

## Suppressed Female Voices In Chauvinistic Patriarchal Society In Anita Desai's *In Custody*

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**ABSTRACT:** Anita Desai is a prominent feminist author of our time who has raised the issues of women suffering in patriarchal society and has presented their problems in a realistic manner. Although the novel 'In Custody' is basically about men – Deven Sharma and Nur Shahjehanabadi – and all the female characters are mostly passive or silent, the author has depicted their view point also candidly. The present paper is an attempt to analyse the psyche of the subjugated female characters of the novel and to explore their position and exploitation in male dominated society.

**Key words:** patriarchal, subjugated, psyche, male-dominated, exploitation.

### Introduction

Women's status and their rights in society have always been a matter of discourse across the globe. Extending from the ancient scriptures in the East to Plato's writings in the West, all the writers, philosophers, thinkers, authors and social reformers have tried to define the place of women in society. It was with the beginning of women's activism that women started contributing in discussions. 'Women Suffrage Movement' of 1840s during the Victorian Era, 'Women's Liberation Movement' of 1960s, 'Black Feminist Movement' of late 60s and 'Anti-Porn Feminist Movement' of late 70s are some of the well-known feminist uprisings that attracted global attention. The list can be updated by including the '#Me Too' movement of 2018. The creation of the 'UN Women' in 2010, as a unit of the United Nations for gender equality and women empowerment provided an official platform for addressing the challenges and grievances of women of the world. The issue of women empowerment is also a burning topic in most of the Asian countries.

The last three decades have witnessed the appearance of some Indian feminist writers such as Anita Desai, Bharti Mukerjee, Shashi Deshpande, Gita Mehta, Ismat Chughtai, Kamla Markandey, Manju Kapoor and Kiran Desai. They have raised the issues related to women's predicament and generated a consciousness regarding the modern Indian women all over the globe. Anita Desai, a prominent novelist and short story writer, as well as a leading voice in Indian English literature has explored the destiny and position of female characters in her works and has presented their conflicts, tensions and turmoils in a convincing manner. Desai has used her works as a tool for discovering the inner psyche of the female characters and she presents sensitive individuals, fragmented and spiritually devastated by the particular social conditions of life. All the important characters of her novel '*In Custody*' (1984) seem to be deviating from the guidelines created for them by the tradition and culture. Moreover, this struggle is assisted, or at least influenced, by modernity and westernization. In Desai's novels, "Men and women fight for more independence and supremacy to prove themselves right, consequently, they suffer from inner conflicts. They seek love and parallelly want to prove themselves equal or even better than each other" (Kumar).

### Protagonist's Search for Meaning of Life

The main cause of these conflicts, as presented in '*In Custody*' is the patriarchal social set up where men relish a publicly leading position and women are systematically trained to support a passive womanliness. Thus, the novelist presents the different images of both men and women who are developed in the context of social discernment and phase of cultural transformation. The novel '*In Custody*' which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize also

presents the characters who are struggling in search of the meaning in life. The following lines from 'In Custody' explain the struggle of life: "Life is no more than a funeral procession winding towards the grave/Its small joys the flowers of funeral wreaths" (*In custody* 21).

The protagonist, Deven Sharma, tries to lift his spirits through Urdu poetry to get away from his boring routine of life. Once he had a strong passion to write Urdu poetry, however, he ignored it to sustain his married life. The couple were living in a loveless union where they finely communicate their dissatisfaction to each other. Even though Deven's first love is for his first language i.e. Urdu, he earns his living by teaching Hindi literature where he has neither talent nor interest. Deven is supposed to interview a senior celebrated Urdu poet, Nur Shahjehanabadi. Initially, Deven is tense about rejuvenating his life-long dreams but the attraction is too strong to elude. When he reaches Nur-Sahib's residence, he experiences as if "a most tide of jubilation rise and an increase inside at being recognized, named and invited into the presence of a man so clearly a hero" (*In Custody* 34). It appears to him to him as if "God had leaned over a cloud and called for him to come up and angels might have been drawing him up these ancient splintered stairs to meet the deity" (36). His enthusiasm, excitement and ecstasy are on the cloud nine, but they suddenly disappear as he finds Nur's home full "of filthy abuse, rotten gums, raw liquor...and too much impotent rage" (92). Deven struggles a lot to receive the finances and equipment from the university authorities that too on his assurance that he will produce something of genuine value. Then he has to persuade and convince Nur Saheb for the interview. Finally, when he meets Nur Saheb, the latter proves out to be a brilliant poet slowly surfacing into mere soil shattering Deven's image of his classic idol.

### **Subjugated Female Characters: Sarla, Intiaz and Safiya**

All the female characters in the novel are commonly subordinate ones but there is definitely some similarity in their depiction: they all are resilient wives who have control over their partners. All of them are uneducated; some are bossy; while others are subjugated housewives or prostitutes. The female characters as presented through Deven's eyes, are mostly hindrances in the way of achieving his ambition. However, Desai wants to portray what a patriarchal societal set up can do to women. Even their expected silence makes them want to make noise and they growl and shout in anger and discontent and assert whatever sort of authority or autonomy they have. Anita Desai has aptly presented outer realms as well as the inner realms of the female characters. Pranami Bania rightly comments, "Desai always adopts novels as vehicle for exploring the inner psyche of the female characters.... All the characters in her novels ... suffer from a sense of isolation that is not merely physical but also psychic" (48).

First important character in the novel '*In Custody*' is that of Sarla, Deven's wife. Her influence on him can be easily understood from the remark, "a two-cigarette man," (2) in the opening chapter of the novel. Deven tells his friend, Murad: "My wife has told me not to buy a packet at a time. She says if I have to go out to buy just one at a time, I will smoke less" (2). Sarla is presented as being "plain, penny-pinching and congenitally pessimistic." As a young girl and newlywed, she had visualized a home with "a phone, a Frigidaire" (66) and all the amenities but she settled in a small city with a similarly frustrated companion. Deven always thinks so deeply before spending his own hard earned money. Although she is unable to stop Deven's frequent visit between Mirpore and Delhi, she is certainly successful in bringing him back home at the end of the novel.

Sarla is a victim of her husband's disillusioned daydreams. When Deven reached home after his first unsuccessful attempt to interview Nur, "he was afraid of facing Sarla's stony face, her sulks or her open fury" (*In Custody* 67). He thought that "she would teach him

not to venture out of the familiar, safe dustbin of their world into the perilous world of night time bacchanalia, revelry and melodrama” (68). Sarla and Deven’s world is filled with crumpled dreams and aspirations. Deven’s mother and aunts fixed his marriage with Sarla. They failed to realize that Sarla had her own dreams. She wished for an ideal family life full of sheer bliss. She wanted to have “Fan, phone and frigidaire” (69). Whereas “Deven Had been more a poet than a professor” working as “a temporary lecturer with confidence in his verse – and for the wife of a poet she seemed too prosaic” (69). After getting married to someone in academic profession and moving to a small town outside Delhi, her dreams never came true and she got disillusioned. As a result, “there was cut two dark furrows from the corners of her nostrils to the corners of her mouth as deep and permanent as surgical scars” (70) making her look hostile. He knew her disappointment very well because both of them were victims of circumstances but this did not lead to any understanding between the two for they believed “two victims sought to avoid each other, not yoke together joint disappointments” (70). She blamed him tactfully, and he too talked roughly to Sarla “hurling away dishes not cooked to his liking, bawl uncontrollably if meals were not ready when he wanted them or their small son was noisy or unwashed” (70).

Manu, Deven and Sarla’s son, may truly be the only thread holding them together. She is well-defined by her quietness. Circumstances have made her bitter and stuck in an unhappy marriage with a husband whom she does not love. She broods over his inability to satisfy her materialistic and emotional ambitions. Sarla is repressed by gender inequality as a social paradigm. She “never lifted her voice in his presence – countless generations of Hindu womanhood behind her stood in her way, preventing her from displaying open rebellion” (*In Custody* 163). Deven being a man, is expected to be the bread earner of the house, and hence, he cannot pursue his dream of indulging in poetry. His family and his job give him a sense of being stuck and his financial dependence on Sarla. Both Sarla and Deven have a sense of being victims of the fate, as a result, there is no closeness of spirit or any companionship between them. Deven is exasperated by her accusations and tactfulness with which she mocks his attempts of chasing his dreams. “So, no more Delhi for you? That happened to you were thrown out?” (141), she asks him, her voice dripping with sarcasm. Both her deafening silence and her occasional cryptic comments call for a debate on gender hierarchies in the Indian society.

Deven’s sense of failure, isolation and imprisonment probably results from the fact that he never tells his wife anything about his dreams, strategies or disappointments as gender hierarchies prevent him from doing so. At the end of the novel, he returns to Mirpore after his “disgraceful, thoughtless, irresponsible and hopeless failure” (*In Custody* 231), and compassionately observes his wife “crawl about the floor, sweeping the dust into little hills before. He found he was no longer irritated by the sight of her labour, or disgusted by the shabbiness of her limp, worn clothes, or her hunched, twisted posture, her untidy hair or sullen expression” (221). For a moment he thinks of “touching her, putting an arm around her stooped shoulders and drawing her to him” (221). However, his male ego prevents him from doing so because it would have “permanently undermined his position of power over her” (221) – a position that was as important to her as to him. Moreover, if she did not believe in it, what would he do and, where would he go?

The second barrier in the way of Deven’s dreams, besides his family and his job, is Nur’s young wife, Imtiaz Begum whom Nur calls “a star fallen into the well of courtyard” (*In Custody* 84). She shares the same dominating characteristics as Sarla, but as a sharp contrast to Sarla, “Imtiaz is given shrieking voice” (Singh). Though much younger than Nur, she appears to be monitoring Nur’s actions and conducts. She is introduced as “so called poetess,” “female mafia,” and “a prostitute or dancing girl” (*In Custody* 88). Her dressing style and her manner of reciting her poems in the presence of so many men make her a

typical dancing girl from Chandni Chowk. She is portrayed as an infuriated spouse: “She does not like me to recite anymore...”(94) confesses Nur to Deven. She efficiently uses her young age and beauty to become the wife of the well-known Urdu poet, Nur from the low position of a prostitute from Chandni Chowk. She has spies all over the house and has full knowledge of each and every word spoken to or by Nur, snatching his freedom of speech, restricting his movements and making him feel like a prisoner in his own house. Deven is surprised when he listens to her “How could she claim monopoly of the stage with her raucous singing that now afflicted their ears, her stagey recitation of melodramatic and third rate verse when the true poet, the great poet, sat huddled and silent, ignored and uncelebrated” (86). He wonders “Why did Nur submit to her insane whim of performing in this house, the house of a poet”? (86). Later even Nur accuses her of stealing his audience and “poetic jewels” (93). In reality, her acting skills, youth and beauty are her foremost charms which have helped her in becoming a ‘Begum’ – title used for a Muslim woman of high rank – from a prostitute.

Although Imtiaz Begum is quite skilled in singing, she is valued only for her body by the male characters. She enters Nur’s heart and home through her budding poetic abilities. When Deven finds her reciting her poetry, he is taken aback and even makes disparaging comments “Oh, she has learnt her tricks very well, the monkey.” Imtiaz Begum starts reciting Urdu poetry like her husband who accuses her of stealing his limelight: “... 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” (*In Custody* 89). Gradually Nur starts hating Imtiaz because he cannot tolerate her cunningness and superiority over him. Nur neglected her when she was sick. Imtiaz’s sickness whether actual or pretended, puts her in the typical role of the frail woman, who is totally dependent on him for her existence, identity and needs. However, she failed to get this support from Nur and even from his first wife, an old woman Safiya. In her song, she describes herself as “a bird in a cage, that 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...” (87).

Nevertheless, the character of Imtiaz Begum is entirely distinct from the other female characters in the novel including Nur’s first wife, Safiya Begum and Deven’s wife, Sarla. No doubt, Imtiaz Begum has been as unprivileged as any of them or even more than them but what sets her apart is her open rebellion. Throughout the story, she voices her views and opposes the prejudices against her. Finally, her letter to Deven at the end of the novel is one of her most fearless acts. It brings her in front of the readers in an altogether different light and the unjust image portrayed by Deven is left far behind. Here, she appears to be a strong woman who is more than her bright clothes and loud makeup “The essential, unsuspected spirit of the woman appeared to step free of its covering, all the tinsel and gauze and tawdriness, and reveal a face from which the paint and powder has been washed which wore an expression that made Deven halt and stumble before he could read on” (*In Custody* 222 - 23). Through her letter, Imtiaz Begum's frustration has found a way to the audience. “In this unfair world that you have created what else could I have been but what I am?” (223). She also discloses that it is because of her brainpower that Nur married her. Along with this she poses a question challenging patriarchy as well as accuses Deven of being too insecure as a male to accept the fact that a woman can possess beauty, talent and brains because that might make his so called superiority to women questionable. She sends her poems along with the letter and challenges Deven to read them.

Despite all the accusations and frustration, Imtiaz Begum is still trying to prove her capabilities and gain the respect that she deserves. She is not womanly or graceful but intolerant, forceful, aggressive and bold. She is someone who would not submit to the

opinions of so called traditions of the society. Women are marginalised and silenced in literary works but Imtiaz Begum represents all those women loud and clear. Female characters are often shown in relationship with a man and stereotypically portrayed as being the custodian of family pride, honour and everything but themselves. However, Imtiaz Begum is rather the custodian of her life, words and poetry. In spite of being born into a house without privileges, deprived of education and forced to marry a much older man, Imtiaz simply puts up a challenge against a ruthless, patriarchal society which refuses to take her poetry seriously and is too insecure to see her as anything more than an immoral woman in loud clothes, singing solely for its pleasure. In an interview with Gee, Desai comments, “I made a very conscious effort with ‘*In Custody*,’ to break away from the writing I’d been doing until then. I had written about the Indian family and women’s lives so often that I could almost do it blindly, treading over and over again the same small piece of territory. But I couldn’t realistically have women characters just pushing open the doors of the world, so I had to write about men” (Gee 9).

Safiya Begum, Nur’s neglected older wife lives in a part of the house hidden from view, defined by the lack of sound, light and activity. Relegated to the domestic sphere, the aspirations or troubles of “lighter of fires, washer of clothes and keeper of goats” (*In Custody* 136) are given no space in the novel. Deven describes her as rustic and ignorant who is unable to grasp words such as ‘interview’ and a ‘tape recorder.’ Despite her husband’s second marriage and her hatred for the second wife, she seems to have a certain amount of reverence for him. She is the one who has a sense of duty for her husband, more than genuine admiration, since she hardly knows anything about his art. Safiya Begum is mostly referred to as “the old woman” and this may have been purposely done by the author to highlight her old age. Polygamy is tolerable in the Muslim culture and she is presented to display the lascivious nature of Nur. Her position is given to the young Imtiaz because Safiya has become old. Furthermore, the fact that she has a daughter not a son is probably the reason that might have been unfavourable to her.

Underneath Safiya’s adherence to the typical role of an ignorant Begum, the reader finds her pragmatism. She grabs the opportunity to fan Deven’s ego and diplomatically presents to him a solution to arrange his meeting with Nur, without the other wife’s knowledge. Deven, who is enraged by his failed attempts to record Nur’s poetry, gladly accepts her help. It is only after he has agreed to her plan that she asks him for money in return. This action of hers is significant because the lady known as “the lighter of fires, washer of clothes and keeper of goats” (*In Custody* 136) challenges the man’s role as bread earner. Moreover, she wants to restore “glory for Nur Sahib – glory which should be, must be recorded for all times” (136). As compared to other female character, age has given Safiya relative freedom to voice her revulsion to her husband’s acts and she says: “Did he marry one to make me live in a pigsty with him?” (58)

Thus prosaic and ever complaining Sarla; the fire-breathing and manipulative Imtiaz and unsophisticated, speculative Safiya are all very difficult to like. As the events are narrated from the perspective of a male chauvinistic character, it is quite natural to find a disagreeable, frenzied and especially an intimidating female presence. Even though Deven is forced to admit that the Urdu used by Imtiaz in her letter is sophisticated, ornate and enters his ears like a display of trumpets, he does not “have the courage ...to deal with this new presence, one he had been happy to ignore earlier” (*In Custody* 224). His refusal to read her *shayari* deprives the reader of the opportunity to judge her as an artist. We very much doubt that Deven’s uneasiness is due to Imtiaz’s female presence in the world of Urdu, conventionally dominated by men. If a woman does not need male assistance at every step of life, men get exasperated and start condemning her.

There are some other less important characters like Raj's widowed aunt, the Principal's wife, the female client of the tailor, prostitutes of the house, and Mrs. Bhalla. There are the other widows who ritually pass Deven's house in the course of their early morning march. These women belong to the frailest and most oppressed social groups but there is no consideration in Deven's heart for these women. Widowhood enforces still stricter discipline upon these women as they have to lead a colourless life and have to find redemption in sacred and charitable work. The man like the tailor take undue advantage by enjoying free boarding and lodging the house of Raj's aunt, who is a widow, on the excuse of giving her some protection. Deven finds her silent and unquestioning service favourable for his pocket. She is mostly quiet because the patriarchal norms of the society are deeply deep-seated in her mind and they expect her to follow some valued ideals of widow hood. Even the common woman like the Principal's wife is presented through the male scrutiny. She who appears momentarily in the novel and is depicted as a typical unpredictable woman who can hardly be trusted on for saying the right things at the right time.

### **Women's Role Judged by Male-Dominated Mindset**

It can be concluded that men like Deven do not have the audacity to treat women like Imtiaz as an equal even though she figuratively washes off her makeup and steps free of the coverings that society had always forced her to hide behind. Though marriages in India are equally frustrating for both men and women, it is only men who have a right to express their dissatisfaction. Women victimization has always been taken for granted. Their education, their dreams, their identity and their freedom are never a priority in male-dominated society. "Thousands of women still have to live with the challenges like patriarchy, inequality, male domination and sexual abuses. Though the governments and organizations are working in these directions, an ambivalence remains associated with it" (Bhatnagar 66).

We can say in the words of Iyenger, "With her practiced ease, Anita Desai explores sensibility ... and reveals light and shadows alike" (489). She has presented the role of women as seen through the lens of male chauvinistic approach in a realistic manner. All the male characters in *'In Custody'* are trapped in unsuccessful life. The lead character, Deven, is unsuccessful due to his timidity and lack of passion to pursue his dreams. As a result, he faces one problem after the other without any resolution or assistance. "By silencing the women, Desai 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" (Aphale 553). Nur, a dignified and talented Urdu poet, is usually surrounded by the lousy, littered and gutter-like environment. Instead of being appreciated and venerated for being such a great poet, Nur's life is filled with "vultures" and "lafangas." The reason is his lusty character and patriarchal mindset as he married a young and beautiful prostitute, Imtiaz when his first wife became old and she could not provide him a son. Nur is also a victim of old age, greed and gluttony. His undue devouring of food and drinking alcoholic drinks is yet another problem which makes him weak. Moreover, he is unsympathetic and totally unconcerned about Deven's efforts to interview him and restore the heritage of Urdu poetry. He is happy amusing the fools around him and running for food or even looking for a third wife.

The female characters have even more reasons to feel exasperated in a male-controlled society that compels them to remain committed to these men who cannot even recognize their identity. Wives like Sarla and Safiya have devoted their life to the family forgetting their dreams and passions but their efforts are not acknowledged. Rather they are criticized, insulted and unvalued. "Majority housewives suffer from ... abuse on daily basis and become a victim of their husband's anger and frustrations" in India (Samina Firoz). All such incidents leave a gloomy and harmful impact on the heart of a woman. Marriages work

when both the partners make all possible efforts and they share mutual respect and understanding. “A person who has low self-esteem and struggles with having confidence often ends up creating trouble in a relationship. They don't like themselves. Thus, when they are struggling, instead of asking for help, they end up blaming the person next to them.” (ETIMES). This can be very understood from the case of Deven and Sarla.

### Conclusion

Anita Desai in one of her interviews said that primarily she did not want to include women characters in her novel ‘*In Custody*’ but she could hear them blaring behind the scenes. She said in an interview:

“When I wrote the book and I was writing about Nur and Deven and ... the lives they lead, I was aware that there were women in the background. ... I could hear them, knocking pots and pans together in the kitchen and screaming loudly, and I could imagine ... thinking that they too had something to say while they were not being listened to. So I found some of the women ... Intiaz Begum, being extremely shrill whenever I gave her a voice.... And I wondered: why am I creating such an unpleasant

character ... Why am I making them so nasty? And I realized that if women are kept locked up in the conditions that they are in, that is how they would be.

extremely nasty and shrill and make sure that they were heard somehow, even if just by making a great deal of noise with pots and pans” (Guignery).

Anita Desai creates a world of married women who fight to free themselves from the chains that imprison them. Intiaz Begum is fully aware of the controlling forces in her life and desperately wants that people should acknowledge her struggle against them. “Intiaz succeeds in challenging the monopoly of patriarchal authority ... and demands an equal position as a woman and a worthy ‘custodian’ of cultural richness of her society” (Arasteh 66). They grow from just being a mere victim to vocal individuals capable of challenging the male dominance without breaking the relationship. By presenting the women as silent characters, Desai is accusing the society which believes in the marginalization and subordination of women, forcing them to undergo the discrimination within the boundaries of their stereotyped role. “By making her women silent and articulating them through male thought- processes, Desai is actually 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 to serve its purpose” (Roy 202). We have to keep in mind “patriarchal oppression of women is rooted in home/ family” (Sultana16) and its effect is found everywhere in all social relations. Hence, it is important to bring equality in rights and duties of men and women. We can establish peace in society only if there is peace in home and real “democracies, egalitarian societies can only be established if we practice democracy, equality and mutual respect within the family” (16).

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