

Memory, Identity and Time : A Study of Anita Desai's in Custody

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Introduction - Anita Desai is a diasporic Indian novelist, short story, and children's books writer and has a credit of introducing psychological novels to India. Her works are highly symbolic. In her novels, she discusses cultural themes like the clashes of Eastern and Western cultures and the conflicts between Indian cultures and religions. She discusses many cultural themes focusing on the death of the old valuable culture of India after Partition and the birth of a new culture. In *In Custody* (1984), Desai depicts the changes that India has witnessed in post-colonial period and how it affects the characters in person. She focuses on the ruined ancient Indian culture which has been replaced by a new materialistic one at the hands of the British colonization and always let her characters experience their own psyche. It is clearly visible that she focuses on the death of Urdu poetry and language which are associated with the glorious past once India had. Deven, the protagonist, whose ambition is to be a great poet in Urdu is forced to teach Hindi instead of Urdu which is rarely used. The novelist narrates the journey of Deven who struggles to revive Urdu poetry by interviewing the famous Urdu poet, Nur. Deven faces many obstacles during his journey. These obstacles are represented in the change India has witnessed and in the change of people's motives, identity search and mentality.

In Custody is set in post-independence India, delves into the lives of Deven, a Hindi lecturer, and Nur, a renowned Urdu poet. Their meeting sparks a reflection on the power of memory, identity, and time. *In Custody* is a novel written in 1984 by the famous Indian-American author Anita Desai, serves as a significant literary exploration of memory the quest for identity and time. Positioned within the contemporary Indian milieu, this work delves into the intricate themes of identity and linguistic expression, employing the lyrical medium of Urdu poetry as its narrative backdrop. At the narrative's center lies Deven Sharma, the principal protagonist, a reticent Hindi instructor who is presented with a life-altering opportunity when his audacious childhood friend, Murad, extends an offer to interview his revered idol, the venerable and reclusive Urdu poet, Nur

Shahjahanabadi. Deven consciously puts aside his own aspirations of emerging as an Urdu poet of note, thus embarking on a journey that brings into focus the deeply entwined themes of memory, identity, and time. His own life, marked by a loveless marriage and a sense of unspoken discontent that he shares with his wife, is emblematic of the pervasive dissatisfaction that often characterizes human existence. The paper discusses Memory, identity and time in the novel and we find the author saying...

"The past, like a palimpsest, lay hidden beneath the surface of the present." (Desai 50)

This quote highlights the interconnectedness of time, memory, and identity. In Anita Desai's *In Custody*, the themes of memory, identity, and time are explored through the protagonist Deven Sharma's interactions with the Urdu poet Nur.

Memory plays a significant role in the novel. It is very captivating to see how memory comes before us in various ways. One of which is nostalgia and reminiscence where we find Deven's memories of Nur evoke a strong sense of nostalgia, highlighting the contrast between his mundane life and his brief, meaningful interactions with Nur.

"I remembered the way he used to sit, cross-legged on the charpoy, his eyes closed, his hands clasped together, and his voice, that rich, rumbling voice, reciting his poetry... I felt as if I had known him all my life." (Chapter 1)

This nostalgia emphasizes Deven's deep admiration for Nur and his poetry. Then we find the cultural memory and the novel explores the cultural memory of India's past, particularly the decline of Urdu language and culture. The novel highlights the significance of Urdu language and culture in Indian history

"Urdu, once the language of the courts and the poets, was now a dying language... It was as if the very soul of India was being torn out." (Chapter 5) Nur's poetry and legacy serve as a connection to this cultural heritage. The novel touches on the Mughal empire's influence on Indian culture. "The Mughal emperors had built mosques and palaces, gardens and tombs, and left behind a legacy of

beauty and elegance.” (Chapter 6) This cultural memory emphasizes the rich Islamic heritage in India.

The novel critiques colonialism's impact on Indian culture. “The British had come and gone, leaving behind their own language and culture, but erasing much of ours.” (Chapter 7) This cultural memory highlights the struggle to preserve Indian culture. The novel explores post-independence India's cultural identity. “India was free, but what did that mean? Was it free to be itself, or was it still trapped in the past?” (Chapter 10) This cultural memory raises questions about India's future.

Nur's poetry serves as a cultural memory, preserving Urdu language and culture.

“His poetry was a window into the past, a glimpse of the beauty and elegance that had once been.” (Chapter 8) Deven's efforts to record Nur's poetry symbolize the struggle to preserve cultural memory. Cultural memory shapes Deven's identity.

“I felt connected to the past, to the culture and language that had been lost.” (Chapter 9)

This cultural memory emphasizes Deven's sense of belonging.

Memory influences Deven's sense of identity, as he grapples with his own insignificance and Nur's greatness. “I felt small, insignificant, beside him. He was the great poet, the master of language and imagination. I was just a schoolteacher.” (Chapter 2) Deven's interactions with Nur shape his self-perception.

The novel touches on the transmission of memories and cultural values from one generation to the next. “Nur Sahib, you are the last of the great poets. Who will carry on the tradition after you?” (Chapter 7) Deven's relationship with Nur represents a bridge between past and present. Deven's memories of Nur are fragmented and often interrupted by the harsh realities of his life.

“I tried to recall the lines of the poem he had recited that day, but they slipped away from me, lost in the noise and chaos of the city.” (Chapter 3) This fragmentation reflects the disconnection between Deven's idealized past and his unsatisfying present. Deven's memories are tinged with regret, particularly regarding his failure to record Nur's poetry and conversations. “If only I had recorded those conversations, those wonderful, rambling talks... But I had not, and now it was too late.” (Chapter 9) This regret underscores the importance of preserving cultural heritage. The novel highlights the collective memory of India's cultural past.

“The past was a burden that we carried with us, a weight that pressed upon our shoulders.” (Chapter 10)

The novel emphasizes the significance of preserving cultural heritage.

The characters in the novel struggle for their identity. In Anita Desai's “In Custody,” identity is a complex and multifaceted concept that is deeply intertwined with cultural heritage, language, and national identity. Deven, the

protagonist, struggles to reconcile his personal identity with his cultural and professional aspirations. As a schoolteacher, Deven feels disconnected from his passion for Urdu poetry, which serves as a connection to his cultural heritage. His interactions with Nur, a famous Urdu poet, highlight the tension between Deven's mundane life and his idealized past. Deven's identity is also shaped by his relationships with others, particularly Nur, who embodies the rich cultural legacy of Urdu language and literature. Furthermore, the novel explores India's national identity post-independence, raising questions about the country's future and its relationship with its past. Language plays a significant role in shaping identity, and Deven's love for Urdu is contrasted with his duty to teach Hindi, reflecting the complexities of Indian society. Ultimately, Deven's identity is fragmented, reflecting the struggles of navigating multiple identities and the search for belonging in a rapidly changing world. Through Deven's journey, Desai masterfully explores the intricate web of identity, culture, and language, shedding light on the human experience.

Identity is a complex and multifaceted concept in “In Custody,” deeply intertwined with cultural heritage, language, and national identity. Deven, the protagonist, struggles to reconcile his personal identity with his cultural and professional aspirations. As a schoolteacher, Deven feels disconnected from his passion for Urdu poetry, which serves as a connection to his cultural heritage.

“I felt small, insignificant, beside him. He was the great poet, the master of language and imagination. I was just a schoolteacher.” (Chapter 2)

Deven's interactions with Nur highlight the tension between his mundane life and his idealized past. “Nur Sahib, you are the last of the great poets. Who will carry on the tradition after you?” (Chapter 7) Nur embodies the rich cultural legacy of Urdu language and literature. “Urdu, once the language of the courts and the poets, was now a dying language... It was as if the very soul of India was being torn out.” (Chapter 5) Deven's identity is also shaped by his relationships with others. “I felt like an outsider, a stranger in my own country.” (Chapter 7) Language plays a significant role in shaping identity. “I felt torn between my love for Urdu and my duty to teach Hindi.” (Chapter 3) Deven's love for Urdu is contrasted with his duty to teach Hindi, reflecting the complexities of Indian society. “The past was a burden that we carried with us, a weight that pressed upon our shoulders.” (Chapter 10)

Ultimately, Deven's identity is fragmented.

“I felt connected to the past, to the culture and language that had been lost.” (Chapter 9) Deven's search for belonging is reflected in his desire to preserve Urdu language and culture. “His poetry was a window into the past, a glimpse of the beauty and elegance that had once been.” (Chapter 8)

Through Deven's journey, Desai masterfully explores the intricate web of identity, culture, and language.

Time is a pervasive and multifaceted theme in "In Custody," influencing character development, plot, and cultural commentary. Desai skillfully employs time to explore the human experience, emphasizing its relentless passage and the consequences of its passage.

Time's passage is a recurring motif, underscored by Deven's reflections on his encounters with Nur. "Time had passed, and I had let it pass, unused, unspent" (Chapter 5). This quote highlights Deven's regret over missed opportunities and the fleeting nature of human connections. Deven's nostalgia for the past is a powerful force, driving his desire to preserve Urdu language and culture.

"The past was a burden that we carried with us, a weight that pressed upon our shoulders" (Chapter 10).

This quote illustrates the tension between past and present, as Deven struggles to reconcile his longing for a bygone era with the harsh realities of the present. Time's passage is also linked to the decline of Urdu language and culture.

"Urdu, once the language of the courts and the poets, was now a dying language... It was as if the very soul of India was being torn out" (Chapter 5). This quote emphasizes the consequences of time's passage on cultural heritage. Deven's memories of Nur are tinged with regret, particularly regarding his failure to record Nur's poetry and conversations.

"If only I had recorded those conversations, those wonderful, rambling talks... But I had not, and now it was too late" (Chapter 9).

This quote highlights the importance of preserving memories and cultural heritage. Desai also explores the cyclical nature of time, as embodied in Nur's poetry. "Time, like a river, flows / Carrying all away" (Chapter 8). This quote illustrates the relentless march of time, underscoring the interconnectedness of past, present, and future. Through Deven's experiences, Desai illustrates the human experience, emphasizing the fragility of human connections and cultural traditions. "Life was short, and art was long" (Chapter 11).

This quote underscores the tension between the fleeting nature of human existence and the enduring power of art and culture. The novelist is found to have succeeded in exploring the elements of memory, identity and time.

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