

Women and Society: Depiction of Female Characters in Anita Desai's *In Custody*

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Abstract-From India getting its first female prime minister to the revolutionary Chipko Movement initiated by tribal women of Uttarakhand, History acknowledges 1970s as the decade of women's emancipation in the Indian subcontinent. But the wide gap between sanctioned rights given to women and their actual practice in the domestic and public space is highly contested. The Booker prize winner and celebrated writer, Anita Desai, unveils the reality of women's existence in her acclaimed novel- *In Custody*. Though the novel presents the male world of responsibilities and hidden desires placed in between the Hindi and Urdu language debate, the women hover over the text in their momentary yet significant appearances. Be it Deven's wife, who can never openly revolt against the indifference of her husband in their married life, or Nur's second wife Imtiaz Begum, whose poetic talent is overshadowed by the veil of her sex, the mental agony of the womenfolk is captured by Desai poignantly in her novel. With its focus on the women's condition in 1970s India and its depiction in the literary space, the following paper attempts to read Anita Desai's *In Custody* about the varied women characters it portrays. Using theoretical inputs like Foucault's concept of Heterotopia and Bhabha's concept of mimicry, the research paper tries to bring issues like female identity, rights of women, and the need for expression and identification beyond stereotypes of women to the forefront, issues that are still relevant even after decades of the novel's composition and Indian Independence.

Keywords: Anita Desai, women's question, post-colonial identity, patriarchal ideology, mimicry, heterotopia.

Government and historical records of India remark the 1970s as a decade of the country's first woman prime-minister Indira Gandhi. The decade in which women in India gained momentum in the socio-political sphere with feminist activism making its mark in the Indian context. The government of India took pride in setting up a committee in 1974 for speedy socio-economic development and empowerment of women who were most vulnerable to discrimination. Efforts were also made by the Congress government to reshape the post-colonial minds with national identities and brotherhood. These records showcase the bright side of government rule and considered faulty policies, like the sterilization campaign during the emergency period of 1975-1977, leading to forced sterilization and vasectomies all over India, as unsuccessful experiments of government welfare activities. The wide gap between the rights granted to women and their implementation is only realized by women who's actual take on larger socio-political issues didn't matter.

The increased efforts of the government in the promotion of Hindi as the national language of India further created a rift in minds of bilingual speakers of the languages. In such a situation of a wide gap between policymakers and policy followers, fiction comes to the rescue as it represents the truth of the time. Writers like Anita Desai, with her portrayal of characters who are making sense of the new realities of the newly independent India, help us to understand the social scenario of India in the 1970s. Her novel *In Custody*, set in India in the 1970s is the story of Deven, a lecturer in the Hindi department of suburban Lala Ram Lal College in Mirpore, and of his desire to rise out of his life's circumstances through aesthetic fulfilment afforded by the opportunity to interview Nur: the greatest Urdu poet alive. His illusions about the illustrious nature of Nur got shattered when he makes his way into the life of the poet and discovered that he is lost in the illusion of grandeur and trapped in the domestic sphere, just like him. The novel ends with his defeated aspirations, fallen illusions, and a new determination to make sense of the life one has been awarded.

The novel presents a male world of work and action in contrast to women who are dependent on their male folk. By silencing women in her narrative, Desai raises an accusing argument at the society which by default believes in the marginalization of women, forcing them to remain indoors and conform to the ideal prototype. Through intricate detailing and extrinsic presentation, Desai foregrounded how the prevalent gender hierarchy is flawed in its execution. Though popular perception attributes women to depend on their male folk, the hierarchy is overturned in Deven and Nur's families where familial responsibilities and economic problems are the lots of women while men remain busy spinning fantasies. Sarla on coming upon her husband Deven lying immobile on a chair while she is busy completing her household chores thinks: "It was only men who could play at being dead while still alive; such idleness was luxury in her opinion. Now if she were to start playing such tricks, where would they all be? Who would take Manu to school and cook lunch for them?" (Desai 128).

Both Sarla and Nur's elder wife Safia begum are hardworking women fulfilling all their womanly duties and sticking to societal norms. Sadly, their efforts are still unacknowledged by their husbands. While Safia's age permitted her to openly mock the poetic sensibilities of her husband when he fails to meet her corporal needs, Sarla never raises her voice against Deven's anger outbursts for which she is never responsible- "Sarala never lifted her voice in presence-countless generations of Hindu womanhood behind her stood in her way, preventing her to display open rebellion" (146).

In more than one instance, marriage is portrayed as a trap under which both sexes suffer equally and yet it is only men who have the freedom to react to their dissatisfaction. Women have legal rights but no social sanction to rise against the dominant sex. Deven understands Sarla's defeat in marriage, the wrecking of her magazine dreams of marriage-love, a life full of luxuries with a refrigerator, and a telephone and still, he cannot bring himself to empathize with her as this will hurt his male superiority. And it is not merely the wedded wives who serve their households pleasing the patriarchs, the world of *In Custody* has quite a few widows- Mrs. Bhalla (Deven and Sarla's neighbor) and her group of other widows who chant and sing, walk to temple every morning. Deven's friend Raj's widowed aunt with whom Deven lives in Delhi is also one of the widows presented to readers in the novel. There is no trace of sympathy in Deven's comprehension of these women rather there lies a sense of dislike. They lead colourless lives and have to find solace in religious activities whose primary beneficiaries are men- aesthetes, priests, etc. interestingly, the widowed status of Raj's aunt is exploited by men like the tailor who enjoys free lodging on the pretext of providing "sister Ji" some protection and Deven who finds her unquestionable service favourable for his pocket. This shows how widows, as women devoid of a male head, are entitled to live more constrained life bounded under the shackles of patriarchy.

Even the minor women characters who made their appearance in no more than ten lines are presented to readers with popular female stereotypes. The principal's wife who made her appearance during the day of the board meeting is an erratic woman who cannot manage to say the right things at the right time. Even the tailor who lives with Raj's widowed aunt while talking to Deven about one of his female customers outlines her stereotypical female vanity in describing extravagant designs she ordered for her blouses and comparing her to a courtesan. It is well to remember that the 1970s is remembered as a period when the fashion industry is flourishing in India with women's styles and looks being revolutionized during this time. Any such change in the lives of women is never appreciated by men who want them to live as it is without any change. With her presentation of the struggles of women's lives, it seems like Desai is advocating the legitimate rights and freedom of such unfortunate women who, despite several political rights, are trapped under the shackles of patriarchy.

Historical movements often shed light on the advancements in the perception of thinking of people that lived during that time. The Chipko movement of 1973, witnessed women coming in together to save the trees that constitute their livelihood. In absence of the male folk of the family, the women gathered together to fight the authorities that wished to clear the land for settlement projects. As a harbinger of environmental consciousness, the Chipko movement is also categorized as a movement that gave momentum to feminist ideologies in the Indian subcontinent. During this period, the notion of double colonization enters post-colonial and feminist discourses indicating how women in formerly colonized societies were doubly colonized by imperial powers and by patriarchal ideologies. It is realized that it is only by giving the oppressed a voice, a step toward equality can be achieved. The step that can be recognized more aptly in a decade in which women are seen as capable enough to be a part of the revolution. Nur's second wife Imtiaz (meaning advantage) represents one such voice that despite its commanding force remains sidelined.

A 'tawaif' renowned for her dancing and singing skills but prized only for her body gets admission in Nur's heart and house through her poetic abilities. While she managed to establish her reputation as a poet, the tag of 'tawaif' never left her side. Concentrated on her looks and the profession she was engaged in, nobody tried to appreciate her fine poetic sensibilities. Right from Imtiaz Begum's first poetry recitation that he attended on her birthday, Deven is determined to disregard her poetic abilities. To him, she is merely a monkey mechanically practicing tricks she has learned from Nur. Important to note here is how in the progress of the novel even Nur accuses his second wife of stealing his audience. The kind of treatment that Imtiaz Begum is getting from society and her husband, can be understood by using Homi Bhabha's idea of mimicry.

Bhabha in his essay "Of mimicry and men" introduces mimicry as one of the most elusive strategies of colonized power. He asserts how the colonial authority wanted its colonial subjects to become a blurred copy and not the same or better versions of colonial rulers (Bhabha 132). This is ensured to preserve their power and authority over the suppressed subjects and eradicate their ways of proving a threat to colonial existence. Thinking closely, men and women in India share the same inequalities of the hierarchical relationship between colonizer and colonized. While Deven finds Sarla inadequate in understanding his aesthetic urge to preserve Urdu for later generations, Nur only wanted a blurred copy of himself in Imtiaz and is never willing to appreciate her for her fine poetic sensibilities. He took pride in marrying a beautiful woman with an aesthetic sense but prefers to display his love for Imtiaz only when she is ill and able to play the stereotypical role of a weak woman dependent on her husband.

Desai has a sharp eye for unveiling the reality of society. While projecting the discrimination women goes through, she very well included the narratives of women folk who often use the same patriarchal mindset to address women who didn't fit into set stereotypes. Safia Begum, Nur's elder wife description of Imtiaz Begum as the live epitome of a woman who has internalized the patriarchal structure of Indian society:
A fine actress chuckled the old woman... 'She used to be a dancing girl out there... 'and she knows all the dancer's tricks. Now she's persuaded them she's really ill. It is always like that when she wants something from him, always (121).

The way society perceives Imtiaz Begum is very much influenced by her association with the brothel. Brothel as a space of social deviance can be categorized as, what Michael Foucault calls, heterotopia that is a space of deviation where individuals who exhibit behavior outside the norm are placed (5). As a space of deviance, the brothel functions in non-hegemonic conditions, offering a space of residence to women who wish to earn their livelihood independently by the display of their abilities and the

use of their bodies. By stepping out of the traditional household and breaking the hierarchy of female dependence, Imtiaz as a 'dancing girl' was earning money through the power of her dancing skills and poetic talent. But while the patron Nur admires her talent, the husband Nur wanted his wife to subsume in the traditional role of a housewife. The identity of a dancing girl that she was forced to abandon because of the decline of admiration for Urdu poetic talent post-independence, continues to haunt her existence in the new life where her talent is easily overshadowed under the garb of the makeup and her desire for independence subsumed under the status of being Nur's second wife. In more than one instance in the text, the true admirer of Urdu poetry: Deven can notice the floury layer of powder and glistening lipstick over Imtiaz's face but fails to admire her fine poetry.

Anita Desai very consciously chose the character of 'tawaif' to raise her voice against inherent patriarchal ideologies. This conscious decision might be sprung from the desire to highlight how a gender-sensitive environment that encourages women to garner their abilities and become economically independent can help them to defy discriminatory norms of conduct. Many ancient texts like *Mrichchhakatika* of Sudraka written in the 5th century B.C used 'ganika' Vasantasena as its lead actress who is economically independent and braver and wittier than the male protagonist. The character of the courtesan is often used in literature to highlight the discriminatory attitude of society towards women and the treatment they go through if they defy the established code of conduct.

Throughout the book, Imtiaz is depicted as a dominant woman who is jealous of his husband's fame and his desire to rise above him as a poetess. But reading between the lines, one can see how her desire blooms out of the discrimination she has been subjected to throughout her life. She attempts to stop her husband from reciting poetry as she can see Nur lost in the glory of the old days. Failing to capture the new nature of commercialized poetry, Nur is lost in preserving the old days of glory by inviting a whole set of drunken cronies into his house and letting them enjoy. The same host crowd that only eats and drinks in Nur's presence, throws coins while Imtiaz recites her poetry. By her wits and logic, Imtiaz Begum is earning money and also fulfilling her desire of being a poetess. The only occasion in the narrative in which she powerfully voices herself for what she is rather than what she is made out of everyone is in her letter to Deven. This letter has seen the signifier of a new woman capable of gaining her due by asserting her rights and abilities:

"I am a woman and have had no education but what I have found and seized by myself. Unlike poets and scholars who had won distinctions, I had no patron apart from my husband, no encouragement and sympathy. Yet there must have been some natural gift if Nur sahib himself was impressed by my early verse. It is the reason why he married me in his old age, to have at his side an intellectual companion of the kind he did not have in his first marriage" (196).

Her letter along with her poetic verses attached to it is a manifesto of the inherent weakness of male chauvinism challenging society as a whole:

"Let me see if you are strong enough to face them and admit to their merit or they will fill you with fear and insecurity because they threaten you with danger-danger that your superiority to women may become questionable." (196)

Deven lacks the courage to read her poetry and accept his defeat. Yet again Deven leaves her poetry unread as his mind is so preoccupied with Nur's fading glory that he is unwilling to face the emergence of Imtiaz. Imtiaz's insistence on telling her story to Deven is symbolic of Indian women writers who were struggling during this time to tell their stories to the world. Imtiaz is an Indian woman in search of an autonomous identity and through Deven's consciousness, Desai articulates male perception that wishes to bind women in a set hierarchy of submission. It is ironic how the entire male action revolves around voicing linguistic voices while female voices are muted with exception of Imtiaz begum who doesn't have generations of womanhood behind her, forcing her to conform to the norms of patriarchy. Defiance from society is not new for Imtiaz who used to be a dancing girl, she has garnered the strength to assert her capabilities and make the world acknowledge her abilities.

In Ismail Merchant's movie adaptation of *In Custody* Imtiaz is shown as an independent woman asserting her authority over others. After finding Deven different from other of Nur's followers he requested Deven to record her voice so that her hidden talent reach the world to which Deven never agreed. In the world of the novel where Hindi and Urdu rival one other for supremacy, Murad is on a mission to preserve Urdu poetry through his magazine 'Awaaz' and Deven is out to be a custodian of Nur's voice through a second-hand tape recorder (which by default is only available in urban cities like Delhi as compared to Mirpore which stays away from the wave of technological development signaling regional disparities in India), the voice of Imtiaz begum remains ignored as she is a woman. Her voice is also 'in custody' of a world preoccupied with male voices.

It is important to acknowledge how Anita Desai in *In Custody* did not wish to create ideal characters. All the male and female characters in the novel have their strengths and weaknesses. The male protagonist Deven is hard working with fine poetic sensibilities but lacks judgment and has an inherent fear to face life with adversities. Sarla presents the ideal prototype of an ideal wife but is in the custody of the prevailing patriarchal structure. Nur, the greatest Urdu poet is obsessed with the glory of his eluded past and doesn't wish to accept the reality of his present. Safia begum is lost in her domestic world and is happy conforming to the assigned gender norms. Her only mission in life is to surpass Imtiaz begum who runs the household economically and get back her lost authority in the domestic sphere. Imtiaz begum is both physically and aesthetically gifted but because of unjust societal treatment, she wishes to be the center of attention by all means possible.

Anita Desai's *In Custody* focuses on the psychological turmoil that the people of India face in the context of the social conditions prevalent at that time. Problems arising out of the socio-political context attacked both men and women equally but while men had the opportunity to voice their opinions and assert their views, women's experiences are always side-lined and Desai's representation of such women helps in awakening minds who might wish to give women a chance to speak, to break out the custody of patriarchal and colonial domination and make their mark in the new flourishing India and the outside world.

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