

Dream vs. Reality in In Custody:

Deven's Journey and His Triumph over Disillusionments

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Abstract: Anita Desai is a renowned Indian-English novelist. Born in 1937 in Mussoorie, India, she is well known for her critically acclaimed novels and children's books like *Clear Light of the Day*, *Fasting, Feasting*, *The Village by the Sea* etc. She has won several awards including the Sahitya Akademi Award, The Guardian Prize and three Booker Prize nominations for her writings. Her works often explore themes of isolation, identity, cultural displacement, and the internal conflict of her characters. Desai delights readers through the use of literary techniques like stream of consciousness, flashbacks and indirect discourse to get into the depth of the character's psyches and delve deep into their internal conflicts. In her novel *In Custody* which was published in 1984, Desai brings forth the admirations/aspirations vs. the reality of life through the protagonist Deven Sharma. The topic of discussion in the research paper titled "Dream vs. Reality in *In Custody*: The Tragic Gap in Deven's Journey" is exploring the journey of Deven, his dreams and aspirations, his love for Urdu poetry, his struggles, his internal conflict and his realization of the harsh realities of life.

Keywords: Dreams vs. reality, identity, self-realisation, patronizing Urdu, dying culture, disillusionment, human emotions, complexities of life

Introduction: The novel revolves around the lives of the characters: Deven Sharma, the protagonist; Sarla, Deven's wife; NurShajanabadi, the legendary Urdu poet; Safiya Begum, Nur's first wife; Imtiyaz Begum, Nur's second wife; Murad, Deven's childhood friend and the editor of the magazine *Awwwz*; Siddhiq, Deven's colleague and the head of Urdu Department etc. Every character is undergoing an inner conflict which leaves their lives restrained in many ways against their wishes.

This case study focuses mainly on the journey of the protagonist of the novel, Deven Sharma, a temporary lecturer in Lala Ram Lal College at Mirepore. Deven has his heart and soul immersed in Urdu poetry but contrary to his heart's desire he is chained to his job as a Hindi lecturer, a subject of the masses; questioning how often does one literally go out of their way to follow their deep desires regardless of societal norms. In the post independent social/political scenario Urdu poetry represents a dying culture while Hindi symbolizes the dominant choice. Deven's choice

and acceptance of Hindi over Urdu as a profession is a source of constant ache and turmoil in his heart. Moreover, the financial restraints he is going through is an ever persisting reality killing many of his aspirations, his marriage and the quality of life he desires.

Urdu poetry was first introduced to Deven when he was a boy by his father who was a schoolteacher, a scholar and a lover of Urdu poetry. For Deven, Urdu "*the language of the court in the days of royalty*" (Desai, 8) is a symbol and source of inspiration, beauty, depth, imagination, richness of cultural heritage, emotional fulfillment - more so the meaning of life. Perhaps it represents everything he desired to have in life. He has strong conviction about the very high standards of Urdu language and immense love for the language. Urdu is where his heart and soul rests. But succumbing to the existential needs, he picks up Hindi as his profession. Hence he lacks the inspiration and the zeal as a Hindi lecturer which makes his life mundane, unsatisfied, unhappy and disappointed.

The novel opens with Murad - Deven's childhood friend giving him an unexpected visit in his college. Murad offers him to interview the legendary Urdu poet NurSahajanabadi, Deven is apprehensive at first but later gave in to Murad's insistence despite his doubts. Deven is a great admirer and lover of the poet himself and Urdu poetry. Through this meeting, his hopes of reviving the majesty of the Urdu language and Urdu poetry run really high. Moreover this also gives him an opportunity to escape the monotony of his life as he felt trapped in the dull, uninspiring life in Mirepore - the city which itself is in a state of decay with no growth and stagnancy. The state of Mirepore can be assessed from the words "*But where was the centre of this formless, shapeless town on the plain that had not even a river or a hill to give it any reason for its existence?*" (Desai, 15). Murad's insistence of meeting the legendary poet NurShazanabadi fills Deven with a sense of purpose and the dream of meeting the legendary poet makes him excited, exalted, anxious and deep down he anticipates a new brighter phase of life ahead.

Deven sets out to meet the poet and after going through numerous mazelike streets and the bazaars of Delhi, he finally reaches the poet's dwelling. When the poet NurSahajanabadi approved to meet Deven, Deven goes into a state of sublime. A joy beyond words. His hopes, happiness and aspirations rise to a new height. These lines exude his deep emotions towards the legendary poet Nur. "*It was to him as if God had leaned over a cloud and called for him to come up, and angels might have been drawing him up these ancient splintered stairs to meet the deity: so jubilantly, so timorously, so gratefully did he rise. This, surely, was the summons for which he had been waiting all these empty years, only he had not known it would assume this form.*" (Desai, 36)

Prior to meeting the legendary Urdu poet, Deven anticipated Nur to be living a great life, rich in culture and a great ambience. For Deven, Nur's home represents a shrine - a place of worship, reverence and deep emotional significance to the glory of Urdu poetry. He envisions Nur as a living legend, a spiritual and cultural beacon. Deven had imagined and expected NurSahab living in an atmosphere of intellectual richness and dignity but the reality was grim. Desai writes "*The room in which the poet lay resting, like a great bolster laid on a flat low wooden divan, was in*

semi-darkness” (Desai, 37). He finds him in a squalid, chaotic environment, surrounded by opportunistic hangers-on, noise, and disorder. His disappointment is evident as we read these lines *“He had pictured him living either surrounded by elderly, sage and dignified litterateurs or else entirely alone, in isolation. What were these clowns and jokers and jugglers doing around him, or he with them?”* (Desai, 49).

Deven feels deeply disillusioned and disturbed by the poet's living conditions. The poet was living in constant chaos amid his quarreling discontent wives, gambler followers. He could sense even the great poet himself was trapped and needed an escape from these lines *“To escape from these - these devils from the gambling dens and drinking houses of my past.”* (Desai, 44). His expectations shatter as he comes face to face with the poet's deteriorating state and wretched way of life against his imagined figure of an ideal poet.

Upon meeting the poet, Deven discloses to Nur that he has come to interview the poet on the request of his friend Murad, editor of the Urdu magazine *Awaaz*. In the novel, Desai writes *“He has asked me to interview you for the special issue on Urdu poetry. It is a great honour for me, sir, a great privilege”* (Desai, 38). In response to this, Nur's statement comes as *“How can there be Urdu poetry where there is no Urdu language left? It is dead, finished....So now you see its corpse lying here, waiting to be buried”* (Desai, 39). These lines are one of the most poignant and symbolic lines in the novel.

Deven has immense love for Urdu language and culture. According to him, Urdu is a noble and timeless language and he would go above and beyond in preserving the cultural heritage of the language. But from Nur's statement about Urdu language, the irony is striking. Through the use of metaphor of death and burial, the poet compares the post Independent state of Urdu language to a **‘corpse’** - a once living entity but now lifeless and soulless, and **‘waiting to be buried’** - in its final stage of existence and waiting to be disposed off to decay as it is no longer relevant and active. The language has lost its soul among people and nobody even cares to honor, respect and revive the language. These lines from the legendary Urdu poet himself compels Deven to confront the declining state of the language and realise that romanticizing alone the fading glory of the past can never save the grace of the glory Urdu language once achieved. His deep belief gets shattered when the great Urdu poet NurShahjanabadi himself discloses to Deven that Urdu language is dead and is no longer relevant.

While Deven is dealing with the harsh realities of Urdu language and its declining glory, he is also enduring a whirlwind of conflicts in his paradise at home. Both he and his wife Sarla are unhappy and dissatisfied in their married lives. Deven dreamt of a marriage of companionship, understanding, and support but his dream goes unfulfilled as he finds his wife Sarla to be emotionally distant and constantly complaining. Sarla on the other hand was neither happy nor fulfilled in her marriage with Deven. Before she got married she had her own aspirations about her marriage and had dreamt of a marriage where her basic material needs of *“Fan, phone, frigidaire”* (Desai, 69) are met besides her fancy admirations of *“stepping out of a car with a plastic bag shopping bag full of groceries and filling them into the gleaming refrigerator, then*

rushing to the telephone places on a lace dolly..”(Desai, 69). Sarla’s discontent and complaints about lack of her basic needs, mundane domestic chores, more importantly impoverished nature of life cannot just be overlooked as she herself is exhausted with the meagre quality of life wherein there is no love and comfort that she had always desired. *“All of Sarla’s goals have been crushed, and she realises that she will never be able to achieve them”(Malik, 2023).* Deven and Sarla were more or less both victims of their own situations, both felt trapped and stuck with no respite. They both understood the secret truth about one another but they did not make visible efforts to get over their disappointments. No clear heart to heart communication between them, lack of emotional connection and empathy for each other’s struggles and feelings, tear down the dream of an ideal marriage and they settle for a rather mechanical, loveless, stagnant and an unhappy one. The disillusion of a happy marriage is thus clearly evident in Deven’s life.

Overlooking his marital conflicts, Deven moves in pursuit of reviving Urdu and saving the cultural heritage. He persuades Nur Sahajanabadi for an interview. However, the shabby and the chaotic ambience the poet lived in, makes it an impossible feat to interview the poet at his home. When Safia Begum, first wife of Nur sees Deven failing to get an interview with Nur, she advises Deven to take the interview somewhere outside Nur’s house, in absence of his second wife Imtiaz Begum but at a cost. Deven needs to pay some money to Safiya Begum for the interview. *“She does this for money and says she will not allow Nur to leave the house without money (Malik, 2023).* Deven feels relieved and happy that finally he will be getting an opportunity to get the best out of the poet but that too at a cost. The saying *“Nothing is free.”* sounds so apt here. As Deven is already struggling with his finances and on top of that every meeting with Nur drill holes in his already worn out pockets as he needs to pay almost everyone right from the tongawallah to the tea-boy to meet the poet. And now it’s Nur’s first wife Safiya Begum demanding money for the interview with the poet.

In order to make arrangements for the interview, Deven tries to get financial support from the institution he worked for but he does not get as much support as he had expected. After continuous persuasion and support from Siddiqui, his colleague and the head of Urdu department, he gets some fund from the college to get a tape recorder needed for the interview. Siddiqui initially does not have enough confidence in Deven but later agrees to help with the fund. With this money Deven buys a decently prized Japanese tape recorder from Jain Sahib who assures Deven that this machine will be very good. *“Deven, this is the machine that is going to help you in your project; it is better than a secretary or a typewriter or even both together” (Desai, 119).* He also gets an assistant technician named Chiku to help him in this task as he does not know how to use the tape recorder.

During the interview, Deven finds that the tape recorder is rather outdated and the operator Chiku, lacks sound technical knowledge to operate the recorder. The technician Chiku is inept and clumsy and lacked timely action to capture the verses which Nur recited during the interview session. Chiku often forgets to start the record button when Nur would start reciting the verses and he would fall asleep when the recording is still going on, ultimately recording just the noises,

snarls, and all the commotion inside the room. Desai writes “*Chiku was still fumbling with the machine and not taking any of it down. When his clumsy impatient fingers had finally put things in working order and switched on the machine, it was too late: Nur had come to the end of his recitation..*”(Desai, 173).

In addition, the poet himself is physically frail, emotionally unpredictable, and surrounded by people who use him or interfere constantly. He is not in a state physically and mentally to fully deliver the verses he thought would, as his mind was constantly wandering between food, liquor, his condition and the Urdu verses. At times, he was more demanding and reluctant in his efforts to recite the verses. His requests for biryani, liquor were more of a nuisance. “*The biryani will have to be sent for from the Bazaar, Deven Sahib*”, “*I would like a good mutton biryani from Jama Masjid for my lunch*” (Desai, 169).

The most awaited interview turned out to be a chaotic one. It was not only Chiku’s fault but other factors affecting the interview. Desai writes “*It was not Chiku’s ineptitude alone that threatened to sabotage Deven’s painstakingly constructed project: all the idle men, buffonish and heedless, attempted ceaselessly to turn it into a drinking party, edging closer to the poet, coming between him and Deven with their proffered bottles and glasses. Time and again they would deflect him from any attempt to get work done and induce him to speak on matters Deven felt could be of interest to academic circles*” (Desai, 175). Nothing fruitful came out of the interview even after Deven’s full dedication and efforts in the task. The interview was a failure. Yet Deven gets to experience times “*when Nur would quietly, soberly recite his verse without any cajoling or prompting at all from Deven*” (Desai, 176). These were the moments Deven cherished.

When Deven played the record in front of Murad, “*It was a fiasco*” (Desai, 196). The recorded audio of the poet Nur plays nothing but “*long intervals of crackling and sputtering interspersed with a sudden blare of horns from the street, the shrieking of nest-building birds, loud explosions of laughter and incoherent joviality, drunken voices bawling, singing, stopping short*” (Desai, 196). Nur’s voice could be heard occasionally with statements like “*Fetch me a glass of rum. What have you ordered for lunch today?*” (Desai, 196). Deven’s embarrassment was beyond imagination. His expectations of having a great interview with Nur and preserving his literary works ends up in a devastating embarrassment leading him to nothing but embarrassment and criticism from everyone.

After finding the poor quality of the record, Deven somehow manages to repair and restore the best parts from the tape recorder and present it before Siddiqui and other members to save his face but to no avail. After hearing the tape, Siddiqui’s anger and disappointment could be felt from his statements like “*Charming*”, “*Deven, they released the funds for a tape, not a monograph*” (Desai, 205). His such behaviour was justified as he had also tried all ways to get fund from the college. Deven loses his face in front of everyone and finds himself in an embarrassing and humiliating situation.

Despite Deven's sincere efforts and dedication in this task, he is ultimately left with nothing more but bills and bills from everywhere when he himself is in dire need of money. He wants to get bills cleared and get financial help from Murad but he slyly declines. He tries to meet and explain his situation to Siddiqui Sahib but to no avail. Deven's inner conflict, helplessness and frustrations about being used by everyone can be felt when he says these lines to Siddiqui - *'It was not my fault! I worked hard- I prepared for it and I worked- but I was fooled and cheated by everyone- the man who sold me the secondhand equipment, the technician who said he could do the recording but completely inexperienced, by Murad who said he would pay and did not, by Nur who had never told me he wanted to be paid, and by his wife, wives, all of them-'* (Desai, 228).

Despite several disappointments from people and situations; before, during and after the interview episode *"The novel ends with a positive note. When all support is withdrawn, Deven explores his own potentials"* (Pandey and Shilaja, 2021). Deven did not just lose it all. He had moments of great revelations. He gets enlightened in a different way, he discovers himself in the process through this journey woven with intricacies of people and their interests, disappointments, humiliation, treachery, submission, loss, acceptance. He now sees the reality a lot more clearer and realises that not every dream is worth chasing when it becomes more of a burden than a dream worth living. Deven also realized and accepted the fact that there are certain things in life like the soul of poetry, greatness of the legends cannot just be captured or recorded for posterity rather they are meant to be experienced and live with. He imbibed the verses the poet recited in his presence, deep in his soul, the moments he lived with the poet - a lifetime experience to be cherished. More importantly, he rises above his disillusionments.

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