



# Language and its Spatial Existence: Reading Anita Desai's *In Custody*

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**Abstract:** *The cultural heritage associated with language is intertwined within the communal relations of its origin. Anita Desai's narrative in her novel In Custody attempts to create a cultural reconstruction of the grandeur of the Urdu language. Keeping Desai's narration of the hegemonic existence of the Hindi language and the presence of Urdu in the outskirts of a thriving society in mind, my paper would explore Desai's novel, in its subtle play of characters ranging from middle class teachers to long lost poets, language and the fixity of space. My paper would analyse the novel's portrayal of the cosmopolitan and capitalist structures that enclose language within the aspects of moneymaking and fame. Through fractured human identities trying to reconstruct a language presently dwelling only in poetic and literary masterpieces, my analysis would unravel the various questions that Desai poses on the barriers that tie the Urdu language to tradition and modernity, and in doing so, allow it to live beyond the custodianships imposed upon it.*

**Keywords:** *language, South Asian literature, Indian writing in English, Anita Desai, culture.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION :

"The language you speak and your interest in it becomes a vital signifier of religious and national loyalty."<sup>1</sup> Siddique's words in Anita Desai's novel *In Custody* shows the post-Partition India and, in such a case; expressing a love of old Urdu poetry was seen as a mark of betrayal. Anita Desai's novel captures the essence of the ways in which language is closely dependent on the cultural anxieties and ideas of nationhood that are prevalent in a postcolonial, postpartition nation. Tracing the roots of a language residing in the fringes of the society, enmeshed in tradition; Desai portrays nationalism as a vehicle for the annexation of important cultural roots that form such an important part of the cultural confluence that India is made up of. In a country where the Muslim community had to leave the national boundary of India as an aftermath of partition, there was a diminishing Islamic and Muslim culture and the ongoing debate of Urdu as an official language. While Urdu gave way to Hindi as the official language of a newly formed country, language induced a cultural hegemony within the space it became a part of. Keeping the hegemonic existence of the Hindi language and the presence of Urdu in the outskirts of a thriving society in mind, I would explore the attempt of Desai's novel, in its subtle play of characters ranging from middle class teachers to long lost poets, to question the idea of language having fixity of space. I would explore the novel's portrayal of the cosmopolitan and capitalist structures that enclose language within the aspects of moneymaking and fame. Through fractured human identities trying to reconstruct a language presently dwelling only in poetic and literary masterpieces; I would unravel the various questions that Desai poses on the barriers that tie the Urdu language to tradition and modernity, and in doing so, allow it to live beyond the custodianships imposed upon it.

<sup>1</sup> Desai, Anita, (1984). *In Custody*. Heinemann.

The cultural heritage associated with the language keeps it within the communal origins that it is associated with. Desai's narrative process attempts to create a cultural reconstruction of the grandeur of the Urdu language. The story of *In Custody* revolves around Deven Sharma, a Hindi professor at a college in Mirpore, and his love for Urdu poetry. Deven, financially hard pressed and yoked in a marriage, must leave his creative aspirations of becoming an Urdu poet to the critical need to support his family. Through Deven and the lack of resources that prevent him from pursuing career in the Urdu language, Desai enters the Hindu-Urdu debate in a poignant way. The elitism and communal segregation associated with the language keeps a middle-class man constantly at odds with his desires and aspirations – he remains on the fringes of Urdu culture because he does not come from an élite background and has chosen to teach the language that offers better employment prospects. When the unexpected opportunity of interacting with Nur Shahjahanabadi comes his way through Murad, an editor of an Urdu magazine, Deven feels compelled to take it. His existence in Mirpore was imprisoned within his need to achieve an economic stability; the escape to Delhi for an interview was reassuringly adventurous for him. My study would explore Desai's fiction in relation to commonwealth literature, multilingualism in post-partitioned India and postcolonial nation building by close-reading analysis of her novel *In Custody*. An exploration of background readings like Benedict Anderson's book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* would supplement my understanding of Desai's fiction.

Desai describes Mirpore as a place that 'lacks history' "The temples were more numerous but had no history at all. There was not a literally not a man in Mirpore who could have told when they were built or by whom' (Desai, 13). The huts of the poor and stalls of the traders, the temples were repeatedly wrecked, rebuilt and replaced and no one knew about the age of the banyan trees or its legends or their history. "The fact was that no one knew the difference" (Desai, 14)

There were 'Hindu area' and 'Muslim area' whose division was unwritten, and people observed restraint usually. Once a year when Muharrum and The Holi festival came on the same day, there used to be bloody clashes, the police *bandobust*, the mutual threats and editorials on secularism in newspapers. After the return of normalcy, the cautious and peaceful co-existence was restored." (14)

Desai forms an authentic as well as aesthetic image of India in both the places that Deven is a part of. He leaves the rural landscape that does not have any traceable history and goes to Delhi to excavate the past of a language long forgotten. It is Deven's memory and repeated insistence on an ideation of the language as a tradition and its association to pre-modern aristocracy that holds 'custody' of the language. He imagines the royalty associated with the former court language, artifact of old India. Desai makes Urdu a lived experience; from the grand narratives of being a court language Urdu faced the communal crisis of existing as an official one in a post-partitioned India. The pangs of separation and partition affected the language and there was a subsequent decay owing to the ongoing formation of nation. While Urdu signifies an elite class structure and is accessible to only a few, Desai lets Deven explore the problematic existence of individual identities. She demystifies the idea of a national effort or a collective that language has been associated with and creates loopholes in Nur's, Deven's idol, character. Nur's condition prevents Deven from idealizing the language; from yet again putting it in as much a caged existence as he is. Deven's construction based on nostalgic cultural memory shatters and rouses the desire to 'save' his idol and his idealized language from the dilapidated state of existence. Deven, therefore, attempts to elucidate his memory within the terms of Urdu language and literature. He has a memory of the cultural and literary position of Urdu coupled with the memory of his father. It is all the memories and feelings of nostalgia that binds Urdu to him. Facing the reality of Chandni Chowk and Nur's morbid household, he is unable to fathom the reality that is not even close to the ideal image that he had in mind. The novel, therefore, is a portrait of human lives as they exist in their own exclusive circumstances, of the hypocrisy and pretension lying within the human spirit, of the difference between the town and the city life, of human helplessness and oppression on the road to one's aspirations.

The evolution of the print culture and its aspiration of building a nation with the languages that were a part of the print capitalism was one of the nuanced ways of nation building that Benedict Anderson explores in his book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. In Desai's *'In Custody'*, Murad 'print culture' in search of promoters for the Urdu language. He is aware of the fact that with more people knowing Hindi and the massive inaccessibility to the Urdu language in the modern age, his magazine would dwindle with time. He takes advantage of Deven's financial crisis and his love for Urdu poetry to ensure a continuous functioning or even a growth in the readership of his magazine. While Murad thought very highly of himself because of his endless efforts to promote the Urdu language, he was aware of the consciousness of the society he was a part of. Wealth, class and business are what

the urban sector runs on and the print culture accentuates it by reaching out to people with information and literature that has a considerable impact on society. The modern age, burgeoning urban sectors, also give rise to tormented selves who are in a relentless search for economic sustenance. Their consciousness is directed only to acquiring a humongous lifestyle and their selves are fractured by materialistic desires. Murad's desire to search for Nur and make Deven interview him stems from the high aspirations that he has for the magazine he is a part of. He decides on harnessing Deven's passion for Urdu poetry and prey on his economic instability to get access to Nur. Murad considers himself as the fulcrum of the Urdu language in its current state where the language has been driven to the farther recesses of the society and he finds a way to work through the victimized self of Deven, caught within the two polarities of love and duty; passion and work; and nostalgia and reality, and capture Nur within the anticipated success of the magazine. Murad's magazine, unlike Deven's nostalgic mind that makes Nur the royal self harboured in the grandiose of Old Delhi, literally captures literature the way it is and presents it to its readers. The magazine holds language within the wideranging yet conscious boundaries of its readership and tries to present itself in a nuanced way to claim a territorial importance. Murad's idea of bringing Nur back into the pages of his magazine or as a part of his association has nothing to do with the passionate attempt of a middle-aged Hindi teacher to search for his idol; or with an old man receding towards depression and despair because of the loss of an identity, a language. He is aware of the consumerist and capitalist functioning of the society and makes a literary initiative; a work of passion and creativity; a part of the manufacturing feeless manufacturing units. Urdu literally lives within a few pages of Murad's magazine for its readers, completely oblivious to the stressful conditions in which Nur was found and the chaotic ways that led to his final publishing.

It is perhaps because of the world being oblivious to poetry and language and striving towards the demands of the modern age that Nur decides to reside within the coup of his aristocratic habits, feeding his pigeons, hogging on rich food and surrounding himself with a group of admirers who pay attention to him, appreciate his talent and dancers like Intiaz Begum who make him feel the royal self that he portrays himself as. Upon Deven's arrival Nur says,

“Urdu poetry...How can there be an Urdu poetry when there is no Urdu language left? It is dead, finished...So, now you see its corpse lying here, waiting to be buried...Those Congress-wallahs have set up Hindi on the top as our ruler. You are its slave. Perhaps a spy even if you don't know it, sent to the universities to destroy whatever remains of Urdu, hunt it out and kill it...It seems you have been sent here to torment me, to show me, let me know to what depths Urdu has fallen. All right then, show me, and let me know the worst.” (26)

Nur associates the Urdu language to the artists, the culture and the aristocracy that it was born into. He has never considered the language when it is devoid of its cultural origins. As for himself, Nur sits in the heart of Old Delhi poignantly trying to capture the cultural chords that would bring about the assemblage of an Urdu culture. While people like Murad tend to buy themselves the custodianship of the language, Nur lives within it, he is Urdu in flesh and blood, a symbol of torment and distressed living. Nur's residence mirrors his immured existence, in the narrow 'gullies' of Chandni Chowk. Amidst peeling walls, overflowing drains, and dirtridden lanes, it was as if the place had seen a culture die within its arm, as Nur says, “Urdu was a corpse waiting to be buried.” Nur's house is symbolic of the old and ageing body of a poet and the ruthless state of a language. The residence stands shattered from within, almost like the individual self that it harbours. It was in a state of despair, desolation; an inorganic image of the death surrounded by the stench of decay. The house does not satisfy Deven's quest for self-identification that would have been fulfilled by the poetic calibre and eventual fame of the poet. The house, symbolically tethering the language and its origins as it is separated from the rest of the world, incorporates a tragic use of language; a male dominated society and male oriented confrontation; and existential concerns embodied by the woman whose husband is incapable of fending for himself with his poetic prowess. All these components are bound with the beauty of language, which aesthetically proves itself. Referring to the state of the Urdu language in the country and the role that it plays in the society, Desai was able to put forth the frustrations of the postcolonial society through Deven who had to discard the language that he is passionate about to earn a living. With the official statuses that were given to a few languages, the vernaculars shifted into spaces like Chandni Chowk and Nur himself; and were kept alive within the disillusionment created for its existence. Deven's encroachment into this fantasy came with a lack of funds and a broken tape recorded- the society that functions on moneymaking does not spend it on the process of digging out a language and its poetry from its fossilized state. The novel captures Deven as an incompetent being who wishes to save his idol Nur Shahjahanabadi from the ruins of excessive drinking; the perils of a lethargic life; and the torment of his daily life, in doing so, keep project his memory of the Urdu language to the urban society.



## 2. Summary:

In finally taking on the task of a custodian, Deven discards his own creative fervor to not let a poetic legend die without recognition. Deven's nostalgia is rooted in the cultural memory of a traditional as well as aristocratic past, which for Nur rejects the values of a forthcoming modern society. The narrative interrogates the centralization of the Hindi language, which, in its movement towards progress, becomes the dominant force of modernity. The idea of Urdu, encapsulated as a tradition to be remembered rather than taken forward and allowed to foster in the society, lets most people like Nur, Deven and Murad take over or impose their custodianship over the language. Desai presents the tropes of a communally charged atmosphere through Murad's denial of funding the project related to Urdu and its lack of an economic base; and Deven being threatened to be shifted to the Urdu department. Deven's memory of Urdu, amidst all the negative portrayals of the language, comes out as a refreshing narrative of its own. Desai's narrative excavated the dichotomies of language - it is unable to break out of the fragmentary Hindu-Hindi and Muslim-Urdu debate that is ongoing. It presents itself through people like Deven who have equally parallel lives with the reality of a family to be taken care of amidst the history that needs to be uncovered. The question that lingers on all through the novel and the advent of Indian English fiction and commonwealth literary traditions is does language then, ever live free from the cohesive culture and tradition that it was built on?

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## Author Biography:

Priyanjana Das' research exploring narrative(s) of women in Indian Diaspora Literature has enthused her to expand her knowledge horizons as a researcher and teacher and engage with inclusive projects within the academic sector. Her interests and growing research profile not only critically engage with narratives – prose literature, poetry, drama and films – as they continue to be read and understood in the context of their production but also attempt to understand literary markets producing cultural capital and impacting the world at large.