



## Linguistic Superiority, Hegemony and Exile in Anita Desai's *In Custody*

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### Abstract

*In Custody* is a novel that deals with languages and their underlying politics. It puts forward the overwhelming political shades of both nationalistic and linguistic clashes between languages. This novel in particular has a parabolic nature that deals with how a state interpolates its dominant code into citizens' register. This paper examines the nature of linguistic superiority which in case of the novel is Hindi and a language in race of slow extinction that is Urdu. This paper will also examine the relationship between power and linguistic preference of states in terms of rejoicing one language and denouncing the other. In the novel Anita Desai wants us to see that art is not an isolated identity of a person rather it exerts the politico-economic agendas. On the whole, this research sheds light on the concept of linguistic superiority and hegemony in post-colonial India and how cultural changes, in a newly independent country, are responsible for preferring one particular language and disapproving the other.

**Keywords:** linguistic superiority, linguistic hegemony, exile

### Introduction

Anita Desai's novel *In Custody* gives us a comprehensive look into the world of languages, hegemonic stance of linguistic chauvinism and exile. The novel's parabolic nature encapsulates how a state implants its authoritative code in citizens' register. The decay of a language in terms of the other also is one of the major issues that the author tells us in the journey of Deven, the protagonist of the novel. He encounters mostly negative transgressions by loving the 'non-mother tongue'—Urdu. The language of the 'other' plays a big part in this novel as Deven encounters a Urdu poet Nur, who is the last of his breed expressing his anguish of being the last spectator of a dying language in a death row in India. The clash between a historical language with an extensive body of literature and a state doctrine is causing the thought cloud for not only the protagonist of the novel but also the readers. Another thing that can be said about this work of fiction is that the fictional opacity and reality that this tale tries to draw from reality is mostly hindered by the author's choice of language in terms of portraying this beautiful politico-linguistic essence of Indo-Pak clash. This research paper broadly discusses the nexus between power and linguistic choice of the states and this relationship ultimately brings forward love for a particular language and hatred for the other. In the novel, Anita Desai shows us that art is inseparable from human activities and she also brings into focus all socio-political and economic issues interrelated with human actions. The relationship between art and the political separates people of all classes are due to political hegemony and religious dogma. As language is a social construct, Anita Desai wants us see her questioning every essence of why languages be the catalyst of cultural conflicts, instead it can force that binds cultures. Anita Desai is an Indian author whose works have been critically acclaimed all over the world. Her novels entail the innermost feelings of Indian men and women in the deepest of the human experience. She is also known for her lucid prose that evokes compassion and eloquence of her

characters presented in her stories. Born and educated in India she is the author of many novels, children's books and short stories. She has been shortlisted for the Booker Prize three times. She has been writing all her life as she explained what it is to be like a writer as, "I have been writing since the age of seven, as instinctively as I breathe" (encyclopedia.com). She also expresses her love of writing as,

From a very young age I knew that this was I what I wanted to do. Before I could even spell I was putting letters together to make words. We also had lots of books in our home and everyone read a lot. My family would see me sitting in a corner, scribbling all the time, so they used to address me as "The Writer." I just wanted my books to be on the bookshelf too (You Turn Yourself into an Outsider).

Anita Desai's *In Custody* offers a comprehensive look into an understanding of how the necessities of life become grandeur of potential "unnecessities" as the novel mostly deals with language and linguistic decay and hegemony. Born in Mussoori in June 24, 1937, she is a professor of humanities at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Born as Anita Mazumdar she is the daughter of D.N. Mazumdar, a Bengali businessman and Toni Nime, who was a German. Well versed in Bangla, German, Hindi, and English, Anita Desai has always preferred to write in the English language as it appears that she finds the language more soothing in terms of expressing the realities of India. The novel under scrutiny is also a clear representative of how languages are cornerstones of feeling and sometimes collide according to their power structures.

### Background of in custody

*In Custody*, a wonderful novel of Anita Desai discusses a huge issue of inner India where she did not just focus on the deconstruction of the English language but focuses more on the politics of language in a country. She brings the hidden feelings of some Indian's- love for Urdu, in front of the world which can never be told in India. Before the partition

in 1947, India and Pakistan were together and Urdu was the language which has been used in many places in the continent. The official language of India changed from Urdu to Hindi. Although the two languages are very similar and a person who speaks Urdu can understand Hindi to a great extent and vice-versa, the difference lies in the script. Urdu has the Arabic script written from right to left and Hindi has the Devanagiri script that are written from left to right. Urdu is mostly spoken by Muslims, who went to Pakistan and Hindi is the language of Hindus who were left behind in India. But the issue left behind Urdu poetry which bears the legacy of both India and Pakistan. Nationalism takes a firm root in a large section of people and that is why loving Urdu poetry, even working on it seems to be an unpatriotic feelings towards Indian government. When Deven, the protagonist of *In Custody* a lecturer in Hindi applies in person for one week's leave to interview the legendary Urdu poet Nur Shahjahanabadi, his head of department, Trivedi, meets the request with a virulent, short-tempered and communally charged reaction. "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 (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) you are a traitor". (Desai, 145) The hatred for the Urdu language has been clear here for the reader but the point Desai wanted to focus is that people have hatred for a language which does have legacy for India but love for the English language which does not have anything indicating India; people are accepting it, without any reason, as a truth.

Apart from the Hindi language, Urdu can be a tool of satisfaction and consolation for Indians' creativity and literature. Many valuable pieces of literature have been created while both the languages were there and that is why to uphold the Indian culture in front of the world. The sanctity of a teacher or a literature lover will never fit into language territory but Deven has fallen into this. Urdu fuels his imagination and Hindi sustains his corporal needs, as he says- "I am-only a teacher.....and must teach to support my family. But poetry-Urdu-.....I need to serve them to show my appreciation". (Desai, 43) Here the decaying of the Urdu language has been clearly seen where it can be a useful tool for Indians in their intellectual development. The British Raj divided the whole nation into two parts and the partition has been done politically where the issue of religion and culture plays a big role. Desai has slightly touched on these issues, not raising the problem of the English language, but shows the Christians looking satisfactorily at the situation of communal riots between the Muslims and the Hindus. "The Hindu slaughtered pigs in their own quarters, the Muslims took to slaughtering buffaloes in place of cows.....The few Christians of the town ate the meat of both and attended the one small whitewashed brick Church set in a cemetery". (Desai, 22) She brings forth the inner problem of Indian Urdu lovers in a language where the world would know the authentic interest of an Indian, not the conventional thoughts of people.

Finally, Desai did not go for a solution of the problem that has been created by the British but give an overview of the present situation. Big poet like Nur has become a special issue for today's publishers while once he was the main attraction. Through her book Desai shows that sensitive issues like an Indian's feelings for Urdu poetry can only be told via an international or common language where one can

also bring forward the universal problem.

### **The nature of language**

In his seminal work *Course in General Linguistics*, Ferdinand de Saussure argued that language has typically been concerned with the method they have been expressed. He also claimed that the major meaning making game of language has always been concerned with the idea that meaning comes from outside, not embedded inside the matter (20-25). The nature of meaning thus serves the purpose of 'alive' languages as he argued "Although dead languages are no longer spoken, we can easily assimilate their linguistic organisms. We can dispense with the other elements of speech; indeed the science of language is possible only if the other elements are excluded" (15). In case of the protagonist Deven, his love for Urdu led him to the last living legend of the said language Nur. The obsessive nature of loving and nurturing the language in the death row makes Deven understand the hegemonic nature of language. He understood that language can sometimes be cruel as he has been mistreated by his boss who thought that the dominant language can be the only thing that matters. What Deven failed to realize that languages can be heterogeneous and subject to signs. The supposedly dead language in question in the novel is the language of the 'other' that lives in the outside of the border of Hindustan.

### **The politics of language**

*In Custody* is a novel that deals with languages and its underlying politics. It puts forward the overwhelming political shades of both nationalistic and linguistic clashes between languages. The condition of Urdu in India can be assumed as a souvenir language among other languages in India. The political game between Hindi and Urdu can be described as the ongoing cultural anxieties Indian hegemonic consciousness and present nature of Urdu in India. Desai's novel charts the changing sociocultural values in India that have been drawn from the protagonist's love for a decaying language. The author tries to depict Deven's love for the decaying Urdu speaking people living in a liminal space of chaotic boundaries of linguistic asylums. The linguistic supremacy described in the novel is the politicization of linguistic, social and artistic ramification (Driss 1). Desai also expressed her idea of expressing the politics between the languages as,

"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 (Costa)?"

A fraught relationship between Hindus and Muslims has also been taken from history as the demise of Urdu started long before the liberation and separation. It was possibly the dire consequence of 1857's mutiny. North Indian Muslims

were severely punished after the failed rebellion. The expulsion and execution of Muslims from Delhi—the previously ground zero for Islamic culture in India. Destroying the cultural capital and the libraries has caused a great damage in India resulting in the weakening of the language (Daya 33.35). The weakening state of Urdu is nevertheless the political failure of Muslims in India who failed to establish an ideological standpoint through their language.

### **Hegemony and Exile in *In Custody***

Hegemony is the idea primarily concerned with dominance of one nation over another, but now this idea has been generally understood as “domination by consent” (Ashcroft et al. 106). Before Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci the concept of hegemony was mostly about predominance, but he investigated that the ruling class was so successful in promoting its own interest in society that fundamentally the idea of ruling class becomes synonymous with the hegemony. The ruling class manages to convince other classes that ‘their interest’ is the interests of all (Ives 3). Significantly due to Gramsci’s work on language, domination and hegemony is now used to describe the intricacies of power relations in many different fields varying from literature, education, film, cultural studies, political science, history and international relations. In short, Gramsci redefined hegemony to show the formation and institutionalization of consent. But as we shall see, this is not a passable understanding of Gramsci’s notion of hegemony, which contains a better-off and more composite theorization of consent and its relation to linguistics (Ashcroft et al. 106-107).

Dictionary meaning of exile suggests that it is a condition where the “condition of someone being sent or kept away from their own country, village, etc., especially for political reasons” (dictionary.cambridge.org). The idea of exile in theory suggests a separation and distancing from homeland or cultural or ethnic origin. It is a state of ‘inbetweenness’. In most cases this separation, as Andrew Gurr suggests, is involuntary, sometimes an act of state or sometimes the first settlers who cannot come back to their “place of origin” (125).

In Desai’s novel *In Custody* we see that the identity of one’s self has been normalized and suppressed due to their preferred languages. Aijaz Ahmed points out, the history of Urdu language helps excavate the truth that there was a massive exodus of Muslim Urdu speakers, who fled to Pakistan after the separation (72). There were certain religious and political sentiments that governed the self-exile from their mother land. Urdu was made the official language of Pakistan after the separation, then it became synonymous with the idea of religious languages from both sides. In ‘Hindustan’ the preferred language is Hindi and Muslims were considered as outsiders, in India (A Critique of Language Snobs: Urdu and the Politics of Identity). It has also been pointed out by Aijaz Ahmed that the British used their experience of the European nation state to conclude that people of a specific geographical area should have only one language (*ibid*). They thus tried to look at the language scene in the Subcontinent through this lens – an unrealistic proposition that led to separated nation states and religiously extremist identification. In the novel we can see that language not only works as the communal identity but also works as the vocation of one’s existence. When Deven asks

permission from the head of the department he is mistreated, humiliated and threatened as if he has done something taboo or blasphemous. The religious bigotry, the presumed fear of havoc in the nature of language of the ‘non mother tongue’ gets wafted up from the social sphere to the suburbs to the communal and spaces of intimacy. The threat Deven was given for loving Urdu was the political consent that Hindi reigns supreme in the ‘land of the Hindus’. This tendency also explains why the Urdu speakers are mostly kept in the liminal spaces like that we see in the case of Nur, the supposedly last Urdu poet. Desai wanted to represent Urdu literature through Nur. The surrounding of Nur’s place appears as Foucaultian space that is “as gloomy as prison”. Clearly, Nur is in as bad shape as someone in exile, the inner concealment that Nur choose to believe that the nature of Hindi is outwardly domineering is also a false claim because Urdu once enjoyed the supreme language of this united nation. After the separation the hegemonic dominance led them to understand the political ‘correctness’ and the ‘other’ both inside home and over the border—mostly understood as enemies. The nature of Urdu literature is further metaphorically shown in the novel through Nur weakening nature of health. The hospital and prison referred to in this novel represents regiment and control. These spaces put emphasis on the fact that not only language that has been hegemonized but the idea of citizenship also being rendered effectively. These two institutions: language and state put obsessive stance in terms of making one language glorious and also the other one submissive. Urdu has been shown in the novel as having lost its power and unable to exert hegemony over others around in India.

### **Conclusion**

Anita Desai’s novel discusses the tragedy of the Urdu language. It also is a eulogy to the dying art of Urdu poetry in India. *In Custody* is a novel which deals quietly with the Islamic and Hindu culture by avoiding the religious aspects. The disillusionments of cultural liminality that have been shown in the novel is also from the very nature of postcolonial subversion of the interpolated ideology that not only hurts Hindus like Deven, but also the exiled poet Nur. The novel sharply highlights the social and cultural changes in postcolonial India. By depicting Delhi and Nur, the author tries to contrast the ‘old days’ of Urdu and the present one. For the protagonist Deven, the language in question is a divine language that he refers to has an upper hand in comparison with his mother tongue—Hindi. He considers himself to be caught in middle between Hindi and Urdu; he also earns a ‘living by teaching’ Hindi literature to uninterested college students. The author tries to capture the ‘lyrical romance’ of Urdu poetic tradition found in Delhi which can be found in the vehement voice of Nur, “we need the roar of lions, or the boom of cannon, so that we can march upon these Hindi-wallah and make them run.” The language of Nur was once the voice of the sultanate, but it appears to be now the voice of nothing or the voice of something that doesn’t matter. He and his mother tongue have been subjected to the oppressive power struggle between regimes. The old regime deflected it and the new tries to push it to the ‘other’ ground. Deven understood the true nature of language game, the hypocrisies and the belatedness of his passion for a dying breed in his country. Deven remains the only character who struggles to protect a language. All his efforts turned to fruitlessness as all his

attempts turned into farce and mocked by others. He failed to have a proper interview with the poet. He also could not get the chance to record poems either. In his role of the custodian, he failed miserably and understood how the third space of identification works a long way in religious and political struggle. The Urdu language is not the only language in danger, but other languages are also under the threat of Hindi. Anita Desai also has an advantage in writing this novel in English where she wants to express her questions and tries to formulate the answers in terms of using English, the post-colonial language of choice. Anita Desai's *In Custody* engrosses complexities of contemporary Indian culture and its problems. Her choice of choosing a Hindu as the custodian of Urdu works as a message against the linguistic superiority as well as an initiation to cultural reconsideration.

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