

*An Image of India:*  
*A Study of Anita Desai's "In Custody"*

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**I**N *Voices in the City* (1965) Anita Desai's second novel, Calcutta is easily and quite recognizably the crowded metropolis and busy port city of West Bengal. Situated on the Hoogli and skirting the Bay of Bengal, it appears in the novel with its familiar landmarks and characteristics — the Howrah bridge, the swarming crowds, the thundering trams, the hubbub of commerce, the small painted boats of longi-clad fishermen, the neon and naphtha lights, the coffee houses, haunts of the city's intellectuals.

Mirpore in Desai's latest novel, *In Custody* (1984), is not like Calcutta in *Voices in the City*. Mirpore is unidentifiable as a particular city on the map of India and yet, it is every Indian city. It is not imaged to build a locale-bound background or scene but is more allusive, brought in to evoke an image of contemporary India. Beneath the apparently loose lumping together of protean detail, it is really a concentrated imaging, like long shots of a camera directed full gaze upon different parts needed to put together the mosaic whole. It is, in some ways, like E. M. Forster's Chandrapore in *A Passage to India*, a deliberately focused evocation — only more detailed and more heavily laced with irony.

In Mirpore, there are no alien rulers to exploit and plunder native resources. Yet it is as decadent, neglected, and dying a town as Chandrapore:

Although it lacked history, the town had probably existed for centuries in its most basic, most elemental form. Those shacks of tin and rags, however precarious and impermanent they looked, must have existed always, repetitively and in succeeding

generations, but never fundamentally changing and in that sense enduring. The roads that ran between their crooked rows had been periodically laid with tar but the dust beneath was always present, always perceptible. In fact, it managed to escape from under the asphalt and to rise and spread through the town, summer and winter, a constant presence, thick enough to be seen and felt. During the monsoon, always brief and disappointing on this northern plain more than a thousand miles from the coast, it turned to mud. But the sun came out again very soon and dried it to its usual grey and granular form. The citizens of Mirpore, petty tradesmen rather than agriculturists, could not be blamed for failing to understand those patriotic songs and slogans about the soil, the earth. To them it was so palpably dust. (19)

The passive resignation of Chandrapore's "inhabitants of mud" becomes here the cynicism and disillusionment of the citizens (note that they are referred to as "citizens" and not as "inhabitants") of Mirpore, the commercial city of "dust." "Dust" with its connotations of unproductivity, sterility, and death is more real to them than soil, associated with vitality, creativity, growth. Throughout the novel, the nouns and adjectives that occur with almost uninterrupted regularity in the characterization of Mirpore are "debris," "desolation," "empty," "barren," "stagnant," "stale," "blight," "dustbin."

Mirpore is a town properly spoiled and neglected by its own citizens, who seem to have no sense of history. There is no respect for monuments, no special signs or space or protection for them. The small mosque of marble and pink sandstone, built by a nawab to commemorate his safe escape to this "obscure and thankfully forgotten town" after the mutiny of 1857 and also to raise a memorial to the grace of God who had made his escape possible, is now

... so overgrown by the shacks, signboards, stalls, booths, rags, banners, debris and homeless poor of the bazaars that it would have been difficult for anyone to discern it beneath this multi-layered covering. Its white marble facings had turned grey and pock-marked through urban pollution, the black marble inlay had either fallen out or been picked out by sharp instruments held in idle hands, the red sandstone of the dome had turned to the colour of filth from the smoke of open fires, the excreta of pigeons, and the ubiquitous dust of Mirpore. (20)

Of course, the traditional use of the mosque continues and five times a day the priest gives a call to worshippers who come and pray. But no one remembers the mosque as a historical landmark nor attempts to reconstruct or restore it.

In other ways too, the town is the very essence of sterility. In the passage below, heavy irony is employed to suggest aridity and stagnation and the underlying despair and futility that mark the town:

Lacking a river, the town had an artificial tank in which people bathed and from which they fetched water although there was no water to be seen in it, only a covering layer of bright green scum on which bits of paper, rags and flowers rested as on a solid surface. There were wells, too, in which the water was even more successfully concealed. Mirpore spared no effort to give an impression of total aridity. (21)

In *A Passage To India*, Aziz asks Fielding/the British to go — “Clear out, you fellows, double quick, I say’ ” — so that India can become a nation of brothers:

“India shall be a nation. No foreigners of any sort! Hindu and Moslem and Sikh and all shall be one! Hurrah! Hurrah for India! Hurrah! Hurrah!” (317)

But in Mirpore in free India, the same communal divisions as under the British persist: “the area around the mosque is considered the ‘Muslim’ area, and the rest ‘Hindu’ ” (21). Although no boundaries mark one area from another there are differences between them, not easily discernible but known to all so that “pigs were generally kept out of the vicinity of the mosque and cows never slaughtered near a temple” (21). Even so, if once a year Moharram and Holi happened to coincide, communal disturbances would break out and tensions remain high for a time: “Then the dust of Mirpore rose and swirled and buried everything in sight again; the citizens of Mirpore returned to their daily struggle to breathe” (21-22).

Also to be found in Desai’s Mirpore is the same fear of Muslims being swamped by the dominant group, the same seeking of identity in the past days of glory and grand style of Nawabs, and the same use of the Urdu language — the language of the court,

in the days of royalty, that had to be saved from being swallowed by that "vegetable monster, Hindi."

Mirpore in independent India has also had its share of "development" — schools, colleges, the railway station, the bus depot. Close to Delhi, the busy centre of business and commerce, it seems to be in a state of "perpetual motion." However, the bustle is strangely unproductive :

. . . the yellow sweets were amongst the very few things that were actually manufactured here; there was no construction to speak of, except the daily one of repairing; no growth except in numbers, no making permanent what had remained through the centuries so stubbornly temporary — and it was other cities, other places that saw the fruits of all the bustle, leaving the debris and the litter behind for Mirpore. (23)

The incantatory irony-laden negations of worth, growth, and creativity — "no construction . . . except the daily one of repairing," "no growth except in numbers," "no making permanent what had remained . . . so stubbornly temporary" — build up Mirpore as a town with no reason for existence.

However, the novel is also about human beings who entertain hopes and aspirations like human beings everywhere in the world. These are both people who live in that "prison," "trap," or "dust-bin" (as it is variously called by the characters in the book), Mirpore, and those outside it, in Delhi, where some of the action in the book is also developed.

First, there is Deven, the protagonist, a lecturer in Lala Ram Lal College, living in Mirpore with his wife, Sarla, and his son, Manu. Deven is the portrait of an ordinary, average human being. A lecturer in Hindi, he regards himself as a failure — both as a teacher and as someone who aspired to some status in life. At thirty-five, he feels old already, having spent all the "empty years" waiting for a break, waiting to do something worthwhile, something "great." Deven is a romantic and an escapist, incapable of facing crises. Unable to change his "circumstances," he seeks relief in fantasy and the rich promises of Urdu poetry.

Sarla, his wife, is a "plain, penny-pinching, congenitally-pessimistic" woman whom Deven's aunt selected as his bride for

these very virtues. As a young girl and as a bride, she had the usual aspirations of her girlfriends to own the three F's: "Fan, 'phone, frigidaire!" they would shout whenever anyone mentioned a wedding, a bridegroom, a betrothal, and dissolve in hectic laughter" (67). But because she has married into the academic profession and lives in a small town, all her dreams have been rudely swept away:

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. . . . They made her look forbidding, and perhaps that was why her husband looked so perpetually forbidden, even if he understood their cause. He understood because, like her, he had been defeated too; like her, he was a victim. (68)

Disappointment, however, has not brought them any closer. To live within a lecturer's salary can be an oppressive experience, and though Deven and Sarla have no choice but to do so, it has given their marriage a permanent quality of despair.

A contrast to "thrifty," "domesticated" Deven is Siddiqui, his colleague, a Muslim lecturer in Urdu, a bachelor, hedonist, and romantic who has the "talent for remaking fact into more acceptable, more attractive fiction." Thus, when he discovers that he can't make ends meet or maintain the disintegrating old *haveli*, his ancestral home, he sells it to a Delhi businessman who wants to "develop" that land and build a block of flats with shops on the ground floor, a cinema house at the back, offices on top — "all kinds of plans for putting this wasteland to use."

Yet another contrast to Deven is Murad, his childhood friend, now in Delhi. Murad, the son of a wealthy Kashmiri carpet seller, was to Deven the rich spoilt boy with lots of money to spend on cinema and cigarettes, while Deven was a poor widow's son "who could be bribed and bought to do anything for him." Yet their friendship has lasted. Murad, the editor of an Urdu journal which he says he runs to save the glorious traditions of Urdu from being extinguished by the Hindi-wallahs, is probably not very rich now: he says that his father has disinherited him. Unlike Deven, he is resourceful and aggressive and seems to give the impression that he can get his way with most people. Even so,

there is something quite pitiable about his attempts to get things out of people in order to maintain the appearances of decent living.

The motifs of despair, failure, and mediocrity that underline the lives of each of these people are repeated in several situations in the book: in the kind of homes, D/II type, that Deven and other low-paid employees in the same grade live in (71); in the alienating colonial system of education mirrored by the set-up of Lala Ram Lal College, Mirpore; in the attempts to teach the languages in a scene dominated by science studies; in the phenomenon of "braindrain" and migration to more prosperous countries for lucrative jobs and other "goodies" (185-86).

What brings a dramatic change into the monotonous, purposeless existence of the protagonist, Deven — and by ripple effect, into the lives of some others — is a chance visit by Murad. His visit triggers off a chain of events from which Deven finds it difficult to extricate himself. Murad asks Deven to go to Delhi and interview Nur Shahjehanabadi, the greatest living Urdu poet of Delhi — although no longer very active — and to write an article for a special number on the poet that he proposes to bring out.

For Deven, lover of Urdu poetry and admirer of Nur (as he is called in short), his hero since childhood, this becomes *the* very summons he has been waiting for all these years. In being asked to interview Nur, his idol, he feels that he has been "allotted a role in life." His first meeting with the poet is rather comic:

Before he could make out who had opened the door and now stood behind it, he heard an immense voice, cracked and hoarse and thorny, boom from somewhere high above their heads: 'Who is it that disturbs the sleep of the aged at this hour of the afternoon that is given to rest? It can only be a great fool. Fool, are you a fool?'

And Deven, feeling some taut membrane of reservation tear apart inside him and a surging expansion of joy at hearing the voice and the words that could only belong to that superior being, the poet, sang back, 'Sir, I am! I am!'

There was an interval and then some mutters of astonishment and horror at this admission. In that quiet pause, pigeons were heard to gurgle and flutter as if in warning from the wings.

The mocking tone of the narrative places both Nur and Deven within a corrected perspective — Nur is no God, nor is Deven a fool or a court jester — but for a few moments in the drama of their meeting, everybody else is forced to occupy the wings of the stage while the “superior being” and the nervous admirer and devotee meet.

To be a success has always been an anxiety for Deven and the contact with Nur, once a fiery symbol of Urdu literary creation, the epitome of success, represents for Deven all that Deven cannot be. In that sense, Nur is Deven’s alter ego. In the interview that Deven hopes to have with Nur, he really aspires to experience the bright promises of poetry as against the grey shades of his own incomplete existence. But Nur, at the time of the meeting, is already old and has lost much of his creativity, although Deven, blinded by his own adulation of the poet and his need to experience greatness and fame through him, refuses to accept this fact. In this self-deception lies much of Deven’s later misery and the seeds of Nur’s decision to exploit him for what Deven is going to get out of him — fame for the interview of the great poet. In fact, in the first meeting itself, Nur identifies Deven as a possible victim:

... A wrinkled eyelid moved, like a turtle’s, and a small, *quick eye* peered out at Deven as if at a *tasty fly*. (42; my emphasis)

In a series of episodes that follow this meeting, Deven is cleverly manipulated by Nur: the promised interview and the set of new couplets are always dangled before him as bait. In the hope of getting the poems and the interview, Deven allows himself to be cheated and befooled, his sincerity mocked and held up to ridicule. In the last chapter of the book, Deven, now deserted by both Murad and Siddiqui, faces the prospect of dismissal from his college for not having been able to produce the promised interview for which Siddiqui, in order to help Deven with the expenses incurred in interviewing Nur, has persuaded the college to buy a taperecorder and pay Nur’s fee for the interview, on the ground that the tapes would be a valuable accretion to the library holdings of the Urdu department.

There is also the matter of Deven's understanding about the relationship between art and life. Having always held poetry to be superior to reality, Deven's concepts about poetry are rudely shaken when he is allowed into the poet's home with all its private and public moments. As one trying to record Nur's life and poetry, he wants only the poet, the creator, purged of the dross of his human life. But Nur comes to him with all the sordidness of his personal life: his poverty, age, parasitical companions, vulturish family — and his poetry. Deven's perpetual dilemma is how to sift art from Nur's life. Even in the secluded room Deven rents for recording only Nur's art, Nur comes with his noisy, loutish companions. And when Nur speaks, he rambles a lot, about *biryani*, rum, and tales of a neighbour who once tried to rob him of two rupees — matters utterly unconnected with art, according to Deven.

The recording sessions, naturally, are a fiasco. Nur is temperamental and garrulous and talks of poetry but rarely. Furthermore, Deven's inefficient assistant seems to record only the irrelevant portions of Nur's discourses and somehow to miss out moments when Nur talks of poetry. Nur, suddenly tired of the sessions, which have already lasted over three weeks, abandons Deven and refuses to talk or to be recorded. Dispirited, Deven returns to Mirpore and faces the possibility of dismissal. He who has yearned for a life away from the ordinary now prays for the security of routine to return. Nur finds pretexts to send him one pathetic letter after another begging him for money: his pigeons are dying and need medicines; he needs rent for the room where the recording was done or money to go to Mecca on his last pilgrimage. Deven does not answer his letters.

Two important realizations come to him out of his experiences. The first realization has to do with the central vision of the book and its title, *In Custody*: in taking somebody into custody, one has also to surrender oneself to the other's custody. To be only custodian is to possess without being possessed and is a relationship of power. Both the epigraph and the conclusion of the novel suggest the need to recognize that every true relationship is essentially a two-way commitment, an act of continued responsibility for the other. Thus it is between true friends, between hus-

band and wife, between artist and art, between art and critic, between a person and his country, city, monuments. One does not abandon what one has once made use of:

[Deven] 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. (204)

To Deven, who has never willingly accepted responsibility, this realization is indicative of his growth as a human being. It is a realization that the novel has been moving towards from the outset. In fact, the novel's structure mirrors this movement. Unlike most novels that work towards one point of intensity which reaches a resolution, there are in this novel two focal points or peaks. One occurs at the end of Chapter 3 on Deven's first visit to Nur. Nur has retched after consuming a lot of drink and is being scolded by his second wife, the flamboyant Imtiaz Begum. Thoroughly shaken by this sordid episode, Deven abandons the poet and runs out of the house:

Those were the two moments of the evening that stayed . . . the moment when he stood above the well of the courtyard, listening to the voices inside, and the moment he had erupted out of the house, dropped the papers and run. What exactly had happened in between? There were times when he remembered a totally different scene: how he had marched in and thrust away the vengeful figure of a white and silver witch . . . but then his congenital inability to satisfy himself with fantasy would apply a brake . . . and he would be faced with that one truth again — how he had abandoned the poet in his agony, desecrated the paper on which he wrote his verse, and run. (62)

The other occurs at the end of Chapter 9 when the poet suddenly refuses to continue with the recording sessions:

'No, I will not resume,' Nur told him, shaking his head and continuing to shake it as he was led up the lane to the back door of his house, Deven following in an agitated dance. Adamant up to the very door, he said, 'All one can resume, at my age, is the primordial sleep. I am going to curl up on my bed like a child in its mother's womb and I shall sleep, shall wait for sleep to come.'

The door in the wall opened and the servant boy helped him over the threshold and led him in. The door shut. (169)

In the first instance, it is Deven who abandons the poet, while in the second, it is the poet who abandons Deven, and both focal points draw even. It is in Chapter 11, the last chapter, that the resolution occurs when it dawns upon Deven that having taken something from each other once, neither can abandon the other. In giving him custody of his work, Nur in turn has earned the right to become Deven's custodian. Nur can make demands on Deven, not only during his lifetime but also after his death, for his widows and his sons, and Deven will have to fulfil those demands. In vowing to commitment, Deven discovers his identity and his worth.

The second realization is that art is not separable from life. It is the very stuff of life with all its ordinary, meaningful, routine activities. Art is like the recordings of Nur's short recitations, interspersed with rambling accounts of his favourite foods, and the blaring of car horns from the street below. Art is both the poem and the poet's vomit (a reference to Imtiaz Begum bullying Deven into wiping the poet's vomit after he has retched: only as Deven tries to discard the soiled sheets does he realize that they could have been Nur's poems). Unlike Deven, Nur, the true poet, understands the problem of creativity very well. When Deven feels irritated at the recording sessions, unable to decide what to record and what to leave out, Nur asks him:

'Has this dilemma come to you too then? This sifting and selecting from the debris of our lives? It can't be done, my friend, it can't be done, I learnt that long ago' . . . (167)

The technique of the novel reiterates this truth as well. Throughout the novel, verse — Nur's or that of the Romantics Keats and Shelley — is subtly interspersed with descriptions of ordinary day-to-day existence, conflicts, and problems.

Art, Deven realizes eventually, is a perfect bubble like the dome of the mosque in Mirpore: if one tried to break art into life's problems and their answers, as one does in the sciences, then "the bubble would be breached and burst, and it would no longer be perfect." And if it were not perfect, then it would no longer be art (192).

Similarly, art cannot be split into life fit for art and life not fit for art. All of life has to go into art whether it is uncreative Mirpore or Deven's mediocre existence as husband, father, teacher. The creative exists within the routine, the derelict, the wretched. Life has to be accepted as a package — the creative tangled hopelessly with the uncreative. The novel here acquires universal tones, reverberating with meaning for the meaningless act of existence.

Reality is always depressing but the answer does not lie in escapism, fantasizing about great deeds, or in migration — the fantasy of some of Deven's colleagues (185-86) about re-making their future in more prosperous and "creative" countries — but in facing reality headlong as it unfolds, unfettered by weak or cowardly thoughts. Deven learns this truth in the very end and is at peace with himself at last :

He walked up the path. Soon the sun would be up and blazing. The day would begin, with its calamities. They would flash out of the sky and cut him down like swords. He would run to meet them. He ran, stopping only to pull a branch of thorns from under his foot. (204)

The book has moments of humour, the comic and the mock heroic — as in the passage cited above — and these work to defuse and edit the gravity with which the characters are prone to take events and happenings that do not match their expectations. In this respect, the novel is a bit like the novels of R. K. Narayan, where events are always reviewed from a comic perspective, often to suggest that the characters have taken their problems far more seriously than was called for. In this context, I feel that Desai's *In Custody* is different from her other novels. Although the pervading philosophy in the novel is dissimilar from Narayan's — his is more in the traditional, Hindu metaphysical strain while hers is for a life that has to be faced squarely, with courage, integrity, and responsibility — the novel ends on a note of hope and optimism. It evokes through creative language, structure, and technique, an image of India that belies the impression of a "dead," "stagnant" India. *In Custody* offers an image of India that is full of hope and that transcends the superficial irritants that many Anglo-Indian novelists have referred to — the

heat and dust of India. It is a beautiful novel by a great Indian woman writer.<sup>1</sup>

## NOTE

- <sup>1</sup> This is a modified version of a paper read at Poona University during the National Seminar on "The Image of India in the Indian Novel in English 1960-1985," Poona University, 12-15 March 1986.

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