

## A Critical Study of Anita Desai's Novel *In Custody*

Prof. Rani Tiwari<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of English, S.S.V.(P.G.) College, Hapur, U.P. Affiliated to C.C.S. University, Meerut, U.P.

Received: 20 Jan 2025, Accepted: 25 Jan 2025, Published with Peer Reviewed on line: 31 Jan 2025

### Abstract

Anita Desai, one of the greatest modern Indian English novelists, is renowned in the entire world. She has incredibly influenced the literary world. This paper aims to make a humble attempt to focus attention upon the thematic concern as it relates itself in the novel *In Custody*. The paper gives a glimpse of the various characters drawn by the novelist from the Indian society. The male and female characters are very well dealt with. The issue of decline of Urdu language is taken up. The writer has brought forth the ironical post-colonial situation of language. Anita Desai's art of technique and themes deal with confinement and lack of freedom. This novel depicts a realm of solitude, vacuum and dismay. Desai has deep understanding of human psychology. In this novel she writes about inner psyche and subconscious state of characters. With her powerful writing, Anita Desai has greatly contributed to Indian Writing in English.

**Key Words:** Decay, Failure, Freedom, Growth, Isolation, Power.

### Introduction

Since Indian independence, there have been significant contribution to the world literature by Indian English writers. They have made their name on the international level. They have been placed in the list of best selling writers and have been critically acclaimed thus making a mark on the literary scene internationally. It is quality of writing and the imaginative use of English language that writers like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, and Anita Desai have been given significant place in the world of literature. Arundhati Roy won the Booker prize in 1997. To name a few more writers of Indian English literature who have reached to great height, we can mention the names of Geeta Hariharan, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Kamla Markandeya, Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sehgal, and Shobha De.

Anita Desai is a distinguished Indian English novelist, who is famous across the globe. She is a versatile genius in writing great novels. She has written short stories. She has been screenwriter and writer of children's books. She has deeply influenced the writers of different generations. Her literary output is remarkable. She has greatly contributed in enriching the world of English novels. The works of Anita Desai portrayed the Indian experiences by its fellowmen. She is a diasporic writer, whose time is spent in literary writing and teaching. Her voice defines the literary scene of post-independent India. With her artistic perfection, she is a leading luminary of Indian woman writers. The themes dealt by her in her novels have universal relevance and scope. R.S. Pathak rightly observes, "Her concern for human lot has imparted profound appeal to her novels."<sup>1</sup> Her novels have drawn worldwide attention.

Her unique achievement is her concern with high aesthetic values. Her social, psychological and philosophical dimensions are impressive. She is a great artist. As observed by a critic, "Anita Desai displays a remarkable capacity for adaptation in her language and style."<sup>2</sup> She gives such a philosophy through her writings which helps in sustaining the hardships of life. She reflects on human life and reveals the mysteries of existence. We note that she has been a successful writer who wrote for global world. She has great power of imagination, epic style narration, exploration of individual identities. She has gained a remarkable position with her technique of novel writing.

One of the interviewers comments about Anita Desai, “She is mainly preoccupied with the essential human condition. By handling the style of presenting the characters and situations in her novels, she looks like a perfectionist.”<sup>3</sup> *In Custody* is one of her great contributions. The novel came up in an embryonic form in her mind when she wrote her short story “The Accompanist”. It portrayed a shadowy character who played a musical instrument in the background serving with full commitment. It was indicated by the author that *In Custody* was an expansion of this theme.

The master in this novel was replaced from a musician to a great poet. Anita Desai uses many symbols in her writings. The title of the novel is highly significant. It indicates the subject matter of the novel. The writer herself has said, “The title is somewhat misleading. It is about an emotional prison, a spiritual prison, not a physical one. It is a word with a double meaning - custody means guardianship safe keeping, as well as imprisonment.”<sup>4</sup> The writer is skillful in weaving the plot. The title of the novel itself is central metaphor around which the writer weaves the other metaphors. Anita Desai’s maturity and subtlety can be seen in her this work. With a powerful ease, she conveys the sensations of Indian life in her novel. Her artistic skill can be seen through her this work.

In the year 1992 *In Custody* was made into Merchant-Ivory film. Anita Desai wrote the screen play for it. Ismail merchant directed the first feature film based on this novel starring Shashi Kapoor. It won the 1994 the President of India Gold Medal from the Indian Government for Best Picture, Best Actor, Best Costume, and Best Production Design. The great beauty of the novel lies in the fact that what seems to be a story of inevitable tragedies turns out to be a tale of victory over these sufferings.

The novel was shortlisted for the 1984 Booker McConnell prize. *In custody* deals with the predicament of a male protagonist. Anita Desai has taken up the issues of poetry, language, and nature of art. She brings forth the ironical post-colonial situation of language. There is a systematic fusion of three thematic motives, which are the desire for freedom, imprisonment, and death-in-life through city wherein the writer gives the imagery of insects, birds of prey, animals, and such other objects. This novel criticizes the traditional Indian society. The novelist focuses on a pathetic male character Deven. He is despised by his wife for not being able to have financial success. The existential dilemma of Deven is projected. Deven happens to be a Lecturer in Hindi at Lala Ram Lal College in Mirpore. Ambitious by nature, he has great love for Urdu poetry.

He is a plain simple man. He lacks the ability to look into the crude schemes of crooked people. Initially, he is a mediocre Lecturer in a college. But he ruins his peace by bringing financial ruin to himself as he incurs monetary debt. Finally, he has to endure the situation. He has a wife and a child in the family. He tries to fulfill their needs. As the plot develops, we know that male characters are shown to be entangled in such a world which hardly provides them an opportunity to come out of their situation. The frustration of female characters too is being shown. They are the victims of such a society where they are forced to be with such men who are incapable of fulfilling them fully. Through her powerful use of imagery, the writer adds the strong undercurrent of violence. It is through this skill that the writer has shown how Nur is being preyed upon.

The characters of Anita Desai appear to be justified as they act out of self-preservation. Her women act against the traditional ways. Nur's young wife Imtiaz Begum is an excellent example of this. Enraged with her limitations, she takes defense by writing on her own. She makes a strong place for herself as she is the most outrageous of all women characters. She insists on telling her story and redefines herself. Dr. M.F. Patel writes, “When women make the lives of real women the centre of their books, they go beyond creating sympathetic female characters to make claims for an alternative reality, an alternative truth. The illicit, self-interested qualities so condemned in earlier fiction become liberating, positive, and creative forces.”<sup>5</sup>

In the beginning of the novel, Murad tries to convince Deven for the interview of Nur Shahjehanabadi which was required for his magazine. He discusses the depleting condition of Urdu language in present times. He says, "Urdu - language of the court in 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."<sup>6</sup> In a dramatic tone, Murad tries to put forth the change in social position of Urdu. But it is ironical that the greatest Urdu poet lives in a filthy area. But when Deven reaches him and is called by the poet, the scene fades from his mind. The poet calls him in "a voice that could grasp him, as it were, by the roots of his hair and haul him up from the level on which he existed - mean, disordered and hopeless - into another, higher sphere. Another realm it would surely be if his god dwelt there, the domain of poetry, beauty and illumination" (35).

Deven finds a resemblance between Nur and his poetry. He feels that Nur's poetry is so uplifting that it indicates that the poet himself lives on a higher plane. Deven feels upset to see the poor place of dwelling of the poet. He had imagined him living in a divine isolation among dignified litterateurs. When Anita Desai pictures the poor dwelling of the poet surrounded by crude lafangas of the bazaar world, she tries to put forth the idea that good literature is inseparable from life's social and economic conditions. Deven feels uncomfortable to sit in the room of Nur, "wondering how, out of all this hubbub, the poet drew the threads and wove his poetry or philosophy. Yet, when he paid attention to his talk, he discovered that it was, after all, about his poetry" (50). Deven decides to help the poet at the cost of his own family.

Nur's house is a reflection of male accomplishment. He says in opposition to Imtiaz Begum, "That is what she really wanted, you see. This house - my house - was the right setting for it. But she was not content with that, she wanted my house, my audience, my friends. She raided my house" (89). The sense of life of Deven is reflected in his own house, which has "wretchedness and lovelessness" (66). He feels that his economic condition is his personal failure. His ownership of house is asserted which limits the power of his wife. This leads to discomfort in the family. The author writes, "At least Deven had his poetry, she had nothing; and there was an added accusation and bitterness in her look" (68). The situation of Imtiaz Begum is contrary to this. She is a great support to Nur with her poetic performances. She is presented as a part of Urdu poets of next generation. She is a provider and supporter of her husband's poetry. But Deven is ignorant of this fact. It is sad to note that they fail to acknowledge Imtiaz Bagum's gift of Urdu poetry. This attitude seems harmful for Urdu poetry.

Anita Desai's use of symbolism can be noted in Siddiqui's family Villa. Being relative of the Nawab of Delhi, Siddiqui lived in a large villa, which was built by the Nawab. Once in prominence, it was a ruin now. It is symbolically portrayed. Urdu language, which once was held so high, was now at its decay. Siddiqui himself admits to Deven, "Did you think I lived like a Nawab in a Nawab's palace? Take a look, my friend, take a look - have you ever seen such a ruin?"(145). The decadent condition, isolated living of Siddiqui, his ambiguous sexuality, is suggestive of the same position of Urdu language.

Anita Desai represented ordinary, traditional women as wives, widows, and mothers. Deven's wife had expressed her anger and resentment in a way approved by society as being in her own domain in kitchen or in her bedroom, "refusing to speak at all, inciting their child to wail in sympathy" (158-159). Anita Desai has presented men and women in a state of confinement, Deven is unable to share his hopes and sorrows to his wife, and so he lived a life of pain, isolation and imprisonment. When they had returned from Mirpore, his vision towards his wife had undergone a change. He wanted to express his love and his pain to her in her

existing shabby state. But he could not make a move as his power assertion over her was very important for both of them. Similarly Sarla felt empowered in her own domain i.e. her home.

Anita Desai has presented the male adherents of Urdu as lazy and self-absorbed. Deven loves Urdu poetry, but has fear that he may not be able to act to preserve it. Initially in her writings, Desai dealt with the issues of women, but she felt to move on from this and widen her canvas. She says “So I very deliberately opened the doors, to widen the canvas, and started writing more about male characters and their lives, because I felt they had a wider experience of the world, and I could not address a greater variety of experiences.”<sup>6</sup> There is a revelation towards the end of the novel.

The readers feel throughout that Nur married for the second time as a result of physical entrapment, but it is revealed that it was the result of the gifts and abilities of the lady. Imtiaz Begum writes a letter to Deven, “Let me see if you are strong enough to face them and admit to their merit. Or if they fill you with fear and insecurity because they threaten you with danger - danger that your superiority to women may become questionable”(216-217). But Deven proves to be a coward and instead of helping her gain a position in the realm of Urdu poetry, he tears up her poems.

Deven is a weak character, whereas Nur’s wife is rebellion. Towards the end of the novel, Deven becomes noble. He dares to take responsibility to have the custody of poetry of Nur. He had gained internal vitality by now. “Soon the sun would be up and blazing. The day would begin, with its calamities. They would flash out of the sky and cut him down like swords. He would run to meet them”(226). Anita Desai has shown that how the life of men in India is different from that of women. In the words of a critic, “*In Custody* is a story of a man who, at the initial stage, finds himself entrapped in an existential situation, and then constantly tries to transcend it by searching out higher values that can provide him freedom and the sense of meaning in life.”<sup>7</sup>

“The novel tackles the negative side of the new India which has been born after the Partition.”<sup>8</sup> Thus we note that the primary subject matter of the novel is the overshadowing of Urdu by Hindi language. Symbolically the poet’s decline presents the decline of Urdu language. Anita Desai’s *In Custody* the combings forth the problems of contemporary issues of India. “It recreates in a subtle way a new postcolonial order that does not really differ from the old colonial strategies of domination and control.”<sup>9</sup> The poverty of India is brought up. Much time is spent in the plot in the recitation of poetry. Anita Desai has shown that how the life of men in India is different from that of women. Sometimes Anita Desai is criticized that she being a woman, gave a subordinate position to her women characters in the novel. But Anita Desai penetrates deep through the psyche of men. She tries to bring out their hidden thought and feelings. She has deep concern about the suffering of mankind.

She is sensitive towards the retardation of the growth of the male characters, which is the result of society. The novelist’s protagonists work very hard for their identity. They suffer like the tragic characters. But ultimate gain dignity. They constantly struggle like brave soldiers and strive for their existence. India is very well pictured in this novel, but the themes of the novel are universal. Thus *In Custody* is a remarkable novel. Anita Desai has given a new direction to the contemporary Indian novel writing. She is a cosmopolitan writer in approach dealing with vernacular aspects of Indian cultural heritage. Her attempt is to globalize the local themes.

## **References-**

- <sup>1</sup> Pathak, R.S., *The Alienated Self in the Novels of Anita Desai, The Fiction of Anita Desai*, ed.R.K. Dhawan, New Delhi: Bahri Publications, 1989, p.17.
- <sup>2</sup> Solanki, Mrinalini, *Anita Desai's Fiction: Patterns of Survival Strategies*, New Delhi: Kanishka Publishing House, 1982, p.185.
- <sup>3</sup> Dalmia, Yashodhara, *An Interview with Anita Desai, The Times of India*, 29 April, 1979, p.13.
- <sup>4</sup> Sheth, Ketaki, *Its Fatal to Write with an Audience in Mind, Interview with Anita Desai, Imprint*, June, 1984, p.58.
- <sup>5</sup> Patel, M.F., *An Exposure of Feminine Psyche in Some Novels of Anita Desai*, Jaipur: Sunrise Publishers & Distributers, 2008, p.77.
- <sup>6</sup> Desai, Anita, *In Custody*, London: Vintage, 1999, p.8.
- <sup>7</sup> Singhal, Suresh, *Inner Urgencies and Outer Compulsions: A Study of Anita Desai's In Custody, The Vedic Path*, LIII, 1, June, 1990, p.76.
- <sup>8</sup>[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/364136960\\_The\\_Old\\_Vs\\_New\\_Indian\\_Culture\\_in\\_Anita\\_Desai's\\_In\\_Custody](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/364136960_The_Old_Vs_New_Indian_Culture_in_Anita_Desai's_In_Custody)
- <sup>9</sup><https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=108>