



MALE CHAUVINISM IN ANITA DESAI'S 'IN CUSTODY'

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ABSTRACT

Indian literature in English has journeyed a long way to achieve its present glory and grandeur. Beginning with the trio of Raja Rao, R.K.Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand, today it is assimilated in the rubric of post-colonial literature. At present it is enriched by a sizeable numbers of women writers read and acclaimed all over the world. Their works offer penetrative insight into the complex issues of life. The fictional concerns of these women writers are not limited to the world women and their sufferings as victims of male chauvinistic society; they also express social, economic upheavals in Indian society. Among these women writers Anita Desai has earned a separate space for her particular attention towards psychological insight and existential concerns. Her sensitive portrayal and understanding of intrinsic human nature makes her writings captivating. She herself admits her preference for her internal world of the psychic space that has always been a major concern in her fictional writings.

“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 reflection of the visible world.”

Anita Desai is one of the most famous and of India's best modern novelist in English. She is an Indian novelist, short story writer. She has enriched Indian fictional world with her significant literary outputs. Anita Desai, originally an Indian citizen, migrated to America. She can be considered to be an expatriate writer of the Indian origin. Anita Desai was multilingual. Since



1950's she has lived in many cities like Calcutta, Chandigarh, New Delhi and Pune. Some of the cities are well described in her novels.

Anita Desai in her psychological novels, presents the image of a suffering woman preoccupied with her inner world, her sulking frustration and the storm within; the existential predicament of a woman in a male dominated society. Through such characters, she makes a plea for a better way of life for a woman. Her novels have Indians as central characters, and she alternates between female-centered and male-centered narrative. Her later novels written when she moved to the U.S.A, reveal all the characteristics of diasporic fiction, that is, a concern with the fate of immigrants, and a growing distance from the reality of India, which is viewed from the outside.

A sensitive heart and a bold hand synchronize in Desai's work, giving the reader immensely rich reading experiences. Her created characters linger in the mind, sculpted with substance, even in her shortest short stories. To read Desai is not to be overwhelmed in flowery descriptions, but to be allowed to observe salient moments of revelation and transformation. Preferring to reveal truth over sentimentality, Desai isolates the details that matter, with critics and admirers, comparing her to some of the best modernist writers, including Virginia Woolf and T.S.Eliot. Desai's subjects are often seen captive in the walls of the home, or in a confining social convention, but she lets the reader see their hopes, pleasures, and compassions. Never claustrophobic, Desai's characters domains and inner selves are given distinction and quiet dignity amidst an unyielding world.

Having an affinity for both India and the west, Desai has a true familiarity with marginalization and dual ethnicity. Her mother was German and her father was Indian. The biggest difference between Desai's parents and those in her neighborhood is that she and her sisters were encouraged to read the best English literature. Even as a six year old, she knew she would become a writer.

"We had a house that was full of books. All of us were great readers. We were always going to the library and the bookshop. When I was taught how to write and read at school I remember I made up my mind that this was what I'd love to do the best and this was the world I was going to occupy. So I started writing little stories in that time. I never really wanted to do anything else. I think it was simply a love of books, and the pleasure I found in imagining images within words."

From the Point of view of technique what is important is not innovation or novelty but how effective the technique is in conveying the meaning and narrating the story effectively. Anita Desai is able to evoke the atmosphere to probe the psyche of her characters successfully and for this she uses flashback technique, stream of consciousness technique, use of contrasting characters, use of symbolism and effective use of language either to evoke an atmosphere or to



transcribe the pronunciations or the characters or to use rhetorical skill for harangue. And to create realistic effort she also uses Hindi words but in moderation. We find in her major novels, different techniques; she has made use of Indian words, German poetry and a few nursery rhymes. Mainly she portrays dilemmas and doubts of women who are- misfits in their own way, who do not want to be heroic but all the time we find them struggling for what they do not have- love, affection, attention, acceptance, recognition or appreciation. Her novel focuses on the inner climate, the climate of sensibility. The interplay of thoughts, feelings and emotions is reflected in language, syntax and imagery aspects of existentialism are in evidence in the total framework of her stories.

Apart from concentrating on the problems of women and the way they impact their mind, Desai's novels have an irresistible appeal for the treatment of the external world of politics impacted by momentous historical events. Her 'Clear Light Of The Day (1980) and In Custody (1984) fictionalize the tragic saga of the partition. Desai's treatment of the social role and implications of language forms the central thrust of the novel. Her motive becomes amply clear when she replies to a question related to the theme of the novel in the following words; I was trying to portray the world of Urdu poets. Living in Delhi I was surrounded by the sound of Urdu poetry, which is mostly recited. Nobody reads I, but one goes to recitations. It was very much the voice of North India. But although there is such a reverence for Urdu poetry, the fact that most Muslims left India to go to Pakistan meant that most schools and universities of Urdu were closed. So that its language I don't think that is going to survive in India...there are many Muslims and they do write in Urdu; but it has a very artificial existence. People are not going to study Urdu in school and college anymore, so who are going to be their readers? Where is the audience?"

In Custody makes a departure from Anita Desai's earlier novels where the concentration was on the internal consciousness of the individual. In Custody, depicts a world beyond the individual. This novel has a male protagonist who comes from a lower middle class family and who seeks to reach out into a wider world in the hope of fulfillment.

Devan Sharma is a lecturer in Hindi in a college in Mirpore, a small town near Delhi. He is portrayed as an average man completely lacking in initiative because of his timidity. However he has literary aspirations and longs for distinction. The conflict between fantasy and reality is one of the themes in the novel. (The Novels Of Anita Desai:A Critical Study-Manmohan Kr. Bhatnagar,pg64)

In custody is a novel about a in heroic, unimpressive and unassertive lecturer of Hindi in Mofussil degree college in Delhi, named Devan who is married to an insipid wife Sarla who is miles away from her literary tastes and intellectual pursuit. He is an Urdu enthusiast and wants to



interview an established ageing poet of Urdu with two wives. The whole novel is about the interview which is beset with many obstacles and mishaps and when at last it materializes the tape recorder is not operated well and what is recorded is a string of nonsense utterances of the senile poet blabbering about Biryani, Pigeon fight, wrestling bouts and memories of his young days. Since the interview was financed by a grant from the college. But what was there on the tape worth depositing? Devan is in a plight and he does know what to do. He is much enamored of the personality of the poet that he seems to be in custody of the poet.

Devan's social role is that of a teacher but because of his poor personality he commands no respect from his students. While taking class instead of looking at the students he would be looking outside the class towards an imagery audience. No wonder he was an unsuccessful teacher' who could not command attention, let alone the command of his unruly class.'(IC.p.4)

The students are rowdy and take no interest in studies. Devan is quite opposite of the traditional image of a guru he is always unsure of himself and because of his simplicity and tactfulness he always land in some odd situation.

His unsympathetic and un-understanding wife Sarla has absolutely no idea about her husband's preoccupation and suspects that his frequent trips to Delhi are in order to meet his girl- friend. Whereas the fact is that Devan is so timid that he hardly make friends with any girl. Sarla, the wife knows nothing but to fret and sulk leading a dry existence always crosses with her husband. Financially not well off, Devan marital life is insipid. Sarla tries to discharge her duties as a house wife but there is nothing attractive about her body or her temperament. Devan's preoccupation with his literary pursuit and supercilious attitude towards his wife makes things even worse. Once again it is an ill-matched marriage which is a favorite theme of Anita Desai. Devan's male chauvinism reflects in two aspects, he is neither a good husband nor a good teacher and he is failure in both of them. (A Critical Study Of The Novels Of Anita Desai- N.R.Gopal,p.50-51)

Devan loves Urdu and Urdu poetry but he has to choose Hindi as a subject because of its value in the job market. On the other hand the people like the head of the department of Hindi in his college associate language with community dislike Devan's love for Urdu. When he applies in person for one week's leave to conduct an interview with the legendary poet NurShahjahanbadi, the head of the department, Trivedi bursts out 'one week ? it would be a relief to me if it were one year, bawled Trivedi, and I did not need to see your stupid mug again. I'll have you demoted, Sharma-I'll see to it you don't get your confirmation. I'll get you transferred to your beloved Urdu department. I won't have Muslims toadies in my department, you'll ruin my boys with your Muslims ideas, your Urdu language. I'll complain to the principal,.....(IC)



Trivedi's violent reaction to Devan's request clarifies how language becomes a signifier of religious identity and national loyalty. The novelist discourse here gains greater relevance in terms of contemporary language base politics gaining significance in political and social affairs. The novel presents the Hindi/Urdu controversy that involves communal implications and does not allow the languages to become objective mediums of communication.

At the same time the false beliefs of the people who developed a highly romantic attitude towards poetry and language also stand exposed in the novel. The poets and writers no doubt play a significant role in the progress of a language but their romantic notions tend to play havoc with it. Instead of understanding the use value of language some of them to attach a romantic notion of false pride of being a poet or writer in a language and like Nur, consider certain forms of behavior as essential.

It is perhaps because of such an attitude towards poetry and language that Nur, in his senile old age, still lives with the aristocratic habits, feeding his pigeons, gulping rich food and gathering around him a group of admirers whom he supplied rich food and liquor. Treating themselves as the custodian of a language, people like Nur indulge in glorifying their role. Even genuine attempts of persons like Devan are spurned by Nur simply because he fails to understand language freed from established views associating language with certain cultural groups or persons and artist like himself, "Urdu poetry...how can there be an Urdu poetry when there is no Urdu poetry left? It is dead, finished..so, now you see its corpse lying here, waiting to be buried...perhaps a spy even if you don't know it, sent to the universities to destroy whatever remains of Urdu, hunt it out and kill it...it seems you have been sent there to torment me , to show me, let me know to what depths Urdu has fallen. All right then, show me, and let me know the worst."

Devan's fantasy about the poet is shattered when he realizes that Nur was as trapped as Devan was, in fact Nur's cage was more prominent. Devan is now forced to accept Nur's life as another facet of reality.

"the drunken revelry, the noisy melodrama enacted every evening in Nur's home seem to serve the purpose of driving away his loneliness. But it was too much for Devan who' hoped his former life of non events, non-happenings, would be resumed, empty and hopeless, safe and endurable."(IC,p-183)

Nur's ailing body symbolically represents the sickening state of Urdu. The psychological pain of Devan is alter ego of Nur's physical pain. Devan is torn between the conflict of dreams and duty. Murad, editor of Awaz is in some better position as Devan as he has not surrendered to Hindi. He wishes to crown Urdu its coveted crown. His accusation of Devan as a traitor haunts him



perpetually. Whenever he enters Urdu arena, he feels like an alien. Sincerity of purpose, zest, hero-worship of Nur help Devan in no way to realize his dreams.

The setting and locale of Nur's residence are symbolic of dereliction and filth. Devan finds himself entrapped and could not find an exit from the mazy surroundings. Nur's residence was in Chandnichowk which looked like market in a nightmare. The peeling, stained walls of the office buildings wore a squalid look. Devan could not imagine the dwelling of his hero among these ruins. The stench of unclean lanes, overflowing gutters, quacks with their powders held his breath. Chandnichowk had witnessed the mutilated bodies of its residents during partition. It seemed as if someone has pulled out its liveliness and cursed it with morbidity.

Siddiqui, the head of Urdu department is symbolic of past grandeur of Muslims. He is not entrusted with the job of custodian of Nur's poetry because he himself is living on the fringe of society. Murad chooses Devan for this vocation as he belongs to the emergent group. Murad's home in a dilapidated villa has an air of impeccable royalty and majesty. His ancestral home is his lucrative commodity which he plans to sell to some landlord. He is unmarried and spends lavishly on himself and his friends. He is patronizing and encourages his servants for his melodious voice. He considers himself a patron and a well-wisher of Urdu language and feels great pride in saying that he is trying to keep alive the delicate language. He worries about the dwindling numbers of Urdu readers:

'Worries, worries, worries. And where are the readers? Where are the subscriptions? Who reads Urdu anymore?(IC.p.15).

Murad considers himself a patron and a well-wisher of Urdu language and feels great pride in saying that he is trying to keep alive the delicate language. He has a self-congratulatory attitude towards Urdu. Nur has another attitude towards the language and he gives absolutely no credit to academics for the well-being of the language. He is so disgusted with the universities that he calls them graveyards of the language. The occasion for his outburst is gathering of young poets who are reciting their poems in 'tarannum' at Nur's house.

'Cowards, babies...' you recite verses as if they were nursery rhymes your mother had composed. I tell you, we must get over this rolling of Urdu verses into little sugar pills for babies to suck. We need the roar of lions, or the bottom of cannon, so that we can march upon these Hindi-wallahs and make them run. Let them see the power of Urdu, he thundered.' They think it is chained and tamed in the dusty yards of those cemeteries that they call universities, but can't we show them that it can still let out a roar or a boom?... yes let Urdu issue from any orifice as long as it drives them away. Bit makes its presence felt,' he thundered thumping down his glass



on his knee so that the liquor flew from it'(IC.p.52-53)(A Critical Study Of The Novels Of Anita Desai-N.R.Gopal,p.53)

Since the two languages belong to two different and hostile religions the language issue is politicized and it is this political angle that Devan dislikes and avoids.' He had always kept away from the political angle of languages. He began to sweat with fear.'(IC.p55).

Anita Desai perpetually observes that language issue has vitiated the mind of the intelligentsia evoking from it stereotype responses and argument. This is how the language issue and its controversies are described:

'There was the Indian camp and the Pakistani camp, the pure Persian camp and the democratic-Hindustani camp. They quarreled and mocked and taunted and lost their tempers, but as if acting assigned roles. There was no evidence of anyone persecuting anyone else or of winning anyone over to his side through argument of persuasion.'(IC,p.54)

Nur is as contemptuous of Hindi as Murad . He taunts Devan and asks him about Urdu literature and his poetry and go back to his college and...'teach your students the stories of Premchand, the poems of Pant and Nirala. Save simple Hindi language...and the romance of Krishna.(IC,p.55)

According to Nur Urdu died in 1947 when the country got independence. But the fact is that even today the government of India is running University departments of Urdu, Madarasas and Urdu academics. But throughout the novel the Urdu-Wallah projected that Urdu was hardly beyond being a court language in Moghul Empire. The court language had always been Persian and Urdu was language of soldiers.(A Critical Study Of The Novels Of Anita Desai. N.R.Gopal,p.52-54)

Another aspect of the character of Devan is the color symbolism. He regards his life as 'grey clay' and a field bare of grain. Grey is the only prominent color in the novel in keeping with the drab world of the protagonist. It is colorless and meaningless. When he takes his son in one of the rarely experience happy moment 'one brilliant feather spring green fluttered down through the air(IC,p73). The color green which normally represents prosperity seems to Devan to signify death and destruction as yellow signifies dryness and lifelessness. (The Novels Of Anita Desai: A Critical Study-Manmohan Kr. Bhatnagar,p67)

In the same way, Desai's presentation of man-woman relationships in a patriarchal society reveals her concern and understanding of different forms of woman's experiences which proves sheer male superiority in our society. The women in the book seems vicious, specially the enraged young wife of Devan, the poet Nur. Just as the male characters are entrapped in an unsuccessful world, the female characters are feel frustrated within a patriarchal society that reduced them to cling to those men who fail to provide them what they want. Devan's wife Sarla



hates him and feels disgusted at his failures. All her dreams of luxurious life are dashed to the ground because of his meager income. But the way she registers her protest is nothing more than a symbolic dissatisfaction with her lot. It may be because of the serfdom that runs through their blood that these women fail to rebel openly.

The character of Imtiaz Begum is problematic. She belongs to the family of dancers, and is second wife of Nur. She is bold enough to call Devan, a jackal who has come to relish the blood out of Nur's body when he will be dead. She calls 'universities asylum of failures'. Her powdered and painted face, reptile like movements disgusted Devan. Her insistence on telling her story to Devan is symbolic of Indian women writers who tell their own stories and that of other women. In her previous novels, women protagonists were of poetic temperaments and male characters were cold and calculating: Maya-Gautam, Monisha-Jiban, and Sita-Raman all represents such couples. But here the situation is reversed. Imtiaz Begum and Sarla mock at the poetic sensibilities of their husbands because they fail to meet their corporal bodies. The bold letters of Nur's wife at the end of the novel presents her as an icon of New woman. She gains respect as a character by asserting her rights and abilities, Devan never manages such fiery rebellion.

“The elegance and floridity of her Urdu entered Devan's ears lie a flourish of trumpets and beats at his temples while he read. The essential, unsuspected spirit of the woman appeared to step free of its covering, all the tinsel and gauze and tawdriness, and reveal a face from which the paint and powder had been washed and which wore an expression that made Devan halt and stumble.(IC.p195)

Devan did not have the courage to read the poetry of a woman, because she is a woman. Her bold question pointed out the male chauvinism in society.

“Are you not guilty of assuming that you are a male, you have a right to brains, talent, reputation and achievement while, I because I was born female, am condemned to find what satisfaction I can in being maligned, mocked, ignored and neglected? Is it not you who has made me play the role of the loose woman in gaudy garments by refusing to take my work seriously, and giving me just that much regard that you would extend to even a failure in the arts as long as the artist was male? In this unfair world that you have created what else could I have been but what I am?”

Her angry statements make the reader re-evaluate what they previously had only seen through the eyes of a male character. By making women's aggravation understandable, the primary unsympathetic portrayal of women character turn out to have been of Devan's and not the Author's perceptions. This new image of woman makes prominent feminist concerns in Desai's works. Nur's wife is the representative of a feminist who explains the change that has taken place in Indian society.



Thus we find that *In Custody* is a novel that represents several aspects of society and tell us how Devan has to carry himself as a social being. His position is not very happy but through him we come across different kinds of people representing different social classes, a wide range of teachers, shopkeepers, the poet and his hangers –on and students. It is mainly through Devan that the story has been narrated and mainly it is through him that the theme of male –dominated society is expressed in the novel.(A Critical Study Of The Novels Of Anita Desai-N.R.Gopal,p.55)

CONCLUSION:

Most of the novels written by Desai highlight the predicament of her women characters. ‘it has been said that ‘ to view Anita Desai’s novels as predominantly concerned with women not paying adequate attention to the male characters’. Except in *Nirode* in *Voices in the city* and *Devan* and *Nur* in ‘*In custody*’, few male characters are real characters. Even *Devan* and *Nur* are not quite different from abstracting. Men mostly stay at the fringe of her novels. They are either marginally present or entirely absent from the scene. The main purpose of writing these novels was the exploration of the inner world of women. It would be interesting to see how the novelist tries to convey the feminine sensibility and themes through her medium.

Devan leads a rather uninteresting life with a subdued passion for Urdu poetry. *Devan* gets an opportunity to break out of his monotonous life when his old friend *Murad*, an editor of an Urdu magazine, asks him to meet and interview *Nur*, the greatest Urdu poet in India. Seeing escape from the disrespected halls of his university and a hope to meet his childhood hero, *Devan* agrees to devote his Sundays, to the task of interviewing *Nur*.

Desai is not a conscious writer. To her writing is a matter of instinct and not an act of deliberation, reason and choice. But she is not negligent of the potential of the medium at her disposal. At her hands it is not an artifact but a means of shaping and expressing her vision of life and a pointer to her search for meaning. Desai told *Yashodhara Dalmi* that :

‘Writing is an effort to discover and then to underline and finally to convey the true significance of things’

Desai’s use of language in her novels should be viewed only in this light. She does not seem to be fully satisfied with her expressions at times and this happens with all good writers and seems to be working under severe limitations. Ultimately she has to rely upon the readers imagination to supply musing details and links.(*Indian writing in English;Critical Appraisal-Amar Nath Prasad,p.172-173*)



It is wrong to say that Desai deals only with the female psyche. Her successfully probing into the male psyche establishes her as a psychological novelist whose interest is in human psychology. In her novel 'In custody', the main focus is shifted to the male psychology. The major protagonist, Devan is the representation of male psyche. Devan comes from a lower middle class family and his consciousness is directed towards a wide world beyond himself and his family. A thirty five Devan feels already having spent all the empty years wanting for a break, waiting to do something worthwhile, something great. Devan is presented as romantic and an escapist, a weak person incapable of facing crisis. A chanced visit by Murad brings a dramatic change into the monotonous and purposeless existence of Devan. Murad's offer to take an interview of Nur appears the very summon, Devan has been waiting all the year.

“Devan felt another warm, moist tide of jubilation rise and increase inside him at being recognized, named and invited into the presence of man so clearly a threshold into the house”(IC.P-4)

Thus Desai's fiction is symbolic, sensitive and psychological. Her fictional world reflects her concern with psyche of her characters.(Anita Desai And Her Fictional World –Neeru Tandon.p166).

The novelist has brought out the setting of old India in a very real way by depicting the patriarchal society, the communal beliefs and differences, the dying trend of Urdu and the importance of technical knowledge compared to arts and literature. Including words like Kebabs, Biryani, Surahietc also add an Indian touch to the text. Anita Desai has targeted the sexiest nature of Indian society. She does this via Devan's wife Sarla's dissatisfaction and secondly by the bold attitude of the Imtiaz Begum. With Sarla's displeasure from her mediocre lifestyle being displayed not to her husband but to the kitchen walls, the author brings out the male dominance of the society. Additionally, Nur's wife, Imtiaz Begum's demand for herself and her work is Desai's way to support freedom and respect for women. While talking of relationships in the novel, the friendship of Devan and Murad is seen lost to selfishness and coldness.

Communal hatred and misconceptions have been brought to light. Devan's shift to Mirpore and his choice of teaching Hindi present the pressure of religion. The sniggering behavior of his colleagues and department head show how language can become the identifier of religion, community and, nationality and even political beliefs. Though the whole novel portrays a descending trajectory of Devan life, it also shows perseverance giving it a meaning. The protagonist of this novel goes from being in the custody of society as a professor but Urdu lover to getting the 'custody' of his childhood hero, Nur. So despite using the perfect image of his idol, Devan actually gains the truth out of him. The novel sensitizes the reader towards many issues while being artistic at the same time.



The novel incorporates language-confrontation, male-dominance and existential concerns of Desai. All these components are bound with the beauty of language which never fails to satisfy the aesthetic sense. Though there is an ultimate catastrophe waiting for Desai's protagonist, yet it is his will to struggle which makes him indefatigable, a traveler in the never ending quest for identity and purpose in life. The interaction of the fictional concerns and their artistic presentation makes the novel an artistic whole and stands testimony to Anita Desai's maturity as a novelist.

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