English Hons. 2nd Sem

Topic: In Custody (Plot)

In Custody (1984), a novel by Indian-American author Anita Desai set in Delhi, India, was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. The book deals with the search for meaning in life. Traditionally, Persian and Urdu poets are engaged in the mystical life and meditating on God. Set in contemporary India, In Custody explores themes of identity and language using Urdu poetry.

Deven Sharma, the main character of the novel, turns to Urdu poetry as an escape from his ordinary daily life. Deven lifts his spirits through poetry. In his life, Deven feels that he has given up any ambitions he had and has settled. He once had a strong desire to write poetry. He put that aside in order to support his wife. The couple has settled into a loveless union in which they subtly let each other know their dissatisfaction with each other. Further frustrating Deven is the fact that although his first language, the one he is enamored with, is Urdu, he makes his living teaching Hindi literature. This field does not hold any interest for him, and he has no particular talent for it. While wallowing in his own sense of failure, Deven receives an opportunity to revive the elements of his life that once inspired him.

Deven is asked to interview an elderly Urdu poet of great renown Nur Shahjehanabadi. At first, Deven is nervous about rekindling his early in life dreams. He finds, however, that the pull is too strong to avoid. Deven’s father enjoyed Nur’s poetry and often recited the poet’s lines. Deven still reads Nur’s work. Deven visits the poet in the uppermost room of a tall house. As he climbs the stairs, it is as though he is symbolically rising above his present situation in life and climbing to reacquire his past. Although Deven might find an inner majesty in this, the surroundings are anything but. The place is rundown and strewed with trash. The poet is in a room surrounded by fighting, squalor, and drunkenness.

Deven is turned off by the conditions and feels as if he would like to run. This impulse is not lost on the famous poet who refers to it in a later interview with Deven. He offers lines from poetry that Deven has not heard before, including a reference to, “This sifting and selecting from the debris of our lives?” For any uncertainties he may hold, Deven is true to his devotion to poetry as art. Nur exploits this as it serves him; Deven does not lose his reverence for the aged bard.

Deven’s conflicted nature reflects the setting of the novel—a post-partition India containing the old and the new, the East and the West. Deven lives in the town of Mirpore. Between Delhi and Mirpore billboards litter the landscape, advertising “modern” things. Women entering arranged marriages think of the modern conveniences they aspire to. Even the college where Deven is employed represents a juxtaposition of new and old. The popular Hindi department is held in high regard while the Urdu department has one employee and barely exists.

Exploring duality is a characteristic of Anita Desai’s work that The Washington Post recognized saying, “In Anita Desai’s reckoning, one and one do not make two. They make three, four even. In her logic, if you are a compound of two cultures, you are more likely fractured in myriad ways, launched on a lifetime of shapeshifts and in-betweens. It is a theme she has explored in numerous quietly lyrical, profoundly moving works, among them the short story collection Diamond Dust and the novels Clear Light of Day, Baumgartner’s Bombay and, most recently, Fasting, Feasting. She is, to other hybrids like her, an enlightened voice in an increasingly variegated world.