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A new novel considered

From a structural viewpoint the recently published novel of Anita Desai, *In Custody*,[1] can be placed in the category of pure novels, like those of Jane Austen, in which all the parts are harmoniously subordinated to the design and perfection of form. From the angle of action it can be classed with Hemingway's novel *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), which deals with only one fishing episode. *In Custody* deals with a single episode of an interview for writing an article. The fable, action, character, sentiment and diction in the book are subordinated to the central purpose--showing Deven Sharma's poetic consideration and adoration and its result.

It is pertinent to discuss the personality of the hero, Deven, before discussing his poetic adoration. He is a Hindi professor in a suburban college, having middling intellectual caliber. Economically hard-pressed, yoked in marriage with a typically timid, loyal, Hindu wife with a son, he has no really high "ambition" or "distinction, magic" (p. 128). His "reflexes" are "sluggish" and he is "never ready with the apt word or action" (pp. 127-128), nor is he a brilliant teacher. He inherited from his asthmatic father diffidence and lack of domineering nature. He owes love of Urdu poetry to his father as a cultural heritage. He has two distinct powers: the critical, intellectual power of a professor and the creative power of a poet, though most of his poems are rejected by publishers, and his poetic faculty is gradually withering after marriage. Like the accompanist, the tanpura player, he plays only the second fiddle in life, the role of an adorer. Thus, he is temperamentally, intellectually suited to love and adore an idol--the poet Nur is that idol. This is the need of his ego, his psyche; poetic estimation is thus his life blood and central motive.

The motive of poetic veneration has many subtle interior facets: a love of poetry, a love of the poet, the galvanizing transmission of glamor from living personality to poetry, a feeling of hero-worship, and the joy of higher emotional, artistic, and spiritual companionship. In all these Deven and Nur are alternately at the receiving and transmitting end. Deven accords veneration; Nur receives it and is elated; Nur offers love, grace; Deven is gratified.

But mainly it is Nur who is at the transmitting pole of grace. He has a glamorous and multidimensional personality. He is an adorable poet demigod, like the freedom-fighter father in Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1978). At first sight he is a statuesque marble-like giant, with white beard, a compact body like stone teeming with experience (p.40). There is a shady facet in his personality. In the past he was connected with nonentities and bad characters. He knows suffering, and the pain of piles indicates irregular dietary habits (p. 47). He drinks to excess and tamely succumbs to Imtiaz Begum's wishes. He is also superstitious. But these human weaknesses make him only more convincing and complex.

Nur's love of pigeons and body of a wrestler, gathering news of "akhadas" (wrestling arenas; p. 49) and wrestling champions through the masseur, add a special weight to his personality. A picture of Nur surrounded by the poetasters of Delhi suggests Keats' image of "Queen Moon on her throne, clustered around by all her starry Fays. . . ."[2] He is the presiding deity,

the inspiring angel for all artists or bohemians, those having written lyrics or acting a role in theaters, or fans of art and creativity (p. 50). He ridicules Hindi and, comically, is a champion and director of Urdu Poets. He has such power and glory that at a move of his finger the chaotic audience comes to order (p. 54). Anita Desai's likening Nur to a lion with his room as "dark as a lair" elevates his character. Deven describes him as immortal and eternal (p. 150). His association, in thought and feeling, with Shelley, Keats and Byron further ennobles his picture. Nur is not a real living poet--he is a creation of the novelist; maybe some living poet of some sort suggested a parallel. Anita Desai admits in the epigraph to *The Village by the Sea* that she based that story on fact and a real village and living people.[3] The pen name "Shahjahanabadi" (Shahjahanabad is the old name of Delhi) confirms, however, his fictitious nature.

Two ladies, Safiya Begum and Imtiaz Begum, haunt and hover around Nur. Safiya Begum is the type of simple, loyal, well-wishing, hard working, selfless wife who cooks, cleans, washes and manages the Nur household materially. She has worldly wisdom and clarity of brains and adores her husband as a glorious man, cannot brook with his humiliation, and arranges the interview on payment. Other letters for Nur's material benefit must be her doing.

Imtiaz Begum is a bad fairy--selfish, egocentric, whimsical, unpredictable, wanton--sapping and sucking the poetic genius and soul out of Nur, but this female, although destructive, solely lives on the poet. She is a versifier, dancer, singer; she is intellectual, beautiful, sophisticated and thus steals into Nur's heart and holds him in thrall. Later man-woman rivalry arises, and she wants to excel Nur as a poet. Out of jealousy she tries to stop the usual poetic sessions, the interview and the book. She celebrates her birthday to win over Nur fans to her side as poetess by singing her verses, using all possible tricks (p. 85). She removes Nur's secretary and is rightly accused by Safiya Begum: "You have taken his name and his reputation and today even his admirers" (p. 90). She snatched his "jewels" (p. 87). She persuades Nur that his poetry is outdated, and he better keep mum (p. 116). She hates his "chelas" (students, followers) Her last letter to Deven aims at her recognition in the poetic ranks of Urdu. But she is built by Nur and cannot live without him; she is one of the illustrious poetasters surrounding him. Murad, and Siddiqui, the Urdu professor, are other adorers of Nur. Thus, it is notable the entire *dramatis personae* are created only to support the central theme.

Reverting to the first theme--Deven's veneration of Nur's poetry--we note that the central motive of Nur's poetry is eternal suffering: "Many sins and much sufferings such is the pattern / Fate has traced on my tablet, with blood . . . (p. 44). Deven is moved by this note of eternal suffering; every verse of Nur enchants Deven's soul. Certainly Nur the poet's image does not inspire that strange awe suggested in Coleridge's "Kubla Khan": "And all should cry, Beware! Beware! / His flashing eyes, his floating hair!"[4] But certainly Deven expects elevation and a feeling of transport from contact with Nur: "Another realm it would surely be if his god dwelt there, the domain of poetry, beauty and illumination" (p. 40). A magic, a glory, a fragrance radiates from the verses and the personality of Nur, and Deven sups on this "honeydew." Coming to the third point, Nur's verse will be charming even when he is dead, but living Nur transmits a glamor and grace to his poetry which is magical. "It was not Nur's name that was bringing about this transformation, it was his genius, his art" (p. 106). But Nur is not a mere poet, he is also the "hero" of Deven's aspirations and dreamland whom he worships. Contact with him is a "gloriously successful pursuit" (p. 39). The magic name of Nur brings a "stir," an exultation to Deven and Nur's humiliation at Imtiaz Begum's hands shocks Deven. The epitome of Deven's poetic adoration is the magic bond between the two which is essentially artistic and spiritual: "Brushing them aside, he tried to return to his old idolatry of the poet, his awe of him, his

devotion . . . his gratitude for his poetry and friendship, that strange, unexpected, unimaginable friendship that had brought him so much pain" (p. 293). This companionship has both assets and liabilities Here lies the greatness of *In Custody*.

The richness of the novel depends on various themes packed in it--professor versus poet, critic versus creative artist, Hindi-Urdu rivalry, Hindu-Muslim antagonism, the suffering of Indian intellectuals, the dissolution of an artist's talent by a woman writer--editor dependence and exploitation, spontaneity of poetic inspiration, dream and reality of poetic fascination, rising above mediocrity, poetic nausea and disgust, the tirade that universities are cemeteries and asylums for failures, and at professors as jackals feeding on the artist's carcasses (p. 118). The characters very successfully embody and express these themes.

The fable, the story of the novel, is based on a thin yarn--the offer of an interview to a Hindi professor, the preparation, the holding of the interview, publication of an article and the consequences--all these incidents concern Nur and Deven. There is no solid action in the novel in the traditional Aristotelian sense. Deven's movements at Mirpore and Delhi, his journeys between Mirpore and Delhi, his activities in the college and the city of Delhi pertaining to the interview and the article--these are all by way of action. But all this intellectual (accompanied by physical) effort is "serious," also it is "entire" having a beginning, middle and end, and though it has scanty physical "magnitude" but great importance. The story is objectively presented in third person universal observer technique. Descriptions of Mirpore, Chandni Chowk, Murad's office, Nur's house are marked by racy objective movement and are in good taste. Important temperamental traits of all the characters--Deven, Sarla, Trivedi, Jayadev, Siddiqui, Murad, K. Sahay, Mr. Jain, Nur, Imtiaz Begum, Safiya Begum, the admirers and poetasters, Mrs. Bhalla, and Raj's aunt--are vividly drawn. Most of them are type-figures and bear very well the burden of plot, action and theme.

The predominant emotion in the novel--that of the protagonist Deven--is one of disappointment and bitterness well hinted at by the recurrent use of the image of "neem" throughout the book. This is occasionally relieved by contentment and resignation and real "jubilation" in the contact of Nur. The prison image is also repeatedly used and expresses the chains under which man's life is put in the world. An undertone of humor permeated the novel and characterizes Nur's tirade on Hindi: "Listen and tell me if my poetry deserves to live, or if it should give way to that fodder chewed by peasants, Hindi?" (pp. 54-55) An effect of boisterous laughter is achieved in describing the Principal as King Leo and the Registrar as Mr. Jackal (p. 101).

In *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) Anita Desai used a highly sensitized, elevated and rich poetic diction consisting of unusual words giving the impression of a museum piece. In *Clear Light of Day* (1980) and *In Custody* the language has a lucidity and naturalness. *In Custody* uses mainstream current English idiom, varied by some Hindi words commonly used in English. Major parts of the descriptions are objective but there are occasional psychic probing through expressionistic technique: "Nur . . . was a name that opened doors, changed expressions, caused dust and cobwebs to disappear, vision to appear bathed in radiance. It had led him . . . to another land, another element" (p. 105). Here impressionist, expressionist, and stream-of-consciousness techniques are employed to convey the magical effect of Nur's name on Deven. The style is dynamic, varied, and versatile. Certain images as that of "jewels" acquire symbolic depth.

Like Jane Austen, Anita Desai writes with deep philosophical import. *In Custody* deals with Deven's regard and consideration for poetry and the conse-

quence of risking his freedom: "He had imagined he was taking Nur's poetry into safe custody, and not realized that if he was to be custodian of Nur's genius, then Nur would become his custodian and place him in custody too" (p. 203). Thus mutual alliance between the poet and critic may have "burden" or "honor" but requires "equal strength," as envisaged in the epigraph of Wordsworth placed in the beginning.

Fellowship and friendship are the guiding value of life according to all religions. The joy of communion between the creative artist and critic is greater. Howsoever gloomy and pessimistic man's caged life may be ("Still, it was just a cage in a row of cages. Cage, cage. Trap, trap" (p. 131) the redeeming points are the value of art and spiritual companionship. Some religious affirmations are presented through Mrs. Bhalla and Raj's aunt. Even Nur goes to offer devotions at "urs" (ceremonies observed on the anniversary of of fakirs). These graces can sustain life. Only a man of power can love poetry and face the greater responsibili- ties--in the beginning of the novel Deven lacked this power, at the end he partly possesses it and feels elevated: "He 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" (p. 204). But economically, this distinction is too difficult to maintain. Deven cannot meet Nur's demands for money: for the cure of his pigeons, the education of his child, a journey to Haj, unless he becomes a symbol of society. Thus rightly the artist and society would be in each other's custody. At the end Deven physically runs away from Nur, but emotionally, spiritually and artistically he is in the poet's eternal bondage.

Notes

1 Anita Desai, *In Custody* (London: William Heinemann, 1984). Subsequent references appear in parentheses in the text.

2. *English Verse*, vol. 4 (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 419.

3. Anita Desai, *The Village by the Sea* (Hammondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 6; first published by William Heinemann, 1982.

4. *English Verse*, p. 78.