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A Study of Female Voices in Anita Desai's '*In Custody*'

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Abstract:

Anita Desai, the most known post-independence Indian woman writer in English mostly concerns the questions of survival and existence of women in her novels. The present article aims to trace the articulation of resistance in term of gender. Anita Desai has been strong voice in portraying Indian women's life, their struggles against patriarchal and colonial oppression. Desai's '*In Custody*' is suffused with her feministic consciousness and it showcases her understanding of female psychology and experience at its best. Desai criticizes traditional society and focuses on a pathetic male character 'Deven' whose wife despises his inability to succeed financially. As the male characters in '*In Custody*' are trapped in unsuccessful life, the female characters have even more right to feel frustrated with a patriarchal society that reduces them to clinging to these men who cannot provide them with what they want.

Keywords: Patriarchy, male-dominance, female resistance, trap-custody.

Post-Independence Indian English fiction gained a notable place in world-wide English literature. The birth of English novel in India is, to some extent, the result of historical, political, social and cultural incidents. Indian struggle for independence, Gandhian Movement and Partition of India are the three major incidents which encouraged the birth and growth of English novel. After 1970s the themes were extended to East-West conflict, multi-culturalism, social realism, gender-issues, comic aspect of human nature, magic realism, diasporic writing, etc. The works by the women writers critique the novels of awareness of modern India. Their writings bring to light the hardships women faced, who usually did not inherit money, could not work and where their only chance in life depended on the man they

married. Anita Desai was one of the respective novelists of this period. Some of her best-known works are set against India and abroad. Her works 'Fasting-feasting' (1999), Journey to Ithaca (1995), Baumgartner's Bombay (1988), In Custody (1984), Cry the Peacock (1963), are known for Social realism, patriarchy, women and their struggle etc. Desai always tried to unravel the various assumptions about women, their conflicts, feelings, positions, and their aspirations. '*In Custody*' is a novel written by Anita Desai in 1984. Its theme is about the searching for identity and meaning in life.

The title '*In Custody*' represents the way that characters in the fiction are figuratively trapped in their lives. The inner selves of characters in combination with external social forces make them feel imprisoned. This is Anita Desai's second novel to be short-listed for Booker Prize. It marks a "conscious" shift in her writing. Anita Desai is not interested in registering surface realities of Indian life. Instead she is interested in the probing of inner truths lying under the surface level. In order to present submerged psychic truth she employs various linguistic devices. In the earlier novels Anita Desai concentrated on the internal consciousness of the Individual on the other hand '*In Custody*' depicts a world beyond the individual. This novel has a male-protagonist Deven Sharma, who comes from a lower middle-class family and who seeks to reach out into a wider world in the hope of self-fulfillment. He is a lecturer in Hindi in a college in Mirpore, a small town near Delhi. He is portrayed as an average man completely lacking in initiative because of his timidity. He is portrayed as a different and awkward hero, who feels himself a victim of circumstances. As a protagonist he is seen thrown from one problem to another, without getting any solution or relief.

Though the protagonist of the novel is male character, the present study focuses on the portrayed of women and female instances of resistance and the spaces through which they manage to survive in a male-dominated, post-Independence Indian Society. The oppression and marginalization brought about by the colonial condition has provided a space for feminism and post-colonialism to move in parallel as discourses of resistance, since they both share the mutual aim of challenging modes of oppression. '*In Custody*' is primarily, in terms of plot and narrative, the story of Deven, a lover of Urdu poetry. The women in the world of '*In Custody*' are sealed in silence. By silencing the women, Desi rather than convincing with patriarchal structures of thought, is raising an accusing finger at a society, which, by cultural default, believes in the marginalization and subordination of women, enforcing them to remain shackled within the bounds of an imposed stereotype. Anita Desai in one of her interviews stated her initial intention of not including women characters in her '*In Custody*':

I thought I would try to write without any female characters, but it proved impossible. I could hear them screaming in the background, banging on the doors, being very hysterical.

I asked myself, "Why I made all these women so awful?" and I thought, "Well if that was the house they were made to live, they would probably be awful."

The women in the '*In Custody*' are sealed in silence still they speak lot through their narrative and action. While the novel '*In Custody*' is mostly male oriented, it cannot be denied that the female characters have decisive roles to play in I. there are three major women characters – Deven Sharma's wife Sarla, Nur's older wife Safiya Begum, his second younger wife Imtiaz Begum. There are several minor women characters such as: Raj's widowed aunt, the wife of Principal, the female customer of the tailor, unnamed prostitutes of the house, Mrs. Bhalla and the other widows who pass Deven's house in the course of their early morning procession. These women are part of the weakest and most exploited social groups – housewives, widows and prostitutes. Desai has represented the social reality of Indian women's life in the 1980s which is suffered under the patriarchal male dominance and gender-power politics. Domestic space is the specific arena for the women's exploitation. It is succinctly revealed in the novel through Deven Sharma and Nur's families. Sarla, Safiya Begum and Imtiaz Begum lead dismal lives in physical, material and emotional terms. These female characters are mostly secondary ones but there is certainly a common denominator in their portrayals: they all are strong wives who seem to exert control over their husbands.

Deven Sharma and Sarla's marriage is arranged marriage. Sarla is not Deven's choice. She has been chosen as his life partner by his mother and aunts. They are very crafty and cautious women. Sarla was the daughter of Deven's aunt's friend. Sarla lived near about Deven's Aunt's house so she knew her well. Desai writes. "...they had observed her for years and found her suitable in every way, plain, penny-pinching and congenitally pessimistic (P.75). Sarla is living a marooned life with Deven. Deven has been more a poet and she seemed two prosaic. She is othered by Deven. There is no mutual understanding among them; both are emotionally at logger heads. Sarla being tired of this relation is silenced permanently. Still there is a string influence of Sarla on Deven's life. Sarla power over Deven can be seen from the above mentioned opening lines of the novel. Her 'penny pinching' traits have been permeated into Deven turning him into a "two cigarette man". Deven even thinks so intensely before spending his own earned money. He would rather have home-made food rather than canteen food. Her empowered features also seem to go against the orthodox, patriarchal Indian society which believes that husbands should be the controlling ones not vice-versa.

Murad is Deven's good friend and helps him in interviewing Nur, the great Urdu poet. But as a guest, Deven is unable to provide hospitality to Murud. His hesistance to buy lunch for Murud actually shows the power of Sarla over hm. She might not have the power restraining Deven's travelling back and forth between Mirpore and Delhi but she certainly contributes in bringing him back to Mirpore at the end of the novel. Despite these praiseworthy traits, Sarla is a victim of her thwarted dreams. Her arranged marriage to Deven seems to have brought- more disappointments than achievements in her life. Their martial relation is more a 'love-less one'. Manu, their son might actually be the only string holding them together. She is an unhappy wife. She had dreamed having a home filled with a phone, a Frigidaire and all luxuries but it remained as dream only. She feels unfortunate wife as she feels abandoned by a husband who seems to be more interested in poetry than his family life. But Sarla never lifted her voice in Deven's presence, countless generations of Hindu

womanhood stood in her way, preventing her from displaying open rebellion. Deven knew she would scream and abuse only when she was safely out of the way, preferably in the kitchen, her own domain. Her other method of Defense was to go into bedroom and refusing to speak at all, inciting their child to wait in sympathy (P.169).

The second noteworthy female character is Imtiaz Begum. The young wife Nur, shares the same over-powering characteristics of Sarla. She has effectively used her young and beauty to go from a prostitute of chandni chowk to become the wife of well-known Urdu poet Nur. Like Sarla she seems to have imposed limit on her husband. She actually becomes a major hurdle for Deven's interview with Nur. She snatches the freedom of speech and movement from Nur. Her acting skills, enchanting beauty and her youth are her main weapons and these qualities certainly make her an impressive female character. Her strength also lies in her ability to move from being a prostitute to a begum. To Deven she is a mere monkey, mechanically practicing the tricks, she has learnt from the great Nur. Blossoming under the tutelage of Nur, Imtiaz manages over a few years to establish her reputation as a poet. She has stolen the Nur's talent of Urdu poetry. Nur accuses her of stealing his poetic jewels, his admirers, his fame and even his poetic space:

‘... she wanted my house, my audience, my friends.

She raided my house, stole my jewels... those are

What she wears now as she sits before an audience,

Showing them off as her own (P. 89)’

A prostitute from a dancing house, Imtiaz Begum, renowned for her singing skills but prized only for her body, gets admission through her budding poetic abilities into Nur's heart and home. Nur gradually hates Imtiaz for her cunningness and superiority over him. Nur neglected her when sick. Imtiaz's illness whether real or feigned, enables her to play the stereotypical role of the weak woman, needing the physical and emotional support of her husband and entirely dependent upon him for her very being existence and identity. But she failed to get this support from Nur and even from his first wife, an old woman Sophiya. Women also are the social truth of Indian society is represented by Desai in her *'In Custody'*.

The third significant female character portrayed in *'In Custody'* is Nur's first wife Sophiya Begum. Sophiya Begum is the old wife of Nur, though appearing very briefly in the novel has a rather vital role in the interviews process. She is mostly referred not as Sophiya Begum but as the old woman and this might have been intentionally done by Anita Desai in order to accentuate on her old age. she is neglected by Nur when she lost her youth, charm and beauty and he married the young, charming, beautiful Imtiaz. Polygamy is acceptable in the Muslim traditions and her character is used to highlight the lustful character of Nur. Her old age and may be the fact that she bore a daughter might have been disadvantageous to her. The reality is that in male-dominant Indian society sons are preferred than daughters.

Deven does not have faith either in Safia Begum or Imtiaz Begum. He takes Safia as a snake, an imposter who has stolen her husband's verse. According to him Imtiaz is also a

problematic character. He hates her as she has taken away everything of Nur. Sarla and Safiya Begum are kindred souls – hardworking women, emotionally unacknowledged by their husbands and rendered coarse by years of self-abnegation. But while her age has given Sofiya Begum the relative freedom to voice her disgust to her husband's face and says:

“Did he marry me to make me live in a pigsty with him?” (P.58)

It shows the inner helplessness and hatred of Sophia for her husband Nur. Marriage is portrayed as a yoke under which both the sexes suffer shared victimhood and yet it is only the men, used to satiety, who have the freedom to react to their dissatisfaction, while for women victimization remains the norm. Desai not only portrayed the misery of married life but widowed women's misery also. Mrs. Bhalla and her other widowed friends are disliked by Deven and other neighbours. Deprived of all rights, to hope, joy and contentment; they lead as 'colourless lives' as their colourless garments and have to find their salvation in religious and philanthropic services.

Evidently throughout the narrative of 'In Custody' the relationship between male and female characters emerges as a hierarchical relationship and shares the same inequalities of the hierarchical relationship and shares the same inequalities of the hierarchical relationship of colonizer and colonized. Desai manages to create a subaltern character screaming from the margins of the very narrative form of her novel. By making her women silent and articulating them through male thought-processes Desai is uncovering the ways in which womanhood as a whole is defined in terms of male desire and are exploited in all possible manners – physically, emotionally, philosophically and verbally.

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