



# Reconfiguring Knowledge and the Politics of Knowing in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*

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**Abstract**— This paper explores the epistemic dimensions of Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* (1980), interrogating how knowledge is produced, mediated, and resisted within familial, cultural, and gendered frameworks. Focusing on the characters of Bim, Tara, Raja, and Aunt Mira, the article examines how epistemologies of gender, colonialism, and domesticity intersect to define authority, memory, and identity. The narrative functions as a site of epistemic tension, wherein Desai's characters grapple with not just personal histories but also larger cultural and intellectual discourses. The study foregrounds the way Desai challenges dominant modes of knowing, particularly patriarchal and colonial constructs, through her nuanced portrayal of female consciousness.



**Keywords**— Knowledge, Epistemology, Technē, Metaphysics, Axiology

## I. INTRODUCTION

Literature, beyond its aesthetic dimensions, often serves as a philosophical inquiry into the structures that govern human experience. In this light, Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* (1980) emerges not merely as a narrative of familial estrangement or historical trauma, but as a richly layered meditation on the epistemic conditions that define identity, memory, and agency. Set against the backdrop of a post-Partition India, the novel traverses the private and political, the domestic and historical, while probing the ways in which knowledge is produced, internalized, and contested within specific socio-cultural frameworks. This paper explores *Clear Light of Day* through the lens of epistemology—not in its strictly abstract, philosophical sense, but as a lived and gendered reality that structures the consciousness of Desai's characters. At the heart of the novel lies a series of epistemic tensions: between speech and silence, memory and forgetting, institutional knowledge and experiential understanding. These tensions are not neutral but deeply embedded in patriarchal and colonial epistemes that assign value to certain forms of knowing while de-legitimizing others. Desai's women characters—Bim, Tara, and Aunt Mira—offer distinct epistemological positions, shaped by their access to

education, language, and emotional autonomy. Their narratives foreground the ways in which women's knowledge is often marginalized, rendered invisible or affective, and yet, paradoxically, it becomes the very site from which resistance and redefinition emerge. By examining the gendered politics of language, the institutional frameworks of schooling, and the emotional and historical labour of remembering, this paper argues that *Clear Light of Day* constitutes an epistemic critique of dominant narratives. It interrogates who gets to speak, who gets to write history, and how alternative, often feminine, ways of knowing are both devalued and indispensable. The novel's structure—mediated through memory and subjectivity—further complicates the authority of truth and the act of knowing.

### Epistemological Foundations of Knowledge:

Philosophy, at its core, is a reflective and critical pursuit of knowledge. This pursuit is not merely about gathering information but about examining the very conditions under which knowledge becomes possible. Among the primary concerns of philosophy, epistemology emerges as its most fundamental branch. Epistemology is the philosophical investigation into the nature, scope, and limits of human knowledge. It explores how we come to

know what we know, how to distinguish between truth and falsehood, and what constitutes valid knowledge. This branch delves deeply into the dynamics between the knower and the known, continually questioning the reliability of human cognition and the justification of belief. Closely aligned with epistemology is metaphysics, often regarded as the central branch of philosophy that investigates the nature of reality itself. Metaphysics raises profound questions: What is the essence of existence? Is reality singular or plural in its nature? What is the meaning of space and time? What purpose, if any, lies behind the universe's creation? Is there a divine presence or ultimate cause? These questions lead into subfields such as ontology (the study of being), cosmology (the study of the universe), philosophy of the self, and theology. Metaphysics attempts to understand the totality of what is—examining the world, the self, and the possibility of the divine. Another vital domain of philosophy is axiology, the philosophical study of value. Axiology concerns itself with understanding what is good, what is beautiful, and what is worthy of belief or action. It encompasses three key subdivisions. Ethics investigates the moral dimensions of human behaviour, probing the criteria for right and wrong, virtue and vice. Aesthetics examines the nature of beauty, artistic expression, and the standards by which aesthetic value is judged. Logic, while often treated as a separate discipline, is intimately tied to axiology in its concern with truth. It deals with the structure of reasoning, the validity of arguments, and the principles underlying rational thought—including types of propositions, definitions, and hypothesis formation. Together, these branches—epistemology, metaphysics, and axiology—form the foundational framework of philosophical inquiry. They orient our understanding of what it means to know, to exist, and to value, shaping the intellectual scaffolding upon which all philosophical reflection is built.

Aristotle famously begins his *Metaphysics* (ca. 350 BCE) by asserting, “All men by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness they are loved for themselves; and above all others the sense of sight.” Centuries later, Immanuel Kant articulated this fundamental impulse by posing the question of what human beings are capable of knowing. This enduring preoccupation with the nature and scope of knowledge forms the core of epistemology, a branch of philosophy concerned with the origin, nature, methods, and limits of human knowledge.

The term *epistemology*, derived from the Greek words *epistēmē* (knowledge) and *logos* (theory or discourse), was introduced into modern philosophical vocabulary by the Scottish thinker James Frederick Ferrier (1808–64). At its heart, epistemology seeks to address how

knowledge is acquired, how it is validated, and how one discerns truth from falsehood. Before delving into the classical definitions of knowledge, it is essential to examine what it means “to know.” In everyday usage, the concept of knowledge manifests in various forms such as “knowing that,” “knowing how,” “knowing why,” “knowing him/her,” and “knowing whether”—each carrying distinct nuances. In English, the word “knowledge” may refer to familiarity (as in knowing a person or place), awareness, or even psychological conviction. Philosophical inquiry, however, tends to categorize knowledge into several modes: “knowing that,” “knowing which,” “knowing how,” “knowing what,” and “knowing what it is like.” Plato distinguished between *epistēmē*—a more rigorous, truth-evaluable form of knowledge—and *technē*, which referred to practical skill or “knowing how.”

A fundamental distinction in epistemology lies between “knowing how” and “knowing that.” The former pertains to abilities or practical competencies—such as knowing how to swim—which may not always be articulable in terms of explicit rules or theories. The latter, however, refers to the possession of information that can be communicated, assessed, and evaluated for truth. Philosophers are primarily concerned with this second type—propositional knowledge—which forms the basis of much of epistemological discourse. Propositional knowledge, often described as “knowing that,” involves statements that can be either true or false. While the former is true and factual, the latter is false, despite both being grammatically valid propositions. What distinguishes propositional knowledge is its susceptibility to belief, doubt, assertion, and denial—activities that bring into focus the issues of truth and certainty. Not all sentences qualify as propositions. For instance, interrogative expressions like “What is the time?” do not assert any truth-claim and hence do not count as knowledge claims. Propositions, on the other hand, can be believed or disbelieved, affirmed or denied, and such affirmations or denials are known as judgments. Within this framework, the epistemological question of “What is knowledge?” becomes a matter of assessing the truth-value and justification of belief. Plato famously offered a foundational definition of knowledge in his dialogue *Theaetetus* (ca. 369 BCE), where he posits that to “know” something is to hold a belief about it and to be able to account for its essential nature. This definition gave rise to the classical tripartite model of knowledge as “justified true belief.” According to this view, knowledge is not merely true belief, but belief supported by adequate justification. Consequently, one cannot be said to *know* something simply because one believes it and it happens to be true; without proper justification, the belief does not amount to knowledge.

## II. EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE: RECLAIMING WAYS OF KNOWING

Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* is not merely a novel of familial relationships or a post-Partition chronicle; it is a meditation on the epistemologies that govern identity, memory, and power. The act of remembering, the authority of texts, the pursuit of education, and the valuation of speech and silence—all function within regimes of knowledge. Epistemology, in this context, is not confined to philosophical abstractions but rooted in the everyday experiences of Desai's characters, particularly the women who are systematically excluded from traditional knowledge systems. The novel allows for an epistemic interpretation that questions who is allowed to know, to speak, to write, and to define truth. The Das family's dynamics illustrate how knowledge is unequally distributed and epistemically policed along lines of gender and power. Raja, the brother, is permitted access to Urdu, a language associated with the courtly, literary elite—signifying both masculine and cultural capital. In contrast, Bim and Tara are relegated to Hindi, viewed in the narrative as a language of lesser epistemic prestige. Raja expressed his disdain for Hindi, saying that it was an impediment that disrupted the flow of composition. This underscores how epistemic hierarchies are reinforced through language. Bim's resistance to this stratification—through her love of literature, intellectual ambition, and ultimate rejection of marriage—suggests an epistemic rebellion against the conventional narratives allocated to women.

Tara, by contrast, submits to the epistemic authority of her husband, Bakul, a diplomat who embodies the public, bureaucratic, colonial mode of knowing. Tara internalizes this structure, accepting protection and emotional repression in exchange for the comfort of a “neat, sanitary, disinfected” life. Her nostalgia for childhood safety contrasts with Bim's pursuit of autonomy and intellectual agency. Tara's epistemology is affective and regressive, whereas Bim's is critical and forward-moving—albeit constrained. School is an epistemic battleground. For Bim, it was a site of liberation, where the lessons posed a challenge to her natural intelligence and mental curiosity.

For Tara, it is an alienating space that induces emotional retreat. This contrast points to the internalization of epistemic possibilities: Bim embraces knowledge as a form of self-realization, Tara as displacement. The sisters' divergent paths highlight how access to knowledge is not merely institutional but also psychological and affective. Aunt Mira, the family's emotional anchor, provides yet another epistemic stance. Deprived of formal education and intellectual agency, she cultivates an embodied, experiential knowledge grounded in caregiving. Though her life is

marred by early widowhood and systemic marginalization, her strength lies in a tacit understanding of family dynamics and emotional labour. Her epistemology is maternal and intuitive, yet resilient. Her marginality enables a critique of the formal, textual modes of knowledge that fail to recognize emotional intelligence. Desai's narrative structure itself is an epistemic artifact. Told through the lens of memory, the novel critiques the reliability and authority of remembered truths. Memory in *Clear Light of Day* is partial, fractured, and often contested—a means through which epistemic injustice is both reproduced and resisted. Bim's final confrontation with her past, especially her reflections on Raja's betrayal and her own solitude, is a moment of epistemic self-assertion. She chooses not to forget, nor to forgive blindly, but to reinterpret. This act of reinterpretation is epistemologically radical—it recasts pain as insight and reclaims authority over her own narrative.

## III. CONCLUSION

Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* is a nuanced exploration of the ways in which knowledge is produced, denied, and reclaimed within socio-cultural and gendered frameworks. Through the intersecting lives of Bim, Tara, and Aunt Mira, Desai reveals how epistemic power is stratified along lines of language, education, gender, and emotional labour. The novel critiques institutional modes of knowing—rooted in patriarchal and colonial structures—while simultaneously foregrounding alternative epistemologies that arise from lived experience, affect, and memory. Bim's intellectual independence, Tara's emotional conformity, and Aunt Mira's intuitive wisdom illustrate the multiplicity of knowing that exists beyond the dominant paradigm. Furthermore, the novel's memory-driven narrative form unsettles the authority of linear history, allowing for subjective reinterpretations of truth. In doing so, Desai challenges the classical notion of objective, propositional knowledge and offers a feminist epistemology rooted in embodiment, relationality, and resistance. Ultimately, *Clear Light of Day* redefines the politics of knowledge, posing critical questions about who has the right to know, to remember, and to speak. It demonstrates that epistemic justice is not merely a philosophical ideal but a lived necessity—especially for those historically silenced. In reclaiming marginalized ways of knowing, Desai's novel becomes an emancipatory act of epistemic recovery and narrative reclamation.

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