

Searching for Identity in Anita Desai's *In Custody*

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ABSTRACT

Desai portrays Sarla's psyche not as passive, but as a site of bitter, quiet rebellion. She has given birth to two strong female characters in this novel, namely Sarla and Imtiaz Begum. Because she cannot leave due to societal constraints, she exerts her resistance through domestic hostility. This paper symbolizes the protagonist Deven's emotional and intellectual imprisonment. It reflects his trap in a routine life, his obligations to family and profession. Desai's novels transcend mere social realism, exploring into the psychological, emotional, and spiritual proportions of existence. This paper highlights the psychological depth, isolation and message of struggles.

Keywords: existence, struggle, conflicts, isolation, exploitation, humiliation individuality and freedom

Introduction

Anita Desai is 20th-century renowned writer and her novels on the experiences and inner lives of Indian men and women are known for their compassion, eloquence, and lucid prose. In *Custody*, charts the journey of Deven a young lecturer who works in Lala Ramlal College, Mirpore. Deven's conflicts bring out the trauma of a middle class Indian intellectual pitted against a consumerist, acquisitive culture which corrupts and exploits. The chaotic familial and social situation of independent India, the frightening and bewildering aspect of rootlessness are perceived by Desai. Only a coherent self-image can solve the conflicts according to her. Deven is compressed by the proprietarily demands of society, family and culture; the tedium of it settled upon him like a grey, crumbling mildew. He felt aged and moldy. Desai has used specific terms to suggest the alienation of Deven from his environment. Deven's wife Sarala is a disappointed person. There is no understanding or intimacy between Sarala and Deven. The social, familial and economic pressures drive them apart. Sarala's resentment stems from Deven's thorough neglect. Both feel trapped by the hostile environment. Deven faces the patches of meaningless existence. The ambivalent attitude of others around him along with familial and social obstruction creates an excessive detachment from life. He feels that every effort he had made had ended in defeat: most of the poems he had written and sent to Murad had been rejected, his monograph never published, his wife and son eyed him

with blatant disappointment; nor had he won the regard of his colleagues or students. The intrinsic weakness in his father that had made him an incompetent if harmless, teacher and house holder had been passed on to him. He felt it inside him like an empty hole, one he had been staring at all his years, frightened by its blackness and blankness.

Deven is 'framed' in a society where the socio-political conditions confine and limit the progress and expression of personality. The estrangement of Deven from his environment is suggested in these lines: And that was all he was -a trapped animal.. . . Marriage, family and a job had placed him in this cage, now there was no way out. . . . It was only a kind of zoo in which he could not hope to find any freedom; he would only blunder into another cage inhabited by some other trapped animal" (Desai, 131)

The repetition places of interest the emotional trauma of a separated person. Deven's alienation and the resultant conflicts move him away from people. The compulsive nature of conflicts manifests itself on the self as neurosis. Deven feels defenseless and alienated. Alienation is self-destructive as it causes the paralysis of one's mental prowess. Social identification has always been an important stage in the development of the self. When the self is painful in the ethical world, it generates conflicts. These conflicts in turn lead to social and psychological division of the self from the ethical world. So the thrust in alienation is given to three aspects. That is the self's incapability to identify with the social and ethical world around it; secondly the inability to declare its individuality and freedom and finally the consciousness that it is a circle without a solid firm centre. The centre, of course, is a strong solid self. Its totality and inherent worth contribute to self-actualization or in other words make the circle complete with a centre. When this centre or nucleus of a person is at stake, he feels alienated from his environment.

This is accurately what happens in the case of Deven, Hugo Baumgartner, Adit, Dev and Sarah. Desai points out the insuperable conflicts faced by the modern man. When the conflicts become 'insurmountable' the person can neither fight nor mollify justify or they cause an automatic drifting of the individual from the environment. Deven, like a typical alienated human being, becomes aware of his unworthiness, and hence falls into the abyss of self-contempt and defeatism. When

tackled by many contradictory drives Deven feels victimized. He feels that, like him, his wife Sarala too is a devocalized victim of many unsettled conflicts. "He understood because like her, he had been defeated too; like her, he was a victim. Although each understood the secret truth about the other, it did not bring about any closeness of spirit, any comradeship, because they also sensed that two victims ought to avoid each other, not yoke together their joint disappointments." (Desai, 68) After coming back from home Sarala finds Deven's obedience unbearable: "She began to get irritated by his inaction. She wanted to get on with the cleaning of the house. She got up and went to fetch the duster, shouting from the kitchen, 'how could you let the house get so filthy? Why didn't you call for the sweeper to come and clean?'" (Desai, 194)

The failing relationship between the husband and wife, the regular occurrence of spousal turbulences are looked at, psychologically by the author. The doubt between the two also contributes too many conflicts. Deven's failure to accommodate his wife's needs and Sarala's inability to voice her suffering throw light on the negative aspects of stereotyping that exists in our society. They are rooted in the psyche of individuals and they marked in their attitudes and behavioral patterns of the individuals. Even an offhand reaction is colored by stereotyping. We here stumble over one potent question, and redefining the 'roles', by stabilizing the shaky identity and recouping the crushed self-worth of the 'second sex'.

Deven is conscious of his wife's repressed state. But he is afraid to do anything that would free her from her marginalized existence. Deven treats his wife in a traditional manner. He is very sure about his wife's submissiveness. Perhaps that is the only thing he is sure about, in his life. Even education, his wide reading and finer emotional responses have not changed the stereotyped attitude of Deven towards his wife. In support of this the authorial voice speaks: "Sarala never lifted her voice in his presence - countless generations of Hindu womanhood behind her stood in her way, preventing her from displaying open rebellion. Deven knew she would scream and abuse only when she was safely out of the way, preferably in the kitchen, her own domain." (Desai, 145) The behavior of Deven marked by conflict may now be analyzed. Deven feels that by reaching out to his wife he might lose his control over her. He also feels that his non-masculine overture may not be to her liking. Since, she would consider it a degrading act on his part. The Inner conflicts of Deven run on parallel lines with those of Sarala Like a typical Indian wife she is a regular practitioner of the act of repression with its negative and disastrous consequences. "Karen Horney points out that quite often the repression of aggression against the male drains ail her vital energy. The woman then feels helpless to meet life" (Karen Horney, 111) She will shift the entire responsibility for

her helplessness on to man, robbing him the very breath of So it is the fear of losing one's pedestal position, the power to control and 'own' her completely that contributes to his deviant behavior.

The inherent rhythm in Desai's narrative movement transforms the lived experiences into artistic reality. Here she uses the process of psychologizing or seeing through: Psychologizing goes on whenever reflection takes place in terms other than those presented. It respects an interior, not evident intention; it searches for a hidden clock work, a ghost in the machine, an etymological root, something, more than meets the eye; or it sees another eye. It goes on whenever we move to a deeper level" (James Hillman, 135) This is what is done by Desai. Desai brings to light the highly contradictory values, divergent ways of living and powerful circumstances that keep the individual 'in custody'. We are reminded of the lines by Narendra Patil: "Circumstances have slapped down a suit on burning thoughts in my minds! They've put all burning mind the patriarchal ideology is in a way responsible for keeping women in custody." (Narendra Patil, 48). The root of female oppression and the resultant conflicts is traced back to this ideology.

The woman becomes 'angst'-ridden when she is kept in custody by an ideology that allows her no freedom. She becomes claustrophobically inactive adhere self is rocked by emotional conflicts and mordant pessimism. The denial of rights and privileges, unfulfilled desires and the re-centre of her two selves lead to the de-centering of the self. The edgy moments of the self, it's longing for a tangent to achieve wholeness and the turbulence created by the internalized weakness feelings of the female self are adequately mirrored by Desai. There may be imperfections in this mirrored world, but the most important and fundamental thing is to convey the warp and weft of mind with all its sincerity. What one feels is that conflicts are the main connecting thread running through every novel of Desai. These conflicts take on extra significance because of their psychic territoriality.

Most of Desai's novels deal with conflicts created by the stratification of men above women. This power over women down the ages has created a powerful image of man as a patriarch, law giver or a 'boss' or a person who is in charge of women's life. With a new awareness penetrating the minds of women, their attitude towards the existing socio-familial environment becomes polemic. The appetitive need for a new self image and the recurrent trope of transformed women are the direct results of conflicts according to Desai.

In Custody, Merchant Ivory made a Hindi film based on this novel. It is the best novel of Anita Desai. It is a different novel from all its previous counterparts. In her preceding novels, she has primarily been concerned with

hypersensitivity and inner working of women characters. However in this novel Desai has shifted her focus from woman's world to man's world.

Nur, a famous Urdu poet of yesteryear is a setting sun existing in immeasurable loneliness. His plight as a secluded person is shown in the changing world. Devan, a college lecturer in Hindi is inclined towards Urdu poetry, yet for his livelihood he selects Hindi. He is unhappy with his wife. He felt his marriage a trap- from which he could not escape. The feeling of meaninglessness of existence in life detaches him from the people around him. Murad- a shrewd person asks Devan to interview Nur.

Devan grabs this opportunity to achieve distinction. But his ambition is shattered. Murad, Safiya Begum, Imtiaz Begum (wives of Nur) exploit, humiliate and even extract money from his meager economic sources. Anita Desai has sketched him not only as a weak person but also a boring teacher who could not command attention in order to abscond reality he tries to enter Nur's world that he considers bigger but he is shocked to see his hero in a pitiable plight. After interviewing Nur's life, he sees his own reflection in him. Devan gets so entangled with Nur's life that it becomes difficult for him to come out of it.

Anita Desai has described the downfall of a rich language like Urdu through Nur which is related with the political act of partition. No book was judged worthy of the award this year because Urdu is, supposed to have died in 1947. Nur's poetry did not receive due appreciation when he was alive. Devan wishes that after Nur's death he would keep alive the poetry of Nur.

He had accepted the gift of Nur's poetry and that meant he was custodian of Nur's very soul and spirit. It was a great distinction. Anita Desai leaves a positive note that the protagonist who fails in his life has a ray of hope, and is firm to keep the poetry alive. Later he tries to come out of his illusionary world to the real world- he tries to become a realist from an escapist.

Nur's relationships have been beautifully carved by Anita Desai. Nur's and Devan, Nur's and his wives- the relationships creative talent of Nur is crushed by octopus like arms of relationships in the form of exploitation and humiliation at the hands of the wives. Nur is not happy with his wives who almost fought amongst themselves like jealous tigresses. The first wife is devoted to her husband where as the second one is self centered- more concerned about name and fame for herself. "She makes emotional blackmail. Yes you will call your friends, eat, drink, recite your poems and sing and dance while I lie here dying.. She was the main hurdle for Devan" (Desai, 194)

Murad- friend of Devan makes Devan a weapon- a ladder to reach Nur- to give finance through the publicity of his magazines. Nur relies more on Devan than his wives. After giving him the custody of his poetry, he is relieved and dies a peaceful death.

The other minor themes discussed by Mrs. Desai are those of the education system, the administrations exploiting the teachers, discrimination between the science teachers and language teachers, problems of unemployment etc. Through this novel Desai shows that languages are not given its due importance in our country and that the current trend is towards science and technology. The novel laments the sad decline of an extremely rich Indian language Urdu symbolized by a destruction of a palatial building for a multistoried building.

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CONCLUSION

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