

In Custody (1984)

Story Most critics consider this to be one of Anita Desai's most successful novels. It tells the story of Deven, a small-town college lecturer who gets the opportunity to interview his hero, a famous Urdu poet (Nur) living in Delhi. His old friend, Murad, who edits an Urdu literary magazine in Delhi, comes to Deven's town and invites him to write a piece on the poet. Deven hopes he can not only write up an interview but also publish some of the poet's early work and possibly his memoirs. This opportunity, he thinks, is the chance of a lifetime. When he actually meets Nur in the oldest part of Delhi, Deven is shocked by his house in 'a narrow lane that was lined with nothing but gutters and seemed to serve as a latrine for the entire neighbourhood...It was as gloomy as a prison.' The poet himself is also disappointing and says that the Urdu language will soon be extinct. Still, every Sunday, his free day when he should be with his wife and children, Deven makes the long trip to Delhi to meet with the poet, Nur. Making no progress, Deven gives up hope for his life-changing project, but Murad convinces him to stick with it, suggesting that he buy a tape recorder to record the poet's language and thus enable students to learn more about Urdu. Deven borrows money from his college to purchase the recorder, but he can only afford a second-hand one. Deven is sceptical but the shopkeeper assures him that it is good quality and promises that his nephew will help him operate it for a nominal fee. Nur's wife then tells Deven that she can arrange a room where he can make the recordings, for a price, and Deven arranges another loan from his college. With everything set up, the interview is a total failure; it turns out to be less about poetry than about rum and kebabs. Deven then discovers that Nur's wife is also a poet with considerable talent, but he insults her by leaving in the middle of one of her recitals. In the end, Deven is left with debts (to his college, to Murad, to the shopkeeper), broken dreams and a troubled marriage.

Characters

Deven Deven is a dreamer, a weak man who is deceived by his own grandiose plans, neglects his family and is manipulated by others. He is a lecturer in Hindi at a small-town college in north India, but he thinks he could have been a famous poet in the Urdu language. As a Hindu, his love of Urdu poetry was controversial at the time.

Murad In total contrast to Deven, Murad is a slick, literary entrepreneur who lives in Delhi. He is cold and calculating, exploiting Deven and his own wife. His pockmarked face appears to symbolise the disfigurement of his character.

Nur Nur is the greatest living Urdu poet, the object of Deven's ill-fated infatuation. As a symbol of the fading grandeur of the Mughal Empire, he lives in squalid conditions and drinks rum rather than composes poems. He also laments the decline of Urdu and speaks with disdain of the Hindi language.

Imtiaz Imtiaz is Nur's second and younger wife, who is herself an excellent poet. She is ambitious, jealous and spiteful, and is determined to create a name for herself while her once-famous husband fades into the shadows.

Sarla Sarla is Deven's conventional wife, who stays at home and looks after children. She complains that Deven does not earn enough money to let the family live in comfort, by which she means herself. Like all the female characters in this novel by a woman author, Sarla is unsympathetic.

Themes

Language and identity To understand this theme, we need to know that Urdu (written in a Persian-Arabic script) and Hindi (written in devanagari, or Indian script) are the language of the Muslim and Hindu populations, respectively. Urdu was the court language of the Mughals and the official language of the British Raj until the mid-19th century. Urdu became the national language of Pakistan after 1947, while Hindi (and English) were the national languages of India. Despite these sharp political differences, however, the two languages share an overlapping vocabulary, grammar and syntax. 'Two scripts, one language,' as it is often said.

These tensions, in which speech underpins religious identity and nationalism, simmer on the surface of this novel. Deven is a Hindu but he loves Urdu poetry, an affection that is derided by his department head at the college, who calls him a 'traitor' who will 'ruin the students.' On the other hand, Murad, the editor of an Urdu literary magazine, calls Hindi 'the language of peasants...who eat

potatoes.' Nur, the old Urdu poet, laments the decline of Urdu, claiming that 'Urdu is dead, finished, waiting to be buried.' In other words Urdu is 'in custody,' under the protection of dying poets like Nur and aficionados like Deven. The author seems to be saying that while the political dispute over Hindi and Urdu is real, the issue is made worse by people who build up romantic images of a language and its past. The fanatics who want Hindi to be the national language are the mirror image of those who lament the 'death' of Urdu.

Women Like most of Desai's novels, *In Custody* explores the complexities of women's lives in modern (Post-1947) urban India. If Deven and Nur are the key male characters, and sharply contrasted, their wives are similarly opposite characters. Sarla, Deven's wife, is angry because her husband's meagre salary means she cannot have the comforts she hoped for. Despite her feelings, however, she does not openly confront him because of her socialisation as an Indian wife. 'Sarala never lifted her voice in his presence- countless generations of Hindu womanhood behind her stood in her way, preventing her from displaying open rebellion. Deven knew she would scream abuse only when she was safely out of the way, preferably in the kitchen, her own domain. Her method of defence was to go into the bedroom and snivel, refusing to speak at all, inciting their child to wail in sympathy.' Imtiaz, Nur's wife, is articulate and assertive, a talented poet who becomes famous through her semi-public recitals. Still, as a woman, she does not win the same acclaim as her now-inebriated but once-famous husband. The inability of men to appreciate women poets is highlighted in a letter that Imtiaz sends to Deven. She writes, 'I am enclosing my latest poems for you to read... Let me see if you are strong enough to face them and admit to their merit. Or if they fill you with fear and insecurity because they threaten you with danger – danger that your superiority to women become questionable.'