
Anita Desai *In Custody*: Navigating the Complex Interplay of Urban Space, Cultural Dynamics and Erosion of Tradition

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Abstract:

Anita Desai has earned a distinct space for her attention to psychological insight and existential concerns. Her sensitive portrayals and understanding of intrinsic human nature make her writing conspicuous and captivating. Her probing penetrates the existential corner of an individual who tries to discover some meaning in his life. In her novels, she presents the image of a suffering human being preoccupied with the inside world, sulking in frustration, and the storm within. She gives voice to the existential predicament of an individual in society under the powerful clutches of spatial forces, the individual psyche, and its interaction. The paper explores the treatment of the urban setting in Anita Desai's novel *In Custody*. This study offers a critical reading of the novel where each character articulates their narratives of trauma, grief, and loss within and against the spatial and cultural dynamics. She strikes a new note by depicting how, marred by the time and place, Deven, the protagonist, moves in search of his identity. The paper also attempts to bring together the different spatial and temporal concerns in the novel.

Keywords: space, cultural dynamics, trauma.

Introduction:

Anita Desai has earned a distinct space for her attention to psychological insight and existential concerns. Her sensitive portrayals and understanding of intrinsic human nature make her writing conspicuous and captivating. She admits her preference for the internal world of the psychic space has always been a significant concern in her fictional writing:

My writing is an effort to discover, underline, and convey the significance of things. I must seize upon that incomplete and seemingly meaningless mass of reality around me and try and discover its significance by plunging below the surface and plumbing the depths, then illuminating those depths till they become more lucid, brilliant, and explicable reflections of the visible world. (Kakatiya Journal 4)

She adds a new dimension to the achievement of Indian women writing in English Fiction by dealing with the inner climate of her characters irrespective of their gender. Her probing penetrates the existential corner of an individual who tries to discover some meaning in his life. In her psychological novels, she presents the image of a suffering human being preoccupied with the inside world, sulking in frustration, and the storm within. She gives voice to the existential predicament of an individual in society under the powerful clutches of social forces, the individual psyche, and its interaction with social values. As an explorer of the human predicament, she presents the individual against himself and this milieu by using a different language to depict the inner tensions in the lives of her characters.

As a mute observer, Anita Desai perceives everything, every situation, very minutely. All her characters, like Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*, Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain*, Monisha in *Voices in the City*, Deven in *In Custody*, and Hugo in *Boumgarten's Bombay*, seem to be existential, searching out a meaning in life as a mystery. She says, "I am interested in people who live in a kind of exile from the rest of society..." In her criss-cross examination of the theme, she shows the various shackles of human predicament. She continues in an interview, "... every human territory is tiny," and all one can explore is "a very tiny section of that territory" (Barnes January 14, 2014). Anita Desai's novel "In Custody" is a sensitive portrayal of human nature. Set in the small town of Mirpore, it revolves around Deven, a Hindi lecturer, and his encounter with Nur, India's greatest living Urdu poet. Deven's decision to become the custodian of Nur's verse leads to an unusual alliance. Through this relationship, Desai explores the complexities of human connections and the gradual erosion of culture and tradition in the face of modernity.

The novel delves into identity, purpose, and the clash between tradition and contemporary values. Desai's vivid characters grapple with whether modern India will embrace or abandon its centuries-old Persian and Islamic heritage. Overall, "In Custody" is a thought-provoking parable that laments cultural decay while celebrating the intricate tapestry of human relationships.

Deven is an unassertive lecturer of Hindi but a true admirer of Urdu, teaching in a small town, Mirpore, near Delhi. The story revolves around Deven's awareness of the questions of life, his sentience of the meaninglessness of existence, and his yearning to discover meaning in life as well as in the world of Urdu poetry. He is an ordinary man living an ordinary life who finds no interest either in his personal or professional life. In the college where he teaches, he gets very monotonous looks from his students, which makes him feel duller. He teaches in a college but suffers from dislocations from everyday life. The students trap him with their expression of "boredom, amusement, insolence and defiance-made him look away quickly and focus his eyes upon the door at the far end of the room, the door that opened the passage, freedom and release" (*In Custody* 5).

The air of gloom hangs over in the atmosphere area of Mirpore. Even the department of Hindi that carries the capacity of high literature presently lies in a

dilapidated condition. It is firstly due to the lack of enthusiasm on the part of the students to respect the Hindi language, "that language of peasant . . . that language that is raised on radishes and potatoes . . ." (8) which has little value in the job market and secondly due to the composition of town itself as a town of the tea wallahas and the truck driver, "the citizens of Mirpore, petty tradesmen rather than agriculturists, could not be blamed for failing to understand those patriotic songs and slogans about the soil, the earth. To them, it was so palpably dust" (12). The class of people inhabiting Mirpore forms a distant part of the desire to grasp the beauties of philosophy, art, and poetry. However, he carries the capacity of high literature. However, he cannot assert his knowledge and learning due to the lack of enthusiasm on the part of the students as well as due to the slightest sense of beauty in the local people of Mirpore.

There was no construction to speak of, except the daily one of repairing; no growth except in numbers, no making permanent what had remained through the centuries so stubbornly temporary-and it was other cities, other places that saw the fruits of all the bustle, leaving the debris and the litter behind for Mirpore. Its solidity, its stubbornness had formed a trap, Deven felt. (17)

Anita Desai meticulously depicts the prime characters in the novel. She associates them with the identity of characters living in it, like Deven's practical and cunning friend, Murad, who is the publisher, or Nur's second wife, who is smart enough to understand the importance of her husband's past and wants to make money. Nur has memories attached to old Delhi. Delhi is where Deven forms relationships of friendship (Murad, Nur), recording together with the assistant, and succeeds in seeking the help of Noor's first wife. The place adds to the individual's identity. Nur is identical to Chandni Chowk in old Delhi, where he lives. This place is old, as is Nur, and is crowded, just like Nur is surrounded by people who give him little importance, but both had a glamorous past. Mirpore is similar to Deven, moving directionless in the realm of time. Delhi presents a contrast of old and new. Deven was surprised to know that Nur enjoyed Byron and Shelley in the true spirit of Delhi by accepting and appreciating anything wondrous.

Deven goes to old Delhi to interview Nur in the lanes of Chandni Chowk, which he describes as a "bazaar encountered in a nightmare" (38). He continued to wander in the lanes, which had old stained buildings, shops, and different stalls. The description in the novel is very apt: "They walked past shady-looking and evil-smelling shops where herbal medicines and panaceas were being wrapped in paper packets by men who looked too ostentatiously like quacks, past booths in which astrologers and palmists and soothsayers had spread out the exotic tools of their trade..." (39) Deven could not help noticing the open flowing gutter, a humped bull munching paper and a hospital with fading green walls. For him, it was a nightmare. What was more appalling for him was that a great poet lived in an ambiance like this. He tells the boy who was guiding him, "We must be lost. This is not the right place. It is no use to go further. I am not going on." (39). His romantic versions of the abode

of the great poet are thwarted, and along with him, the readers are also made aware of the changes in old Delhi.

Murad, on the other hand, symbolizes the New Delhi or the modern Delhi. He wants Deven to interview Nur so that the saleability of his journal increases. He is also like a 'chameleon' and crafty and could easily lure Deven. He teased Deven and made fun of him. He is practical and unemotional. He has modern ideas of using a recorder for poetry. He is fast and thinks that he knows what he wants. The contrast is also shown in the modern methods of recording, through the tape, and the flow of poetry that flows naturally, failing all the artificial means to capture the past.

Unlike the bustling metropolis of Calcutta in Desai's earlier novel "Voice in the City," Mirpore is an unidentified city on the map of India. However, it embodies the essence of every Indian city. Desai masterfully paints a vivid picture of Mirpore, where dust pervades every corner. The roads, even when periodically tarred, reveal the ever-present dust beneath. The citizens, predominantly petty tradespeople, understand dust more palpably than soil. Dust symbolizes decay, neglect, and stagnation, conflicting with the validity associated with fertile soil.

Anita Desai transports the existential crisis of Deven as a man who suffers a displacement from professional life and instability in family life and finds both his job and family oppressive. He realizes himself chained to the necessity of earning a livelihood to support his family, but his existential crisis lies elsewhere. His existential crisis lies in his romantic notion of meeting his ideal poet, Nur, but the harsh realities of life and personal incompetence cast an air of frustration on him. "He was so confused and shattered by it that he did not know what it was that shattered him, just as the victim of an accident sees and hears the pane of glass smash or sheet of metal buckle but cannot tell what did it-rock, bullet or vehicle"(58).

She portrays the monotony of the quotidian dreams of the individual, the probable impossibility of knowing one's self, and the paradoxical nature of human existence. The question of self dominates in her novels, and she believes firmly in the dignity of the self. She says: ". . . without this sense of dignity and sanctity of the self, the existential awakening of the self remains vulnerable, and the tuner space can once again become contaminated" (Dalmia 13). She beautifully catches the mood and the physical environment of Deven, "this shabby house, it's dirty cornered its wretchedness and lovelessness, looking around it, he felt himself sag with relief and gratitude. At the same time his shoulder drooped in defeat" (68-69). With her psychological understanding of the inner conflict of human beings and her philosophical, existential vision, she raises the existential questions tormenting Deven. She also brings forth the existential void in Nur, whose existence becomes a trap for him, dividing him into two selves: one Nur as the legendary poet of Urdu and the other as the man struggling to keep his body and soul together. The character of Nur, who finds it difficult to escape from his cage, reflects pessimism. "A cage is a row of cages, Cage cage trap, trap . . . There is the existential search for freedom, the

human quest for liberty then where was freedom to be found? Where was there fresh air to breathe?" (131)

"In Custody" delves into the extinction of Urdu culture in post-partition India—the novel grapples with losing language, tradition, and artistic heritage. Deven, the protagonist and a Hindi lecturer, becomes entangled in the quest for identity and purpose. His interactions with the celebrated Urdu poet Nur, whom he interviews, reveal the complexities of cultural preservation and personal transformation. Through Deven's experiences, Desai weaves a poignant narrative that resonates with anyone seeking meaning in a changing world.

The prospect of interviewing Nur opens up a new world for Deven. However, Deven suffers from doubts, as Anita Desai writes. "What madness had drawn him to undertake his journey into what could only be a disaster?" (35) What vain glory to have accepted Murad's challenge to have agreed to a task for which he was not qualified for which Deven's entrance. Deven hopes to enter Nur's house, "feeling some taut membrane of reservation tear apart inside him and a surging expansion of joy" (35) at hearing the voice but "to great mutters of astonishment and horror" (35) to his jubilation, he finds Nur in semi-darkness and shadowy gloom amidst furniture that enhance the sense of lucid "murkiness, heavy and palpable with gloom" (37). He finds Nur trapped.

Contrary to his expectations, he finds Nur lying on his bed, old and surrounded by sycophants and admirers praising him in exaggerated ways, drinking and laughing loudly, and enjoying the malls every day. Without any sincere reverence, the world of Nur is sharply in contrast with the one dreamt by Deven. It is an atmosphere of garishness blaring music, the cacophonous sounds of the by-lanes of Chandni Chowk resided by pimps and prostitutes where Nur presides over a court of louts and lechers.

The idealized vision of Deven receives a rude jolt when he finds Nur trapped in the semi-darkness and shadowy gloom amidst furniture that enhances the sense of lucid murkiness. Nur, sitting in the middle and taking pleasure in the company of uncultivated wannabees, causes havoc to his expectations and enthusiasm. Deven gets to see (Nur) his hero, and talks to him. As soon as Deven arrives at Nur's flat, "he feels the most tide of jubilation rise and an increase inside at being recognized names and invited into the presence of a man so clearly a hero" (35). "It was to him as if God had learned over a cloud and called for him to come up, and angels might have been drawing him up these ancient splintered stairs to meet the deity" (36). "he had pictured him living either surrounded by elderly sages and dignified literature or else entirely alone in divine isolation" (49) Contrary to this he finds "clowns, jokers, and jugglers doing around him" (49).

His constant longing for Urdu poetry and attaining his creation and failure in giving them to the Urdu world leads him to isolation. Deven feels frustrated due to the need for more appreciation. He nourishes his dream to carve a niche in Urdu

literature. With all his hardships, Deven goes to interview Nur. He tells Nur about his love for Urdu literature. He also tells him he works as a temporary lecturer in Hindi literature to earn a living. Nur dismisses this excuse with contempt, suggesting that Deven should have chosen to trade in rice and oil if earning a living was his priority. "The language of the court in the days of royalty now languishes in the back lanes and gutters of the city. There is no place for it to live to which it is accustomed. No emperors and Nawabs to act as its patrons" (15).

Deven soon realizes that the culture in the present time is changing and the people who were the authentic admirers of Urdu poetry are reclining. The evening meetings in Nur's house, where they discuss mundane topics over biryani and drinks instead, symbolize their lack of serious effort. They are passing their time. There is a lack of interest among people who come to Nur's house to listen to his poetry. They are shallow and are interested in eating and drinking and making merry. This crowd has come to hear Nur's second wife, who was a dancer. The wrath of the writer is evident. "Deven abhors this group of shopkeepers, clerks, bookies, and unemployed parasites" (50). Thus, "The novel is unique in its faithful portrayal of Deven's predicament till he receives the invitation and the disillusionment that sets in when he enters the illustrious poet's domain" (Maya 148).

Not finding him alone for the interview and being scared to see the unexpected miserable condition of real life, he decides to return to Mirpore to catch his class the next day. He feels disenchantment in her life when he realizes Sarla "would teach him not to venture out of the familiar, safe dustbin of their world into the perilous world of the night bacchanalia, revelry, and melodrama" (68). He realizes genius blooms even in their happenings of sordid reality. He feels his future as a poet and feels himself *In Custody* of it in the same way as Nur is found entrapped with a sick wife and a young school-going child to care for and weighed down by poverty; he is as trapped as Deven. Even if his cage is more prominent and has attracted more attention, this realization enables Deven to face reality. A transformed Deven takes stock of his empirical existence and commits himself to his responsibilities. The preaching of the Bhagavad Geeta offers Deven the incentive to return to his duties and responsibilities.

The protagonist symbolizes the dilemma and anxiety of many a modern young Indian. He hopes the interview will be a door to liberation and an opening into the world of art and achievement, and he hopes to gain recognition. Deven's dissatisfaction with life is reflected in his career as a college lecturer and husband. He repents that he never has a chance to prove himself and is doomed to continue the dreary drudgery of a monotonous life. As an unsuccessful teacher, he bores his students in the class. He brings his sense of boredom, isolation, and alienation through his attitude towards his students and the locale of Mirpore as "its solidity, its stubbornness had formed a trap" (17). As an Urdu lover and enthusiast, he wants to interview his ideal, his role model, but his first meeting with Nur causes a crisis in Deven's mind. The journey of Deven manifests a change in outlook and

understanding of life as he commutes between the slow-drop life of Mirapore and the city of dreams, Delhi, trying to arrange an interview with Nur, he discovers the futility of seeking a perfect world.

He walked as if he were walking away from the debris of his Delhi trip, his visit to Nur, the failed interview, leaving it all behind. The first desolation at his loss of them was being gradually filled this evening as an empty glass with water, with the realization that that loss has simplified his existence, reduced it once again to a pure emptiness with which he knew how to cope, having coped so long. He had made a timely escape from the complexities with which he would not have known how to contend. (74)

Though the purpose of interviewing Nur ends in failure, it gives a realization that Deven and "he was determined" (189) that the secret of existence is to be meshed and unmeshed to manifest the ultimate meaning of life. Deven constantly struggles with the existential crisis, trying to find the reason for his being, and finally realizes that it is not some external force that has led him to this fate, but his disinterest in his regular life is the cause of his existential void.

Deven is overcome by doubts and despair even during his journey from Mirapore to Delhi. His doubts continue if somehow such a miracle—the journey into what would only be a disaster. Lacking a critical approach, he comments between Delhi and Mirapore, between poetry and prose, between nightmares and stark reality. He thrice decides and thrice retreats. However, he finally realizes that there is an escape from Mirapore, but there is no escape from Nur. "There was no release or escape" (232). The true devotion of Deven to the great living poet Nur makes him captive. He is very timid and unable to defend his position. He goes to Nur with his monograph, which he has written in his praise, but is told by Nur's wife that the interview with the poet would not be possible without paying some money; Deven feels himself caught between the poet's two wives and their demands. "Marriage, a family and a job had placed him in this cage" (146), which is a closer familiarity with the poet who is "as trapped as Deven . . . still it was just a cage in a row of cages. Cage, cage. Trap, trap. Then where was freedom to be found? Where was there fresh air to breathe?" (146)

Despite having a tape filled with disastrous memories, he feels he must preserve it. He finally realizes hardships and anguishes will always be a part of life, and he is ready to accept these challenges. Anita Desai observes his existential struggles germinating from the existential absurdity, a sense of confusion in the meaningless world. This existential crisis leads him to complete desolation and alienation, which generates in him a feeling of freedom. It is through the existential pangs suffered in entrapment that Deven craves for freedom. In the end, Deven's lack of identity illuminates gloriously being the responsible custodian of Urdu language poetry and the poet himself. Deven is so locked in Nur and his poetry that he pays a second visit to him. The illusory world of Deven is shattered by Nur's condition. Nur's

bare feet, his loose pajamas, and his vest full of holes made him appear like a caged animal.

Desai constructs a framework of time and space in “In Custody.” The characters’ lives intersect within this matrix, reflecting cultural shifts and dynamics. The narrative skilfully interweaves past and present, urban and rural, tradition and modernity. As readers, we witness the delicate balance between nostalgia and the urgency of the present. Through this intricate web, Desai invites us to contemplate the fragility of cultural heritage and the choices we make in preserving or relinquishing it. She juxtaposes traditionalism with modernism, emotion with rationalism, material with immaterial, presence with absence, attachment with detachment, self with others, fame with anonymity, and masses with classes. In the novel, culture defines the way of life. The main aim of this paper has been to bring together the spatial and temporal concerns that contribute to cognitive analysis, bordering psycho-analysis, and socio-cultural exposition. Overall, “In Custody” is a thought-provoking parable that laments cultural decay while celebrating the intricate tapestry of human relationships.

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