

Urdu Poetry In Anita Desai's *In Custody*: An Assessment

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Abstract

Urdu as a language, despite its richness of culture and literary and poetic outputs, has perceived a process of slow decline in independent India due to social and political reasons. Anita Desai's novel *In Custody* deals with the above theme fascinatingly as it shows the debauchery of the great poet Nur and his disciples, the passion of Deven for Urdu and the buffoonery of Murad. The lanes of Old Delhi, associated with the great Urdu poet, are also explored in the novel. The research paper "Urdu poetry in Anita Desai's *In Custody*" critically reflects on Desai's concerns for Urdu language and poetry in the novel *In Custody*.

Keywords: Hindi, Politics of Language, Decline, Urdu language and literature.

In Custody is a unique and exciting fictional work as Anita Desai chooses to pen down not only about friendship, loneliness, the hardships and responsibilities of a lower-middle-class man trying to adjust to the demand of life and his desire of bringing harmony among people and cultures but also about the decline of Urdu as a language as well as its literary outputs. The research paper explores Desai's concern for the Urdu language in the novel *In Custody* and shows how she is pained by the gradual process of deterioration of Urdu, which she aesthetically manifests in the novel. The beautiful culture of Old Delhi was shown slipping away and Desai, in her efforts to represent that process of fading away of Urdu poetry, creates a novel that has been regarded as a masterpiece in Indian Writing in English.

Anita Desai's novel *In Custody* describes how beautiful the Urdu language and literature have been but now it faces a steady decline in terms of its speakers and its prestige. Once upon a time, Urdu was the language of the Mughal rulers. The language used to be the centre of attraction, and much of the literature was composed in the Urdu language. Even during the first seventy-five years of British rule in India, the official language was Urdu. People, in general, used to be immensely respectful for the Urdu culture and literature. The poets and writers in the Urdu language were venerated. But in the present circumstances Urdu has remained only as a ghost of what it used to be at one point of time. (Tiwari, 2004)

Salman Rushdie in "Introduction" to *In Custody comments* – "The slow death of my mother tongue, Urdu, is much further advanced than it was twenty-three years ago, and much that was beautiful in the culture of old Delhi has slipped away forever."

In the novel, the novelist presents this condition of Urdu language in detail through the portrayal of a famous Urdu poet Nur Shahjehanabadi as well as through the college lecturer Deven Sharma who has immense veneration for the poet Nur as he plans to take an interview of Nur to write a feature for the next issue of Murad's magazine *Awaaz*.

Deven, the son of a poor widow, has a passion for Urdu poetry but he fails to pursue a career in it. He has to take up the job of a lecturer in Hindi in Lala Ram Lal College at Mirpore to earn his livelihood. Murad, his friend is not a simple person but Deven thinks that Murad is his good friend as he shells out money to pay for his food. Murad who is the editor of the magazine 'Awaaz' bullies him. He is well aware of Deven's passion for Urdu poetry so he travels to Mirpore to ask him to go to Delhi and interview the great Urdu poet Nur Shahjehanabadi for his magazine. Deven is caught between his love for Urdu and his responsibilities which tie him to his college and family. Though he wanted to pursue a passion for Urdu language and literature yet he could not do the same for a living and, thus, lives with a sense of discontent. In this circumstance, his friend Murad visits him in his college and invites him to contribute an article for his magazine on Nur. The relationship between Deven, a weak and unwordly man and Murad, a posturing person can be compared with some of the characters of Narayan. However, Narayan's meek characters are usually traditional Indians, while his bullies stand for the modern world. Murad is a greedy person who beguiles his boyhood friend, Deven. Deven's passion for Urdu is a known fact to Murad and he knows that he will be able to trap Deven and succeeds too in doing so. Deven being simple at heart, accepts his friend's offer of interviewing the great poet. He is excited with thought of meeting the aged bard, Nur:

"Deven's hand fluttered onto his knees as he melted at the suggestion and felt a glow creep through him at the thought of writing something in the language which had been his first language ... The glow was also caused by pride, at being asked to contribute a piece by the editor of what he took to be leading Urdu journal." (*In Custody*)

At the advice of Murad, Deven buys an old tape recorder to record the interview, and arranges an assistant but this complete maneuvering is a fiasco as the incompetency of the assistant spoils the recording.

The novel, *In Custody* presents the poet Nur Shahjehanabadi as a famous stalwart of Urdu Poetry. However, Nur has not published anything worthwhile for fifteen years. Still, he is considered one of the great poets, which means he has produced something great earlier. So, when Murad plans an issue of his magazine *Awaaz* on Urdu Poetry, he feels that without a piece on Nur Shahjehanabadi, his magazine will not get the required richness. Murad travels from Delhi to Mirpore to convince his friend, Deven Sharma to come to Delhi and interview Nur and write a piece on him. On the request of his friend Deven travels to Delhi to meet Nur.

Unfortunately, Nur is old so he is not as creative as he used to be. Deven, however, refuses to accept this fact in his blind admiration for the poet. He wants to experience literary glory as well as greatness through him. Viney Kirpal also expresses a similar view when he says: "To be a success has always been anxiety with Deven, and the meeting with Nur ... represents for Deven all that he could not be". Nur, in that sense, is Deven's alter ego. Deven's romantic visions of the poet are soon shattered when he encounters the harsh realities of the poet's life. Initially, Deven enjoys a "miraculous intimacy" with Nur as he joyfully hears the poet's voice quoting poetry. Deven joins Nur in quoting back his poetry, which binds them in an exquisite "web, an alliance." This intimacy is rudely intruded upon by the arrival of Nur's servant-boy, followed by several "loutish" young men. Their audacious ribaldry shocks Deven, but he finds Nur to be unmindful of it. He is amazed to see Nur in the centre of those "lafangas of the bazaar world" who "lived out the fantasy of being poets, artists and bohemians..." in the company of Nur. Deven is further shocked to see Nur greedily stuffing himself with biryani, kebabs, korma, dal and drinks. His hope of a dialogue about poetry amid such "garishness" dwindles dismally. Deven's fantasy world of the bard living amid "elderly, sage and dignified litterateurs entirely alone, in divine isolation" comes crashing down when he finds Nur surrounded by "clowns and jokers and jugglers" instead. This only serves to fill Deven with disillusionment 'which reaches its peak when he finds his hero, Nur, in a very undignified position, "face downwards, arms and legs spread-eagled across the thick mattress" on the floor.

This reality is in sharp contrast to Deven's earlier visualization of Nur as a "god". But things are written otherwise for him. Nur despises Deven in the first meeting but soon Deven gets a letter from Nur inviting him to be his secretary. Deven does not want to be a secretary to the poet as he cannot leave his job of a lecturer to become so. Deven pursues the poet to give an interview, but to no avail, till Safiya Begum, comes to his help in exchange for money (Jyer, 2001).

Deven fails to record his interview (which is a mix of sudden bouts of poetic recitals and more of talks of Biryani and Rum) as the tapes are not up to the mark. Deven is not able to get anything out of those tapes. He is worried because his college has given him money to buy a recorder. His colleague Siddiqui also helps him arrange money so that Deven can give it to Safiya Begum for arranging the interview with Nur. Deven is in a fix as he does not know what he will show to the college authorities. However, the night before he meets the college authorities, Nur's poetry saves him from existential anguish. It can be said that Nur and Deven shared a kind of spiritual relationship where Deven worships Nur for his celestial poetry. This poetry eventually saves Deven.

Urdu is becoming a dead language because it has lost prestige due to social political reasons. Further it is not appreciated and esteemed even by the Muslim community. Murad Beg, the editor of *Awaaz*, having some ulterior motives advocates for the preservation of the Urdu language and poetry. He has taken up the responsibility of rescuing the Urdu language from shameful death by championing its traditions through *Awaaz*. So, he goes to Mirpore from Delhi and requests Deven to interview the renowned Urdu poet Nur for his magazine so that the magazine may achieve some glory and the love for Urdu poetry can be restored.

Deven is presented in the novel by Anita Desai as the true preserver of Urdu language and art. His love for Urdu language and literature makes him undertake the painful journey of coming to Delhi from Mirpore to meet the poet Nur and interview him even though he faces many difficulties. Murad's request makes Deven come forward to interview Nur to preserve some aspects of Urdu poetry that he loves from the bottom of his heart. When one looks at this aspect of the novel, it seems that Anita Desai is presenting to the audience the view that even though the Urdu language is facing the danger of extinction, yet the language and its art will never get lost because of the people like Deven. They will probably be able to carry forward their love for the Urdu language. So even though the novel ends in a hopeless situation for Deven, the main character of the novel, the fate of Urdu does not seem bleak.

Languages are always in the process of evolution. Some get extinct due to lack of prestige, state negligence, lack of users, language policy and standardization processes, change of political regime, etc. The British policy of divide and rule India made the two communities – Hindus and Muslims. This also led to the Partition of India, initially in 1905 it was done by Lord Curzon when they divided Bengal (against which the whole of India stood up in protest) and then in 1947 when India got over with the colonial rule. After that, with

the birth of Pakistan as a Muslim state, a tendency of neglect of Urdu carried on in India, leading to a gradual loss of prestige for Urdu.

Anita Desai has portrayed the politics responsible for the decline of the status of Urdu. She has also showcased that due to the lack of prestige, the poets of Urdu have got into a debauched life (as is the case with Nur and his supposed admirers), the practitioners are being forced to take another language as a means of earning a living (as is the case with Deven). This sad state of the Urdu language and literature forms the background to the novel. (Siwanna, 1994).

Anita Desai suggests that the political process has led to the decline of the Urdu culture and literature. Anita Desai writes, "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 ... There are many Muslims, and they do write in Urdu. However, it has a very artificial existence. People will not study Urdu in school and college anymore, so who will be their readers? Where is the audience?" This sad state of Urdu pains the novelist as she puts it across in her narrative.

Therefore, at the very beginning of the novel, it is said, "Yet, like these vegetables, it (Hindi) flourishes, while Urdu – language of the court in days of royalty – now languishes in the back lanes and gutters of the city. No palace for it to live in the style to which it is accustomed, no emperors and nawabs to act as its patrons." (Chapter 1, *In Custody*). Even Nur speaks in the same vein when he states, "How can there be Urdu poetry where there is no Urdu language left? It is dead, finished. The defeat of the Moghuls by the British threw a noose over its head, and the defeat of the British by the Hindiwallahs tightened it. So now you see its corpse lying here, waiting to be buried." This sad state of Urdu is further being compared to Hindi as Nur speaks, "Because Urdu is supposed to have died, in 1947. What you see in the Universities – in some of the universities, a few of them only – is its ghost, wrapped in a shroud. But Hindi – Oh, Hindi is a field of greens, all flourishing, and this is its flower."

With the advent of Hindi as the official national language of India and with the gradual decline of Urdu, there has been a state of debauchery in the practitioners of Urdu poetry, and it seems to be the concern of Anita Desai in *In Custody*. The politics of language and the standardization of an official language may be the reasons for the decline of Urdu.

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