



## Psychological Conflict in Anita Desai's "In Custody"-A critical study.

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### Abstract:

Anita Desai, the most known post-independence Indian woman writer in English. *In Custody* is widely discussed novel from various angles of literary theories. This paper depicts a picture of inner psyche of existential characters in Anita Desai's fiction *In Custody*. She has consciously examined the difficult situation and psyche of women in isolation. Anita Desai depicts the life of Devan, a lecturer in Hindi. Imagination, illusion, fantasies, wish- fulfilment, disappointment, fear, obsession & isolation finds in the story, which creates psychological conflict.

The novel "*In Custody*" reflects Devan's love for Urdu poetry and his fantasy on the great hero Nur leads him to sadness, hopelessness and often helplessness. Devan's dream clashes with the realism of Nur the Urdu poet. This prediction leads her to examine the psyche of her character and draws her gaze towards the aspects of life. The paper entitled Psychological Conflict in Anita Desai's "*In Custody*".

**Key Words:** Psychological Conflict, Isolation, Realism, fantasy and obsession.

### Introduction:

Anita Desai is one of the most significant Novelists of the Twentieth century. Her preoccupation is explored by the deep psychic of her character. She has shown her craftsmanship in her novels like *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), *Voices in the City* (1965), *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), *In Custody* (1964), *FastingFeasting* (1998), and *The Zigzag way* (2004). Desai herself states that "*In Custody*" is an attempt to symbolize the decay of the Urdu language. This novel was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. The protagonist of this novel, Devan Sharma comes from a lower-middle-class family. He is a junior lecturer in Hindi literature, at Mirapore a small town near Delhi in a provincial college. He endures the pangs of abortive pursuits in professional and domestic life. He seeks to reach out into a wider world in the hope of self-fulfillment. Desai depicts him as an average man who lacks initiative traits due to his timid nature. He leads an unhappy domestic life with his wife Sarala and small son Manu. He considers himself a failure and thinks of his existence as that of one caught in "*a cruel prison*" (p.19). Unable to stop one night, he paces up and down thinking that,

*“... he must look like a caged animal in a zoo... And that was all he was – a trapped animal. In his youth, he had the illusion of having free will, not knowing he was in a trap. Marriage, a family and a job had placed him in this cage; now there was no way out of it. The unexpected friendship with Nur had given him the illusion that the door of the trap had opened and he could escape after all into a wider world that lay outside but a closer familiarity with the poet had shown him that what he thought of as ‘the wider world’ was an illusion too...” (p.131).*

### **Illusion and Reality:**

The story revolves around Devan, His feelings and his excitement when he gets the chance to interview the greatest and living Urdu poet Nur Shahjehanabadi. Devan’s love for Urdu language is an illusion whereas his job as Hindi Lecturer is the realism. Always it is a battle between mind and heart, illusion and reality.

Anita Desai depicts very impressively the conflict between fantasy and realism in the novel *“In Custody”*. The class situation forces the hero to enter into fantasies of sudden wealth, unexpected cheques and acceptance in the literary circles of the metropolis.

### **Psychic balance, wholeness and inner self:**

Deven, the protagonist of the novel *“In Custody”* presents the stage in psychic balance and wholeness. He stands at a crossroad, not knowing where to turn to. In the end, he finds strength in his inner self and restores to face life as it comes to him. Throughout the novel, socio-economic factor colours his personality and molds his psyche.

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. To present submerged psychic truth, she employs various linguistic devices.

### **Resistance of female character in male-dominated Indian Society:**

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. As we know, he is a lecturer in Hindi at 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.

### **Marginalization and Subordination of women:**

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.

### **Frustrated quest for idealism:**

Evidently throughout the narrative of 'In Custody' the relationship between male and female characters emerges as a hierarchal relationship and shares the same inequalities of the hierarchal relationship and shares the same inequalities of the hierarchal 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.

Desai depicts the picture of village roads, temples, houses, wells and villages very minutely. She points out the conflict between illusion and reality by depicting the changed picture of village, killing the calm and healthy past life. Devan memorizes those days full of enjoyment at the background of industrial world. The reference of Nur and his thoughts, "*The first white hair on a man's head appearing like a white flower out of grave.*" (p.26) indicates the fantasy avoiding the realism. The clash between illusion and reality showed very cleverly in the following line.

*"Life is no more than a funeral procession winding towards the grave, its small joys, the flowers of funeral wreaths..."* (p.26).

### **New courageous "self":**

*In Custody*, Desai however like her earlier novels ends up with positive note. Devan is able to perceive a ray of hope even in his boundless suffering and humiliation. Towards the end of the novel, he becomes convinced. The sunlight dissolving the darkness of the night before is symbolic of the emergence of new courageous "self" of Devan dispersing his previous timid, vulnerable self.

*Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society – Simone De Beauvoir* presented the thematic problem of man-woman relationship, the importance of love in marriage. Although the theme of husband-and-wife alienation and marital disharmony is not a new theme in the novels of women writers, but with depth of the writing of Desai it gains new depth and meaning. In her novels, Desai points out the incompatibility of man and woman in carrying out their marriage, love, compatibility due to the predicament of modern world tension and stressful life. Women always shown to long for love and communion of the spirit with their partners who tend to reciprocate their feelings.

### **Conclusion:**

Nur is representation of illusion for Devan. However, his journey of realisation passes through a series of illusionary intervals. "In Custody" offers a subtle transcendence of existence which is quite symbolic of a convergence of all contradictory pulls. It shows multiple psychological conflicts. Her fiction is symbolic, sensitive and psychological.

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