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Breaking the Seals of Silence: Locating Female Voices in Anita Desai's *In Custody*

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Abstract

*Although Anita Desai officially refuses to be labeled a feminist, a general survey of her creative oeuvre cannot fail to indicate her persistent preoccupation with women's lives, their muted and muffled voices and the omnipresence of socially and culturally impeditive forces in their identity-formation. This paper proposes a feminist reading of Anita Desai's *In Custody*, attempting to locate behind the novel's chief concern with cultural and linguistic preservation, Desai's caustic critique of patriarchal structures that conspire to silence women ostensibly in a show of strength but in reality to conceal fear and weakness. Charting the world of the novel through the point of view of her male protagonist Deven, Desai expertly trains her female gaze on a world of men - their endeavours, failures and accomplishments, revealing embedded within the grand narrative of the male world, a confined subculture of neglected, subordinated women who, nevertheless, refuse to be passive. By uncovering the resistant voices of women within the male-dominated text of the novel, this paper intends to establish *In Custody* as Desai's significant foray into feminism, not merely in thematic terms but in terms of narrative art as well.*

“The grass is also like me
As soon as it can raise its head
the lawnmower
obsessed with flattening it into velvet,
mows it down again.
How you strive and endeavour
to level woman down too!
But neither the earth's nor woman's
desire to manifest life dies.
Take my advice: the idea of making a
footpath was a good one.”

- Kishwar Naheed, *The Grass is Really
Like Me*

The world of Anita Desai's *In Custody* (1984) has, over the years, yielded itself to rich and varied textual and critical interpretations. The general critical tendency, however, has been to regard it as a venture in which Desai, for once, puts her feminist leanings to rest and explores the larger issues of language, art, life and culture in a limiting world. Her choice of a male consciousness through which to frame her narrative in this novel has been lauded and her skillful and detailed portrayal of the male psyche has helped to



tip the balance in favour of her writing as serious (androgynous) rather than belonging to the category of mere women's writing. But the fact remains that *In Custody* is suffused with Desai's characteristic feminist consciousness and showcases her understanding of female psychology and experience at its best. This paper attempts to study Desai's choice of a male narrative consciousness for her novel as a feminist strategy of looking at female experience from a male point of view. By silencing the women in her (male-centered) narrative, Desai rather than conniving 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. My reading of the novel shall try to locate the silenced voices of women in a world where language and its debates are the prerogative of the male and women in the custody of patriarchy, languish in the non-linguistic sphere of silence.

In Custody is primarily, in terms of both plot and narrative, the story of Deven, a lecturer of Hindi in a decrepit suburban college in Mirpore, on the outskirts of Delhi, and of his desire to rise out of his life's circumstances through the promise of aesthetic, academic and material fulfillment afforded by the opportunity of interviewing Nur, his idol and the greatest Urdu poet alive. A lover of Urdu poetry, Deven's aspirations ascend their summit when he is promised the interview by Nur but as he gradually makes his way into the world of the poet, his romantic illusions are shattered and the practical truths of life begin to entwine him in all their force and tightness. Negotiating with the poet

and engaging with his poetry, he realizes entirely different issues and the novel ends with his defeated aspirations, fallen illusions and a new determination to be contented with his present status in life. The novel essentially presents a male world - a world of work, action, art and academics with male academicians, male students, male editors, male poets and male connoisseurs of poetry crowding the canvas. In this whirl of activity, women, though not exactly absent, occupy the interstitial narrative and social spaces as wives and concubines, and are dependent upon and subordinate to their men-folk.

Anita Desai, in one of her interviews, stated her initial intention of not including women characters in this novel:

'I thought I would try to write without any female characters, but it proved impossible. I could hear them screaming in the background, banging on the doors, being very hysterical. I asked myself, "Why have I made all these women so awful?" and I thought, "Well, if that was the house they were made to live, they would probably be awful.'"

The women in the world of *In Custody* are sealed in silence and are not just ideologically but literally defined by patriarchal discourse symbolized by the development of the narrative through Deven's point of view. A close textual analysis singles out three major women characters in the narrative – Deven's wife Sarla, Nur's older wife Safiya Begum and his younger wife Imtiaz Begum, with several minor ones like— Raj's widowed aunt, the Principal's wife, the female customer of the tailor, unnamed prostitutes of the house, and Mrs. Bhalla and the other widows who ritually pass Deven's house



in the course of their early morning procession. These women, constructed through the male gaze, inhabit the margins of patriarchal space and are stifled by its norms and it is perhaps no coincidence that they are part of the weakest and most exploited social groups – housewives, widows and prostitutes. Desai has very subtly woven in the novel's fabric, a social documentary on the condition of women in India in the 1980s and has so successfully achieved their configuration under the male gaze, that the gender-power politics at play in the novel is easily discernible. Incidentally, the epigraph at the starting of the novel, taken from Wordsworth's *Rob Roy's Grave*, also speaks of a power relationship:

“...they should take, who have the power

And they should keep who can.”

(epigraph)

In Custody, like most of Desai's other novels, albeit in a less overt manner, takes up domestic space as the primary arena for the exploration of its theme. The family as a site of female exploitation is succinctly revealed in the novel through the presentation of both Deven and Nur's families. The wives in both these houses lead dismal lives in physical, material and emotional terms. In both the families, familial responsibilities and economic hurdles are the lot of the women, while the men spin fantasies and frustrate at their unfulfillment. Sarla, on coming upon her husband, Deven lying immobile on a chair while she toiled away at her housework, thinks with annoyance:

‘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?’ (p.139)

Sarla and Nur's older wife, Safiya Begum are kindred souls – hardworking women, emotionally unacknowledged by their husbands and rendered coarse by years of self-abnegation. But while her age has given Safiya Begum the relative freedom to voice her disgust to her husband's face –

‘Did he marry me to make me live in a pigsty with him?’ (p.58)

Sarla converts her expected silence to a means of feminine resistance:

‘Sarla never lifted her voice in his presence — countless generations of Hindu

womanhood behind her stood in her way, preventing her from displaying open rebellion.... Her method of defense was to go into the bed room and snivel, refusing to speak at all, inciting their child to wail in sympathy.’

(p.p158, 159)

The image of life as a cage is palpably presented in *In Custody*, both thematically and stylistically, and the idea of marriage and domesticity as a trap is reinforced by the ubiquitous dissatisfaction in conjugal life. Marriage is portrayed as a yoke under which both the sexes suffer shared victimhood and yet it is only the men, used to satiety, who have the freedom to react to their dissatisfaction, while for women, victimization remains the norm. Deven implicitly understands Sarla's defeat in marriage, the thwarting of her desires and dreams and yet, he cannot bring himself to empathize with her:



‘He understood because, like her, he had been defeated too; like her, he was a victim. Although each understood the secret truth about the other, it did not bring about any closeness of spirit, any comradeship....A victim does not look to help from another victim; he looks for a redeemer.’ (p.68)

He felt that it was his marriage to the prosaic Sarla and the consequent family responsibilities which it entailed, that was responsible for his aborting his promising career as a poet and taking to the mundane act of teaching instead. He knew that as a breadwinner he was inadequate and the knowledge that his failure was known by his wife made him defensive, causing him to resort to patriarchal display of power and masculinity:

‘Usually he was enraged by her tacit accusations that added to the load on his back. To relieve it, he would hurl away dishes that had not been cooked to his liking, bawl uncontrollably if meals were not ready when he wanted them or the laundry not done or a button missing or their small son noisy or unwashed; it was to lay the blame upon her, remove its clinging skin from him. Tearing up a shirt she had not washed, or turning the boy out of the room because he was crying, he was really protesting against her disappointment; he was out to wreck it, take his revenge upon her for harbouring it. Why should it blight his existence that had once shown promise and had future?’ (p.68)

Neglected by the world at large and thwarted in his poetic fantasies, it is only before Sarla that Deven can give vent to all his frustrations and misses no opportunity to establish his male authority over her. He exults in the realization that as a wife, her peaceful existence in his house is entirely a matter of his arbitration and pretends to detest the gifts that his in-laws send him with a view to placate him and ensure the well-being of their daughter:

‘He had tossed it (the shirt) on to the floor in an obligatory fit of temper – the meek are not always mild – saying the colour was one he detested, that the buttons did not match, that the size was too large – how could they have chosen such a cheap garment for their son-in-law.’ (p.18)

For Sarla, on the other hand, the wrecking of her magazine dreams of marriage — love, middle-class affluence and shared harmony — cast little shadow on her course of action. Life is yet to be lived and indulgence in frustration and self-pity is a luxury that she cannot afford, trying to fashion her dream world through every little joy that reality brought her way. As she sees for the first time, her husband ministering affection towards their little son and then walking out hand-in-hand, with the child’s tiny forefinger clutched in his tight fist, she is filled with astonishment and in that brief, transient moment she feels herself

‘...coming as close to that mother in the glossy magazine as she was ever likely to come.’ (p.71)

And it is not merely the wedded wives who serve their husbands in a patriarchal household, cooking and slaving without



any acknowledgement of their indispensable services, Patriarchy so monitors women that their labours extend even beyond the realms of conjugality, even in the utter deprivation of widowhood. The world of *In Custody* has quite a few widows - Mrs. Bhalla, Deven and Sarla's neighbor and her group of other widows who, chanting and singing, walk to the temple every morning, awakening the whole neighbourhood and Deven's friend Raj's widowed aunt with whom Deven puts up at Delhi. There is no trace of sympathy in Deven's comprehension of these women; rather, there lies in him a sense of foreboding and even dislike. Out of the ties of conjugality, widowhood imposes still greater discipline upon these women for whom life becomes an act of repentance. Deprived of all rights to hope, joy and contentment, they lead as 'colourless lives' as their colourless garments and have to find their salvation in religious and philanthropic service, whose primary beneficiaries are men – ascetics, priests, travelers, vagabonds and beggars. The life of Raj's aunt is a case in point. Her widowed status is severely exploited by men like the tailor who at once shifts in with her, enjoying free boarding and lodging on the pretext of giving 'Sister-ji' some protection and singing devotional songs to feed her religious fervor and by Deven who finds her silent and unquestioning service favourable for his pocket. And yet, she remains silent, unperturbed, the patriarchal norms of society having ingrained deeply in her the desirable and valued ideals of widowhood.

Even the 'common woman' in the novel, by which I mean any passing, insignificant female character, is

constructed and placed on board through the male gaze. The Principal's wife who appears briefly early in the novel is presented as the stereotype erratic woman who fails to keep apart her personal and public lives and can hardly be relied on for saying the right things at the right time. In fact, at a later period in the novel, the tailor, while talking to one of his female customers outlines her stereotypical female vanity and in describing the extravagant designs she had ordered for her blouses, compares her to a courtesan:

'She is counting out the materials...and each one a different style. What styles, I tell you, even the courtesans of the Moghul courts never thought up anything like them – here an opening, there an opening, what is there left for me to sew, only tapes to hold them together?'

(p.181)

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.

The study of feminism, along with that of post-colonialism, has long realized that it is only by giving the oppressed a voice, by making the subaltern speak, that emancipation and a step towards equality can be achieved. But Desai in *In Custody*, tragically reminds us that under the all-pervading layers of patriarchy, even the most piercing voices can be muffled. Nur's second wife, Imtiaz Begum represents one such insistent voice, which in spite of its commanding force remains



unacknowledged. A prostitute from a dancing house, Imtiaz Begum, renowned for her singing skills but prized only for her body, gets admission through her budding poetic abilities into Nur's heart and home. Blossoming under the tutelage of the great master, she manages over a few years to establish her reputation as a poet and yet, the cruel fact that cannot be obliterated is that it is her person more than her poems that inspire the visitors. She is first introduced to Deven and the readers on the day of her birthday, reciting her recent collection of poems to a mehfil and Deven's first reaction to her is one of loathing, mediated by the fact that he had expected it to be a gathering in honour of his hero Nur and is shocked by the poet's marginalized presence on the scene. To make matters worse, she is a woman, part of that same 'female mafia' which leaves Deven feeling so inadequate and insecure and therefore a certain target of his patriarchal prejudice. Right from the beginning of her recitation, Deven is determined not to listen to her verse and when he does listen to it, it is with reservations and a preconditioned mind. Singing of her caged existence, voicing incidentally the same thoughts which occupy Deven's own consciousness, she draws from him no empathy or understanding, only a deep hatred. Imtiaz Begum's poetry is of an undeniably high order, drawing itself, one realizes, from her womanly life of servitude but while the other members of the audience are visibly affected by her expression, Deven's prejudice leaves him feeling cold and contemptuous. To him, she is a mere monkey, mechanically practicing the tricks she has learnt from the great Nur, a belief that is ingrained in Nur's heart as well.

Nur accuses her of stealing his poetic jewels, his admirers, his fame and even his poetic space:

'...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.' (p.89)

To Nur, her birthday celebration is odious, a celebration of approaching death that the passage of every year heralds:

'Birthdays. I thought we had done with celebrating
them, with the setting up of gravestones along the
paths of life....But the vanity of women....No chance
to gather garlands, gifts, applause, attention can be
passed by you see. Not even the occasion of setting up
of another gravestone.' (p.88)

And yet, when Deven visits him a few weeks later to find Imtiaz Begum very sick, Nur's attitude towards her is entirely different, a change which leaves even Deven surprised. In the face of her weakness, Nur can find her lovable and even right in her thoughts and actions. The birthday celebration ceases now to be a brazen and willful display of vanity and takes on the colours of a performance that has severely strained its performer and superstitiously brought about her mental and physical breakdown:

'You see what has come of that mistaken celebration
we had for her birthday? I did not want it all – I am
superstitious – but she insisted – and it proved too



much for her. *She is not strong, you see. She never was strong, and she breaks easily – under strain - .* (p.119, my italics)

Imtiaz Begum's illness, whether real or feigned, enables her to play the stereotypical role of the weak woman, needing the physical and emotional support of her husband and entirely dependent upon him for her very being, existence and identity. By thus constituting her in the group of ordinary woman and relieved by the deteriorating strength of her voice, Nur feels less threatened and can freely admit his affection towards her— a weak woman punished by her weakness because of her imprudence in acting against her husband's wishes.

Desai does not, at any point within the novel, offer us a glimpse into the consciousness of Imtiaz Begum. Being the most defiant of all the women in the world of *In Custody*, she is the most subalterned, and objectified under the patriarchal gaze – of men and even women like Nur's elder wife for whom she, attempting to transgress her limits rather than being contented with her lot, is a sinner. The only occasion when she powerfully voices herself, demanding to be respected for what she is rather than what she is made out to be by Nur and his admirers, is in her letter to Deven. Strangely, this letter from her who has so far been spoken for, judged and condemned by the male world, places her in a completely different perspective. She, so far cast as the painted and powdered dancer, showing off very cleverly her stolen poetic jewels, suddenly breaks off from this patriarchal mould and attempts to configure herself through her

own clear voice, a transformation that leaves Deven drained and exhausted:

'The elegance and floridity of her Urdu entered Deven's ears like a flourish of trumpets and beat at his temples while he read. 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 had been washed and which wore an expression that made Deven halt and stumble before he could read on.' (p.215)

She, paradoxically, uses the same arguments that Deven had psychologically employed to convince himself of her unworthiness, to prove her worth. She, a common dancer, was Nur's wife but by viewing Nur's choice as commonplace and not attributing to her any merit, was not Deven implicitly insulting his hero, Nur? Had there been no poetic quality in her verse, would the great Nur have consented to make her his wife, on the basis of her vulgar past existence? And if her poetry was not of the same standard as that of Nur and therefore ineligible for appreciation, was it her fault – a simple woman with no education except what she had seized for herself? These questions hurled at Deven unsettle him from his comfortable patriarchal niche. Here is a voice he had condescendingly relegated to the margins, entrapping it in stereotypes, but it had broken free to assert itself and mock at his complacency. The volume of poetry enclosed in the envelope is intended to shatter Deven's mental world:



‘Let me see if you are strong enough to face them and admit to their merit. Or if they fill you with fear and insecurity because they threaten you with danger – danger that your superiority to women may become questionable.’ (p.216)

Her letter is a manifesto of the inherent weakness of male chauvinism, striking its blows at not merely Deven but the patriarchal set-up as a whole:

‘Are you not guilty of assuming that because you are a male, you have a right to brains, talent, reputation and achievement, while I, because I was born female, am condemned to find what satisfaction I can in being maligned, mocked, ignored and neglected? Is it not you who has made me play the role of the loose woman in gaudy garments by refusing to take my work seriously and giving me just that much regard that you would extend to even a failure in the arts as long as the artist was male?’ (p.217)

But Deven lacks the courage to confront her challenge, to negotiate with her self-formulated presence and the feminist voice of her individuality:

‘He did not have the will or the wherewithal to deal with this new presence, one he had been happy to ignore earlier and relegate to the grotesque world of hysterics,

termagants, viragos, the demented and the outcast.’

(p.217)

Through Deven’s consciousness Desai articulates the male formulation of frustrated womanhood, the stereotypical moulds in which it is cast – as hysteric, termagant, virago and outcast. It is these roles that aberrant women are allotted in a man’s world, their voices pushed beyond hearing while the compliant ones are included in the game, admitted by their badge of silence. Desai states that her novel is about “...how life is like for men, how different it is from the life of women.”

‘...I wanted to show how much easier it is for a man to live this life; how much harder it is for a woman’s words to be taken seriously, or even have the time, the space and the privacy...’

And this is brilliantly done through her strategy of focusing the narrative through Deven’s consciousness, giving it from time-to-time, a wider perspective. It is ironical that the entire (male) action in the novel revolves around the issue of voicing – of linguistic, cultural and poetic voicing while the female voices are conspiratorially muted, silenced, stifled. In the world of the novel where Urdu and Hindi vie with one another for supremacy, Murad is on a mission to preserve the voice of Urdu poetry through his magazine significantly titled, ‘Awaaz’ and Deven is out to be the custodian of Nur’s voice through the symbolically second-hand and inefficient tape-recorder, the voice of Intiaz Begum with its asserting merit remains ignored because she is a woman. The weaknesses of the patriarchal



narrative become all too obvious here and one realizes that in this male world full of

sounds, it is the voices of women that are in custody.

Primary source:

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