

## **Post-Independence Indian Literature in English and ‘In Custody’ by Anita Desai**

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### **Abstract:**

Post-Independence period in India was a traumatic period. At the same time it was a fertile period for Indian Literature. The pangs of partition fuelled literature of different hues. Many of the novels during this period have common features like dislocation and consequent distrust. Most of them imbibed a sullen spirit caused due to partition. The cultural divide and language conflict are the common themes. *In Custody* by Anita Desai is a trendsetter of post independence literature which depicts the state of Urdu language against the backdrop of an educational institution. It describes the life and interest of a temporary college lecturer Deven, who from his childhood wanted to become a poet but couldn't because of the worldly responsibilities and eventually became a college lecturer. The story revolves around Deven, his feelings and his excitement when he gets the chance to interview the great poet Nur, the greatest living Urdu poet. His excitement ends in disappointment when he discovers the feet of clay of his much esteemed role model and apostle of Urdu literature. The disappointment is reflected through an atmosphere of moroseness and sullenness prevailing throughout the novel.

Post Independence period in India was a fertile period for Indian literature. The agony and anguish of partition fuelled profuse and prolific writings. The traumatic period triggered creative writings despite the wound it created in the minds of the people. When the subcontinent was divided into two and Pakistan was carved out, it also marked the division of hearts, driving a wedge between two communities and the subsequent dislocation and emotional traumas. Partition and the pangs of separation have spawned countless narratives in Indian Literature laced with pain and longing.

The Partition indeed was a fertile period for Indian Literature particularly in the field of novel writing. Many of the novels during this period have common themes and features like dislocation and consequent distrust. Most of them imbibed a sullen spirit caused due to partition. New ideas like nationalisation, development, nationality, language conflict, cultural divide and ups and downs in business markets came to the fore front. Along with them came modern education and educational institutions. Dominance of English language led to decline

of classical language like Urdu. Besides language conflict, came the cultural divide among the people having western education and the traditional roots. It led to a thematic change in writings, depiction of progressive trend prevailed and positive kind of social awakening was fully attempted.

In short the post independence literature is pregnant with many wonderful writings and witnessed the exposition of many exuberant writers. India as ever is rich in its literary outputs, and with the abundance, ambiance and the innovative attitude of our writers it has remained rich and robust among other world literatures.

Appearance of many valuable women writers is a remarkable outcome of the progressive perspective that was prevalent during this period. Anita Desai is one among the best and is well known for her realistic narration of the post partition culture. She is a master creator of very sensitive characters particularly women characters. She along with Balraj Khanna also depicted academic and educational institutions as they provided the right setting for language and cultural conflict.

Anita Desai's *In Custody* and Balraj Khanna's *Nation Of Fools*, two of the major novels of this era depict how campus setting has been used by them in the larger backdrop of post independence and post partition to depict themes close to their hearts.

*In Custody* by Anita Desai is a trendsetter of post independence literature. Rated as "A magnificent novel" by Salman Rushdie and shortlisted for the Man Booker prize, *In Custody* by Anita Desai, depicts the state of Urdu language against the backdrop of an educational institution. It describes the life and interest of a temporary college lecturer Deven, who from his childhood wanted to become a poet but couldn't because of the worldly responsibilities and eventually became a college lecturer. The story revolves around Deven, his feelings and his excitement when he gets the chance to interview the great poet Nur, the greatest living Urdu poet. Nur used to be the inspiration for Deven once. Like R.K. Narayan's *The Bachelor of Arts* and *The English Teacher*, we find graphic description of college and school scenes in this book. There is also some similarity between Narayan's Malgudi and Desai's Mirpore.

The novel begins with a college scene. The readers find Deven, the Hindi lecturer in Lala Ram Lal College at Mirpore, a small town, buying cigarettes in the college canteen when he encounters his old friend Murad, an opportunist who has come from Delhi to meet him with a sinister design and forces him to skip his class. They "walked away from the canteen, across the dusty field that separated the corrugated iron shack of the canteen from the brick building of the college where Deven taught." Deven was uncomfortable because the students were watching the encounter and tried to wriggle out of Murad's grasp.

Escaping from Murad's grip, Deven rushes towards his class and in his haste dashes against a group of girl students which "caused much offence, affront, tittering and giggling" among the students. He tried to "construct an authoritative teacher-self out of his jolted nerves and distracted ways" inside the class room, where there was "much scraping of chairs and shouting across desks." Being aged and "Withered as the last leaf upon the tree, Shaken by the chill blast of winter," he is used to recite poetry aloud, a habit he had inherited from his school teacher father. But the class is not amused. Rather they had an expression "of boredom, amusement, insolence and defiance", which forced Deven to look towards the door that "opened onto the passage, freedom and release." His student-unfriendly habits like ignoring the class, speaking to him made him "a boring teacher who could not command the

attention, let alone win the regard, of his unruly class”. After the class, while having his lunch with Murad in a restaurant, Murad suggests him to interview the famous Urdu poet Nur for the special issue of his magazine, “Awaz”. Having always loved Urdu poetry and missed the chance to be an Urdu language professor, he is excited to go to Delhi. Even though he shrinks at the idea of possibly being exploited by his sharp and selfish friend Murad, the dream of meeting Nur and to enrich the literary circle with his presence draws him on. So he sets off on a number of adventures on Sundays, the one free day that he should have spent with his wife and son.

In Chapter 2, the scene moves from the college to Mirpore. When Deven boards a bus at Mirpore to go to Delhi, the small town comes to his mind as a flash back. “Those shacks of tin and rags”, “the roads that ran between their crooked rows”, “the citizens of Mirpore, petty tradesmen rather than agriculturists”, “the small mosque of marble and pink sandstone” built by the Nawab to commemorate his safe escape during Mutiny of 1857, but now overgrown by shacks, stalls, booths, banners, debris and homeless poor of the bazaar. So also the temples, numerous but without any history, the artificial tank, the shabby municipal park are the landmarks of this small town. Unlike Malgudi which is shown in a positive light in R.K.Narayan’s novels, Mirpore is rather depicted in a somewhat bleak manner signifying the state of Urdu language, a theme of the novel and the trend of post independence era. Mirpore is also dotted with “the college where Deven taught and some of the schools.... named after Lala Ram Lal, Mahatma Gandhi, Swami Dayanand and Annie Besant.” “The bus rumbled past the graffiti-scarred yellow walls of the Lala Ram Lal College, its dust field and barbed wire fencing, past the red brick walls of the Swami Dayanand Veterinary and Agricultural College which seemed to have no human population but was set in surprisingly lush grounds of green, waving grain and bougainvilleas that ran rampant along the boundary fence, several outhouses full of mud and dung and domestic beasts, and then it was out in the countryside.”

The sullen atmosphere is perceptible throughout the novel, in keeping with prevailing trend of post partition period. The low key atmosphere continued when the scene changes from Mirpore to Chandni Chowk, Delhi which was like a “pullulating honeycomb of commerce” where he fulfilled his long cherished desire to meet his hero, the Urdu poet, Nur. The meeting was disappointing. He found the feet of clay in his demigod and returned to his campus life disheartened and disillusioned.

The atmosphere of moroseness and sullenness is further evident in the novel(in Chapter 6) when the writer depicts its “annual spring cleaning” to spruce up the campus and “to make them look fresh and sylvan” in view of imminent annual board meeting. But how these exercises are futile and money is wasted in such renovation jobs in a campus have been depicted. The electrician changing the electric bulbs is morose because he knows that within a week all will be stolen or smashed again. The water cooler is put in such a place that it was destined to leak and rust in the centre of a permanent puddle that students’ shoes tracking through turned to liquid mud. Graffiti, which are common in a campus, were scratched before the annual board meeting.

Frenzied preparation for the annual board meeting of the college makes the college setting lively. Overnight erection of a marquee, the Principal in his newly dry cleaned grey suit receiving guests, the Principal’s wife , “in a new saree of Japanese nylon printed all over with sprigs of brown and violet flowers” coming forward with folded hands to receive the chief guest, the chief guest’s joke are depiction of typical college annual day. The annual event

comes to an end with “a sound of splashing and spilling then, of clinking and clattering, of sloshing and giggling”.

The element of satire is quite perceptible when the author describes the head of the Urdu department, Abid Siddiqui who, “in keeping with the size and stature of the department, was a small man, whose youthful face was prematurely topped with a plume of white hair as if to signify the doomed nature of his discipline”. Despite the small size of the Lala Ram Lal college and the decadence of the language, Urdu has been retained as a subject due to the legacy of the erstwhile Nawab ruler of Mirpore. Urdu has been reduced to a state of “a language that had become doomed the day the Muslims departed across the newly-drawn border to the new country of Pakistan.” Naturally the students of this subject were few and so were the admirers. But one exception was Deven Sharma, who never misses an occasion to converse with lonely Siddiqui who finds Urdu as scarce as salted cashew in the annual function.

The invasion of new electronic gadgets like tape recorder is a sign of the modernity in that period, particularly in the context of teaching aid. When Deven said he was going to tape the life history of great poet Nur, the surprise of Siddiqui knew no bounds. To whet his appetite, Deven suggests to make a proposal to the Principal to allocate some funds to buy a tape recorder for the department and “to begin the era of electronics in our college.” But it rebounded as Siddiqui cleverly wriggled out by saying “how can a timid rabbit like myself approach King Leo in his den?” Rather they can approach the registrar whom the author describes as King Leo’s chief minister, Mr. Jackal, to the amusement of Deven.

While discussing about fund allocation, the discrimination between science subjects and humanities section came to the fore. Deven “was perfectly aware that funds were being made readily available to the science departments, that the Sciences were the rajas of the empire with the humanities pushed to the dustier and more neglected corners where they languished.” Even among humanities there is class distinction. “If any of the humanities departments received any attention, it was those of economics and political science.” The language departments were “not worthy of any attention” and remained neglected and uncared for.

The writer also depicts the dichotomy in the educational system of the nation where students with scientific backgrounds are meant for the luxuries of life whereas those with a knack for humanities are shown to rot in dingy classrooms. This fact is also revealed in the way in which Deven’s Hindi students take technical classes outside in order to get employment, giving least importance to the learning of the subject within the college premises. This is a reflection of the fact that the art, culture, heritage and history of the country lies threatened in front of the emerging technological boom of the globe. This is true even today and is a glaring blemish in the academic scenario.

Another aspect of sordid nature of campus life is brought to the fore, when a section of lecturers construed Deven’s weekly trips to Delhi as romantic trips. Gossips and attributing fancied opinion on others are common in a campus. So also insensitivities and crudity of colleagues as also threatening by rowdy students are daily regimen of an academic setting. Since he is a meek character, even the students of his college would threaten him: “Meet us behind the college and see what we do to you”

Other common features of apathy and passivity are stained wall and the rusty steel furniture, the apathetic doorman of the registrar's office encountered by Deven when he goes to meet the registrar. Fanciful that he was Deven at times imagines he would "move into the world of poetry and art leaving behind these college grounds, these fields of dust, these fences of rusted barbed wire, these groups of hostile and mocking young students at the gate and the bus stop."

The language controversy is yet another facet of post partition period in this novel. Deven loves Urdu and Urdu poetry but has to choose Hindi as a subject for teaching because of its value in the job market. He says: "I am only a teacher.....must teach to support my family." Otherwise he has great love for Urdu poetry and fondly remembers his father's liking for it. On the other hand, the people like the head of the department of Hindi in his college, associate language with community and dislike Deven's love for Urdu. When he applies for one week's leave to conduct an interview with the legendary Urdu poet Nur Shahjahanbadi ; the head of the department, Trivedi, bursts out: "I'll get you transferred to your beloved Urdu department. I won't have Muslim toadies in my department; you'll ruin my boys with your Muslim ideas, your Urdu language. I'll complain to the Principal, I'll warn the RSS, you are a traitor." Trivedi's violent reaction to Deven's request clarifies how language becomes a signifier of religious identity and national loyalty. This linguistic confrontation leads to communal riots. The novelistic 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. This controversial issue taken up in the novel has been aptly explained in the following words: "The Hindi – Urdu controversy by its very bitterness demonstrates how little the objective similarities between language groups matter when people attach subjective significance to their languages. Willingness to communicate through the same language is quite a different thing from the mere ability to communicate."

Along with language controversy, the author has depicted the social evils prevailing in Indian society like alcoholism, poverty, superstitions, fight for religion, brain drain, domestic violence, exploitation of poor by the rich etc. Murad earns more but never pays Deven for his contributions even though Murad is the son of a rich businessman and Deven of a poor widow. She has also portrayed the true picture of the plight of teachers, poets and the deprived ones struggling for name, fame and wealth. In the present novel Anita Desai has tried to bring up a new issue of problems of extinction of a language like Urdu after the partition of India and Pakistan.

Deven, the protagonist is fond of Urdu poetry. The whole novel is cleverly woven around Deven's preparations and efforts to interview Nur. Deven has not been able to do much in life. He lacks confidence. Deven finds his hero's house a house of misery and confusion. Having sunk into a senile old age, surrounded by fawning sycophants, married to a younger calculating wife who wants to use his glory to win herself fame, Nur is not what he once was. Perhaps he always was like this. "It was clear to Deven that these louts, these lafangas of the people around him are constantly pouring out benefits from his simplicity, weakness of not able to put forth his ideas, and innocence, he acts like a puppet in their hands because when it is a choice between head and heart, he chooses heart." When Murad approaches him to interview Nur, Deven realizes it is a dream come true. Desai has portrayed a weak protagonist who is easily driven by others and who like a true Shakespearean protagonist of a

tragedy is held between the decision of whether to interview Nur or not. While climbing up the stairs of Nur's house, Deven lives a whole life and the writer seems to suggest that he will have to climb up very high to reach the status of Nur. The dirty, old furniture in Nur's room shows the value and status of the old Urdu poet after partition among the rising Hindi poets in India. The room is dark and seems to reflect the true picture of the language Urdu which is in total darkness. But the poet in white clothes sitting in that dark room shows the status enjoyed by him even after partition.

“It was clear to Deven that these louts, these lafangas of the bazaar world- shopkeepers, clerks, bookies and unemployed parasites- lived out the fantasy of being poets, artists and bohemians here on Nur's terrace in Nur's company.”

Nur, like a withered leaf waiting for its decay, is barely able to respond. But his weak stature seems to get electrified after he has consumed alcohol. He forgets that he is a poet- rather he behaves like a common Muslim who feels rejected, neglected and dejected. He hates 'Hindi wallahs'. He is trapped in the vanity of Imtiaz Begum, now his second wife, a prostitute who has ruined the life of the poet. She is so called lover of poetry and herself a poetess. She is jealous of Nur's skill and competes with him by holding 'mehfil' of poetry where she recites her poems in public. Deven, the middle aged man, is drawn to this old poet, wishing to help and protect him though he cannot defend himself. His repeated visits to Nur's place and the experiences hunt him even after returning home. He gets acquainted to some new aspects of life. Nur has two wives and feels guilty of not providing a good living to his family. This forces Deven to think that he too does not give any time to his wife Sarla and son Manu.

The setting and locale of Nur's residence are symbolic of dereliction and filth. Deven finds himself entrapped and could not find an exit from the mazy surroundings. Nur's residence was in Chandni Chowk which looked like a market in a nightmare. The peeling, stained walls of the office buildings wore a squalid look. Deven 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. Chandni Chowk 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 the society. Murad chooses Deven for this vocation as he belongs to the emergent group which is Hindi. Siddiqui's home in a dilapidated villa has an air of impeccable royalty and majesty. He is the silent spectator scrutinizing the shifting interests of the society. 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 and patronizing by nature.

We find in the novel conflict between tradition and modernity, which is a common trend during this era. Urdu poetry, symbolizing tradition is on decline after independence. The inherent love and divinity of Urdu poetry is lost in quest for materialism of post colonial time. The modern era doesn't recognise love and adoration as the Islamic era did. The modern era has been about materialism and success at any cost which has affected familial as well as social relationships to a considerable extent. The society has been in transition and constant change in definition of relationships among the members in the society in the materialistic world has been dominating the field of literature to a considerable extent. This is presented with the delineation of Murad, Nur, the wives of Nur and the Urdu lecturer in the

college where Deven also serves. Urdu was popular with the Mughals and now Hindi is popular. No sooner does Deven reach Nur's house, the politics of languages is discussed at large between the two. Deven finds himself frightened but Nur must say whatever comes to his mind. The discussion switches over to the literary awards with such remarks as the general idea in the bazaar is that Gobind's latest poem cycle will win the Sahitya Academy Award for Hindi this year. For Urdu the remark shall be: 'No book was judged worthy of the award this year'

People constantly make fool of him and he has to bear the brunt. Every effort made by Deven ends in defeat. He is also a failure like Nur. In order to save the name and works of Nur for posterity, he decides to record his voice on tape for his small-town university. In the process Deven is exploited monetarily and emotionally. Nur's family demands money to keep themselves happy, Murad refuses to pay him for submissions to his self-proclaimed literary magazine. His wife Sarla is indignant at his frequent movements and his fellow professors think he is having an affair in Delhi. The saddest part is the result of the sessions. Drunk and encouraged by his admirers who follow him along to the sessions, Nur offers nothing.

Anita Desai has brought a lot of symbolism in this novel. The whistle of the train seems to be the call of life to Deven trapped in his circumstances. When Nur goes up on the terrace, he is attacked by pigeons symbolizing the demand of Urdu lovers asking protection for the language and Urdu poetry. Pigeons were once used as messengers. So, they bring here the message of the community that loved Urdu language but now witnessed its downfall. Pigeons also symbolize peace. They surround the poet who has completely lost his peace of mind. His mind is now full of burning political issues of partition and diminishing status of Urdu language.

The novel from beginning till end revolves around Deven trying to interview Nur. He succeeds in recording some verses in the poet's voice but the tapes are in poor condition. The voice cracks and there are many other technicalities. Deven lacks future insight. It is this weakness that puts him into troubles one after another. He thinks he was going to bring the poet out of dark lanes into new lights but he ends up being exploited by all around him including the poet. Nur keeps on sending letters and telegrams to Deven demanding money on one pretext or another. His first wife has already taken money from Deven. After Nur's death, she sends Nur's bills to Deven. Murad demands copyrights in lieu of help.

The novel can be regarded as an optimistic tale of Deven and Nur in spite of the repeated pessimisms hovering in their lives. This is because Nur at the end finds himself a custodian and Deven gets the opportunity to take the custody of the divine poet whom he almost worshiped. It was a name that opened doors, changed expressions, caused dust and cobwebs to disappear, visions to appear, bathed in radiance. It had led him on to avenues that would take him to another land, another element. This is an achievement in itself. The novel is a portrait of human lives as it exists in their own exclusive circumstances, of the hypocrisy and pretension lying within the human spirit, of the difference between the town and the city life, of human helplessness and oppression on the road to aspirations.

The author has also depicted diversity in cultures when she describes the meetings in the house of Nur in the evenings. Nur's house is supposed to have some gathering where the visitors are divided into camps like Persian Camp, Hindustani Camp, Pakistan Camp. They are discussing things over drinks and *biryani*. This symbolizes their lack of serious effort because after drinking too much, they go to sleep rather than work practically. When Deven

sees this type of the group of poetry appreciating people, he develops a dislike for them because they appear as ‘shopkeepers, clerks, bookies and unemployed parasites’.

Deven is a sufferer all through. To purchase a tape recorder and record Nur’s interview, Deven had borrowed money from his college. His sincere most efforts did not bear any fruit. But the Urdu lecturer, Mr. Siddiqi is busy developing a plot for construction and is paid for that by a Delhi businessman. He is not interested in Urdu promotion. Even then, the position of this non-literary lecturer is sound in college. To get some more Delhi boarding bills paid and get the previous loans allowed, he approaches Siddiqi Sahib only. To his various questions Deven answers: “...I was fooled and cheated by everyone – the man who sold me the second hand equipments, the technicians who said he could do the recording but was completely inexperienced, by Murad who said he would pay and did not, by Nur who had never told me he wanted to be paid, and by his wife, wives, all of them.

During the very first meeting between Nur and Deven, the former teases the latter about the purpose of visit also: “It seems you have been sent here to torment me”. Nur is much frustrated and he cannot even think of himself as a logical being anymore. He tells Deven: “I tell you? Those Congress-wallahs have set up Hindi on top as our ruler. You are its slave. 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”. Gradually Deven comes to know of this man as a much debilitated being who is fond of drinks. After drinks he vomits in the house and his second wife humiliates him.

Desai’s treatment of the questions related to 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 always surrounded by the sound of Urdu poetry, which is mostly recited. Nobody reads it, 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 it’s a language I don’t think is going to survive in India ..... There are many Muslims and they do write in Urdu; but it has a kind of 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?”

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 doubts 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 tend to attach a romantic notion of false pride in being a poet or writer in a language and, like Nur, consider certain forms of behaviour 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 them as the custodians of a language, and by implication a culture or cultural group people like Nur indulge in glorifying their role. Even genuine attempts of persons like Deven are spurned by Nur simply because he fails to understand language freed from established views associating language with certain cultural groups or persons and artists like himself : “Urdu poetry...How can there be an Urdu poetry when there is no Urdu language left? It is dead, finished...So, now you see its corpse lying



here, waiting to be buried...Those Congress-wallahs have set up Hindi on the top as our ruler. You are its slave. 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 here to torment me, to show me, let me know to what depths Urdu has fallen.”

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