B.A. (Hons.) English **Semester-II**

Core Course : Paper-III
Indian Writing in English
Unit II - Anita Desai : *In Custody*
Study Material



SCHOOL OF OPEN LEARNING
UNIVERSITY OF DELHI

Department of English

Paper-3 Indian Writing in English

Unit-2

Anita Desai: *In Custody*

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Unit 1

ANITA DESAI: LIFE AND TIMES

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai is an eminent writer of Indian English fiction who is known across the world for representing poignant pictures of Indians and their sensibilities. Her characters not only represent the milieu in which they are born but also at the same time often are victims of their circusmstances from which they try to struggle their way out. The novel *In Cutody* is a similar kind of a novel where the protagonist Deven is shown to be caught in the quarmire of his existence and as he tries to pursue his passion for Urdu poetry, how he is caught up in a web which he himself along with his circumstances create for him. It is a great psychological and sociological novel having a depth which very few Indian novelists could achieve in their works. This unit of the self-instructional material is designed to make ourselves acquainted with Anita Desai from a biographical point of view and also to comprehend her contribution to the development of the genre of novel in Indian English canon.

1.2. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, we will learn about –

- Anita Desai as a significant writer of Indian English Fiction
- How Anita Desai's works are representative of her times
- A brief summary of her significant works

1.3. ANITA DESAI – LIFE

Anita Desai (born on 24th of June 1937) is one of the leading Indian English novelists who through her writings have created such a niche in the Indian English literary canon that today when one talks about Indian English novel, one of the first names that comes to our mind is that of Anita Desai. She was attained a wide-spread critical acclaim through her writings – both within India and abroad. In her novels, she deals with the essential human predicament as she portrays the inner turmoil and the psychic mayhem of sensitive individuals who are trying to find some kind of authentic existence in a supposedly anxiety-ridden, alienated and meaningless society. In that sense, she can be termed as one of the modern novelists of India who has used her craftsmanship to add a new depth and dimension to Indian English writing. She can be said to be the first Indian woman novelist to attain this. It is in her writings that Indian English novels get certain transformation from the outer world of matter to the inner world of depth.

Anita Desai was born to a Bengali father and a German mother in Mussourie on June 24, 1937 in a small town near Dehradun. At home, the family generally used German as a means of their everyday communication. Living within the boundaries of India, the Indian culture and traditions at the same time played havoc in shaping up the mentality of Anita Desai from her childhood. In that sense, both Indian and European sensibilities found manifestation in her lives from the very beginning of her existence. She was

educated in Queen's Mary School and later she finished her graduate studies from Miranda House in University of Delhi. From her early childhood she was a voracious reader and used to devour books after books – an ardent lover of literature, she chose to also write about the experiences that she found all around herself. While a student, she started writing short stories which kept on getting published in different magazines. These small publications helped Anita Desai to take the big jump of writing novels.

1.3.1. Earlier Writings

As a college student, Anita Desai started writing stories which were published in the college magazine. She also wrote for the Writer's Workshop Journal and an English Magazine called Envoy. Her first novel, *Cry, The Peacock* was published in 1963. Before the publication of the novel she was already well known as a short story writer. Her first short story was "Circus Cat, Alley Cat" which was published in 1957 in *Thought.* Her second short story "How Gently in the Mist" was published in *The Illustrated Weekly of India* next year. In 1958, her story "Tea with Maharain" was published in *Envoy.* "Grand Mother" was published in 1960 in Writers' Workshop Miscellany I and "An Examination" was published in *Writers' Workshop Miscellany III.* With the publication of short stories such as "An Examination" and "Ghost house", Anita Desai's name as a short story writer was already established. Thereafter she went into writing many short stories – one after the other. Apart from short stories she also started writing books for children as well as essays, articles and reviews for different magazines. As days progressed, her fame reached to every corner of the world. Today she is known more as a novelist and therefore we will focus on her novels in the next few pages.

1.3.2. Anita Desai's Novels

Her first novel, *Cry, The Peacock,* was published in 1963 and from then on there is not stopping of her literary journey as she carried on producing one novel after another, handling the craft of fiction writing with great critical acclaim and popular appreciation. Desai got into the habit of writing from very early in her life, she comments in Author's statement in Vinson, James, Ed., *Contemporary Novel* – "I have been writing, since the age of seven, as instinctively as I breathe. It is a necessity to me: I find it is in the process of writing that I am able to think, to feel, and to realize at the highest pitch." So writing comes naturally and instinctively to her as she cannot think but write.

Of course one of the greatest concerns here Anita Desai as a novelist is that she looks into the inner beings of men and women and writes about it. Often it is being said that the characters in her novels are "haunted protagonists" who are faced with such utter senselessness and meaninglessness of life that they are faced with doom and desolation before finally emerging victorious from them. In the novel *In Custody,* there were every chance that Deven would succumb to the pressures of the society and not being able to continue with his interviewing of Nur; but things happen otherwise and he is able to interview him for three weeks; it may be that the recorded tapes of the interview were not up to the mark to be placed in a library for future reference, but the interview, the interaction with the famous poet Nur Shahjehanabadi is something that Deven Sharma will cherish all his life.

1.4. THE NOVELS OF ANITA DESAI

In the following section an effort has been made to give you the gist of the novels of Anita Desai in the same chronology in which Anita Desai wrote them so as to make you aware of Anita Desai's development as a novelist.

1.4.1. Cry, the Peacock

Cry, the Peacock is a story of Maya and her married life with Gautama recollected by Maya herself. Maya marries Gautama only because she finds some resemblance between Gautama and her father. But after the marriage she feels that everyone in her husband's house neglects her. She becomes restless and miserable. The reason for her misery is that she is a misfit in the family. She wants to have Gautama completely to herself just as she had her father completely to herself. The situation is complicated by an astrological prediction that her husband will predecease her. All these thoughts oppress her mind. One day she has an argument with Gautama and during the course of the argument Gautama falls down from the building and dies. The third part of the novel describes what happens after Gautama's death. It is interesting to note that in Part II, the central part of the novel, we have first person narration and in Part III, it is third person narration. Maya's effort to tell her story to herself seems to be to discover some meaning in her life or even "to justify herself to herself" *Cry, the Peacock* is the first novel of Anita Desai, but the novelist shows the qualities of a mature novelist. Maya's intensity fills the whole book and gives it form and life. The name Maya is itself suggestive and symbolic. Maya seems to be in a state of 'maya' because she feels that it was only her father who loved her sincerely. The privacy that she wants to have with her husband is not possible in a joint family. The novelist employs psycho-narration to unravel Maya's hopes, fears, obsessions and her tragic melancholy.

1.4.2. Voices in the City

Voices in the City explores the life of the middle classes in a densely populated city. The nauseating industrial backdrop plays a crucial role in generating psychic disorders. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar feels that this novel, in spite of its rich diction, is less satisfying than the first novel, *Cry, the Peacock***,** because it is not contained by a single sensibility like Maya's, Nirode is a practicing Poet and Journalist and moves with the minor poets of the city. He dislikes his mother when she becomes the mistress of Major Chadhar. He always has in his mind the life of Baudelaire: "He longed to remind them of the two rights Baudelaire had added to the rights of man....". The right to contradict oneself, and the right to leave. But Nirode's problems are too personal to articulate. His study of Camus also does not help him. He writes a Play and gives it to his elder sister, Monisha. She feels that Nirode is more involved with their mother and the past than she had suspected. Surprisingly Monisha's suicide brings about a great change in Nirode's attitude towards everything including his mother. The obsessions in Nirode and Monisha have their roots in the disharmony they find in their family, thus proving the fact that the external world has a strong influence on the inner self of a person. Like Maya in Cry, the Peacock, Monisha is also married into a joint family where her privacy is violated. It is not only her home life but the life in the city that drives her to suicide.

1.4.3. Bye-Bye, Black Bird

Of all the novels Anita Desai's Bye-Bye, Black Bird is most closely related to her own experiences "Of all my novels it is most rooted in experience and the least literary in derivation" She also says that this novel is" the closest of all my books to actuality". The central character in this novel is Dev who goes to England to study at the London School of Economics. In the initial stages he finds it difficult to adjust himself to the new environment. Anita Desai's description of Dev's life in England is filled with humour. Dev is unhappy because he finds that Indians are not treated properly in England": the London docks have three kinds of lavatories ..... Ladies, Gents and Asiatics. He does not want to live in a country where he is insulted and unwanted. He is at a loss to know why the Englishmen are so firm about their privacy. His alienation and agony are clearly revealed by his experiences in the London tube, which for him is a "dark labyrinth of a prison". He starts hating the immigrants because he thinks that they are very soft and do not have self-respect. Slowly, as Dev observes the various attractions of London, he becomes uncertain about his attitude to England. He is caught under England's spell. He changes place with Adit, whose attitude to England has also undergone the great change and who wants to go back to India. We have another character in the novel, Sarah, who also suffers from a loss of identity. She feels that she is culturally alienated. In conclusion, we can say that people like Dev and Sarah cannot belong to a world. They are torn between two worlds.

1.4.4. Where shall We Go This Summer?

This novel has been compared with Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and Margaret Attwood's *Surfacing***.** Sita, in her fifth pregnancy, deserts her husband and goes to an island, Manori, where her father once commanded respect, in search of peace. The novel is divided into three parts. Part I entitled "Monsoon 67" describes Sita's visit to Manori. She is fed up with the business atmosphere of Bombay and is unhappy with her husband who is "not an introvert, nor an extrovert - a middling kind of man, he was dedicated unconsciously to the middle way." She takes two of her children along with her to the island. Part II entitled "Winter 47" presents in a flashback Sita's father and his saintly life in the island. He was a Gandhian and the villagers worshipped him. But Sita is shocked when she comes to know that her mother had, like herself, deserted her father and stayed in Benaras for twenty years. Sita fails in her attempt to know the reason for her mother's behaviour. It is after her father's death that Raman becomes her guardian and her husband. Sita does not feel that she is indebted to Raman for his help. On the other hand she thinks that her marriage led her "out of the ruined theatre into the thin Sunlight of the ordinary, the everyday, the empty and the meaningless." In Part III entitled ".Monsoon 67" we find that Raman goes to the village and Sita thinks that he has come to take her home. She knows that in spite of her reservations about her husband, it is in the company of her husband that she finds comfort and security. She is disappointed when Raman tells her that he wants to take their daughter back so that she can join the Medical College. In spite of her silent protest against her husband's view of life, she accompanies her husband and children to Bombay.

1.4.5. Fire on the Mountain

Anita Desai was awarded the Sahitya Akademi award for this novel. The scene of action in this novel is Kasauli on the Shimla Hills. There are three main characters in the novel, Nanda Kaul, her great granddaughter Rakha and her old friend, Ila Das. These three characters come though near to one another, link in their separate loneliness and make vain attempts to understand one another. Nanda Kaul feels that her life as a Vice-Chancellor's wife was not a pleasant experience. "Its crowding had stifled her." That is why she is afraid that Rakha's visit may force her to open the "troublesome ledger" again. She feels that her life in Kasauli, where she came after her husband1's death, will be disturbed. She has got used to the peaceful surroundings of the house, and the only visitor is her old friend Ila Das. She and Ila Das were friends even in the childhood but she cannot approve of her wholeheartedly because of her rigid attitude. Also, Nanda Kaul does not like things about which Ila Das talks, things like old age. But Ila Das discharges her duties as a Welfare officer efficiently. It is her passion for justice that brings her trouble. She is raped and killed when she tries to prevent a child marriage,. When the police officer tells Nanda Kaul about the murder of Ila Das, the news shocks and kills her. She realises the difference between what society thinks of her and what in fact she is.

Like her great grandmother, Rakha also seems to suffer from an oppressive memory associated with her parents. There is no love lost between her mother, Tara, and her father. In one of the secret trips to the Mountain she sees a huge fire in the valley "The death of Nanda Kaul, caused by the unhappy fate of Ila Das seems to be a thematic variation ... of the fire Rakha causes on the Mountain." As K.R. Sreenivasa Iyengar points out, "The supreme irony is that Nanda with all her children, grand-children and great grand-children and the unmarried Ila equally feel utterly lonely, which perhaps is meant to show up the futility of living, married or single."

1.4.6. Clear Light of Day

Clear Light of Day is the story of a family of two brothers and two sisters. Raja and Baba are the two brothers and Tara and Bimla are the two sisters. Tara is married to a successful diplomat and is the mother of two daughters. But she is unhappy that she cannot help her problem – ridden parental home. Raja is a Poet. He marries a Muslim girl and lives in Hyderabad. He almost discontinues his contact with his sisters and brother. It is left to Bimla to look after Baba who is mentally retarded. She is unmarried and works as a lecturer in a Delhi College. When Tara along with her husband and children visits her parental home that Bimla remembers the past and reflects on it. She is unhappy with the behaviour of her parents and her brother. She often compares her relations to mosquitoes. It is Dr. Biswas who diagnoses Bimla's predicament : "Now I understand why you do not wish to marry. You have dedicated your life to others ... to your sick brother and your aged aunt and your little brother who will be dependent on you all his life. You have sacrificed your own life for them." The domestic disharmony strifles and chokes Bimla's adventurous spirit.

We also have in the novel the family of the Misra whose life is meant to be a commentary on the various mental conditions of Bimla. The Misra girls were married at an early age but live away from their husbands. Bimla's views on the Misras apply to her parents, her brother and sister.

1.4.7. The Village by the Sea

The Village by the Sea: An Indian family story may be classified as a children's story. But the tale itself has rich meaning which can be put in any adult framework. ***The Village by the Sea*** dramatizes the heroic struggle of a boy and a girl, a brother and a sister who hail from Thul, a village near Bombay. Hari and Leela try to manage their affairs in such a way that the reader is made to see the significance of a cliche that man lives by hope. In the other novels of Anita Desai human predicament appears to be hopeless. But in ***The Village by the Sea*** surprisingly enough it appears to be hopeful. Hari's father is a confirmed drunkard who squanders the very little money he has on booze. His mother is bed-ridden and her ailment is later diagonized as chronic anaemia caused by malnutrition. Unable to cope with the crisis Hari leaves for Bombay leaving his sister to do what she can for the family but by a happy coincidence of circumstances the mother after a long treatment in the hospital recovers her original strength. He returns home from Bombay as a skilled technician in watch-mending. His experiences in Bombay were such that they made him a man.

The story ends on a happy note with the mother and children coming together but this family amelioration is the consequence of the sympathetic and substantial help Hari and the children received from de Silvas and Syed Ali Sahib who lived in the bungalow of the village. What is significant about this story is when we compare it with the other novels of Anita Desai is the sense of hope and a capacity for endurance which children show in types of crisis. Most of the characters in the novel wilt under the heat of a crisis.

1.4.8. In Custody

The protagonist of *In Custody*, Deven Sharma, is an ineffectual but well meaning young man whose problems, unlike those of the other Protagonists of Anita Desai's novels, are not just personal and private but public and social. Deven works as a Hindi lecturer in a college at Mirpor. He has great passion for Urdu poetry. The town has a Muslim area and a Hindu area represented by the Mosque and the Temple respectively. Deven is asked by one of his friends to write an article on the poetry of Nur for his journal. In spite of his poor financial circumstances, he ventures to interview Nur as he wants to become popular as a critic. But when he goes to Chandni Chowk he finds himself in an alien and suffocating atmosphere. He finds the celebrated poet completely immersed in tackling people who surrounded him. Deven likes Nur for his active imagination : "That was what Nur's verse did ... placed frightening and inexplicable experiences like time and death at a point where they could be seen and studied in safety." Deven finds it extremely difficult to translate his aesthetic sensibility into a written document in spite of his best efforts to overcome obstacles like Nur's poor health and the friction between his wives. Even the attempt to record Nur's views on poetry fails. Deven feels that his friends cheated him but, in spite of the crisis he fails, "He thought of Nur's poetry being read, the sound of it softly murmuring in his ears. He had accepted the gift of Nur's poetry and that meant he was custodian of Nur's very 'soul and spirit. It was a great distinction'. He could not deny or abandon that under any pressure."

1.4.9. Baumgartner's Bombay

Anita Desai foregrounds the Indian cityscape in her novels. The actions of *Voices in theCity , In Custody, The Village By the Sea* dramatize, apart from the private lives of the characters a variety of Indian urban life. *Baumgartner's Bombay* dramatizes Hugo. Baumgartner's life in Calcutta and Bombay during and after the second world war. Baumgartner, a German Jew who lives in Berlin because of political compulsion and comes to India to eke out his livelihood as an exile in an unknown land without anybody to share his existential agony. Baumgartner shifts himself from Calcutta to Bombay. In Bombay he comes into contact with Lotte, a dancer who boasts of a German origin - Living in a dilapidated apartment in Bombay. Baumgartner is friendly with Lotte and lives as a man whom nobody acknowledges as his friend. As in the other novels of Anita Desai in **Baumgartner's Bombay** also we have the flashback narration in which we see Hugo Baumgartner's childhood and youth in Berlin and his middle and old age and death in Bombay. The narrative mood is such that we also see the political, racial and the cultural tensions that prevailed in Europe and Asia before and during the war years. It sounds very ironic to note that Baumgartner, the Jew is knifed by a young man of the Aryan origin. The motive behind may be simply stated as lucre. But considering it from a broader historical and cultural perspective which the novel evolves Baumgartner's tragedy is symbolic in the sense that gives the political and cultural milieu of the post second World War. It appears that the evil forces generated by Nazism are still active and are tremendously disturbing.

1.5. SUMMING UP

Anita Desai is a recipient of several awards both within India and abroad for her writings. She is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, London and of the American Academy of Arts and Letters as well as a Fellow of Girton College, Cambridge. Three of her novels, *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *In Custody* (1984) and *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) were shortlisted for the prestigious Booker Prize. Below is the list of awards that she got –

Awards

- 2014 Padma Bhushan
- 2007 Sahitya Akademi Fellowship
- 2003 Benson Medal of Royal Society of Literature
- 2000 Alberto Moravia Prize for Literature (Italy)
- 1999 Booker Prize for Fiction (shortlist)
- 1993 Neil Gunn Prize
- 1984 Booker Prize for Fiction (shortlist)
- 1983 Guardian Children's Fiction Prize
- 1980 Booker Prize for Fiction (shortlist)
- 1978 National Academy of Letters Award
- 1978 Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize

Though the list of awards and honours are provided to you to gauge the kind of recognition that Anita Desai received; but it no way reflects the true qualities of an artist that she is. The way she has fabricated the vision of her protagonists in her novels through the use of modern techniques of fiction, her complex handling of themes as well as her masterful use of language in such a way that makes her novels pleasurable reading experience.

1.6. SUGGESTED QUESTIONS

1. What do you think is the contribution of Anita Desai to Indian Writing in English?
2. What makes you feel that Anita Desai is one of the earliest women writers of Indian English to enrich the genre of Indian English novels?

1.7 RECOMMENDED READINGS

- Belliappa, Meena. *Anita Desai: A Study of Her Fiction*. Calcutta: A Writers Workshop Publication, 1971.
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Unit 2

IN CUSTODY – AN INTRODUCTION – THEMATIC STUDY

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In Unit One, you have come across a brief introduction to Anita Desai and her significant works which probably gave you some idea about the depth of her writing and also kind of novels she wrote which made her such a significant Indian English author of the twentieth century. It can be said, that during her time, she was the one writer whose works made such an impact in the reading audience across India that she is still considered to be the mpst charismatic novelist from India. Her novel, *In Custody,* which was even shortlisted for Booker Prize, not only is a representative novel of Anita Desai to understand her writings; but also is a work which typifies in more than one ways the cultural map of the then India. In other words, it can be said that the novel, *In Custody,* is a work which will make us know India and its small towns, India and its Urdu culture, India and its cultural sensibilities. This Unit is especially designed to make you get acquainted with the novel and its multifarious facets which make it not only worth reading, but also to deal with it critically so as to understand the ways in which a novel can realistically portray the inner and the outer realms of human existence of a particular period of time.

2.2 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we will be getting acquainted to –

- *In Custody* as a novel by Anita Desai
- Brief introduction to the issues that the novel *In Custody* deals with

2.3 IN CUSTODY: AN INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai's fame and charisma as a writer is not only known within India, but also throughout the world. That *In Custody* was shortlisted for Booker Prize talk volume about the nature, content and style of the book which not only made the author achieve fame, but also made available to the readers an experience of knowing India and its sensibilities from very close quarters. It is one of the most significant writing from an Indian which the whole world values not just because of its just representation of the Indian culture and civilization; but also because it shows how the modern circumstances have made it difficult for people to realize their dreams and live a life of their own choices.

It is to be stated here that *In Custody* deals with Indian life from very close quarters – it represents the Indian ethos. The small town of Mirpore and and the big city of Delhi (the Old Delhi, primarily) – being its context, the novel justly portrays the small town and big city of India in such a realistic manner that when we read the novel we are transferred to those cities and times and experience both the richness as well as drudgery of these places. Even though the novel deals with Delhi and Mirpore in a realistic manner, yet the novel has a great depth in terms of it being a great psychological study of characters. In other words, it can be said that in the novel, *In Custody,* Anita Desai makes both a sociological as well as psychological study.

When we talk about the western canon of novel as a genre, we see that nineteenth century is usually seen as the great age of realism and the early twentieth century boasts itself of pyshcological study of characters, but when we read Anita Desai's novels in general and *In Custody* in particular, we come across both the sociological portrayal as well as indepth pyshcological study at the same time, which makes the novel truly enigmatic as well as persistent. In the course of this unit, we will come across some of the issues that the novel occupies itself with, though they are not the only ones. What this Unit does is to introduce the novel to you in gist, though the same will be elaborated in much more detail in the next few units. At this juncture it is advised that you read the original novel so as to experience the richness of the text and then pursue reading this self-instructional material in detail.

2.3.1. *In Custody* – Pyschological Portrayal

As being mentioned a while ago, Anita Desai is a skilled artist who not only represents the outer realms of our existence, but moreover focuses on the inner realms of our lives. All her characters can be seen to be psychological studies. Not only the characters like Deven, Murad, Nur, Sarla, Imtiaz Begum and others are studied in the novel *In Custody* from a psychological point of view, but the stream of consciousness technique that is often used in the novel prove that Anita Desai is a master of portraying the inner dilemmas and turmoil of her characters in such a way that the readers can feel the depth of the abyss that they are into. The hopelessness, the alienation, the small manipulations, the petty mindedness, etc. comes alive in the novel in such an extent that the novel seems to be a just portrayal of events and people. In other words, it can be said that Anita Desai, the master craftswoman, has done great justice to her character portrayals and also in working on the style of representing those characters.

2.3.1.1. Characterization

Creating characters which are unforgettable is one of the chief markers of Anita Desai as an artist. She created her characters in such a manner that they seem like "haunted protagonists" who are living in the world full of worries and anguishes. It is these anguishes of these characters that they try to fight in the progression of the plot of the novel. In *In Custody*, we meet the incredible characters like Deven Sharma and Nur Shahjehanabadi. We also meet characters like the "stony faced" Sarla (wife of Deven) and the supposed "female mafia" – Imtiaz Begum (second wife of Nur). These characters make the novel such that once we get accustomed to these characters through our reading of the novel they are forever inched in our minds. Such is the power of Anita Desai's characterization that we are taken from our world to the world of the characters and made to suffer their anguishes and anxieties. (For more details on Characterization refer to the Unit on Characters)

2.3.2. Status of Urdu Language

Anita Desai's novel *In Custody* deals with the protagonist Deven's relationship with the famous Urdu poet Nur Shahjehananadi as he meets Nur to interview him to write a feature on Murad's Urdu magazine *Awaaz.* It is interesting to note that the novel *In Custody* deals with art and artistic endeavours in India, especially in the Urdu language, which is often thought to be a dying language in India as most people neither speak, nor

use the language in their everyday conversation as well as in their literary outputs or any other formats of writing. The poet Nur is of the opinion that Urdu as a language died in 1947 and what remains of the language is nothing but its ghosts. Probably the poet Nur is justified to some extent in thinking in such a manner as Urdu as a language has lost its pristine glory which it once used to enjoy – it was thought to be a language of much refinement and polish; but with the onslaught of modernity, English language has taken such a toll on the language environment of India that Urdu has lost the glory it once used to enjoy. The novel *In Custody* thus seems to be an interesting study of the language situation in India. When one reads the novel, one is often made to think how and why the language which has immense prestige and poetic value at one point of time has come to a position when it is degraded by its practitioners. In other words, it can be said that the novel is a great study of the evolution and decline of Urdu language – a systemtic study of the modern day practitioners of Urdu so as to make the readers understand how because of the social, political and cultural set up of independent modern day India has led to do away with the language which was once the language of the rulers.

2.3.2.1. Deven as Preserver of Urdu Language and Art

If one the one hand, there is this notion that Urdu is going to be a dead language because of its lost prestige and because of it being not valued even by its own speech community – the Muslims; there is another aspect which is shown as far as Urdu language is concerned – it is the efforts of preservation of the Urdu language. Murad, though a manipulator and a person with ulterior motives in the novel, has taken up the mantle of saving the Urdu language from disgraceful death by championing its traditions through his magazine *Awaaz.* Murad may be a person who has some other motif behind his efforts of preservation of Urdu language through his magazines, but he is the one who takes the effort in the beginning of the novel to travel from Delhi to Mirpore to request Deven to interview the famous Urdu poet Nur so that the magazine gets some glory and the love for the Urdu poetry is revived.

It is Murad's request which makes Deven come forward to interview Nur so as to preserve some aspects of Urdu poetry which he loves from the bottom of his heart. Deven is actually presented in the novel by Anita Desai as the true preserver of Urdu language and Art. It is his love for Urdu language and literature which makes his undertake the painful journey of coming to Delhi from Mirpore to meet the poet Nur and interview him even though he faces many a difficulties. When one looks at this aspect of the novel, it seems that Anita Desai is presenting to the audience the view that even though Urdu language is facing the danger of extinction, yet it is because of the people like Deven that probably the Language and its art will not be lost after all. Probably, people live Deven will be able to carry forward their love for Urdu language in such a manner so as to somehow carry on with the traditions of Urdu language. So even though the novel ends in a hopeless situation for Deven, the main character of the novel, the fate of Urdu does not seem so bleak as efforts such as that of Deven would definitely reap results.

2.3.3. Deven – The Hero without Heroism

Modern man is not a hero in the classical sense of the term. Modern heroes do not fight with their swords and emerge victorious. Modern heroes are a bundle of fragmented selves trying to fight a battle with themselves – with the world that they are living in and

at the same time with the inherent dichotomies that the world offers to them. Deven is no different. He is not a hero in the classical sense of the term – he is the main protagonist of *In Custody*. He is someone who is trying his best to cope up with the challenges that are heaped on him by the society as well as by himself. That he can face those challenges, even though that do not apparently seem so brave, makes him a hero, though he does not have any heroism. He is a man who is lost in life – he is fighting for a long cause – for the famous debauched Urdu poet Nur – and it is obvious therefore that he is not going to gain any victory. Moreover, he will be submerged into a pathetic and tragic life as the society around him will not let him do what his heart desires. He loves Urdu language and poetry – but his love for it makes him suffer more and more in manifold ways. It is in his suffering – in his capacity to forbear those sufferings that Deven is a hero.

Moreover, one can say that with no one in this world he shares a relationship which can provide him with some respite. He is a friend of Murad who uses him to manifest his own motives. He has a wife Sarla with whom he does not have a very cordial relationship. He has his devotion for the poet Nur, who is living a debauched life amidst the louts and two cunning wives and therefore cannot forge a proper relationship of the devotee and the devoted. Thus Deven suffers from a sense of deep alienation – an alienation which seems to be in verge of taking him down to the abyss. It is this pathetic portrayal of Deven by Anita Desai which makes us look at his character with much sympathy.

2.3.4. Nur and his Company

When we meet Nur, the famous old Urdu poet, in the novel, he is surrounded by louts and his two wives. Most of these people surrounding Nur do not have any love for Urdu language and literature; but they are there as in Nur's presence they can enjoy themselves. In such a company that Nur keeps with him, he degenerates further. But he seems to care less about it as he has already accepted the fact that Urdu has lost its past glory and that the times of Urdu is gone. So instead of holding on to the past, he looks forward to good times even though that is all about living a decadent and debauched life.

When Deven Sharma, the college Hindi lecturer from Mirpore, visits Nur Shahjehanabadi for the first time, he is alarmed to see his venerated poet in such a state of debauchery. The question which naturally comes is – why does Anita Desai present Nur Shahjehanabadi in such a light? Why is it that Nur keeps a company of louts to give him company in his drinking? The answer seems to be that with the loss of glory of the Urdu language and literature/ poetry, Nur Shahjehanabadi is not able to live up to the standards of what is expected from a renowned poet. He has fallen from his grace as it happened with Urdu language. Nur Shahjehanabadi becomes synonymous with Urdu in the novel. He represents all that Urdu once was and as it is now.

It is to be kept in mind here that Deven Sharma when he reaches Old Delhi to Nur Shahjehanabadi's residence, he is flabbergasted to find things in such a way as he has always thought of Urdu poetry as it sounds and means – the musical and poetic elements of Urdu. Instead of poetry and music what Deven encounters with the present Nur is gross prosaic nature and melodrama. At one instance in the novel, Deven goes to Nur's house and finds that Nur's second's wife Imtiaz Begum's birthday is being celebrated. In the celebration Imtiaz Begum with her third grade melodramatic poetry is the centre of attraction while the poetic Nur sits in one corner of the room and is brooding to himself.

Probably this scene symbolically tells not only the state of Urdu poetry, but also the general condition of our culture.

2.3.5. Women Characters in the Novel

There are three major women characters in the novel. They are Sarla, Deven's wife and Imtiaz Begum and Safia Begum, two wives of Nur. It is a general tendency in Anita Desai to see the world from women's perspective. But in *In Custody*, she does something different. Instead of seeing the world from women's perspective, Anita Desai looks at the world from the perspective of men. Apparently, this may look as if Anita Desai is changing her perspective; but that does not lead to any major difference, because the three women characters that she creates in the novel show three different aspects of women.

Whereas Sarla is a housewife who is least interested about anything else, leave apart Deven's pursuit and love for Urdu Poetry or Nur. She had her material ambitions in life but all those ambitions are thwarted by her marriage with Deven, a college lecturer who does not earn enough to give her the luxuries of life. She has made some arrangement with herself and have accepted the fact that in this life, she has no means of achieving her dreams and therefore he has become "naturally embittered."

As against Sarla, is the character of Imtiaz Begum, the second wife of Nur Shahjehanabadi who has come from the world of prostitution; but has some natural flair for Urdu language and literature and herself claims that she is an "intellectual partner" of Nur. She writes poetry and wishes to get some recognition as a poetess which she does not get in the novel apart from one instance when on her birthday she gets a chance to perform before the admirers of Nur. She is an authoritative figure who has much influence on Nur and manages the household according to her own wishes. She is the aspiring "new woman" in the novel.

2.3.6. The Scheming World

Modern day existence becomes difficult if one is not scheming enough to counter the schemes of everyone else living around one. Deven, apparently a simpleton, is fooled by almost everyone in the novel. Deven writes for the magazine *Awaaz*, but is not paid by Murad Beg, the proprietor of *Awaaz*. Moreover Deven is fooled to believe that he should go and interview the famous Urdu poet Nur Shahjehanabadi as Murad knows that Deven worships Nur. When he gets a grant from college to buy a tape recorder to record the interviews of Nur, he is being fooled by Murad and the shopkeeper Jain to buy a second hand tape recorder which does not work properly. He moreover is given the assistance of Mr. Jain's two nephews in different occasions for recording Nur's interviews and later for editing the tapes of the interviews. These nephews of Mr. Jain are incompetent fools who mar all the efforts of Deven and he is being again fooled. Thus we see that throughout the novel, Anita Desai presents the scheming world trying to fool Deven and he is anguished by all these.

2.4. CRITICS ON ANITA DESAI AND ANITA DESAI ON HER WRITINGS

2.4.1. Critics on Anita Desai

- Srinivas Iyengar – "Since her preoccupation is with the inner world of sensibility rather than the outer world of action, she has tried to give up a style supple and suggestive enough to convey the fever and fretfulness of the stream-of-consciousness of her principal characters."

- Jasbir Jain – "The world of Anita Desai's novels is an ambivalent one; it is world where the central harmony is aspired to but arrived at, and the desire to love and live clashes – at times violently with the desire to withdraw and achieve harmony."

- B. Ramachandra Rao -- "Mrs. Desai brings something new to Indo-Anglican novel. Instead of portraying character in terms of the environment of defining an individual in terms of his social or caste functions, Mrs. Desai creates character and the environment is important only in so far as it enables the reader to understand the character. Moreover, the true artist that she is, Mrs. Desai presents each individual as an unsolved mystery."

- R. S. Pathak – "Few Indian novelists in English have surpassed Anita Desai in psychological delineation of the protagonist."

- Salman Rushdie – "The slow death of my mother tongue, Urdu, is much further advanced than it was twenty three years ago, and much that was beautiful in the culture of old Delhi has slipped away forever. ("Introduction to In Custody")

- S. B. Bhambar – "… Anita Desai is especially noted for her sensitive portrayal of the inner life of her female characters"

2.4.2. Anita Desai's reflections on her writings –

- "My novels are no reflection of Indian society, politics or character. There are parts of my private effort to seize upon the raw material of life – its shapelessness, its meaninglessness."

- "I really don't know very much about Urdu literature. I understand the language, but I don't read or write it. My knowledge of it is very limited, but I think of it as the repository for a certain period of Indian history and a certain culture."

- "My writing is an effort to discover, underline and convey the significance of things. I must seize upon that incomplete and seemingly meaningless mass of reality around me and try and discover its significance by plunging below the surface and plumbing the depths, then illuminating those depths till they become more lucid, brilliant and explicable reflection of the visible world."

- "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?"

- "I made a very conscious effort with *In Custody*, to break away from the writing I'd been doing until then. I had written about the Indian family and women's lives so often that I could almost do it blind, treading over and over again the same small piece of territory. But I couldn't realistically have women characters just pushing open the doors of the world, so I had to write about men."
- "I meant to keep women out of it altogether, because the world of Urdu poetry would be very male. But I found all these women whom I had locked out were screaming and thumping on the door and demanding to come in."

2.5 SUMMING UP

Thus, the novel *In Custody* deals with various issues that were prevalent during the times when it was written. It is to be kept in mind that Anita Desai is no social reformer, neither is she taking up the prospects of the social novel in her writing; she is merely portraying the anguishes of a man who is caught at the wrong waters. From this point of view when we look at the novel we find Anita Desai to be an aesthete who is trying to portray the ways in which Deven is trying to adjust to the ways of the world with which he is not accustomed with because of his inexperience in those fields. Deven does not understand the scheming natures of Murad and Mr. Jain. Deven does not fit into the culture of debauchery where people eat, drink and make merry. He has love for pure poetry of Urdu language and he pursues that in the novel passionately so as to preserve it from being endangered. The novel seems to be Deven's fight against himself, as well as against the society in which he does not fit in.

2.6. SUGGESTED QUESTIONS

1. What are the main themes that Anita Desai deals with in the novel *In Custody?*
2. Among the varied themes that *In Custody* deals with, which one do you think is most significant and why?

2.7. RECOMMENDED READINGS

- Belliappa, Meena. *Anita Desai: A Study of Her Fiction*. Calcutta: A Writers Workshop Publication, 1971.
- Jain, Jasbir. *Stairs to the Attic: The Novels of Anita Desai.* Jaipur: Printwell Publishers, 1987.
- Lal, Malashri. *The Law of the Threshold: Women Writers in Indian English*. Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1995.

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Unit 3

IN CUSTODY – BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE NOVEL

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In Unit Two, you have been introduced to the basic issues that Anita Desai's novel *In Custody* deals with. Probably by now, you have finished reading the text in original and have formed an idea of the plot development of the novel. You probably have already understood the way in which Anita Desai has developed the themes of the novel which you have come across in the last Unit. In this Unit, an attempt has been made to provide you the summary of the chapters in some detail so as to refresh your memory of the reading of the novel as well as to formulate the ideas which shaped the course of the novel. It needs to be understood here that a novel's summary is not the same as the reading experience of the novel. The summary is there for quick reference and not as a substitute of reading the novel.

3.2. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In this unit you will learn about –

- The Plot development of the novel *In Custody*

3.3. IN CUSTODY – SUMMARY OF CHAPTERS

Before going into the summary of the chapters it is essential that you understand the ways in which a story and a plot of a narrative or a literary piece of work differs from each other. Based on the classical notion of 'plot' and its difference from 'story', the formalists make a point about how 'defamiliarization' technique is used by narrative writers, though it is to be kept in mind here that the concept of plot for Aristotle and for the Formalists are very different. According to Formalists, there is a clear distinction between Plot and Story –

- A **plot** is an artful disposition of incidents
- Whereas a **story** is the raw material which are artfully disposed to make it a plot.

In other words, **story (Fabula)** is the raw material, that is, the incidents as they happened which the poet of the writer finds suitable to write about, and **plot (Sjuzet)** is the artistic arrangement of those raw materials in a particular order to make those raw materials render some artistic touch.

In this unit, an attempt has been made to provide you the plot of the novel *In Custody* in the same order as the novelist have tried to present in the novel.

3.3.1. Chapter 1

Anita Desai's novel *In Custody* opens with the appearance of Murad at Mirpore where Deven is a lecturer of Hindi in a college. Murad is the editor of an Urdu Magazine *Awaaz* and he has comes to his friend Deven to cajole him to interview the famous Urdu poet

Nur at his house in Old Delhi. Two friends – Murad and Deven go out to bazaar to have lunch where they discuss the problems related to their respective finances. Deven shows his grievance as he is not being paid for the poems and reviews in Murad's magazine. Murad, on the other hand, informs him that his magazine business is not a success at all; and yet he is carrying on with it because of the great illustrious tradition of Urdu poetry. Murad informs Deven that he wants some new work so as to complete the Feature on Nur and requests Deven to go to Delhi and find Nur so as interview him in detail to make a great feature on Nur.

3.3.2. Chapter 2

The town of Mirpore is vey gloomy and dull to Deven and he finds it to be a place of his boredom and separation. So somehow Deven's journey from Mirpore to Delhi is seen as a respite by him. on his way to Delhi, the landscape that he encounters is base which is to some extent an extension of Deven's mind. In other words, the barren and empty landscape that he sees, seems to be an outpouring which is analogous to his own mind – the wasteland of his own existence.

However, Deven reaches Delhi and meets Murad. He takes a formal letter of recommendation from Murad so as to formally meet the famous Urdu poet Nur Shahjehanabadi. Though he takes the letter, but at the same time feels whether the letter of recommendation is of any use from a person of Murad's stature. Deven thinks much whether he should go to meet Nur or not and at last decides hesitatingly that he should go and meet the poet.

.3.3. Chapter 3

Deven meets Nur at his residence in Old Delhi and is shocked to find the poets surrounded by the company of louts which the poet seems to be enjoying much. Deven has been a great admirer of Nur and had been worshipping him for his literary outputs; but when he meets Nur personally he is completely flabbergasted at the way Nur conducts himself. Deven figures out that Nur is living with his two wives and his second wife Imtiaz Begum was earlier connected to a brothel. When Deven finds Nur in such a state, he is more in shock of the situation. Moreover, he finds it even more disgusting that when Nur censures Deven for disturbing him and also for being a Hindi lecturer.

Nur feels that Urdu as a language died in 1947 and that the ghosts of Urdu language now exists. Deven finds the atmosphere of Nur's house to be very suffocating and the people there to be very savage and vulgar. Amidst this vulgarity and savagery when he sees his loved poet Nur, he feels very disgusted. Nur's wife scolds Nur and all people present in Nur's house for drinking too much as well as for making the world of Nur much more agonizing. Nur feels that he should not visit the poet anymore and that he should go back to his own world in Mirpore and not unnecessarily waste time in exploring the world of Nur.

3.3.4. Chapter 4

After his first encounter with the world of Nur, the famous Urdu poet, Deven feels disgusted with himself as he travels back to Mirpore. While travelling he seems to be undecided about whether he should pursue his dreams of unraveling the world of Nur or

should be merely keep himself busy in his world of college in Mirpore. As he reaches Mirpore by bus, he seems one of his students in the bus stand and is immediately again transported to the world of Nur's poetry.

As he comes to Mirpore, he is undecided about what to do next. Instead of going home, he heads directly for college as he does not want to face the "stony face" of his wife Sarla. When he reaches back home later in the day, he is perturbed to find out the way Sarla is treating him as if he is a stranger. He looks forward to his little son Manu, but there too be finds himself disappointed. Anita Desai writes – "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."

Later he receives a letter from Nur in which the poet has written that he agrees to allow Deven to work as his secretary and that Murad is ready to publish his work. Deven is quite surprised at this decision of the poet as he never thought Nur will agree to this.

3.3.5. Chapter 5

Even though, Deven loves and idolizes Nur, but he thinks that he cannot take up the job of being Nur's secretary by leaving his job of college lectureship in Mirpore. As a college lecturer, he has an income and some other privileges which he does not want to leave to take up the uncertainty of the world of Nur. Moreover, he does not understand the purpose of Nur as he has sent him the proposal of being his secretary. As Deven is thinking about all these, Murad again tries to influence his decision – Murad tells him that he should pursue his dream and try to interview Nur for his upcoming edition of the magazine *Awaaz.* Deven again agrees to Murad's demands and journeys to Delhi to meet Nur, but this time he sees that in Nur's house, a *soiree* has been arranged to celebrate the birthday of Nur's second wife – Imtiaz Bibi. In that *soiree,* Imtiaz Bibi carries on with his own melodramatic third grade verses while the great poet Nur sits in one corner and just remains unnoticed in the crowd of lumpens.

As the *soiree* continues, Nur and Deven retire to a room away from the party and there Nur tells Deven how he has been duped by Imtiaz begum of all his belongings and how he is suffering. Though, Deven listens to all these, but his real interest lies in taking an interview of Nur. Nur agrees to give an interview and even says that he will recite some of his verses, even the verses which are unpublished. As Nur says this, Deven promises that he will write a memoir or a full book on the life and verses of Nur Shahjehanabadi, if the poet agrees to it. At this moment, Nur's two wives come in and they create a scene which makes Deven flee away from the scene.

Murad, on the other hand, decides that he will devote a whole issue of the journal on Nur Shahjehanabadi's verses. As the time was passing by the time for the publication of the next issue of *Awaaz* was getting nearer, so Murad asks Deven to hurry up with the interview of Nur and even advises him that he should use a tape recorder to record the interview and the verses of Nur which he can then work on while he is at home. Moreover, Murad allures Deven by telling him that he can also write a book on Nur by the name "My Days with Nur Shahjehanabadi."

3.3.6. Chapter 6

Deven's college also has an Urdu department and the head of the Department of Urdu is Mr. Siddiqui who when he listens to Deven's work with Nur, arranges for fund for the tape recorder from the college. Murad takes Deven to a tape recorder shop where Murad convinces Deven to buy a second hand tape recorder. Murad seems to have a prior deal with Mr. Jain, the owner of the tape recorder shop owner which he does not declare to Deven. Deven who is a novice about matters relating to electronics goes by what Murad tells him. moreover, a technician named Chiku is also given to Deven to assist him in his work of recording the interview of Nur.

3.3.7. Chapter 7

As the tape recorder is procured, Deven seeks an appointment with the poet Nur for interviewing him. When he arrives at the scene, he figures out that Nur's second wife Imtiaz begum has fallen sick from the day of her birthday and that she has high temperature and loose bowel movement. So in that atmosphere, the poet Nur is not in a situation to be interviewed by Deven. Moreover, it is suggested that Nur cannot even recite poetry in his own house now as it is censured by his second wife. She feels that no one wants to listen to Nur anymore as they are enamoured by the young voice of Imtiaz Begum.

So, in these circumstances, Deven feels very depressed that he is not able to interview Nur. When Nur expresses the desire that his second wife be sent to a hospital for treatment, Deven is elated to listen to that as he thinks he will get the opportunity to find Nur alone to interview him. But when he comes to know that Nur has already failed in his attempt to send Imtiaz Begum to hospital, all his hopes are thwarted.

Deven then informs Nur that in order to have the ease of interviewing process, he has decided that the interview will be recorded by him, though this makes Nur a bit nervous as he thinks it is below his dignity to get his voice recorded. They are being informed at this point of time that Imtiaz Begum has asked for them and Deven is terrified of the idea of meeting her. Imtiaz Begum immediately thwarts the idea of recording the interview. At this moment, Nur's first wife Safia Begum comes to their help as she tells that she will help them in making Nur go out of the house through the back door to a place that she will hire where they can have the interview. Deven happily agrees to it and tells her that he will let her know the time and place. Safia Begum then tells Deven that she is expecting some payment for the same to which Deven shows his surprise and at this point of time, the demand of more money makes him think that he should shelve the project of interviewing Nur.

3.3.8. Chapter 8

Deven is portrayed in a foul despairing mood as his repeated attempts to interview Nur has always succumbed to failures. Moreover, when Sarla teases him about his going to Delhi, he feels disgusted. At this point of time, he receives another letter from Nur in which Nur has invited him to come and copy the new cycle of thirty six couplets that the poet has created. He again is reminded of the fact that till the time he gets the money for

Safia Begum, he will not be allowed to interview Nur. Deven is torn between his wish of interviewing Nur and his lack of resources.

Deven again approaches Abid Siddiqui for financial assistance and he recues Deven again by somehow using the good relations with the Registrar of the college to release funds for payment for Nur's interview. Once again, Deven's zeal finds manifestation in his excitement to go to Delhi and interview Nur. When he approaches the Head of the Department of Hindi, Mr. Trivedi for a week's leave, Deven is heavily scolded by him and was asked to defer the interview for two months till summer vacation. Yet luck somehow favours Deven and he manages the leave; but the next hurdle was Sarla. There also Deven becomes successful as to convince Sarla to go to her parents' house. All seems to be going well, yet Deven felt that there is somehow something which may not work well in his process of interviewing Nur.

3.3.9. Chapter 9

Deven again goes to Delhi with the intention of interviewing Nur. She meets Safia Begum and gives her the money for the interview and then she directs him to a place which she had already hired for the interview. Deven and the tape recorder technician Chiku reach that room and wait for Nur to come. When Nur finally reaches the designated room, Deven is again disturbed as Nur has brought along with him, his regular visitors. Moreover, Nur, instead of talking about his verses and his life, starts talking about Birayani and rum. Nur requests Deven to arrange for food and drinks for the assembled group and Deven leaves the room and calls up Murad for financial help. Murad agrees to provide food and drinks, but he puts the condition that he will deduct the sum from Deven's payment for the interview. After getting the food and drinks, Nur sometimes bursts into occasional bouts of his poetry; but here too Deven faces the problem of Chiku not being professional in recording what one needs to record. Deven's work is made hard on many accounts – (i) Nur is not consistently speaking on his poems and poetry; (ii) Chiku, the technician is not trained enough to understand what to record and what not to (iii) the assembled people (the supposed audience of Nur) create much rabble to carry on the smooth recording of the interview.

Yet, the interview carries on. The occasional strong emotional outpouring of Nur's poetry makes Deven lose sense of time. This kind of eating and drinking along with occasional bouts of poetry carries on for three weeks. At the last day of the interview, Nur bursts into a verse that no one has heard before. As the tape recorder was not working anymore, Deven had started taking notes on his copy. Nur takes the copy from him and starts writing the verses himself. Deven at this moment is filled with a glory that filled his heart. But soon Nur realizes that his writing days are over. With this the long interview session comes to an end.

3.3.10 Chapter 10

A new kind of problem now comes to Deven as he figures out that the recording Chiku has done of Nur's conversations and his poetry is not coherent at all. It seems moreover confused talks and Deven realizes that his venture has come to a failure. Again a ray of hope is shown by Murad who tells Deven to take the tapes to Mirpore and edit them to

produce a coherent interview. Mr. Jain, then, offers to help Deven again by sending another of his nephew Pintu to assist in the editing of the tapes.

He reaches Mirpore and finds the college abandoned. This abandoned look of the college makes him realize his duties which he hasn't done to the college. Deven takes help of one of his students Dhanu for editing the tapes. But even after all the editing, the tapes are not up to the mark to produce them before the college authorities.

So Deven again approaches Abid Siddiqui, the head of the Department of Urdu who has eagerly helped him earlier. Deven seeks his help to escape the wrath of the College authorities, but Siddiqui also censures him for wasting the college funds. Deven feels very anguished and thinks of returning to his work – so he spends almost the whole night evaluating the answer scripts of students.

At this point of time, another letter comes from Nur which makes Deven disbalanced. The letter has along with it a bill of rupees five hundred as room rent for the place where the interview was conducted. Deven feels disgusted with himself and approaches Murad to help to pay off the bill. But Murad refuses to give any more money. As Murad censures him badly, Deven realizes that he has nowhere to go and that he is completely cheated. So instead of going back to Mirpore, he starts walking aimlessly and reaches a park in Delhi where looking at the stately building and the eastern walls of the great Friday mosque Deven finds an answer to his question about the significance of poetic art in the image of the dome which he perceives against the background of the sky.

3.3.11. Chapter 11

Deven finds an awareness of life in nature and then when he comes back home, instead of being annoyed and perturbed by the stony and graceless looks of Sarla (his wife) he feels compassion for her as he can now identify his own distress with that of Sarla's. Deven knows that he was genuine with his project and that he has pursued his project with utmost sincerity; but it is not that Murad, Chiku or Nur and his wives are to be blamed for the failure of the project; that he himself is to be blamed for all the wrongs that have happened to him. Deven has sleepless night thinking what evidence to produce before the college authorities. He there after takes a long walk to think about what to do with his anguished and despairing self – he even thinks that death is a possible escape from this distress.

Again at this this moment Deven recalls Nur and his poetry – Deven tries to evaluate his genius even though he is old and dishinouable to some extent in his present condition. Even though, Nur has come to this state, still he feels that his essential relationship with Nur has been fruitful and he comes up with a sense of thankfulness. He feels a certain kind of spiritual bond with the poet. The act of inheriting Nur's poetry, a keeper and preserver of Nur's poetry makes Deven fill up with an existentialist awareness at the moment of the dawn. He resolves that he will continue to carry on working for the true legacy of Nur and thereby gains courage to fight against his misfortunes.

3.4. Summing Up:

In this Unit, you have come across a brief outline of Anita Desai's novel *In Custody* which probably has given you a fair notion of the way in which the plot has been

developed by the author to present the dilemmas and problems that Deven, the protragonist of the novel, goes through as he tries to interview Nur, the famous Urdu poet, for his friend Murad's magazine. The novel is a poignant portrayal of the decadent state of Urdu culture and literature and how Deven is trying his best to keep alive what is already in a process of decaying.

3.5. UNIVERSITY QUESTIONS

1. Comment on the Plot development of the novel *In Custody*.
2. In what ways do you feel Anita Desai has developed her plot in *In Custody* to build the suspense?

3.6. RECOMMENDED READINGS

- Belliappa, Meena. *Anita Desai: A Study of Her Fiction*. Calcutta: A Writers Workshop Publication, 1971.
- Jain, Jasbir. *Stairs to the Attic: The Novels of Anita Desai.* Jaipur: Printwell Publishers, 1987.
- Lal, Malashri. *The Law of the Threshold: Women Writers in Indian English*. Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1995.
- Nityandandam, *Indira. Three Great Indian Women Novelists*. New Delhi: Creative Books, 2000.

Unit 4

IN CUSTODY - CRITICAL COMMENTS – CHAPTERWISE

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In the last Unit, we have come across the Summary of the novel *In Custody* which probably has given you an over all idea about the novel and the plot development. In this Unit, an attempt will be made to make you know each chapter of the novel in a much more thorough way by providing you with critical appreciation of the individual chapters, so as to make you acquainted with the chapters in a much detailed fashion.

Anita Desai's novel *In Custody* deals with a slice of life of Deven Sharma, a college lecturer in Lala Ram Lal College, Mirpore. The novel deals with Deven's relationship with the famous Urdu poet Nur as Deven tries to interview him for a magazine called *Awaaz* which is run by his friend Murad. In the process of taking the interview, Deven formulates a strong spiritual bond with the poet Nur which sustains him even though his life gets filled with disappointments because of the repeated failures related to the interviews of Nur. This seems to be the essence of the novel. The novel in brief is about this; but Anita Desai like a true artist brings in other significant issues through this small plot description. It is the beauty of the novel that there is not much action in the novel; yet the novel achieves in rendering to its readers the beauty of the world of poetry and how poetry can be a relief from the actual world of anxieties and disappointments – how the metaphysical anguishes can be dealt with poetic beauty.

Though much does not happen in the story in terms of action – as Deven Sharma moves between Mirpore (the world of his college and his family) and Old Delhi (the world of Nur's poetry); yet each chapter of the novel is able to present to the readers the anguishes that Deven suffers from in his life. It is advised that one should read the original text so as to get oneself better acquainted with the text, the Chapter summary with critical comments are only meant for better understanding of the novel and not as a substitute for reading the novel.

(In this context, it also should be mentioned that for a better understanding of the plot of the novel, you can also watch the movie *In Custody*, directed by Ismail Merchant. But it is to be remembered while watching the movie that there are many digressions in the movie as well as some changes which were needed so as to adapt the novel to cinematic representation.)

4.2. LEARNING OBJECTIVE

In this Unit, you will learn about –

- Critical Appreciation of the Individual chapters so as to make you understand the different facets of the novel in a much detailed way.

4.3. CHAPTER WISE CRITICAL COMMENTARY

4.3.1. Chapter 1: Critical Comments

As an introductory chapter, Anita Desai has pointed out the significant themes of her novel in this chapter. We are introduced to the world of Deven Sharma. He is a lecturer of Hindi in a private college in a small town of Mirpore. He does not have a great respect in college as he is not a great teacher. Anita Desai writes –

"The students in the first row or two were staring openly at him now … the expression he saw – of boredom, amusement, insolence and defiance --- made him look away quickly and focus his eyes upon the door at the far end of the room, the door that opened on to the passage, freedom and release."

This passage from the first chapter of the novel clearly shows how Deven is not a very great teacher and that he is doing teaching only as a job. He has no passion for teaching and yet he is doing so as he has his material needs. He cannot make the students engage in the class as he somewhere does not feel connected to the whole teaching profession. He is therefore a boring teacher.

If this is one aspect of teaching that Anita Desai shows in the very beginning of the novel, then there is the other aspect of how teachers are not paid well. Murad says –

"It is too bad how badly our lecturers are paid. How can the intellectuals of this country do any worthwhile work if no one shows them any respect or compensates them for all the suffering they have to undergo for the sake of art?"

Probably, Murad is saying this only to butter Deven and to prepare the grounds of his demand of asking him to come to Delhi to interview Nur, but Anita Desai through this passage by Murad shows to her readers how the teachers in India are not paid well enough to lead a standard life and how therefore often the teaching-learning process is hampered.

The first chapter also discusses the status of Urdu language in India as Murad speaks –

"Yet, like these vegetables, it (Hindi) flourishes, while Urdu – language of the court in days of royalty – now languishes in the back lanes and gutters of the city. No palace for it to live in style to which it is accustomed to, no emperors and nawabs to act as its patrons."

Thus a significant theme is introduced in the chapter one, where we come to know about the status of Urdu language in India. it is a language which is not been respected and honoured in the same way as it used to be done once and it is going to be a dead language if people do not act as a preserver of the language. Murad says that inspite of his little means, he is trying to do his best to keep Urdu language be preserved through his magazine *Awaaz.* But Deven, even if he wants to, he cannot try to take up Urdu as his occupation. He therefore says – "I can write Urdu now only as my hobby." Urdu language will not provide Deven with bread and butter and therefore he can only pursue his passion for Urdu as a hobby.

Next, we are introduced to Nur Shahjehanabadi – the famous Urdu poet, whose new works, Murad wants to publish in the next edition of his magazine which is one Urdu Poetry. So Murad asks Nur to go and Find the poet Nur and interview him for his magazine. Apparently, it may seem here that Murad is really concerned about his friend Deven and gives him a chance to pursue his passion; but it is only later that we come to know that Murad is a scheming man and he does not care much about his friend and only wants to use his friend Deven to serve his own purpose.

Thus, all the three major male characters of the novel – Deven, Nur and Murad are introduced in the novel. Sarla is just mentioned which probably tells the readers that the novel is about the relationships of men.

4.3.2. Chapter 2: Critical Comments

Deven in this chapter is transferred from Mirpore to Delhi. The chapter first shows the journey that the protagonist Deven makes from the prosaic world of Mirpore to the supposed poetic world of Nur Shahjehanabadi. The environment of Mirpore and the barren landscape that Deven sees from his bus journey from Mirpore to Delhi only presents the way Deven's mind is working. Deven seem to be looking at the barren landscape as his mind is similarly barren.

As Deven reaches Delhi, he takes a letter of recommendation from Murad, the Editor of *Awaaz,* so as to meet the famous Urdu Poet Nur Shahjehanabadi. As he prepares himself to meet the poet, he is in two minds whether he should really take the pains of meeting him or should he go back to Mirpore. Even though he is undecided, at last he makes his decision to go and meet the poet which is a way in which he forms an everlasting spiritual relationship with the poet.

It is interesting to note that though it is a long chapter, but this chapter does not show much action in terms of the progression of the plot of the novel. The chapter only builds up the suspense. As we are told about the great Urdu poet Nur Shahjehanabadi in Chapter One, one necessarily feels an urge to meet him. By prolonging the act of meeting Nur, the chapter builds up the necessary suspense which is an essential element in any novel.

4.3.3. Chapter 3: Critical Comments

When we finally meet Nur Shahjehanabadi, we are in a similar state of shock as that of Deven. The poet who has been so greatly been talked about in the earlier two chapters lives in a state of where he is completely bamboozled by a crowd who knows how to make merry by eating and drinking. Deven and the readers expected a complete gentlemanly person in Nur as he is very poetic in his creations. But when we meet him in person in the novel, it seems that he is too much into things which seems to that of the world of the lunatics. The crowd which gathers around him supposedly for the sake of giving company to the poet's caliber is actually more interested in enjoying themselves at the cost of the poet.

Seeing all these, both Deven and the readers feel that their high opinions of the poet is somehow grounded and that there is actually nothing left of such a great poet. He has not only grown old, but also have gone senile – that his real caliber is lost in the humdrum of everyday existence. Nur's second wife Imtiaz Begum justly says in the chapter to the

supposed admirers of Nur – "Do you call that a poet, or even a man? All of you – you followers of his – you have reduced him to that, making him eat and drink like some animal, like a pig, laughing at your jokes, singing your crude songs, when he should be at work, or resting to prepare himself for work." Probably Anita Desai is voicing the sentiments of the readers through the character of Imtiaz Begum. What Imtiaz Begum says is quite justified that a poet like Nur's stature should not get into heinous acts like eating and drinking as a pig with his followers. In that sense, the censure that Imtiaz Begum does to Nur's followers portrays two things –

(a) That the poet Nur should not be doing what he is engaging himself with his followers / admirers.
(b) That Imtiaz Begum cares for Nur and has certain authority. We will find more examples of Imtiaz Begum's notable features in the coming chapters.

Apart from these, this chapter is also significant from the point of view of building up the discussion on the state of Urdu language in India, as Nur says in two occasions in this chapter –

"How can there be Urdu poetry when 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 if the British by the Hindiwallahs tightened it. So now you see its corpse lying here, waiting to be buried."

"… Urdu is supposed to have died, in 1947. What you see in the universities – in some of the universities, a few of them only – is its ghost, wrapped in a shroud …"

Both these statements of Nur are very significant in our understanding of the status of Urdu language in Modern India. With the Moghuls perishing, the language was also on its way of perishing and according to Nur, by the time of 1947, the language was already dead. It is true to some extent. What Nur is voicing is being voiced earlier in much milder terms by Murad and Deven in Chapter One. It is again repeated in this chapter to give the notion to the readers that the language of Urdu and its poetry is not considered as high any more by the people who neglect both the language and its poetry.

4.3.4. Chapter 4: Critical Comments

After Deven's encounter with Nur Shahjehanabadi which proved to be disastrous for Deven, this chapter is all about the psychological aspects of Deven. One of the critics has rightly commented that -- "Few Indian novelists in English have surpassed Anita Desai in psychological delineation of the protagonist." (R. S. Pathak). The beginning of this chapter shows Deven psychologically devastated with the encounter with Nur. He had immense respect for the poet; but seeing his present state he could not decide whether to carry on pursuing the dream of interviewing Nur and writing on him or to leave it altogether and go back to his world of Lala Ram Lal College in Mirpore.

This chapter is also significant in terms of presenting the relationship of Deven and Sarla – husband and wife. Usually in almost every circumstance, a person travelling by night would like to go home and refresh himself before he heads for his professional space. But Deven does the exact opposite as he does not want to go home and meet the "stony face" of his wife Sarla. Instead, he decided to go to college and refresh himself there. It is

unusual and speaks highly of the marital disharmony that the couple suffers from. Anita Desai very aptly presents the characters of Deven and Sarla in this chapter.

She writes – "Although each understood the truth about the other, it did not bring about any closeness of spirit, any comradeship, because they also sensed that two victims ought to avoid each other, not yoke together their joint disappointments. A victim does not look to help from another victim; he looks for a redeemer. At least. Deven had his poetry; she had nothing, and so there was an added accusation and bitterness in her look." This passage justly sums up the marital discord between Deven and Sarla and shows why they cannot help each other. The novel *In Custody* is not merely about the male relationships – Deven and Nur or Deven and Murad or Deven and Abid Siddiqui; it is also about male-female relationship. In this context, the present chapter is very significant as it shows the relationship between Deven and Sarla.

Through Anita Desai's rendering of the character of Sarla we come to know that she had very high aspirations from her life. She wanted all material comforts from her life -- "So she had dared to aspire towards a telephone, a refrigerator, even a car." But all these material comforts are not to be achieved when she is married to Deven. She has realized this very well in the novel and this realization has made her feel that she is trapped in a marriage in which she has no interest. This realization has also affected her physical features as Anita Desai presents – "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 and permanent as surgical scars." Thus in this chapter, Anita Desai is able to bring forward the man-woman relationship in a very subtle way.

Moreover, by the end of the chapter, there is again a twist in the tale that we see. Whereas in the earlier chapter, when we are presented with Deven's encounter with Nur, we get the feeling that the chapter of Nur is probably over as Deven felt that it is very awkward of him to visit Nur and deal with the atmosphere in which he is living in. Moreover, the way Nur has censured him for disturbing his afternoon nap as well as for teaching Hindi in college made Deven feel that he is not interested in giving any significance to Deven; but to his utter surprise he gets a letter from Nur asking him to be his secretary. This is a new beginning in the novel as the readers are prepared for another series of encounters with the poet Nur.

4.3.5. Chapter 5: Critical Comments

Deven is flabbergasted when he receives a letter from Nur Shahjehanabadi, this favorite and famous Urdu poet asking him to be his secretary; but he cannot accept the offer of being his secretary as he has a family to maintain for which he needs a ready source of money which his job of lectureship in Lala Ram Lal College in Mirpore is providing him. One should be passionate about things and moreover should do things to pursue one's passion; but at the same time one needs to be realistic in life so as to maintain the sanctity of life. Deven is caught up here between his realistic self and his self which is passionate about Urdu Poetry and Nur Shahjehanabadi. He had to choose one of them and at this moment he thought that it is better to choose the life in Mirpore over being the secretary of Nur as that is a much more practical decision. He chooses a practical thing over his

passion as he has to look after his wife and son, Sarla and Manu, respectively. It is to be kept in mind that Deven is not a very strong character – he is always in doubts about things happening in his life. So when he decides not to be secretary of Nur, he thinks that he has missed a great opportunity in life; yet one needs to understand that Deven has to take care of a family which the job in Mirpore somehow guarantees. Being a secretary of Nur is all about uncertainties and a family man cannot take that chance.

Deven receives another letter from Nur, inviting him to his place and when he goes to Nur's place in Old Delhi he figures out that Imtiaz Begum's birthday celebration is going on where Imtiaz Begum is performing before the supposed admirers of Nur Shahjehanabadi while the poet himself is sitting in one of the dark corners of the room. It is a situation of dichotomy apparently that the poet is relegated to the background and Imtiaz Begum has taken the central stage. Deven feels that Imtiaz Begum's poetry is third grade compared to that of Nur and yet the so called admirers of Nur are having great fun. This incident is very significant in the novel from multiple points of view. They are –

(a) Imtiaz Begum is a poetess and needs audience for herself which she never gets as she is a female. It talks about how Urdu poetry is traditionally thought to be a male arena and whenever a female tries to enter into that arena she is being seen as third grade.
(b) Deven and Nur, the supposed custodians of Urdu Poetry in the novel, cannot stand the fact that Imtiaz Begum has taken the central stage and therefore they soon retire to a different room where they discuss about the interview.
(c) Deven, even though is a sensitive man, could not take Imtiaz Begum's poems seriously as he has no respect for her and also at the same time his devotion to Nur has made him forget that there are other things in Urdu poetry than Nur's poetry.

All these make the *soiree* a significant incident in the novel.

As Deven and Nur retire to a different room, we see that Nur and Deven discuss how Imtiaz Begum has taken over the whole household of Nur. Apparently it sounds like a complaint from Nur; but one has to understand that Imtiaz Begum is a strong authoritative woman who cannot be left to the corners to do her own thing, she is the 'new woman' who will always try to come to the limelight however much the patriarchal society tries to subdue her. She is the one character in the novel, who cannot be subdued by any force – she has decided to shine bright and tries to do everything so as to achieve that. Apparently, it may seem that she is a vicious female who is trying to gain things for herself; but one needs to remember that Imtiaz Begum is not just the second wife of Nur Shahjehanabadi, but she has a personality of her own which is very significant. Women in the modern age are trying to break free from traditional shackles and achieve things for themselves and Imtiaz Begum is a good example of that. She with her competence and talent need to shine bright and she does everything to achieve that in the novel. Women are traditionally thought to be submissive to patriarchal society, women are made to learn from their childhood that they should give up their own self, their aspirations, their desires so as to facilitate the works and means of the male counterparts. Imtiaz Begum does not follow that norm and therefore is often looked down upon – but she should not

be looked from that point of view. She is the "female mafia" who would do everything to achieve things for herself and there is nothing wrong with that.

Next, Deven and Nur discuss about the interview that Deven plans and Nur agrees to give not only to give the interview; but at the same time recite some of his unpublished verses to Deven which Deven finds great. But at this point of time, Nur's two wives comes into the room and create much hullaballoo which wrecks havoc on Deven and he immediately rushes away from the scene.

Listening to the conversation between Nur and Deven, Murad instigates Deven further to carry on with the interview and moreover lulls him by saying that he may devote a whole issue of *Awaaz* to Nur Shahjehanabadi's poems and moreover tells him that Deven should think about writing a book on Nur by the name "My Days with Nur Shahjehanabadi." It is seen earlier in the novel that Murad is a very manipulative character and that he has manipulated Deven into taking the interviews of Nur. Now he is further instigating him write a book on Nur. Murad does not in reality want anything like that; he is merely saying this to Deven so as to keep Deven's interest alive in taking Nur's interview for his magazine. Murad is no good friend of Deven; he is merely a person who wants to take advantage of Deven's goodness and innocence.

Murad, moreover, advises Deven to record the interviews of Nur by using a tape recorder. Apparently, it seems to be a good suggestion; but a tape recorder is an expensive product and Murad does not tell Deven from where to get it and by what means. It is to be understood here, that Murad has often given good suggestions to Deven; but all those suggestions are from a manipulative man and not from a dear friend.

4.3.6. Chapter 6: Critical Comments

Deven comes back to Mirpore and has already decided his mind that he will carry on doing the interviews with Nur. Deven now needs funds to buy a tape recorder; but he does not know from where he can get those funds. He speaks about his project of interviewing Nur, to another colleague of him, Mr. Abid Siddiqui, the head of the Department of Urdu in Lala Ram Lal College. Abid Siddiqui tells Deven that he can try to get the funds from college to buy a tape recorder.

In this chapter, we are introduced to the character of Abid Siddiqui who is a real well-wisher of Deven. Abid Siddiqui is the descendant of the Nawab of Mirpore and is a man who is very honest and loving. He goes out of the way to help Deven in his project. His idea works for Deven and soon Deven gets the fund from College to buy a tape recorder so as to interview Nur.

After getting the funds from College, Deven again rushes to Delhi to arrange a tape recorder. Murad takes him to the shop of Mr. Jain who deals with electronics. Murad had already made an arrangement with Mr. Jain and when Murad and Deven goes there Mr. Jain shows them a second hand Japanese tape recorder which they advise Deven to buy from the funds. Deven first of all disagrees to buy a second hand machine; but soon are convinced by Murad and Mr. Jain that he should buy that one. With the problem of tape recorder being procured, now is the question of recording the interview and here to Mr. Jain comes to much help as he provides his nephew Chiku to help in the recording.

4.3.7. Chapter 7: Critical Comments

The chapter is significant in terms of Deven Sharma progressing another step towards the interviewing of Nur Shahjehanabadi. As Deven takes two steps forward to interview Nur, he find some impediment or the other which comes in his way. First it was the issue of the tape recorder and the funds to acquire one. When from the funds of Lala Ram Lal College, that problem is resolved and Deven is more or less ready for the interview, he finds out that there are problems in Nur's house – Imtiaz Begum (Nur's second wife) is not well since the time of her birthday celebration and she has censured Nur from reciting any poetry at home. In such circumstances it becomes difficult for Deven to hold the interview in Nur's house.

In this chapter, we are again made aware of the authority that Imtiaz Begum has in Nur's house. She makes things happen according to her own wishes in this house, which makes the author term her a 'female mafia.' She is a mafia with no followers, she is a mafia with her own authority. She things she can assert the power over the house as she has a he hold over Nur. Nur, like an obedient child, follows everything that Imtiaz Begum has to say. This brings to us a new facet in the Nur – Imtiaz Begum relationship.

In this chapter, we are also made to acquaint ourselves with the cunning and practical mind of Safia Begum, Nur's first wife. As Safia Begum figures out that Deven is hell bent on taking the interview of Nur, she thinks that this is an easy way for earning some money and therefore she suggests to Deven that she can arrange for the place for the interview outside Nur's house and send Nur there through the back door, if Deven promises her to pay for it.

So on the one side, we see that Imtiaz Begum has censured Nur from reciting poetry in the house, Safia Begum tries to find a way out of that. So if some impediment has come in Deven's way to interview Nur, then there is a way out too – but that way out needs more money which Deven does not have and therefore the inordinate delay in the interview for which the readers are made to wait from the beginning of the novel.

4.3.8. Chapter 8: Critical Comments

Deven's journey in the novel to interview Nur, takes quite a few turns in the novel. The interview is the climax of the novel – so the author Anita Desai postpones it though her artistic bents and twists in the plot of the novel. It is the greatness of a novelist who can make a simple interview prolong so much in the novel so that readers are waiting for the interview to happen and yet it does not happen for many impediments that Deven had to suffer in the process of taking the interview.

In this chapter, Deven is torn between his desire for the interview of Nur and his lack of resources. He has already taken the funds from college to buy the tape recorder; now he thinks he has nowhere to go. So he seems very sad about it and when his wife Sarla teases his about his Delhi sojourns, he feels more disgusted. It is to be kept in mind here that Anita Desai in her novels often deals with "haunted protagonists" who are not at peace with themselves. Deven too is not at peace with himself as he is caught between his

ardent passion and desire to interview Nur and the hard circumstances of his life which does not allow him to do so.

Again, Deven approaches his colleague from Urdu department of the College Mr. Abid Siddiqui for telling him how he has again got stuck with interviewing Nur as he needs more money for the same. Abid Siddiqui being a nice person that he is, tries to help Deven in all possible ways. So he talks to the Registrar of the Lala Ram Lal College using his childhood bonhomie and gets the required amount sanctioned for Deven. One thing has to be kept in mind here that if there are impediments that Deven faces in life so as to interview Nur, then there are ways out of them too. Abid Siddiqui shows him the way twice and gets for him the required funds.

Next issue that Deven has to solve was to get the required leave from the college for which he approaches the Head of the Hindi Department, Mr. Trivedi. Listening to Deven's requests, Trivedi shouts at him asking him to postpone his interviews for two months when the summer vacation begins. But somehow Deven manages to get the leave which is also about his good luck. It is to be remembered here that if Deven has got many impediments in his interviewing of Nur, then he at the same time was lucky as to get the right impetus at the right point of time so that the interview happens.

Next problem for Deven was Sarla. What to do with her for the seven days for which he will be away in Delhi. That problem too is solved very soon as Sarla and their son Manu are being sent to her parents' house. Thus everything is almost resolved in the novel as Deven prepares himself mentally to hold the interview with Nur. The readers are made to wait for this interview from the beginning of the novel and now the times has come that the readers will be told what happens in the interview.

4.3.9. Chapter 9: Critical Comments

At last the chapter has come where the interviewing of Nur by Deven Sharma will be done. The readers have been waiting for this as Deven was eagerly waiting for his passion of interaction with Nur to be fulfilled. Deven approaches Delhi and meets Safia Begum and gives her the money for the interview. Safia Begum asks Deven to go and wait in the designated room that she has arranged for the interview and moreover tells him that Nur will soon join him. Deven goes there with his recording technician Chiku and waits.

Nur Shahjehanabadi arrives in a while; but with him his so called admirers also join in. Nur comes and instead of giving an interview on his poetry, starts talking about and birayani and rum and requests Deven to arrange for the same. Deven gets disgusted by the whole atmosphere and Nur's demands; but still be does his best to arrange the things that Nur has asked for. He calls up Murad for help, which Murad does but with the condition that the money will be deducted from Deven's payment for the feature that he is going to write for the magazine.

With Birayani and rum, the interview process starts, where Nur, more than talking about his poetry starts rambling about other things. The technician Chiku also seems to be problematic as he does not know what to record and what not to. When Nur is rambling on things, Chiku records that and when Nur gets into occasional bouts of poetry, Chiku manages not to record them. Thus Deven has a hard time doing the interview.

The interview carries in for three weeks, instead of a short time that they had planned earlier. In the meantime the tape recorder also does not work anymore leading to more problems for Deven. So instead of recording, Deven starts taking notes of whatever good things Nur Shahjehanabadi has to say about poetry in general and Urdu poetry in particular.

4.3.10. Chapter 10: Critical Comments

When we are reading the last chapter, it was very clear to the readers that the interview was not a success at all. In this chapter, we come to know that whatever is recorded in the tapes of the interview are nothing but confused talks of Nur. Deven feels disgusted with himself as he has nothing productive at the end of three weeks interview with Nur. It seems to him that he has wasted his time and resources and also the resources of the college to which he is answerable. When Deven feels thus disgusted with himself as well as Chiku's efforts at recording, Mr. Jain offers him another help – he offers his another nephew Pintu to assist in editing the tapes so that something concrete comes out of the interview tapes. Deven feels that editing the tapes is the only hope that he has now. Even if he can produce something from the editing of the tapes then also it will be a face saver.

Deven comes back to Mirpore with the tapes. When he reaches college, he sees the deserted look of the college which reminds him how he has been neglecting his regular duty in the college and has been only after his passion for interviewing Nur. Deven takes help from a student named Dhanu for the editing of the tapes and hopes that something substantial comes out of it; but soon he realizes that there is nothing great that has been recorded and that the whole process has nothing but a failure.

With his failures, Deven now approaches to Abid Siddiqui for explaining things to him as he has always helped him in gathering funds for the interview. Listening to the ways in which the tapes are of no use, Abud Siddiqui censors Deven for being so irresponsible. Abid Siddiqui is justified in whatever he says as he has gone out of his way to get the funds sanctioned from College for Deven and all that funds are now a waste. He moreover reminds Deven that he should present whatever he has before the college authority and let the college authority decide about it.

Deven seems very much disturbed by the whole thing. He had the best of intentions. He was thinking to be acting as a preserver of Nur's poetry. He was making all efforts so as to make Nur memorable forever to pay his obeisance to Nur. But what he has achieved is nothing compared to what he has started with. There is a gap between the desire and the outcome. In Deven's case, it is completely true. Deven had hoped that he would be able to do some considerable work with Nur Shahjehanabadi, but circumstances and people he met are so that all his hopes were dashed to the floor.

Deven now receives another letter from his poet favourite poet Nur demanding Rs. Five hundred as a rent for using the premises for the interview. Deven does not know what to do and therefore he approaches Murad for help. Murad censures him badly for the demand of more money. Deven does not know what to do. He comes out of Murad's office and takes a walk in the city of Delhi without an aim instead of going back to Mirpore. Deven reaches a park and from there he sees the reaches a park in Delhi stately building and the eastern walls of the great Friday mosque. In this gaze towards the

mosque, Deven finds an answer to his question about the significance of poetic art in the image of the dome which he perceives against the background of the sky. One can say that the metaphysical anguishes that Deven suffers from in the novel finds a kind of a solution when Deven is able to find an abstract answer to his problems in the poetic art. Art is the solution to life. As an aesthete, Anita Desai seems to providing this message to her readers through this resolution of Deven.

4.3.11. Chapter 11: Critical Comments

The last chapter of the novel is a continuation from the earlier chapter. With the new realization that had dawned upon Deven while looking at the stately mosque in Delhi makes him realize that there is no way that he can hold others guilty for the wrongs that has happened in his life. So we see that his approach to the stony face of his wife Sarla also changes in this chapter. Deven is a changed man. He may go and speak to Mr. Siddiqui in the following terms –

"Siddiqui Sahib, it was not my fault! I worked hard – I prepared for it and I worked – but I was fooled and cheated by everyone – the man who sold me the secondhand equipment, the technician who said he could do the recording but was completely inexperienced, by Murad who said he would pay and did not, by Nur who had never told me he wanted to be paid, and by his wife, wives, all of them –"

But that does not make him a character who is shown to be weak; because by the end of the novel he realizes that it is he himself who needs to own up responsibility for things that has happened in his life. Therefore it is being said at the end of the novel "That friendship still existed, even if there had been a muddle, a misunderstanding. He had imagined he was taking Nur's poetry into safe custody, and not realized that of he was to be custodian of Nur's genius, then Nur would become his custodian and place him in custody too. This alliance could be considered an unendurable burden – or else a shinning honour, Both demanded an equal strength."

He worries about the fact that he has nothing significant to produce before the college authorities; but at this moment he realizes that the true fight in life is to fight with all sincerity. He has done so throughout his life and if things have gone wrong that is not in his hands. So instead of blaming anyone he takes recourse to Nur's poetry which gives him the courage to deal with life's misfortunes.

Apart from Deven's development as a character, we see two other significant facets of the novel in the last chapter – (a) Nur's state of affairs and (b) Imtiaz Begum's letter

Nur Shahjehanabadi is in a deep problem by the end of the novel because he feels that he has sinned much in his life and now his pigeons are dying which was a source of inspiration for him. Therefore he writes to Deven about the death of his pigeons and speaks that when the last of the pigeons will die, he will stop writing altogether. Moreover he asks Deven to arrange for a Mecca pilgrimage for him as he wants to wash away his sins through this pilgrimage. Nur Shahjehanabadi is thus portrayed to be a devastated man at the end of the novel *In Custody* who is not any more in a situation to continue his writing poetry any further and confesses to Deven that some admirer of his needs to take him and his poetry into custody so as to preserve his poems. Nur has

realized the honest efforts of the Deven and is now asking him to keep the tradition of Urdu alive through his efforts.

Imtiaz Begum's letter is an eye opener for Deven. Deven had always thought Imtiaz Begum to be a great impediment to his interviewing Nur and had thought that she is jealous of Nur's popularity. But this letter shows a different aspect of Imtiaz Begum. While Deven was reading the letter, "the elegance and floridity of her Urdu entered Deven's ears like a flourish of trumpets and beat at his temples …" This shows that Imtiaz Begum is not what Deven had thought earlier. His earlier notion was that Imtiaz Begum was a third rate poet, but reading her Urdu in the letter, Deven forms a different opinion about her. Moreover, she may be from the house of prostitutes, but it is not with her dancing skills that Nur was impressed, but with her poetry. According to Imtiaz Begum, Nur was looking for an "intellectual companion" for himself and Imtiaz Begum filled that role well which made Nur marry her.

Imtiaz Begum further states – "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?" This is a strong feminist statement made by Imtiaz Begum. She states that it is only because that she is born as a female that she has to endure such hardships and sufferings in life. It is primarily because women are not heard and are always silenced, mocked and tiraded against that is why Imtiaz Begum even after having the talent to write poems has been neglected. Deven too has neglected her and thought not so highly about her. Imtiaz Begum here challenges Deven to take up her poetry and read them so as to judge her caliber. Two things are to be understood here –

(a) Even Imtiaz Begum has understood that fact that Deven is a true preserver of Urdu language and literature and therefore both Nur and Imtiaz Begum are writing letters to him.
(b) Imtiaz Begum who was thought to be third grade poetess earlier is taken up seriously in this chapter which suggests that she is also the future of Urdu poetry. Urdu poetry is not any more a pejorative of the male bastion of poets; but women are also coming up to make the language keep alive in the hard circumstances.

Thus the concluding chapter is very significant as it makes Deven comes up with the heroic resolution to face the world with all integrity and bravery as well as Imtiaz Begum's confessions to Deven through the letter to have faith in her as a human being and also as a Urdu poetess as well as Nur Shahjehanabadi's appeal to Deven to keep his poetry in his "custody" as well as planning a Mecca Pilgrimage for him.

4.4 SUMMING UP

In Custody is a complex novel dealing with divergent themes and yet the novelist Anita Desai has rendered these themes in a meticulous manner so as to make the readers understand the themes of the novel in a much thorough way. The objective of the unit was to acquaint you with the critical aspects of the novel in terms of the chapters so as to make you have a detailed knowledge of the ways in which the plot of the novel is dileanated to the readers. In the next Unit, we will be getting into detailed character study

so as to fathom the depth of the ways in which characterization is being dealt with by the author.

4.5 SUGGESTED QUESTIONS

1. Write a critical appreciation of the first chapter of the novel to show the way in which Deven is introduced in the novel *In Custody.*
2. Do you think that the evolution of the characters is well presented by Anita Desai as we progress with the novel *In Custody?* Give reasons for your answer.
3. What are your views about the Concluding chapter of *In Custody?* Do you feel that Anita Desai has done justice to the character of Deven in the novel?

4.6 RECOMMENDED READINGS

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Unit 5

CHARACTERIZATION IN *IN CUSTODY*

5.1. INTRODUCTION

Characterization is very significant for any work of art as it is through the characters that the novel/ play tries to present the essence of what the playwright or the novelist wants to say to the audience/ readers. Some of the characters of a work of art become so memorable that they become a part and parcel of our consciousness. Anita Desai in the novel *In Custody* is also able to create such memorable characters who through their words and actions are able to make a permanent mark in our minds. Some of these significant characters are discussed in this Unit so as to familiarize you with the ways in which these characters are essential to the development of the plot of *In Custody.*

5.2 LEARNING OBJECTIVE

In this Unit, we will learn about

- The major and minor charaters of Anita Desai's novel *In Custody.*

5.3. THE CHARACTER OF DEVEN

> "Every effort he had made had ended in defeat; most of the poems he had written and sent to Murad had been rejected, his monograph never published; his wife and son eyes him with blatant disappointment; not had he won the regard of his colleagues and students. … He felt it inside him like an empty hole … Even his attempt to fill it with a genuine and heartfelt homage to a true poet … had been defeated by all the obstacles … It was one more blow, and perhaps the bitterest of all."

Perhaps, this passage from Anita Desai's *In Custody* sums up the character of Deven Sharma. He seems to be a character who has no potentialities for being a heroic figure, but by turn of fate he seems to getting things in his life which makes him unique in the novel. It is to be remembered here that as against the classical heroes whom we measure in terms of their courage and valor, the modern day heroes are all defeated people who try hard to sustain themselves amidst the odd world in which they are thrust into. Deven is a Hindi Lecturer in Lala Ram Lal College in Mirpore who aims at interviewing the famous Urdu poet Nur in New Delhi. The plot of the novel *In Custody* revolves around the relationship that Deven and Nur forms in the process of by which Deven after much difficulty is able to take the interview of Nur. The novel traces Deven's angsts and anguishes as he strives hard for the interview of his favourite poet. In that sense, the main protagonist of the novel is Deven.

5.3.1. Deven – The Hero without Heroism

Modern man is not a hero in the classical sense of the term. Modern heroes do not fight with their swords and emerge victorious. Modern heroes are a bundle of fragmented selves trying to fight a battle with themselves – with the world that they are living in and

at the same time with the inherent dichotomies that the world offers to them. Deven Sharma is no different. He is not a hero in the classical sense of the term – he is the main protagonist of *In Custody*. He is someone who is trying his best to cope up with the challenges that are heaped on him by the society as well as by himself. That he can face those challenges, even though they do not apparently seem so brave, makes him a hero, though he does not have any heroism. He is a man who is lost in life – he is fighting for a lost cause – for the famous debauched Urdu poet Nur – and it is obvious therefore that he is not going to gain any victory. Moreover, he will be submerged into a pathetic and tragic life as the society around him will not let him do what his heart desires. He loves Urdu language and poetry – but his love for it makes him suffer more and more in manifold ways. It is in his suffering – in his capacity to forbear those sufferings that Deven is a hero.

Moreover, one can say that with no one in this world he shares a relationship which can provide him with some respite. He is a friend of Murad who uses him to manifest his own motives. He has a wife Sarla with whom he does not have a very cordial relationship. He has his devotion for the poet Nur, who is living a debauched life amidst the louts and two cunning wives and therefore cannot forge a proper relationship of the devotee and the devoted. Thus Deven suffers from a sense of deep alienation – an alienation which seems to be in verge of taking him down to the abyss. It is this pathetic portrayal of Deven by Anita Desai which makes us look at his character with much sympathy.

5.3.2. Deven as Preserver of Urdu Language and Art

If one the one hand, there is this notion that Urdu is going to be a dead language because of its lost prestige and because of it being not valued even by its own speech community – the Muslims; there is another aspect which is shown as far as Urdu language is concerned – it is the efforts of preservation of the Urdu language. Murad Beg, though a manipulator and a person with ulterior motives in the novel, has taken up the mantle of saving the Urdu language from disgraceful death by championing its traditions through his magazine *Awaaz.* Murad may be a person who has some other motif behind his efforts of preservation of Urdu language through his magazines, but he is the one who takes the effort in the beginning of the novel to travel from Delhi to Mirpore to request Deven to interview the famous Urdu poet Nur so that the magazine gets some glory and the love for the Urdu poetry is revived.

It is Murad's request which makes Deven come forward to interview Nur so as to preserve some aspects of Urdu poetry which he loves from the bottom of his heart. Deven is actually presented in the novel by Anita Desai as the true preserver of Urdu language and Art. It is his love for Urdu language and literature which makes his undertakes the painful journey of coming to Delhi from Mirpore to meet the poet Nur and interview him even though he faces many a difficulties. When one looks at this aspect of the novel, it seems that Anita Desai is presenting to the audience the view that even though Urdu language is facing the danger of extinction, yet it is because of the people like Deven that probably the Language and its art will not be lost after all. Probably, people live Deven will be able to carry forward their love for Urdu language in such a manner so as to somehow carry on with the traditions of Urdu language. So even though the novel ends in

a hopeless situation for Deven, the main character of the novel, the fate of Urdu does not seem as bleak as efforts such as that of Deven would definitely reap results. ….

5.3.3. Deven's Relationship with Sarla

Deven and Sarla share the relationship of husband and wife in the novel *In Custody;* but in real terms they both behave to each other as if they are strangers. They probably feel this way because they both know that they are victims of some kind or the other. Anita Desai in the novel writes -- "Although each understood the secret about the other, it did not bring about any closeness of spirit, any comradeship, because they also sensed that two victims ought to avoid each other, not yoke together their joint disappointments. A victim does not look to help from another victim; he looks for a redeemer. At last Deven had his poetry; she had nothing, and so there was an added accusation and bitterness in her look." This passage seems to be the central statement in understanding Deven – Sarla relationship in the novel as both of them are victims of their circumstances and in no way can help each other get over their anguishes. Throughout the novel, there is no moment that is being portrayed where Deven and Sarla are shown to be close to each other; they live together as they are married. Sarla does not understand the poetic concerns of Deven and cares least about his trips to Delhi; whereas Deven is fearful that Sarla with her tantrums will make the family atmosphere such which can become detrimental for the house. In other words, it can be said that Deven and Sarla are individuals who are very unlike each other and therefore at no point of time they can aspire for any kind of emotional or intellectual bonding.

5.3.4. Deven's relationship with Nur

Nur Shahjehanabadi is a famous Urdu poet in the novel *In Custody* who is an old man surrounded by fools who claim themselves to be his admirers. These so called admirers eat and drink with Nur which seems to be too lowly when Deven meets Nur for the first time. Seeing his poet living such a debauched life, Deven feels disturbed and feels that there is no way that he will be able to interview Nur. But things are written otherwise for him. Even though Nur despises Deven in their first meeting, but soon Deven gets a letter from Nur inviting him to be his secretary. Deven does not want to be a secretary to the poet as he cannot leave his job as a lecturer to become so. Deven pursues the poet to give an interview, but to no avail till Safia Begum comes to his help in exchange of money. Though Deven is able to record his interview (which is a mix of sudden bouts of poetic recitals and more of talks of Biriyani and Rum), but the tapes were not up to the mark. Deven is not able to get anything out of those tapes while his college authorities have paid for the tapes and also for the money to give to Safia Begum for the interview. Deven is in a fix as he does not know what to show to the college authorities, but the night before he is supposed to meet the college authorities, it is Nur's poetry which saves him from the existential anguish. It can be said that Nur and Deven shared a kind of spiritual relationship where Deven worships Nur for his celestial poetry and it is this poetry which eventually saves Deven.

5.3.5. Deven's relationship with Murad

Murad Beg is a college friend of Deven Sharma who comes from a well off family than that of Deven. So when Murad meets Deven in the first chapter of the novel he mocks

him by saying that Deven has still remained a 'two cigarette man' and cannot afford to buy a whole packet of cigarettes. This shows that though Deven and Murad are friends, still there lies a vast gap among them, the gap which will never be filled as Murad will always remain a money-minded shrewd manipulator and Deven will always remain a victim. During his college days, Murad took notes and help from Deven, but scored better than Deven in exams. In the novel, we see that Murad takes out an Urdu magazine called *Awaaz* for which Deven has contributed earlier, but Murad hasn't paid Deven for those. In the first chapter, Murad has again come to Mirpore to coax and cajole Deven to go to Old Delhi and meet the famous Urdu poet Nur Shahjehanabadi and interview him so that a feature can be brought out on the next edition of *Awaaz* which focuses on Urdu poetry.

Murad is able to fill Deven's heart with a desire for achieving something which Deven would have never dared to do by himself. Even though it is because of Murad that Deven's meeting and consequent relationship with Nur becomes possible in the novel, yet we see that Murad makes the most benefit out of the whole episode. Murad makes secret pact with Mr. Jain to fool Deven into buying a second hand tape recorder and by providing assistants like Chintu and Pintu so that he can make money out of it. Murad refuses to pay for the food and drinks when Nur asks for it during the interview and at last when he agrees to give it, he says that he will deduct it from Deven's fee for the interview. At the end of the novel, when Deven goes to him with the request to give money so as to pay the bills of rent where Nur's interview has been performed; Murad tirades Deven once again and tells him not to pester him.

Thus, even though it is Murad who instigates Deven to take Nur's interview to write a feature on him, yet throughout the novel it is Murad who makes Deven go through many humiliations and anguishes. Deven is a very straight forward person and does not know how to deal with manipulative people and his relationship with Murad is the best example of that.

5.3.6. Deven's relationship with Siddiqui

Abid Siddiqui is the Head of the Urdu Department of Lala Ram Lal College, Mirpore where Deven teaches Hindi. Abid Siddiqui is descendant of the Nawab who came from Delhi and lives in a dilapidated mansion alone. In the novel, Siddiqui seems to be too benevolent towards Deven and he is the only one who helps out Deven with all the required things so that he can interview the poet Nur Shahjehanabadi. First he gets the grant from college so that Deven can buy a tape recorder to record Nur's interviews. When Deven goes to him second time for more money from College so that he can fulfill the financial demands of Safia Begum (Nur's first wife), Siddiqui goes out of the way to have a private chat with the Registrar of the College so that grant for Deven's needs are achieved. Thus throughout the novel, we see that Abid Siddiqui is helpful to Deven in all possible ways. In the novel, as in the real world, there are few characters who are not scheming and money minded and at the same time thinks of others' good; Abid Siddiqui is one of them and it is because of Abid Siddiqui that Deven is able to interview Nur. So, on the one hand, if Deven meets people like Murad or Mr. Jain or Safia Begum who are just interested in money, then there are characters like Abid Siddiqui who goes out of the way to help Deven.

5.3.7. Deven anguishes

Deven is not a very strong character which is evident from the beginning of the novel when we see him in the classroom addressing students. Deven cannot manage his classes very well and therefore shudders to go into the classroom. Throughout the novel he suffers from much anguish which presents to the readers the vulnerabilities of Deven. He is vulnerable while dealing with the characters such as Murad, Mr. Jain, Imtiaz begum, Safia Begum and others.

Deven is passionate about Urdu poetry and Nur, so when he gets a chance to interview Nur, he wanted to make the most of it as it would provide him with some pleasure. But one after another, there comes impediments to his interviewing Nur and consequently he suffers from much anguish. At the end of the novel, we again see Deven with his anguishes as he has used the funds that he has received from the college to take Nur's interview, but could not translate these interviews into recorded tapes as he had planned earlier. He has to present before the college authority the recorder tapes of Nur, but he does not have anything concrete in hand and therefore he suffers from anguishes; but it is at these moments that Nur's poetry comes as a savior for him from his existential crisis.

5.3.8. Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that the character of Deven Sharma has been sketched by Anita Desai with utmost care to provide us a glimpse of a person who is mediocre in every sense of the term; but has extraordinary zeal for Urdu language and poetry. Though, being a lecturer of Hindi in a small town, his love for Urdu poetry, especially that of Nur, pulls him to Delhi a number of times to interview his favourite poet which goes wrong in multifarious ways. Even though, he is a failure in terms of taking the interview, but at the end of the novel he is an enriched man who has had some fruitful poetical encounters with Nur Shahjehanabadi which he will probably value throughout his life. The night before he has to appear before the college authorities with his tapes for the interview, the way he goes through existential crisis and is saved by remembrance of Nur's poetry shows that he may be a man who is defeated by the cruel money-minded world, but his spirit will never be defeated and that he is to shine amidst all adversities.

5.4. CHARACTER OF NUR

Nur Shahjehanabadi is the famous Urdu poet in the novel *In Custody*. Deven Sharma, the college lecturer from Mirpore comes to interview the poet Nur to Old Delhi so as to do a feature on him in Murad's Urdu Magazine *Awaaz*. The novel deals with the way in which Deven faces many difficulties and hardships in taking the interview and how that leads to an existential crisis in his life. When we meet Nur in the novel, he is an old man who is very temperamental and lives a decadent life amidst his so called admirers who eat and drink and make merry. Nur second wife censures Deven by saying – "You have reduced him to that, making him eat and drink like some animal, like a pig." This shows how the great poet has degenerated with his age and that he is not able to produce anything worthwhile. When Murad speaks to Deven in Chapter One about interviewing him, he at the same time says – "Poor man, he is very old and ill – he has written nothing new. He is finished." In the novel, Deven tries his best to bring alive the best that Nur represents but

he fails miserably not only on account of Nur's decadent lifestyle, but also because of many other factors, including himself.

5.4.1. Nur's Appearance

When Deven meets him for the first time, we see that he is shocked to meet his favourite poet in such a state where he is amidst his admirers drinking and making merry and not doing anything which is usually thought to be just for a great poet like Nur. Regarding his appearance, the novelist speaks –

"In the midst of all the shadows, the poet's figure was in startling contrast, being entirely dressed in white. His white beard was splayed across his chest and his long white fingers clasped across it. He did not move and appeared to be a marble form. His body had the density, the compactness of stone. It was large and heavy not on account of weight, but on account of age and experience. The emptying out and wasting of age had not yet begun its process. He was still at a moment of completion, quite whole. This gave him the power and the dignity to be able to say to the intruding stranger in a murmur , "who gave you permission to disturb me."

The poet Nur's figure comes out to be a stark contrast in the environment that he is living in because he is poetry at his best, living in the prosaic world – he is the light midst the dark dingy lanes as well as room in Chadni Chowk. This contrast is highlighted often in the novel by Desai to represent the ways in which Nur's life is itself a contrapuntal representation of what the state of the Urdu language and poetry is – whereas it had a royal assemblage at one point of time, but it is reduced to nothing at the present times when even most of the Muslim population even do not use Urdu anymore.

5.4.2. Nur – The Epitome of Urdu Poetry

Nur can be said to be presented in the novel as the epitome of Urdu poetry. In the beginning of the novel, when Deven and Murad discusses the fact that Murad is planning to take out the next issue of his magazine *Awaaz* on Urdu poetry, they come to the view that without some feature on Nur Shahjehanabadi, the issue will not achieve completeness. This shows the position Nur has in Urdu poetry which makes people believe that his poetry is central to Urdu Poetry's existence. Deven even mentions that he should have got the Nobel Prize for his poetry. Throughout the novel, we see him occasionally bursting into his poetic bouts when he can have a glimpse of the poet, though otherwise he leads a life which seems to be too degenerated.

5.4.3. Nur – The Poet who has lost it

Murad Beg speaks about Nur in the beginning of the novel in such terms – "Poor man, he is very old and ill – he has written nothing new. He is finished." Murad probably is right to some extent that the golden days of Nur's poetry is over and that he is an old man now living a degenerated life and produces nothing great any more. But one needs to understand that a poet's productive years are also limited and a poet is first of all a human being with his needs and wants, his desires, his lacunae, his health and age, his death and disease. When Anita Desai is portraying the character of Nur, she is not merely presenting him as a famous poet, but also as a human being who has gone awry with time as times has changed. Once Urdu used to have a commanding position in the language

scenario in India and from there because of manifold reasons, Urdu language and poet has lost that glory leading to situation when the poet Nur feels that it is a dead language. So when a language itself is in a decadent state, one can't expect its practitioners to be living a glorifying life. In the novel, we see that Deven can only practice Urdu poetry as a hobby and cannot take it up as a profession. Similarly, Nur's present situation is also because the general decadence that the Urdu language has suffered in India.

5.4.4. Nur's relationship with Deven

When Deven comes to meet Nur for the first time, the poet censures him for manifold reasons – (i) for disturbing his afternoon nap, (ii) for being a Hindi teacher in a college when he is thinking of keeping the tradition of Urdu poetry alive, etc. Though, initially Nur reprimands Deven, but soon Deven gets a letter from Nur asking him to be his Secretary – which Deven cannot take up leaving his secure job as a lecturer in Lala Ram Lal College in Mirpore. Thus the relationship between Nur and Deven is shown to be a balanced one – where each one needs the other; but cannot serve the other's purpose as they themselves are tied to their contexts in such a way that they cannot but fly, though Deven worships Nur, the poet. Very soon, Nur realizes Deven's earnestness in interviewing him as well as his intentions of keeping the Urdu tradition alive and agrees to give an interview to Deven (with the help of Safia Begum) but as usual with the fake admirers all around him – willing to enjoy with Biriyani and Rum, and the incompetence of Chiku, the recording assistant, Deven's efforts comes to a sad end when the recorded tapes are nothing but ramblings of the poet mostly about food and nothing else. Even though the interview fails, but it was a learning experience for Deven to know the poet closely, to understand the significance of Urdu poetry.

5.4.5. Nur's relationship with his two Wives

Nur has two lives – Safia Begum and Imtiaz Begum. Whereas Safia Begum is a money minded person who sees Deven's intention of taking Nur's interview as an excellent opportunity to earn some money. So she arranges for Deven a place outside her home where Deven can interview the poet peacefully. As against Safia Begum, Imtiaz Begum has a literary taste and a poetic sensibility which finds manifestation when she takes over Nur's admirers with her poetry on the day of her birthday. She equally wants to be famous as that of Nur and therefore urges Deven to look at her poetry too. Though, both of them are fixed in their own worlds – they care for Nur which often makes them censure Nur's admirers. We see Imtiaz Begum saying to the poet – "You have reduced him to that, making him eat and drink like some animal, like a pig." This shows that Imtiaz begum does not want Nur to live in such a pathetic condition and moreover wants him to carry on producing great poetry in not for anything else but for the sake of art.

5.4.6. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that Nur is an epitome of Urdu poetry – a legacy which is lost because of the odd circumstances in which Urdu language is caught into because of the insistence of the modern times on Hindi and English languages. Salman Rushdie in an Introduction to the novel *In Custody* writes -- "The slow death of my mother tongue, Urdu, is much further advanced than it was twenty three years ago, and much that was beautiful in the culture of old Delhi has slipped away forever." It is the slow death of

Urdu language which has also led to the situation where its practitioners also had been suffering and Nur is an excellent example of that.

5.5. CHARACTER OF MURAD

Murad Beg is a college-friend of Deven Sharma who seems to be a very scheming, money-minded man and used Deven for his own good. The novel *In Custody* portrays Murad as a very mean person who does not sympathize with the plight neither of Deven, nor of Nur. Though he claims himself to be a preserver of Urdu culture and poetry through his magazine *Awaaz,* but in reality he is merely a petty business man trying his best to use Urdu as a means to earn his money.

5.5.1. Murad as Deven's Friend

We are introduced to the character of Murad in the novel as a friend of Nur who has travelled from Delhi to Mirpore to meet Deven and to give him the task of interviewing the famous poet Nur so that a feature can come up in the forthcoming edition of his magazine *Awaaz.* Apparently, this seems to be a great idea from the point of view of art and aesthetics, but Murad's intention is not art, but money.

5.5.2 Murad Takes advantage of Deven

From his college days, Murad has been a person who has taken advantage of Deven and has used Deven to serve his own purposes. "Murad had been the spoilt rich boy with money in his pocket for cinema shows and cigarettes and Deven the poor widow's son who could be bribed and bought to do anything for him." Even Murad got notes and other academic help from Deven and yet is able to score higher than Deven. This only shows that Murad is a person who is very scheming and knows how to use people for his own advantage.

5.5.3. Murad Mocking Deven

In the beginning of the novel, when Murad visits Mirpore to meet Deven, he starts his conversation by mocking Deven in the following terms -- "A full-fledged lecturer in a college, an important citizen of Mirpore, and still can't afford a whole packet of cigarettes? You seem to be where you were in your college days." This mocking tone carries on throughout the novel when Murad always sees Deven as a fool who does not know how to use his finances and his life to get his own ends. It is Murad who pushes Deven into interviewing Nur knowing very well that he is going to have a hard time in doing so.

Instead of facilitating Deven's interviewing of Nur, he takes the advantage of the situation to get things for himself. Even though, he has asked Deven to interview Nur, he does not spend a penny for the same. Deven has to arrange the funds from his college with the help of Abid Siddiqui to do the interview with Nur whereas Murad should have funded it if he wanted Nur's interview or a feature on him in his upcoming edition of his magazine *Awaaz.* Moreover, when Deven gets the money from college to buy the tape recorder, Murad makes an arrangement with Mr. Jain to make him buy a second hand tape recorder to have his own profits. In other words, it can be said that Deven is completely being fooled by Murad.

5.5.4. Murad – Shows False Sympathy

When Deven talks about how he is not being paid for the pieces that he has written for Murad's magazine earlier, Deven starts talking about how he himself is having a great financial difficulty as a publisher to carry on publishing *Awaaz.* Moreover, he shows his sympathy for Deven in particular and the intellectuals in general by speaking in the following terms –

"It is too bad how badly our lecturers are paid. How can the intellectuals of this country do any worthwhile work if no one shows them any respect or counter balance them for all the suffering they have to undergo for the sake of art."

One has to remember here that what Murad is saying is absolutely true about the intellectuals in India and the way they are paid very low; but coming it from Murad makes it clear that he is just showing false sympathy to Deven so that he can fulfill his own objective.

5.5.5. Murad – A Self Proclaimed Preserver of Urdu

Murad in the novel presents himself to be a character who claims to Deven and to the world that he is the one who is trying to preserve Urdu language and poetry by publishing the magazine *Awaaz* – "Now I am planning special issue on Urdu poetry. Someone has to keep alive the glorious tradition of Urdu literature.". But in reality, what Murad Beg does is to make money by printing the magazine; he does not have love for the language. Nowhere in the novel, he shows any respect for Nur Shahjehanabadi like the way Deven does. He is well known to Nur and Nur comments on him in the following terms –

Nur, the experienced man and the poet justly comments on Murad – he is actually a circus clown – a clown who thinks too big of himself but in reality is nothing but a cheap scheming person who knows how to take advantage of honest and hardworking people like Deven.

5.5.6. Conclusion

When at the end of the novel, Deven goes to Murad to get the help so as to pay the bills of Safia Begum, the way Murad treats him shows the absolute contemptuous character that he is – he is not concerned about anything or anyone else but for himself. It is his shrewdness which shows itself from the very beginning of the novel till the end making him a very flat character.

5.6. CHARACTER OF SARLA

Sarla is introduced in the novel as the wife of Deven Sharma who teaches Hindi in a college named Lala Ram Lal College in Mirpore. Deven and Sarla do not have a very harmonious relationship as presented in the novel which talks a great about the man-woman relationship in the novel. Anita Desai through the character of Sarla is probably commenting on the average Indian woman who finds themselves trapped in marriage in which they have little say and from which they have no way out.

5.6.1. Deven- Sarla Relationship

Deven and Sarla share the relationship of husband and wife in the novel *In Custody;* but in real terms they both behave to each other as if they are strangers. They probably feel this way because they both know that they are victims of some kind or the other. Anita Desai in the novel writes -- "Although each understood the secret about the other, it did not bring about any closeness of spirit, any comradeship, because they also sensed that two victims ought to avoid each other, not yoke together their joint disappointments. A victim does not look to help from another victim; he looks for a redeemer. At last Deven had his poetry; she had nothing, and so there was an added accusation and bitterness in her look." This passage seems to be the central statement in understanding Deven – Sarla relationship in the novel.

5.6.2. Why Sarla a Victim?

Sarla had very high aspirations from life – as most people have. All of us feel that life should provide us with all comforts. She too desired for things in her life -- "So she had dared to aspire towards a telephone, a refrigerator, even a car." There is nothing wrong with such aspirations. When people all around have such material comforts in life then it is natural that Sarla too would want them in her life. But Deven Sharma, the temporary teacher of a private college in a small town could not afford all these. Anita Desai writes – "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 and permanent as surgical scars."

5.6.3. Sarla – "naturally embittered":

Sarla, as the above quote from the novel presents is "naturally embittered" as all her hopes has been dashed down and that she knows that she is never be able to realize those dreams in her life. She knows very well that she is doomed in this marriage with Deven and she has no way out. She has accepted her life as it is, but this acceptance is not without any condition – it has led her to be very bitter about life. And this bitterness has affected their relationship. So we see that when Deven comes back home after his first encounter with Nur at the early hours of morning, he does not go home directly but instead prefers to go to college where he thinks he will refresh himself -- "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."

When Deven goes to home later in the day, Sarla is gossiping with her neighbour and when Deven enters home, Sarla gives a look as if he is a stranger. Anita Desai writes -- "As he pushed open the gate with its familiar rusty sound of protest, both women raised their dropping heads and stared at him as if he were a stranger, an interloper. Then Sarla twitched a fold of her sari over her head. She didn't normally cover her head when he appeared; it was evident that she was preparing a scene. He tried to smile, then lifted his hand to cover his mouth because he felt he shouldn't." This shows that Sarla is not the type of female who will accept everything that he husband does. She knows how to protest and it is because of this that Deven finds ways not to encounter her so as to carry on with marital peace.

5.6.4. Conclusion: Sarla – "For the wife of a poet she seemed too prosaic."

In the course of the novel Anita Desai also comments about Sarla that "For the wife of a poet, she seemed too prosaic." But her being prosaic is not her fault. She is prosaic by nature where as Deven is in love of poetry. Deven has his poetry with which he can keep himself engaged; but Sarla has nothing except for her son Manu. She seems to be a victim of circumstances and in her victimization there is no one's fault but that of the society which makes people get married without knowing each other and consequently suffer throughout their lives.

5.7. CHARACTER OF IMTIAZ BEGUM

Imtiaz Begum is the second wife of Nur Shahjehanabadi, the famous Urdu poet in Anita Desai's novel *In Custody*. She seems to be too fascinated by the poet Nur and also presented in the novel to be jealous of his poetic achievements as she herself strives to be a poetess. She is being presented in the novel to be a "female mafia" who is a terror to the supposed admirers of Nur and often she even vexes Nur for his excesses. In other terms we can say that she is "the new woman" in the novel which Anita Desai paints with much concern to show how women are taking up the arenas which was traditionally thought to be that of males such as poetry.

Imtiaz Begum's Fascination for Nur:

Imtiaz Begum is fascinated by the world of Nur's poetry to such an extent that she marries him knowing full well that Nur has a wife. She is not from well off background – she was the quarters where dancing and singing is the norm of the night. But within that world of muddy waters, she is like a lotus who has shined so brightly that Nur could not but not only notice her beauty and talent; but at the same time fascinated to such an extent so as to marry her. As she herself has a poetic bent of mind and often endorses herself in poetic creations therefore she is portrayed in the novel to be having an advantage over Nur's first wife, Safia Begum.

5.7.1 Imtiaz Begum's Authority

In the house of Nur Shahjehanabadi, it is Imtiaz Begum who is dreaded by everyone for her authority. She wants to keep a strict control of things. She is the one who vexes the supposed admirers of Nur by saying that they are corrupting the poet and not letting him concentrate on his poetry. We see Imtiaz Begum saying to Nur's admirers – "You have reduced him to that, making him eat and drink like some animal, like a pig." This shows that Imtiaz begum does not want Nur to live in such a pathetic condition where he is surrounded by his admirers who eat and make merry; and moreover wants him to carry on producing great poetry in not for anything else but for the sake of art. Here we see that Imtiaz Begum is very concerned about Nur, his poetry and also about his health. He tirades Nur throughout the novel to make him concentrate on his own self and not live so much in the world and company of his admirers.

Therefore when Deven comes to take Nur's Interview, Imtiaz Begum seems to be the biggest impediment for the interview as she does not allow Deven to take the interview in the poet's house. Ultimately, Deven is forced to take the interview outside Nur's house.

5.7.2. Imtiaz Begum – An aspiring Poetess

As already mentioned, Imtiaz Begum is an aspiring poetess who is trying to curve a niche in the world of poetry, but poetry being a male bastion, it is very difficult for her to prove herself in that world. Probably she has married Nur with the intention that she will get a chance to remain close to Nur and learn some tricks of producing great poetry. She seems to be having a very practical bent of mind and decides things which would result in bringing and getting things for herself.

So on her birthday celebrations, we see that she has not only performing but also has taken away Nur's audience from him when the great poet is sitting in one corner of the room in darkness. Safia Begum tells her "You have taken his name, and his reputation and today even his admirers." This is a serious charge that is being laid on her—but this charge has some truth in it as she was always aspiring for some attention as a poet. She got the chance on her Birthday to do so and therefore did so without any hesitation.

5.7.3. Imtiaz Begum – Jealous of Nur.

The way Imtiaz Begum takes away Nur's admirers on her Birthday makes many think that she is very jealous of Nur's popularity as a poet. Moreover, these scholars also see that Imtiaz Begum's becoming an impediment to Deven taking Nur's interview also as her jealousy where she does not allow the interview to happen as that would bring him some fame. But when this kind of a reading is done of Imtiaz Begum, it defeats the purpose with which the character was created by Anita Desai. Anita Desai is trying to portray a loving wife and an aspiring poetess in the character of Imtiaz Begum. Her taking away of Nur's admirers was nothing but an attempt on her part to get some attention for herself where she has no other things in her mind. Even being an impediment to Deven's interview is primarily because she wants the poet to be left alone to himself so that he can concentrate on his poetry.

5.7.4. Imtiaz Begum – the New Woman

We can probably come to the conclusion that Imtiaz Begum is the image of the new woman that Anita Desai is painting in the novel *In Custody.* She is bold and authoritative – she wants to take control of things and wants to prosper as a poetess. She does not want to live a life in the darkness and in the world of infamy; but has every aspiration to come forward and let the world know about herself. In these terms, when we see that character of Imtiaz Begum she seems to be a new kind of woman is willing to take charge of life and live life according to her own terms.

5.8. MINOR CHARACTERS

5.8.1. Safia Begum

Safia Begum is the first wife of Nur Shahjehanabadi, the famous Urdu poet in the novel *In Custody* by Anita Desai. She is of practical bent of mind and is often seen to be very money-minded. When she sees Deven practically a failure to get an interview of Nur, she thinks that 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 that without money she will not allow Nur to go out of the house.

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. Here too Safia Begum shows her money-mindedness as she tries to take out as much money as possible from Deven. It is to be reminded that poets and their passion for art often makes them forget about the material needs. To counter that aspect of Nur's life, probably Safia Begum has become money-minded as she had to run a family.

5.8.2. Abid Siddiqui

Abid Siddiqui is another significant minor character in the novel *In Custody*. He is the Head of Department of Urdu in Lal Ram Lal College, Mirpore and helps Deven immensely in accomplishing his interview with Nur. When Deven comes to him with the hopeless tale of how he is in a fix as he has no money/ funds to take the interview of Nur Shahjehanabadi (the famous Urdu poet), Abid Siddiqui goes out of the way to help him get the funds from the college – not once, but twice. First, he arranges the funds for Deven to buy the tape recorder to record the interview and secondly, when he again goes out of the way to please the Registrar of the College to arrange the funds so that Deven can pay Nur's wife Safia Begum the money to hold the interview. Thus, he seems to be the only helpful character in the novel who goes out of his way to help Deven.

Abid Siddiqui, apart from being the lecturer of Lala Ram Lal College, is also the descendant of the family of the Nawab of Mirpore and therefore lives in a great palatial house which is not in a bad shape. He is unmarried and therefore does not have any liability and lives life to the fullest. Regarding his physical appearance and his stature, Anita Desai writes in the novel –

"Fatefully, it was the head of the Urdu Department, Abid Siddiqui who, in keeping with the size and stature of his department, was a small man, whose youthful face was prematurely topped with a plume of white hair as if to signify to signify the doomed nature of his discipline. It was perhaps unusual to find a private college as small as Lala Ram Lal's offering a language such as Urdu that was nearly extinct, but it happened that Lala Ram Lal's descendants had not inherited quite a big fortune as to endow the entire college on their own, and had to accept a very large donation from the descendants of the very nawab who had fled Delhi in the aftermath of the 1857 mutiny and built the mosque as well as some of the largest villas in Mirpore …"

By the end of the novel, we see that Abid Siddiqui is a bit concerned and sad about the fact that Deven hasn't been able to use the funds released from the college properly so as to interview Nur. He asks Deven that he should follow the course of the presenting himself before the college authority and explaining to them what the tapes are all about and how he has managed recording Nur's interview of whatever little he has achieved.

In short, it can be said that Abid Siddiqui is a man of very helpful nature and lives a life which is hedonistic to some extent as he wants to enjoy life to the fullest. Yet, he is a

concerned individual who feels and thinks for Deven's good and does his best to help him out in every way possible.

5.8.3. Mr. Trivedi:

Mr. Trivedi is a minor character in the novel *In Custody*. He is the head of the Department of Hindi of Lala Ram Lal College, Mirpore where Deven teaches as a temporary lecturer. Deven often has to bear the brunts of the temper tantrums of Mr. Trivedi as Trivedi looks for occasions to show his superiority to Deven. Probably, Mr. Trivedi's character is drawn by Anita Desai as a contrast to Abid Siddiqui who goes out of the way to help Deven complete his interview with Nur by getting him monetary grants from the college. As against that when Deven approaches Mr. Trivedi for sanctioning a leave for seven days so that he can interview Deven, Trivedi asks him to postpone the interview till summer vacation.

Mr. Trivedi is the Head of the Hindi Department, but he has no love for its literature and language. He is a person who just wants to show his superiority as he himself suffers from a complex. So whenever he gets a chance, he needs to assert himself and what better prospect of asserting than a temporary lecturer who is always in the fear of losing job.

5.8.4. Mr. Jain:

Mr. Jain is the person who sells the tape recorder to Deven with which he is to record the interviews of Nur Shahjehanabadi. He along with Murad makes a fool of Deven by selling him a second hand tape recorder which does not work properly. As Deven has no knowledge of electronics, therefore he falls into the trap of Mr. Jain and Murad, both of whom are very manipulative and money-minded men.

When Mr. Jain figures out that Deven cannot handle a tape recorder, he provides his nephew, Chiku to assist Deven in recording the interview. Here again, Mr. Jain makes a fool of Deven, because Chiku is no expert in recording. Later, he provides his other nephew Pintu to Deven to edit the recorded tapes. Throughout the interaction between Mr. Jain and Deven, Mr. Jain has tried to take advantage of Deven's innocence and lack of knowledge of electronics to make fool of him and earn as much money as possible.

Mr. Jain seems to be character who is similar to that of Murad – money-minded and scheming – trying his best to make more and more money out of Deven. Through characters like Mr. Jain and Murad, Anita Desai is making a statement on the general state of affairs of people in the big cities where people are there to fool each other in whatever ways possible. If one is not practical and street smart, as Deven is not; then there are chances that he will be fooled at every step.

These characters – of Murad and Mr. Jain – can be compared and studied against the character of Abid Siddiqui who goes out of his way to help Deven. Whereas in Abid Siddiqui certain aspects of nobility is apparent, in the characters of Murad and Mr. Jain we see nothing but meanness and selfishness.

5.8.5. Admirers of Nur

Admirers of the famous Urdu poet Nur Shahjehanabadi are minor characters in the novel, though they serve a very significant function in the novel. They assemble at the feet of

Nur so that they can enjoy their lives with food and drinks at the expense of the poet. They are not really concerned about the poet, not his poetry. It is a sad state of affairs that is being portrayed by Anita Desai of Urdu language and literature, where the custodians of it are in the hands of people like Nur's admirers who are nothing but lumpens. Therefore, Nur's second wife tirades the poet as well as he admirers saying that "You have reduced him to that, making him eat and drink like some animal, like a pig." The admirers of Nur are still people who stick around with Nur as they know being with Nur means enjoyment unlimited in terms of food and drinks.

Moreover, these admirers of Nur become one of the major impediments in Deven's taking the interview of Nur. Early in the novel, whenever, Deven tries to talk to Nur about the interview, the admirers of Nur comes up with something of the other so as to deviate Nur from Deven's concern and while taking the interview too Nur's admirers are there with him constantly talking and bickering about things which does not concern the interview.

Also, when one looks at Nur's supposed admirers one can understand the significance of Deven as an admirer. Deven is a true admirer of Nur which is established in the novel when he compare and contrast him with the other admirers. Deven has gone to Nur, with no interest of his own. His prime concern for interacting with Nur is to preserve Urdu language and literature and his genuine concern for Nur's poetry. Probably Anita Desai to present this aspect of Deven's character gives so much space to Nur's other admirers.

5.8.6. Chiku and Pintu

Chiku and Pintu are two very minor characters in the novel who help Deven in the recording of the interview of Nur and in editing the tapes respectively. They do not have much role in the novel apart from the fact that both of them are incompetent fools who do not have much knowledge of electronics. Both of them are nephews of Mr. Jain and Mr. Jain has appointed them to help Deven. It is primarily because of them that the interview tapes are of no consequence and Deven has nothing to produce in front of his College authority which deeply concerns him at the end of the novel.

5.9. SUMMING UP

The Unit has introduced you to the major and minor characters of the novel *In Custody.* Character study is significant to understand the ways in which Anita Desai makes an attempt to do a deep pyshcological study of her characters. In Unit 2 too we have seen how Anita Desai has been deeply interested in the character portrayal. This Unit has provided you with a detailed study of each of the characters in the novel before moving on to the significant themes of social issues, gender as well as status of Urdu language in the next Unit.

5.10. UNIVERSITY QUESTIONS

1. Deven is the protagonist of Anita Desai's novel *In Custody*, but he is not the hero in the traditional sense of the term. Do you agree?
2. Write a character sketch of Deven with special reference to his relationship with Nur, Sarla and Murad.

3. Deven is caught between the two worlds – the world of Urdu Poetry and the mundane world of Mirpore. Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer.
4. Deven is an individual who is caught in the quagmire of everyday living but has high hopes / dreams about being successful in elevating the status of Urdu literature. Do you think the statement is justified?
5. Murad is a manipulative man who just takes advantages of his friend Deven. Do you agree? Write a character sketch of Murad.
6. Murad seems to be a friend of Deven; though he has his own machinations which serve only his own purpose. Do you agree?
7. Sarla is not a fully developed character in Anita Desai's *In Custody.* Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer.
8. Sarla is a simple housewife, concerned with her petty things and not at all about the interests of Deven. Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer.
9. Write a character sketch of Sarla.
10. Write a critical note on the women characters in the novel *In Custody.*
11. Comment on the characters of Sarla and two wives of Nur in the novel *In Custody.*
12. Critically comment on this critical statement by Salman Rushdie on *In Custody* – "Anita Desai has so brilliantly portrayed the world of male friendship in order to demonstrate how this, too, is a part of the process by which women are excluded from power over their own lives is a final, bitter irony behind what is an anguished, but not at all a bitter book."
13. The Character of Nur in the novel *In Custody* presents the state of Urdu literature and language in India. Do you agree with the statement? Give reasons for your answer.
14. Write a character sketch of Nur.
15. Do you agree that Nur is a victim of India's neglect of Urdu Language? Give reasons for your answer.
16. Imtiaz Begum is the new woman that Anita Desai has created in the novel *In Custody.* Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer.
17. Write a character sketch of Imtiaz Begum.
18. Comment on the relationship between Deven and Sarla in the novel *In Custody.*

5.11. RECOMMENDED READINGS

- Belliappa, Meena. *Anita Desai: A Study of Her Fiction*. Calcutta: A Writers Workshop Publication, 1971.

- Jain, Jasbir. *Stairs to the Attic: The Novels of Anita Desai.* Jaipur: Printwell Publishers, 1987.
- Lal, Malashri. *The Law of the Threshold: Women Writers in Indian English*. Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1995.
- Nityandandam, *Indira. Three Great Indian Women Novelists*. New Delhi: Creative Books, 2000.

Unit 6

SOCIAL AND GENDER PERSPECTIVES IN *IN CUSTODY*

6.1 INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai has a keen power of observation of the social processes which is reflected in her novels to such an extraordinary degree that when we read her narratives, they present to us the world in much greater sharpness leading to us having an understanding of the world in a much more clearer terms. It is true that Anita Desai does not have an open didactic purpose in her novels, but at the same time there is a presentation of the social perspectives which cannot be over looked. J. P. Tripathi Observes: "Anita Desai's aims in literary writing are neither didactic nor ethical; they are purely aesthetic. Many critics will like to place her in the tradition of art for art's sake rather than in the tradition of art for life's sake. But the general impact of her writings is ethical." This means that though there is an aesthetic element in the works of Anita Desai, yet at the same time, her novels present to us certain social messages which are essential to fathom so as to make sense of the ways of the world and also to make a critique of the ways in which the world functions in ways which are not always beneficial for everyone. In this unit, an effort has been made to understand the fictional world of Anita Desai, especially of *In Custody,* so as to figure out the ways in which the novelist has commented and critiqued certain social and moral issues of the day which are still pertinent to today's world.

6.2 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, we will learn about –

- Anita Desai's concern for the society in her works, especially *In Custody*
- Realistic elements in *In Custody*
- Issues of gender as it is being dealt by Anita Desai in *In Custody*

6.3. ANITA DESAI AS AN AESTHETE

As an aesthete, Anita Desai's realm was to create extraordinary narratives which exist by their own right and do not have any overtly social message to give to its readers so as to assert their sales and popularity. There are often writers like Oscar Wilde and others who have championed the notion of "art for art's sake" and there are writers like George Bernard Shaw who openly commented that he would not take the pain of writing a single line for the sake of art. So the writers are divided in their opinion about what the objectives of their writings are. Whereas some are openly didactic in their writings, others try to camouflage their social message under the garb of artistic pretensions.

But when one says this one is not completely right as any writer is a product of his or her age and there is bound to be reflections of his or her age in the writings. So is true of Anita Desai. Moreover Anita Desai as she deals with the psychological delineations of her characters is known for making deeper psychological studies in her novels, as she herself admits in an interview with Yashodhara Dalmia – "I am interested in characters

who are not average but have retreated or been driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against, or made a stand against, the general current. It is easy to flow with the current, it makes no demands, it costs no effort. But those who cannot follow it, whose heart cries out "the great no" who light the current and struggle against it, they know what the demands are and what it costs to meet them."

6.4. REALISM IN DESAI'S NOVELS

The reality that is presented in Anita Desai's novels is the reality that is seen through the eyes of the mind. It is the psychological reality that is of much concern to Anita Desai in her earlier novels. In novels like *In Custody* and *Clear Light of the Day*, Anita Desai shifts her focus from the inner realm of existence to the portrayal of the outside world. Thus when we read a novel like *In Custody*, we are made to understand the world of Mirpore and Old Delhi in much greater sharpness.

6.4.1. Mirpore – A Small Dusty Town of India

Mirpore is presented as a dusty small town which has a life of its own – where things happen in a lazy manner and people seem to be much relaxed. Deven is a lecturer of Hindi in the Lala Ram Lal College of Mirpore where he is living a comparatively uneventful life dealing with his students in classroom and evaluation of scripts and an equally dull if not more, family life with Sarla and Manu. So as soon as he gets the opportunity to interview Nur, Deven flies off from the monotony of the small town of Mirpore to get to the exciting world of Urdu poetry.

The world of Mirpore is populated with characters who represents all realms of lives – there are people like Abid Siddiqui, who are loving and helpful and represent the old order of nobility (Abid Siddiqui being the descendant of the Nawab of Mirpore) and there are characters like Mr. Trivedi who wants to feel important as the head of the Hindi Department of Lala Ram Lal College and often is looking for chances to tirade Deven. then there is Deven who is a temporary college lecturer and finds it difficult to have the luxuries of life and therefore his wife seems to be perpetually nagging about the lack of modern amenities at home. He can barely live life, but at the same time has the passion for Urdu poetry and Nur Shahjehanabadi which makes him travel to Delhi to interview him. Apart from these significant characters there are the neighbours of Deven as well as Deven's college students, though they are not major focus of the novel.

6.4.2. Old Delhi – The House of Nur

Old Delhi is represented in the novel *In Custody* as the place where Nur resides with his two wives and a child in a dilapidated mansion which is moreover reminiscent of the Urdu language and culture. Urdu was once upon a time the language of the nobility, the Mughals and from there in the modern India we have seen a steady decline of Urdu language and literature. Nur Shahjehanabadi is a true connoisseur and famous poet of Urdu language, but with the decline of language of Urdu, his fate as well as his state has also declined. He is not surrounded with ruffian admirers who eat and drink and make merry. Nur Shahjehanabadi has also lost his sense of great art and lives with his admirers in the midst of mutton birayani and rum. The loss of the great culture of Urdu is

represented in the novel *In Custody* in detail so as to portray the state of Urdu language and culture.

6.4.3. Murad and Mr. Jain – the money-minded Delhi

If Nur represents one aspect of Delhi and its Urdu culture, Murad and Mr. Jain (the shopkeeper from where Deven buys the second hand tape recorder) represents the money-minded and scheming nature of Delhi. With the growing commercialism, people have become money-minded and they have forgotten that there is an aspect of humanity which longs for human relationships. Murad travels to Mirpore to meet Deven so that he can accomplish his job of making Deven interview Nur for his magazine *Awaaz.* Moreover, Murad conspires with Mr. Jain to sell Deven a second hand tape recorder which he is about to use for the interview of Nur. When later in the novel Deven goes to Murad to ask for money to pay Nur's wife Safia Begum, Murad asks Deven for the tapes to be sold to Music Companies to make money. Thus we see that Delhi is represented as a place where money-minded and scheming people are populated with. Even Safia Begum is shown to be money-minded as she asks for money so that Deven can interview Nur.

6.4.4. Conclusion

Thus there are many sociological and political issues that Anita Desai deals with in the novel *In Custody,* though her primary concern is not sociological. As an aesthete when a writer writes, she or he is definitely trying to portray a particular society which gets represented in his or her work leading to a sociological study. It is true that Anita Desai never wanted her novel to be sociological document, but it has become one by virtue of it being a portrayal of small town of Mirpore and the world of the big city of Delhi.

As a corollary statement to Anita Desai's sociological perspective it can be said that Anita Desai in her novel *In Custody* deals with "haunted protagonists" who are trying to fight their ambitions, disappointments, loneliness, frustrations and failures in a society. Deven as a character seems to be "a swimmer in unknown water." Deven is a protagonist who is straight forward and simple and has his own dreams and anguishes with which he enters the world of Murad and Nur and finds himself to be a complete misfit. It is a small town man trying to find his ways in the big city of Delhi.

6.5. GENDER ISSUES

Anita Desai is a writer of eminence who has in her novels tried to portray the plight of women in such a way so that we as readers understand the ways in which women suffer in a patriarchal set up. Women are not only made to suffer in male-dominated society, but often their voices are silenced and they are thought to be second-class citizens who have no rights and desires of their own. Whenever a woman is seen to be having any desire of any kind she is thought to be an aberration and therefore shunned and neglected in such a way that she had to suffer immensely.

In the novel, *In Custody,* Anita Desai does not deal with women characters as the primary protagonists of the novel. The novel deals with Deven Sharma, a temporary Hindi lecturer of Lala Ram Lal College, Mirpore and his relationship with the famous Urdu poet Nur Shahjehanabadi who lives in Old Delhi in a dilapidated mansion. Deven is an ardent admirer of Nur and when Murad asks him to interview Nur to write a feature on

Nur for Murad's magazine *Awaaz,* Deven passionately follows his ambition of interviewing Nur. Thus a relationship is formed which is the main thread of the novel. The novel *In Custody* therefore seems to be a study of relationships of two male characters; but amidst these two male protagonists we come across three women characters who stand by their own right in the novel. These three women characters represent the feminist aspects of the novel. Deven's wife Sarla, Nur's two wives – Safia Begum and Imtiaz Begum, though are not the main characters of the novel, yet they stand in much significance as far as the feminist view point of the novel is concerned.

6.5.1. Sarla

Sarla is introduced in the novel as the wife of Deven Sharma who teaches Hindi in a college named Lala Ram Lal College in Mirpore. Deven and Sarla do not have a very harmonious relationship as presented in the novel which talks a great about the man-woman relationship in the novel. Anita Desai through the character of Sarla is probably commenting on the average Indian woman who finds themselves trapped in marriage in which they have little say and from which they have no way out. Deven and Sarla share the relationship of husband and wife in the novel *In Custody;* but in real terms they both behave to each other as if they are strangers. They probably feel this way because they both know that they are victims of some kind or the other. Anita Desai in the novel writes -- "Although each understood the secret about the other, it did not bring about any closeness of spirit, any comradeship, because they also sensed that two victims ought to avoid each other, not yoke together their joint disappointments. A victim does not look to help from another victim; he looks for a redeemer. At last Deven had his poetry; she had nothing, and so there was an added accusation and bitterness in her look." This passage seems to be the central statement in understanding Deven – Sarla relationship in the novel.

Sarla had very high aspirations from life – as most people have. All of us feel that life should provide us with all comforts. She too desired for things in her life -- "So she had dared to aspire towards a telephone, a refrigerator, even a car." There is nothing wrong with such aspirations. When people all around have such material comforts in life then it is natural that Sarla too would want them in her life. But Deven Sharma, the temporary teacher of a private college in a small town could not afford all these. Anita Desai writes – "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 and permanent as surgical scars."

Sarla, as the above quote from the novel presents is "naturally embittered" as all her hopes has been dashed down and that she knows that she is never be able to realize those dreams in her life. She knows very well that she is doomed in this marriage with Deven and she has no way out. She has accepted her life as it is, but this acceptance is not without any condition – it has led her to be very bitter about life. And this bitterness has affected their relationship. So we see that when Deven comes back home after his first encounter with Nur at the early hours of morning, he does not go home directly but instead prefers to go to college where he thinks he will refresh himself -- "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."

When Deven goes to home later in the day, Sarla is gossiping with her neighbour and when Deven enters home, Sarla gives a look as if he is a stranger. Anita Desai writes -- "As he pushed open the gate with its familiar rusty sound of protest, both women raised their dropping heads and stared at him as if he were a stranger, an interloper. Then Sarla twitched a fold of her sari over her head. She didn't normally cover her head when he appeared; it was evident that she was preparing a scene. He tried to smile, then lifted his hand to cover his mouth because he felt he shouldn't." This shows that Sarla is not the type of female who will accept everything that he husband does. She knows how to protest and it is because of this that Deven finds ways not to encounter her so as to carry on with marital peace.

In the course of the novel Anita Desai also comments about Sarla that "For the wife of a poet, she seemed too prosaic." But her being prosaic is not her fault. She is prosaic by nature where as Deven is in love of poetry. Deven has his poetry with which he can keep himself engaged; but Sarla has nothing except for her son Manu. She seems to be a victim of circumstances and in her victimization there is no one's fault but that of the society which makes people get married without knowing each other and consequently suffer throughout their lives.

6.5.2. Imtiaz Begum

Imtiaz Begum is the second wife of Nur Shahjehanabadi, the famous Urdu poet in Anita Desai's novel *In Custody*. She seems to be too fascinated by the poet Nur and also presented in the novel to be jealous of his poetic achievements as she herself strives to be a poetess. She is being presented in the novel to be a "female mafia" who is a terror to the supposed admirers of Nur and often she even vexes Nur for his excesses. In other terms we can say that she is "the new woman" in the novel which Anita Desai paints with much concern to show how women are taking up the arenas which was traditionally thought to be that of males such as poetry.

Imtiaz Begum is fascinated by the world of Nur's poetry to such an extent that she marries him knowing full well that Nur has a wife. She is not from well off background – she was the quarters where dancing and singing is the norm of the night. But within that world of muddy waters, she is like a lotus who has shined so brightly that Nur could not but not only notice her beauty and talent; but at the same time fascinated to such an extent so as to marry her. As she herself has a poetic bent of mind and often endorses herself in poetic creations therefore she is portrayed in the novel to be having an advantage over Nur's first wife, Safia Begum.

In the house of Nur Shahjehanabadi, it is Imtiaz Begum who is dreaded by everyone for her authority. She wants to keep a strict control of things. She is the one who vexes the supposed admirers of Nur by saying that they are corrupting the poet and not letting him concentrate on his poetry. We see Imtiaz Begum saying to Nur's admirers – "You have reduced him to that, making him eat and drink like some animal, like a pig." This shows that Imtiaz begum does not want Nur to live in such a pathetic condition where he is surrounded by his admirers who eat and make merry; and moreover wants him to carry

on producing great poetry in not for anything else but for the sake of art. Here we see that Imtiaz Begum is very concerned about Nur, his poetry and also about his health. She tirades Nur throughout the novel to make him concentrate on his own self and not live so much in the world and company of his admirers.

Therefore when Deven comes to take Nur's Interview, Imtiaz Begum seems to be the biggest impediment for the interview as she does not allow Deven to take the interview in the poet's house. Ultimately, Deven is forced to take the interview outside Nur's house.

As already mentioned, Imtiaz Begum is an aspiring poetess who is trying to curve a niche in the world of poetry, but poetry being a male bastion, it is very difficult for her to prove herself in that world. Probably she has married Nur with the intention that she will get a chance to remain close to Nur and learn some tricks of producing great poetry. She seems to be having a very practical bent of mind and decides things which would result in bringing and getting things for herself.

So on her birthday celebrations, we see that she has not only performing but also has taken away Nur's audience from him when the great poet is sitting in one corner of the room in darkness. Safia Begum tells her "You have taken his name, and his reputation and today even his admirers." This is a serious charge that is being laid on her—but this charge has some truth in it as she was always aspiring for some attention as a poet. She got the chance on her Birthday to do so and therefore did so without any hesitation.

The way Imtiaz Begum takes away Nur's admirers on her Birthday makes many think that she is very jealous of Nur's popularity as a poet. Moreover, these scholars also see that Imtiaz Begum's becoming an impediment to Deven taking Nur's interview also as her jealousy where she does not allow the interview to happen as that would bring him some fame. But when this kind of a reading is done of Imtiaz Begum, it defeats the purpose with which the character was created by Anita Desai. Anita Desai is trying to portray a loving wife and an aspiring poetess in the character of Imtiaz Begum. Her taking away of Nur's admirers was nothing but an attempt on her part to get some attention for herself where she has no other things in her mind. Even being an impediment to Deven's interview is primarily because she wants the poet to be left alone to himself so that he can concentrate on his poetry.

We can probably come to the conclusion that Imtiaz Begum is the image of the new woman that Anita Desai is painting in the novel *In Custody.* She is bold and authoritative – she wants to take control of things and wants to prosper as a poetess. She does not want to live a life in the darkness and in the world of infamy; but has every aspiration to come forward and let the world know about herself. In these terms, when we see that character of Imtiaz Begum she seems to be a new kind of woman is willing to take charge of life and live life according to her own terms.

6.5.3. Safia Begum

Safia Begum is the first wife of Nur Shahjehanabadi, the famous Urdu poet in the novel *In Custody* by Anita Desai. She is of practical bent of mind and is often seen to be very money-minded. When she sees Deven practically a failure to get an interview of Nur, she thinks that 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 that without money she will not allow Nur to go out of the house.

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. Here too Safia Begum shows her money-mindedness as she tries to take out as much money as possible from Deven. It is to be reminded that poets and their passion for art often makes them forget about the material needs. To counter that aspect of Nur's life, probably Safia Begum has become money-minded as she had to run a family.

6.5.4. Conclusion

Thus through these three characters, Anita Desai has represented three different aspects of women in Indian society. Sarla represents the victimized state of Indian women in marriage where they have to leave all their desires and live a lifeless life in accordance to the societal demands and the demands of the husband. In Safia begum, we see the money-minded woman who is ready to earn money for the sake of the family and in Imtiaz Begum we see the "new woman" who is willing to take every step to reach certain place in life – who wants to live a life with authority so that she can 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.

6.6. THE CONCERN OF ART AND ARTISTS IN *IN CUSTODY*

The condition and status of art as well as the artists is yet another important objective in the modernist works whether one talks about James Joyce's *A Portrait o f the Artist as a Young Man* or Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and to a certain extent in D. H, Lawrence's novel *Sons and Lovers.* In *In Custody* (1984) the concern of the artists and art has been the main theme. Jasbir Jain also observes that "the novel is about the nature of art". S. Indira comments that the novel "deals with the issues of language and poetry ...."

Deven Sharma seeks to escape from the harsh realities of life by seeking relief in a fantasy world of Nur's poetry. In other words, it can be said that he run away from the real world of Mirpore to the fantastic world of Chadni Chowk in Old Delhi to the world of Nur. Deven is a lecturer in Hindi working on a temporary basis in a private college Lala Ram Lal College, of a small town, Mirpore. Leading a monotonous and purposeless life, Deven's only achievement so far has been failure - both as a teacher and as someone who had aspired to some status in life. Even his marriage has a permanent quality of despair because of his wife's unfulfilled aspirations and his own perpetual inability to rise above his unsatisfactory condition. The only bright spot in his otherwise gloomy life is his love for art or more specifically for Urdu poetry. Unable to change his gloomy circumstances, Deven takes refuge in occasional writings in Urdu which lead him to fantasize about "sudden wealth, unexpected cheques" as well as "acceptance in the literary circles of the metropolis."

Deven's fantasy appears to change to reality when his childhood friend, Murad, approaches and persuades him to do an article on Nur Shahjehanabadi - once a famous symbol of Urdu literature - now no longer active. Doubt and trepidation over his own efficacy overcome Deven when he sets out to interview Nur. How these feeling so overcome him about meeting at last his childhood 'hero' is revealed in their first meeting. As the door is opened, Nur bellows out in a "cracked and hoarse and thorny" voice enquiring, "Who is it that disturbs the sleep of the aged at this hour of the afternoon that is given to rest? It can only be a great fool. Fool, are you a fool?" The extent of Deven's adulation is revealed now. After hearing the poet's voice, Devon so forgets himself as to acknowledge the fact that he is a 'fool'. As Deven is asked to be brought up by the poet, he feels radiant and wonders if this was not the "summons" he had always been waiting for. Deven has high expectations about this meeting which would surely lift him from his "mean, disordered and hopeless" existence into another - that of "poetry, beauty and illumination." In actuality, Nur - the epitome of success - represents for Deven all that he fantasizes to be but could not be. In the interview that Deven hopes to have with Nur, he - in reality - wants to experience his much longed for fame through poetry as against his own gloomy existence.

Unfortunately Nur is already too old and has lost much of his creativity. Deven, however, in his blind adulation of the poet and in his need to experience literary glory and greatness through him refuses to accept this fact Viney Kirpal also expresses a similar view when he says: To be a success has always been an anxiety with Deven, and the meeting with Nur ... represents for Deven all that he could not be. Nur, in that sense, is Deven's *alter ego.* Deven's romantic visions of the poet are soon shattered by his stay and encounter with the poet's private life. Initially, Deven enjoys a "miraculous intimacy" with Nur when he joyfully hears the poet's voice quoting poetry. Deven joins him in quoting back Nur's poetry and this binds them in an exquisite "web, an alliance." This intimacy is rudely intruded upon by the arrival of Nur's servant-boy followed by several "loutish" young men. Their audacious ribaldry shocks Deven but he finds Nur to be unmindful of it. In fact, he is amazed to see Nur in the centre of those *"lafangas* of the bazaar world" who "lived out the fantasy of being poets, artists and bohemians..." in the company of Nur. What is further shocking to Deven is the sight of Nur himself, greedily stuffing himself with *biryani, kebabs, korma, dal* and drinks. His hopes of a dialogue about poetry in the midst of such "garishness" not only dwindle dismally, it also seems to appear quite "grotesque." Deven's fantasy world of Nur living surrounded by "elderly, sage and dignified litterateurs entirely alone, in divine isolation" comes crashing down when he finds instead "clowns and jokers and jugglers" surrounding Nur. This only serves to fill Deven with disillusionment which reaches its peak when he finds his hero, Nur, in a very undignified position, "face downwards, arms and legs spread eagled across the thick mattress" on the floor. This reality is in sharp contrast to Deven's earlier visualization of Nur as a "god" upon hearing his words. A huddled and whimpering Nur has to face the venomous contempt of his second wife, Imtiaz Begum while Deven is compelled by her to clear up Nur's vomit with some papers she throws at him.

Thoroughly shaken and shattered by this sordid episode Deven abandons the poet and runs back home to Mirpore. However, before his departure, after he drops the "sopping bundle of paper" into the gutter, realization dawns on him that those very papers which he

had thrown away might have been inscribed with Nur's verse. This is indicative of the fact that art is not separable from life but instead constitutes the very stuff of life. As Viney Kirpal rightly says, "Art is both the poem and the poet's vomit" and "it was only as Deven was trying to discard the soiled sheets that he realized that they could have been Nur's poems". Art constitutes not just Nur's poetry but it encompasses his sordid life also. This realization is of course, still at the nascent stage subconsciously and erupts into Deven's consciousness much later. Back home, his bitter experience makes him face up to reality for once and just this time he doesn't resent his circumstances. But it appears that his visit to Nur has started a chain of events from which Deven cannot extricate himself, Taking advantage of Deven's love for both Nur and Urdu poetry, Deven is manipulated very subtly by Nur himself. This is done firstly, by Nur renewing his interest in the interview and secondly, by expressing his willingness to recite his poetry, both old and new. Nur therefore writes to Deven asking him to come to Delhi and work as his secretary.

This time Deven's visit to Nur's house coincides with the birthday of Imtiaz Begum who is celebrating it by a recital of poems. In fact, she sings the very verses she had learnt from Nur - imitating and parodying his skills. Seeing her dressed no better than a "prostitute or dancing girl" and becoming the centre of attraction with her "raucous singing", Deven is angered to see the mockery that she has made of art. The revered Nur is "silent, ignored and uncelebrated" and this makes Deven wonder why he had allowed this performance to take place in his - a poet's - house. The angry Nur tells Deven about his personal life and the slow weaning away from Nur of his house, audience, friends and jewels by Imtiaz Begum. He then proceeds to curse her in the "most filthy terms he could assemble with his slurred speech and sodden memory'. This angry outburst shocks Deven as it was neither a fit subject nor the worthy language of a poet. Once again, the reality of life is contrasted with the fantasy world of art. Nur the poet's melodious verses are a shocking contrast to Nur the man's filthy abuse. Deven had always held poetry to be superior to reality but Nur's dark room reeking of "filthy abuse, rotten gums, raw liquor, too many years and too much impotent rage" shatters his very concepts about poetry.

The sudden entry of an exhausted, enraged Imtiaz Begum and her words further adds insult to the idolatry concept of poetry held by Deven. Whereas poetry had been exalted by Deven and Nur, Imtiaz Begum has used it as a means of earning easy money. With the entry of Nur's first wife in this volatile situation, Deven, once again flees from Nur's house. From close quarters, Deven finds Nur degenerated into a drunken, complaining, ill-tempered, whining old man while his home and wives appear to be the house of "ferocious felines" who would between themselves "devour the helpless quaking flesh of the poet". Once again, this vision of Nur's personal life suggests the inseparability of art and life. Nur is the poet as well as the drunken, ill-used husband. In the other words, this indicates that creativeness - as suggested by Nur the poet - is found even in uncreative circumstances - as suggested by Nur, the man. This is also not obvious to Deven at that stage.

Nur's bait - of reciting his poems - is able to catch the prey for the thought of the impending interview propels Deven to once again meet Murad who advises him to get a tape-recorder wherein to record both Nur's voice and poetry. The Head of the Urdu Department of Deven's college evinces a keen interest in the proposed interview and

helps in sanctioning the tape-recorder to an unbelieving Deven. Once again, he is filled with new hope making him fantasize about the world of poetry. He consequently feels that finally he has been "allotted a role in life" (105) to capture for posterity Nur's genius.

Unfortunately, Deven is again deceived by Murad who without prior consultation arranges a defective second-hand tape recorder to be purchased. He also arranges without Deven's consent, for a totally inexperienced boy to be Deven's technical assistant. Finally, when Deven goes to Nur's house to fix the time and place for the interview, he finds Nur highly dejected over Imtiaz Begum's illness. At the same time, Imtiaz Begum categorically and emphatically prohibits Nur from reciting his poetry for recording. Now that every attempt of his proves futile, Deven is overcome by feelings of inadequacy, in confidence and incompetence. But with the college's sanction, it becomes too late for Deven to withdraw and so he accepts Nur's uncouth first wife's offer to arrange - in return for payment - the tape-recording outside the house.

Even though, further funds are arranged from the college for Deven, he becomes highly disillusioned and no longer knows if he wants to be helped any further in the project. In fact, the sordid revelations about Nur and his family causes doubt to invade in. Nevertheless, Deven sets out for the tape-recording sessions feeling a kind of "hazardous euphoria" - "hazardous" as both doubt and enthusiasm plague him and "euphoric" because of the opportunity of re-living his fantasy. Contrary to these high expectations, the recording sessions turn out to be a fiasco. Nur, surrounded by his loutish companions is temperamental and garrulous, talking mostly about food and drink - *biryani* and rum and rarely about poetry. It is only once or twice that lie throws in a line of poetry in between his rambling. It is in recording this, that Deven slowly faces a predicament, that the matter was indeed not a "simple one of separating prose from poetry, life from art." At times when Nur relates ordinary meaningless facts about his loves or quarrels, his youth, education and travels, it makes Deven suddenly aware that these had some bearing after all on Nur's art. Yet, Deven still finds it difficult to believe that art is also related to life. Hence, the ribald comments of Nur's companions of having found his second wife in a brothel - incidentally the very building of their recording sessions - makes Deven wonder in despair:

"In taking Nur's art into his hands, did he have to gather up the stained, soiled, discoloured and odorous rags o f his life as well?"

Thus, Deven's dilemma is how to sift Nur's art from his life for Deven wants to record the life and poetry of Nur - the creator of poetry - excluding Nur - the man with his sordid family life. Viney Kripal has rightly said:

"As one trying to record Nur's life and poetry, he wants only the poet, the creator, purged of all the dross of his life as a human being. But Nur comes to him with all the sordidness of his personal life... and his poetry."

At one such session when Deven appears unable to decide what to record and what to omit, Nur unexpectedly conveys his understanding of this dilemma:

"Has this dilemma come to you too then? This sifting and selecting from the debris of our lives? It can't be done, my friend, it can't be done, I learnt that long ago ...."

What Nur wants to convey to Deven is that life and art are inseparable, that the creative is found even in the "debris" of life. As if to prove his point, Nur breaks out into a new verse filling everyone with silent wonder. Nur thus, is the living example of the inseparability of art and life. That Art encompasses all of life is shown symbolically through the recording itself - the recording of Nur's short and sudden recitations interspersed with his meaningless ramblings as well as the blaring of car horns from below. Deven again* has yet to realize this fully. Nur suddenly tires of the recording sessions after three weeks and refusing to talk any further abandons Deven. A highly dispirited Deven returns to Mirpore to find the tapes entirely useless for his inefficient assistant had managed to record only the irrelevant portions of Nur's ramblings and had missed out the rare moments when he had talked of poetry. With his project a total failure Deven now faces the prospect of dismissal from college for incompetence and misappropriation of funds. With events leading to failure, Deven's fantasy world of earning fame through poetry is crushed forever.

Visiting Delhi, one last time Deven yearns to question Nur to see if his perusal of Nur's art had been worthwhile and try to discover, what poetry or art was all about Viewing the dome of a mosque which rose like a "vast bubble" - "absolutely still, very serene" - Deven finds a "silent answer to his questioning". Deven feels that Art is like that perfect - bubble in its purity - "cool, high-minded and remote". Unlike disciplines like Mathematics and Geometry in which "every question had its answer and every problem its solution", art cannot be explained away by answers and solutions. In fact if art or poetry were made to "submit their answers" then the perfectness would be lost - the "bubble would be breached and burst, and it would no longer be perfect." In order to be perfect, art has to be "contained within perfect unblemished shapes" for if art is not "perfect and constant" like the dome, it would be reduced to "nothing". This new perception about art makes Deven realize that art is perfect only because it is unexplainable. Hence, art cannot be questioned or divided into life being fit or unfit for art. Thus, Deven finally realizes the inseparability of art and life. Jasbir Jain also comments on this aspect of an as comprehended by Deven:

"Art... does not explain, does not offer solutions, it is by its very nature a mystery, and a mystery it shall continue to be ... art is art by virtue of being inexplicable."

She further adds:

"Art could be responded to, understood, absorbed, identified with but mystery it would still remain."

S. Indira also makes a similar observation with regard to Deven. She says that Deven's new awareness and understanding about art makes him "accept" the "mysterious nature of art as something natural and vital to the very nature o f art."

Again, Viney Kirpal's views regarding the inseparability of art and life are worth quoting:

"... Art cannot be split into life fit for art and life not fit for art. All of life has to go into art ... Life has to be accepted whole, as a package - the creative tangled hopelessly with the uncreative."

Meanwhile, Nur continues to write to Deven asking for money to save his pigeons, the rented room, to make the last pilgrimage to Mecca and so on but Deven doesn't reply. Thinking of his total experience with Nur, Deven tries to re-capture his old idolatry and devotion for Nur. As he ponders over that "strange unexpected unimaginable friendship" with Nur that had been so painful, Deven is overcome by another important realization - "in taking somebody into custody, one has also to surrender oneself to the other's custody." Thus, every relationship is basically a two-sided commitment:

He had imagined he was taking Nur's poetry into custody and not realized that if he was to be custodian of Nur's genius, then Nur would become his custodian and place him in custody too, Viney Kirpal considers this realization as related with the "central vision of the book and its title, *In Custody*

"... To be merely custodian is to possess without being possessed and is a relationship of power. Both the epigraph and the conclusion of the novel suggest the need to recognize that every true relationship is essentially a two-way commitment, an act of continued responsibility for the other."

Deven now recalls in memory the reading of Nur's poetry:

"... the sound of it softly murmuring in his ears. He had accepted the gift of Nur's poetry and that meant he was custodian of Nur's very soul and spirit, it was a great distinction. He could not deny or abandon that under any pressure."

As Nur the artist could not be separated from Nur the men, Deven therefore feels that having taken custody of Nur's art he would have to take custody of Nur's life too. This "connection" would not break or end even when Nur died. Deven therefore resolves to treat his "alliance" with Nur as an honour and distinction. This acceptance would help him meet the "day... with its calamities." Thus, Deven's realization of the relationship of art and life helps him to discover an inner strength of mind dispelling his habitual despondency and defeatism. His new vision of art and life removes his earlier vision of fantasy and leads to his growth as an individual.

6.7. SUMMING UP

The last unit of Self-instructional material on Anita Desai's *In Custody* deals with the most significant thematic issues that the novels deal with. The issues of gender, concern of art and artist as well as portrayal of the social aspects are the key issues Anita Desai deals with in the novel which has been enumeraretd in this Unit.

6.8. UNIVERSITY QUESTIONS

1. Critically comment on Anita Desai's views on the decline or Urdu Language in post-independent India in her novel *In Custody*.
2. What do you think are the ways in which Anita Desai presents the state of Urdu language and literature in *In Custody?*
3. Do you agree that Deven is the preserver of Urdu language and literature in the novel *In Custody?*

4. Through the poet like Nur, Anita Desai presents the decadent state of Urdu language and literature. Do you agree?
5. What are the significant themes of Anita Desai's novel *In Custody?* Comment on any one theme which you think is most prominent according to you.
6. Comment on the portrayal of the modern times in Anita Desai's *In Custody.*
7. Anita Desai's novel deals with the horrifying conditions of the modern day existence. Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer.
8. Give a sociological perspective to the novel *In Custody.*
9. Comment on the theme of man-woman relationship in Anita Desai's *In Custody.*

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