**" She jokes that she'll die there just like the cow.

While in some ways Bim and Tara have switched roles, in others, they have also both fulfilled their dreams: Tara has become a mother and Bim a history teacher; Tara surrounds herself with family and Bim with books. Bim's comment about losing track of her heroic dreams again links the well to death, forgetting, and the inaccessibility of the past. Yet in a way, she does become a hero: Desai writes her into this book, and she will be the one who saves her family in the end.

Just before bed, Tara tells Bakul that she's worried about Bim, who may seem to have achieved the life she wanted but is actually "angry and unhappy and upset." At first, Bakul is too busy thinking about his travel plans to seriously listen. But as Tara describes Bim's conflict with Raja, Bakul realizes that there is a problem to solve—and an opportunity to impress—so he tunes in. He proposes Tara get Bim and Raja to meet, but she protests that she's been trying the whole time. He says he didn't know, and he goes to sleep. Tara broods, and Badshah runs to the gate and howls.

Tara notices that Bim's unhappiness stems not from her own day-to-day life and career, but from her frayed relationships and enduring resentment toward her family. But Bakul's advice is clearly unhelpful: he cares less about Tara's issue than about what resolving it will achieve for himself, and he doesn't have the empathy or consideration to realize that Tara is already several steps ahead of him. When he learns that she has already thought of his proposal, instead of continuing to work on the problem, he resents that his image has been tarnished and goes to sleep.

In the morning, Bakul tells Bim that he's willing to ask Sharma about the letter, but Bim curtly tells him that she will be selling the family's shares. Bakul says the whole family should discuss this decision, but Bim says that it's up to her and Baba now. Bakul proposes asking Raja, and Bim firmly refuses.

Bim seems to make this decision out of pride, stubbornness, and a desire for power, rather than careful consideration. Put differently, she appears willing to destroy her family's finances just to prove that she can—and, consequently, that the others can no longer ignore her.

Tara grows increasingly desperate. One morning, she points out Bim's moods to Jaya, one of the Misra sisters, who had visited to ask if she should repaint her furniture pink or blue. But Jaya says that Bim is fine and busy taking care of Baba. Tara explains that Bim doesn't want to go to the wedding, but Jaya just calls Bim stubborn, says Tara should have fun at the wedding, and leaves.

Like Bakul, Jaya doesn't take Tara's concerns seriously. The pretense for her visit (choosing her furniture color) highlights her shallowness, and her insistence that Bim is fine seems designed to protect herself from the reality of the situation, rather than to truly help Tara with it. Above all, unlike Tara, Jaya does not seem to see the prospect of Bim changing or the Das family healing its divide.

Bim becomes angry and cruel. She criticizes Tara's jingling keys and feeds her a curry too spicy to eat. She gets furious at having to clean up a dead baby bird, and when Baba keeps playing the song "Don't Fence Me In," she goes to his room, turns off his record player, and sits down. She explains her plan to sell the family's shares, then tells Baba that he might have to go live with Raja in Hyderabad. Baba says nothing, as usual, but seems to draw away. Catching herself, Bim apologetically says that she didn't really mean it.

Frustrated by Tara's attempts to make her take stock of her life and reconcile with Raja, Bim lashes out at her siblings. Her interaction with Baba may be the most important turning point in the novel's plot, because it precipitates a breakthrough for her. Throughout the whole novel, Baba is an absolutely innocent figure, incapable of committing harm. When Bim threatens to send him away to Hyderabad, she sees that her anger and resentment have gotten in the way of her vow to protect him for the rest of her life. She realizes that she has gone too far and must make a change.

Bim spends the rest of the day lying still in bed, unsettled by the silence, wishing Baba's **gramophone** would fill it. She wonders why she took her anger out on Baba instead of Tara or Bakul—and instead of finally writing Raja a letter. She realizes that she hoped to break through "Baba's silence and reserve and otherworldliness." She admits that she loves her whole family deeply, that they are inseparable parts of one another. She wishes she could love them better, to accept their flaws: her parents' distance, Raja's abrupt departure, Baba's silence. She realizes that she needs to reconcile with Raja and earn Baba's forgiveness.

This passage is the novel's climax, the crucial turning point that makes it possible for the Das family to reconcile. Bim finally starts analyzing herself instead of blaming her siblings, and she accepts that they all share a fraught past, which she cannot blame her siblings for escaping—even if this meant leaving her behind. In fact, their departures were never about her at all. She thus realizes that she has the power to choose between forgiveness and spite. This epiphany will finally redeem her to her family, and her family to her.

When Bim brings Baba his tea that afternoon, she is relieved to see that he wasn't punishing her by leaving his **gramophone** off—he just fell asleep. She feels a profound, ethereal love for him. That evening, she and Tara struggle to make conversation because they are both exhausted, so they go to bed early.

Bim had wished to push past Baba's "silence and reserve and otherworldliness" in order to get some sign that he loves her the same way that she loves him. But now, she accepts that she will never get the clear sign she wants. Instead, she must trust that he loves her on faith, and she must recognize that the beauty of the feeling of love is her reward for loving him. Her reconciliation with Baba will become the model for her reconciliation with Tara in the coming pages and Raja sometime in the future.

Bim is too anxious to sleep, so she spends the night reading. She turns to a passage about the emperor Aurangzeb's last words: "*Strange that I came with nothing into the world and now go away with this stupendous caravan of sin!*" She looks through her old translations of Raja's Urdu poems—which are well-crafted but unoriginal emulations of his favorite writers—and wonders how he would feel if he saw them. Reflecting on Aurangzeb's words, she decides to atone for her sins in order to leave the world free from them. She tears up Raja's letter about the rent, as well as her own old papers—exams, letters, pamphlets, and so on. She realizes that she can't wait to finish with "all this storm of emotion" and return to teaching, and she finally sleeps.

Aurangzeb's words express his terror of God on his deathbed and suggest that people are the culmination of their moral choices. For Bim, this underlines the importance and urgency of forgiveness: she wants to live the rest of her life and die at peace, rather than loading her soul down with resentment. When she peruses Raja's poetry, she realizes that she holds a precious piece of him that not even he can see anymore, which is a metaphor for the special relationship between siblings. When she shreds her papers and Raja's letters, this represents her resolving to put the past behind her once and for all.

Tara and Bakul's daughters, Mala and Maya, arrive in the morning and each greet Bim with a kiss when she wakes up. They ask if she has slept, point out the mess of papers in her room, and compliment her clothes. She teases them and makes tea. The girls spend lots of time listening to music and playing bagatelle with Baba, and when Bakul tries to send them out to buy saris, Tara refuses.

Mala and Maya's arrival brings joy to everyone at the house on Bela Road, showing what kind of love and connection the Das family can share if they overcome their differences. Indeed, their affection for Bim demonstrates what she is missing by refusing to build a relationship with her brother and his children.

The next morning, the last one before the wedding, the whole family shares tea and discusses their plans. Tara and her daughters will return to Delhi after Hyderabad, and they look forward to relaxing at home. Bakul insists that Mala and Maya meet his family, who will introduce them to people their age, but Bim accuses him of trying to marry them off and interrupt their studies—just like Tara.

Tara and the girls' plan to return to Delhi means that they will have further opportunities to deepen their relationships with Bim and guide her towards reconciliation with Raja. But Bim's comments to Bakul reflect her fear that Maya and Mala—like Tara—will opt for marriage even when careers might be a better choice for them.

After breakfast, Bim goes to walk in the garden, which is shriveling in the summer heat. Tara calls out to Bim, who says that Tara should be packing. But Tara says she's already done, and she approaches Bim. She holds Bim's arm and apologizes for marrying Bakul and disappearing so many years ago, without returning to help take care of Aunt Mira. Bim says that Tara couldn't possibly have come back, but Tara still feels guilty. She didn't even make it to Aunt Mira's funeral. Bim tries to change the subject, but Tara repeats herself and explains that, even if it all happened so long ago, "nothing's *over*, ever."

Back in the garden, the same place where they began the novel, Bim and Tara finally work past their differences. Having reflected on her childhood and understood Bim's resentment, Tara recognizes that she must be the first to recognize her past mistakes and ask for forgiveness. When Tara says that "nothing's over, *ever," she doesn't mean that people ought to hold grudges from the past indefinitely, but rather that old conflicts stay around and fester until they get resolved—no matter how long this takes.*

Bakul, Tara, and their daughters bring their suitcases to the car and say goodbye to the servants. Tara runs back inside, and Bim worries that Baba will try to leave with her. Instead, Tara returns to the car and says that Baba refuses to leave his room. Bim explains that Baba finds arrivals and departures overwhelming, and Tara asks, "Shall I tell Raja—?" Bim says yes: while she and Baba can't travel, he should come visit them in Delhi. He can bring his whole family, settle the business with Sharma, and even fix Hyder Ali's old house. She actually wants him to visit. Shocked and delighted, Tara gets in the car and the driver speeds off. Everyone waves goodbye.

Bim's concern about Baba leaving with Tara reflects her own insecurities—and shows that she depends on Baba for her sense of self just as much as he depends on her for his. Tara and Bim's conversation about Raja demonstrates that Bim has decided to forgive him. This means that Tara's efforts to repair her family are proving successful. While readers will not get a chance to see Bim and Raja reconcile up close, Raja's past visit, letters, and wedding invitation suggest that he will cherish the opportunity.

Bim returns to the veranda. Baba and the cat join her. Bim asks if Baba wanted to attend the wedding, and he shakes his head. Having said all she needs to, Bim feels like she's floating in an ocean of sunlight.

With harmony reestablished in the Das household, Bim feels the consequences of her decision to shed the past and choose love over resentment: sublime pleasure and psychological security.

One of the Misra sisters, Jaya, comes over to invite Bim and Baba to attend (and help set up for) the youngest Misra brother Mulk's guru's birthday party at their house. They agree. A few hours later, they are sitting on the Misras' lawn, watching the musicians set up and Mulk jovially greet the crowd. Mulk starts singing, improvising until he finds a melody he likes. When he does, he repeats it triumphantly, launching his song, and the instruments follow him. Bim looks around at the crowd—a little girl points out Bim's cigarette to her mother, and the Misra brothers sway to the music and yell out "Vah! Vah!" in approval.

This final scene serves as a sort of coda to the novel, which metaphorically captures several of its central ideas—like the power of love and the beauty of forgiveness. Tellingly, it does so not only in the form of music, but in a performance genre historically linked to Delhi and its Muslim high culture. Mulk has only appeared one other time in the novel, when he stumbled drunkenly out of his chair at the beginning of Part I and complained about no longer being able to sing. But here, he finds redemption—like Bim. Indeed, she also seems to be giving another chance to him and the rest of the Misras, whom she has long despised.

The Misra sisters start passing out tea, and then a small old man—the guru—goes up to sing. While the younger Misra brother Mulk's voice is "full and ripe," the guru's is rough and full of "sadness and passion and frustration," as though he were approaching death. Bim takes comfort in a line from T.S. Eliot: "*Time the destroyer is time the preserver*." Since Mulk and his guru have learned to sing as part of the same tradition, Bim wonders if Mulk's voice will eventually grow to sound like his guru's. She thinks the same applies to **her home** and the family that has rooted their "deepest selves" in its soil. The guru sings some of Raja's favorite lines from the great poet Muhammad Iqbal, and someone calls out, "Vah! Vah!"

The guru and Mulk, the T.S. Eliot quote, and the Das family's troubles all point to the old wisdom that time heals all wounds. Specifically, enduring commitments give people the opportunity to change together over time, and such commitments are central to the formation of people's "deepest selves." As Bim points out, Mulk and the guru belong to the same musical school, and their voices reflect their experience. The T.S. Eliot line suggests that things are preserved over time for posterity only because they decay and cease to be what they once were. And Bim's remarks about her family indicate that she will make the effort necessary to overcome her rift with Raja—and build a new, happier future alongside him, Tara, and Baba.

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