



In Custody: Quest for a Dignified Existence

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Abstract— *In Custody* is the story of a married young man, a Hindi college teacher, Deven Sharma, making vain efforts to establish his identity by doing something new and different: to get the interview of a very famous poet Nur Shahjehan badi published in a magazine. But this does not happen to be an easy task; he has to face a number of complexities that stupefy him. He gets trapped in a number of situations where he feels helpless and hopeless. He, unable to reconcile between his dreams and disillusionments, ultimately faces failure. The present paper makes an attempt to trace the journey of this young man trying hard to cope up with the circumstances, unfavourable to him, in order to prove his worth in a narrow minded self-centered society. His journey is full of dreams and disillusionments, hopes and frustrations, communication and lack of communication. However, by the end of the novel he gains some respite to console himself.

Keywords— *identity, isolation, predicament, self.*

The thematic concern in Anita Desai's *In Custody* (1984) is the mystery of human predicament, the mystery that shrouds the nature of world and nature of human destiny. The novel is a burning epitome of a life-history caught in the morass of mean and impoverished existence, yearning to redeem it. Deven, the hero of this novel, is duped and deceived in a project that brings him ultimate ruin and disaster. It explores an extraordinary and unique individual life that sets to attain Himalayan glory but finds relegated to the nadir of a stormy sea. Mrs. Desai brings out existential predicament by delineating the unfortunate experiences, the joys and sorrows, and the enduring conflicts of Deven Sharma. It is all delineated in the true vein of an existentialist writer and a philosopher.

The novel unravels the story of a different, awkward, credulous and disingenuous character, Deven Sharma, who is a Hindi teacher in a private college in a suburban area of Delhi, Mirpore. He is ambitious of interviewing a famous Urdu poet, Nur, and publishing this interview in his friend, Murad's Urdu magazine, but is unluckily overcome by his helplessness and timidity. The whole narrative keeps moving, back and forth, between

Deven's dreams and disillusionments, his success and failure, his enthusiasm and vacillation and the final disaster into which he lands. The novel opens with his friend Murad, now editor of 'Awaz', an Urdu magazine, asking Deven to interview Nur Shahjehanbadi for a special number of its forthcoming issue. Deven readily agrees to undertake this important and honourable job of interviewing the great poet, his hero, at his residence in Chandhi Chowk, Delhi.

However, Deven does not possess the confidence and courage to rise equal to the occasion. He thinks that it is some sort of madness which carries him to Delhi for a task which he is incapable of doing. He feels that he has neither qualification nor experience for this challenging pursuit. However, he reaches Delhi with an introductory letter from Murad, so that he can hold a formal meeting with the Urdu post. He is full of apprehensions because he feels a great poet like Nur will not see him. But, finally, he decides to meet the poet hesitatingly, being escorted by a boy of Murad's office.

When he faces Nur at his residence, he is stunned to find that the poet, whom he so greatly admired and

adored as God, lived among “the louts, *lafangas* of the *bazaar* world” and his second wife, named Imtiaz Begum, earlier belonged to a whorehouse. The meeting is not very successful. After his first unsatisfactory and unsuccessful meeting with Nur, on his way back to Mirpore in the bus, Deven’s mind oscillates between his aspiration for poetry and its illusory nature:

Henceforth he would avoid that mirage, that dream that so easily twisted into nightmare. Any reality was preferable, he told himself, even if it was the smeared window of a country bus bumping along the rutted roads homewards. (*In Custody*, 63)

Defeated aims, frustrated ends, and thwarted wishes take away the light from the heart of man and fill it with gloomy darkness that benumbs the spirit and freezes the morale. The sagging heart fails to realize the bubbling strength and tremendous potency inherent in the being. A molehill appears unscalable mountain to him. In such a situation Deven weighs and considers himself.

No all he could measure up to was this—this shabby house, its dirty corners, its wretchedness and lovelessness. Looking around it, he felt himself sag with relief and gratitude. At the same time his shoulders dropped in defeat. (*In Custody*, 67)

The familial and social factors are no less responsible for the drooping spirits of Deven. As a child, he has watched closely the bitter asthmatic father for his failure in coming up to his expectations. The condition and experiences of his childhood and youth turn him live in a very low profile. His childhood experiences generate in him powerful complaint tendencies. We have its glimpse in his encounter with Murad in the college. While Murad is free and frank even in an alien atmosphere where he is only a casual visitor, Deven who belongs to it, appears subdued and inferior. He becomes nervous while talking to Murad. He feels embarrassed and cannot tolerate his students staring at him. The forces working in him side by side show his tendency to subordinate himself to the wishes of others. There is a conflict in him between his idealized self and actual self.

Deven, self-minimising and self-reducing as he is, cannot make assertive or expansive moves. He avoids triumph or success because it is presumptuous. He places taboos on his thoughts and feelings. So acute and unconscious is his self-minimising attitude that he dubs himself a fool in his first encounter with Nur. To Nur’s irritated query, “fool, are you a fool?”, Deven’s ready

response is “Sir, I am! This cannot be termed only as his confused and perturbed state of mind, nor can it be assigned to his oblivious joy at finding himself in Nur’s presence. It is an indication of his moronic condition owing to the effect of shrinking his personality to a nullity. The situation is comic and imparts a lighter touch to the novel’s rhetoric. At a deeper level it is an unconscious fear at having to face greatness personified. The unconscious reaction is to cut short his presumptuousness and feel small and ineffective. This suits his temperament—a suffering, victimized self as he is. After his first visit to Nur, Deven decides to abandon the ideas of having to continue the interview because the sordid aspect of Nur’s personal life is too unpalatable for him. He cannot reconcile with contrast between Nur’s personal life and his artistic excellence. Moreover, forsaking the project is a face-saving device which suits his temperament and simplifies his existence:

He had made a timely escape from complexities with which he would not have known how to contend. Compared to the horror of that threat, this grey anonymity was sweet. (*In Custody*, 71)

Dread pervades the whole universe. A terror from an undefinable source threatens and haunts man’s existence in the world. Martin Heidegger believes that dread reveals nothing. The very concept of nothing as limiting force presupposes the existence of being that transcends its all-engulfing jaws of ensuing annihilation. In moments of blissful solitude man experiences an inner urge to shatter the shackles of his imprisonment and break the bars of his caged life. Deven, in his second attempt to meet the distinguished Urdu poet for recording an interview, comes across Nur’s wife singing before a crude gathering of wanton men and women. What he gathers is that she is sad at the core of her heart. Deven discovers the kinship between the lady and himself:

When Deven brought himself to listen to a line or two, it was just as he thought: she said she was a bird in a cage, that she longed for flight that her lover waited for her. She said the bars that held her were cruel and unjust, that her wings had been hurt by beating against them and only God could come and release her by lifting the latch on the cage door, God in the guise of her lover. When would he come? She languished, panting for the clouds that would carry him to her and the rain that would requite her thirst. (*In Custody*, 82)

Deven oscillates between his dual thoughts and actions. On the one hand, he decides not to involve himself any further with this affair, on the other, he is driven to Nur with a devotional attitude. His conscious mind is repulsed by Nur, the man; whereas his unconscious mind still pushes him towards Nur, the poet. In the face of all odds, despite humiliations, Deven reaches the poet in all devotion, sitting cross-legged at his feet, caressing his slippers. In fact, Nur, the poet, represents to Deven all that he has idealized in himself. He does not wish to blur this image because if this happens, his glorified self will also be shattered. He comes to Nur again and again to resurrect his hero from the debris of his previous meeting. Deven's visit to Nur is hallowed by a dignity and glory which, in fact, the poet lacks.

In other words, we can say that Deven's visit to Nur is his quest for dignified identity. He does not know that in this search for greatness, the ordinary, dismal and sordid aspects of life cannot be evaded because they constitute reality. Only towards the end of the novel, trapped from all sides, does he recognize his true self when he rises above his confusion and finds a joyous affirmation in life. Till this moment, he feels caged because, by turning to Nur, he tries to fill the void between his real self and his idealized self.

His dependence on Nur enfeebles his inner strength. As all his powers to think, feel and act are related to an outside factor, he is unable to express his individual potential. He ever needs a support and that is why there is blockage of spontaneity in him. Lacking spontaneous responses, Deven entraps himself further into compulsive activities. If he accedes to Murad's requests, he feels weak and angry with himself; if he does not, he is gripped by his own worthlessness because it entails having betrayed a friend. Murad, who has always exploited him and has never paid for his book-reviews and poems, has caught weak aspects of Deven's personality and known how to manipulate things to his own advantage. But Deven is fully aware of Murad's tricks and his deceptive ways. He knows that Murad can betray him. At one place in the novel he broods that it has been foolish on his part to trust Murad:

Deven set bemused upon a wooden stool in the shadows, watching Murad pass through one act after another like some chameleon giving a bravura performance. Considering the full range of his moods and shifts in temper, his contradictions and discrepancies, he wondered why he had trusted his words....(*In Custody*, 34)

But the irony is that he, unable to make himself get rid of Nur or Murad, is bound to suffer the pangs of everlasting conflict.

Through the life-episode of the protagonist in the novel Anita Desai takes us to peep into the very scheme of human life in the world. Changes are so sudden and trends are so drifting that the worldly way, *in toto*, remains baffling to the human intellect: palaces are raised sky-high in moments and sky-scrapers are seen dashing to the ground in no time. Every moment something is gained and something is lost, something is attained and something missed. The human destiny is locked in such a see-saw game of joys and sorrows, victory and defeats, hopes and despairs. It appears to Deven that Murad, Mr. Siddiqui, Nur's first wife and his students are for his rescue and support, but they all are inclined towards him in order to take advantage of him. He is an easy prey to their tactics. He needs them and looks up to them helplessly for encouragement and support, and feels relieved when his burden is shared. There are a few of his expressions typifying his defeatism: "No one ever listens me," "My hard work leads nowhere, to nothing, Nothing" (*In Custody*, 185). A sense of discomfort hangs about him persistently. He is overpowered by doubts and his reply is "I can't" to every new venture. When Murad chides him for such trepidations, he gains a semblance of confidence and struggles to make some headway in the project. His timidity and inefficacy go to such an extent that he cannot even buy the tape-recorder, leave alone operating it. It appears to him once that the college would finance for the tape-recorder required for his project. But in twinkling of an eye he realizes that his advocates for the cause have gone with the wind. This is how he feels:

Deven was not unacquainted with disappointments and anti-climaxes, with delays and diversions. It did not surprise him at all that the unusual success of his conversation with him at all that the unusual success of his conversation with Siddiqui, passing with such unfamiliar rapidity from doubt to interest and enthusiasm, should have been dashed within minutes upon the story insensitivity and crudity of his colleagues who had forced them apart and prevented them from pursuing this new association. (*In Custody*, 103-104)

It is not that the bad weather ever persists and winter ever lasts; the sun also shines and summer too comes. But very tender and susceptible is the inner kernel of man's heart—he laughs in success and weeps in failure.

The moment Deven comes to know that the tape-recorder has been duly sanctioned by the office and his proposal totally accepted, he is filled with radiance and gaiety. Happiness transforms his customary outlook and helps fresh vision blossom. Deven now thinks over the course that things have taken:

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. Yes, these college grounds, these fields of dust, these fences of rusted barbed 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, all would be left behind, and he would move on into the world of poetry and art. (*In Custody*, 105-106)

The worldly scheme of human life is permeated by time. The molehill and the mountain, the grain of sand and boundless sea and sky are all encompassed by the compelling presence of time. Nothing escapes its impact, nothing remains untouched by its onslaughts. Clock ticks and cycle of birth and death, smile and tears, starts. The process of destruction and preservation goes on in human existence. Time effaces and obliterates, life recovers and recuperates. Regarding time, Anita Desai comments:

I wanted to have as palpable an existence as the spatial world perceived by the five senses. I wanted time to be an element, like light, or darkness that is pervasive, and that is perceived by the characters as music is heard, scents smelled, food tasted, texture felt, sight seen a part of their everyday consciousness. (Anita Desai, 224)

Time threatens life with annihilation. Ultimately, it leads human existence to its virtual end. Nur Shahjehanbadi, the Urdu poet of the novel, affirms it:

Before Time crushes us into dust we must record our struggle against it. We must engrave our name in the sand before the wave comes to sweep it away and make it a part of the ocean. (*In Custody*, 113)

Deven aspires for a dignified existence, he travails. To wrest name and fame and to get his confirmation as a lecturer, he is induced by his friend and publisher, Murad and tempted with an allurement to have a

published article to his credit in the special number of the magazine. But the dream never materializes; the taped interview with the poet remains a fiasco. He is humiliated, cheated, bullied and thrown away. This is the harshest reality of human existence. Deven describes his plight and suggestively conveys the hidden failures, obstacles, agonies and futility lurking in his life:

Every effort he had made had ended in defeat: most of the poems he had written and sent to Murad had been rejected, his monograph never published, his wife and son eyed him with blatant disappointment, nor had he won the regard of his colleagues or students. The inherent weakness in his father that had made him an ineffectual, if harmless, teacher and householder had been passed on to him. He felt it inside him like an empty hole, one he had been staring at all his years, intimidated by its blackness and blankness. Even his attempt to fill it with a genuine and heartfelt homage to a true poet, a man who had distinguished himself as he would have liked to do, had been defeated by all the obstacles that sprang up in his life like shards and pebbles sent up at every step. It was one more blow, and perhaps the bitterest of all. (*In Custody*, 128)

Almost every individual in this world is in custody. His being is immured, trapped and caged. Freedom from agonies, anxieties, wants and cares is a mirage. Every stage and category of human life is dissatisfying and taxing one. Man cherishes an inner urge to transcend the imposed limitations over his being and attain the blissful state of solitude. But the conflict inherent in being and non-being, self and no-self, soul and matter, world and individual will not let man taste the nectar of pure being. That is why he is condemned to be caged and doomed to be haunted. Deven unravels this harsh reality of life, imprisoned as it is, within the shackles of frustrations and failures:

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.... (*In Custody*, 137)

Throughout the narrative, Deven feels like a trapped animal. Marriage, friendship and even his friendship with Nur appear to him a cage of problems and he is to face these problems without any flicker of success.

The novel ends with a positive note. When all support is withdrawn, Deven explores his own potentials. Made wise and imparted a philosophical outlook by misery and sufferings he is certain that "perhaps when everyone had cut him off and he was absolutely alone, he would begin to find himself and his own strength" (*In Custody*, 189-90). He discovers the ineluctable reality of existence that positive freedom can be gained by removing the blockage on inner dynamism of life, and is able to live as an independent individual. He perceives that his strength lies within, not without. He is able to resolve the conflict between Nur, the poet, and Nur, the man, in his mind:

When he remembered the joy of hearing his voice and listening to him quote poetry, then quoting his lines back to him, binding them together in web, an alliance, he knew this was what he would have to recover, to retrieve. If he could do that it would give him a reason, and strength, to survive whatever came. He had to believe that.... That friendship still existed, even if there had been a muddle, a misunderstanding. He had imagined he was taking Nur's poetry into safe custody, and not realized that if he was to be custodian of Nur's genius, then Nur would become his custodian and place him in custody too. This alliance could be considered an unendurable burden--or else a shining honour. Both demanded on equal strength. (*In Custody*, 203)

Other characters in the novel that deserve mention are Deven's wife, Sarla, Nur and his two wives, and Mr. Siddiqui. All of them, in one way or the other, seethe in the cauldron of existential agony. Sarla is the stereotype of Indian wife. As Deven's bride, she is his mother's and aunt's choice. The couple's marital and material ambitions are unfulfilled. Moreover, she is anguished as she has no charm in her life except tedium and boredom. Her husband has failed to cater to her material needs. Her aspirations were suppressed, which filled her with resentment and a sense of frustration. For satisfaction, Deven takes recourse to poetry but she has nothing. Though living together, they cannot properly communicate with or belong to each other.

Nur is portrayed as a superhuman poet. But, he is not all angelic. In the past, he was connected with nonentities and bad characters. His suffering from piles indicates his libertine irregular eating habits. His love of pigeons ennobles him and connects him with ancient Muslim nobility. In Chandni Chowk, in his own room on the terrace, he is the presiding deity of poetry, and all the chaotic audience are like obscure fairies of the literary sky. Many of the miniature poets recite their verses to Nur for his appreciation and guidance and Nur plays, comically, the role of the director of Urdu poets. His second wife, Imtiaz Begum, is composed of two opposite elements, fascination and jealousy, for the poet. By her intellect, beauty, skill in singing and dancing, she has won the heart of Nur. The husband-wife isolation is much obvious as she tries to stop the usual poetic sessions of Nur at the terrace, and plots against his publicity, interview and book-publication on him. She adores and hates Nur for his superior talent. Helpless Nur, knowing the fangs of her venomous malice, is yet in love with her and cannot go against her will. Foppery, pretensions and stratagems characterize her nature.

To receive appreciation and assert her superiority over Nur she celebrates her birthday and sings verse composed by her to Nur's admirers. She uses all the tricks of a dancer to win the audience with her relatives planted in it to praise her. Nur revolts against his wife's vain glory and retires, as he feels that his 'jewels' are taken away by her. Her driving away of Nur's secretary is another example of conspiratorial rivalry. Safia Begum's accusation of Imtiaz makes it clear: "You have taken his name and his reputation and today even his admirers" (*In Custody*, 90). Imtiaz Bibi's hatred of Nur's *chelas* and desire to take away his glory are known to Safia Begum. Her letter to Deven confirms the intention of placing her (Imtiaz) in the rank of great poets through critics like Deven.

Safia Begum is a simple, pragmatic and humble character. She cooks, cleans, washes and manages Nur's household. But being illiterate and unsophisticated, she could not be an intellectual companion to Nur or Imtiaz. She has perfect clarity of mind and knows Imtiaz's role in Nur's life. She feels greatly infuriated when she sees Nur being harmed and humiliated by Imtiaz Bibi.

Mr. Siddiqui, related with the family of Nawab of Mirpore, with a crumbling palatial house, is extravagant and wide-hearted like Nawabs. He heads the withering Urdu Department. But he is resourceful and worldly wise and takes Deven out of his impasse. He celebrates his Eden while presiding over a party of feasting, drinking and gambling.

Mrs. Desai dramatizes Deven's moments of crisis by reflecting the banality of the surrounding life. His loneliness, rootlessness, paralyzing helplessness, sense of isolation and deplorable existence are evoked through various symbols and images: nature, the city, the house, and the circus animals. The natural scene through which he comes across during his journey from Mirpore to Delhi prefigures his mental condition and his blurred future. His journey to Delhi to gain material prosperity leads our mind to the material development attained by industrialization. The evils of industrialization symbolizing concrete, zinc, smoke, pollutants, decay and destruction have obliterated a pleasant agricultural aspect. Deven's dry and drab existence of driving uncertainty, of despair, of increasing desperation is objectified by the nature that he beholds around him. The depiction of the landscape symbolizes his caged existence and isolation.

The image of water serves as a symbol of Deven's mental perturbation and his tortured life. During his morning walk beside canal, he wishes that it would have been good if his students were to emerge and stab him. The void and dreariness of his existence are reflected in the water. Deven's stopping at the canal bank and staring at the water—turning concentrically in a whirlpool—is a symbol of his inescapable imprisoned life.

The sun image symbolizes hope and reality for Deven. On the morning on which Deven's final attempt of seeking Nur's interview is turned into a failure, the sun rises in a sharp, clear atmosphere. It also symbolizes his gaining of inner strength and dignity: "The sky was filling with a grey light that was dissolving the dense blackness of night". (*In Custody*, 204)

The city is an objectification of Deven's plight. It symbolizes Deven's place of trap and imprisonment. It is used to measure as much his dry and drab existence as to prove the unnatural disorder and corruption in things and people around him. When Deven leaves Mirpore for Delhi, ironically he is happy to free himself from it, but does not know that he is landing himself into another labyrinth.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, Anita Desai, thus, studies in this novel the problem and plight of a timid and ineffectual but growth-oriented individual making impassioned appeals to society for the establishment of genuine relationship. Her fiction is bound up by what may be called existentialist framework both, thematically and technically.

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