



Gender Issues in Anita Desai's *In Custody*: A Critical Exploration

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Abstract

Anita Desai is an Indian novelist writing in English who is held in very high respect as an Indian author and has made it her aim in her writing to depict the challenges women face in India's patriarchal society. In a society dominated by patriarchy, not only are women subjected to oppression, but they also have their voices silenced. They are also treated as members of second-class citizens with no rights or desires. When a woman is shown to have any desire, society labels them as abnormal and works to guarantee that they endure a significant deal of suffering as a result. Because she does not have an independent identity, she is forced to live a life that is dependent on their husband. Anita Desai paints a picture of the status of women in her novels, which is most emphatically represented in her novel *In Custody*. Such a pitiful state of women in Indian society is the parameter that almost all women have to live with every day. Anita Desai portrays this status of women in a very realistic manner in her novels, especially in *In Custody*. The topic of discussion in the research paper titled "Gender Issues in Anita Desai's *In Custody*: A Critical Exploration" is the novel's female characters and how they manifest gender politics and how Anita Desai has tried to contribute significantly to feminist politics in Indian writing in English.

Keywords

Gender, *In Custody*, Indian Writing, Patriarchy, Women Characters

Anita Desai's novel *In Custody* does not feature leading female protagonists, though the novelist vehemently projects gender issues at the very core of the narrative. Deven Sharma is a visiting Hindi professor at Mirpore's Lala Ram Lal College. The novel centres on his friendship with the renowned Urdu poet Nur Shahjehanabadi in a crumbling palace in Old Delhi. Deven has nothing but praise for Nur and his poetry. Deven's lifelong dream has been to interview Nur, so when Murad (Deven's friend) suggests it for a story in Murad's magazine *Awaaz*, Deven jumps at the chance. This leads to the novel's central connection. Therefore, *In Custody* examines the dynamics between two male protagonists. Despite the novel's focus on two male characters, three strong women advocate for themselves and other women. These three women embody the novel's feminist ideals. Though females are not the novel's significant protagonists, Deven's wife, Sarla, and Nur's two wives, Safia Begum and Imtiaz Begum, stand in significant prominence from a feminist perspective in vividly representing the plight of Indian women and how they need to stand up for their rights against the male-chauvinist order (Chaudhary). The paper explores the three female characters to understand the feminist politics of Anita Desai and how she strongly critiques the patriarchal Indian mindset which domesticates women and does not let them have their desires fulfilled and also does not allow women to come out of the prescribed gender roles and realise their fullest potential.

The novel introduces the reader to Sarla, the wife of Deven Sharma, a Hindi Professor at Mirpore's Lala Ram Lal College. In the story, which focuses heavily on the power dynamics between male and female characters, Deven and Sarla do not have an amicable relationship. It seems likely that, through Sarla, Anita Desai is making a statement about the average Indian woman who feels incapacitated, ineffective and ineffectual in her marriage and unable to leave the family as she is dependent on her husband (Pathania). It is but the sad plight of Indian women which is represented through the character of Sarla, who has been domesticated to such an extent that she finds no means to take a flight of her fancy into things that she desires. She is trapped in a passionless and emotionless marriage where the husband and wife do not share a relationship and tend to avoid each other as much as possible. Deven and Sarla represent the husband-wife relationship of most middle-class Indian families where women are married to a man who aspires to reach greater heights. The women unsuccessfully become the victims of his passion. Deven's love for Urdu poetry and Nur makes him neglect his family. Whereas Deven runs to Delhi to fulfil his attraction for Nur, Sarla remains bound in her house, taking care of the children as a female; she is made to accept it as her plight in a male-chauvinist society.

Also, the societal mores do not allow her to decide to live separately with the children. In the novel *In Custody*, Deven and Sarla are husband and wife, but they treat each other like strangers. They likely feel this way because they have both experienced victimisations. Anita Desai writes, "Although each understood the secret about the other, it did not bring about any closeness of spirit, comradeship, because they also sensed that two victims ought to avoid each other, not yoke together their joint disappointments" (Desai 70). A victim does not seek assistance from another victim; instead, he seeks a saviour. The sentence, "At last, Deven had his poetry; she had nothing, so her look an added accusation and bitterness" (Desai 70), seems to be the novel's primary point in comprehending the relationship between Deven and Sarla.

The man-woman relationship thus finds a kind of just representation in Desai's novel. While most people have modest ambitions, Sarla had lofty goals for her own life. We all believe that life owes us nothing except the greatest of luxuries. That she "had dared to aspire towards a telephone, a refrigerator, even a car" (Desai 69) is not bad; everyone has material desires. It is only reasonable for Sarla to desire such worldly comforts, given their availability in the lives of those around her. Deven Sharma, a substitute teacher in a small town, needed more funds to purchase all of these. However, these hopes still needed to materialise by marrying someone in an academic profession and settling in a little hamlet outside the city (Dhawan). She was naturally resentful, as author Anita Desai describes. "Two deep, permanent furrows, as deep as surgical scars, ran from the ends of her nostrils to the corners of her mouth as a result of her hopes being dashed"(Desai 70).

All of Sarla's goals have been crushed, and she realises that she will never be able to achieve them. Therefore, she is "naturally embittered" (Desai 70), as the above phrase from the novel suggests. She has accepted that her and Deven's marriage is doomed from the start, and she has come to terms with her current situation but is pretty jaded because her material desires remain unfulfilled and she cannot connect with his love for poetry. Their relationship has suffered as a result of this resentment. After Deven's first encounter with Nur in the wee hours of the morning, he does not immediately return home; instead, he decides to head straight to college in the hope of recharging his energy there: "He could not go home and face Sarla's stony face, her sulks, or her open fury; it would be better to go straight to college" (Desai 66-67).

Later in the day, when Deven returns home, Sarla is engaged in idle chatter with her neighbour and treats Deven like a stranger. "As he pushed open the gate with its familiar rusty sound of protest, both women raised their drooping heads and stared at him as if he were a stranger, an interloper" (67), writes Anita Desai. Sarla then fidgeted a sari fold above her head. She was not generally so dramatic, but she set up a scene by covering her head whenever he came around. He attempted a smile but quickly covered his mouth since he

knew he should not, revealing that Sarla is not the type of woman to accept her husband's every whim. She can raise a fuss, so Deven avoids her whenever possible for marital harmony.

For the wife of a poet, she seemed prosaic, says Anita Desai in the novel, although Sarla's lack of poetic sensibility is not her fault. In contrast to Deven, who swoons over poetry, she is a practical realist. While Deven has his poems to occupy his time, Sarla has only her kid Manu. She appears to be helpless in the face of adversity. Her misfortune is not her fault; instead, it is the fault of a society that encourages people to get into marriage without fully getting to know each other. People like Deven should not get into marriage just because it is a social and cultural norm and live a life where they are victimised. It also becomes a reason for the victimisation of a female like Sarla.

Imtiaz Begum is the second wife of the famed Urdu poet Nur Shahjehanabadi. She seems too enamoured with the poet Nur and too well described in the narrative for her aspirations to be resentful of his creative success. In the story, she is portrayed as a "female mafia" (Desai 88), terrifying to those who claim to be Nur's fans and frequently irritating even Nur himself for his excesses. In other words, she represents "the new woman" in the novel, which Anita Desai paints with great care to demonstrate how women now actively participate in fields formerly regarded as exclusively male, such as poetry.

Imtiaz Begum is so drawn into Nur's poetic world that she agrees to marry him even though she knows full well that Nur already has a wife. She did not come from a privileged home; instead, she grew up in a neighbourhood where late-night music and dancing were commonplace. Within that murky environment, however, she is like a lotus that has shone so brightly that Nur was captivated enough by her beauty and brilliance to marry her. The narrative portrays her as superior to Safia Begum, Nur's first wife because she has a lyrical bent of mind and frequently endorses herself in literary writings.

Imtiaz Begum is feared by all in the Nur Shahjehanabadi household because of her position of dominance. She prefers to keep a firm hand on the reins. She is the source of much annoyance for Nur's purported fans, whom she claims corrupt the poet and prevent him from focusing on his poems. Imtiaz Begum tells Nur's admirers, "You have reduced him to that, making him eat and drink like some animal, like a pig" (Desai 77). This shows that Imtiaz Begum does not want Nur to live in such a pitiful condition where he is surrounded by his admirers who eat and make merry and instead wants to continue producing great poetry for art's sake. She constantly berates Nur throughout the book to get him to stop basking in the adulation of others and start focusing on himself.

So, when Deven comes to take Nur's Interview, Imtiaz Begum appears to be the most significant roadblock, as she refuses to let him into the poet's home. Ultimately, Deven has no choice but to interview outside Nur's home. As stated, Imtiaz Begum is a budding poet

working hard to establish herself in the field. Still, poetry is dominated by men, making it difficult for her to make a name for women in the field. Likely, she married Nur so she could hang out with Nur and pick his brain on how to write fantastic poetry. She appears to have a quick and decisive mind, which she uses to her advantage by bringing and retrieving items (Inamdar).

So, at her birthday party, we discover that she has not only performed but also diverted attention away from the great poet Nur, who is relegated to a dark corner of the room. Safia Begum accuses her of stealing his fame, saying, “You have taken his name, his reputation, and today even his admirers” (Desai 89). This is a harsh accusation, but it is also partly true, as she did want to be recognised for her poetry. She finally had the opportunity on her birthday, so she took it. That she gets to the centre stage and does what her heart desires makes her one of the central figures in the novel as she tries to attain what she desires with her soul. Even though she may be accused of stealing Nur’s fame, in the state that Nur is in, nothing more can be taken away from him. So, there is no harm if she uses Nur’s position to get what she ardently desires.

Many people believe Imtiaz Begum is envious of Nur's success as a poet because of the way she steals her birthday attention. In addition, some academics believe that Imtiaz Begum's jealousy is to blame for her role as a roadblock in Deven's attempt to take Nur's interview and boost his public profile. This interpretation, however, undermines Anita Desai's original intent for the character of Imtiaz Begum. Anita Desai's Imtiaz Begum attempts to show both a devoted wife and a budding poetess. She stole Nur's fans because she was bored and wanted to draw attention to herself. She obstructs Deven's interview primarily because she wants the poet to be reassured as he writes.

In her work *In Custody*, Anita Desai portrays a modern woman named Imtiaz Begum. She has a strong sense of self-confidence and wants nothing more than to make it as a poetess. She intends to come forward and let the world know about herself rather than remain in the shadows and the world of infamy. In this light, Imtiaz Begum's character represents a new type of empowered female who is not afraid to define success and happiness for herself (Tiwari).

Feminism can be defined as “a political position against patriarchy”, and feminist criticism is “a specific kind of political discourse: a critical and theoretical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism” (Toril Moi 117). Desai portrays the character of Imtiaz Begum, intending to directly take a position against patriarchy as she wanted to show how a female from a marginalised space can also take a stand in a highly male-chauvinist Muslim family and gain what she wants to get. She tries to give her wings of desire the necessary flight; therefore, she can be considered the “new woman” who will, by hook or crook, gain the position and status that she desires.

Safia Begum is the first wife of Nur Shahjenbadi, the famous Urdu poet in the novel *In Custody* by Anita Desai. She is of the practical bent of mind and is often seen to be very money-minded. When she sees Deven failing to get an interview with Nur, she thinks she can make money by arranging the interview. She advises Deven that he can take the interview somewhere outside Nur's house, where Nur's second wife, Imtiaz Begum, will not be there to be an impediment. So she arranges for the interview in the neighbouring house where Deven and Nur can be at peace with themselves without any intervention from Imtiaz Begum. She does this for money and says she will not allow Nur to leave the house without money.

At the end of the novel, we see that Deven receives a letter from Nur where Nur has asked for Rs. five hundred as a bill for the rent for using the premises for an interview. Safia Begum also shows her money-mindedness as she tries to take as much money as possible from Deven. It is to be reminded that poets and their passion for art often make them forget about material needs. To counter that aspect of Nur's life, Safia Begum probably became money-minded as she had to run a family.

Thus through these three characters, Anita Desai has represented three aspects of women in Indian society. Sarla represents the victimised state of Indian women in marriage, where they have to leave all their desires and live a lifeless life to societal and the husband's demands. In Safia Begum, we see a money-minded woman ready to earn money for the family's sake. In Imtiaz Begum, we see the "new woman" willing to take every step to reach a specific place in life – who wants to live a life with authority to achieve things for herself. She wants to be a poetess, but the male world of poetry does not want to accept her, but she wants to make every possible attempt to reach that world (Belliappa).

To summarise, Anita Desai's three characters represent three diverse types of women in Indian society. Sarla represents the plight of married Indian women, who are often pressured to abandon their ambitions to meet the demands of their husbands and Indian culture as a whole. Safia Begum is the prototypical ambitious, family-focused lady. On the other hand, Imtiaz Begum is emblematic of the driven, independent, and power-hungry "new woman" who prioritises success and independence over everything else. She aspires to become a poet but meets opposition from the field's traditional male bastion. Thus, through these three female characters, Desai represents the whole gamut of women's experiences within the institution of family and marriage and how they suffer due to the patriarchal mindset and practices. Nevertheless, her portrayal of Imtiaz Begum with her new ethos and desire provides the novel with a new direction regarding how women should not prune their desires to find themselves to fit into the patriarchal mould but should give vent to their aspirations and live a life according to their terms.

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