**The Context: Journal of English Studies**
**Volume 12, Issue 6, September 2025**
ISSN: 2349-4948
www.thecontext.in

*Article*

# Rethinking Disability and Identity Politics in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*

**Dr. Ratan Sarkar**

Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Tezpur University (A Central University), Assam, India;
ratan91@tezu.ernet.in | https://orcid.org/0009-0008-5480-0165

Accepted version published on 5th September 2025

DOI https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17059933

**Abstract:** In this paper, I read Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* (1980) through the dual lenses of disability studies and identity politics, examining her representation of Baba, an intellectually disabled adult. If the novel has been conventionally read as a Partition narrative, a tale of memory, loss, and reconciliation, Baba's ever-present spectre of an absent father would appear worthy of analysis as a locus of identification and familial negotiation. Baba's intellectual disability refracts the Das family's relationships, which require his sister Bim to take on caregiving and the family to reconfigure expectations of duty, typical, and belonging. This paper draws on theoretical frameworks of Disability Studies - notably Garland-Thompson's "extraordinary bodies," and Mitchell & Snyder's "narrative prosthesis" - to argue that Desai questions normative constructions of identification and productivity. Baba's silence is not the void but a tentative speaking that undermines relations of (in)action, power, and social value. This paper situates Baba in the politics of identity to explore how Desai negotiates disability, memory, and familial obligation at the intersections of disability and identity in postcolonial India. Identity politics cannot ultimately be relegated to race, gender, or class alone. However, they must make an accounting with the neglected territory of disability, a site where silence and presence speak their own kinds of resistance.

**Keywords**: Disability Studies; Intellectual Disability; Identity Politics; Silence; Care Ethics; Memory and Trauma

ISSN 2349-4948

**Introduction**

A pioneer of Indian literature, Anita Desai is renowned for her psychological realism, tender portraits of domestic spaces, and nuanced exploration of memory, silence, and identity. Her 1980 novel *Clear Light of Day* (viewed as a Partition novel) embeds familial stories within larger histories of trauma, memory, and reconciliation. At the same time, critics have pointed to the novel's engagement with Partition and its aftermath (Mehrotra, 2003; Fig. In this respect (Kaul, 1995), the character of Baba-Bim and Raja's younger brother, who is described as having an intellectual disability, is seen as an axis of meaning that destabilises dominant interpretative frames of nation and trauma.

Baba is unique among his siblings. He says little, talks little, and seemsn't bothered by the historical and familial crisis that constitute the Das household. However, his lingering silence and repetitive routines flout normative standards for adulthood, masculinity, and productivity. In terms of the family economy, Baba is not the model of the independent, rational, articulate subject - qualities prized by both colonial modernity and postcolonial nationhood. His silence is more than absence: It becomes a kind of political presence that disturbs what Lennar Davis (1995) terms the "force of normality." By refusing to conform to normative measures of speech, ambition, and social contribution, Baba becomes a figure resisting hegemonic forms of identity construction. This refusal is echoed in disability Studies, which have argued that Disability is "not just a biological or medical condition but a social, cultural and political category of identity" (Garland-Thomson, 1997; cf. Oliver, 1990; (Mitchell 1and1 Snyder, 2000). Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's notion of "extraordinary bodies" reminds us that disabled identities are socially produced as "other" in relation to normative ideals of rationality and autonomy, and narrative prosthesis describes how disability is frequently a symbolic prosthetic device in literature, following on from Michel Foucault's notion of the body as ideological "inscription". Baba resists reduction to metaphor in *Clear Light of Day*, however. Although his disability defines the symbolic registers of silence, stasis, and endurance in the novel, Desai also declares himself a lived identity that challenges prevailing categories of family and nation. Desai's novel is a case study in what contemporary scholars have called the identity politics of disability. An insistent recognition of disability not as a marginal deficiency, but as a mode of being that calls for cultural recognition and political inclusion, Nayar, 2019; cf. Campbell, 2009). By placing Baba at the centre of the action, Clear Light of Day opens up postcolonial Indian fiction, traditionally concerned with Partition, nationalism, and gender, to include disability as a critical category of identity. In doing so, it identifies voices and presences that remain marginalized in literature and society.

This paper argues, therefore, that Baba's portrayal in Clear Light of Day forces readers to reexamine identity, family, and belonging through the prism of disability. Situating Baba at the intersection of postcolonial literature with Disability Studies, the discussion demonstrates how Desai envisages later theoretical interventions within disability studies, arguing that identity politics within Indian fiction must take into account Disability as well as race, class, gender, and nation.

ISSN 2349-4948

**Disability and Identity Politics: A Theoretical Framework**

Identity politics in its broadest sense describes how "marginalized groups - racial, gendered, sexual, classed, and disabled - have asserted their presence, humanity, and rights in the face of systemic exclusion". In disability context, identity politics takes on a particular shape: It challenges the dominant medical model of disability, which defines disability as individual pathology/deficit, and puts forward the social model of disability, which argues that exclusion/marginalization are caused primarily by cultural norms, systemic barriers, and institutional discrimination; Oliver, 1990; cf. Shakespeare, 2006). This reframing of disability as not impairment but cultural identity also places disabled people not as pitiable objects of medical intervention, but as political and social agents.

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's (1997) concept of "extraordinary bodies" provides a critical framework for analysing how disabled identities are socially constructed as distinct from normative ideals of embodiment. Disability becomes a cultural marker against which normative behaviour is defined and policed, rather than a biological inevitable outcome. Similarly, in his 1995 argument, Lennard Davis argues that modern societies are built on an "enforcement of normalcy" whereby the disabled body is needed to "stabilize and legitimize" the category of the "normal." In literary discourse, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's (2000) notion of "narrative prosthesis" explains how disability is often a symbolic device—a stylistic crutch used to advance plots, characterisation, or larger social issues—while denying disability as a lived identity.

In applying these frameworks to Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*, Baba's representation reveals conformity to and resistance to these tendencies. One might interpret Baba's intellectual disability as a narrative prosthesis: His silence and immobility contrast with unresolved tensions regarding care, memory, and responsibility within the Das family. He becomes the axis around which the family's fractured identities revolve. In contrast, Desai does not reduce Baba to metaphor or symbolic absence. Contrary to stereotypical representations of disability in literature, Baba is not pathologised, pitied, or violently erased. He takes up a role marked by constancy, rhythm, and endurance qualities that thwart normative expectations not only of speech and ambition but also of autonomy.

Baba's condition upsets what constitutes legitimate identity. His near-silence reveals the cultural bias towards the voice as the locus of agency; his repetition with gramophone records similarly critiques a society fixated on progress, productivity, and futurity. So Desai disrupts what Garland-Thomson (2002) later calls the "normate position" - the culturally privileged identity assumed to be male, able-bodied, articulate, and productive. By refusing to accept Baba into this frame of reference, Desai places disability as a political identification that forces the family and the reader into questioning established value systems and notions of belonging. *Clear Light of Day* demonstrates how disability might function as a literary device as well as how it might go beyond symbolic utility and insist on recognition as lived presence. Baba Desai constructs a character that encapsulates disability identity politics tensions.

ISSN 2349-4948

Appropriated for narrative function but still insistently fundamental, irreducible, and resistant to erasure.

**Baba's Silence: Fragile Voice and Political Presence**

Baba rarely talks in *Clear Light of Day*, and when he does, his words are brief, repetitive, and often cut off from the dramatic flow of the conversation. He bases his life on his gramophone records, which he listens to obsessively and religiously, as though he is making a world of his own that can endure historical upheavals and family quarrels. For many critics, this silence has been interpreted as an absence: a marker of Baba's marginality, or of his failure to adequately enrich the family's store of memory or identity (Kaul, 1995). Still, to dismiss silence as absence is to ignore its subversive potential. However, silence is also political: it may be a form of resistance - a fragile but potent assertion of identity that resists appropriation into dominant discourses of speech, rationality, and productivity.

In identity politics, voice is a marker of empowerment: To "speak out" means to claim visibility and agency. However, Baba's weak voice - his near silence - forces us to reassess the centrality of speech to identity construction. According to Davis (1995), in his theory of "enforcement of normalcy," in modern societies, speech, rationality, and autonomy are the primary criteria for achieving complete social legitimacy. Baba changes this logic. Refusing to engage in the economy of dialogue places him outside the normative sphere of subjecthood. However, this exclusion also constitutes a critique: By not speaking, Baba reveals a cultural bias that links speech to value, identity, and agency.

Baba is not in a vacuum but in the presence of music, rhythm, and repetition. His gramophone record engagement corresponds to what Garland-Thompson (2002) terms an "alternate epistemological practice of embodiment," in which knowledge and meaning are produced through sensuous experience and affective engagement rather than through rational discourse. Unlike his brothers and sisters, who are entangled in memory, trauma, and the anxieties of Partition, Baba lives in a different temporality - one defined by the repetitive present of music and not by past or future burdens. In this way, his silence is both active and not passive, offering an alternative mode of being that resists the linear, progress-driven logic of modernity and postcolonial nationalism.

Hence, Baba's silence must not be read as passiveness or deficit. Instead, it is a refusal to become absorbed by the demands of a society that values productivity, ambition, and speech as prerequisites for identity. His presence is political precisely because it disturbs such cultural hierarchies: it asserts identity in absence, fragility, and stillness. In doing so, Baba embodies what Siebers (2008) calls disability as a cultural identity - a modality of existence that is not ascribed to pathology but which challenges normative notions of value and belonging.

**Family, Responsibility, and the Politics of Care**

Baba's disability also reforms family responsibility, in that it requires his sister Bim to become his lifelong caregiver. In this role, the caregiver is both burden and affirmation, a site of oppression and ethical resistance. A part of it is that caring for Baba

ISSN 2349-4948

binds Bim to the crumbling family home in Old Delhi while her siblings strive for independence and mobility. Her identity as an unmarried woman is doubly shaped by gendered expectations of care and association with a disabled brother who needs constant supervision. Here, Bim's role exemplifies what feminist theorists refer to as the "care trap": women's identities are often bound by arbitrary obligations to nurture and self-sacrifice (Kittay, 1999). At the same time, caregiving is a form of ethical resistance against the abandonment that Raja and Tara make. As her sisters flee - Raja via marriage and social mobility, Tara via domestic assimilation into her husband's family - Bim refuses to remain with Baba despite the cultural tendency to silence disability in private. By taking responsibility, Bim demonstrates a form of relational ethics, which Eva Kittay (1999) refers to as the moral importance of interdependence in caring relationships. Far from accepting her fate, Bim actively reformulates family fealty and kinship as obligations that can neither be contracted out nor escaped. This asymmetry of caregiving demonstrates how disability reconfigures family identity. The partition and unequal distribution of care within the household fracture the Das family, as well as its historical trauma stemming from Partition. Baba, the silent center, negotiates with siblings on responsibility, duty, and belonging. For Raja and Tara, his disability means reason to withdraw - a reminder of the trap they wish to escape. For Bim, though, it becomes the framework around which she reconstructs familial meaning - an ethical demand that binds her to her sense of self while constraining her freedom.

Desai thereby criticises wider cultural realities of Indian society in which disability has historically been relegated to the private realm of family care rather than as a matter for public rights or state responsibility. By placing disability in the domestic sphere, *Clear Light of Day* explores how disability issues intersect with gender and identity politics. Not only does Baba's disability shape the family, but the gendered allocation of responsibility leaves Bim disproportionately burdened. In this sense, the politics of care in the novel point to how disability and gender reconfigure family identity and individual agency. The Das family is not just fractured by Partition trauma; it is fractured by Partition identity. It is also reorganised around Baba's care. Disability takes center stage in the politics of familial belonging/exclusion, and the reader is confronted with the ethical and political implications of care. As he places disability at the centre of the family narrative, Desai demonstrates that questions of identity, kinship, and survival in postcolonial India cannot be understood apart from the lived experiences of disability and caretaking.

**Disability, Memory, and Postcolonial Trauma**

*Clear Light of Day* has often been situated within Partition literature, with critics highlighting its central concerns with memory, loss, and reconciliation (Kaul, 1995; Fig. Mehrotra, 2003). The fractured relationships of the Das family mirror the fractured national consciousness of post-Partition India: Bim is bitter, Tara wants reconciliation, and Raja represents escape and distancing. In this memory-saturated framework, Baba's presence impedes and disturbs dominant readings. Unlike his siblings, Baba has no memory, nostalgia, or historical reflection. His existence is entangled with the here and

ISSN 2349-4948

now - in his grammophone records - detached from the Partition passé and uncertain postcolonial future.

This distancing is more than a personal quality; it is also a counternarrative to postcolonial memory politics: Postcolonial identity politics frequently rests upon recovering silenced histories and recuperating a collective memory (Spivak, 1999). Chakrabarty, 2000). Baba, however, resists such frameworks. His disengagement points to the possibility that identity need not be anchored to memory, trauma, or nationalist discourse. Instead, his identity is a matter of silence, stasis, and music - a departure from the narrative of traumatising remembrance that pervades much Indian fiction. Here Baba is what Homi Bhabha (1994) calls a "third space of identity." Neither constituted by postcolonial historicity nor nationalist futurity, but constituted by an alternative present temporality. Unlike Bim, Tara, and Raja, who represent memory, regret, and reconciliation, Baba is without history. His unwillingness—or incapacity—to engage with memory shakes the expectation that postcolonial subjects will be defined primarily in relation to national trauma. As such, Baba is a critique of postcolonial identity politics, performed in silence: not all lives can (or should be) folded into the narrative of Partition or national narratives.

**Resilience and Alternative Ways of Being**

Baba appears to be resilient through routine and repetition in his contentment with his gramophone records. Baba survives on repetition as his siblings fight over the past and negotiate fractured identities. Playing the duplicate records, using the same habits, in a stable rhythm world. His life contrasts with the turmoil of his family's emotional struggles and larger historical traumas associated with Partition. Desai does not attempt to show Baba's disability through the standard literary tropes of tragedy (the "pitiable victim") or heroism (the "supercrip" overcoming adversity). She instead shows Baba as having another kind of being - not tragic or exceptional, but ordinary and self-sufficient in his own terms. This approach corresponds to what Siebers (2008) terms disability aesthetics: disability as a recognition of different, valid ways of life and meaning-making that need not conform to normative ideals of productivity or ambition. Refusing to normalise Baba or to relegate him to categories of progress, ambition, or memory, Desai destabilises conventional identity categories. Baba is not a passive absence or a symbolic metaphor; it is not a metaphor. He is a presence that recasts what human life is worth/meaning. He demonstrates that repetition, stability, and simplicity may themselves be means of survival and quiet resistance. *Clear Light of Day* is in line with disability identity politics, which aim to make disabled lives complete, legitimate, and worthwhile as such, not as deviations from an able-bodied norm (Garland-Thomson, 1997; Nayar, 2019). Baba's existence thus demands recognition not as a tragic limitation or a narrative device, but as a different epistemology of living—one that finds strength in silence, stability in repetition, and joy in music.

**Conclusion**

Partition novel or family saga, *Clear Light of Day* is also a reflection on disability, identity, and care politics. Through Baba's weak voice and silent presence, Desai

ISSN 2349-4948

destabilizes normative productions of subjectivity that cite speech, productivity, reason, and autonomy as the foundations of social legitimacy. Baba's intellectual disability frames the Das family dynamics as Bim assumes caregiving duties for life and points out the intersections of disability, gender, and familial obligation. In doing so, Desai demonstrates how care can act as both a burden and an ethical commitment, revealing both the constraints and the transformative potential of interdependence. By placing Baba in the discourse of identity politics, Desai foresees future developments in disability Studies that claim Disability is a social, cultural, and political identity and not just a medical condition. Baba is not easily defined: He is neither a tragic nor a heroic survivor, a mute family trauma symbol, nor a narrative device. He is instead what Garland-Thomson (1997) terms an "extraordinary body" - one whose presence "disturbs dominant cultural logics and disrupts normalcy itself". As Baba's silent but powerful power is acknowledged, *Clear Light of Day* insists the politics of identity must include disability - not as a metaphor for national trauma or familial stagnation, but lived experience, fragile resilience, and alternative ways of being. Desai's novel thus expands the scope of Indian fiction beyond the familiar axes of Partition, nationalism, and gender to include disability as a category of identity and analysis. In doing so, it contributes to Disability Studies in literature, where silence is read as fragility, and disability is recognised as a critical site of identity politics itself.

**Funding**: This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data sharing policy does not apply to this article.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

**Works cited**

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.

Campbell, Fiona Kumari. *Contours of Ableism: The Production of Disability and Abledness*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton UP, 2000.

Davis, Lennard J. *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*. Verso, 1995.

Desai, Anita. *Clear Light of Day*. HarperCollins, 1980.

Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. Columbia UP, 1997.

Garland-Thomson, R. "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory." *NWSA Journal*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2002, pp. 1–32.

Kaul, A. N. *The Partition of Memory: The Afterlife of the Division of India*. Permanent Black, 1995.

Kittay, Eva Feder. *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency*. Routledge, 1999.

Mehrotra, Arvind Krishna, editor. *A History of Indian Literature in English*. Columbia UP, 2003.

Mitchell, David T., and Sharon L. Snyder. *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. U of Michigan P, 2000.

Nayar, Pramod K. *Disability Studies: An Introduction*. Routledge India, 2019.

Oliver, Michael. *The Politics of Disablement*. Macmillan, 1990.

Shakespeare, Tom. *Disability Rights and Wrongs*. Routledge, 2006.

Siebers, Tobin. *Disability Theory*. U of Michigan P, 2008.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. Harvard UP, 1999.