

## Review

# Remnants of Urdu poetic culture and politics of language in Anita Desai's 'In custody'

Bhasha Shukla Sharma

Department of Humanities, UIT, RGPV, Bhopal, India. E-mail: [bhasha.shukla@gmail.com](mailto:bhasha.shukla@gmail.com).

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**Anita Desai is a well known novelist who captures the 'Indian upper middle class' realistically in her novels. Although these novels seem more engaged with a wider world, they tend to maintain the idea that freedom is to be found in romantic transcendence, perhaps a product of the melancholic literary tradition. Her writing might be fictitious but she blends the textual fabrics of the narrative with historical realism. This paper attempts to study the Urdu-Hindi conflict in Anita Desai's novels. In her novel 'In Custody' a parallel is drawn between Urdu and Hindi juxtaposed with the change of cultural dynamics after the partition (political separation of India and Pakistan) of India. During post-colonial era, Urdu became the marker of a cultivated man and the cultural legacy of India. Anita discusses the tragedy of Urdu poetry, the disillusionment of the Muslim poet, the frustration of the postcolonial society and the psychological insight into various characters. The paper focuses on how Desai captures the nostalgia of 'lyrical romance' of the cultural tradition of Old Delhi and how she tries to seize poetry and music from 'the dark gullies' that were the preferred amusements of the royal courts in Delhi. The theme of language is mixed with religion and politics. The greatness of the novel lies in the fact that it exposes the defeated cause of promotion of Urdu poetry. The reasons might be political, social or regional. The paper assumes that Desai's narratives cleverly deal with Indian identity with respect to socio-cultural, socio-linguistic and politico-religious divides without causing controversial and polemic debates.**

**Key words:** Indian Culture, literary tradition, historical realism, post-colonial fiction, Urdu poetry.

## INTRODUCTION

Anita (Mazumdar) Desai was born in 1937, in Mussoorie, India; of a Bengali father and a German mother and grew up speaking German, Bengali, English, Urdu and Hindi. Her fiction, observed by Shyamala et al. (2003) cited in Malhotra (2003), seems confident when it deals with the upper middle classes. While her contemporaries, Nayantara Sehgal and Kamala Markandya concern themselves primarily with the external political and social circumstances of their characters, Desai concentrates on their psychology. They contend that Desai has often made her priorities clear, 'Writing, to me, is a process of discovering the truth-that is nine-tenths of the iceberg that lies submerged beneath the one-tenth visible portion we call reality. Writing is my way of plunging to the depths and exploring this underlined truth...My novels are no reflection of Indian society, politics, or character'. Tabish (2003) places Anita Desai along with Vikram Seth and calls them 'literary realists'. Generally, her protagonists are all women but in a few novels such as *In Custody* by

Desai (2008), *Clear Light of the Day* and in the three short stories, she has switched 'to male-centered plots.' Narayan and Joe Mee further note: 'Although these novels seem more engaged with a wider world, they tend to maintain the idea that freedom is to be found in a kind of romantic transcendence, a product perhaps of the literary tradition illustrated in the quotations Keats and Shelley in *In Custody*'. This link between the melancholic Romantic English poets and nostalgic Urdu poetry is also developed as a motif in Desai's characterization of Raja in *Clear Light of Day* (Desai, 1980b). In the days leading up to Partition when Raja is struck down with tuberculosis it is said: 'His situation was Romantic in the extreme, Bim could see as she sponged his face and helped him ... his heavy, limp body as she lifted it as spent and sapped as a bled fish, and the city of Delhi burning down about them. He hoped, like Byron, to go to the rescue of those in peril. Instead, like Byron, he lay ill, dying' (Desai, 1980a). Gautam in *Cry, the peacock* quotes Urdu couplet

(Desai, 1980a). Desai captures the true identity of India in her novels. Bhabha (1990) observes, 'Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye. Such an image of the nation- or narration- might seem impossibly romantic and excessively metaphorical, but it is from those traditions of political thought and literary language that the nation emerges as a powerful historical idea in the west, an idea whose cultural compulsion lies in the impossible unity of the nation as a symbolic force'.

## INDIA AND ITS CULTURAL IDENTITY

Analyzing 'the true Indian identity', Kakkar and Katharina (2007) India's foremost psychoanalyst and cultural commentator, asks, 'How can anyone generalize about a country of a billion people- Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Jains- speaking fourteen major languages?' Kakkar soon takes a u-turn and quotes travelers from ancient times that identified common features among India's people. He further quotes India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, who wrote in *The Discovery of India*, 'The unity of India was no longer merely an intellectual conception...Yet I think with a long cultural background and a common outlook on life develops a spirit that is peculiar to it and that is impressed on all its children, however much they may differ among themselves'. Kakkar and Katharina observes the Muslims of India (The Indians: portrait of a people, 2007) and notes that, 'The loss of a collective self- idealization, or self esteem is also evident in the case of the elite among the Indian Muslims...For many, this mourning is never completed; the stock of narratives of loss and their elegiac mood, most vividly captured in the Ghazal, is passed from one generation to the next'. For these 'dispossessed men and women of the elite classes,' undertone of grief 'has become a part of their social identity'.

Anita Desai in her novel *In Custody* discusses the tragedy of Urdu poetry, the disillusionment of the Muslim poet, the frustration and the psychological aspect of her characters but plays safe by avoiding discussion on the role of religious and political demagogues, which is unlike Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* that provoked controversy as soon as it was published. *The Satanic Verses* controversy, also known as the Rushdie Affair, was the heated and sometimes violent reaction of some Muslims to the publication of Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses*, which was first published in the United Kingdom in 1988. Many Muslims accused Rushdie of blasphemy or unbelief and in 1989 Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini of Iran issued a fatwā ordering Muslims to kill Rushdie (1992). Numerous killings, attempted killings, and bombings resulted from Muslims' anger over the novel. Although, Yakin (2004) notes 'those readers who are interested in 'Commonwealth literature', we are being told, 'postulate'

'pen environments' but these readerly islands of literality are besieged by 'configurations on the ground' based on 'blind patriotism'. He finds Said's way of posing English against Arabic rather odd but further remarks: 'In the Arab-speaking countries, surely, the characterization of Arabic as the language of Islam may be substantially true, but in so far as he speaks constantly of larger things (Asia and Africa, Commonwealth literature, Rushdie and 'Khomeini threat',) it may be worth recalling that the vast majority of Muslims in the world speak or understand no Arabic...and the representatives of orthodox Islam, who led the campaign against *Satanic Verses* in England knew English very well, while a great many knew no Arabic' (Devy, 2010). Desai captures the pain of loss of the melodious poetry in Urdu language, which at one point of time, was considered the language of elite. But after independence of India (in post-colonial India) Hindi became the national language of India. Urdu, along with other twenty four languages, is one of the official languages of India as given in the eighth schedule of the Constitution of India. Urdu remained alive with the lyrical romance of Urdu shayari (poetry). According to Hasan (1993) cited in Devy (2010), 'The despair at the moral decay and political decline of Muslim societies is a recurrent theme in Urdu literature and journalism'. Naipaul also sees 'India as a country of headless people wounded by Islamic rule' (1998) cited in Devy (2010). The novelist portrays a true picture of the plight of poets and masters (teachers) struggling for existence.

## URDU LANGUAGE AND MUSLIM CULTURE IN INDIA

*In Custody* deals subtly with the diminishing Islamic and Muslim culture in postcolonial India and the plight of Urdu as an official language. A parallel is drawn between Urdu and Hindi which are juxtaposed with the change of cultural dynamics. With the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, the official language of India changed from Urdu to Hindi. Although the two languages are very similar and a person who speaks Urdu can understand Hindi to a great extent and vice-versa, the difference lies in the script. Urdu has Arabic script written from right to left and Hindi has Devanagari scripts that are written from left to right. Urdu is spoken by Muslims, who went to Pakistan and Hindi is the language of Hindus who were left behind in India. *In Custody* deals with the protagonist Deven, who is Hindu, and who has high regard for Urdu language and culture, and the Muslim Nur, the great Urdu poet, who is no longer in demand. The culture of people who spoke these languages had similarities yet had differences as well. When Deven, a lecturer in Hindi (in a small college in Mirpore), applies in person for one week's leave to interview the legendary Urdu poet Nur Shahjahanabadi, his head of department, Trivedi, meets the request with a virulent, short-tempered and communally charged reaction: 'I'll get you transferred to

your beloved Urdu department. I won't have Muslim toadies in my Department; you'll ruin my boys with your Muslim ideas, your Urdu language. I'll complain to the Principal, I'll warn the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) you are a traitor'.

*In Custody*, shortlisted for the Booker prize, is about an Urdu poet in his declining days. It deals with the disillusionment of the protagonist Deven when he realizes that Nur, the great Urdu poet he idolizes, 'has feet of clay'. He comes to accept the complications of their relationship in another vision of renewed possibilities in the closing pages of the novel (Narayan and Mee, 2003; cited in Tabish, 2003).

*In Custody* was also made into a successful Bollywood film called *Muhafiz* in 1994 with sub-titles in English. It was directed by Ismail Merchant starring Shashi Kapoor, Shabana Azmi and Om Puri. This film was shot in Bhopal, the second largest Muslim state in pre-independence India after Hyderabad, a secular city but with a strong flavor of Islamic culture due to historical reasons. *Muhafiz* was critically acclaimed and won the 1994 President of India Gold Medal for Best Picture. There are suggestions that Nur's character was inspired by the character of the great twentieth century poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz, the Urdu poet of social realism, whose poetry has been used by Merchant in his film.

The novel sharply highlights the social and cultural changes in postcolonial India. With the description of Delhi and Nur, Desai creates a picture perfect image of the Old Delhi culture. Deven, the protagonist, nurtures his dream to create a mark in the world of Urdu literature. He associates Urdu with 'good times' and looks upon the language as divine. Later, when 'bad times' befall upon him, he has to teach Hindi Literature in Lala Ram Lal College of Mirpore. He considers himself to be caught in the profession to 'earn a living' by teaching Hindi literature to uninterested college students. He is neither appreciated nor regarded by the students, who make fun of him. They do not respect him as a teacher. His career choice is based on the market economy that favors Hindi but is still not lucrative. He continues to teach Hindi to sustain his corporeal needs but his imagination is fueled by Urdu. He says: 'I am—only a teacher ... and must teach to support my family. But poetry—Urdu— ... I need to serve them to show my appreciation'. Lala Ram Lal College could open a department of Urdu as it received a 'very large donation from the descendants of the very *nawab* who had fled Delhi in the aftermath of the 1857 mutiny...' Siddiqui and his deteriorating *haveli* truly capture 'the dying culture he represents'. Desai's representations again are very similar to the colonial constructions referred by Dalrymple (2003) - 'of a morally decrepit Muslim aristocracy collapsing from drink, debauchery and decay'. Siddiqui turns self destructive (because he could neither hold the great literary tradition of Urdu poetry nor the traditional *haveli*) and sells the decaying *haveli* to a builder who 'wants to ... build a

block of flats with shops on the ground floor, cinema house at the back, offices on top.... And as I need the money—you know my weakness—the offer was too good to refuse'. Anita Desai tries to shape history of the small town of Mirpore by linking it to the presence of Muslim aristocracy— a long forgotten *nawab* whose ancestors fled Delhi to escape the aftermaths of the 1847 mutiny, an aristocratic *haveli*, and a Mosque. But she does not try to link Hinduism with any such past: 'The temples were more numerous but had no history at all. There was literally not a man in Mirpore who could have told one when they were built or by whom'. She also tells us that the Mirpore communities were mutually observant of the stratified 'Muslim' and 'Hindu' areas.

Teaching in the same college, Deven has not chosen his profession to be a lecturer in Hindi. It is his 'bad' time and 'wrong placing' that has led to such a condition where he has to take care of a family. Deven feels frustrated due to lack of appreciation. He has fond memories of his childhood and his deceased father who was a lover of Urdu poetry and the fact that he could narrate so many Urdu verses gave him great applause. Perhaps that was the best part of his memory (past). After his father's death, he lost 'good times', his mother brought him to Delhi from Lucknow and he had to study in a Hindi medium school. Deven associates Urdu with his father and with good times: 'I studied Urdu, sir, as a boy, in Lucknow. My father, he was a school teacher, a scholar, and a lover of Urdu poetry. He taught me the language. But he died. He died and my mother brought me to Delhi to live with her relations here. I was sent to the nearest school, a Hindi medium school, sir'.

The narrative begins when Deven is exploited (when he agrees to work free for Murad under duress) by his childhood friend Murad, an editor of an Urdu magazine *Awaz* (meaning voice), to interview the noted Urdu poet Nur Shahjahanabadi for a 'special issue'. Deven does so to overcome his guilt that he is not doing anything in the field of Urdu literature. Deven feels that his true interests lie in Urdu poetry and therefore he jumps at the chance to meet the great Urdu poet, Nur. The editor Murad wished to do something new that would perhaps increase the sale of his Urdu magazine: 'Nur will be the star of the issue. The light that blazes in the center and sends its rays to all corners of the world where his verse is known—in Iran, Iraq, Malaysia, Russia, Sweden—do you know, we have sent his name to the Nobel Prize Committee for its award for literature once again?...I want a full feature on Nur —Nur in his old age, the dying Nur before he is gone, like a comet into the dark. I want you to do that feature'. Murad desires to 'keep alive the glorious tradition of Urdu literature. If we do not do it, at whatever cost, how will it survive in this era of—that vegetarian monster, Hindi? That language of peasants', Murad sneered, picking his teeth with a matchstick. 'The language that is raised on radishes and potatoes ... it flourishes, while Urdu—language of the court in days of

royalty—now languishes in the back lanes and gutters of the city’.

Deven, with this decision of going to Delhi, becomes more close to the long forgotten Old Delhi and its poetic tradition which was not possible in the small town of Mirpore and is able to bridge the gap of ‘impassable desert that lay between him and the capital with its lost treasures of friendships, entertainment, attractions and opportunities.’ With all his hardships, Deven goes to interview Nur. He tells Nur about his love for Urdu literature. He also tells him that he is working as a temporary lecturer in Hindi literature to earn a living. Nur dismisses this excuse with contempt, suggesting that Deven should have chosen to trade in rice and oil if earning a living was his first priority. This dismissal itself shows a sharp indication of the culture in old times, when, to follow literature, people would leave their family and would sacrifice everything to practice knowledge or literature (Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of knowledge). To earn money was easy and even a trader could do so. When Deven reaches Nur’s house, they discuss the politics of languages. The latter finds himself frightened and a little uncomfortable but Nur is accustomed to such meetings and says whatever comes to his mind. As the discussion moves to the literary awards with such remarks as the gossip in the bazaar is that, ‘Gobind’s latest poem... will win the Sahitya Akademi Award for Hindi this year’. For Urdu, the remark shall be: ‘No book was judged worthy of the award this year’. Nur is much frustrated by the condition of Urdu and he cannot even think of him as a logical being. He tells Deven: ‘I tell you, those Congress-wallahs have set up Hindi on top as our ruler. You are its slave. Perhaps a spy even if you don’t know it, sent to the universities to destroy whatever remains of Urdu, hunt it out and kill it...It seems you have been sent here to torment me, to show me what depths Urdu has fallen’.

Deven soon realizes that the culture in the present time is changing and the people who were real admirers of Urdu poetry and Urdu literature are declining. After a series of events, Deven (assisted by Chiku) lands up recording the poetry using a second hand tape recorder. Nur says: ‘He has come to speak for me.... Through his throat, my words will flow. Listen and tell me if my poetry deserves to live, or if it should give way to—that fodder chewed by peasants, Hindi?’ Deven feels that ‘Nur was inviting him to join the fray, allowing the sublime concept of time to dwindle into the mere politics of language again.... He knew he ought not to have stayed, listening to this kind of talk; he is a Hindu and a teacher of Hindi.’

He had always kept away from the political angle of languages’. Here, Desai could not refrain from linking the ‘theme of language’ with religion and politics. Deven sees ‘recording of Nur’s poetry’ as a belittling act towards the great poet comparing it to ‘some song for the cinema, or radio’. But Murad finds the idea ‘brilliant’ and mocks Deven exclaiming, ‘This is the age of electronics, haven’t

you heard? Or hasn’t the news traveled to Mirpore yet?’ The recorder (due to various reasons), however fails to record ‘the voice of traditional Urdu poetry’ by the legendary poet Nur. ‘It was a fiasco. There was no other word for it. Disbelievably, Deven had the first tape removed, the second tried and then the third and the fourth’. Murad’s implications (to capture Urdu poetry in Awaz, the voice) results in recorded (poetic) silences symbolizing ‘the silence of Urdu poetry.’ ‘It was absolutely still, very serene. It was in fact the silent answer to his questioning’.

## POETRY AND MUSIC: CULTURE OF OLD DELHI

Desai in *In Custody* captures the nostalgia of ‘lyrical romance’ of the cultural tradition of Old Delhi. While ‘poetry, music and elephant fights were the preferred amusements of the court’, Desai captures poetry and music. Dalrymple (*City of Djinns*, 1993) quotes Daroga Quli Khan and writes, ‘If it was the courtesans that captured Daroga Quli Khan’s imagination, his real admiration was reserved for the Delhi poets. One of the most interesting descriptions in the *Muraqqa*’ is of the famous mehfiles, the literary or musical evenings for which the city was then renowned’ (This description is very similar to the evenings in Noor’s house in *In Custody*). ‘Although Hazeen (a Pirsian Sufi) leads a life of purity and charm, there is always a large crowd gathered in his house,’ wrote Khan. In the evening, the courtyard of his house is swept and sprinkled with rosewater and colourful carpets are spread out on a raised platform. The great poets then start the recitation of their work. Hazeen’s verses make the audience ecstatic and inspire them to polish their own skills’ (*City of Djinns*, 1993). Dalrymple notes further that Khan was in Delhi in 1739, and further adds some more information about commoners quoting Khan’s references of the same era, ‘Other *Mehfiles*, however gathered crowds for non-literary reasons: [The poet Miran] is humble, well mannered and hospitable. [But] he is also a connoisseur in the art of attracting charming new faces... As a result Miran’s *Mehfiles* always attract the beautiful and their lovers. Dancers begin to assemble from morning onwards... A large number of pretty young lads are lured to the show including both Hindu and Muslim catamites. Good looking women gather in such large numbers that the mere sight of them appeases the appetite, although [of course] for the lecherous this does not suffice’ (*City of Djinns*, 1993). Khan witnessed the Persian invasion in Delhi by Nadir Shah and the bloody massacre of 150,000 ‘Delhi-wallahs’. He does not call it an end of Delhi’s greatness but just a ‘temporary setback for the city’ that ‘dimmed the brightness of some of the *Mehfiles*—one noble was forced to lay his capital at the feet of emperor during the invasion and afterwards his mehfiles are described as subdued’. And soon after Nadir Shah’s return to Persia

'the overwhelming impression that Khan tries to convey is still of a Bawdy city of joy, a place remarkable for its wild parties, its lively celebrations and orgiastic festivals'. This image of Delhi is far removed from the image of modern Delhi of the '*nouveau-riche* Punjabis'. Dalrymple swears that 'You can still find them in the dark gullies of the Old City-if you know where to look' (City of Djinns, 1993).

And Deven of *In Custody* surely knows these 'dark gullies' and finds the exaltations (even if it is for a short period) of the Delhi *Mehfils*, that nostalgic Desai tries to capture from Delhi's past. He accepts Murad's offer to interview Nur (one of the greatest poets of the age as mentioned in the novel) in Delhi. Nur's poetry is referred to as 'a comet in the dark'. The poetry referred to in the novel evolves from the so called 'high' cultural tradition of the nineteenth century and Desai again avoids to mention any new dimensions of poetry. Nur is the sole representative of a dying Muslim tradition -of poetry, mega-*haveli* (mansion), *Mehfils* (parties), with 'rich *biryani* (food) washed down by enormous amount of alcohol' and a certain aristocratic lifestyle (extravagant and self-indulgent) of a long lost Muslim *navab* of nineteenth century. Deven's vision is probably to give a new lease of life to Urdu poetry by highlighting Nur's poetry. Although, Guilhamon (2009) sees the narratives (poetry by Nur) falling 'far short of the description displaying nothing of the flamboyance and the intensity of what Deven seems to think of as the typical Urdu style; instead, the pastiches offer up a collection of lifeless, often trite and formally unexceptional metaphors.' and similes. There are certain references to Nur's poetry in the novel:

Life is no more than a funeral procession  
winding towards the grave,  
Its small joys the flowers of funeral wreaths...  
(IC: 21).

The breeze enters; the blossom on the bough  
wafts its scent.  
The opened window lets in the sweet season,  
spring. (IC: 112).

My body no more than a reed pen cut by the  
sword's tip,  
Useless and dry till dipped in the ink of life's  
blood. (IC: 139)

As Anita Desai remarks about Deven, 'he realizes that he loved poetry not because it made things immediate but because it removed them to a position where they became bearable'. Deven's frustration is evident. He wants to run away from his monotonous work life and the expectations of his middleclass wife. He wants to transcend into some other world with the melancholic Urdu poetry. 'Grumpily he would agree to forgive them and recite a verse sequence he had written in his youth on flight and that was familiar to his audience, easy and

loved. Ravished by its sweet tones and murmured sibilances, Deven would sink back on his heels and shut his eyes, nodding gently in agreement with the poet's sentiments'. '[He] thundered out one of his earliest, almost forgotten poems that had once caused the literary world to be shaken like a straw stack in a storm, so livid and loud was it with dissent'.

It is not surprising that the only character left (since Nur has grown old) with any kind of literary association with Urdu language is the courtesan (a former dancer), Imtiaz Begam, Nur's second wife. She utilizes her situation in the best possible manner and pursues Urdu poetry. She uses her poetry in garb of Nur's poetry in her (It is Nur's poetic assembly but she takes over as people come to listen to her) poetic assembly at Nur's House. She says, 'she said she was a bird in a cage, that she longed for flight, which her lover waited for her. She said the bars that held her were cruel and unjust, that her wings had been hurt by beating against them and only God could come and release her by lifting the latch on the cage door, God in the guise of her lover'. She befriends Deven and challenges him for not being fair to her. She says, 'The recording is no secret. Whatever your reason for concealing it from me, Nur Sahib could not conceal it from me. Was I considered incapable of understanding the need to record Nur Sahib's voice for posterity? Was Safiya Begum considered wiser and more capable because of her greater age and her longer years with him?' Imtiyaz Begum considers herself 'an intellectual' and 'no less' than Nur in poetic gifts. She says, 'Dear friend, I beg to put it to you that you have insulted my intelligence by your deception...you thought I was a prostitute who dazzled Nur Sahib's eyes with my dance and so inveigled my way out of a house of prostitution into the house of a distinguished poet...Kindly remember that unlike Nur Sahib and unlike your respected self, I am a woman and have had no education but what I have found and seized for myself...When you rose to your feet and left the mehfil while I was singing my verse, was it not because you feared I might eclipse the verse of Nur Sahib and other male poets whom you revere? Was it not intolerable to you that a woman should match their gifts and even outstrip them?' She sends her manuscript to Deven for critical analysis. When Deven rejects her work (by tearing up the poems she sent) she is heartbroken. 'In this unfair world that you have created what else could I have been but what I am? Ask yourself that when you peruse my verses, if you have the courage...' The evening meetings in Nur's house where they discuss mundane topics over *biryani* and drinks rather symbolize their lack of serious effort. They are passing their time or killing time. There is lack of interest in literature even among people who come to Nur's house to listen to his poetry. They are shallow and are interested in eating and drinking and making merry. This crowd has actually come to hear Nur's second wife, who was a dancer. The wrath of the writer is evident. When a visitor comments adver-

sely on Nur, Nur does not even reply. Deven abhors this group of 'shopkeepers, clerks, bookies and unemployed parasites'. With the passage of time, Deven becomes disillusioned about his favorite poet. This constitutes a semiotic break. It violates that basic code by which the relations are governed in any particular society. Nur is a much weaker and infirm kind of a person who is fond of drinks. He vomits in the house after drinking and his wife humiliates him for drinking. He has a second wife, a dancer, who married him to earn against his name as a poet. People come to Nur's house not to hear his poetry, but to listen to Nur's second wife. She is still close to Nur. The protagonist Deven instead of interviewing Nur lands up paying bills for Nur's family. After Nur's death, Nur's second wife sends Nur's bills and poems to Deven. The novel ends when Deven finally accepts the gift of Nur's poetry from Nur's second wife. Perhaps 'that meant he was custodian of Nur's very soul and spirit'.

*In Custody* draws our attention to the importance of Urdu which was: 'The language of the court in the days of royalty – now languishes in the back lanes and gutters of the city. No place for it to live in the style to which it is accustomed, no emperors and nawabs to act as its patrons'.

Even when Deven hears Nur's poetry, he himself takes it as lightly as a bus ticket. This might be possible because Deven is described as a day-dreaming creature or the narrator wants to suggest that Nur has lost his vigor in his old age:

'a verse of Nur's fell into Deven's mind as casually as a discarded bus ticket:  
Night ends, dawn breaks, and sorrow reappears,  
Addressing us in morning light with a cock's  
shrill crow' (IC, 64).

Bhabha (1994) remarks, 'Terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative are produced performatively. The representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of *pre-given* ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation. The 'right' to signify from the periphery of authorized power and privilege does not depend on the persistence of tradition; it is resourced by the power of tradition to be reinscribed through the conditions of contingency and contradictoriness that attend upon the lives of those who are 'in the minority'. The recognition that tradition bestows is a partial form of identification. In restaging the past it introduces other, incommensurable cultural temporalities into the invention of tradition. This process estranges any immediate access to an originary identity or a 'received' tradition. The borderline engagements of cultural difference may as often be consensual as conflictual; they may confound our defi-

nitions of tradition and modernity; realign the customary boundaries between the private and the public, high and low; and challenge normative expectations of development and progress'.

## CONCLUSION

In an interview, Anita Desai responded to the suggestion that *In Custody* is a representation of the decay of Urdu literature as follows: '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. 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?' The novel draws cultural parallelism between Hindi and Urdu as languages (as language of masses and as official language) and how the semiosphere of Urdu (along with the culture associated with it) has now, with the passage of time (post independence), reduced to a language of poetry within a limited section of society. Urdu represents India's composite culture. Urdu language and literature survive till today as it is produced by certain composite traditions of the Indo-Persian culture within the Indian subcontinent. Urdu language and literature, beyond their spatial confines, have been more heard of than read. During the post-colonial era, Urdu was the mark of a cultivated man. It is the cultural legacy of India. The greatness of the novel lies in the fact it exposes the defeated cause of promotion of Urdu poetry, which has few takers. Urdu was popular earlier but now, Hindi is taking the edge. The reasons might be political, social or regional. The novelist, it should be noted, does not take sides or tries to convince the importance of one over the other, but narrates the events in due course of time. The central characters Deven, Murad, Nur, even Imtiaz Begam wish to restore the lost glory to Urdu. They are nostalgic about Urdu's past and somehow try to retain the former practices not willing to adapt with changing times. The presence of Urdu evokes, borrowing Bhabha's words, 'an archaic anxiety and aggressivity by impeding the search for narcissistic love-objects in which the subject (here Deven) can rediscover himself' (1994). Nur's companions have already declared the language dead, 'Urdu is supposed to have died, in 1947'. Desai's narrative cleverly deals with the Indian identity with respect to socio-cultural, socio-linguistic, politico-religious divides without causing controversies. Yet she mourns the loss of the poetic tradition of Urdu.

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