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Reading Urdu, Writing home:

Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*

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Introduction: An absent language

On the 14th of September 1949, Hindi was adopted as the official language of India, abandoning the common language of 'Hindustani' and erasing a 'living link between Urdu and Hindi'.[1] In the years following Partition, Aijaz Ahmad argues, there occurred not just a mass movement of people, but that of linguistic categories – in his words: 'Where does Hindi end and Urdu begin, especially when the connecting bridge of Hindustani has been made to collapse?' (Ahmad, *Lineages of the Present,* p. 117). Much like the violence of Partition, this separation of language comes to symbolise the political and discursive reorganisation of the nation around homogenous categories of belonging. As Robert King notes, after Partition, 'the essential iconic proportion that must always be borne in mind is this: Hindi: Hindu: Hinduism = Urdu: Muslim: Islam'.[2] Veena Das suggests that when writing the trauma of the Partition of India, language seems to freeze up, that the extremity of violence 'annihilates language' and this

[1] Aijaz Ahmad, *Lineages of the Present: Ideology and Politics in Contemporary South Asia* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 111. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.
[2] Robert D. King, *Nehru and the language politics of India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 75.

'terror cannot be brought into the realm of the utter-able'.[3] What we must question now is, when such common languages and histories are erased, what remains to speak of that violence? In her novel *Clear Light of Day,* Anita Desai suggests that literary language itself, and particularly the intertwined histories of Hindi and Urdu in South Asia, might offer a vehicle through which to un-work the violence of the nation-state.

Clear Light of Day was published in 1980, the same year as the founding of the Bharatiya Janata Party, a political party self-described as the 'defender of "Hindu society"' and which, within two decades, had captured political power at the centre.[4] The 'ideological godfather' of the BJP party, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) was the Hindu nationalist organisation that had shaped the Indian political climate under its social and education movement since 1948.[5] The 1970s in India had seen the mobilisation of branches of the RSS across the country against the Congress Party government under Indira Gandhi. The spike in the number of attacks by Hindu groups against Muslims in Jabalpur, Bhiwandi and Ahmedabad also marked the period as one of growing communal violence.[6] By the 1980s a crisis of historical revision was overtaking Indian society. Its culmination came in the Ram Janmabhoomi movement which claimed the historical birthplace of the Hindu deity Ram as on the site of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya; eventually in 1992 riots broke out on the site and mobs took part in a ritualised destruction of the mosque. In Desai's novel, a decade earlier, the characters return to the months leading up to Partition in the summer of 1947 in Delhi and do so through the childhood memories of two sisters. These memories revolve around the absent brother, a Hindu who has since settled in Hyderabad with the family of their former Muslim

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[3] Veena Das, *Critical Events: An Anthropological Essay on Contemporary India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 184.
[4] Thomas Blom Hansen, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 159.
[5] Walter K. Anderson and Shridhar D. Damle, *The RSS: A View to the Inside* (Haryana: Penguin Random House India, 2018), p. ix.
[6] See Amrita Basu, *Violent Conjunctures in Democratic India* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

neighbour. Rather than writing an account of Partition that makes clear an irretrievable trauma, an 'annihilation of language', Desai keeps alive the memory of Urdu in India. In doing so, the novel undermines contemporary Hindutva ideology which seeks to homogenise the nation's language and history. Aijaz Ahmad writes that the nationalisation of a language at this moment in India represents the 'virtually unbearable pressure which proclaims that the choice between Hindi and Urdu is a choice between Hinduism and Islam, nationalism and foreignness' (Ahmad, *Lineages of the Present,* p. 116). *Clear Light of Day* works against an officially sanctioned, Hinduised memory of India by sustaining a link to the creative capabilities of Urdu literature and its idiosyncratic use of the language of absence to fashion a future from the trauma of separation. As Indian and Pakistani socio-political division sets in, there is a pressing need in Desai's postcolonial moment to take part in a remembrance that 'connect[s] what you remember to the memories of others, including the memories of those with whom you share that past'.[7] Language, Desai hopes, may open up a space in memory to re-write formal histories of the nation.

Aamir Mufti writes that the 'auratic attempt to resolve the crisis of postcolonial [Indian] culture can be taken in either a 'Hindu' or 'Muslim' direction. But at no point can either account of Indian reality open itself up adequately to the other.'[8] The 'minoritisation' of Urdu in India, Mufti argues, often produces the historiography of the language and literature solely through its Persian and Arabic sources, effectively the 'forgetting of the (ambivalent and problematic) Indianness of Urdu itself' (Mufti, pp. 18, 19). The project of nationalism in India sought 'to synthesise the "material" superiority of the modern West with the "spiritual" greatness of "Indian" culture, a synthesis to be achieved through (Hindu) religious reform' (Mufti, p. 28).

[7] Dennis Walder, 'Writing, representation, and postcolonial nostalgia', *Textual Practice*, 23 (2009), 935–46 (p. 938).
[8] Aamir R. Mufti, *Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 19. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

Aijaz Ahmad further points out that the consolidation of the nation was to coincide with the category of 'Indian Literature' that denoted a 'canonical kind of "Hinduism"', ironically modelled on 'Semitic religions, with notions of uniform beliefs, canonical texts, prophetic traditions, clerical institutions, adjudicable bodies of prescription and all the rest.'[9] The inherited colonial and Oriental knowledge of a 'syndicated Hinduism' thus moves forward as a ghost into the postcolonial present.[10] The claim to homogenous religion, to language and to history is the distinct fundamentalist and fascistic strategy which drives contemporary Hindutva politics. Literature and language are not simply cultural markers of a national history, but actively take part in constructing it.

In *Clear Light of Day*, Desai makes it impossible to recall pre-Partition Delhi without invoking the memory of an absent family member, and thus the memory of a Hindu subject's study of Urdu language and literature. The presence of Urdu literature undoes the 'modern communalist' rhetoric which would assert that Hindus in India who speak or write in Urdu are 'passive recipients' of another culture which does not belong to them (Ahmad, *In Theory*, p. 123). It is the pressure in post-Partition India of a singular and homogenous 'mother tongue' which, as Aijaz Ahmed describes, 'required enormous and entirely *willed* losses of memory' among communities for whom the multiplicity and variations of spoken and written languages had once been part of the texture of everyday life (Ahmad, *In Theory*, pp. 120–21). In Desai's novel, Raja is a product of the 'reading that went to make up their romantic and inaccessible and wonderful brother': he is a living link to an unofficial past of India.[11] His study of Urdu literature and his ability to recite its poetry brings a multiplicity of language into the lives and

[9] Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London; Verso, 1992), p. 260. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.
[10] See Romila Thapar, 'Syndicated Hinduism', in *Hinduism Reconsidered*, ed. by Gunther D. Sondheimer and Hermann Kulke (New Delhi: Manohar, 1991).
[11] Anita Desai, *Clear Light of Day* (London: Penguin, 1980), p. 131. Further references to this text are given after quotations in the text.

domestic spaces of a Hindu family. It is this, 'the dialectic of separation and union', that can, through language, open up the space for productive remembrance through loss – a tool inherited precisely from the cultural history of Urdu literature (Mufti, p. 220). The collective memories of Bim and Tara, the communities of pre-Partition India and the cultural experience of Urdu are not 'inaccessible', but continue outside of the officially sanctioned narrative of the nation. Desai's very genre of writing denotes a certain task of transmission and of translation. As Priyamvada Gopal notes, the Indian-English novel 'in the subcontinent returned repeatedly to a self-reflexive question: "What is India(n)?"'.[12] In creative response, Desai suggests that the novel might become 'custodian' to the legacies of the Urdu poet, finding its place in the contemporary Indian home and family – the responsibility for the preservation of these cross-communal histories placed in the intimate and domestic sphere.

For Hindutva groups such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the Hindu nation is conceptualised as an eternal entity. M. S. Golwalkar, a former leader of the RSS whose work within the contemporary discourses of Hindu nationalism is still central, argued in 1939:

> the conclusion is unquestionably forced upon us that in this country, Hindustan, the Hindu race with its Hindu religion, Hindu Culture and Hindu Language (the natural family of Sanskrit and her offsprings) complete the Nation concept; that in fine [sic], in Hindusthan exists and must needs exist the ancient Hindu nation […][13]

Not only does Golwalkar identify the modern conceptualisation of the nation as a product of homogenous language, race and culture, but that the nation itself has been present in all periods of history. The nation, symbolised as *Bharatmata* (Mother India), revolves around two

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[12] Priyamvada Gopal, *The Indian-English novel: Nation, History and Narration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 6.

[13] M. S. Golwalkar, 'Extracts from *We or Our Nationhood Defined,*' in *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader,* ed. by Christophe Jaffrelot (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 98–116 (pp. 116–17).

important states of existence for Golwalkar and subsequent Hindutva thinkers: the ‘Golden Age’ of *Satyuga* and the temporary state of *Kaliyuga*, an age of ‘Chaos and Ignorance’.[14] The colonial periods of Indian history fall into the category of *Kaliyuga*, whereby the nation is polluted with un-Hindu ideas, rules and peoples. The modern, calendrical time of the nation, or as Walter Benjamin would call it, homogenous, empty time’, signifies the type of history that is being formulated at the consolidation of national borders.[15] Years after Raja’s departure from Old Delhi, Bim narrates her own version of national history:

> Whatever happened, happened long ago – in the time of the Tughlaqs, the Khiljis, the Sultanate, the Moghuls – that lot… And then the British built New Dehli and moved everything out. Here we are left rocking on the backwaters, getting duller and greyer.
>
> (Desai, p. 5)

The contempt felt by Bim at being ‘left’ behind in the past, in the family home, places Old Delhi firmly within this empty homogenous time of the nation – the formal history written for her. Golwalkar writes of national time that the ‘permanent’, the eternal is national life, whereas the ‘impermanent’ is represented by the individual.[16] In its structure, the novel relies on the impermanent, and often false, nature of memory to reconstruct a lived experience of Partition. Desai, however, re-evaluates this seeming ‘impermanence’. By the end of the novel, Bim sees that her time is *preserved* in a place ‘where her deepest self lived, and the deepest selves of her sisters and brothers and all those who shared that time with her’ (Desai, p. 182). The individual

[14] Paola Bacchetta, ‘The (failed) production of Hindu nationalized space in Ahmedabad, Gujarat’, *Gender, Place & Culture*, 17 (2010), 551–71 (p. 558).
[15] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (London: Fontana, 1973), p. 265.
[16] M. S. Golwalkar, *Bunch of Thoughts* [1966] (Bangalore, 1968), p. 36. <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.201991/page/n3> [accessed 20 May 2020].

and personal memory – marked as cross-communal – becomes a new way to write national time through shared, lived experience.

Reflective Nostalgia

When Bim recalls herself and her sister Tara searching through their older brother Raja's room as children, she notes the 'enormous green volumes containing Keats and Shelley, Blake and Donne; the verses of Zauq and Ghalib, Dagh and Hali in cheap tattered yellow copies'.[17] At a historical moment where identity is being consolidated into homogenous linguistic and religious categories, Raja is captured by the romantic nostalgia of both Urdu and English poets. Desai does not write about Urdu literature wishing to reproduce a canon of nostalgia for the lost Islamic past of India, but rather in tandem with the project of modernist Urdu poets. As Frances Pritchett argues, modernist Urdu poets in the period after the 1857 Mutiny were invested in what they viewed as the reconstruction of 'the endangered mansion of Urdu poetry. Which of the old timbers should be reinforced and refinished, and which ones were hopelessly rotten and had to be removed?'.[18] The Mutiny in 1857, especially in Delhi, had marked a 'real end' of Muslim upper class and aristocratic culture, the finality signified by the exile of the last Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar from India in 1858 (Pritchett, p. 28). The Urdu poet Azad wrote that 'Urdu emerged from Delhi – and its lamp ought to have been extinguished with the kingship of Delhi,' but what followed was a conscious effort to bring forth Urdu literary culture from the ruins of the royal courts and into the collective imagination.[19] The reconstruction of Urdu needed to reflect a new reality of literary culture, a diaspora from the aristocratic setting

[17] Anita Desai, *Clear Light of Day* (London: Penguin, 1980), p. 131. Further references to this edition are given after quotation in the text.
[18] Frances W. Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness: Urdu Poetry and Its Critics* (London: University of California Press, 1994), p. 39. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.
[19] Muhammad Husain Azad, *Āb-e ḥayāt* (Water of Life), cited in Frances W. Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness: Urdu Poetry and Its Critics* (London: University of California Press, 1994), p. 39.; See Aziz Ahmad, *Studies in Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment,* 2nd edn (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 29.

of Delhi. Aamir Mufti argues that a century later, in the wake of Partition, poets writing in Urdu faced again the difficulty of relocating a cultural home for the literary language in Pakistan, leaving behind the historical 'homes' of Urdu in cities like Delhi, Lucknow and Hyderabad (Mufti, p. 228). In *Clear Light of Day,* Raja encounters Urdu during the summer of Partition, bringing together the histories of the upheavals, reconstructions and diasporas of the literary language. Appearing in the family home in Old Delhi, the poetry enters into the narrative not as a remnant of a nostalgic, forgotten past, but as an ongoing process, and a changing cultural landscape.

At the beginning of *Clear Light of Day*, Bim tells her sister that coming back to visit Old Delhi is like visiting a grave: it 'does not change. It only decays' (Desai, p. 5). Aijaz Ahmad argues that 'the moment of decolonisation itself is experienced in the whole range of Urdu literature of the period not in the celebratory mode but as a defeat, a disorientation, a diaspora' (Ahmad, p. 118). The writing of the self in Urdu literature can only be experienced as an exile from a specific time and place in which the poetic language lived. For Bim, the life has left the city along with her siblings and their lived experiences of pre-Partition India. In the novel's structure, however, Tara's arrival in Old Delhi in their childhood home sparks an act of remembrance of their brother, and therefore a tangible link to the spatial and temporal place of Urdu in Old Delhi; as Bim would now remember 'those days before Partition when students had a choice between Hindi and Urdu' (Desai, p. 47). It was these 'possibilities' held out to Raja, especially at their neighbour's house where Urdu poetry was recited and received by an audience, that situates the language firmly within a memory of Old Delhi as a productive cross-communal space (Desai, p. 49). This project of building a framework and restoring the foundations in which the past literary sensibilities of Urdu and Islamic culture could thrive in India is therefore revisited in the twentieth century, as it was in the aftermath of the 1857 Mutiny.

In Raja's absence in the present day setting of the novel, Tara is horrified by Bim's disavowal of her admiration for her brother's poetry, 'wilfully and cruelly smashing up that charmed world with her cynicism, her criticism' (Desai, p. 26). Bim's rewriting of her childhood memories reflects the conflation of Raja's departure from Old Delhi with the communalist idea which Desai articulates in her later novel *In Custody,* that 'Urdu is supposed to have died, in 1947'.[20] Amina Yaqin argues that throughout her work, Anita Desai explores Urdu as the 'cultural object of a lived experience in post-Partition India'.[21] It is important to note, in this respect, that the Urdu poets Raja studies in *Clear Light of Day* are famed for using the literary languages such as 'Hindavi' or 'Rekhta'. These terms, often used by poets and about poetry, identify a particular mode of writing in a 'scattered' or 'mixed' language with both Sanskrit and Persian origins and the varieties of Hindi and Urdu language before their formal linguistic categories.[22] In *Clear Light of Day,* the nineteenth-century poet Ghalib is one of Raja's favourites, Tara and Bim finding volumes of his poetry when searching his room. The poetic form of the *ghazal* was one of Ghalib's favourite modes of writing and one described in the introduction to a collection of his poetry as the 'crown jewel of Indo-Muslim poetry'.[23] In one particular *ghazal*, Ghalib writes, '"How could *Rekhta* be the envy of Persian?" Just once, recite to him the words of Ghalib — "Like this!"'[24] With the post-1857 claims of modern Urdu to Persian and Arabic sources, and Hindi to its Sanskrit ones, Rekhta literature becomes, as Imre Bangha argues, 'more than one of the most important meeting points between Hindi and

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[20] Anita Desai, *In Custody* (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 53.
[21] Amina Yaqin, 'The Communalisation and Disintegration of Urdu in Anita Desai's *In Custody*', in *Alternative Indias: Writing, Nation and Communalism*, ed. by Peter Morey and Alex Tickell (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), pp. 89–114 (p. 91).
[22] Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, *Early Urdu Literary Culture and History* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 23–29.
[23] Frances W. Pritchett and Owen T. A. Cornwall eds., 'Introduction: Ghalib's Life and Times', in *Ghalib: Selected Poems and Letters* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), pp. 1–20 (p. 10).
[24] Mirza Asadullah Khan, Ghalib: Selected Poems and Letters (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), p. 41.

Urdu; it is the shared early life of the two gradually separated languages.'[25] A 'mixed' language, therefore, offered poetic expression in both Hindu and Muslim worlds of literature. Moreover, the form of the *ghazal*, now popularised in modern global culture, represents, in Frances Pritchett's phrase, a 'living genre' – one which has crossed multiply through language, space and time.[26] The form, cultivated in the fourteenth-century Sultanate courts of Delhi, became a wide ranging vehicle for the poetic articulation of love, loss and longing. The great Urdu poet of the twentieth century Faiz Ahmed Faiz famously employed the form of the *ghazal* in his political poetry, this heritage of Urdu literary culture becoming after 1947 'a site for the elaboration of a selfhood at odds with the geometry of selves put into place by Partition' (Mufti, p. 243). Poetic expression in mixed and forgotten languages becoming, as Aamir Mufti argues, the 'forms of elaboration that do not consecrate the nation-state as the natural horizon of culture and community' (Mufti, p. 243). Desai deploys these poets and poetic works within her narrative, a reminder from memory of the multiplicity of the ways in which we can identify with and remember the past.

Raja's imitation of the great Urdu poets throughout the summer leading up to Partition in India, however, becomes 'excessively romantic', and Bim describes 'his heavy, limp body as she lifted it as spent and sapped as a bled fish, and the city of Delhi burning down about them' (Desai, pp. 47, 60). Raja suffers, lamenting the loss of the Hyder Ali family and the communal violence of Partition, with the subject of Urdu becoming thereafter a stagnant and indulgent nostalgia. When reading Raja's poetry, Bim notes that 'each was a meticulous imitation of what he had read, memorised and recited' (Desai, p. 168). Rather than renewing Urdu literary culture, Raja had simply longed for a mythological return of its former glory.

[25] Imre Bangha, 'Rekhta: Poetry in Mixed Language,' in *Before the Divide: Hindi and Urdu Literary Culture*, ed. by Francesca Orsini (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010), pp. 21–83 (p. 83).
[26] Frances W. Pritchett, 'Urdu Literary Culture Part 2: Histories, Performances and Masters', in *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia,* ed. by Sheldon Pollock (London: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 864–911 (p. 907).

When clearing away Raja and her family's old papers, Bim sits down to read one of her history books. Interestingly she chooses a history of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb and finds her mind 'stilled at last' upon reading an account of his burial:

> Laying her open book across her chest, she lay with her eyes closed, repeating the emperor's last words to herself like a prayer. She felt tears seep from under her eyelids involuntarily […] They left a map of riverbeds in the dust…
>
> (Desai, p. 168)

The image Desai evokes with tears falling from Bim's body and creating a 'map of riverbeds' speaks directly to a poetic rebirth. The significance of rivers in South Asian history and geography is rooted even in the naming of the land: as a word used by Turko-Persian conquerors, 'Hindustan' refers to a territory mapped by its connection to the rivers that run through it.[27] The land is effectively reborn whole again through Bim's tears which form its geographic plains, effectively disrupting the modern linguistic and cultural categories which seek to divide it: 'Hindi: Hindu: Hinduism = Urdu: Muslim: Islam.'[28] Bim envisions herself with the emperor, on his deathbed with his last words resting upon her chest, claiming a language and a spatial territory for herself and her memories. Loss is not all consuming for Bim, but transformative. The transformation is crucially of an Urdu literary image into a contemporary experience of a lived syncretic culture.

Desai in her novel does not simply portray the failure of Urdu literature to move beyond its romantic nostalgia for the glory of the Mughal empire and a pre-Partition India, but instead

[27] See Abdul Jamil Khan, *Urdu/Hindi: An Artificial Divide*, Algora Publishing, 2006, ProQuest eBook Central <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/gmul-ebooks/detail.action?docID=319222> [accessed 20 May 2020].

[28] King, p. 75; Faiz Ahmed Faiz does something similar in his poem 'Black Out' (written during the India-Pakistan War of 1965) in his use of the metaphor of rivers and renewal. For a discussion of this poem see Mufti, *Enlightenment in the Colony*, pp. 228–29.

uses the language and literature to transform the concepts of absence and loss. Urdu literature functions, Pritchett argues, as a 'game of words', allowing for the creative possibility of fashioning a new framework for history – one that relies on cultural, lived memory (Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness*, p. 92). 'You don't know any Urdu, you can't understand,' Raja says to Bim as he recites poetry to her (Desai, p. 47). Ironically however, it is Bim who is tasked with remembering the lived memory of Raja's childhood and the existence of Hyder Ali's family in their neighbourhood. It is a nostalgia that Svetlana Boym theorises in *The Future of Nostalgia* as '*reflective*'.[29] Where *restorative* nostalgia gives way to a desire to restore a mythic nation that has been lost, *reflective* nostalgia embodies the impossibility of recapturing the past entirely. *Reflection* upon the past allows within it a space for ambivalence and creativity. Unlike Raja, Bim and her sister do not merely mythologise a golden age of Urdu in India and lament its passing, they are tasked with remembering its living presence in the face of a nation in the process of forgetting and erasing its history of language and culture. Their memories throughout the novel run counter to the officially sanctioned history, culture and language of the nation state. In sustaining the memory of Urdu literature within the sphere of the domestic home, childhood and a pre-Partition past, Desai articulates the possibility for a *reflective* nostalgia in a cross-communal literary past.

Reflecting women

The traditional poetic form of the *ghazal* in Urdu literary culture is encompassed by the figure of 'the lover, who while longing for his inaccessible (human) beloved or (divine) Beloved, reflects on the world as it appears to him in his altered emotional state' (Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness*, p. 89). Reflection renewed through a poetic lens is not simply a desire to reinstate

[29] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. xviii. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

that which has been lost, but 'show[s] the social life of the lyric subject' (Mufti, p. 230). Desai's reimagining of the Urdu literary tradition of longing is transformed, rendering the figure of the lover as a woman rather than a man, and her longing for the inaccessible is rooted in the familial, domestic sphere. Raja's departure from Old Delhi follows moreover from their Aunt Mira's death, an important maternal figure in the children's lives. Bim notes upon Mira's death that she could not help but recall the lines of poetry she had read in Raja's book, *The Waste Land* by T.S. Eliot:

> *Who is the third who walks always beside you?*
> *When I count, there are only you and I together*
> *But when I look ahead up the white road*
> *There is always another one walking beside you*
> *Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded*
> *I do not know whether a man or a woman*
> — *But who is that on the other side of you?*
>
> (Desai, p. 100)

The haunting of Aunt Mira in Bim's imagination represents the ever present, yet absent, subject of loss throughout her life. I would suggest here that both Aunt Mira's role in the narrative and her name deliberately invokes a history and legacy of Indian poetry. The sixteenth-century poet Mira (alternative spellings and incarnations include Meera, Miraji, Mirabehn and Meera Mai) was a *bhakti* saint from Rajasthan. Mira has often been associated from the nineteenth century with a 'conscious self-representation of Rajputs through the medium of historical writing' and an example of a pure Hindu heroine.[30] Yet her story, one of devotion to God, her lyrics of love

[30] Nancy Martin-Kershaw, 'Mirabai in the Academy and the Politics of Identity,' in *Faces of the Feminine in Ancient, Medieval, and Modern India*, ed. by Mandakranta Bose (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 162–82 (p. 168).

and longing, and her persecution for having transgressed caste boundaries, reflect a different legacy. Mira's writing of experiences of being exiled from a homeland have become influential for 'generations of women and subaltern classes to insert their own experience of disempowerment and resistance into the Meera poem'.[31] Both the feminised figure of the lover and the poetics of longing speak to a forgotten history of the nation.

Tara remembers that as her brother left childhood behind, 'she and Bim were actually comrades-in-arms for they pursued Raja together now and Raja eluded them both' (Desai, p. 116). Desai not only transforms the traditional figure of the lover, but the subject of longing itself becomes shared by the two sisters. Bim recalls affectionately the memories of stealing into Raja's room together, of searching his bookshelves, trying on his clothes and lighting his cigarettes (Desai, pp. 131–34). The youthful solidarity of the sisters is shaped from the beginning by a search for their absent brother. At the end of the novel, Bim finds that her sister's visit had forced her to re-examine memories, re-read long forgotten letters and poetry – it had 'cost her by constantly dragging her apart into love and hostility, resentment and acceptance, forgiveness and hate' (Desai, p. 169). This examination of the self, of the disparate parts of memory which resist being held in a monolithic narrative of a childhood, and of a national history, serve to break the cycle of 'mourning for the impossibility of mythical return' (Boym, p. viii).

In a speech given in Urdu in a Delhi mosque in 1947, Abdul Kalam Azad, the Muslim scholar and President of the Indian National Congress, told his crowd:

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[31] Rashmi Dube Bhatnagar, Reena Dube and Renu Dube, 'Meera's Medieval Lyric in Postcolonial India: The Rhetorics of Women's Writing in Dialect as a Secular Practice of Subaltern Co-authorship and Dissent', *boundary 2*, 31 (2004), 1–46 (p. 8) <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/174862> [accessed 20 May 2020].

> I want to remind you that these bright etchings, which you see all around you, are relics of the Qafilas of your forefathers. Do not forget them. […] Learn to create your own surroundings, your own world.[32]

Memory of India's Islamic past provides a basis on which to build new landscapes, new political ideologies without forgetting or erasing living history – recalling instead that Urdu language and history might allow for the creativity to envision a shared postcolonial world. Bim finally tells Tara at the end of the novel that she will stay in Old Delhi to 'see Hyder Ali's house – and repair it. Tell [Raja] I'm – I'm waiting for him – I want him to come – I want to see him' (Desai, p. 176). Transformed by her sister's visit and her resurfaced memories, Bim is no longer 'left' behind in Old Delhi. Desai recentres the narrative of Partition, giving both a language and future to those 'left behind'. Tasked with repairing the old Hyder Ali house, a history which until now has belonged only to her brother, Bim assumes the role of the modernist Urdu poets in reconstructing the metaphorical 'endangered mansion of Urdu poetry' and thus keeping alive the memory of a thriving cross-communal past in India (Pritchett, p. 39). Desai importantly regenders the canonical Urdu poetic figure who longs for his beloved; in her brother's absence and inability to creatively fashion a future for the literary culture, Bim must herself take up the task of rebirth and rebuilding. The narrative furthermore centres itself around the theme of hospitality: Bim waits with open arms to receive Urdu and its history back to Delhi, taking charge of the space and present to which she can now belong. Ultimately, Bim's invitation to Raja to visit her in Old Delhi invites the possibility of a South Asian future shaped and narrated by the lived, intensely domestic and local memory, able to work against the racially and linguistically homogenous narratives of the nation. This is the project, as Mufti would describe it, of 'unsettling the *finality* of Partition' (Mufti, p. 255).

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[32] Abul Kalam Azad, *Selected Works of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad*, 11 vols, ed. by Ravindra Kumar (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 1991), III, p. 84.

Clear Light of Day reminds us again at the end of the novel of Raja's reading, this time with a line from T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* (through an idea itself borrowed from the *Bhagavad Gita*): 'Time the destroyer is time the preserver.' For Desai, to forget cultural, individual memory is to rewrite history in the most fundamental of ways. Language however, 'persists in bearing witness to some forgotten wound'.[33] Desai's narrative centres on Urdu literary tradition as a means of thinking through exile and displacement. As Mufti reminds us: 'To be in exile is to engage in a constant effort to remember, to rediscover, a self that is at home' (Mufti, p. 240). Over the course of the novel, Bim imaginatively remaps her childhood home through her memories, creating her own space that interweaves forgotten histories and languages. Bim sees how 'her own house and its particular history linked and contained her as her whole family with all their separate histories and experiences' (Desai, p. 182). Urdu language and literature is not absent, but contained in memory in the novel and sustains the creative ability to imagine a future landscape of India, and it is, as Bim reflects, 'not binding them within some dead and airless cell but giving them the soil in which to send down their roots' (Desai, p. 182).

Postscript: December 2019…

In her next novel *In Custody* (1984), Desai allows Urdu poetry to live on past the life of its author and into that of a Hindu acolyte: '[Deven] had accepted the gift of Nur's poetry and that meant he was a custodian of Nur's very soul and spirit [….] He could not deny or abandon that under any pressure' (Desai, *In Custody*, p. 226). Menozzi argues that *In Custody* reflects a form of what he terms 'postcolonial custodianship', whereby poetry might 'transmit beyond separation and appropriation'.[34] In reading Desai's work from *Clear Light of Day* to *In*

[33] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996) p. 4.
[34] Menozzi Filippo, *Postcolonial Custodianship: Cultural and Literary Inheritance* (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 58.

Custody, we are charged with remembering a non-formal history, the recognition of its absence providing the tools to deconstruct the formally written histories of the nation. At the end of the novel, a Hindu guru performs a song for an audience in a garden in Old Delhi. As Bim listens, she realises that the guru sings the Urdu poet Iqbal's lyrics (a favourite Urdu poet of her brother's) and notes that the 'old singer's voice rose higher, in an upward spiral of passion and pain' (Desai, pp. 182–83). Traumatised cross-communal spaces in the wake of Partition still contain within them these shared histories of language and literature; Desai writes with the belief that language has the power to open up these spaces, particularly in the domestic home and community, for lived cultural memory to become a new, *reflective* history of the nation. This history becomes one in which absence is vividly present and forever changing, creative of new narratives that interrupt the purity of ethno-nationalism.

Desai wrote at the threshold of the renewed fundamentalist assault on Indian politics. Decades after the publication of *Clear Light of Day*, India again faces an increasingly ethnocentric and fascistic rhetoric towards its history and its Muslim population. On the 9th of December 2019 the Indian government passed the Citizenship Amendment Act, granting fast-track Indian citizenship and legal status to Hindu, Parsi, Sikh, Buddhist and Christian immigrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan. The bill notably excludes any Muslim immigrant from obtaining citizenship. This is part of a distinctly right wing Hindu nationalist project in India, continuing from the implementation of the National Register of Citizens in Assam in 2013-14 which saw two million people in the state of Assam stripped of their rights as citizens and detained in camps, the majority of whom were Muslim. The Home Minister in India has since announced that the NRC will be implemented across India by 2021, publishing a Model Detention Centre Manual which will be used to construct detention camps in all Indian

states.[35] The protests in India following the bill in December (and again in February of 2020) were led largely by students; the Indian government responded with severe police force, entering the University of Jamia Millia Islamia and beating students. Today, under the cover of the COVID-19 pandemic, they are rounding up and imprisoning the (Muslim) protest leaders.[36] In *Clear Light of Day* Raja is forbidden from attending that same university – as a Hindu boy studying Urdu he is told: 'you will be torn to bits, you will be burnt alive' (Desai, p. 52). On the 15th of December 2019, a student, Rahool Banka, was seized by police inside the Jamia Millia University library, and beaten whilst police taunted him: '*Allah ka naam kyun nahi lete ho*' ['Why are you not calling out for Allah'].[37] In an interview for an article in *The New Yorker* in December, writer and journalist Rana Ayyub was asked whether India's persecution of Muslims might drive her to leave the country. She replied simply: 'I'm not leaving […] I have to stay. I'm going to write all this down and tell everyone what happened.'[38]

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[35] Tawqeer Hussein, ''How is it human?': India's largest detention centre almost ready', *Aljazeera,* 2 January 2020 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/01/human-india-largest-detention-centre-ready-200102044649934.html> [accessed 20 May 2020].

[36] Nileena MS, 'Amid lockdown, Delhi Police target and arrest anti-CAA protesters from Jamia Nagar,' *The Caravan*, 15 April 2020 <https://caravanmagazine.in/politics/anti-caa-protesters-jamia-arrested> [accessed 20 May 2020].

[37] Quoted in Ahan Penkar, 'At AIIMS, doctors and police treated detained Jamia protestors with hostility, ridicule,' *The Caravan*, 17 December 2019 <https://caravanmagazine.in/amp/politics/jamia-millia-islamia-cab-caa-aiims-student-protest> [accessed 20 May 2020].

[38] Rana Ayyub, cited in Dexter Filkins, 'Blood and Soil in Narendra Modi's India', *The New Yorker*, December 2019 <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/12/09/blood-and-soil-in-narendra-modis-india> [accessed 20 May 2020].

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