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## Anita Desai's Novel '*In Custody*'-- Themes and Analysis

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### Abstract

Anita Desai is an Indian author who is quite well-known. She is referred to as the "Mother of the Indian Psychological Novel" because of her contributions to the genre. In recognition of her thorough representations of contemporary Indian life, she has earned a position of honour in the pantheon of Indian authors. Desai is the recipient of the Sahitya Academy Award, and he has written as many as sixteen pieces of fiction. The majority of her novels are based on her own personal life experiences. She never favoured or patronised any one theme or message. She believed in telling things how they are and not sugar-coating them. Her sympathetic depiction of the inner thoughts of her female characters is exceptional, as is her use of metaphor.

Many of Anita Desai's works deal with the difficulties that exist between family members as well as the isolation that middle-class women experience.

Desai's works are concerned with contemporary Indian life, including cultural differences between the East and the West, generational divisions, and practical and emotional exile from one's homeland<sup>1</sup>. During the post-Partition period, the novel *In Custody* takes place, and the large exodus of Muslims into Pakistan is the primary reason for the waning popularity of the Urdu language in India, in recent years. Anita Desai is a writer who has dedicated her life to the craft of weaving a fine cloth out of entangled threads of hardships – both ordinary and uncommon – in a smooth and seamless manner, as described by the *New York Times*. Her latest work, *The Present*, is another example of her excellent designs. *In Custody*, a powerful and realistic novel by Anita Desai, attempts to connect the reader's line of thought to the bilingual scene of Hindi versus Urdu before and after India's partition, as Urdu – once known as "the language of the court" in the days

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<sup>1</sup>Tiwari, Shubha. *Critical Responses to Anita Desai*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2004.

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of royalty – now languishes in the back lanes and gutters of the city<sup>2</sup>. "There is no location for it to live in the style to which it is accustomed, and there are no emperors or nawabs to serve as its supporters."

By understanding the themes and the characters of *In Custody*, it will be easier to depict the irony in the novel of Anita Desai.

## 1. Introduction

As one of India's most celebrated writers of Indian English fiction, Anita Desai is well-known throughout the world for painting sensitive portraits of Indians and their sensibilities. Her characters not only symbolise the environment in which they are born, but they are also frequently victims of the situations in which they find themselves, and they battle to find their way out of them. Through her writings, she has carved out such a unique place in the Indian English literary canon that, today, when we hear the phrase "Indian English novel," one of the first names that comes to mind is Anita Desai. Her writings received widespread critical acclaim both within India and internationally, and she went on to become a much-published author<sup>3</sup>. In her works, she deals with the fundamental human conundrum by depicting the inner turmoil and psychic mayhem of sensitive individuals who are attempting to discover some form of true existence in a society that is allegedly anxiety-ridden, alienated, and pointless. It is possible to consider her one of India's modern writers, who has utilised the skills she has acquired through her art in order to offer additional depth and texture to Indian English literature. She can legitimately claim to be the first Indian woman novelist to achieve this status. Specifically, it is through her writings that Indian English novels experience a change from the outside world of substance to the inner world of depth. Anita Desai was born on June 24, 1937, in Mussoorie, a tiny town near Dehradun, to a Bengali father and a German mother. She was the youngest of three children. At home, the family's primary language of communication was German, which they used on a daily basis. Anita Desai's mentality was shaped by her upbringing in India, where she was exposed to Indian culture and traditions, which had a negative impact on her development. So, from the very beginning of

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<sup>2</sup>Rao, B. Ramachandra. *The Novels of Mrs. Anita Desai: A Study*. New Delhi: Kalyani Publishers, 1977.

<sup>3</sup>Prasad, Madhusudan. *Anita Desai: The Novelist*. Allahabad: New Horizon, 1981.

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her existence, both Indian and European sensibilities found expression in her lives, and she came to embody them both. She had her primary and secondary education at Queen Mary's School, and later completed her graduate studies at Miranda House in the University of Delhi. Beginning in her early childhood, she had a voracious appetite for reading and would devour book after book. As a passionate admirer of literature, she made a conscious decision to write about the experiences she encountered all around her. She began writing short stories while still a student, and her work has since been published in a variety of publications<sup>4</sup>. Anita Desai was able to take the enormous step of writing books as a result of these minor publications. The novel *In Custody* is a story in which the protagonist Deven is portrayed to be trapped in the quagmire of his existence and, as he attempts to pursue his passion for Urdu poetry, he becomes entangled in a web that he, along with his surrounding characters, creates for himself. It is an excellent psychological and social novel with a level of depth that just a handful of Indian novelists have managed to accomplish in their works. We will learn about Anita Desai's life and work in this write-up. We will also learn about her contribution to the development of the novel genre in the Indian English canon through her biographical writing<sup>5</sup>.

Anita Desai in her novel, *In Custody*, writes about that Deven Sharma, the protagonist, who is an inept but well-intentioned young man whose issues, in contrast to those of the other protagonists of Anita Desai's works, are not just personal and private but also public and social in nature. Deven is a Hindi lecturer at a college in Mirpore, where he lives with his family. Urdu poetry holds a special place in his heart. The Mosque and the Temple, which represent the Muslim and Hindu sections of the town, respectively, define the town's Muslim and Hindu population. One of Deven's friends approaches him about writing an article about Nur's poetry for his journal, and Deven agrees. Despite his precarious financial situation, he takes the risk of interviewing Nur in order to establish himself as a respected critic in the community. However, when he arrives in Chandni Chowk, in Delhi, where Nur lives, he finds himself in an unfamiliar and oppressive environment. He discovers the famed poet entirely absorbed in dealing with the people who are in

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<sup>4</sup>Kanwar, Asha. *The Novels of Virginia Woolf and Anita Desai: A Comparative Study*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1988.

<sup>5</sup>Dhawan, R.K. *Indian Women Novelists. Set. I. Vol.II*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1991.

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his immediate vicinity<sup>6</sup>. Nur is a favourite of Deven because of his active imagination: "The effect of Nur's poem was to "put terrifying and unfathomable things like time and death at a position where they could be observed and analysed in safety." It is incredibly difficult for Deven to put his aesthetic taste into words, despite his best efforts to overcome barriers such as Nur's failing health and the discord between his two wives. Even the attempt to capture Nur's thoughts on poetry fails miserably. Deven believes that his friends have betrayed him, yet he continues to struggle despite the crisis. "Nur's poetry was being read to him, and the sound of it was softly murmuring in his ears while he pondered about it. The poetry of Nur was given to him as a gift, and this meant that he was now the guardian of Nur's very soul and spirit.' It was a significant distinction. He could not, under any circumstances, disavow or abandon that."

## 2. Anita Desai's views of different themes in the novel *In Custody*

### 2.1 Introduction to *In Custody*

After reading a brief introduction to Anita Desai and her significant works, a better understanding can be gained of the depth of her writing, as well as the types of novels she wrote, which helped to establish her as a significant Indian English author of the twentieth century in the United States<sup>7</sup>. According to some, she was the only writer during her lifetime whose writings had such an impact on the reading public across India that she is still regarded as the most captivating novelist from the country. Her novel, *In Custody*, which was even nominated for the Booker Prize, is not only a representative novel of Anita Desai in terms of understanding her writings, but it is also a work that exemplifies in more than one manner the cultural map of India at the time of its publication in the United Kingdom. Or, to put it in another way, the novel *In Custody* can be described as a piece of writing that will introduce us to India and its little towns, Indian culture in general, Indian sensitivities, and Indian Urdu culture, specifically. As a result, this article is specifically designed to help you become acquainted with the novel and the numerous aspects that distinguish it as not only worthwhile reading but also worthy of critical consideration so that you

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<sup>6</sup> Chaudhry, Bidulata. *Women and Society in the Novels of Anita Desai*. New Delhi: Creative Books, 1995.

<sup>7</sup> Pathania, Usha. *Human Bonds and Bondages: The Fiction of Anita Desai and Kamala Markandaya*. New Delhi: Kanishka Publishing House.

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can understand the ways in which a novel can realistically portray the inner and outer realms of human existence during a specific period of time<sup>8</sup>. In addition to her reputation and charisma as a writer, Anita Desai is well-known throughout India and the rest of the world for her work. Her nomination for the Booker Prize for *In Custody* speaks volumes about the nature, content, and style of the book, which not only helped the author gain renown, but also provided readers with an opportunity to get to know India and its sensibilities from very close quarters. It is one of the most significant pieces of writing from an Indian that the entire world admires, not only for its accurate portrayal of Indian culture and civilization, but also for demonstrating how modern circumstances have made it difficult for people to realise their dreams and live a life according to their own preferences<sup>9</sup>.

It should be noted that *In Custody* is a novel that deals with Indian life from a very intimate perspective — it is a novel that symbolises the Indian spirit. Being set in the context of the small town of Mirpore and the big city of Delhi (primarily, the Old Delhi), the novel accurately portrays the small town and big city of India in such a realistic manner that, as we read the novel, we are transported to those cities and times, and experience both the richness and drudgery of these places as well. Despite the fact that the novel deals with Delhi and Mirpore in a realistic manner, the novel has a tremendous depth in terms of being a wonderful psychological study of the individuals in the novel. This means that Anita Desai's novel *In Custody* might be characterised as an examination of both sociological and psychological issues. People know that the nineteenth century is considered to be the golden age of realism, and that the early twentieth century is known for its psychological studies of characters. However, when we read Anita Desai's novels in general, and *In Custody* in particular, we come across both sociological portrayal and extensive psychological study at the same time, which makes the novel truly enigmatic as well as persistent<sup>10</sup>. The topics that the novel is concerned with will be discussed in detail throughout this unit, albeit they are not the only concerns that we will come upon. What this article does is to provide you with a high-level overview of the novel, which will be expanded upon in much

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<sup>8</sup>Prasad, Madhusudan. Anita Desai: The Novelist. Allahabad: New Horizon, 1981.

<sup>9</sup>Gupta, R.K. The Novels of Anita Desai: A Feminist Perspective. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 2002

<sup>10</sup>Pathania, Usha. Human Bonds and Bondages: The Fiction of Anita Desai and Kamala Markandaya. New Delhi: Kanishka Publishing House.

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greater detail later. It is recommended that you first read the original novel in order to fully appreciate the depth of the text, and then proceed to read this article in its entirety. Anita Desai, who holds a prominent position among current writers of Indo-Anglican fiction, is a member of the Anglican Church of England. Anita Desai's stories have a constant theme of alienation between husband and wife, temperamental incompatibility, a sense of hopelessness, and loneliness. Anita Desai makes an attempt to go deep into the dark recesses of the human mind in her novel. She exposes harsh social truths and mentally analyses the characters in her work. Their concerns are never addressed directly by her in her portrayal, and she never attempts to intervene or offer solutions to their problems. She paints a detailed portrait of society, complete with its sorrows, fears, and misery<sup>11</sup>. According to John Koller, a scholar from the United States, "its primary premise is the potential of human freedom from our fragmented, finite, and painful life." She portrays her heroes as being in the midst of an emotional crisis as they struggle to find their own identity in a chaotic society. It is clear to them that they have a strong sense of the past, a pitiable present, and a hopeful future. She embodies the fundamental social structure of a society in her own right. It is via the use of a carefully constructed spatial and temporal matrix that Anita Desai develops the framework for her novel. The characters in her novel *In Custody* have a variety of experiences that are intertwined with respect to time and space limits. Her narrative weaves together time and geography in the context of cultural dynamics.

## 2.2 Portrayal of Themes

After all, Anita Desai is an accomplished artist who not only depicts the outward areas of our existence, but also concentrates on our inner realms, as was previously stated. All of her characters can be considered as objects of psychological studies in their own right. The psychological aspects of the characters such as Deven, Murad, Nur, Sarla, Imtiaz Begum, and others are explored in depth throughout the novel *In Custody*. The stream of consciousness technique that is frequently employed throughout the novel demonstrates that Anita Desai is a master at portraying the inner turmoil and dilemmas of her characters in such a way that the readers can feel the depth of the

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<sup>11</sup>Inamdar, F.A. "Fetters of Illusion: In Custody", Indian Women Novelist. Vol.1 Ed. R.K. Dhawan. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1991.

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abyss that they are in. Throughout the novel, the characters' feelings of hopelessness and isolation, as well as their tiny manipulations and petty mindedness, come to life to such an extent that the novel appears to be a fair description of events and people<sup>12</sup>. To put it another way, it may be argued that Anita Desai, the master craftswoman, has done tremendous honour to her character depictions as well as to the style in which those characters are represented. The novel *In Custody* is set during the post-Partition period, and the vast exodus of Muslims to Pakistan is the primary reason for the progressive decline in interest in the Urdu language as seen throughout the course of the novel. The Urdu Department at Deven's college is small and almost non-existent, which reflects the language's linguistic doom in a clear and obvious way. Deven is described as being indolent and unenthusiastic by those who work with him at the Department of Urdu language. He says that Muslims are abandoning India in order to settle in other countries, and that the Urdu language is becoming increasingly scarce, like "cashew nuts."

Furthermore, the story is replete with references to the concept of Existentialism. This is explained in detail in section 2.2.2 below.

### 2.2.1 Friendship theme

Deven has found that the subject of friendship has been both a blessing and a curse for him.

In spite of his weaknesses, Murad ends up turning out to be a godsend for Deven. His proposal to interview Nur transforms Deven's meaningless existence into one that is full of adventure. Alternatively, the friendship between Deven and Raj appears to be more real and unselfish in nature than others. Despite the distance, Raj is able to assist Deven by giving him a place to stay in Darya Ganj<sup>13</sup>. However, the difficulties Deven is experiencing in his marital life with Sarla appears to be exerting a significant amount of control over Deven's life. She appears to be interfering with his ability to pursue his aspirations. She constantly reminds him that ambitions and passion are insufficient to support a family. Indeed, Deven and Sarla are both locked in an

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<sup>12</sup>Jyer, Sharada, "Anita Desai's in Custody: Deven's Agony and Ecstasy," Critical Responses to Indian Fiction in English. Ed. Amar Nath Prasad. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001

<sup>13</sup>Das, Gurcharan. (2002) "The Elephant Paradigm-India wrestles with change" Penguin books, New Delhi, 2002, (1, 28, 85) (Hereafter the work will be cited as TEP).

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unsatisfying relationship. They are both the victims of an arranged marriage, which they are both ashamed of.

### **2.2.2 Theme of existentialism**

When it comes to representing the novelist's aim, setting plays an important function in the novel. The two environments of Mirapore and Delhi have had a profound impact on the protagonist, Deven, and his life as a whole. They are also intimately associated with one of the novel's primary themes, that of Existentialism, which is explored in depth. In the beginning, Mirapore is introduced as a dirty and encircled town, a land with limited opportunities, whereas Delhi is introduced as a land of hope and fulfilment. Throughout the story, Deven's existence is called into question on a number of different levels. His job as a Hindi Lecturer, as well as his marital life, do not provide him with adequate fulfilment for him. His life in Mirapore appears to have been moulded by Sarla, his wife, and his low-income family background, according to Sarla. He is a failing Hindu Lecturer, a despised husband and parent, and a poor businessman. Nur's interview has given him a reason to feel happy in some way. If he is successful in interviewing Nur, he will not only have a sense of accomplishment, but he will also have a sense of purpose in his life<sup>14</sup>.

### **2.2.3 Theme of linguistic conflict**

After Partition, the novel takes place in Pakistan, and the large number of Muslims who have migrated there has been a major contributing factor to the progressive loss of interest in the Urdu language. The Urdu Department at Deven's college is small and almost non-existent, which reflects the language's linguistic doom in a clear and obvious way. According to reports, Siddiqui, the Head of the Department of Urdu Language, is uninterested and unenthusiastic. He says that Muslims are abandoning India in order to settle in other countries, and that the Urdu language is becoming increasingly scarce, like "cashew nuts." Nur's family is the setting where the linguistic

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<sup>14</sup> Augé, M. (1995). *Non-places. Introduction to anthropology of super modernity*. London / New York: S Verso, (75-115).

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battle is most visible. While Urdu poetry used to be revered and admired, Imtiaz Begum now employs Urdu poetry to amuse drunkards and charlatans at Nur's residence<sup>15</sup>.

### 3. Analysis of Desai's Novel *In Custody*

#### 3.1 Analysis of the Novel's Themes

In Anita Desai's *In Custody*, Deven is “a captive” or trapped on a rollercoaster of epiphanies and disasters. After this thrilling scenario, Deven realises that life has its hurdles to overcome. Life is a rollercoaster of ups and downs. Deven admired Nur and modelled most of his poems on his works. Desai portrays Nur as a magnificent comet that slowly decays into dust, shattering Deven's grandiose hero image. Sarla and Manu also disclosed as two symbols during Deven's rollercoaster ride. Deven subsequently recognises that his mission in life is to collect and preserve Nur's Urdu poetry by overcoming hurdles. These epiphanies and obstacles led to Deven's most crucial conclusion. He learns that the only way to survive is to “learn to live through them”.

Desai's *In Custody* describes Nur as the acme of Urdu poetry. Murad calls him “the [future] star of [his Urdu] issue”. “The light that blazes in the heart and extends its rays to Iran, Iraq, Malaysia, Russia, and Sweden”. Especially when it comes to Deven, the character respects Nur. “To visit [Nur], his hero and chat to him,” Deven says, despite teaching Hindi at Lala Ram Lal College. “A tremendous flood of jubilation rises in him” as Deven enters NurSahib's flat. The ancient broken stairs seemed to him to be dragging him up to meet the deity. This is his first “up” on the rollercoaster plot, as he feels anticipation for the first time. His joy and euphoria were undeniable, but they vanished when he encountered Nur. Nur claims that Urdu is a dead language and that interviewing him for the special edition on Urdu poetry is pointless. Nur questioned Deven if he taught in the Urdu department after he informed him that he taught in the Hindi department. Nur then accuses Deven of being a spy sent by the universities to hunt down and destroy the Urdu

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<sup>15</sup>Prasad, Madhusudan, Anita Desai : The Novelist. Allahabad:

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language. Deven's vision of Nur as god-like, crumbles. It turned out to be merely dust and tragedy, which also describes a downfall on his rollercoaster path<sup>16</sup>.

Sarla and Manu are two distinct characters in Deven's life. Sarla, his wife, represents disillusionment. In the treacherous realm of night-time bacchanalia, revelry, and melodrama, Deven was scared as he returned after his first crushed conversation with Nur. Their world is full of broken dreams. Sarla does not want Deven to escape his defeat and immerse himself in something entertaining or unusual when she is there. Deven's mother and aunts arranged his marriage to Sarla, we learn. They failed to recognise Sarla's dreams. She imagined herself jumping out of a car with a plastic shopping bag full of groceries, running to the phone placed on a lace doily on a three-legged table...behind a flowered curtain. She wished for a perfect American family life; a blissful married life. But after marrying into academia and moving to a small village outside Delhi, her hopes never came true, leaving her bitter. Because her fantasies were obstructed, she developed two dark furrows from her nose to her mouth that were as deep and permanent as surgical scars. He understood her since they were both victims, but they believed that "two victims tried to avoid each other, not yoke together their disappointments". "Hauling away unappealing meals, bawling excessively if their young son was noisy or unwashed," was how he behaved with Sarla. This was an attempt to retaliate against her disappointment. His son, Manu, is another "up" in his path. Deven had another significant realisation when he and Manu went for an evening walk to bond as father and son. For once, he didn't resent his situation, as "the first desolation at his loss was gradually replaced with the awareness that loss had simplified his existence" because he was used to emptiness. His fear of substantial change and its potential influence on his life allowed him to easily "escape from complications with which he would not have known how to contend". Sarla was a big decline in Deven's rollercoaster trip, whereas Manu was an uplifting factor.

During Deven's second visit to Nur, he discovered he was no longer a college professor, but the poet's guardian. But Deven's goals were thwarted by his family, his career, and Nur's wife Imtiaz Begum. With the help of Nur's first wife, he was able to overcome his setbacks. Deven believed he

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<sup>16</sup>Desai, Anita. (2008) *In Custody* (New Delhi: Random House). (Hereafter the work would be cited as IC).

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“[couldn't] lose [his] work, [his] pay, [his] family” after his first failed interview with Nur, but he eventually realised “being confined like an animal” wasn't worth it. Deven understood that Nur's creativity and art were transforming his life and banishing "the formerly static and sluggish backwaters of his existence". Deven's objective was to preserve Nur's poetry, and his family was not going to stand in his way. Imtiaz Begum, Nur's second wife, was also described as a huge hindrance in Deven's life. He assumed his unexpected relationship with Nur would help him to escape his "trapped life", but greater acquaintance with the poet revealed his delusion and that he would merely "bumble into another cage occupied by some other caged animal". Deven thought that meeting Nur would be life-changing, but they were both trapped in cages by their marriages. Like Deven, Nur was caged by his family and job, especially his annoying wife, Imtiaz. Soon after, Deven meets Nur's first wife, who advises him not to let Imtiaz stop him from interviewing Nur. She gave Deven and Nur privacy by hiding the interview from Imtiaz Begum and holding it in another building. Obstacles including his family, job, and Imtiaz Begum stood in the way of “the dear shining horizon”, but they were overcome by Deven's perseverance and Nur's former first wife<sup>17</sup>.

Despite the backing of Nur's first wife, debt troubles and technical issues hampered Deven's interview with Nur. Deven soon learns that life has its ups and downs and that the only way to survive is to fight back. This also ended Deven's wild ride. Nur's first wife gave assistance but demanded payment. “Are poets' families to starve while you and your ilk feast?” she asked Deven. Due to the fee asked by her, Deven was hesitant to continue the interview with Nur, but he decided to finish it. He had borrowed the money from Lala Ram Lal College because he was in debt. Distractions and chatter during the interview disrupted the process. Chiku, Deven's technical assistant, "fumbled with the machine and didn't take any of Nur's verses or memoirs down". In the end, Deven and the college were disappointed. In actuality, the video was mostly made up of meaningless talks during the interview, not Nur's poetry. Deven believes he lost his chance at atonement when he didn't acquire the academic tape. His marriage would be wrecked, and he would lose contact with his co-workers. Because of this, Deven worries being censured or fired

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<sup>17</sup> Rao, Ramachandra B. (1977) *The Novels of Anita Desai*. Ludhiana: Kalyani. 59- 62.

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from his job if the board members see it. Sarla and Manu would be forced to return to her parents' residence while he paid off their accumulated debts, thus damaging his son's perception of him as he sought to patch things up. After Deven's debt problems, he discovers that life has its ups and downs and that the only way to live is to "race to meet them". He realises he lacks structure and form in his life and expects "thorns" to follow. Enough of the generic rollercoaster life for Deven. This realisation also signalled Deven's rebirth. Deven refuses Murad's offer to pay off his debts in exchange for the exclusive rights to Nur's interview footage, proving that he has finally learned to stand up for himself. Deven's function in life changed from a regular Hindi teacher to "custodian of Nur's talent". "[Their] union may be deemed an unendurable burden-or a brilliant honour", he recognised. Deven felt obligated to keep a recording full of tragic memories and tribulations. Towards the end of his rollercoaster experience, Deven accepts that sorrow and anguish will always be part of life.

### 3.2 Analysis of Characters in the Novel *In Custody*

Anita Desai's artistic hallmark is creating memorable characters. Her characters are "haunted protagonists" who live in a world full with fears and anguishes. These characters' angsts are what they fight against in the novel's plot. In *In Custody*, we meet Deven Sharma and Nur Shahjehanabadi. We meet individuals like Sarla (Deven's wife) and Imtiaz Begum, a claimed "female mafia" (second wife of Nur)<sup>18</sup>. The novel's characters are so memorable that once we become familiar with them, we can't imagine life without them. Anita Desai's portrayal transports us from our world to the characters', making us feel their pain and fears.

#### 3.2.1 Status of Urdu language

To write an article for Murad's Urdu magazine *Awaz*, Deven meets legendary Urdu poet Nur Shahjehanabadi, who is the subject of Anita Desai's novel *In Custody*. Interestingly, the novel focuses on Indian art and artistic endeavours, particularly in the Urdu language, which is frequently regarded to be a dying language in India because most people do not speak or use the language in their daily lives or in their literary works. It is the view of poet Nur that the language

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<sup>18</sup>Shukla,HL. (1994) *Semiotical Indica* : Aryan books International, New Delhi.

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of Urdu was extinguished in 1947, and all that remains are its ghosts. Even though he's a little off the mark, poet Nur is probably right in saying that Urdu has lost its pristine glory, which was once considered one of the most refined and polished languages in India. As a result, the novel *In Custody* appears to be an intriguing examination of the state of Indian languages. When reading the novel, one is frequently forced to consider how and why a language that once held such a high regard and had such lyrical value has fallen into such disrepair among its practitioners<sup>19</sup>. To put it another way, the novel is a systematic study of the modern-day practitioners of Urdu in order to explain how the social, political, and cultural context of independent modern India has led to the demise of the language that was once the official language of the country's aristocratic rulers.

### 3.2.2 Character of Deven in the novel

The primary character in the novel is Deven Sharma. He is introduced as a figure who has experienced more disappointments than joy. He reminds readers of Krishna from R.K. Narayan's *The English Teacher*. Deven is a 'two-cigarette' man who is bound by rules. He is compelled to marry Sarla, works at a job he dislikes, and lives in a slum called Mirpore.

Deven feels alive when he speaks Urdu. He is a true lover of Urdu poetry. His intense love for Urdu poetry and especially Nur, the Urdu poet, causes him to break regulations. When he travels to Old Delhi, notably Chandni Chowk, to meet his idol, Nur, he forgets about his family and job commitments. He is "in custody" of Nur, his wives, and most crucially, Murad.

Deven's visits to Nur are symptomatic of his undying love for Urdu poetry. Despite the cacophony at Nur's residence, Deven's devotion of Urdu poetry remains intact. Despite the countless challenges, he is a determined individual.

Deven's character is fascinating because, despite being the novel's protagonist, he resembles an antagonist. He is characterised as being somewhat self-absorbed. His marriage had made him a family slave. His job as a Hindi Lecturer at Lala Ram Lal College helps him support his family. But Murad's offer to interview Nur changed his situation. He is a failed spouse, parent, and Hindi

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<sup>19</sup>Vukanovic, MarijaBrala and Grmusa, LovorkaGruic, ed (2009). *Space and Time in Language and Literature*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, UK.

educator. Modern man is not a hero in the traditional sense. Modern heroes do not fight with swords and win. Modern heroes are a jumble of fractured egos fighting a war with themselves – with the world they live in and its inherent dichotomies<sup>20</sup>. Deven is the same. He is not a hero in the classical sense of the term – he is the main protagonist of *In Custody*. He is someone who is doing his best to overcome the hurdles thrown at him by both society and himself. He is a hero because he can tackle these obstacles, even when they appear not to be brave. An unhappy man battling for a lost cause — for the great debauched Urdu poet Nur – has no chance of winning. He will also be trapped in a miserable and tragic life, since society will not allow him to follow his passion. His love for Urdu language and poetry causes him to suffer in many ways. It is in his suffering – in his capacity of forbearance to those sufferings that Deven is a hero.

Moreover, Deven has no relationship with anyone in this world that can supply him with some relief. Murad manipulates Deven for his own ends. He has a wife with whom he is not very friendly. He is devoted to the poet Nur, who is surrounded by louts and two crafty women, and thus cannot form a real devotee-devoted bond. Thus, Deven suffers from a sense of deep alienation – an alienation which seems to be in verge of taking him down to the abyss. Anita Desai's terrible portrayal of Deven makes us sympathise with him.

### 3.2.3 Character analysis of Nur in the novel

Nur represents the father and protector of Urdu poetry. Readers may see his struggle to preserve Urdu poetry. Despite his talent and dignity, he seems out of place in the crowded, congested, and filthy Chandni Chowk. Nur's life is full with "vultures", "lafangas" and money-hungry people like Imtiaz Begum, his second wife<sup>21</sup>.

The impact Nur has on the “invisible” man, Deven, is what makes Nur's character appealing. The interview inspires Deven to leave the “no-man's” land of Mirpore for the busy Chandni Chowk. Nur is therefore a driving force in Deven's life, rekindling his ambition to pursue his own happiness.

<sup>20</sup> “The Indian Writer’s Problem”, *The Literary Criterion*. Vol.- IX, No. 4, Autumn 1975. 29-32.

<sup>21</sup> Desai, Anita, “Reply to the questionnaire”, *Kakatiya Journal of English Studies*. Vol.- III, No. 1. 1978.

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Nur is also ageing and gluttonous. His excessive food and alcohol consumption is another topic for Deven's interview. Nur is an unsympathetic character who shows little interest in the interview. He looks unaffected by Deven's efforts to arrange the interview. The young fools surrounding him, the food, and even a third wife are more important to him. Readers may wonder who is the true keeper of Urdu poetry.

### 3.2.4 Character analysis of the women in the novel

The novel has three key female characters. They are Sarla, Deven's wife, and Nur's wives Imtiaz and Safia. Anita Desai tends to see the world through a female lens. But in *In Custody* Anita Desai sees the world through the perspective of men, not women. While it may appear that Anita Desai is shifting her viewpoint, the novel's three female characters depict three distinct facets of women. Sarla is a homemaker who is uninterested in Deven's pursuit of Urdu Poetry or Nur. Her marriage to Deven, a college lecturer, thwarts her material ambitions. She has made a deal with herself and accepted that she would never achieve her aspirations in this life, thus she is "naturally embittered."

Imtiaz Begum, Nur's second wife, comes from a prostitute background, but has a natural passion for Urdu language and literature, and calls herself an "intellectual partner" of Nur. She writes poems and desires to be recognised as a poetess, but gets only one chance throughout the novel, when she performs for Nur's fans on her birthday<sup>22</sup>. She is a powerful woman who controls Nur and runs the household according to her whims. The novel's ambitious "new lady".

## 4. Conclusion

A remarkable novelist, Anita Desai is globally famous. She has paved the way for future generations of writers. Anita Desai's literary output over the last five decades has established her as one of the world's top writers. From her childhood to her old age, she has portrayed the commitment, excitement, and self-motivation that society now wants to instil in the new culture. Desai's concerns, such as gender inequality, are universal, especially in the Third World. She

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<sup>22</sup>Belliappa, Meena. *Anita Desai : A Study of Her Fiction*. Calcutta : A Writers Workshop Publication, 1971.

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challenges global societies to reflect on the evolution of their cultures, the changes and advances that have occurred. Her social and cultural inquiry fosters knowledge and assertiveness, especially for women in today's world. Desai has always emphasised the importance of culture and psychology in literature. Thus she has the reputation as the Mother of Indian Psychological Novels. For her thorough depiction of current Indian life, she has earned a position among Indian authors. Desai has written sixteen works of fiction and won the Sahitya Academy Award. Her novels are mostly autobiographical. She never patronised a message or topic. She believed in stating the facts. Her careful representation of female characters' inner feelings is superb.

Anita Desai's works often deal with family conflicts and middle-class women's alienation.

Disparities between generations, practical and emotional exile are all themes in Desai's writing. The vast exodus of Muslims to Pakistan is the fundamental reason for the gradual loss of interest in Urdu language as per the novel *In Custody*<sup>23</sup>. Although Deven and Nur live in a world where they are plagued by pessimism, the novel can be viewed as an optimistic story of their relationship. This is due to the fact that, at the end of the novel, Nur finds for himself a custodian who will breathe into him the reality of his life, and Deven is given the opportunity to take custody of the divine poet whom he almost worshipped. With a single word, it could unlock doors, alter facial expressions, cause dust and cobwebs to vanish, visions to arise, and bathe the room in light. It had led him down paths that would lead him to a different continent, another element altogether. This is an achievement in itself. *In Custody* is a depiction of human lives as they exist in their own exclusive circumstances, of the hypocrisy and pretension that exists inside the human spirit, of the difference between town and city life, of human helplessness and oppression on the path to aspiration.

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<sup>23</sup> Desai, Anita, "Reply to the questionnaire", Kakatiya Journal of English Studies. Vol.- III, No. 1. 1978.

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