

Clear Light of Day Study Guide

Clear Light of Day by Anita Desai

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Plot Summary

Part 1 focuses primarily on Tara. Having just arrived to visit her home and family, she takes in her surroundings, and the reader is introduced to the house and family members primarily through her eyes.

Part 2 centers primarily on Bim, and goes back in time to when the siblings were children. The reader is given a view of Bim that is very different from the woman who is introduced in Part 1. Bim is forced to nurse her sick brother to health and to care for her sick aunt, as well as caring for Baba, who will always need to be cared for. That summer, the children's mother falls ill and dies, and their father dies soon after, in a strange car accident. Bim is left as head of the household and accepts the responsibility she has been dealt.

Part 3 goes back even farther in time, to when the children are even younger. Bim and Tara's experiences in school are contrasted: Bim loves school and becomes head girl while Tara hates school and everything about it. One afternoon, on a picnic, Bim is attacked by a swarm of bees and Tara, who witnesses this in horror, is unable to help her sister. The guilt she experiences from the incident stays with her. At the end of the section, Tara shows her approval of their neighbors, the Misra girls, who marry early without attending college. Bim vows never to marry and plans to remain at home with her aunt and brother, attend college, teach, and remain completely independent.

Part 4, the final section of the novel, goes forward again in time to Tara's visit to her childhood home. Bim and Tara converse a great deal about their brother, Raja. Although Bim has seemed to resent her brother up until this point, the resentment slowly fades and she convinces herself to accept her brother and his shortcomings. Tara expresses her concern for Bim and, before leaving, pours out her feelings of guilt for leaving Bim with her aunt and brother when she left the house to marry Bakul. Bim looks into her sister's eyes and recognizes her distress. The two sisters grow very close in this moment, as Bim realizes they are not so different after all.



Part 1

Part 1 Summary

Tara wakes before dawn to the sounds of the koel birds in the trees outside her family's home in Old Delhi. She arrived the night before, to visit her sister and brother in the home where they had all grown up. Once the sun has risen, Tara comes outside on the veranda and looks out into the garden, searching the purple bougainvillea trees for the birds that awoke her. Seeing her sister already in the garden, Tara runs to greet her, and the two walk along what they had referred to in childhood as "the rose walk," a strip of grass bordered by two long beds of roses.

Tara notices that, besides the trees in the garden, the other plants have been neglected and seemingly abandoned. She noted also that the rose walk remains almost as it was when they were children. Upon closer inspection, however, she realizes that it, too, has begun to succumb to the heat. There are not nearly as many flowers as before, and the ones that remain seem to barely hang on to life on their thin stems.

As she walks, Tara recalls a memory of herself as a child, prancing through the garden with her mother, who had been ordered to exercise by her doctor. As she pranced, Tara had spied a shiny object on the ground, and found it to be a snail inching along in the garden. Her mother was uninterested, but the little creature intrigued Tara as a child.

As Tara catches up with Bim, they remark at how the old rose walk has gotten smaller and grown sicker over the years, and Bim illustrates this by shaking the stalk of a rose bloom and watching as the petals fall onto the ground. Then, just as she had when she was a child, Tara spots something shiny on the ground and discovers another snail beside the fallen rose petals. Bim watches in surprise and amusement as her full grown sister bends to play with the small creature.

As they walk on, Tara remarks how Bim looks like their mother, but stops short, realizing that Bim will not appreciate the comment. Bim, however, ignores her and asks if Tara slept the night before, to which Tara replies that it was impossible, with the koel birds in the morning and the dog barking during the night, and the buzzing of the mosquitoes in the dark. Bim remarks that the neighbors must have grown used to her barking dog, since she refuses to chain him up and praises his beautiful voice. As if he knows they are speaking of him, the dog, Badshah, appears before them. He is twelve years old now, and Bim points out how his whiskers have gotten white over the years, although his mother, Begum, lived to be fourteen. While the dog enjoys the attention from the two women, their conversation turns to their surroundings.

Tara comments how nothing ever changes there and how it is always the same whenever she comes home. Bim, somewhat dryly, asks if this is disappointing to Tara and asks her if she would like to come back and find it changed. Tara is shocked at the proposition and emphatically disagrees. Then Bim asks, dryly again, if she would then



prefer to return to childhood, to their lives as they used to be with all the boredom, dullness, waiting and then answers for her, "No, of course not," and that Tara would much prefer to leave and go away into the world where things are freer and brighter.

Tara's head drops as she thinks to herself that she cannot trust Bim to be serious, since her older sister doesn't take her seriously. In reply, Tara remarks that Bim never did go out into the world. To this, Bim replies flatly that she never goes anywhere and that it must seem strange for Tara and Bakul, having traveled so much, to come home and see her and Baba, who have never traveled at all. Bim continues on, exaggerating as she paints a picture including other relatives as they were when the girls were growing up, emphasizing how everything would have been the same and asking Tara again if that's what she would like to see.

Tara wonders to herself if Bim is being purposely cruel. Bim announces that this is the risk in visiting Old Delhi: Old Delhi dies not change; it only decays. According to Bim's students, Old Delhi is like a cemetery with every house a tomb, and New Delhi is the place to be, where everything is happening. She adds that everyone who isn't dull and gray goes away and never comes back to Old Delhi. Tara then points out that she and Bakul come back, and Bim tries to brush this off, saying that they come only because their fare is paid for, and Tara insists she and her husband want to come back and enjoy visiting. She then quotes her husband saying that if a person loses touch with his/her home, it is impossible to represent the country.

The women find Bim's cat stuck in a tree, and after Bim successfully rescues her, she and Tara begin an exchange about children. As Bim strokes her beloved cat, she tells Tara she must be wondering how old people go so "ga-ga" over their pets because they have no children, and supposes her sister must believe that children are the real deal. Tara reacts with surprise and a twinge of guilt. Bim continues on, saying that Tara is wrong, and her sister could not possibly feel for her daughters what Bim feels for her cat and dog. Tara thinks Bim has gone too far with this comment but is unable to respond, because as soon as the thought occurs to her, they are accosted by a loud noise: Baba playing his records inside his room. Tara remarks to Bim how Baba is still playing the same records he played when they were children, and Bim responds that he loves the old records and doesn't want any new ones.

When Tara says she thinks this is strange, Bim responds, laughing, that she and Baba *are* strange. At this point, Tara, Bim, and Bakul are sitting on the veranda together. Bim pours her cat some milk and, when Tara receives the milk jug, she finds there is very little milk left for her husband's tea and, upon filling his cup with what is left of it, almost guiltily asks if that is enough for him. Bakul shrugs and does not reply.

The three sit on the veranda silently until Baba appears, and suddenly Bim begins to bustle around. She refills the milk jug, which had been nearly empty just moments before, and fills Baba's teacup with milk and a generous spoonful of sugar. Baba is described as wearing old, frayed pajamas and having a blanched face, his shirt worn almost to translucency. Bim is the only one who doesn't appear to see anything wrong



with the arrangement; she strokes her cat as she makes a comment that he is getting too fat.

Everyone is silent until Bakul makes a comment that this is their first morning in Delhi, and Tara responds by smiling as though he has made a profound remark that deserves congratulations. As they begin to discuss what to do that day, Bim mentions that she has some of her students coming over to the house. Bim asks Tara and Bakul what their plans are for the day, but Tara seems unable to answer before first consulting with her husband. Bakul mentions the possibility of asking his uncle to send them a car so they can go into town, and Tara immediately announces she will go get ready.

While the remaining family members get up and walk along the veranda, Baba remains still. Bim asks him in a very soft voice so the others will not overhear her if he will go to the office today. Tara manages to overhear the question and is very surprised that Bim still urges their brother to go to the office after all this time. Baba does not respond to the question and simply smiles at the tiles on the floor.

Once Tara and Bakul are alone in their room, Bakul reminds Tara how much more convenient it would have been if they had stayed with his aunt and uncle right in the center of town. Tara responds that she did not want to go anywhere and simply intended to remain at home. Bakul then reminds her how impossible this will be with all the plans they had. Tara decides that she will not accompany her husband into town and decides to remain at home for the day. Bakul seems very impatient with her when she announces her intentions. While her husband continues to get ready to leave, Tara walks out onto the veranda and looks out into the garden, taking in the sights and sounds of her surroundings. She thinks to herself that she has fooled her husband into thinking she has acquired the sophistication he possesses when, in reality, it is not true.

Tara goes to visit Baba in his room as he again listens to his records, this time, to the song, "Don't Fence Me In." She looks around his bare room and then at him for a moment, taking in his serene face and long fingers. She tells herself he is an angel, sent to earth but unsoiled by any of it. She wonders why he spends so much of his time listening to his records. Tara quickly grows impatient and asks Baba if he is going out today, offering him a lift to town. Baba casts his eyes down and does not respond, but Tara persists. Baba glances at her, almost pleading, then very slightly shakes his head. When Tara asks him if he is going to the office this morning, he smiles lightly and again shakes his head. Tara persists with her question and finally says she will go ask Bim. Baba is pleased with this and goes back to listening to his records. Baba becomes depressed when the gramophone's needle becomes stuck, and he begins pacing about his room, unable to continue listening to his records. The silence in the room becomes as deafening as it is unusual.

Suddenly, and still very unsure of himself, Baba decides to go to town and quickly begins to dress himself in the first thing he finds to wear. While Tara waits for her husband to finish dressing himself, she sees Baba already reaching the gate before their house, on his way to town. Baba is still unsure of his actions and would have been very grateful for anyone or anything that got in his way at this point, but since nothing



does, he continues on. His mind drifts back to the different times he has gone to town. Now, he witnesses a horse getting beaten and, horrified, throws his hand over his head to shield his face and runs back to the house. Tara finds him in a horrified state and fears he has been hurt. As she cares for him, Bakul exits their room and asks Tara if she is ready to leave, reminding her they will be late.

Bakul does not acknowledge Baba, instead focusing on his missing shoehorn, and Tara mumbles she will not be joining him after all. Tara expects him to explode, but instead he simply tells her that he has only to bring her home for one day and she has already returned to the hopeless person she was before he married her. Tara is upset by his words. Bakul urges her again to leave, but Tara insists on staying at home. Bakul tells her she is not happy at home, pointing out her unhappy face, lightly touching her cheek, but Tara remains insistent upon remaining at home and Bakul finally leaves.

Bim's students arrive and Bim is clearly happy and completely at ease as she talks to them in the drawing room, discussing history with the eager children. Bim finally gets Tara to smile when she buys her sister ice cream from a vendor on a bicycle. The afternoon brings with it intense heat, and everyone and everything seems to slow down with its arrival. Tara remembers her husband saying he could rise above the climate, proving his point when the family vacationed in Moscow and he refused to let the cold slow him down.

Tara's memories fade back to when she was a child and her mother was sick. She had snuck into her parents' bedroom and witnessed her father give her mother a shot. Seeing this as a child, her immediate reaction was to believe that she had witnessed her father killing her mother, and although she soon learned this was not the case, the initial reaction stayed with her.

The narrator comments that to look at Bim and Tara as adults now, one would never guess the two women shared the same experiences as children. The two women begin to converse and the conversation turns to their brother, Raja. Bim comments on his "nauseating" poetry skills. Tara is shocked and speechless at her sister's comment, since Raja has clearly been regarded by the family as a very fine poet. The two women head into Bim's room with the intention of reading some of his poetry, but Bim comes across a letter from Raja and shows this to Tara instead. The letter contains the information that Raja's father-in-law, Hyder Ali Sahib, has died. Since the man is also the family's landlord, Raja has inherited their house and has written to inform Bim that she may continue to keep the house at the same rent. Bim is furious with the letter, and keeps it only to remind herself why she has no intention of speaking to her brother. Tara is upset by this and urges her sister to throw the letter away, but Bim refuses. She insists on keeping the letter as a reminder; every time she feels a longing to see her brother, she reads it to remind herself why she really has no desire to see him.

Later that evening, Bim, Tara and Bakul go next door to visit their long-time neighbors, the Misras. It was at the Misras' house that Tara originally met Bakul. The three spend the evening there, drinking and talking with their friends. Bim stays with the father, an older man, and talks with him on the veranda, while Tara and her husband sit on the



lawn chatting with his sons and daughters. The Misra sons seem notorious alcoholics while the two sisters take care of them as well as the house and their father. After a while, the three return home.

Part 1 Analysis

This first section of the novel seems initially to portray the intense difference between the two sisters, Bim and Tara. From the beginning, when Tara meets Bim in the garden, the two girls are characterized almost as complete opposites, beginning with their attire. While Tara wears a new one, her sister's nightgown is homemade and shabby. Through their conversation, it soon becomes clear from the manner in which she speaks to Tara the Bim is the older sister. Tara seems unable to compete with Bim's ridiculing remarks, accusing Tara of not really wanting to come home to visit. However, when Tara speaks of her husband and quotes him when rebuking Bim's comments, her tone suddenly becomes clearer and more confident than before. It is clear through her exchanges that Tara draws comfort and confidence from her husband and looks up to him a great deal.

Tara's relationship with her husband is clearly not equal; Bakul's dominance over his wife is evident in their exchanges. When the milk jug runs low before Tara can pour her husband's tea, it is meekly that she asks him if he has had enough. When Bakul mentions going into town later that day, Tara immediately goes inside to get ready. She responds with a smile to her husband's comment that it is their first morning in Delhi as if he has said some that is worthy of applause. Later, when the two are in their room, Bakul criticizes her harshly when Tara mentions not wanting to go into town with him. While her husband gets ready, Tara goes out onto the veranda and looks out into the garden. She sees the guava trees and spies some fruit lying on the ground underneath them and thinks to herself that if she were sure Bakul would not see her, she would run out and find one that was whole. She begins to think about her travels and the sophisticated life she leads. Tara admits to herself she has fooled her husband into thinking she has become this sophisticated woman he thinks she is, when, in reality, it is untrue.

As Tara cares for a visibly distraught Baba a few minutes later, Bakul looks in on them and immediately begins to criticize his wife when she tells him she will not accompany him into town. Instead of noticing his clearly upset brother-in-law, Bakul instead becomes engrossed with a lost shoehorn and criticizes his wife severely, telling her that he has only to bring her home for one day and she has already turned back into the hopeless person she was before he married her. His tone is sharp as if he were reprimanding a child. He goes further, saying she won't allow him to help her. He reminds her that he has taught her to be strong and decisive and to face challenges, but she has returned to being weak-willed and helpless upon returning home.

The way Bakul uses the words "help" and "teach," he is clearly speaking down to Tara, as if she were a child in need of his assistance and strict guidance. He even asks himself what he should do with her and says he should take her away immediately, as if she is being exposed to something harmful by arriving home. He touches her face



gently, a touch that may have been interpreted as a caress; however, Tara sees it as if he forced himself to do it and could hardly bear the contact with her.

As Tara licks the ice cream cone her sister bought for her later that afternoon, she guiltily wonders what her daughters or, more importantly, Bakul, would think of her if they saw her licking away at the sweet cream. Clearly, Tara's tendency for sophistication is something she forces when she is away with her family, but once at home, she succumbs to the simple pleasures she enjoyed as a child.

Another theme in Part 1 is the sameness of the house Tara finds when she arrives. She can't help but notice that, although she has been gone for a few years, upon her return, she finds everything seems completely unchanged. The rose walk, for example, a special place she used to walk along a child is still there, although it has grown somewhat older and less healthy over the years. The house has grown older, as well, and so has Tara's sister, Bim, and it seems Bim and Baba have stayed in a time warp. Although each of them has grown older in physical appearance, their behaviors and exchanges seem identical to when they were children; Bim still asks Baba to go to the office, Baba still plays with his pebbles and listens to his records on his gramophone, etc.



Part 2

Part 2 Summary

This summer, the city is in flames. Every night, the flames light up the sky with colors of orange and pink and let out solid columns of smoke. Bim paces on the rooftop of the house, looking at this spectacle, and imagines she can hear shots and screams coming from the city, although this is highly unlikely.

That same summer, Raja is very ill and it is to him Bim reports what she saw on the rooftop. He becomes increasingly worried about Hyder Ali Sahib, the family's wealthy landlord and neighbor, because it appears his family's house has been abandoned. Raja pleads with Bim to go next door to the Misras' house to find out where they have gone, commenting on how they left without notifying him where they were going. Bim is afraid to upset her brother, since even the slightest upset makes his temperature rise. The two continue their conversation as Bim wipes Raja's forehead with a wet sponge. Raja continues to beg Bim to go over and find out what happened to the family, and Bim threatens to call the doctor if he doesn't calm down. Raja responds by saying that nothing could take his mind off the family's whereabouts, but she can read if she likes. Raja remains silent and calm as his sister reads to him.

All summer, Bim reads to her brother and nursed him. She and Raja both love poetry, and this is what she reads primarily to him. His favorite is poetry written in Urdu, a language he studied thoroughly in school, and one none of his siblings could understand. He takes great pride in his knowledge of the language, even bashing Hindi, saying it is inferior to the Urdu language.

When Hyder Ali Sahib learned of Raja's interest in reading and poetry, he came to the house and invited Raja personally to share his library with him. Raja began to visit every day and sat in the library for hours, each day coming home with an armload of books. As Raja grew older, he began to spend time with Hyder Ali's family socially, enchanted with their wealthy lifestyle that was so alien to him. He visited with the family often, and came home at night to relate to Bim all of the exciting details.

When Raja's final school examinations had come out, he waited for his father one night on the veranda until he returned from the club. Raja had filled out his application form for college and asked his father to sign it for him. His father, however, disapproved of the college he had chosen, saying it was a college for Muslim boys, and ripped up the application form. His father grew even angrier when he heard his son wanted to specialize in "Islamic studies," and called him a dunce because of it. When Raja insisted, his father replied, "Rubbish," and stormed off to his room.

That summer was full of hot debate between the father and son on the subject and finally, one night, Raja's father explained his reasoning to him. He explained that if Raja had asked him to attend the school a few years ago, he would have agreed and goes



on to say that it is because of the political situation that he must stop him from going. He explains that, as a Hindu boy in a primarily Muslim school, he will be in great danger; the Muslims will not trust him and the Hindus will hate him for attempting to join the Muslims.

Raja was unprepared for this from his father. He had expected his father to disagree with him, but he had not expected him to have this reasoning behind his decision. Raja grew unusually quiet. The children's father went back to entering and exiting the house without interfering with their lives; the children knew him only as "the master of the entrance and exit."

One night, their mother, for the first time in twenty years, said she was too ill to go to the club for the evening. She stayed in bed that night and slipped into a coma, which is how her husband found her upon returning from the club. The ambulance came to pick her up and the children stumbled out of their beds to watch their mother's limp body being carried away. The following day, Tara remembers the day she walked with her mother along the rose walk; she asks to be taken to see her, but her father says bluntly that since her mother is unconscious, there would be no point in that.

For the next few evenings, instead of going to the club, the children's father went to the hospital. The children were excluded from the affair and were left to wait on the veranda for his return and for news of their mother's health. Their mother died soon afterward, without ever seeing her children again. Since they were not taken to her funeral, it was difficult for the children to accept that their mother was dead and not simply out playing cards at the club.

Raja ended up attending Hindu College, although he did so dispiritedly. He soon began cycling to school with the Mira boys and soon grew acclimated to his new environment and threw himself into his studies. Raja continued to go Hyder Ali's house every evening, and this worried Aunt Mira. She asked Bim to put a drop of her father's brandy in her tea to ease her worries.

Raja began to socialize with boys from his school, but when they found out his political views, they immediately ostracized him. Then, they attempted to make Raja a member of their terrorist group, and continued visiting him even after he grew ill, but Raja didn't concede, and even threatened to call the police to stop them. It was supposed this is what he had done, for a plainclothes policeman soon began standing by the gate of the family's house and the boys from Raja's school finally gave up on him.

The summer Raja became ill, the doctor was called and they soon learned that the diagnosis was tuberculosis. Raja was very frustrated with his illness and inability to move around, and especially to visit the Hyder Ali's house. Bim continued to read to him, and Raja continued to beg Bim to go up on the roof and look into their neighbor's house to see what she could learn about their whereabouts. The night she discovers the house is empty and informs Raja that they have gone, he becomes hysterical.



Everything is left to Bim that summer. She is the second oldest sibling, after all, and was left to nurse her sick older brother since her mother had passed away. During this time, Tara is always out, visiting the Misras every evening. Aunt Mira begins to look unwell, too, and Bim is left to worry about her as well as when Tara arrives home late, etc.

One night, Tara arrives home accompanied by another figure: Bakul. She brings him inside the house and introduces him to her sister. Bakul asks for Bim's permission to take Tara to a party at his house the following evening. Bim concedes, and consults her aunt, who responds by simply nodding frantically. Bakul promises to have her home by Bim's appointed time. After Bakul leaves, Bim asks her aunt if she thinks Bakul intends to marry Tara. Aunt Mira replies with a hiccup, saying she does think so, and immediately begins to drink from her tumbler.

The children's father also dies, that summer, in a very peculiar car accident. He was on his way back from the club one night, when the car hit a curb of a traffic roundabout on a deserted street. The bump caused the car door to swing open, and their father was flung out. He died instantly of a broken neck. Few people attended his funeral, mostly bridge players from the club. He left very little behind, only a closet of clothing, not even any cigars, almost as if he had prepared for his end.

The only thing that constantly reminds the children of his presence is the car in the garage, and its presence makes the children uneasy. Bim tells Raja they need to do something about it and Raja calls a garage owner, the father of one of his classmates from school, and sells him the car immediately.

The effect of their father's death on the household is simply monetary, since their father had not been much of a presence even while he was alive, but he did provide for the family financially. Raja is expected to take his father's place in his business, but he refuses, saying he doesn't care what his father has written in his will. He insists that Baba take his place for him, a suggestion that makes Bim very angry. Mr. Sharma, their father's business partner, comes to the house and explains that all he needs is the family name, a signature on documents to keep the business going. It turns out all their father ever really did anymore was sign papers, and the actual running of the business has already been left to Mr. Sharma and the other staff. Mr. Sharma agrees that Baba can easily take his father's place in the business by signing the papers.

That night, Bim is so frustrated that when the doctor comes to check on Raja, instead of ignoring him as she usually does, she invites him to sit on the veranda with her and initiates a conversation with him. The doctor tells her he sees everything she goes through, all her worries, and reassures her of one thing, that Raja will get well.

Tara and Bakul come home that night from the party and Bakul shares with Tara and Bim that his position in the foreign service has been assigned. Although Tara seems excited and proud of Bakul, Bim seems only vaguely interested in the news. Bakul knowingly informs her of the latest news of the current political situation, speaking calmly and telling her he will personally ensure the safety of the Hyder Ali family, although this is quite impossible since he is only a junior servant in the service.



Raja receives a letter from Hyder Ali Sahib, informing him of their safety and whereabouts. Raja is extremely touched and excited with the letter and the news. In the letter, Hyder Ali asks Raja to visit the house and see what had happened to it, and Raja asks Bim to do this for him. Bim and Baba go together to visit the house, finding it dark and deserted. They find a servant and the Hyder Ali's dog, and take them both home with them. Baba finds Hyder Ali's daughter's old gramophone and silently pleads with Bim to allow him to take it home. She finally concedes, and Baba gleefully takes the gramophone and the accompanying armload of records home with him, his new treasure.

When they return home, Bim finds Raja waiting on the veranda for them, and she scolds him, telling him to go back to bed, but Raja informs her that Aunt Mira is not well. When Bim enters her room, she finds her aunt in a dreadful state. She had clearly been drinking and had clawed off her clothes from her body. She sings a line of a song and trips over a trailing piece of cloth from her sari, spilling what was left of the brandy bottle. Seeing this, she gives a cry and falls onto the bed.

Next door, in Baba's room, the sounds of the old gramophone produce loud music that fills the house.

The narrator describes Aunt Mira's panic and distress, and her addiction to alcohol is evident. Alcohol has become the only thing that can soothe her worries, and she is unable to go without it.

One night, Bakul comes home with Tara, and Tara immediately runs upstairs, leaving Bakul to speak with Bim. Bakul points out a strand of gray hair on Bim's head and Bim is surprised to find that he is right. Bakul asks for Bim's permission to marry Tara, saying that Tara wanted him to speak to Bim before anything was arranged. Bim concedes and Tara soon leaves with Bakul.

Dr. Biswas is forced to visit the house more regularly now, with Aunt Mira's sickness, and he begins to ask Bim to go out with him, inviting her to a concert in the city, telling her she has too many worries and needs to get away for a time. Bim finally accedes to the doctor's pleading invitations and attends a concert with him. He shares with her the great pleasure he finds in music, especially his love for Mozart. When Bim arrives home afterward, Raja teases her relentlessly about her outing with the doctor. His health has been improving steadily and he has finally begun to put on some weight. In the meantime, however, Aunt Mira is growing steadily worse and Bim suspects Bhakta, the servant she brought with her from Hyder Ali's house, of supplying her aunt with liquor.

Bim, after much pleading from Dr. Biswas, finally accepts his invitation to visit his mother. The outing turns out to have been a mistake, however, and Bim unintentionally insults the doctor's mother by failing to eat the sweets she had spent all morning preparing. She also unintentionally announces she must leave just as the mother concedes to her son's pleading and agrees to sing for them, since Bim did not understand the language they were speaking. Although Bim strongly resists, Dr. Biswas insists on walking her to the bus.



As the two walk through the town, they hear that Ghandi has been killed, and Bim shares the news with Raja immediately upon returning home. They turn on the radio to learn more and are extremely relieved to hear that he was murdered by a Hindu, not a Muslim, which would have meant more political friction between the religions.

Bim sees Dr. Biswas one more time after the dreadful evening with his mother, although she never admits it to herself or anyone. One day, in the intense heat of the afternoon, Bim sees a white figure dart out the front door. Startled, she runs outside to find Aunt Mira writhing around naked in the grass in the front of the house. She is screaming that there are rats all over, and other animals, all eating away at her. Bim rolls her up in a blanket and brings her back to her room.

Dr. Biswas arrives and sedates Aunt Mira, giving Bim strict instructions to feed her aunt diminishing amounts of brandy every day. He tells her that he now understands why she chooses not to marry, because she has devoted her life to the needs of others. Bim is horrified at this, and is glad to see the man leave.

Bim continues to nurse her aunt, but Aunt Mira dies soon after the episode outside, and they dress her in a special silk sari for her funeral and cremation. After her death, Bim has visions of her aunt's face appearing in the dreadful well outside in the garden. The visions are very disturbing to her; she is even convinced she sees her poor aunt's naked body here and there in the garden during the day.

Soon after Aunt Mira's death, Raja is feeling better and announces he is leaving for Hyderabad. Before leaving, he promises to return, saying he could never leave Bim and Baba. But Bim and Baba are left alone in the house, Tara having gone off to marry Bakul, and Raja having left to explore greater things in Hyderabad, and all of their other family members having passed away, leaving the two of them alone in the house.

Part 2 Analysis

Part 2 provides the reader with a very different picture of Bim than is first presented in Part 1. Even as a child, it was Bim who ended up leading the household. The children endured a great deal, that summer, with the deaths of their parents and with Raja and Aunt Mira becoming ill. Bim was immediately put in a place of great responsibility, and she handled it as best she could. Tara's part in this section of the book is small, and it seems she is eager to escape from the house, since she never seems to be around.

The rough hand Bim is dealt almost seems to justify her somewhat cruel behavior toward her sister in the first section. Bim is responsible and dutiful, nursing her sick family back to health and leading the household upon the death of her parents.

Bim and Raja seemed to have formed an alliance, and it seems natural since they are close in age and spend so much time together, especially the summer he comes down with tuberculosis. They share a love of poetry and discuss each other's social lives, something Bim doesn't do with her sister personally.



Tara does seem to look up to her sister a great deal, however. Although Tara seems very unhappy in the house and escapes from it whenever possible, it is to Bim that Tara brings Bakul to ask for her hand in marriage. She insisted that Bakul ask Bim's permission before they made plans to marry. This insistence makes it clear that Tara has respect and admiration for her sister, although she never shows it physically. The two girls seem quite removed from each other's lives, at this point.

Aunt Misra's death appears to affect Bim a great deal. She seems to have grown to understand her aunt and her despair better as her health began its sharp decline, just before her death. Once she passed away, Bim has visions during the day and at night, and swears she sees her aunt's naked figure after her death. Bim also has visions of seeing her aunt's face floating in the dark waters of the well in the garden, where the cow drowned. The well had become entrenched in her mind as a child as signifying darkness and dreadful things. She associated the well with death, which is why her aunt's face is imprinted there in her mind.

At the beginning of Part 2, the entire family (mother, father, aunt, and children) are in the house, and one by one, they leave. The mother and father die, as well as Aunt Mira. Tara leaves to get married, and Raja finally gets well and leaves to go to Hyderabad to see Hyder Ali. At the end of the section, only Bim and Baba remain in the house, alone, just as Tara finds them when she comes to visit.



Part 3

Part 3 Summary

This section also begins with Tara's memory of walking with her mother along the rose walk, her mother having been ordered to exercise by her doctor since she was pregnant with her fourth child. Tara spies something shiny on the ground, and with a squeal of delight, bends down, thinking she has found a pearl, but she is surprised to find a snail crawling along on the ground. She reaches to pick it up, but Tara's mother walks on, uninterested.

Tara was soon to be ousted from her position as the youngest of the family, with the birth of her younger brother, Baba. He was said to be the prettiest baby of all, but he soon proved to be different from the other children. He learned slowly and seemed to have no desire to interact with the world. Their mother was not happy, having to care for the children, and she complained that her bridge game was suffering because of it. This was the reason Aunt Mira arrived. Although she was not quite an aunt, she was their mother's cousin, and the children immediately took a liking to her. Suddenly, the children had someone to play with them. Aunt Mira patiently worked with Baba, teaching him to grasp and throw, although no one could get him to speak.

Aunt Mira spoke to the children's mother about a concern that they were not getting the nutrition they needed because the milkman was watering down the milk he brought them. On Aunt Mira's suggestion, the family purchased a cow, and it quickly became an object of great admiration. In the spring, when the nights began to grow warmer, the gardener left her out instead of putting her in the shed. The cow fell into the well during the night and drowned. Her calf died without her, and the whole ordeal was a horror to the children. Immediately, the well became a sign of death to them, and they feared it greatly.

The children asked Aunt Mira why she always wore white, and she explained that it was because she was a widow, and white was the color of mourning. The children loved her, and Tara, especially took comfort in her. Aunt Mira and the children had a special relationship and they protected each other. The first summer she was with them, Bim and Raja caught typhoid and Aunt Mira stayed with the two constantly, nursing them back to health.

One day, when Raja and Bim announced that, upon growing up, they were going to be heroes, Tara announced that she was going to be a mother and knit for her babies. Bim and Raja laughed at her and Tara ran to Aunt Mira for comfort. Aunt Mira assured her that she would be whatever she wanted to be when she grew up, and she doubted Bim and Raja would grow up to be what *they* said they would, and her prediction turned out to be true.



One day, when her mother was not feeling well, Tara had followed her father into her mother's bedroom. He approached her very quietly, so as not to disturb her sleep, and punctured her wrist with a needle. Seeing her mother's head move as the needle went in, and then sink back into the pillow, Tara was sure she had seen her father murder her mother. After sharing this information with Aunt Mira, it was then the children learned that their mother had diabetes.

As children, it had always been impossible for Bim and Tara to catch Raja when they chased him around the garden. There had been one day in particular that they had managed to corner him, but even then, he ducked and escaped from their grasp.

One day, knowing how much Tara longed to have curly hair, Bim told her sister that in order for her hair to ever be curly, it had to be cut short. She offered, then, to cut Tara's hair for her so that she could have the curls she so longed for. Tara was nervous, but followed her sister up onto the roof and allowed Bim to cut her hair. When she was done, Tara was very upset and wept. Bim left her sister and went to do her homework. The strands of hair floated down from the rooftop to the veranda and Tara was found still weeping on the rooftop. At the time, Tara was sure she would never forgive Bim for her cruelty; she clung to Aunt Mira, who assured her that her hair would grow back, which it did, but still limp and with no curls.

In school, Tara was constantly being told she should be more like her sister, who was the head girl. Tara hated school and Bim adored it. She was physically weaker than Bim and unable to keep up with her and the other girls. School brought out Bim's natural vivacity, while it terrorized her sister. While Bim was drawn to challenges, while Tara shrank back from them. Tara also seemed to have an allergic reaction to the classrooms, having only to enter one for her mucous membranes to fill up, not allowing her to breathe. She was too polite to sniff, and so her face took on a set, congested look that the teachers interpreted as stubbornness and insolence.

The missionary ladies who ran the school took all the children to the hospital on Thursdays, to bring gifts to the patients there. All of the unpleasant smells of the place made Tara sick, however, and she did anything to avoid going to school on charity Thursdays.

There were two main episodes that marked the school year for Tara. The first happened when Tara was still in the primary section. One day, she looked out the window to see the principal gesturing wildly to a calm lady and a man dressed in a khaki uniform. The children soon learned that a rabid dog had found its way into one of the latrines outside, and the khaki-uniformed man had been sent to shoot the animal. Although the principal hurriedly came inside to shut all of the doors and windows so that no one could see the shooting, everyone heard it. The shot was followed by the squealing of the dog, followed by another shot to silence it for good.

The second episode involved Tara's teacher. She was a very appealing woman, and all of the children seem to take a liking to her. One day, soon after her arrival, the teacher was called into the principal's office and accused of a misdemeanor. No one knew



exactly what it was, but everyone gossiped about it. When the teacher returned, she was crying hysterically, and the children did not know how to react. A blonde young man, a foreigner, had been seen loitering around the school gates. The girls had said she had a boyfriend, but it remained unclear what the principal had caught her doing, and the gossip grew wilder. One day, Tara collected a bunch of brown and purple pansies for her teacher, but when she arrived to deliver them, their teacher, Miss Singh, was gone, and the girls soon found that she had been sent away. Tara was greatly distraught by this.

Bim continued to work hard at school, seeing it as a way out, of what, although how, she could not say. When Bim became head girl, the principal came to their home to congratulate her parents, but when she arrived, their parents were not at home, and so she had tea with Aunt Mira instead. Raja also received an honor, winning a poetry prize offered by his school magazine.

One day, Bim and Tara went into Raja's room and each tried on a pair of his trousers. Bim convinced Tara to come outside with her, since everyone was asleep, and the girls were surprised at how liberating it was to wear trousers and be able to run. At that moment, in their eyes, the reason Raja seemed superior to them in his abilities was simply because he could wear trousers and they could not. They attempted to smoke some of his cigarettes, but were cut short when Raja arrived home early from school and they had to drop them and run into his room to return the trousers before they were caught.

On another occasion, the Misra girls took them on a picnic, accompanied by two boys, possible suitors for the Misra girls. The children went for a walk and approached a cave. As they stood in the entranceway, a boy threw a rock into the cave, disturbing a swarm of bees that reacted by flying out madly and attacking Bim. Tara looked on in horror and tried to run back to help her sister, but the bees seemed to warn her to stay away. Bim called to her sister to run. After the attack, Bim was left extremely swollen and discolored, while Tara suffered only one sting, and she knew Bim deserved all of the sympathy she received.

Tara was ashamed and guilty at not having been able to help her sister. She began to avoid Bim and Raja and spent more and more time at the Misra's house. Tara felt at home there, and the family welcomed her. She was attracted to the contrast their house provided to hers. The Misras made no attempt to "keep up appearances," and their meals were served haphazardly. It was noisy, and sometimes the girls retreated to Tara's room so they could study.

One day, she walked onto the family's lawn and found them all there before a photographer, posing for a family photograph. The girls, with their easy, careless hospitality, dragged Tara into the picture with them, and there she stood, bundled in an old wool sweater beside the Misras in their best silk attire. Every time Tara saw the finished photograph in the Misra's home, she wanted to cut it out and steal it.



The Misra girls married early, and it was to their engagement party that Tara wore her first silk sari. Bim was invited as well, but she was bored at the party and she retreated with Tara to the rooftop. The two discussed the subject of the early marriage of the Misra girls. Tara saw nothing at all wrong with the arrangement, while Bim could not understand why they would want to be married without first finishing school and becoming educated. Bim then firmly stated that she would never marry, swearing that she would never leave Baba and Aunt Mira. She said she would be independent and earn her own living by teaching, and take care of Aunt Mira and Baba, saying there would be so much to do when they are grown up.

Part 3 Analysis

Aunt Mira's presence in the children's lives changes everything. Their parents had never before taken an interest in them, and this is the first time they have an adult figure who obviously cares for them. Up until her arrival, the presence of the children's parents in their lives was almost ghost-like, simply a presence. They never really seemed to take an active part in their children's lives, and someone's involvement and interest is exactly what the children need.

The children need someone to love them, and Aunt Mira, who is sent to them almost as a discard from another household, aged and worn, desperately needs someone to care for her, as well. The children and their aunt have opposing needs that they are able to fill for each other, which is what makes their bond so strong.

When Bim convinces Tara to let her cut her hair, Tara's trust in her older sister is evident, but it is short-lived. Tara runs to Aunt Mira for comfort after the haircut, as usual. She seems to find comfort in the woman that she is unable to find anywhere else. Bim and Raja have each other to confide in, having seemed to form a kind of alliance that Tara was not a part of, Tara was then left to search for comfort elsewhere, and she found it in Aunt Mira. Although Tara swore at the moment she could never forgive her sister for her cruelty, she eventually does.

Bim and Tara's attitudes about school clearly contrast sharply. While school brings out Bim's vivacity and natural talent, Tara hates it. The girls could not seem to be any more different. Tara admits to no fond memories of school whatsoever, while Bim poured herself into it, becoming head girl.

The episode at the picnic with the Misra girls where Bim is attacked by the swarm of bees clearly affects Tara more greatly than anyone. Her guilt at not being able to help her sister fight off the bees stays with her. She is no longer able to go to Aunt Mira for comfort; she has grown out of that now. Instead, she simply avoids Bim and Raja and begins spending more and more time at the Misra house, and becomes more and more withdrawn from her own home.

The discussion between Bim and Tara on the rooftop of the Misra house at their engagement party about early marriage seems to indicate the future. Tara defends the



Misra girls, who had become her friends, honestly believing there is nothing wrong with an early marriage, and seeming to view college as unnecessary. Bim, on the other hand, vows never to marry, and certainly plans to attend college. In the end, both girls do as they said. Tara marries early and leaves the house while Bim never marries. Instead, she attends college like she planned, remains completely independent, becomes a teacher, and stays at home with Aunt Misra and Baba.



Part 4

Part 4 Summary

Bim is correcting papers at the dining room table while Tara sits near her, attempting to write a letter to her daughters. She turns to Bim and expresses her worry about her. She tells Bim she needs a change and Bim asks her what she means by this. Tara replies that she has been watching her sister and asks Bim if she knows she talks to herself. Bim replies that she didn't know she was being watched, and Tara says she couldn't help overhearing. She also adds that Bim gestures a lot with her hands, to which Bim replies that she didn't know she had to keep her hands still when she talked, and Tara insists that she does it even when she isn't talking.

Tara continues on, insisting that her sister is worrying. Bim says that she has no more worries, and Tara brings up Raja. Bim pretends to be tired of talking about him, but Tara continues. She questions Bim, asking her why she thinks such horrible things about their brother if she hasn't seen or heard from him in years and doesn't know anything about him. Bim insists she does know; he is invited to weddings, engagement parties and anniversaries, where they spread out cushions for him to rest on and he recites poems. Tara points out that Bim hasn't read any of his poetry in years, to which Bim replies that she knows Raja and knows his poems. Tara asks her why it could not have changed and grown better over the years. Bim tells her it couldn't have been the way he lives, emphasizing that he lives in his father-in-law's house, making money on his father-in-law's property, fathering one baby after another.

Tara informs her that his children are quite grown up already, to which Bim replies that the boy is horribly spoiled. Slightly frustrated now, Tara asks her how she could know this, considering she has never even seen him, and Bim replies that she couldn't bear to.

Bim tells her about the one time they visited her, and remarks how fat Raja and his wife had gotten. She claims that Raja needs a vocation, and the reason he eats so much now is that he has given up what used to be his vocation and therefore has to console himself with food. Tara tells her that he and his wife want her to attend their daughter's wedding, and begins to read to her from a letter, but Bim says she doesn't want to hear it because the letter was meant for Tara, not for her. Tara ignores Bim's comment and continues to read.

In the letter, Raja mentions his youngest son riding on a white pony, and Bim immediately tells Tara the only reason he bought that white pony was to mimic the Hyder Ali Sahib's white horse Raja had so envied as a child, and that he is simply gratifying his own boyhood desires through his son. Bim then asks Tara what would happen if the pony threw the little boy and he cried and no longer wanted to ride the pony, but Raja insisted he continue. Tara tells Bim that is a terrible thing to imagine, and asks her why she pictures such horrible things.



Bim shakes her head, holding it with both hands, and admits that is just her trouble, that she does imagine horrible things. She then closes her eyes and appears to be thinking deeply. As she walks away from her sister, Bim's lip trembles and her hands shake. Tara's words have gotten to her and she thinks rapidly about Raja and her sister, accusing Tara of being cruel and Raja of being selfish.

Tara keeps an eye on Bim as she walks around the house and wonders to herself why she has never noticed before how queerly Bim runs the house. She thinks about her excessive meanness, the way she scrapes all the leftovers into saucers and serves them in the following meal. Tara worries that Bim and Baba don't eat properly. She notices how Bim keeps a box of expensive tea, covered in dust, on the kitchen shelf, unable to bring herself to use it.

Although Bim spares no expense when buying books for school, Tara learns from the gardener that Bim has ordered a cartload of manure for the garden and then told the gardener that she has no money left for seeds, and she is always after the gardener for wasting water. Tara is surprised at her recent findings, having always thought of her older sister as so competent and capable; everyone thought this about Bim, Aunt Mira, the teachers at school and even Raja.

That night, Bim, Bakul and Tara sit on the veranda, chatting with one another. Midway through the conversation, Bim gives a small moan and says to Bim with a groan that she has not come to help chase the bees away. Bim is surprised by the comment, and Bakul mentions how Tara has always had a thing about bees. Tara explains the afternoon Bim was attacked by the bee swarm, and laments again how she did not run back to help her sister fight them away. Bim had forgotten the incident altogether, and brushes off Tara's laments, saying there was nothing she could have done and insisting she sent her sister to fetch help instead. Tara remains guilty, thinking Bim's recollection of the incident is not quite accurate.

The conversation turns to the Misra girls, who married early and have been abandoned by their husbands and have turned to teaching, although they apparently don't enjoy it in the least.

Tara asks Bim if she has heard from Dr. Biswas, and is angry with herself for forgetting his name after the man spent so much time in their home. The conversation trickles down and ends with the three of them annoyed, Tara with her own forgetfulness, Bakul at not being listened to, and Bim at having to listen to Tara and Bakul and not being left alone.

Bim thinks about Tara and Bakul and Raja, and how they all in a way have turned their backs on her. She then looks over at Baba, who is sleeping on the cot beside her on the veranda, and wonders if she is precious to him, but then reminds herself he is as unaware of her when he sleeps as he is when he is awake.

The following morning, Tara tells Bim that the atmosphere of the house has changed, ever since she took over. When Aunt Mira became ill, and Raja was sick as well, Tara



said it seemed the illness was passing itself from one generation to the next, and the only way to escape it was to get out of the house. Bim asks Tara if this is why she married Bakul instead of going to college. Tara replies she could never have stood college, that she hated school. She said she was swept off her feet by Bakul because he was older and impressive, and she was overwhelmed when he picked her and paid her attention. Bim looks at Tara and thinks to herself that she has always seen her as a moody, touchy, younger child, and finds herself surprised to hear these mature words coming from Tara.

Tara reminds Bim of the time when Bim and Raja announced they would be a hero and heroine when they grew up, and Tara had said she would be a mother. After all these years, Tara finally laughs at the incident, but Bim cannot. Bim asks Tara where the hero and heroine have gone, at the bottom of the well, perhaps.

Later, Tara confides to Bakul that she is afraid for Bim. She points out how unhappy and angry she seems all the time, and Bakul admits he did not notice. She mentions the situation between Bim and Raja and tells him how Bim is unable to forgive old grudges. Bakul makes a feeble attempt to solve Tara's problem, if only to have her concentrate on him instead of her sister.

The following day, Tara is still preoccupied with Bim. All afternoon, Bim has grown more and more angry, until her anger is almost unbearable. She decides on a target for her anger and chooses Baba. Bim storms into her brother's room and announces that she has decided to sell their family's portion of their father's business. Once she does so, this will mean a slight decrease in their income, although she will be able to continue paying the rent with her teaching salary. Finally, she asks Baba if he would be willing to go live with Raja in Hyderabad. Bim had not planned to say this, her anger had carried her there, and the words escaped without her intention. She immediately tries to retract her words when she sees the hurt look on her brother's face. Finally, her anger has reached its peak and begun to recede. That afternoon, the house becomes deafeningly silent. Bim resolves to forgive Raja for the letter he has written to her. She brings Baba his tea, lovingly and almost apologetically, and he accepts.

That night, Bim decides not to go to bed. Instead, she goes into her room, takes out a stack of papers, and begins to read. She reads a poem about the emperor's death, and after she has finished, her mind seems to settle. When she moves again, it is to go to her desk and remove the entire bottom drawer and begin reading translations she has made of Raja's poems. After reading them through, she realizes how Raja's ambitions were really modest and not as assertive as she had previously thought. Bim has to admit that he has learned to write well. She wonders if he would want her to keep the poetry, after all these years. The only paper she tears up, that night, is the letter Raja wrote years earlier that had disturbed her so much. Tearing it makes her feel much better, as if she were making headway.

Bim awoke the next morning and found her nieces there to wake and greet her. The two girls spent most of their time playing with Baba, who greatly enjoyed their company.



This morning, Bakul and Tara and her daughters were to leave for Hyderabad for the wedding. Before they left, Tara followed Bim into the garden and took her sister by the hand. This came as a surprise to both of them, since the girls had never held hands, even as children. Tara's words came out fast, and Bim realized she had been keeping them bottled up for some time. Tara begins by telling Bim she is sorry and that she can never forget or forgive herself. She continues saying she is sorry for having left Bim, for deserting her when she left to get married. Bim brushes off the apology, saying she simply left to get married, but Tara insists that she should have returned. Bim sees the desperation in her sister's face and in her voice, and grows gentler with her. She looks into her eyes and sees a reflection of her own despair, and realizes they are not so different, after all. Tara seems comforted by this and she heads to the car.

Before she leaves, Bim asks Tara to tell Raja that she and Baba aren't used to traveling, and that he should instead come visit them. She asks her to let him know that she is waiting for his visit and she wants him to come, she wants to see him. Tara lets go of Bim's hand, falls into the car and departs.

At night, Bim is reminded of a line in one of Raja's poetry books that reads, "Time the destroyer is time the preserver." Bim is listening to a singer, and the final line he sings is, "In your world I am subjected and constrained, but over my world you have dominion." An old man calls out in agreement with the line, and the singer raises his hand in acknowledgement.

Part 4 Analysis

This final section of the novel consists primarily of exchanges between Tara and Bim. In the beginning, when Tara brings up the subject of Raja, Bim brushes it off, saying she is bored with the subject, but Tara insists. Bim initially speaks cruelly of her brother and how he has grown fat and lazy over the years, raising his son to fulfill his own childhood fantasies and being spoiled, etc. Tara is shocked at her sister's negativity, and Bim realizes Tara is right.

Bim gives everything a lot of thought, and soon decides to accept her brother with his shortcomings. Bim's anger, however, continues to mount. She grows more and more angry until it finally reaches its peak and she can calm down. When this happens, her head is clear. One night, she stays up reading Raja's poetry and thinking. Her thoughts and feelings about her brother change a great deal, and she realizes her assumptions about him were wrong. That night, she rips up the letter that had caused her so much grief, and this gives her the feeling she is making progress.

Bim's relationship with Raja seems to have been mended, although the two never exchanged words. Now it is the relationship between Bim and Tara that needs mending. Tara has clearly been holding in her feelings for some time now, and the morning before she leaves with her family for the city, she finds it entirely necessary to share them with her sister.



When Tara follows Bim out into the garden that morning, the speed at which she expels her words tell Bim that Tara had been holding them in for a long time. Tara's words are extremely apologetic and guilt-ridden. Almost wailing, she tells her sister how sorry she is that she abandoned Bim when she left the house to marry Bakul, insisting that she should have returned home. Bim tells her it is nonsense to worry about such things, but the worry is very real to Tara. She reaches out physically to Bim, as well, by taking her arm and pulling her toward her before sharing her feelings, something that comes as a big surprise to Bim since the girls never seemed to have been physically affectionate with one another, even as children.

When Bim looks into her sister's eyes that morning, she sees many of her own worries and fears, and realizes she and her sister are not as different as she had previously thought. Tara has shown her concern for her sister. Bim, who had up to now ignored it, now accepts her sister's words, and the two seem to have formed a strong bond that had never been attempted before.



Characters

Tara

Bim's younger sister. Tara was the third child in the family, and as the children were growing up, Tara was the most quiet and reserved of the children, next to Baba. She felt left out of the alliance that seemed to exist between her two older siblings, and never seemed able to live up to the expectations of her friends and family that had been set by Bim. As a child, Tara was also easily hurt, especially by Bim, who was sometimes cruel to her. She felt left out when her older siblings excluded her, and whenever she was troubled, she clung to Aunt Mira for comfort. In school, Tara was constantly in the shadow of her sister. When Bim was left in charge of the household after the death of their parents, and when Aunt Mira and Raja fell ill, Tara reacted by running away. She spent as little time at home as possible, and never seemed to make an effort to help her sister through these difficult times. Instead, Tara longed to escape from the home; she hated school and had no intention of attending college, so when the opportunity of an early marriage presented itself, she happily accepted it.

Tara felt special when Bakul showed interest in her, since he was older and came from a more social and wealthier family than she did. Tara seems to take comfort in her husband's polished ways and, although he tends to speak down to her, she doesn't seem visibly upset with their arrangement, having realized her dream of becoming a mother. Although she feels restrained at times by her life with Bakul, admitting to herself that she has fooled him into believing she is someone she is not, she accepts it. Tara did insist that Bakul ask Bim's permission to marry her before they proceeded with their plans, showing how she looked up to her sister, valued her opinion and needed her approval. Tara left the family home early to marry Bakul and realized her dream of becoming a mother. In her adult life, she returns home every couple of years to visit Bim and Baba. Having returned home now to visit her sister, Tara brings with her some guilt from two main events in their past. The first of these happened when they were children: Bim was attacked by a swarm of bees and Tara was unable to help her sister. Tara remembers the event vividly and carries her guilt about it into adulthood.

The second main reason Tara feels guilt is the way she ran away to marry Bakul without returning home to help her sister nurse her aunt and brother and care for Baba. When Tara returns to visit Bim as an adult, there initially seems to be a void between them, but when she reaches out to her, apologizing for her actions and explaining her feelings, they seem to come instantly closer.

Bim

Tara's older sister. As children, Bim was the top child in school and enjoyed her studies. She and her older brother Raja, the eldest children of the household, shared a love of poetry and academics and formed an alliance that excluded their younger sister, Tara.



After the death of their parents, Bim was forced to take care of Raja when he became ill with tuberculosis, and nursed him back to health. She also nursed her aunt when she became ill, all the while taking care of Baba. As children, she and Raja dreamt of becoming superheroes and scoffed at Tara's dream of becoming a mother.

Bim was cruel to her sister, and sometimes took advantage of her. She knew her younger sister longed for curly hair, and once cut off all of Tara's hair, promising her that in order to grow curls, her hair had to be cut short. One by one, the family members died or went away, and in the end Bim and Baba were left alone at home. In her adult life, Bim went to college and became a history teacher, an occupation she seems to enjoy very much. She never married, and remains living in the family's home, still taking care of Baba when Tara arrives to visit them. When the two are reunited during this visit, their differences become increasingly apparent through their conversations. Bim still ridicules her sister for her way of life and justifies her own. She seems to resent her younger sister on some level for having the ability to leave the home and get away.

Bim has remained the responsible sister. She dutifully cares for Baba and has played the role of caretaker all her life. Bim has always seemed plagued with worry, from the time she was a child dealing with the deaths of her parents and her sick aunt and brother, she grew a strand of gray hair at a very early age. Even as an adult, Tara sees her as a fretful woman, always worrying. Tara becomes concerned with her sister, and Bim is initially very resistant to Tara's offers of help. However, Bim is forced to realize the truth in her sister's words and accepts. Bim seems also to have resented her brother Raja for having married into wealth and left the home, only visiting once since he left. She ridicules him and his lifestyle, but eventually, upon Tara's urging, re-examines her feelings and decides to accept her brother, with all of his shortcomings. Bim and Tara have an instant connection when Tara reaches out to her this way, becoming closer than they had ever been.

Bakul

Tara's husband. He is very polished and proper, something Tara seems to take comfort in. Bakul grows impatient quickly with the simple life in Old Delhi and with Tara's family at the house. He enjoys attention and tends to direct most conversations to himself as much as possible. He is a member of the foreign service, which leads to traveling a great deal with his family. When speaking with Tara, he speaks down to her as if speaking to a child. It seems he has trained and molded her to be a part of his social class and believes his constant attention is necessary to keep her at this level. Bakul becomes frustrated with his wife when they arrive at the house and Tara is resistant to going into town with him. He accuses her of sinking back down to the level she was at when he first met her. Tara doesn't seem unhappy with her husband or her marriage, however, and seems to accept the arrangement without question. Bakul spends little time at the house during his visit to Old Delhi with Tara, preferring to spend as much time as possible in the city. Although it seems to be where his wife is most at home, Bakul is clearly uncomfortable with country life.



Baba

The youngest of the four children. He is clearly mentally handicapped. As a child, he was said to be the prettiest baby of all of the children, but everyone soon realized he was different. As a baby, he was extremely quiet and seemed to have no urge to interact with the outside world. When Aunt Mira came to live with the family, she worked with him a great deal and taught him to reach, grab and throw with a game of small pebbles on which Baba becomes fixated. No one is ever able to get him to speak; he is practically mute, only making sounds on rare occasions. Even as a fully-grown adult with gray hair, he lives with his sister, Bim, who cares for him as if he were her child. He has one other fixation: listening to old records at high volumes while alone in his room. He seems content with his life and only becomes upset when his routine is disrupted. He is also very sensitive. One day, the morning after Tara's arrival to their home, Baba heads to town and witnesses a horse getting beaten on his way there. He is mortified at what he has seen and runs home, badly shaken. Baba is very gentle and kind, and the family cares for him greatly, even if he is a somewhat constant worry.

Raja

The oldest of the four children. He married the daughter of Hyder Ali Sahib, and inherited his wealth. As a child, he looked up to the man greatly and spent much of his time at his home, with his family. Growing up, he was closest to Bim, who nursed him for months when he was ill with tuberculosis and shared his interest in poetry. He seems to have been ill for much of their childhood, and all the while remains fixated on Hyder Ali Sahib and his family. Before he fell ill, Raja had developed a friendship with the man and his family, and spent long hours in the man's library, reading books and taking home armloads of them at a time. When the political situation in India grows unstable, the family flees their home, leaving Raja extremely worried about where they have gone. Eventually, he receives a letter from Hyder Ali, assuring him of their safety, and they continue their friendship through correspondence. Once he is well, Raja leaves for Hyderabad and, from then on, his presence in the story is only through his presence in the conversations between Tara and Bim as adults.

Aunt Mira

A cousin of the children's mother. She was sent for after the birth of Baba, when their mother grew tired of caring for the child, and the children immediately took a liking to her. Aunt Mira was widowed at a very young age and lived with her dead husband's family before becoming the children's nanny. She was extremely patient and loving, and cared very much for the children, giving them attention they had never before experienced. She patiently played with Baba and served as a nurse and caretaker to all of the children. As they grew older, however, Aunt Mira became increasingly distressed, especially after the death of the children's mother and father, and with Raja's sickness. Her worries increase and she begins drinking in order to ease them, and the alcohol eventually leads to her death.



Hyder Ali Sahib

The family's wealthy landlord and neighbor. His wealth and prestige attract Raja to him, and the boy looks up to him a great deal. Raja soon takes to visiting him and his family, and although Hyder Ali is not characterized thoroughly in the book, it is clear through his kindness to Raja as he allows him to visit as he pleases and borrow countless books from his library, that he is a good man. After his death, Raja inherits all of his wealth, having married his daughter.

Dr. Biswas

The family's doctor. He comes to the house often, especially while Raja is ill, and then also takes care of Aunt Mira when she becomes ill. He takes a liking to Bim and begins inviting her out with him. Bim agrees to go out twice with the doctor, the second time meeting the man's mother, but the meeting doesn't go very well, and Dr. Biswas does not leave a lasting impression on Bim and disappears from the story soon after Raja gets well and Aunt Misra passes away. The last memory Bim has of him is when Aunt Mira begins her downward spiral: Raja calls him to the house for assistance, and he approaches Bim and tells her he realizes why she never wants to get married, because she has devoted her entire life to caring for other people. Bim is horrified by his comment and is glad to see him go. Afterwards, she never admits this encounter to anyone, including herself.

The Misra Sisters

The Misra family lives next-door to the family all their lives. The Misra sisters are quiet girls who marry young and are both left by their husbands and eventually move back into their family home. They are not wealthy and end up taking care of their elderly father and fat, alcoholic brothers as adults. They are extremely friendly, however, and as children, it was to their home that Tara retreated to escape from her own. It was at their home, as well, that Tara first met Bakul, and there that the novel ends, with Bim listening to a singer, the night after Tara's departure.



Objects/Places

Old Delhi

Where the children grew up with their family and where their house still sits, unchanged.

New Delhi

The city where everything changes and where all the action seems to be far removed from the unchanged Old Delhi.

The Family's House

The novel takes place almost entirely at the family's house. Although characters come and go as they pass away or grow up and move out, the house itself remains unchanged and those who remain in it, Bim and Baba, seem unchanged, as well, when Tara arrives to visit as an adult, years later.

The Well

The well is located in the garden of the family house and becomes a strong symbol of death to the siblings after the death of their cow.

The Rose Walk

Both Section 1 and Section 2 begin with Tara's memory of walking with her mother along the rose walk. Its deterioration seems to serve as an indication of the passage of time from one part of the book to another.

Baba's Pebbles

Aunt Mira gave him this game of pebbles as a child, and he played with them so often they have grown smooth with wear. The game becomes one of Baba's two fixations in life, and he plays the game even into adulthood.

Baba's Gramophone

Baba's primary preoccupation. The loud music serves as a constant reminder of his presence in the house.



Bees

When the children were young, Bim was attacked by a swarm of bees. Tara watched in horror as this happened, unable to help Bim; the memory stays vividly with her, and she carries the guilt from it into adulthood.

The Misra Family Home

Serves as a retreat for Tara from her own home as a child. It is also where she initially meets Bakul. Also, as children, Bim and Tara discuss their future while escaping from a party for the Misra girls. As adults, Bim, Tara and Bakul visit the family one evening and speak of their lives. This is also where the novel ends.

Tea

A central part of Indian tradition and the center of most meetings throughout the novel. It is with a drop of liquor in her tea that Aunt Mira begins her alcoholism, over tea that Bim meets Dr. Biswas's mother, through an ancient box of tea collecting dust on the counter that Tara worries that her sister is not well.

Themes

Rose Walk

Upon Tara's visit back home, the rose walk is where she first greets her sister, and it is where she initially begins to see the decay that has set in around the house that seems otherwise unchanged. Although the roses are still there, after all these years, they are not quite the same as they were when the children were growing up. The roses are thinner and weaker now, as if they have decayed over the years. Although, upon first inspection, everything at the house seems unchanged, further inspection reveals that much of it also seems to have slowly decayed over the years, along with the roses. The rose walk is described multiple times throughout the book, seeming to symbolize the passage of time. The first time it is described is when Tara first arrives at the house to visit. She is surprised at how unchanged she finds everything, but upon closer inspection of the rose walk, she finds that the roses are not as plentiful as they once were, and that the ones that remain are growing weak. The rose walk is described again at the start of Part 3, and the scene where Tara walks with her mother, who is walking under her doctor's orders, and Tara finds a snail on the ground and becomes excited with it. This scene is repeated when Tara returns as an adult. She walks with Bim, instead, and remembers walking along the path with her mother as a child. Now, as an adult, she spies something shiny on the ground once more and again finds a snail. She bends down to examine and play with it, just as she did as a child. As a child, when her mother becomes so ill as to be taken to the hospital, it is the memory of walking along the rose walk with her mother that haunts her and the reason for Tara's asking to be taken to the hospital to visit her mother, a woman she had never been very close with.

New vs. Old

The contrast between new and old is made clear from the first few pages of the novel. The sameness of the house is emphasized through Tara's multiple comments of surprise that the house seems completely unchanged since she had last seen it. The rose walk contributes to this theme by portraying the passage of time between the two parts of the book in which it is described.

Many things portray the sameness of the house and its members, and one of the main ones is Baba. Baba's presence, although quiet, is constant throughout the book. His personality remains the same and so do his habits. His fixation with listening to loud records on his gramophone and playing with his pebbles on the veranda remains the same from his childhood to Tara's visit as an adult. The music on his gramophone never changes and neither does the sound of his pebbles hitting the veranda. The house itself remains the same, as do the family's neighbors, the Misras, who play small but important roles in the development of the novel. Essentially, each of the children seems to have remained relatively the same through childhood to adulthood. Baba has remained quiet and child-like, Raja has aspired to bigger and better things, in the city,



Bim has remained studious, stubborn and responsible, and Tara, although her outward appearance may appear to be more polished than before, finds that her heart remains with her family and their life in the country.

New Delhi is also contrasted with Old Delhi, and Old Delhi is characterized similarly to the house, never changing. While New Delhi is the place where people go and things are always happening, nothing in Old Delhi ever changes, no one ever comes or goes, and everything stays the same. The city always remains in the distance, separated from Old Delhi, where the family resides. There seems to be an invisible line separating the old from the new.

The Well

The well is located in the family's garden and serves as a symbol for darkness and death for the children from childhood through adulthood. When the siblings were children, their family purchased a cow that was a source of great pride and attention for all of them. One day, however, as the nights grew warmer and it was no longer necessary to keep the cow tied up in the shed overnight, she was let loose in the garden and, during the night, fell into the well and drowned. She left her young calf behind and it died soon after. It proved impossible to pull the body of the cow out of the well and so there it remained, forever. The fact that the cow's body remained in the well, decaying, was something that terrified the children. The entire ordeal proved traumatic to them, and the well became a source of fear for the children. They never dared go near the well, and dared each other to throw things into it. The fear they felt toward the well stayed with them even into adulthood. They never dared go near it, and, even as adults, the reluctance remained.

When they were children, the well was regarded as a dark and scary place, a place that symbolized death and other unpleasant, horrible things. The extent to which it stayed in their memories became evident when Aunt Mira passed away. Bim, who had nursed her from the start of her sickness, was deeply affected by the death of her aunt. After she passed away, Bim had recurring dreams and visions of her aunts, and many of those dreams centered around the well. One vision she had in a dream was of Aunt Mira's mangled face floating in the black water of the well. This only goes to show how deeply the association of death and the well had been ingrained in Bim from her childhood experience.

Baba's Gramophone and Pebbles

They are both recurring themes of the novel, and seem to serve as a reminder of Baba's presence. His presence itself is silent, but these sounds are associated with him. The significance of Baba's pebbles can best be described by a quote from the book: "Everyone in the household knew the sound they made as he scattered them across the tiles with a little, quiet, unfolding gesture of his hand, then gathered them up again with



that curiously remote and peaceful smile on his thin face. It was the sound of the house, as much as the contented mutterings of the pigeons on the veranda." (Part 2, page 62)

The pebble game was a gift from Aunt Mira to Baba when he was a young child. It was with these pebbles that she taught Baba to grab and throw, a major feat for the child whose development had been so severely stunted. However, instead of outgrowing the game, Baba continues to play it, even as an adult. He seems to draw comfort from routine activities, and this is one of his. Baba's primary occupation, however, is with his gramophone. He finds it in the Hyder Ali's house and immediately becomes fixated with it. From this day forward, Baba plays the old records on the gramophone loudly, and the unending flow of music from his room serves as a constant reminder of his otherwise noiseless presence in the house. One day, soon after Tara's arrival at the house, the needle on the gramophone wears out and Baba is forced to put it aside with the other worn-out needles. He is so upsetting about being unable to change the needle right away that he remains in a state of shock and sadness for a while. He soon replaces the needle, however, and the same loud music floods the house anew. The music records that never change, and the recurring songs, also contribute to the theme of change vs. sameness.



Style

Point of View

The story is told entirely in third person, by an omniscient narrator. Each, section, however, concentrates on a specific character and takes place in a different time period. Part 1 concentrates primarily on Tara and her arrival at the house. Her observations of the sameness of the house and its inhabitants provide the reader with his/her initial descriptions and characterizations of the characters. Part 2 goes back in time to when the children were growing up, and centers primarily on Bim. The reader is given a completely different outlook on the characters and rationalizations for their behavior in the first section as adults. Part 3 also takes place during the children's childhood and focuses mainly on the two sisters and their differing experiences in school, as well as their relationship and differing personalities. The reader learns a great deal about them through interactions as children that relate directly to their relationship as adults.

Part 4 goes back in time again to Tara's visit to the house as an adult, and concludes the novel with a truce between the sisters. By telling the story in four parts and centering each of the parts on a different character, Desai is able to create complete characterizations of each of the main characters and provide her readers with a thorough understanding of each of them. By alternating the focus of each of the parts on the thoughts and feelings of the two main characters, Desai is able to fully characterize each of them. The readers are able to understand and sympathize with both characters as they view the world through their eyes, rather than just one or the other.

Setting

The novel goes back and forth in time but takes place only in Old Delhi, going from the late 1940s to approximately the 1970s. The entire novel takes place in the family home. Although the characters leave the house for small amounts of time, the bulk of the story takes place in the house. The house grows older with time, and its inhabitants either pass or move away; Bim and Baba are the only two who remain throughout the entire novel. The four parts of the story move back and forth in time from the siblings' childhood to adulthood in each of the four parts, although even these center around the family home, as well.

Language and Meaning

Anita Desai uses language to her advantage, providing her readers with a great deal of imagery, extremely colorful language, and recurring themes to emphasize the development of her characters. Her vivid descriptions provide her readers with a clear picture of her native country of India, where the story takes place, and also clearly portrays the setting and, most importantly, her characters. Desai uses a variety of literary devices, including metaphors, recurring themes and imagery in her colorful



descriptions that add a great deal to the story by painting a clear picture in the minds of her readers of her characters, their personalities and childhood experiences, as well as the setting that, although it appears the same on the surface, shows signs of small but significant change upon closer inspection.

Structure

The story is divided into four sections. The first section centers on Tara's visit to her childhood home and takes place while the children are all grown up. The second section moves back in time to when the siblings are growing up and is told primarily from Bim's point of view. The third section takes place even further back in time, when the brothers and sisters are even younger, as children, growing up in their home. Finally, the fourth section goes forward in time, back to where the novel began, and is told equally from the points of view of Tara and Bim. This structure is very appropriate for the telling of this story because it gives the reader a full understanding of each of the characters, which would not have been possible if the story had been told in first person, from the point of view of only one character. Instead, the structure allows the reader to relate and understand the novel's two main characters, Tara and Bim, which leads to a conclusion that culminates with the resolution of the relationship between the two of them.



Quotes

"How everything goes on and on here, and never changes,' she said. 'I used to think about it all,' and she waved her arm in a circular swoop to encompass the dripping tap at the end of the grass walk, the trees that quivered and shook with the birds, the loping dogs, the roses—and it is all exactly the same, whenever we come home."

Part 1, page 4

"Isn't it strange how life won't *flow*, like a river, but moves in jumps, as if it were held back by locks that are opened now and then to let it jump forwards in a kind of flood? There are these long still stretches—nothing happens—each day is exactly like the other—plodding, uneventful—and then suddenly there is a crash—mighty deeds take place—momentous events—even if one doesn't know it at the time—and then life subsides again into the backwaters till the next push, the next flood? That summer was certainly one of them—the summer of '47—"

Part 1, page 42-43

"A part of her was sinking languidly down into the passive pleasure of having returned to the familiar—like a pebble, she had been picked up and hurled back into the pond, and sunk down through the layer of green scum, through the secret cool depths to the soft rich mud at the bottom, sending up a line of bubbles of relief and joy. A part of her twitched, stirred like a fin in resentment: why was the pond so muddy and stagnant? Why had nothing changed? She had changed—why did it not keep up with her?"

Part 1, page 12

"Bim was quiet, floating the sponge back and forth in the bowl with wrinkled, frozen fingertips. She felt her exasperation blotted out by wonder at Raja's ways of thinking and feeling, so different from anyone else's at that time or day. She could not help admiring what she saw as heroism, his independent thinking and courage. Raja was truly the stuff of which heroes are made, she was convinced, and yet here he lay, ironically, too ill to play the hero he longed to and, she half-believed, was meant to be."

Part 2, page 45

"Holding her aunt's small-boned and cold feet, she saw now what her aunt had suffered through her parents' deaths, through Raja's illness, Tara's going away and the perpetual sorrow over Baba. It was all scored over her face, about her quivering mouth and watery eyes, and Bim had not cared to see it. Now she was lying back calmly on her pillows, smiling at the young doctor, smiling guilelessly and purely as a baby relieved from discomfort. Claspings those knuckled ankles, Bim wished she could remain a baby in a cot, innocent and malleable."

Part 2, page 89



"That was life—a snail found, a pearl lost. Always, life was that."

Part 3, page 103

"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 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."

Part 3, page 111

"It was not spite or retaliation that made Tara abandon Bim—it was the spider fear that lurked at the center of the web-world for Tara. Yet she did abandon Bim, it was true that she did." Part 3, page 134

"Tara nodded silently. She felt Bim's hold on her again—that rough, strong, sure grasp—dragging her down, down into a well of oppression, of lethargy, of ennui. She felt waters of her childhood closing over her head again—black and scummy as in the well at the back."

Part 4, page 149

"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."

Part 4, page 153

"'No,' Bim agreed, growing gentler. She saw in Tara's desperation a reflection of her own despair. They were not so unlike. They were more alike than any other two people could be. They had to be, their hands were so deep in the same water, their faces reflected it together. 'Nothing's over,' she agreed. 'Ever,' she accepted."

Page 4, page 174



Topics for Discussion

How does the relationship between Tara and Bim change throughout the book? What causes it to weaken and strengthen?

There are many recurring themes throughout the book, including the rose walk, the well, and Baba's preoccupations. What is the significance of these reoccurring images? How would the story be different without them?

The political situation in the country while the siblings are growing up is corrupt and unstable. However, the children seem to be sheltered from it in their home in Old Delhi, while the action all seems to happen in the city. How does the political situation affect the outcome of the story? Does it create any tension for the family? Would the story have been different had it taken place with a peaceful backdrop?

Raja seems always to be reading poetry, and much of it is quoted in the book. How do the lines of poetry relate to the story?

One of the recurring themes of the story is the contrast between old and new. How is this contrast presented and how does it play a role in the development of the novel?

It takes Tara many years before she finally relinquishes her guilt to Bim and apologizes for her behavior. It also takes Bim a great deal of time to forgive Raja for his letter and to accept him. Was the time lapse necessary? How would the story and characters' lives have been different if they had been able to forgive and forget sooner? Do you think this would have been possible?

Baba's character seems to stay the same throughout the story. He is silent and never speaks, yet plays an important role in the lives of the other characters and in the development of the novel. Describe this role and what it brings to the novel.

Aunt Misra plays a crucial role in the children's upbringing. Yet, as the children grow older, all but Bim leave her and don't return until her death. Describe the importance of Aunt Misra's presence as the children were growing up. What did she provide for them? What did they, in turn, provide for her? How did this contribute to her downfall?