

# Images of Indian Women and Gender Politics in Anita Desai's *In Custody*

Paper Submission: 10/10/2021, Date of Acceptance: 23/10/2021, Date of Publication: 24/10/2021

## Abstract

Anita Desai, a novelist of psychological realism and human consciousness, represents family life in majority of her literary writings. Her novel, *In Custody* (1984) was shortlisted for Booker prize and filmed by Merchant Ivory production. The novel is one of such memorable literary creations in which she portrays life with more perceptivity and sensitivity. In her early novels, she delineates her main protagonists as women personas who play pivotal roles in the novels. But this novel revolves around a male protagonist, his relationships. It captures the influences of popular cultural and cultural transformation on the middle and lower middle class people. The novelist graphically depicts sea changes in the role and status of languages, specifically Urdu and images of Indian women in the changing scenario. Salman Rushdie, a renowned novelist, writes in introduction of this novel, "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" (Rushdie 5). Her works reveal her struggle for female autonomy played out against the backdrop of the patriarchal cultural pattern. She picks the characters from the backdrop of the patriarchal cultural pattern. She delineates her characters from real life with their aspirations and dreams along with their responsibilities and day-to-day concerns.

**Keywords:** Images, Women, Custody, Relationship, Politics and Cultural Transformation

## Introduction

In the present novel, the protagonist of the novel is a male, one who is not very dynamic and dominating but docile and good for nothing in the competitive world. The major or minor female characters are also not in a very good position socially, economically and intellectually. They have to face different kinds of challenges in their life, which shows their helplessness and marginalized position in society. The present paper focuses on the social, economic and intellectual position of women in the male centric Indian society. Man-woman relationships have always been complicated. Sometimes even a healthy relationship cannot survive when people give priorities to their personal yearnings and tastes. Men and women fight for more independence and supremacy to prove themselves right, consequently, they suffer from inner conflicts. They seek love and parallelly want to prove themselves equal or even better than each other. The basic cause of these conflicts is the patriarchal society where men enjoy a socially dominant position and women are taught to cultivate a submissive femininity. Thus, the novelist presents the different images of both masculinity and femininity which are developed in the context of social discrimination and phase of cultural transformation.

Despite great efforts in every country towards gender as well as social equality, modern society has failed to make relationships between men and women smoother and harmonious. Society expects that men and women should live together in communion and harmony, following the established set of traditional rules of patriarchy. Although, the truth is that human desires and capacities have a tendency to go beyond the various limits of traditional gender roles. Only the persons having similar values, attitudes, and interests tend to form stable and enduring relationships. A true and stable relationship between man and woman does not need similarity in money, status, beauty, and education; it needs love, care and mutual understanding. The problems in relationships simply arise when people expect or assume that the opposite sex should feel, think or act in the same way as they desire. Lack of trust and mutual understanding are the major factors that result in the collapse of the relationship

**Rajesh Kumar**  
Assistant Professor,  
Dept. of English  
Indira Gandhi National  
College,  
Ladwa, Dhanora,  
Haryana, India

between man and woman. In Indian context, Edward Said points out, "as primary resistance[got] under way, to be followed by full-fledged nationalist parties, unfair male practices like concubinage, polygamy, foot binding, *Sati*, virtual enslavement[became the focal point of women's resistance...Raja Roy, an early nineteenth-century nationalist, influenced by Mary Wollstonecraft mobilized the early campaign for Indian women's right a common pattern in the colonized world where the first intellectual stirring against the injustice included attention to the abused rights of 'all oppressed classes'" (Said 263)

The differences are there between husband and wife, especially in the matter of managing the household affairs. Deven is preoccupied more in his pursuit of Urdu poetry than in the management of his family. Deven aspires for an intellectual world of poetry, while Sarla longs for a luxurious life in her house. Sarla's dreams as a wife are shattered by marrying a man of "the academic profession" and moving to a small town outside the capital. As a man of defeated vision, Deven understands the suffering of his wife; but the thoughts of his mind are eclipsed by his poetic consciousness. He therefore keeps himself at a distance from his wife. Deven seeks his fulfillment and satisfaction in poetry.

Murad one of the friends of Deven enkindles the love of poetry in Deven's mind. He advises him to take the interview of the famous Urdu poet, Nur, with a promise of publishing it in his literary journal, *Awaaz*. Deven always lives in ambiguity. He is ready to interview Nur Shahjahanabadi. When Murad inspires him to associate himself with Nur, he feels excited and elevated. Deven comes to Delhi to meet Nur, but he is disappointed. He comes back to Mirpore. Murad with one more trick comes to Mirpore and meets Deven. This time he persuades him to be the secretary of Nur. Deven succumbs easily to the academic temptations of Murad. Deven arranges a tape-recorder on the advice of Murad, as an interviewer. He again gets disappointed at Nur's house because of his involvement with wine and his two wives. He observes a vulgar family quarrels in his house. His *Begum* has planted herself in his house like a witch. The house of Nur appears a brothel to Deven; it is like a restaurant where wine and dance are rampant. The poet and his family have been entrapped with poverty and people of decaying moral values. The frustrated Nur extremely indulged in immoral activities and greediness. Once the poet of great repute has become the puppet of some drunkard people who have no concern for poetry and literature. The novelist implies the idea of social and cultural changes through the transformation of great Urdu poet Nur:

A loud protest broke out. Another bottle of rum was opened and a fresh drink poured. Someone shouted hilariously, calling up the women. Let us have women and dance. Then let us see whose blood is still. Deven jerked up his head to see who could be so crude, so insolent, but Nur was smiling as he shook his head (196).

Apparently, it seems that women and their dance have long since overtaken him and the women for him are just a source of entertainment. The penetrative study of this novel reveals the viewpoint of patriarchal attitudes of society towards women. The poet sinned in his life, and he is aware of the punishment that might be inflicted on him. He confesses that he is prepared for suffering. Through suffering, he will atone for his sins. He realizes these sins shifted on the wooden bed as if in pain. The repetition of the word 'suffering' affirms the karma theory of Indian philosophy. This also reminds one of the famous lines of George Eliot in *Adam Bede* that the people determine their actions as much as actions determine them. Indian philosophy stamps the validity of the *karma* theory. This melancholic vision of Nur exhibits his helplessness in coming out of the vicious circle created by him and his circumstances. He finds himself in chains and in custody. There are other characters who are also the victims of their own actions. Nur's wife regards herself a victim of social injustice and gender disparity. When Deven hears a few lines from Nur's wife and he feels the stinging of scorpions in her psyche:

She said she was a bird in a cage that she longed for flight, 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. When would he

come? She languished, panting for the clouds that would carry him to her and the rain that would require her thirst. It was clear she had learnt everything from him from Nur, and it was disgraceful how she was imitating his verse, parodying his skill flaunting before his face what she had stolen from him, so slyly, so cunningly (92-93.).

Deven's attitude towards her shows the patriarchal mindset of a conservative Indian. His attitude implies that women's identity and individuality, her desires and feelings, and her psychological temperament have not been positively analyzed and understood in Indian social structure. Desai has her own limitations because of the fact that she belongs to the upper middle class and being a woman, her portrayal of women characters is more realistic than the men. Her characterization of female characters shows her, "obsessive involvement with the characters' past as key to their consciousness, their life" (Kanwar 18). She raises very pertinent points through the speeches and conversation of her characters. The novel unearths the complication of man-woman relationship and issues of gender politics. She delineated different women characters such as Sarla, the wife of Deven, Imtiaz Begum the second wife of Nur. It is noteworthy, here that none of them is satisfied with their husbands but first one does not show any dissent note openly but later one raises the issue of gender inequality very passionately:

I am a woman and have had no education but what I have found and seized for myself. Unlike poets and scholars who have won distinction, I have no patron apart from my honoured husband, non-encouragement and no sympathy. Was it not intolerable to you that a woman should match their gifts and even outstrip them? 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? Is it not you who has made me play the role of the loose woman in gaudy garments by refusing to take my work seriously and giving me just that much regards that you would extend to even a failure in the arts as long as the artist was male? In this unfair world that you have created, what else could I have been but what I am? (229-230)

The above passage delineates the deeply rooted resentment and voices of dissents of Imtiaz Begum towards patriarchy. It highlights the partialities and discriminations which women have to face in the different spheres of life. Desai tried to reveal that her female characters Sarla, Imtiaz Begum and Safia Begum have their own sensibilities, sensitivities and susceptibilities. They desire to be treated in a sensitive, polite and respectful way. Mere creature comforts cannot appease or please them. Unless and until they are treated as equal human being and their emotions, expectations, sentiments and aspirations are given due consideration. Financial influences could be a prerequisite for a happy and healthy life.

**Objective of the Study**

The aim of the study is to analyse the images of Indian women in the novel of Anita Desai. The study is also focused on the gender discrimination in the writings of female writer.

**Conclusion**

In *In Custody* female characters like Sarla, Imtiaz Begum and Safia Begum feel oppressed, repressed and subjugated in their own homes because of the domineering nature of their husbands. They neither fulfil their responsibilities and obligations towards their families nor do they let their spouses give vent to their ordeals, distressed and nightmarish conditions. Their ruthless patriarchal attitude is evident from the way they go about in their life. It is very ill-fated that in our society women have never been treated as full human beings. The casual and ignorant attitude towards women is largely accountable for their consistent miseries and sufferings. This condition and the status of the women is not new, their destiny from the ancient times is the same. However, they have been considered *Devis* but in *Manusmriti* it has been mentioned clearly that women cannot be left unprotected whether the male characters portrayed by Desai seem helpless and good for nothing. Thus, the paper is an effort to analyse characterization patterns of male characters in Desai's writing especially in the present novel. The female gender subjectivity has been highlighted while representing male characters in her novels. It has generally been considered that gender politics plays a very substantial role in depicting gender politics in literature. Female authors engage themselves in over adoration of feminine characters and demonstrate them by foregrounding the strengths of their female characters over their weaknesses; and reveal degeneration of male counterparts. Similarly male authors are inherently inclined towards male characters and reflect patriarchy in their works. It has also been observed that genuine representation of men by women authors and women by men authors, is not possible; there is always author's gender subjectivity involved in the representation of images through literature. Gender identity and gendered representation are the pivotal concerns in this analysis.

**References**

1. Budholia, O.P. *Anita Desai: Vision and Technique in Her Novels*. Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation. 2001.
2. Dodiya, Jaydipsingh. *Critical Essay on Anita Desai's Fiction*. New Delhi: IVY Publishing House. 2007 rpt. 2013.
3. Dubey, Vinay. *A Study of love, sex & marriage in Anita Desai's Novels*. Bareilly: Prakash Book Depot. 2008.
4. Iyengar, K.R. Srinivas. *Indian Writing in English*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd. 2001.
5. Kanwar, Asha. *The Novels of Virginia Woolf and Anita Desai: A Comparative Study*. New Delhi: Prestige Books. 1996.
6. Lin Ho, Elaine Yee. *Anita Desai*. Northcote Horndon: House Publishers Ltd. 2006
7. Meerabai, K. *Women's Voices: The Novels of Indian Women Writers*. New Delhi, Prestige Books. 1996.
8. Peterson, Holst Kirsten. "Interview with Anita Desai" *Kunapipi*. 6:3 (1984).
9. Said Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage. 1993.
10. Singhal, Suresh. *Anita Desai: Existential Dilemma in Her Novels (An Affirmative view)*. New Delhi. Sanjay Prakashan. 2008.
11. Woolf, Virginia. *The Common Reader*. London: Hogarth Press: 1953.
12. Desai Anita. *In Custody*. New Delhi: Random House Publications. 1984.
13. All the references in the parenthesis are from this edition only