



A Study of Existentialism in Anita Desai's *In Custody*

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Abstract: *Existentialism has been a much discussed topic over the years, especially after World War – II. The paper studies the life of the protagonist Mr. Deven Sharma of In Custody in the light of the existential tendencies. The frame of the novel traces the feelings of despondency, sadness and a sense of disappointment. In the nexus of the daily petty and inconsequential happenings that entrap a individual's life, persons like Deven find it difficult and traumatic to go on and continue with their routine mediocre life and suppress their desires and dreams. Anita Desai's exploration of individual identities and self formations work in a delicate and problematic way, creating instead miniatures, and guiding the reader's responses through a combination of omniscience, internal focalization, indirect speech and symbolic tropes. Thus, Anita Desai has carved a niche owing to her particular attention towards psychological insight and existential concerns, which are clearly manifested in delineating the pitiable plight of Deven.*

Key Words: *Existential, despondency, pragmatic, realism*

Anita Desai's novel *In Custody* presents before us a pragmatic picture of a helpless male character whose wife despises his poverty and inability to take an initiative and his friend Murad exploits his weaknesses by pronouncing his own selfish motives on him. A victimized and inconsequential Deven dangles between being a "a boring teacher" (*In Custody*, 13), an incompetent husband who fails to fulfil his wife's desires and dreams on the material level and an impending professional who suffers increasing financial losses and failure in pursuing his project.

This novel dwells into the everyday, ordinary scenario and brings to light the understanding of isolation, alienation and self-exile which forms an important element of the contemporary realist novel. The sensibility has been explored in the novel through the character of Deven Sharma who is a Lecturer in Hindi in Lala Ram Lal College, at Mirpore but seeks to reach out into the wider world in the hope of self-fulfillment. Deven undergoes experiences of various shades and complexities like professional struggles, familial dissonance and his failed ambitions of becoming a poet. Deven's sense of despair on the professional front has been clearly depicted by Desai.

Recoiling from them, Deven made his way down the passage to his classroom and arrived at the desk beside the blackboard as if at a refuge, panting with exertion and relief. Here he could turn his back to the class and pretend to write something on the black-board while he composed himself and tried to construct an authoritative teacher-self out of his jolted nerves and distracted ways.

(*In Custody*, 11)

The life of Deven has been surrounded by miseries from all sides. He is at his lowest ebb in professional life due to his inability to hold the attention of his students. Even in his marital life, Deven is pressurized and hopelessly compromised. He is forced to give up his ambitions of writing poetry to earn a living and support his wife. The contrast or distance between the husband, Deven and the wife, Sarla, is presented suggestively when he recollects that she was not his choice but, that of his mother and aunts who were crafty and virtuous. She is presented more through her gestures, rather than actions, and hence, represents the picture of an abandoned wife. There is another disappointment which is depressing than all the rest. Urdu is his first language and his first love but Deven is forced to make his living as a temporary lecturer in Hindi literature, a field in which he has little interest and no marked talent. His career choice is based on the market economy that favors Hindi but is still not lucrative. He continues to teach Hindi to sustain his corporeal needs but his imagination is fueled by Urdu. He says: 'I am—only a teacher ... and must teach to support my family. But poetry—Urdu— ... I need to serve them to show my appreciation'.

In order to frantically avoid his sense of isolation and frustration due to his marital life frictions, he takes shelter in the world of Urdu poetry. At this point of time, his childhood friend Murad offers him to go to Delhi and interview Nur Shahjahanbadi, a great, aging Urdu poet, and to write an article for a special number he proposes to bring out on the poet. At first Deven resists his long unfulfilled dreams but later succumbs to the enthralling opportunity. Deven feels a special connection with Nur as the poet reminds him of the happy times of his childhood and his dead father. He is engulfed in happy nostalgia at the thought of Nur's poetry. The twist in the tale occurs when he finds how the life of Nur whom he considered as the epitome of reverence and regard, the God of Urdu poetry, is fraught with misery and poverty. Not only poverty in the sense of the lack of material goods but the poverty of the mind, the psyche. When Deven visits the person Nur he becomes totally disappointed seeing his lifestyle. In order to save the name and works of Nur for posterity, he decides to record his voice on tape for his small-town university. The recorder (due to various reasons), however fails to record 'the voice of traditional Urdu poetry' by the legendary poet Nur. Thus Deven's



attempts are punctuated by a series of mishaps, each piling upon the other contributing to Deven's dejection. Deven's frustration is mounted as he,

... walked as if he were walking away from the debris of his Delhi trip, his visit to Nur, the failed interview – leaving it all behind. The first desolation at his loss of them was being gradually filled this evening, as an empty glass with water, with the realization that that loss had simplified his existence, reduced it once again to a pure emptiness with which he knew how to cope, having coped so long.

(*In Custody*, 71)

Interpreting *In Custody* from the viewpoint of realism, one can agree that Anita Desai portrays a descending trajectory of a life of a male figure and the rise of miseries coupled with misfortunes. Deven's wife Sarla is indignant at his time away. His fellow professors were also against to him. His fellow professors think he is having an affair in Delhi or push him to get ataping of Nur's voice. The saddest part is the result of the sessions. Drunk and encouraged by his admirers who follow him along to the sessions, Nur offers nothing new. The session between Nur and Deven gives amazing perception about life. The ups and downs of human life, the upheavals in relationship are nicely crafted in this novel of shattered emotions and scattered dreams where the intricacies of relationships are reflected.

Deven withdrew, frowning, feeling more than a little impatient with the old man's weakness and gullibility. It might be a good idea to give him a stiff drink to make him more aware of his powers, his own individuality and commitment and vocation. He looked around the shadowy room to see if he could spot the bottle, a tray and a glass. Since he could not, he decided to try to distract the poet from the dismal subject.

(*In Custody*, 113)

His relationship with his wife Sarla and their son Manu is strained at best. When Sarla is planning to visit her family at their home, she is troubled that Deven will not go along with her and Manu on the trip. Yet her displeasure with the situation shoots not from her love of Deven or her longing to be with him, but from the need to keep up a good appearance for her family. In response to his declaration, Sarla replies after a moment of astonishment, "And -- and what am I to tell my parents? How am I to explain all of this?" (*In Custody*, 146). Deven represent only a token to Sarla. Their relationship has worsened to such a degree that her only concern at this moment is how to explain his absence to her parents. She personally does not care whether Deven will accompany them or not. His insignificance is further demonstrated by the return of Sarla and Manu from her parents' home. By the end of the novel, even Deven's role of provider has been seized from him. Sarla's disappointment is reflected in the passage quoted below:

But by marrying into the academic profession and moving to a small town outside the capital, none of these dreams had materialized, and she was naturally embittered. The thwarting of her aspirations had cut two dark furrows from the corners of her nostrils to the corners of her mouth, as deep as permanent as the surgical scars. The droop of her thin, straight hair on either side of her head repeated these twin lines of disappointment. They made her look forbidding, and perhaps that was why her husband looked so perpetually forbidden even if he understood their cause.

(*In Custody*, 68)

Deven is seen caught up in the dynamics of existential conflict in the narrative. Existential tendencies form the core of the novel. Deven becomes a machine of desire as his tendency becomes stronger with the progression of the narrative. A nagging, accusing wife, an ever demanding son, the need to earn living for supporting the family, the consequent necessity of taking up a job merely to earn money are some of the distinctive features of middle class mundane existence which he had always detested. After having a feeling of getting too stuck up in the so-felt existential trap, he accepts the gift of Nur's poetry and becomes the custodian of his very soul and spirit. Desai makes very clear the type of communication that will perpetuate the link between Deven and Nur. Deven's plight is echoed in many modern novels where the protagonist gets a desolate thought of pulling up in spite of crises. Raymond Williams comments,

The ordinary Victorian novel ends, as every parodist knows, with a series of settlements, of new engagements and formal relationships, whereas the ordinary twentieth century novel ends with a man going away on his own, having extricated himself from a dominating situation, and found himself in so doing.

(Williams, 1988, 589)

From his actions and involvements it appears that Deven attempts to fill the void and bridge the gap of his existence through his interviews with Nur, which makes him recognize the truth and consciously reject the idealized world of illusions at the end. This episode does provide him with a sense of purpose and his assimilation of reality also foregrounds a challenging awareness of his own discrepancies and his eventual flaws. Desai provides an example of Deven himself looking back on the whole affair and recognizing his ultimate vanity and insignificance in what had seemed his own great assignment. In this context Albert Camus says,



There exists an obvious fact that seems utterly moral: namely, that a man is always a prey to his truths. Once he has admitted them, he cannot free himself from them. One has to pay something. A man who has become conscious of the absurd is forever bound to it. A man devoid of hope and conscious of being so has ceased to belong to the future. That is natural. But it is just as natural that he should strive to escape the universe of which he is the creator. All the foregoing has significance only on account of this paradox. Certain men, starting from a critique of rationalism, have admitted the absurd climate. Nothing is more instructive in this regard than to scrutinize the way in which they have elaborated their consequences.

(Camus, 1991, 55)

Deven's life is spent in drudgery merely dragging his existence because the quest for real and free life is always beyond his reach. The mediocrity that underlines his life, his low-paid job, the alienating colonial system of education, the attempts to teach the languages in a scene dominated by science studies, the failed attempts to fulfill his dreams, the deteriorating familial relations - all amount to constitute Deven being a victim of ordinary life. His actions are time-bound and leave little food for thought. Webber remarks in this regard,

An individual action can therefore be explained in terms of motifs or mobile, and both explanations reflect the agent's aim at the time. The senses that our surroundings have for us, the patterns of salience and significance we explain in the world, are a function of the ways in which we are aware of our surroundings and these in turn result from our aims.

(Webber, 2009, 31)

The novel is a portrait of human lives as it exists in their own exclusive circumstances, of the hypocrisy and pretension lying within the human spirit, of the difference between the town and the city life, of human helplessness and oppression on the road to one's aspirations. The frustrations and dilemmas that the protagonist bears become clear by deciphering the spaces in the novel. Deven's existential void and the alienation that surrounds him result in his actions becoming numb and inconsequential.

Deven tried to suppress his dismay and listen patiently, but he could scarcely restrain the trembling of his lips as he sat with his head sunk below his shoulders, plucking at loose bits of cotton from the mat and trying to shut out the some lowly mediocrity's voice reciting banalities.

(*In Custody*, 167)

The philosophers of existentialism emphasize the need of individuality but engage in dialectics on how and what constitutes an individual, what are the concepts of a fulfilling existence and what are the means to achieve self-fulfilment. Here Deven is seen in transition from self-deception to self-awareness and attaining a sense of maturity and coherence. He in his quest for identity learns that tranquility lies within oneself and gains an understanding of his self and his relationships. He achieves growth of his inner resources and is able to fill in the existential gaps to some extent.

To conclude, Desai has clearly brought out the significance of various aspects in revealing the inner workings of Deven. She has laid out the depths of psychosis of Deven to be explored by the readers. The inability of Deven to communicate his desires and feelings with power push him into a mire of hopelessness, despair and failure. The fragmented personality of Deven forces him to get involved in fruitless endeavors and lose the sweetness of relations which become meaningless. Thus, the ensnarement and victimization of Deven due to his own incompetence and inactions truly reflect the existential tendencies in the novel and the dilemmas and quandary of an individual trapped in his own being, between and beneath his failed interactions.

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