

Muslim Ethos in Anita Desai's *In Custody*

Raj Kumar Mishra

Department of English,
Kamla Nehru Institute of Physical & Social Sciences, Sultanpur
(Affiliated to Dr. RMLAU Ayodhya)
Email-rajmishra8327@yahoo.com

Abstract

Anita Desai mostly deals with the questions of survival and existence in her novels. She tries to understand and explore the machinery which subjugated and conditioned othering process. In the novel, Urdu poetry, and two women- Sarla and Imtiaz Begum- are othered through power syndrome. Power operates always in a series of networks and extends its reach everywhere. Power is everywhere and nothing can escape it. It races fast as it gets allied with knowledge. Thus, the othering process is accelerated by power syndrome. Through power complex, a group of people or community is dominated and ruled over by the other. In the othering operation, the hero of the novel Devan proves himself the custodian of Urdu at the cost of his family. However, he could not rise above patriarchal hold. He pays least attention to Sarla due to his bloody patriarchal training and belief and towards the end Imtiaz. The present author intends to highlight instances and occasions wherein Urdu; Sarla and Imtiaz have been othered so that the Muslim life and culture can be taken into account with an objective bent of mind.

Keywords: Other; othering process.

Anita Desai in most of her novels engages the question of survival or existence. All social relations are marred by power-knowledge synthesis. Power is exercised through social and cultural discourses. Raman Selden et al are of the opinion, "In politics, art and science, power is gained through discourse: discourse is 'a violence that we do to things'. Claims to objectivity made on behalf of specific discourses are always spurious: there are no absolutely 'true'

discourses, only more or less powerful ones” (Selden et al 190). The term ‘other’ or ‘othering’ has been taken simply in the context of marginalization. In this process, one group, society or person excludes or marginalizes another. The ways of stereotype discriminate or derecognize other to cancel any possibility for getting each other. This process creates others. In the novel *In Custody* (2007), Urdu and women are victims to power structure. Both are othered in some unique way. In fact, this is colonial-colonized type of relation. One is dominated by the other. The othering strategy is a very powerful tool to silence someone or something without facing any threatening opposition.

Anita Desai in the novel is basically concerned with the fall in Urdu literature and Muslim culture as she has expressed in an interview with Magda Costa:

I was trying to portray the world of Urdu poets. Living in Delhi I was always surrounded by the sound of Urdu poetry, which is mostly recited. Nobody reads it, but one goes to recitations. It was very much the voice of North India. But although there is such a reverence for Urdu poetry, the fact that most Muslims left India to go to Pakistan meant that most schools and universities of Urdu were closed. So that it’s a language I don’t think is going to survive in India.... There are many Muslims and they do write in Urdu; but it has a kind of very artificial existence. People are not going to study Urdu in school and college anymore, so who are going to be their readers? Where is the audience? (Costa Web)

Our historians tell two, three reasons namely India-Pakistan partition, communalization of language that is, Urdu for Pakistan and Hindi for India, and Muslim’s great interest in wine and woman. The novel centers on the present condition of Urdu poetry, Urdu poet’s and lovers’ feelings of disillusionment, frustration, endless nostalgia, and contemporary Muslim society. With the partition of country, Urdu became the official language of Pakistan and Hindi of India. The concerned governments began promoting their official languages. As a result, Hindi got upper edge on Urdu in India and Urdu in Pakistan despite their sufficient readership. The novel centers on Devan, a Hindi lecturer in Lala Ram Lal College at Mirpore. He has great respect for Urdu poetry. Urdu has been his first love and first language since childhood. He is a big fan of Urdu poet Nur Shahjahanbadi. His interest in Urdu literature made him a boring teacher in the class and failed in the maintenance of order and discipline. Murad Beg his friend and editor of Urdu magazine *Awaaz*, one day visits Devan’s college and asks him to interview Nur the great

Urdu poet of India. Murad is well aware of the difficulties that come bringing out a magazine especially Urdu:

'Worries, worries, worries. And where are the readers? Where are the subscriptions? Who reads Urdu any more?' (*IC* 13-14)

Murad is committed 'to keep alive the glorious tradition of Urdu literature'; and therefore, he decided to bring out a special issue on Urdu poetry and Nur would be the star of the issue. Murad also told Devan that this issue would carry full feature on Nur before his death. Murad says:

If we do not do it, at whatever cost, how will it survive in this era of – that vegetarian monster, Hindi?... 'That language of peasants'...raised on radishes and potatoes', 'Yet, like these vegetables, it flourishes, while Urdu – language of the court in days of royalty – now languishes in the back lanes and gutters of the city. No place for it to live in the style to which it is accustomed, no emperors and nawabs to act as its patrons. Only poor I, in my dingy office, trying to bring out a magazine where it may be kept alive. (*IC* 14)

The ethos of Devan's society and college is communal. Communal riots engulf the society frequently which falsifies Indian secularism:

The Hindus slaughtered pigs in their own quarter; the Muslims took to slaughtering buffaloes in place of cows, realizing that the latter would have been tantamount to suicide. (*IC* 21)

At Murad's request, Devan visited Nur's residence. He found the residence unsuitable to a poet. "All he could hear were the pigeons complaining to and consoling each other up on the dusty ledges of the high skylights, and the labored sound of the poet's breathe, snarled in his throat with some elderly phlegm" (*IC* 45). After a brief talk with Devan, Nur nostalgically comments:

'How can there be Urdu poetry where there is no Urdu language left? It is dead, finished. The defeat of the Moghuls by the British threw a noose over its head, and the defeat of the British by the Hindi-wallahs tightened it. So now you see its corpse lying here, waiting to be buried.' (*IC* 45)

Nur suspects Devan because the latter happened a Hindi teacher. Devan explains him that he only took his degrees in Hindi for the sake of bread and butter. He has great respect for Urdu and wants to show his appreciation. Nur seemed as if he were not listening his all arguments. Nur continued his tirades:

Those Congress-wallahs have set up Hindi on 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. And you tell me it is for an Urdu magazine you wish to interview me. If so, why are you teaching Hindi?... It seems you have been sent here to torment me, to show me to what depths Urdu has fallen. (IC 46-47)

After all, Devan tried to arrange interview but it was almost impossible because of excess noise in the premise of the poet. His house was packed with children, women, louts, clowns, jokers and jugglers. Devan feels that "these louts, these *lafangas* (vagabond) of the bazaar world – shopkeepers, clerks, bookies and unemployed parasites- lived out the fantasy of being poets, artists and bohemians here on Nur's terrace, in Nur's company" (IC 55). And around the residence of the poet, the city hustle-bustle made the atmosphere boring and irritating:

Perhaps the rooftop of his house caught some of the electricity that seemed to rise from the city, its sparks flying from the wildly circling and flashing neon signs that lit up the sky, its cacophonous noises from the traffic in the streets, the shops in the bazaar and the cinema soundtrack, now reaching its deafening climax in which songs, screams, gun shots, armoured tanks, galloping horses and hysterical laughter and weeping all joined together in an incredible chorus. (IC 57)

Devan recited an Urdu poem to Nur in a very modest manner. Nur does not approve of the manner and reacted: "We need the roar of lions, or the boom of cannon, so that we can march upon these Hindi-wallahs and make them run. Let them see the power of Urdu', he thundered. "They think it is chained and tamed in the dusty yards of those cemeteries that they call universities, but can't we show them that it can still let out a roar or a boom?" (IC 58) Out of frustration and anger, Nur suggests Devan, "If you want arms, you had better cross the border and go find them in Pakistan. Here we live as *hijras*, as eunuchs" (IC 58). Nur even taunts Devan. Devan gets terrified. Nur further sheds light on the partiality played in the selection of books for Sahitya Akademi award: "No book was judged worthy of the award this year." Why such treatment of Urdu, my friends? Because Urdu is supposed to have died, in 1947" (IC 61). He tells him that even film songs are better than Urdu poems. This is the account of first round attempt of Devan to have an interview of Nur. It was all mere fuss and no success at all.

After first round trip to Chadani Chowk, Devan returned home late finding Sarla "standing in the doorway with her arms and her sari wrapped about her shoulders and her face bent under the thin straggling hair as she talked to a neighbor outside- the picture of an

abandoned wife" (*IC* 73). Sarla is leading of course a marooned life in the house of Devan. She is depreciated by Devan. There is no mutual understanding among them. Both are emotionally at loggerheads. Sarla's taciturnity increases Devan's mental burden. The novelist opines:

Devan had been more a poet than a professor when he married Sarla – he had only been taken on as a temporary lecturer and still had confidence in his verse – and for the wife of a poet she seemed too prosaic. Of course she had not been his choice but that of his mother and aunts, crafty and cautious women; she was the daughter of a friend of an aunt's, she lived on the same street as that family, they had observed her for years and found her suitable in every way: plain, penny-pinching and congenitally pessimistic. (*IC* 75)

After the first-round failure in interview project, Devan got introspective and practical. From now on he wished to look after his household- wife and son. Meanwhile Murad meets Devan to have information about the interview. Devan told him that it was all unsuccessful. He cannot lose his family and salary, provident fund, pension, housing, and medical allowance. He cannot let them to starve. Devan protests and jibes at Murad. Anyhow, Devan got ready for the second- round trip to Nur. This time he saw something different. He expected that he would have a chance to listen Nur. Nur second wife Imtiaz Begum a young lady is ready to recite her Urdu poems. She wished to have training in the company of Nur. As Imtiaz began her poem, Devan sensed and thought:

She said she was a bird in a cage that she 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, God in the guise of her lover, when would he come? (*IC* 92)

Murad has disliking for Imtiaz Begam. He thought her a so-called poetess having a connection with female mafia (don). "She would need only to shed her silver and black carnival costume and take on the drabness of their virtuous clothing. Dressed as she was, she would of course be barred from their society - they would have thought her no better than a prostitute or dancing girl" (*IC* 94). This all proves Devan's as a bloody patriarch. The so-called fans of Nur gathered to celebrate Nur's birthday. Devan is sat on a cane stool as he had on his first-round trip. Nur keeps on drinking. Nur told Devan that Imtiaz took the place of my secretary since she came to my house. Devan got fed up with family dramas and performances, and excess noise making all possibilities to have an interview in the written form null and void. This all Devan told Murad Beg. Murad suggested frustrated Devan to tape his poetry and interview. Devan

knows very well that he cannot bear the cost of tape recorder; so, he protests immediately. Murad asked him to draw the amount from the college fund. No doubt, it seemed him a serendipitous idea.

Next day, Devan met Abid Siddiqui, the head of the department of Urdu. He is short-sized man like his department “whose youthful face was prematurely topped with a plume of white hair as if to signify the doomed nature of his discipline” (IC 109). Siddiqui also accepts that Urdu “is becoming rarity- it is only grown for export” (IC 111). The chief librarian of the college also objected on the ground that the tape would be only useful for Urdu learners. Devan went to his department and asked for few days leave to complete the project of interview. Mr. Trivedi, the head of the department flared at him and warned him, “I’ll have you demoted, Sharma- I’ll see to it you don’t get your confirmation. I’ll get you transferred to your beloved Urdu department. I won’t have Muslim toadies in my department; you’ll ruin my boys with your Muslim ideas, your Urdu language. I’ll complain to the Principal, I’ll warn the RSS, you are a traitor-” (IC 168-69). This is all due to communal feelings.

Mr. Trivedi’s treatment made Devan to think about his relationship with Sarla. Devan has tamed and domesticated her badly. She even trained herself to remain silent. He found Sarla never opposing lady. She is just carrying the burden Hindu womanhood:

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. Devan knew she would scream and abuse only when she was safely out of the way, preferably in the kitchen, her own domain. Her other method of defence was to go into the bedroom and snivel, refusing to speak at all, inciting their child to wail in sympathy. (IC 169)

Devan does not have faith either in Safia Begum (First wife of Nur Sahib) or Imtiaz Begum. He takes Safia as a snake, an impostor who has stolen her husband’s verse. Imtiaz is also a problematic character. He hates her. Safia informed him about the arrangement so that he could interview Nur. Devan is almost on the verge of starvation bearing the cost of interview. He was dying for Nur’s interview. She arranged in a room of prostitute. But all his attempts and Safiya’s assistance were only to destroy Devan: “It was a fiasco. There was no other word for it. Disbelievingly, Devan had the first tape removed, the second tried and then the third and the fourth.... Everyone’s tempers were frayed by the constant stopping and starting. When the tapes could be induced to produce sound, there seemed to be nothing to listen to- long intervals of

crackling and sputtering interspersed with a sudden blare of horns from the street, the shrieking of nest-building birds, loud explosions of laughter and incoherent joviality, drunken voices bawling, singing, stopping short. Where was Nur?" (IC 202) Safia repeatedly sent letters to Devan for the payment of bills charged for interview arrangements as well as other domestic problems. Devan is obliged to pay. On the other hand, Sofia has been bloody opponent of Imtiaz. She does not like Imtiaz and her ambitions. Even in public it is heard that Nur had brought her from a brothel much younger to him and in future he may bring third one too. Imtiaz Begum in a confrontational tone sent letter along with her latest poems for critical evaluation to Devan shedding his patriarchal character:

The recording is no secret. Whatever your reason for concealing it from me, Nur Sahib could not conceal it from me. Was I considered incapable of understanding the need to record Nur Sahib's voice for posterity? Was Safiya Begum considered wiser and more capable because of her greater age and her longer years with him? Dear friend, I beg to put it to you that you have insulted my intelligence by your deception. (IC 228)

She continues her tirades against him:

... you thought I was a prostitute who dazzled Nur Sahib's eyes with my dance and so inveigled my way out of a house of prostitution into the house of a distinguished poet. Is that not an insult to the poet you claim to idolize, quite apart from the insult to me?... Kindly remember that unlike Nur Sahib and unlike your respected self, I am a woman and have had no education but what I have found and seized for myself. Unlike poets and scholars who have won distinctions, I have had no patron apart from my honoured husband, no encouragement and no sympathy. (IC 229)

She sums up:

...I am enclosing my latest poems for you to read and study and judge if they do not have some merit of their own. 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. When you rose to your feet and left the *mehfil* while I was singing my verse, was it not because you feared I might eclipse the verse of Nur Sahib and other male poets whom you revere? Was it not intolerable to you that a woman should match their gifts and even outstrip them? 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? In this unfair world that you have created what else could I have been but what I am? (IC 229-30)

Conclusion

To the very end of the novel, Anita Desai proved that Devan is the real inheritor and custodian of Nur's spirit and poetry. For this distinction, he even destroyed his family. In the novel, Nur is seen more interested in wine and gossips. Devan has obsession for Urdu. In the othering of Urdu, and Sarla as well as Imtiaz Begum, patriarchy and power politics played major roles. Patriarchy is single-eyed ghost. It only learnt the lessons of domination.

Works cited

Costa, M. "Interview With Anita Desai." 2001, http://www.umiacs.umd.edu/users/sawweb/sawnet/books/desai_interview.html.

Desai, Anita. *In Custody*. Random House Publishers India Pvt. Ltd, 2007. (All the references are given to this edition and it is abbreviated to IC and page numbers are given in the body of the manuscript)

Selden, Raman, Peter Widdowson, Peter Brooker. *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. Pearson Education Ltd. 2006.

Author's bio-note

Raj Kumar Mishra is an Assistant Professor of English at Kamla Nehru Institute of Physical & Social Sciences Sultanpur. He has a DPhil on Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry in the Light of *Rasa* Theory from University of Allahabad, Prayagraj. He has published many books, book chapters and critical articles in various national and international journals. His research interests include Indian Poetics, Western Literary Criticism and Theory, and Indian Writing in English.