

Murad (in Desai's novel *In Custody*) **Devious**

Character Murad stands in total contrast to Deven, his childhood friend and the main character of this novel. As the son of a wealthy Kashmiri carpet shop-owner, Murad represents opportunity and independence, whereas poor Deven 'could be bribed and bought to do anything.' In adulthood, Murad is the editor of an Urdu-language literary magazine in Delhi, which he hopes will stem the tide of Hindi in dominating north Indian life. His father, apparently, has disinherited him, but he is cunning resourceful in maintaining an image in Delhi that he is still wealthy. Moreover, he is cold and calculating in exploiting Deven and even his own wife. His pockmarked face appears to symbolise the disfigurement of his character. And yet, in the deft portrait drawn by the author, we feel some sympathy for a man who is driven to deceive others in order to maintain a pretence of wealth and status.

Activities Murad is usually in motion. He makes a long bus journey in the first chapter to convince Deven to come to Delhi. He walks the back streets of old Delhi, visiting printers and poets, in connection with his magazine business. We see him taking tea at pavement stalls, where he uses his flattery and fast talk to project an image of himself as a wealthy man who is 'slumming it.'

Illustrative moments

Manipulative Murad's manipulative nature is illustrated in an early scene, when he makes a trip outside Delhi to visit his old-friend Deven. When they meet, Deven says he must get home because his wife expects him, but Murad stops him. 'If I come all the way from Delhi to see you, you're not going home. No, you're going to take me to lunch, to the best restaurant in town.' Deven feels embarrassed and agrees. 'Yes, here, have a cigarette,' he said, reaching into his pocket. 'I brought two.' 'Still a two-cigarette man?' said Murad, mockingly. Slowly, deviously, Murad steers his friend not just to lunch but to collaborate in a project that Murad hopes will revive the fortunes of his failing magazine. What makes Murad so insidious is his ability to pinpoint Deven's weaknesses, such as his dependence on his wife and his 'two-cigarette' frugality.

Deceptive Murad is not just manipulative, he is also a cheat. When Deven needs a tape recorder to record the poetry of an old Urdu poet, Murad makes sure that he buys the cheapest and most inferior model at an inflated price. Deven is suspicious and says he 'will not pay fancy prices.' But the salesman, a friend of Murad, replies, 'Then how will you get fancy goods, eh?' In the end, after a series of hollow promises and exchange of winks between Murad and the salesman, Deven is persuaded to pay a lot of money, some of which, of course, goes back to Murad 'under the table.'

Nostalgic Murad is a thoroughly venal character, scamming people at every turn, but at least he does have a feeling of nostalgia for the faded glories of the Urdu language and its literature. On Deven's first visit to Murad in Delhi, to record the poetry of an old poet, Murad expresses his motivation for the recording project. 'Urdu,' he says, 'was once the language of the court in days of royalty. Now it languishes in the back lanes and gutters of the city. No palace for it to live in the style to which it is accustomed, no emperors and nawabs to act as its patrons.' It is for this reason, to capture the old poetry before it disappears, that he has roped Deven into the recording project. Of course, Murad being Murad, we are not quite sure that his motive is purely one of linguistic preservation. Desai drops hints that the real reason behind his project is financial, to prop up his failing magazine. Even if that is the case, his despair at the decline of his language seems genuine.