

## Delhi as 'Home': Exploring the Sense of Belonging in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*

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**Abstract.** People form affective ties with the spaces they inhabit via their experiences and expressions of emotion. To develop a sense of attachment and belonging to a specific community and its environment, it is natural for humans to associate and interact with their surroundings, whether they are family, neighbours, co-workers, nature, or a place. This article explores the concept of a sense of belonging with the city in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* (1988). The story is about four siblings, their relationship with one another and the concept of 'home' that binds them together. All four of them have different dynamics with the city, which is a point of concern for this paper. A home is a place where there is acceptance and the surrounding by people with similar likes and dislikes. This paper looks at what a person born in one country and moving to another considers his "home"? How do individuals engage with a city? Is there a relationship between a city and home? Abraham Maslow's 'Hierarchy of Needs' aids the notions of belongingness used in this analysis. Parallel to what Maslow defines as a sense of belonging, the characters long for belonging and love, as displayed by their respective behaviours. Qualitative analysis of adult remembrance of childhood place experience supports the analysis that manifests a long-lasting, positively impacted attachment to the city.

**Keywords :** Sense of belonging; hierarchy of needs; relationship; notion of belongingness.

### Introduction

It is natural for humans to form attachments to things around them. It may be animals, places or material things. Some of them may become an integral part of their identities. The things that belong to an individual might give that person a feeling of steadiness and continuity. They contribute to the development and upkeep of them as individuals. People develop a long-lasting emotive link to a certain geographical location and the significance assigned to that bond. When a person resides in a location for an extended period, he or she usually develops feelings of fondness and a sense of belonging. Attachment to a specific location and a sense of comfort in one's surroundings are two characteristics of the notion of "home". In 2010, Rollero and De Piccolo researched 328 Italian undergraduates to demonstrate the connection between attachment to a location and its perception and judgement. The students were either newcomers to the University city or long-time residents. They concluded, "People ascribe meaning to landscapes and places and in return become attached to the meaning." (Rollero and Piccoli, 200) A sense of belonging is 'the experience of personal involvement in a system or

environment so that person feels themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment' (Hagerty, 173).

### Theoretical Framework

Abraham Maslow's 'Hierarchy of Needs' supports the concept of belonging employed in this study :

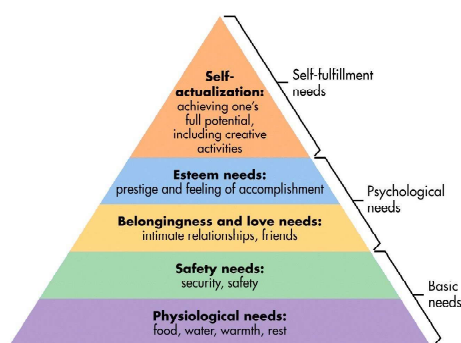


Figure 1. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Figure 1 depicts the five basic needs identified by Maslow in his theory. These requirements include self-actualization, esteem, love or belonging, safety, and physiological needs. This paper will focus on the third need, which is love or a sense of belonging, to analyse and highlight a sense of belonging in Anita Desai's novel *Clear Light of Day*. After the first two levels of demands have been satisfied, individuals will seek to meet the third level, i.e. love and affection, which Maslow classifies as a sense of belonging. In order to supplement the above theory, the paper also discusses the concepts of 'place attachment' and 'home'. The notion of place attachment refers to the subjective experience of embodied human existence in the material world. Most authors recognise an emotional or affective component in the concept of place attachment. Maslow gives two definitions of place attachment:

- (1) Cultural definition: 'Place attachment' is the symbolic relationship formed by people giving culturally shared emotional/affective meanings to a particular space or piece of land that provides the basis for the individual's and group's understanding of and relation to the environment (165).
- (2) Psychological definition: 'attachment' refers to the cognitive and emotionally linkage of an individual to a particular setting or environment' (165). This paper will be based on the above-mentioned concept of 'sense of belonging' and attachment to a place.

### Analysis

Anita Desai's novel *Clear Light of Day* 1980 focuses on the disputes and complex interactions amongst family members living in old Delhi, India. The novel begins with the protagonists as adults, then progresses chronologically backwards to their childhoods, and concludes with a return to their adult lives. As adults, the children have grown apart. The eldest sister, Bimla or Bim, dwells in Delhi with her mentally disabled brother, Baba, and cares for him. Tara, the youngest sister, married Bakul, the Indian ambassador to the United States, and she currently resides abroad. In addition, they have a brother named Raja, who moved to Hyderabad and married the daughter of their Muslim landlord, Hyder Ali. The novel is divided into four parts. In the first chapter, Tara and her husband Bakul undertake their triennial trip from Washington to old Delhi. This couple resides with her sister Bimla, where they discuss their brother Raja, whose daughter will soon be wed. Raja and Bimla were formerly close but are now estranged. Bim is upset that Raja did not pursue his childhood dream of becoming a poet, instead married his landlord's daughter and settled for wealth and comfort. In the introduction to *Clear Light of Day*, Kamila Shamsie writes :

In *Clear Light of Day*, the House (which requires the capitalised letters of a proper noun because it is so vivid a character in the book) holds at least two tones in it at one time. Is it prison or refuge? A mothballed past or an oasis of continuity amongst clamouring change? Who are the fortunate siblings—the ones who escaped it (Raja and Tara) or the ones who stayed (Bim and Baba)? Hence it gives a clear idea that the novel revolves around the 'house' and the relation of the occupants with it. (*Clear Light of Day*, xii)

Kamila Shamsie further writes, "This is not a novel of people who are forced to leave their homes by partition or face violence because of it; it is not altogether subtle tale of how partition changed the world of old Delhi" (ix). It is a story of the Das family who has lived a good part of their lives in their home in Old Delhi, an area of Delhi that serves as the metaphorical core of metropolitan Delhi and is renowned for its bazaars and street food, and Islamic architecture. Their locality has been described as "not a neighbourhood from which people moved - they were born and married and even died in the same houses" (209). The house they live in is not their private property, and they live as tenants; still, they have developed a deep sense of belonging towards it. However, as time passes, individual dynamics with this city or their home change; it becomes stronger for some while weaker for others. The selected theories are used to highlight the sense of belonging of the sibling to the place of their childhood and the transition to adulthood.

Let us first examine Tara's definition of home. Although Tara travels much, she has a strong attachment to the landscapes of her childhood. The reader is aware in the narrative that she lives in a city in the United States. However, Tara has a very ambiguous attitude towards the place. Initially, she is shown to have disliked the monotony of her home and mingled with the 'modern' family of Misras. It is at their place that she discovers New Delhi and attends parties with them; in one of those, she meets her future husband, Bakul. The Misras and Bakul teach her new ways, and she detaches from her own house. Eventually, she marries the handsome Bakul, who is an Indian ambassador to the United States. Even though she stays abroad with him, she keeps coming back. When the novel begins, she is shown to have young daughters, and she has come to India and stays with Bim. After staying in Delhi for some days, she is expected to leave for Hyderabad to attend the marriage of Raja's daughter, Moyna. When she comes to Delhi, she complains, 'How everything goes on and on here, and never changes' (6). Bim confronts her if she would ever want to come back to this monotonous life or not. Tara's stance at that point is not very clear to the readers. However, as the novel progresses, she is portrayed as a displaced person, longing for love and fearing loneliness.

Although she has left Delhi, her childhood place and friends, and is able to stay away from them, she feels a need to keep holding onto the memories. According to Ginsburg (1999), a home has less to do with 'where you are from' and 'more about where you are going'. (Mallet, 77). Mallet cites Case(1996) and says that, as such, home, which can be described as a dwelling, a nation, or even a constellation of relationships, is depicted as a geographical and relational domain from which people travel forth into the world and to which they usually want to return. (77). She has many of her childhood memories playing vividly in her mind. She fears detachment from her home, from her place or family.

When Bakul says she cannot just sit about with her brother and sister all day, doing nothing, she resists by saying, "But it is what I want - just to be at home again, with them... I don't want to go anywhere today, and I don't want to go to New Delhi at all' (*Clear Light of Day*, 17). The same New Delhi that had once captivated her with its glamour carries no unique significance for her anymore. She has instead returned to her origins despite the bitterness and dryness, "Our home represents our subjectivity in the world. Home is the place that enables us to achieve our goals through interacting with the outside world. The setting that helps us to feel at home is our home". (Tucker, 184). She wants to remain in the by-lanes of Old Delhi because she does not have to keep up with a certain image in this setting. She was not just 'the wife of an ambassador' in this house but a daughter and a sister who needed being around her siblings.

As a person who has experienced displacement, Tara requires love and a sense of belonging. She tries to maintain and cherish the relationships between

her place and her family, so she keeps asking Bim to reconcile with Raja. She returns every three years to experience the same love and warmth that this house and its members provide her despite all their problems. Her heart is firmly tied to her childhood memories, where she matured, spent time bonding, came to value a permanent residential place, a home, and learned about friendship and where she belongs. Home is where the heart is, after all.

Bimla or Bim is the oldest sibling in the Das family who is still staying in the same house because she is the one taking care of her brother. She never married because she could never think of leaving her sick brother. She says :

I shall never leave Baba and Raja and Miramosi,  
making Tara look away before her face could 'betray  
her admission that she, closely attached as she was  
to home and family, would leave them instantly if  
the opportunity arose (215).

For Bim, the sense of belongings to the home and the siblings held more importance than her desires and aspirations. Malignant materialism could arise when an individual's attachment to their belongings takes the place of other emotional involvements, such as with other people, or when that attachment becomes so powerful that it threatens their identity if they were to lose their goods. However, it was not the case with Tara and Raja. They left their home and the city to fulfil their dreams.

According to the geographer AnssiPaasi, the nodes of the biography of life, which is itself a unique network of located life occurrences, are represented by place. (Fullilove, 1517). This notion, which examines a location through the lens of an individual's life story, recognises the significance of personal viewpoint in determining what a location "is" (1517). Hence, each character in the novel has a different point of view for the notion of 'home'. If, on the one hand, Tara initially sees the home as a cage where she is not allowed to live her life freely, Raja sees it as a hurdle to his success. Hence, they both leave the house and the city to pursue their dreams. However, with time, they both realise what they belong to. Even though Raja does not return to Delhi like Tara, he tries to reconnect with his siblings to retain the bond they shared.

The importance of the home increases as people get older. Not surprisingly, "older people perhaps express stronger emotional attachments to their homes than younger people, and they appear more firmly committed to staying in them". (Saunders, 182). After having lived nearly her entire life in the same house, Bim understands that she cannot go; nevertheless, in order to make it the same 'home' that it once was, she must bring back those who believe it to be their home. Bim is angered by Raja's letter stating that he will never reclaim the house from Bim and will not increase the rent either. However, it appears to the reader that even Raja

has a sense of belonging to the house, as he wants his own siblings to remain there and leave room for a future reunion.

Raja always wanted to study Urdu, so he got attracted to the company of Hyder Ali. He so influenced him that Raja left his house after the partition and went to Hyderabad to be in his patronage, least thinking about his siblings, "there are two hypotheses to explain his decision. The opposite feeling of attachment to a place is displacement. This is the removal or evacuation of people from their homes and places as a result of different disruptive events, such as war, decolonization, natural disaster, or epidemic" (Fullilove, 1516). Raja had witnessed a pre-Partition Delhi that featured *Tehzeeb*, a culture of urban sophistication that seemingly anticipated the entry of enterprising Punjabis. He associated his home and Delhi with the same attributes. According to Ravinder Kaur, the "urban expansion that took place post-Partition has now come to symbolize the loss of high culture and nobility that Delhi once stood for" (Kaur, 199). The fact that he left suggests that he was unhappy and distressed by the partition and the cultural deterioration of Delhi.

However, following Maslow's assertion that the hierarchy is sometimes inverted, this could possibly be true for him. In the case of certain individuals, self-esteem appears to be more crucial than love (Maslow, 386). Nevertheless, at the end of the novel, Bimla is shown to have forgiven Raja because when she attends a concert with the Misras and watches their strong family tie, she realises that love between family members can overcome all wrongs. Tara had left for the wedding by the novel's end, but she will return with Raja for a trip to Old Delhi. Bim is willing to forgive him. She realises how her house and its history linked and contained her and her family with all their separate histories and experiences, not confining them within a dead and airless cell but giving them the soil and the nourishment to grow, spread, and reach out for new experiences and lives, but always drawing from the same soil, the same secret darkness. The house held significance, as "it was where her deepest self-lived, and the deepest selves of her sister and brothers and all those who shared that time with her" (*Clear Light of Day*, 278). Suppose both the physiological and safety needs are adequately met. In that case, the love, affection, and belongingness wants will arise, and the individual will feel the absence of friends, a spouse, or children more keenly than ever before. Maslow writes :

He will hunger for affectionate relations with people in general, namely, for a place in his group, and he will strive with great intensity to achieve this goal. He will want to attain such a place more than anything else in the world and may even forget that once when he was hungry, he sneered at love (Maslow, 381).

Over time, Bim realises that this house belonged to all the four siblings, for they had shared beautiful memories together. No matter where they had left for, Delhi still remained their 'home', and they ought to return to it like a bird returning to its nest. Saunders and Williams contend that our view of the home as a unique private space is influenced by three interrelated concepts: privacy, privatism, and privatisation. In this perspective, domestic privacy refers to freedom from external scrutiny and role expectations. Privatism is the process by which individuals withdraw from communal life and increasingly concentrate or organise their activities around the house. Privatization refers to the transition from publicly or state-owned housing to privately held housing and privatised consumption. (Saunders and Williams, 88). Going by this classification, each character in the novel eventually chooses to be closer to home because they either find privacy, privatism or privatisation in it.

Regardless of where they had travelled, Delhi remained their "home," and they should return there like a bird to its nest. Therefore, it could be inferred that a person's "sense of place" is shaped by his past as well as his current beliefs, attitudes, and actions.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the preceding instances, this paper emphasises Maslow's claim that people try to overcome emotions of alienation and loneliness. In the case of Tara, being away from her ideal house does not provide her with a sense of belonging in other locations she dwells, as she still cherishes childhood memories of her childhood home. This is apparent throughout the narrative. Bim continues to reside in the same residence despite difficulties and sufferings since she considers it her "home" and place of belonging. Raja, too, recognises that he required the love and affection of his siblings and hence yearned for a reunion in the same "home."

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