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**Women Characters in Anita Desai's *In Custody*: An Exploration**

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**Abstract:**

Anita Desai's women characters, though, are the central protagonists in the novel *In Custody*. However, their presence in the novel makes for a strong feminist statement. Whereas Sarla is caught in an unhappy marriage with Deven, Safia Begum is a traditional Muslim wife. Both Sarla and Safia Begum are victims of patriarchal conditioning. However, Imtiaz Begum is the "new woman" that Anita Desai champions who do not accept her roles and aspires to reach higher in life by hook or crook. Anita Desai's novel *In Custody* deals with the above theme captivantly. The research paper "Women Characters in Anita Desai's *In Custody*: An Exploration" critically reflects on Desai's portrayal of women characters to make a bold statement about the socio-political and cultural conditioning in which women live in India and how there is a need for women to be more assertive like Imtiaz Begum.

**Keywords:**

Anita Desai, Imtiaz Begum, *In Custody*, Safia Begum, Sarla Women Characters.

Anita Desai is a writer of eminence who has in her novels tried to portray the plight of women in such a way so that we as readers understand how women suffer in a patriarchal setup. Women are not only made to suffer in a male-dominated society but their voices are often silenced. They are thought to be second-class citizens who have no rights and desires of their own. Whenever a woman is seen to be having any desire of any kind, she is thought to

be an aberration and therefore shunned and neglected in such a way that she had to suffer immensely.

In the novel, *In Custody*, Anita Desai does not deal with women characters as the primary protagonists of the novel. The novel deals with Deven Sharma, a temporary Hindi lecturer of Lala Ram Lal College, Mirpore and his relationship with the famous Urdu poet Nur Shahjehanabadi who lives in Old Delhi in a dilapidated mansion. Deven is an ardent admirer of Nur. When Murad asks him to interview Nur to write a feature on Nur for Murad's magazine *Awaaz*, Deven passionately follows his ambition of interviewing Nur. Thus a relationship is formed, which is the main thread of the novel. Therefore, the novel *In Custody* seems to be a study of the relationships of two male characters (Gupta, 2002). However, amidst these two male protagonists, we come across three women characters who stand by their rights in the novel. These three women characters represent the feminist aspects of the novel. Deven's wife Sarla, Nur's two wives – Safia Begum and Imtiaz Begum- are not the main characters of the novel, yet they stand in much significance as far as the feminist viewpoint the novel is concerned.

Sarla is introduced in the novel as the wife of Deven Sharma, who teaches Hindi in a college named Lala Ram Lal College in Mirpore. Deven and Sarla do not have a very harmonious relationship as presented in the novel, which talks a great deal about the man-woman relationship in the novel. Through the character of Sarla, Anita Desai is probably commenting on the average Indian woman who finds themselves trapped in a marriage in which they have little say and from which they have no way out. Deven and Sarla share the relationship of husband and wife in the novel *In Custody*. However, in real terms, they both behave to each other as if they are strangers. They probably feel this way because they both know they are victims of some kind or the other. Anita Desai, in the novel, writes - "Although each understood the secret about the other, it did not bring about any closeness of spirit, any comradeship, because they also sensed that two victims ought to avoid each other, not yoke together their joint disappointments. A victim does not look to help from another victim; he looks for a redeemer. At last, Deven had his poetry; she had nothing, and so there was an added accusation and bitterness in her look." This passage seems to be the central statement in understanding Deven – Sarla relationship in the novel.

Sarla had very high aspirations for life – as most people have. All of us feel that life should provide us with all comforts. She too desired for things in her life - “So she had dared to aspire towards a telephone, a refrigerator, even a car.” There is nothing wrong with such aspirations. When people all around have such material comforts in life, it is natural that Sarla would want them in her life. But Deven Sharma, the temporary teacher of a private college in a small town, could not afford all these. Anita Desai writes – “But by marrying into the academic profession and moving to a small town outside the capital, none of these dreams had materialized, and she was naturally embittered. The thwarting of her aspirations had cut two dark furrows from the corners of her nostrils to the corners of her mouth, as deep and permanent as surgical scars.”

Sarla, as the above quote from the novel, presents is “naturally embittered” as all her hopes have been dashed down and that she knows that she will never be able to realize those dreams in her life (Siwanna, 1994). She knows very well that she is doomed in this marriage with Deven, and she has no way out. She has accepted her life as it is, but this acceptance is not without any condition – it has led her to be very bitter about life. And this bitterness has affected their relationship. So we see that when Deven comes back home after his first encounter with Nur at the early hours of the morning, he does not go home directly but instead prefers to go to college where he thinks he will refresh himself - “he could not go home and face Sarla’s stony face, her sulks or her open fury; it would be better to go straight to college.”

When Deven goes home later in the day, Sarla is gossiping with her neighbour, and when Deven enters the home, Sarla looks as if he is a stranger. Anita Desai writes - “As he pushed open the gate with its familiar rusty sound of protest, both women raised their dropping heads and stared at him as if he were a stranger, an interloper. Then Sarla twitched a fold of her sari over her head. She didn’t normally cover her head when he appeared; she was preparing a scene. He tried to smile, then lifted his hand to cover his mouth because he felt he shouldn’t.” This shows that Sarla is not the type of female who will accept everything that the husband does. She knows how to protest, and it is because of this, Deven finds ways not to encounter her to carry on with marital peace ((Bala and Pabby, 2002).

In the novel, Anita Desai also comments about Sarla that “For the wife of a poet, she seemed too prosaic.” But her being prosaic is not her fault. She is prosaic by nature, whereas

Deven is in the love of poetry. Deven has his poetry to keep himself engaged, but Sarla has nothing except for her son Manu. She is a victim of circumstances. In her victimization, there is no one's fault but that of the society that makes people get married without knowing each other and consequently suffer throughout their lives.

Imtiaz Begum is the second wife of Nur Shahjehanabadi, the famous Urdu poet in Anita Desai's novel *In Custody*. She seems too fascinated by the poet Nur and presented in the novel to be jealous of his poetic achievements as she strives to be a poetess. She is being presented in the novel to be a "female mafia" who is a terror to the supposed admirers of Nur, and often she even vexes Nur for his excesses. In other terms, we can say that she is "the new woman" in the novel (Bala and Pabby, 2002). Anita Desai paints with much concern to show how women take up the arenas, traditionally thought males, such as poetry.

Imtiaz Begum is fascinated by the world of Nur's poetry to such an extent that she marries him knowing fully well that Nur has a wife. She is not from well off background – she was in the quarters where dancing and singing are the night's norm. But within that world of muddy waters, she is like a lotus that has shined so brightly that Nur could not but not only notice her beauty and talent; but also be fascinated to such an extent to marry her. As she has a poetic bent of mind and often endorses herself in poetic creations, she is portrayed in the novel to have an advantage over Nur's first wife, Safia Begum (Bala and Pabby, 2002).

In the house of Nur Shahjehanabadi, it is Imtiaz Begum whom everyone dreads for her authority. She wants to keep strict control of things. She is the one who vexes the supposed admirers of Nur by saying that they are corrupting the poet and not letting him concentrate on his poetry. We see Imtiaz Begum saying to Nur's admirers – "You have reduced him to that, making him eat and drink like some animal, like a pig." This shows that Imtiaz Begum does not want Nur to live in such a pathetic condition. He is surrounded by his admirers who eat and make merry.

Here we see that Imtiaz Begum is very concerned about Nur, his poetry, and his health. He tirades Nur throughout the novel to make him concentrate on own self and not live so much in the world and company of his admirers. Moreover, he wants him to carry on producing great poetry, not for anything else for the sake of art. Therefore when Deven comes to take Nur's Interview, Imtiaz Begum seems to be the most significant impediment.

She does not allow Deven to take the interview in the poet's house. Ultimately, Deven is forced to take the interview outside Nur's house.

As already mentioned, Imtiaz Begum is an aspiring poetess trying to carve a niche in the world of poetry. However, poetry being a male bastion, it is challenging for her to prove herself in that world (Chaudhry, 1995). She has probably married Nur to get a chance to remain close to Nur and learn some tricks of producing great poetry. She seems to be having a very practical bent of mind and decides things that would result in bringing and getting things for herself. So on her birthday celebrations, we see that she has not only performed but also taken away Nur's audience from him when the great poet is sitting in one corner of the room in darkness. Safia Begum tells her, "You have taken his name, and his reputation and today even his admirers." This serious charge is being laid on her, but it has some truth: she was always aspiring for some attention as a poet. She got the chance on her birthday to do so and therefore did so without any hesitation.

Imtiaz Begum takes away Nur's admirers on her birthday, making many think she is jealous of Nur's popularity as a poet. Moreover, these scholars also see that Imtiaz Begum's becoming an impediment to Deven taking Nur's interview also as her jealousy where she does not allow the interview to happen as that would bring him some fame (Chaudhry, 1995). But when this kind of reading is done of Imtiaz Begum, it defeats the purpose of Anita Desai creating the character. Anita Desai is trying to portray a loving wife and an aspiring poetess in the character of Imtiaz Begum. Her taking away of Nur's admirers was nothing but an attempt on her part to get some attention for herself where she has no other things in her mind. Even impeding Deven's interview is primarily because she wants the poet to be left alone to himself to concentrate on his poetry (Tiwari, 2004).

It can be concluded that Imtiaz Begum is the image of the new woman that Anita Desai is painting in the novel *In Custody*. She is bold and authoritative – she wants to take control of things and prosper as a poetess. She does not want to live a life in the darkness and the world of infamy but has every aspiration to come forward and let the world know about herself. In these terms, when we see the character of Imtiaz Begum, she seems to be a new kind of woman who is willing to take charge of life and live life according to her terms.

Safia Begum is the first wife of Nur Shahjebadi, the famous Urdu poet in the novel *In Custody* by Anita Desai. She is of a practical bent of mind and is often seen to be very

money-minded. When she sees Deven practically a failure to get an interview of Nur, she thinks that she can make money by arranging the interview. She advises Deven that he can take the interview somewhere outside Nur's house, where Nur's second wife Imtiaz Begum will not impede (Bande, 1988). So she arranges for the interview in the neighbouring house where Deven and Nur can be at peace with themselves without any intervention from Imtiaz Begum. She does this for money and says that she will not allow Nur to go out of the house without money.

At the end of the novel, Deven receives a letter from Nur where Nur has asked for Rs. five hundred as a bill for the rent for using the premises for an interview. Here too, Safia Begum shows her money-mindedness as she tries to take out as much money as possible from Deven. It is to be reminded that poets and their passion for art often make them forget material needs. To counter that aspect of Nur's life, probably Safia Begum has become money-minded as she had to run a family.

Thus through these three characters, Anita Desai has represented three different aspects of women in Indian society. Sarla represents the victimized state of Indian women in a marriage where they have to leave all their desires and live a lifeless life following the husband's societal demands and demands. In Safia Begum, we see the money-minded woman ready to earn money for the family's sake. In Imtiaz Begum, we see the "new woman" who is willing to take every step to reach a specific place in life – who wants to live a life with authority so that she can achieve things for herself. She wants to be a poetess, but the male world of poetry does not want to accept her, but she wants to make every possible attempt to reach that world.

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