

IN CUSTODY

Anita Desai

(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.

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 vocabular, 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.'

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.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

DEVEN (Dreamer)

Character Although Deven teaches at a college, he is more a poet, or a would-be-poet, than a professor. While 'slaving' away at his teaching, he still cherishes dreams of being an artist and finds his wife, Sarla, is 'too prosaic.' Weak and self-aggrandising, Deven blames his poetic failure on her. His fantasy of himself feeds into and is fed by his (and others') romantic picture of the faded glory of Urdu poetry. Urdu, the court language of the great Mughals, is the perfect safe haven for his own unrealistic dreams and expectations for himself. His fantasies also leave him vulnerable, and he is manipulated by almost every other character in the novel. Nevertheless, he cannot gainsay his dedication to the cause of Urdu language and poetry. He is determined to record the voice of the greatest living Urdu poet for posterity (and Deven's own reputation). Deven is the custodian of Urdu poetry.

Activities Deven spends six days a week in the classroom, lecturing, marking papers and (trying) to counsel students. At home, when he isn't trying to compose poems, he argues with his wife. On his only off day (Sunday), he makes the long journey to Delhi to interview a famous Urdu poet.

Illustrative moments

Dreamer When Deven first visits the poet's house, he encounters dirt and dereliction, but his dream of Urdu poetry lifts him above that unpleasant reality. Looking at the house from the outside, he concedes that the ground floors look uninviting, but then hears the poet's voice coming from the upper floor. Looking up, Deven thinks, 'surely that is the abode of my god, the domain of beauty and imagination.'

Irresponsible Deven's dreams render him incapable of responsibility, in his job and in his marriage. In one telling scene, he is about to board a bus once more to Delhi when he sees a student and is reminded that he is neglecting his professional duties. The author captures this perfectly:

'In the moment that they stared at each other with mutual shock, 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 the morning light with a cock's shrill crow.'

Determined Despite his impractical idealism, Deven has the redeeming feature of resolute determination. It may be a dream, but he will pursue it, whatever the financial and emotional cost. This is expressed in the closing paragraphs of book. He has failed, and the sun is setting on some scrubland where he is walking, but he remains committed to his original goal: '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.'

Sensitive Deven also has the sensitivity to appreciate poetry, as the author makes clear in this moving description of him in the first few pages: Deven saw that poems 'could distance events and emotions, place them where perspective made it possible to view things clearly and calmly. He realized that he loved poetry not because it made things immediate but because it removed them to a position where they became bearable. 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.'

NUR (Cantankerous)

Character Nur (or Nur Shahjehanabadi, to give him his full name) is the elderly Urdu poet, whom Deven idolises as an embodiment of the faded glory of the Mughal Empire. Nur, who has two wives, is described as a sort of demi-god, a 'giant, statuesque figure with a white beard and a compact body like stone, teeming with experience.' Indeed, he is a beloved and glamorous poet, but he lives in a seedy part of old Delhi. And, as the various facets of his complex personality unfold, we see that he is far from being a saintly guru. In the past, he had dealings with shady underworld characters, he drinks a lot and he eats poorly (and suffers from piles as a result). He has a strange love of pigeons and of wrestling. In his dealings with Deven, his besotted admirer, Nur shows that he is shrewd at the very least and probably dishonest. He is unforthcoming in interviews conducted by Deven and is often absent at the appointed time and place for their meetings.

The character of Nur has baffled critics, some of whom consider him to be a gifted genius and a sympathetic old man, while others describe him as a senile fraud presiding over 'a court of louts and lechers.' The author herself revealed in an interview that Nur was based on a real-life poet in India, adding 'that the real poet was much more notorious than Nur.'

Activities Nur spends most of his time in the gloomy rooms of his dingy apartment, resting on cushions, sleeping or drinking with fellow poets. In the evenings, his house fills with his admirers, who are treated to traditional poetry recitals, complete with music and dancing, although others might describe it as a carnival of debauchery and raucous self-aggrandisement. He is often on the flat roof feeding his pigeons or under the pummelling hands of his masseur. And at all times, he is keen to learn about the results of amateur wrestling matches.

Illustrative moments

Cantankerous Without passing moral judgement on Nur, we can safely say that he is an irascible and rascally old man. A good illustration of this cantankerous element of his personality occurs when Deven first arrives at the poet's house to interview him. Deven considers Nur the greatest living poet of India, a man whose verses 'light up the world, from India to Syria.' However, when Deven explains his project to print Nur's poems in a new journal, the old man stops him dead in his tracks and says 'Urdu language is dead, finished. So, now you see its corpse lying here, waiting to be buried.' Nur then asks Deven about himself and when he discovers that he teaches in a Hindi (not an Urdu) department, he accuses Deven of being a spy sent by the authorities to find the last remaining vestiges of Urdu and to destroy it.

Perceptive Despite his many shortcomings and unpleasant traits, Nur is not a fool and, indeed, at times shows insight and depth of understanding. This facet of his multi-layered personality is illustrated during the final interview that Deven conducts with him, this time in a brothel. Deven is desperate, defeated even, and appears to fumble with his questions, when Nur suddenly looks him straight in the eye and says in a calm voice, 'You have this problem, don't you? You're trying to sift

and select something from the debris of our lives, aren't you?' Here, Nur may be a spokesperson for all artists, including novelists, who attempt to create something lasting out of fleeting impressions and experiences. A minute later, Nur becomes even more expansive, almost philosophical, when he tries to explain the problem with Urdu literary culture. Nur says that Deven and others like him are too caught up in contemporary politics. 'That is wrong, wrong. You have all been wrong for thirty years or more. It is not a question of Hindustan and Pakistan, or of Hindi and Urdu. It is not even a question of history. It is, instead, a question of time, which is too vast for you to understand.' We are not sure what Nur means by this elliptical statement, but he then breaks out in a mystical poem about the evanescence of love, which might give us a hint.