

CULTURAL DISCOURSE IN ANITA DESAI'S *IN CUSTODY*

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Abstract

Anita Desai (1937) is an Indian Novelist and professor in Humanities. Her published works include adult novels, children's books and short stories. She is a member of the Advisory Board for English of the National Academy of Letters in Delhi and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in London. She has been shortlisted for Booker's prize for three times. Exploring duality is a characteristic of Desai's work that The Washington Post recognized saying, "In Anita Desai's reckoning, one and one do not make two. They make three, four even. In her logic, if you are a compound of two cultures, you are more likely fractured in myriad ways, launched on a lifetime of shape shifts and in-betweens. Her novel In Custody (1984) was again shortlisted for 1984 Booker's prize. She has also been awarded a Neil Gunn international fellowship in 1994. This paper deals with the study of Anita Desai's novel entitled as In Custody, which deals with the description of diminishing Urdu culture and language.

KEY WORDS: Urdu, culture, language, Hindi, official, loss

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Anita Desai (1937) is an Indian Novelist and professor in Humanities. She has been shortlisted for Booker's prize for three times. She is one of the leading women writers and mother to Kiran Desai, the another famous women writer in Indian writing in English, She received a Sahitya Academy award in 1978 for her novel *Fire on the Mountain*. Her novel *In Custody* (1984) was again shortlisted for 1984 Booker's prize. She has also been awarded a Neil Gunn international fellowship in 1994. This paper deals with the study of Anita Desai's novel entitled as *In Custody*, which deals with the description of diminishing Urdu culture and language.

The comparative aspects between Hindi and Urdu language are also drawn which is juxtaposed by the change of cultural dynamics. India and Pakistan were partitioned in those days in 1947 and with that there was change in culture and usage of languages - Urdu and Hindi. However the two languages were almost similar but in written form Urdu has an Arabic script and is written from right to left and Hindi has devnagri script written from left to right. Hence with the partition Urdu became the official language of Pakistan and Hindi as an official language of India.

The novel *In Custody* deals with the protagonist Deven who is a Hindu but has a high regard for Urdu language and culture. And Nur who is a Muslim, the great Urdu poet has lost his status for the same. The 1993 Merchant Ivory Productions film *In Custody* based upon her novel of the same name was directed by Ismail Merchant, with a screenplay by Shahrukh Husain. It stars the noted actors Shashi Kapoor, Shabana Azmi and Om Puri.

Deven, the protagonist, associates his father and Urdu with 'Good times.' He is adoring the Urdu language and Culture. Unfortunately he has to teach Hindi language and literature in Lala Ramlal College, Delhi for the disinterested students who never respect him instead they made fun of him. He assumes this time to be 'Bad times' for him. When his father was alive and was a good Urdu Poet himself he was happy. Composing Urdu Poetry and achieve an applauded from audience but after his father's death his mother brought him to Delhi where he was admitted to Hindi Medium School at Mirpoor. He was frustrated during this bad time, when he says- I studied Urdu, Sir, in Lucknow. My father was a school teacher, a scholar, and a lover of Urdu Poetry. He taught me the language. But he died and my mother brought me to Delhi to live with her relations here. I was sent to nearest school, A Hindi medium School Sir.

As the novel opens Murad Beg a friend of Deven and an editor of Urdu Magazine Awaz offers Deven to interview Nur Shahjahanabadi, a great Urdu poet for his special issue

Deven was overjoyed thinking his dream come true for the survival of Urdu language. He goes to Bhopal from Mirpur to meet Nur, of who he is in admiration. To his surprise, rest of the tale shifts between his success and failure. Throughout his journey in this job he travels from enthusiasm to hesitance and is finally landed to utter failure with nervousness. When he comes to Nur's residence he experiences totally different picture the world which opened in front of him was new one of the crowded homes. Ironically, it was of greedy poets back lanes and brothel house in chandni chawk, there lived Nur the poet and the old man shouldering the weight of his oldage perhaps unwillingly. Here, I feel that Deven has been severely clutched between two aspects of life that is illusion and reality. Deven experiences two Nurs in one person and he is attracted by one and repelled by the other. The novel is filled with absurdities and ironies. Deven is doing the temporary job of as a lecturer. When he reaches at Nur's residence to interview him he is shocked to see his destructive image of either surrounded by elderly people or alone in isolation. He was living amidst louts and lechers. Deven thought to take entry in Delhi's literary world and publish his own Urdu poetry. But he finds Nur, the poet, he admits:

How can there be Urdu poetry when there is no Urdu language left. It's dead. Finished. the defeat of the Moghals by the British threw the noose over its head, and the defeat of the British by Hindiwalas tightened it. So now you see Its corpse lying here, waiting to be buried.

As the story moves further it unfolds further disaster, as the teacher accepts the increasingly, senile poet's foolish demands for payment of his hospital bills and future betterment of his wife and child after his death and also for funeral expenses of himself. He finds him living with feuding wives, visited by sycophants who drink his whisky and eat his food. One of India's renowned poets, Nur, now leads a comfortable life, surrounded by well-wishers, fellow-poets, several wives, and relatives. This is what struggling writer, Deven, expected to write about him as an interviewer. But contrarily, he found was a grossly overweight male, surrounded by hungry friends, greedy relatives, and three wives - one a bitter older woman, Safiya; second a neglected but talented one named Imtiaz, and the third, Sarla, a shrewd and cunning woman, who was selling Nur's poems as her own. Will Deven's presence initiate some change in Nur's lifestyle, or will Deven himself become one of Nur's lazy followers.

Deven observed all this and became more and more attached to the poet. He might have grown sympathy for him because of his torn condition and lost identity as an individual as well as a poet. Finally he reaches to the stage of perfection of art. He was gifted by Nur with his poetry and then he becomes custodian to him. We witness that the undertaking of an interview begins as an adventure but soon becomes cause to resuscitate

not only the dying language but the dying poet. Desai shows that how Devan's dreams about his poetic hero Nur come to disaster in the novel "In custody. His interview with his ideal hero ends up in catastrophe and he remains desolate at the end of the story. Mirapur and Delhi are two different settings and his travel between them teaches him to come out of his illusion, fantasies and to face the reality.

Devan's love for Urdu poetry brings him to accept the proposal. Devan is excited about the project, however becomes a complicated one as the novel progresses. Instead of just an interview, Devan assumes the responsibility of writing a biography of Nur. His attempt to tape the interviews and the poet's recitation of new poems ends in a series of disasters. By the end of the novel, Devan is about to lose his job and his creditors are after him. He has been used by the poet and his irresponsible partners. Despite his frustrations, fears and disillusionment, Devan does not give up his commitments. "He thought of Nur's poetry being read his reminiscences that the recitation is softly murmuring in his ears. He had accepted the gift of Nur's poetry and that meant he was custodian of Nur's soul and spirit. He could not deny or desert that under any pressure."

To conclude, In Custody, like her earlier novels ends up with optimistic note. Devan is able to perceive a ray of hope even in his boundless suffering and humiliation. Towards the end of the novel, he becomes convinced. The sunlight dissolving the darkness of the night before is symbolic of the emergence of new courageous "self" of Devan dispersing his previous timid, vulnerable self. Unfortunately, the Urdu language has been demarcated with the demarcation of two countries India and Pakistan. Thus it remained in India as the language of Muslim minorities. However, Desai illustrates this common link between Nur and Devan. Nur who has accepted the loss and death of the Urdu Language and the diffident Hindi professor Devan who is striving for its preservation.

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