

## LINGUISTIC TRANSITION IN INDIA : ANALYSING THE DISPLACEMENT OF URDU IN ANITA DESAI'S *IN CUSTODY*

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### ABSTRACT

The paper elucidates how the narrative of *In Custody* ingeniously highlights the ironic interplay between literary traditions and academic misunderstandings, primarily through the lens of Urdu and Hindi. In the post-colonial era, Urdu emerges as a symbol of refinement and India's cultural heritage, embodying the essence of individual and national identity. The novel masterfully portrays how language transcends mere communication to become a potent symbol of religious, cultural, and national identity. The rivalry between Hindi and Urdu within the narrative serves as a microcosm for the broader communal and religious conflicts simmering in post-partition India. The language-centric politics assumes paramount significance in the socio-political landscape, influencing the characters' lives and actions. This linguistic rivalry mirrors the imperialistic dynamics of the colonizer's influence over the colonized, manifested in Hindi's dominance over Urdu. The paper finds out how the novel *In Custody* becomes a compelling literary mirror reflecting the intricate interplay of language, culture, and politics in a post-partition Indian society, offering profound insights into the enduring consequences of historical events on linguistic landscapes.

**Keywords :** Displacement, linguistic politics, partition, culture

Anita Desai is distinguished among Indian women writers for her precise sensitivity to psychological insight and existential complexities. Her literary emergence post-independence has centred on contemporary concerns, introducing a fresh dimension to Indian English fiction in the modern era. Desai is associated with a new literary tradition, marked by a distinct style and a departure from the conservatism of colonial Indian literature. Her works delve into the themes of hybridity, evolving identities, and the concept of "imaginary homelands."

This paper aims to explore the conflict between Urdu and Hindi depicted in Anita Desai's novel *In Custody* (1984). It unfolds as a story where central characters, Nur and Deven, ultimately face adversity. The novel revolves around Deven, who once aspired to be an Urdu poet but now finds himself trapped in the role of an unassuming professor at Lala Ram Lal College in

Mirpore, teaching Hindi literature to disinterested students just to make a living. His uneventful life takes a significant turn when he receives an assignment to interview Nur, a renowned Urdu poet, through the recommendation of his friend Murad for his Urdu magazine. This opportunity fulfills a long-standing desire he has held since his days of admiring Urdu literature and the craftsmanship of Urdu poets and novelists.

The pivotal moment in the story unfolds when Deven realizes that Nur, whom he had held in the highest regard as the epitome of honor and reverence, is burdened with misery and destitution. This poverty extends beyond material lack; it encompasses the impoverishment of Nur's poetic soul, the core of his being. As the story progresses, Deven becomes increasingly exasperated by the frequent crises and Nur's continuous financial demands. However, he also realizes that he has unwittingly become the guardian of both Nur's friendship

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and his poetry. In this realization, the hardships he faces suddenly seem inconsequential. Deven, a frail and withering figure, finds himself intricately connected to this aged poet. Perhaps it is the bond he shares with Urdu poetry, a connection he fondly remembers from his childhood days spent with his father, that ties him to Nur so deeply.

*In Custody* fictionalizes how the lives of its characters are shaped by the tumultuous events of India's partition. This novel presents an ironic narrative concerning literary traditions and academic misconceptions. Within this novel, Desai draws a parallel between Urdu and Hindi while highlighting the shifting cultural dynamics following the partition of India and Pakistan. In the post-colonial era, Urdu took on the role of representing a refined individual and India's cultural heritage. Desai delves into themes such as the tragedy of Urdu poetry, the disillusionment experienced by Muslim poets, the frustrations of postcolonial society, and provides psychological insights into various characters.

In Anita Desai's novels, her characters exude a fervent connection to their past, find their present circumstances lamentable, and yearn for a brighter future. She skillfully encapsulates the intricate social fabric of society. The protagonist, Deven, disenchanted with his current situation, embarks on a quest to discover his true identity. The core essence of the novel is forged by Desai's exploration of the questions surrounding social roles and the implications of language. During an interview with Magda Costa, Desai's intentions become quite evident when she responds to a question related to the central theme of her latest work in the subsequent words:

I was trying to portray the world of Urdu poets. Living in Delhi I was always surrounded by the sound of Urdu poetry, which is mostly recited. Nobody reads it, but one goes to recitations. It was very much the voice of North India. But although there is such a reverence for Urdu poetry, the fact that most Muslims left India to go to Pakistan meant that most schools and Universities of Urdu were closed. So that it's a language I don't think is going to survive in India ...there are many Muslims and they do write in Urdu; but it has a kind of very artificial

existence. People are not going to study Urdu in school and college anymore, so who are going to be their readers? Where is the audience? (sawnet.org)

The novel by Desai vividly illustrates the marginalization of Urdu in post-independence India, primarily due to the growing dominance of Hindi. When Deven first visits Nur, the poet, he notices various symbols of death and decay on the poet's doorstep. These symbols reflect the deteriorating state of the Urdu language in India, as it has been marginalized by recent developments and treatment. Nur acknowledges the gradual fading of the language. He recognizes that Urdu is destined to become a historical relic rather than a living, evolving entity. This awareness contributes to the unravelling of his own life.

Deven finds himself entangled in the complexities of linguistic politics, which adds to his frustrations. The sidelining of Urdu from the cultural mainstream is particularly painful for him. However, Deven's adherence to the Hindu religion poses a challenge to his deep affection for Urdu. While the novel's focus primarily revolves around its characters rather than explicit themes, each character embodies a thematic element. One prominent theme is the diminishing importance of Urdu and the erosion of an ancient culture, epitomized by Siddiqui, Deven's fellow Urdu lecturer. His identity is deeply intertwined with Urdu culture, and he grapples with the feeling of losing it.

In the novel, Deven fondly reminisces about his father's passion for Urdu, which has instilled in him a profound love for Urdu poetry. Conversely, at his college, figures like Mr. Trivedi, the Head of the Hindi Department, associate language with religion and community, disapproving of Deven's affinity for Urdu. When Deven hand-delivers an application requesting one week's leave to interview the renowned poet Nur, Trivedi confronts him with anger.

I'll get you transferred to your beloved Urdu department. I won't have Muslim toadies in my department; you'll ruin my boys with your Muslim ideas, your Urdu language. I'll complain to the Principal, I'll warn the RSS, you are a traitor (IC 168-9).

Trivedi's strong reaction to Deven's leave

application highlights how language becomes a symbol of religious, cultural, and national identity, and how the linguistic rivalry between two languages can contribute to communal and religious conflicts. At this juncture, the fictional narrative takes on significant importance in the context of language-centric politics, which plays a role in social and political activities. The novel doesn't portray languages as neutral means of communication but instead underscores the Hindi-Urdu controversy and its potential for communal tensions.

The imperialistic nature of the colonizer's influence over the colonized is reflected in the dominance of Hindi over Urdu. Even before the partition, there was a perception that Hindus should speak Hindi and Muslims should speak Urdu. Consequently, not many Hindus learned Urdu or supported its development. After India's partition, a significant portion of the Muslim population migrated out of India, making it challenging to preserve Urdu within the country. This contributed to the decline of Urdu and the rise of Hindi. The contentious Hindi-Urdu debate explored in *In Custody* aligns with the observations of Paul R. Brass in his work "Language, Religion, and Politics in North India." According to Brass

The Hindi-Urdu controversy by its very bitterness demonstrates how little the objective similarities between language groups matter when people attach subjective to their languages. Willingness to communicate through the same language is quite a different thing from the mere ability to communicate. (128)

The novel avoids delving into the diplomatic aspects associated with these cultural issues that contribute to communal divisions.

The paper's main focus is on how Desai captures the wistful essence of the "lyrical romance" found in the cultural traditions of Old Delhi. It also explores her attempt to reclaim poetry and music from the "narrow streets" that were once the favoured entertainments of royal courts in Delhi. The theme of language is interwoven with considerations of religion and politics. What makes the novel outstanding is its revelation of the unsuccessful efforts to promote Urdu poetry, possibly due to political, social, or regional factors. The paper posits that Desai's narratives deftly address Indian

identity within the context of socio-cultural, socio-linguistic, and politico-religious divisions without inciting contentious or polemical debates.

Desai effectively portrays the lament for the loss of melodious Urdu poetry, once considered the language of the elite. However, after India's independence, Hindi became the nation's official language. Urdu, among the twenty-four languages recognized in the eighth schedule of the Indian Constitution, survived through the romanticism of Urdu shayari (poetry). The novelist paints a poignant picture of the struggles faced by poets and teachers striving for survival.

*In Custody* subtly addresses the dwindling Islamic and Muslim culture in postcolonial India and the challenges faced by Urdu as an official language. Although Urdu and Hindi share significant linguistic similarities, differing scripts set them apart: Urdu employs Arabic script written from right to left, while Hindi uses Devanagari script written from left to right. Urdu is spoken by Muslims, many of whom migrated to Pakistan, while Hindi is the language of Hindus who remained in India. *In Custody* centers on the protagonist, Deven, a Hindu with deep respect for Urdu language and culture, and the Muslim poet Nur, a revered figure in Urdu poetry who has fallen out of demand.

The novel vividly portrays the transformations in social and cultural landscapes in postcolonial India. Through Desai's descriptions of Delhi and Nur, she paints a vivid picture of Old Delhi's cultural essence. The central character, Deven, harbors aspirations of making a significant mark in the realm of Urdu literature. To him, Urdu is synonymous with cherished memories and holds a revered status.

Highlighting the tensions introduced by consumerism, modernism, and the Partition in India, Desai's narrative suggests that the state of art and poetry in the nation is in a dire situation. She attributes this decline to the impact of British colonialism and the widespread adoption of Hindi, driven by market demands.

The gradual extinction of Urdu coincides with a process of Westernization in India, a transformation not universally embraced. Consequently, the death of a

language, and the culture it embodies, represents a pivotal shift from the past to an evolving present.

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