

A Discern of Incompatible Marriages in Anita Desai's Novel 'In Custody'

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Abstract

This paper aim to analyze and strengthen the position of women within the institution of marriage, focusing on Anita Desai's celebrated novel 'In Custody'. Anita Desai in her writings has depicted the differences and the issues of women occurring regarding marriage and compatibility with men, and in this novel, she has used her sheer expertise to portray the various forms in which marriage can haunt women. Marriage in India is a complex construct, altering the collective lives of the counterparts in a huge manner. It is overwhelming as to how marital bliss comes forward as a myth, or a fantasy, when it is concerned with wives. This paper is an attempt to help find the source of voice to the concerns of married women as portrayed in the novel. Moreover, it also attempts to break the conventional notions and taboos around women at workplace, having access to finance and security. It is important to locate the agency and identity of women in the world of men; even in the background of changing times in this 21st century. Mismatched marriage in the terms of women characters Sarla, Imtiaz Begum and Safia Begum will also be the focus point of this paper. The paper will analyze if women stand obliged to their failing and misogynist husbands, or are they, in any manner, rightful to mould her marriage according to her desires and aspirations.

Keywords: Marriage, Identity, subjugation, desire, rights.

‘In Custody’ focuses on human relationships and their aftermath in the post independence era. Anita Desai presents mind-numbing accounts of sensitive women chained in societal institutions. ‘In Custody’ shows the impactful traces of lives of women amidst the frustration and politics related to men. Marriage as an instrument of politics for women also reinforces that however, these women have little access to the outer political circle, the walls of their domestic territory serve as the sight of politics and control for them. The women in the novel are sharp, talented yet suppressed in different ways. The passive resistance of wives in the novel suggests how female counterparts used passages to channelize their anger in various ways while still being accountable for their marital status, and this is rooted in the fact that women were offered with limited choices and outlets to vent out their long-preserved wrath and helplessness.

Marriage in “In custody” appears to be as dull and regressive as it could be- Desai’s treatment of husbands in the work establishes that their subjugation towards their respective wives is not visibly unpleasant but comes in bits and pieces every now and then. Deven and Nur, both struggle as husbands because they are highly aggressive, employing passive ways to torment their wives, knowingly or unknowingly. The fact that they fail to acknowledge the qualities of their wives goes in throughout the novel, whereas the wives take it up as a part of their fates; showing lesser determination towards the cold treatment given to them by their husbands.

Deven’s wife Sarla, also the mother to their son Manu, is in acceptance with her stale marriage with Deven, with absence of attention and care. At first, the character of Sarla appears dull, but later, the character develops several positive meanings around it. Sarla, as her name suggests is *simple*. She is young, shy and innocent, resulting which, her inner feelings always find expression, in a delicate way. Her revolt as an unsatisfied wife is subtle, even in the darkest of discomfort, she preserves her womanly ways in which, she believes, lies the key to the heart of her impoverished husband.

She is too burdened in her marriage with Deven, and constantly opposes his idea of recording a session with the famous Urdu poet Nur, for his friend Murad’s magazine. Her intuition as a

woman is strong and proves to be true afterwards when Nur turns out to be a source of problems for Deven, however, he never loses faith in the charm of Nur, which troubles Sarla, giving her a strong impression of her inability to keep her husband engaged in familial responsibilities, which are, otherwise, looked after solely by Sarla. She has little expectations from her husband, and never really gets a chance to communicate with him.

Deven is a dull and disinterested husband struggling with his career at various levels, thus, his mere contribution towards the marriage remains to be the duty of earning bread for the family to sustain. Here, Anita depicts how the sole responsibility of a marriage remains to be on the shoulders of the wife alone, where she gets limited resources and limited chances to unwind, and absolutely no focus on her personal growth. Thus, it is seen evidently in the novel as to how personal aspirations and growth becomes secondary for a married woman, reinforcing that she has to stick to her husband despite his failure and toxic masculinity. The little access to education and the perks coming with the access to outer world also maintains that Sarla couldn't have courage to be on her own, in the times when the novel was written.

Sarla is not vocal, and her belief in marital adjustment is unimaginable to an extent that active refusal for the actions of Deven is impossible for her. To voice her opinions, she uses passive resistance, and all passive ways of denial as a dutiful Indian wife uses to communicate to her husband. Sarla also seems to locate her ultimate power in her status as a mother, something which sticks to her identity. Although, it is also evident that Sarla lacks content in terms of Deven's behavior towards his son which seems to be largely ignorant.

Deven and his quest for art and poetry comes up as his primary obsession. Somewhere, there is awareness in his thought process about the uselessness of his meetings with Nur, but he avoids this shame and guilt by more frequent visits to Nur. Sarla has little agency to prevent this, and she finds discomfort in the fact that she coexists with a slightly irresponsible husband who is not able to push his boundaries as a father. Deven remains to be a traditional, strict father to his son

Manu, and it shows in his character as to how delusional he becomes in the process of balancing everything in his life and the frustration of the incapability to do the same.

However later, Deven realizes that his association with his wife and son, and his simple small-town life holds greater depth and meaning rather than the frequent visits to a big city like Delhi. The couple struggles to make ends meet, and Sarla is never seen indulging in anything more than what is essential for the functionality of her household. She appears ignorant to the delights of a happily married woman. Sarla is feeble, yet powerful in her own way, although she is never acknowledged by Deven. In the process, she has given away all her feminine urges to sustain her marriage and motherhood. Anita has thoughtfully added the character of little boy Manu in the novel, to show how a child becomes the centre of a woman's life, and how his existence shapes her life at large. In context of the Indian subcontinent, marriage can be seen both as a gift and as an obstacle, because motherhood is a well-celebrated status in the Indian fiction, and Anita has catered to the same sentiment with ease, confidence, and accountability. She is a feminist writer and thus it is evident that she is so comfortable in her skin while addressing the issues of women at large.

There is a visible absence of romance and marital bliss in the marriage of Deven and Sarla, as Deven's inability as a provider of mental peace, security and strength to Sarla is evident throughout the novel. Sarla's actions are as robotic and predictable as they could be- she seems to drag herself along with Deven in the marital relationship because she lacks the opportunity of choosing a better place to be in. A close interpretation of Sarla's psyche suggests that she appears to be continuously haunted by the fear of not being unable to find social acceptability as a separated woman, perhaps, she is not even designed to be like this- and her fear of loneliness and social backlash keeps her from being a single mother. On the other hand, her economic status is negligible in the novel, making her more vulnerable as a woman. In the novel, Sarla is a dutiful wife and a mother, but her status as a mother outshines her objectivity as a wife, because her focus is predominantly on the wellness of her son, she wants to keep her son away from the dark struggles of her own life, at any cost. Sarla is a practical, sensible and devoted women, but

the sheer ignorance of Deven acts as a huge obstacle for her to bloom in her full efficiency. Despite the failure of her arranged marriage, she shifts her focus to her motherly duties, keeping aside her personal aspirations, something which remains as a predominant trait of most Indian married women. Sarla seems to compromise on her small joys and tries to find her mental peace by the way of the happiness and content of her son. It is the purity of Sarla's character which acts for her both as a curse and a boon. The ease with which she has been able to do this suggests her power as a woman. Her power is hidden, but it is still there, whenever Deven suffers from existential crisis and duality of thought at various fronts, be it career, or his married life.

Nur, the famous Urdu poet of his times has married twice- something that is allowed in his religion, and his first wife is Safia Begum. Nur finds religious licensing to validate the nature of his married life, he is dreamy and poetic to the core, surrounded by fake admirers, and this is known to Safia Begum.

The word 'Begum' attributes to 'a Muslim lady of a high rank', or 'a wife of a Beg', which is an aristocratic title in the Islamic culture. Safia and her life is ridiculously in contrast with these sophisticated connotations to her title, and her subjectivity has diminished to just being a helping hand to her husband in sickness. The misery of Nur never allows Safia to deviate from her wifely responsibilities. Despite the grey undertones of her personality, her mind and body appear to be in perfect sync to be available for her counterpart, where she never considers walking away from her marriage.

In comparison to Sarla, Safia Begum is older. The highlight of Safia's character is her acceptance of the fact that Nur's love is divided and is not entirely hers. Safia, matches with Sarla at several points. She is confined in her old house, and yet so much in agreement with Nur. She never chooses to step put and shares unconditional love for Nur. Her status is intact as the woman of the household, despite the presence of Imtiaz Begum, the young and beautiful second wife of Nur.

Safia's love for her husband is more of a devotional service, on the other hand, as the lady of the house, she has some power in her hand when it comes to important decisions about the Haveli and Nur, and she tries putting up the best of her abilities. Hence, it is shown that she, despite all marital challenges, tries to sail along keeping in mind the best interests of her husband. She is clearly deprived of Nur's attention, but she has all the authority to take important decisions about the health and well-being of her counterpart. Other than that, she holds pride in rather nonsensical, but important details like the ability of making the favorite *daal* (lentils) for Nur, which can be made by her only. Thus, Safia has created an imaginary bubble of reassurance around her, to hide the fact that her marriage has also been a failure, and her husband loves the other wife more.

Thus, this must be noted that despite being a bold and devoted wife, Safia still deals with a web of unfulfilled marital desires which has led to the fragmentation of her body, mind and soul. She is aware that the only love for Nur is poetry, and after that, his second wife. Thus, emerges as a possibility of toxic household politics because Safia is only accessible to politics within the boundaries of her marital home. Her leader tendencies and boldness found shelter within the same. She has got hold over the important decisions of the house, and she has the respect of house helps and people around her. She is old and experienced, adding to her feathers, but being devoid of husband's love proves that her efforts prove to be futile. She struggles continuously to enjoy the affection of her husband, but she knows that her agency is only limited to being a protector to Nur, who is in immediate company of several fake admirers.

Anita Desai, through the character of Safia has depicted complex human relationships at its best. Safia to Nur is a bitter lady, which makes him to remarry. Nur is hardly interested in her, as she is childless. Her failure to bear a child has made her rough and dull, and it shows in her behavior. She is never able to enjoy the undivided attention of Nur because of not being able to give him a heir to the family. Safia is unaware of motherly bliss, and her suffering worsens because of the ignorance of Nur. She seems to be transactional, and in constant fights with Imtiaz Begum for Nur's love. As a feminist writer Anita Desai in her fiction, attempts to describe through the character of Safia, that how the loss of beauty and youth, insight and fertility can sabotage the

objectivity and status of Indian wives, despite they are being the perennial source of care, protection and support for their husbands. Safia, because of these factors, moves towards kitchen politics and domestic brawls with Imtiaz Begum, whom she blames for seducing Nur.

Women like Sarla and Safia are taught beforehand about their duties as a wife since childhood. The values preserved since childhood show evidently in their respective characters. These women, act upon the same values to tackle with their marriage, although they are naïve enough to not understand the outdated nature of these values. The outlets chosen by them to channelize their frustrations can be toxic, but this is the maximum these women can do to be heard.

Passive resistance in the women in Anita Desai's novels is more of an emotion, especially in the character analysis of Sarla. The women are not dumb, nor entirely enlightened. They do lack with a sense of freedom and content, constantly under patriarchal check.

Safia keeps aside her expectations from Nur, prioritizing his content, something which is a rare human tendency. She as a woman is brimming with love and forgiveness, her thirst of love is still fresh, despite her age, because she is still hopeful about the miracles of love. Although, it is not to be forgotten that she sometimes uses her verbal weapons against Imtiaz. Safia never revolts for a payback for her love, but her subtle actions and detailing for Nur suggests that she does want recognition, although she is robotic like Sarla, and never really communicates about it to Nur in a healthy way.

The character of Safia Begum has been developed very skillfully by Desai, complex and layered, her outlook towards life is practical, and she is more experienced in terms of age. Her marital concern and duty for Nur never fades away, especially when she is not the centre of Nur's love. Safia is aware of ways in which she could seize the opportunity of saving her husband in various situations, as and when she finds a chance, in order to rise up in the eyes of Nur.

As described by Murad in Chapter 6, Safia Begum and Imtiaz begum are two women tearing each other's eyes out over the great poet's body. The character of Imtiaz begum in the novel appears to be self-centered at first. She was a nautch girl in the past, whom Nur married. To justify his second marriage, he mentions about her meekness at the time when he first came across her in her brothel. Nur attacks her saying that she copied his nazms and recited them for the crowd, for

her own benefits. Imtiaz is an ambitious and charming woman. She stood up as a problem solver, and the sole member in the house to earn, providing for Nur's food and alcohol, because his popularity has faded away with time, and his house is just a source of reminiscing the old-world charm of the bazaars of Purani Dilli. The walls are getting weaker and the foundations of the haveli struggle hard to hold on to the soil beneath. In the house, the roles of a husband are not addressed well, and hence, Imtiaz Begum emerges as the breadwinner of the household, although, this is not acknowledged well.

With Urdu struggling as a language and Hindi taking over it, Nur is no more recognized as the same maestro of poetry. Nur got a son from Imtiaz Begum, something which his first wife was unable to- resulting in the unequal division of his husbandly love between the two wives. Imtiaz Begum is financially strong and supports the family. She had been a talented singer in the past, which attracted Nur. Her beauty and radiance come with beauty and brains, and she has bigger access to the outer life in comparison to Safia Begum, resulting frequent verbal wars between the two. Imtiaz appears as a faulty woman, if understood without incorporating proper character analysis, but the treatment she receives from the family around her is based on how patriarchy puts her on test. Nur accuses her of artistic theft and emotional harassment, but as a husband, he never really gives in ample efforts to understand Imtiaz. Imtiaz is shown aggressive, vocal and dominating- something which was not the trait of most married Muslim women during those times- therefore, there exists huge scope for readers to disagree with the unconventional outlook she had. Imtiaz Begum has been called as a thief by Nur, and of having ulterior motives behind using his poetry and reciting it for her fame and limelight, something which haunted Nur because of the huge male attention his young and beautiful wife bagged.

The portrayal of marriage is vital when it comes to literature. It has national and international relevance as to how women are suffocated within a patriarchal construct like Marriage, not to forget that marital alienation, and subjugation in the context of women is free from the limits of nationality, religion, community, caste, class, creed, or ethnicity. Marital dignity is the sole responsibility of a woman. Up till date, the female counterpart is considered weaker in a

marriage, due to psychological, biological, social, and economic reasons. Financial stability of a wife like Imtiaz Begum is always sensationalized because of her status as a working woman. She is dominant in the power play of marriage, which comes up as a problematic issue, branding her as a woman of wrong ways. Imtiaz as a woman portrays passion and hunger for recognition. Despite the inability to look for the right ways to accomplish it, it can never be denied that she grows and prospers, even more than Sarla and Safia in the novel. Every wife in the novel is heroic in her own way, as a wife as well as a woman. Although Anita attempts to present through Imtiaz's character of how successful women are accounted to be house breakers. Through continuous attacks on Imtiaz Begum in the novel, it is evident that Anita Desai wants to showcase the tools used by patriarchal forces within society to harness the freedom and voice of women turned wives.

The wives through the expertise of Anita Desai are all having different principles and insecurities. The source of unhappiness in their marriage lies in the fact that their counterparts have failed to understand the true essence of feminism. Deven and Nur lack the sense of companionship in their marriage and, a better understanding of the society. Anita shows how patriarchy cannot handle the competition and grandeur of vibrant women as married counterparts to unsuccessful and jealous husbands, Nur and Deven are vital examples of such men.

The husbands in the novel struggle with their demons, and they find shame in accepting the assistance of their wives, they struggle with superiority complex despite their failed attempts in life. They fail to provide decent lives to their wives and avoid communication with them, which acts as a bridge in their marriage. Their domesticity prevents them to look beyond their predestined space in their marriage. Although Imtiaz Begum is an exception in these regards, but she has her own struggles due to lack of recognition by Nur, which she fails to address in a calm manner, given that she is slightly arrogant and rude. Hence, loss of marital content is absent in the novel- however, there always lie a background of socio-political, and class-based challenges affecting human relationships in fiction.

Anita Desai makes the readers relate with the female character of the novel equally as much as the male characters, because predominantly the novel suggests the relationship between men like Nur, Deven and Murad. Anita evaluates the usability, relevance, need, and implication of marriage in the post independence India where societal values were changing and family structures were under evolution in a slow pace.

In conclusion, it could be observed that marriage is a collective responsibility of devotion and mutual respect nurtured with great communication of thoughts and ideas. Anita suggests that marriage is much more than mere companionship. Her analysis of marital alliance is not poetic, but grounded. She provides life to the idea of marriage, testing it through its various dysfunctionalities.

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