

Anita Desai's *In Custody* – A War

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'In Custody' by Anita Desai is a war between the languages – Urdu and Hindi, innocence and corruption, good and evil, loyalty and deception, success and failure, and poor and rich. It is the custody of the language Urdu which finds a custodian in Deven in the novel but it is not as lucky in real life. What to talk about Urdu only. Even Sanskrit language is also looming under the same fate. India, the country of so many languages is the parent of Sanskrit which further proudly parented many languages.

Anita Desai is a writer consecrated with the art of weaving a fine cloth of entangled threads of hardships – so common and so uncommon- in a very smooth way. The present novel is another example of her fine designs.

In this resonant and realistic novel 'In Custody', Anita Desai endeavours to link the readers' line of thought to the bilingual scene of Hindi versus Urdu before and after partition of India, as Urdu 'language of the court in the days of royalty – now languishes in the back lanes and gutters of the city. No place for it to live in the style to which it is accustomed, no emperors and nawabs to act as its patrons'.⁽¹⁴⁾

The revelation of post colonialism and imperialism tracks a criss-cross of cultures, traditions, displacement, Diasporas, alienations and consequential chain of illusions and disillusion. A parallel is drawn between fiction and history in relation to the languages. A small-town man, Deven, gets the opportunity to interview his hero, Nur Shahjehanabadi, the greatest living Urdu poet. Having always loved Urdu poetry and missed the chance to be an Urdu language professor, Deven is charmed into going to Delhi, the big city by his childhood friend, Murad. Even though he shrinks at the idea of possibly being exploited by sharp but selfish Murad, the dream of meeting Nur draws him on. So he sets off on a number of adventures on Sundays, the one free day that he should have spent with his wife and son.

In his efforts to interview the famous Urdu poet, Deven finds himself entangled in the web of paying Nur's bills for food, medicine, and even maintenance bills of his pets-pigeons. He finds himself paying money to Nur's family even after the latter's death.

'He had accepted the gift of Nur's poetry and that meant he was *custodian* of Nur's very soul and spirit'

Deven's meetings with Murad always made him sense the latter's desire to earn money and be a superior person. Despite the fact that Murad expresses his superficial passion for Nur's poetry. Deven looks at him as a 'chameleon'⁽³⁴⁾. Nur calls Murad a joker. But since Deven works for Murad's magazine *Awaaz*, he lets himself be a fool in the presence of his hero, Nur since childhood.

This mannerism of Deven is typical to Anita Desai's portrayal through which complex issues are presented in a realistic style. Anita Desai emphasizes on the individual's inner world of sensibility urges and conflicts. The characterization of Deven and Nur has the typicality of Anita Desai's implicit maneuver as usual.

Deven and Murad are childhood friends. Murad has grown up into a smart man who knows how to lure others and get his work done while Deven, a simple teacher has never been able to command the attention of his students. The novel questions the meaning of friendship that stands on selfishness and insensitivity as observed by Deven's relationship with Murad, the bonds of marriage mirrored in Deven's complacent behaviour towards his wife and the educational system of the nation where students with scientific backgrounds are meant for the luxuries of life whereas those with a knack for humanities are shown to rot in dingy classrooms. This fact is also revealed in the way in which Deven's Hindi students take technical classes outside in order to get employment, giving least importance to the learning

of the subject within the college premises. This is a reflection of the fact that the art, culture, heritage and history of the country lies threatened in front of the emerging technological boom of the globe.

Anita Desai is best known for her studies of Indian life. She has been successful in touching almost all the social evils prevailing in Indian society like alcoholism, poverty, superstitions, fight for religion, brain drain, domestic violence, exploitation of poor by the rich etc. Murad earns more but never pays Deven for his contributions as Murad is the son of a rich businessman and Deven of a poor widow.

She has also portrayed the true picture of the plight of teachers, poets and the deprived ones struggling for name, fame and wealth. In the present novel Anita Desai has tried to bring up a new issue of problems of extinction of a language like Urdu after the partition of India and Pakistan.

Deven, the protagonist is fond of Urdu poetry. The whole novel is cleverly woven around Deven's preparations and efforts to interview Nur. Deven has not been able to do much in life. He lacks confidence. In spite of being aware that the people around him are constantly pouring out benefits from his simplicity, weakness of not able to put forth his ideas, and innocence, he acts like a puppet in their hands because when it is a choice between head and heart, he chooses heart. When Murad approaches him to interview Nur, Deven realizes it is a dream come true. Desai has portrayed a weak protagonist who is easily driven by others and who like a true Shakespearean protagonist of a tragedy is held between the decision of whether to interview Nur or not. While climbing up the stairs of Nur's house, Deven lives a whole life and Anita seems to suggest that he will have to climb up very high to reach the status of Nur.

The dirty, old furniture in Nur's room shows the value and status of the old Urdu poet after partition among the rising Hindi poets in India. The room is dark and seems to reflect the true picture of the language Urdu which is in total darkness. And the poet in white clothes sitting in that dark room shows the status enjoyed by him even after partition. The image of Nur as a poet soon shatters when Deven, expecting him to be surrounded by intellectuals and poets of his stature, finds him with people who are more interested in reciting their own poetry. What Deven finds at his hero's house is misery and confusion. Having sunk into a senile old age, surrounded by fawning sycophants, married to a younger calculating wife who wants to use his glory to win herself fame, Nur is not what he once was. Or perhaps he always was this.

'It was clear to Deven that these louts, these lafangas of the bazaar world-shopkeepers, clerks, bookies and unemployed parasites- lived out the fantasy of being poets, artists and bohemians here on Nur's terrace in Nur's company.'⁽⁵⁵⁾

Nur, like a withered leaf waiting for its decay, is barely able to respond. But his weak stature seems to get electrified after he has consumed alcohol. He forgets that he is a poet- rather he behaves like a common Muslim who feels rejected, neglected and dejected. He hates 'Hindi wallahs'. He is trapped in the vanity of Imtiaz Begum, now his second wife, a prostitute who has ruined the life of the poet. She is so called lover of poetry and herself a poetess. She is jealous of Nur's skill and competes with him by holding 'mehfil' of poetry where she recites her poems in public.

Deven, the middle aged man, is drawn to this old poet, wishing to help and protect him though he cannot defend himself. His repeated visits to Nur's place and the experiences chase him even after returning home. He gets acquainted to some new aspects of life. Nur has two wives and feels guilty of not providing a good living to his family. This forces Deven to think that he too does not give any time to his wife Sarla and son Manu. The comparison between his father and his son's father

(himself) brings a change in him. Deven takes his son for a walk after he reaches back home. And Manu notices the change and reciprocates by sharing his secrets about his teacher.

‘He rushed along at his father’s side instead of dragging behind as was more usual with him.....; he too seemed to find something pleasant and acceptable in the uncommon experience of a walk with his father.’⁽⁸¹⁾

Anita Desai always has a character with psychological disorder in her novels. Be it Maya of ‘Cry the Peacock’, Uma in “Where Shall We Go This Summer” or Intiaz Begum in “In Custody”.

The whole novel portrays a descending trajectory of Deven and the rise of miseries coupled with misfortunes.

After realizing that a very important work of his interest i.e. interviewing the famous Urdu poet Nur, has been thrust on his shoulders, Deven undergoes a lot of pressure and a big change. He becomes more confident and learns tactics. He has now learnt to say no to people like Murad.

‘The breeze enters the blossom on the bough wafts its scent.

The opened window lets in the sweet season, spring.’⁽¹²¹⁾

But very soon he is seized by the fear of being unfit for the project -that - *he was a wrong choice*. The magnificence of the novel lies in the truth that over the plain platform, a dismal strife runs hither and thither conquering, with momentary predilection, the defeated causes of Urdu language and literature promotion. The complexities to undermine the language struggle are political, economic and social. To highlight the desolate morose of the effort, made by the only devoted person, Deven, Anita Desai describes the disturbed family scene in a chain nearing a break between the spouses - Deven and his wife, Sarla.

Here is the occurrence of the failure of tradition and modernity going hand in hand. Urdu poetry is, like any other poetry – divine – based on love but after Indian freedom the practical situation does not help it. The number of readers is on the decline. Post colonial times are of IMF and World Bank. This is presented with the delineation of Murad, Nur, the wives of Nur and the Urdu Lecturer in the college where Deven also serves. Urdu was popular with the Mughals and now Hindi is popular. No sooner does Deven reach Nur’s house, the politics of languages is discussed at large between the two.⁽²⁾

The latter finds himself frightened but Nur must say whatever comes to his mind. The discussion switches over to the literary awards with such remarks as the general idea in the bazaar is that “Gobind’s latest poem cycle will win the Sahitya Academy Award for Hindi this year”. For Urdu the remark shall be: “No book was judged worthy of the award this year”.

In order to interview Nur and record his verses in his voice, Deven spends more than three weeks in a room of a brothel without perceiving the fact that he may also be misunderstood. People constantly make fool of him and he has to bear the brunt. Every effort made by Deven ends in defeat. He is also a failure like Nur.

In order to save the name and works of Nur for posterity, he decides to record his voice on tape for his small-town university. In the process Deven is exploited monetarily and emotionally, where Nur's family demands money to keep themselves happy, Murad refuses to pay him for submissions to his self-proclaimed literary magazine. His wife Sarla is indignant at his time away, his fellow professors think he is having an affair in Delhi.

The saddest part is the result of the sessions. Drunk and encouraged by his admirers who follow him along to the sessions, Nur offers nothing new.

Desai has brought a lot of symbolism in this novel. The whistle of the train seems to be the call of life to Deven trapped in his circumstances. When Nur goes up on the terrace, he is attacked by pigeons symbolizing the demand of Urdu lovers demanding protection for the language and Urdu poetry. Pigeons were once used as messengers. So, do they bring here the message of the community that loved Urdu language but now witnessed its downfall? Pigeons also symbolize peace. They surround the poet who has completely lost his peace of mind. His mind is now full of burning political issues of partition and diminishing status of Urdu language. The pace of the novel is very slow. It sometimes gets monotonous. The reader gets impatient and frustrated towards the end.

The novel from beginning till end revolves around Deven trying to interview Nur. He succeeds in recording some verses in the poet's voice but the tapes are in poor condition. The voice cracks and there are many other technicalities. Deven lacks future insight. It is this weakness that delves him into troubles one after another. He thinks he was going to bring the poet out of dark lanes into new lights but he ends up being exploited by all around him including the poet. Nur keeps on sending letters and telegrams to Deven demanding money on one pretext or another. His first wife has already taken money from Deven. After Nur's death, she sends Nur's bills to Deven. Murad demands of copyrights in lieu of help.

The novel can be regarded as an optimistic tale of Deven and Nur in spite of the repeated pessimisms hovering in their lives. This is because Nur at the end finds himself a custodian to breathe to him his life as it actually is and Deven gets the opportunity to take the custody of the divine poet whom he almost worshiped.

It was a name that opened doors, changed expressions, caused dust and cobwebs to disappear, visions to appear, bathed in radiance. It had led him on to avenues that would take him to another land, another element. This is an achievement in itself. Composed by Anita Desai, the novel is a portrait of human lives as it exists in their own exclusive circumstances, of the hypocrisy and pretension lying within the human spirit, of the difference between the town and the city life, of human helplessness and oppression on the road to aspirations.

Works Cited:

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